

THE DARLING DEVILS SERIES

# *Rival* DARLING



ALEXANDRA MOODY

*Rival*  
**DARLING**

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*For my own darling devils.  
Archie, Ava & Harry.*

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## VIOLET

NEVER DATE A JOCK. It was the one rule I had when it came to boys, but apparently, I was terrible at following it.

“Jeremy’s going to kill me,” I said as I rushed across the parking lot with my cousin Mia at my side. It was my boyfriend’s first hockey game of the season, and we were running twenty minutes late. I glanced at my watch and cursed under my breath—make that *thirty* minutes late.

We’d been slammed by customers at the coffee shop all afternoon and struggled to get out on time. It didn’t help that my car took her sweet-ass time to start. Poor Betty hadn’t adjusted well to our recent move to Sunshine Hills, Minnesota. She’d been loudly protesting the sudden change ever since my mom dumped us here at the start of summer break.

Her tantrums only grew worse once winter arrived and the snow set in, but I couldn’t really blame her since I was struggling with the cold too. Neither of us belonged here. We were supposed to be cruising around in the California sun, not stuck in this freezing hellscape for my senior year.

As if to belabor the point, my foot skidded on a patch of ice, nearly sending me sprawling onto my back. I was even more out of my depth here than Betty, and I was really beginning to wonder if my mom hated me. I knew she was off chasing the job of a lifetime in Europe, but ditching me with my uncle in the middle of nowhere, in Minnesota during winter was just cruel.

“He’s not going to kill you,” Mia said. “He’s in the middle of a game, and I’m sure there’s a big crowd. He’ll just assume you’re somewhere among the masses of his adoring fans.”



“Maybe.” Jeremy was laser focused on hockey these days, so I couldn’t imagine him searching the crowd for my face. Not when he had a game to win. “But I’m sure one of the puck bunnies who constantly chase him around school will tell him I was late.”

There were a lot of puck bunnies at the prestigious Sunshine Hills Prep, but only one who particularly concerned me: Heather. Jeremy said they were just friends, but I got the feeling I’d well and truly derailed her plans to tie him down and become his hockey wife when I’d shown up over the summer. I knew she wouldn’t hesitate to inform him that I’d missed the majority of the game.

“I’m sure he won’t mind. Especially not if he wins.” Mia continued her attempts to reassure me as she pushed through the heavy doors of the hockey center. Even after we entered the building, I was disappointed to find a chill still lingered in the air. It was an ice rink, after all, so I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“It’s his first game of the season, and I’ve missed half of it,” I argued. “He’ll be disappointed.” We hurried along the concourse, which was deserted because everyone was already in their seats. It must have been an exciting game because I could hear the crowd going wild. “I’m trying to be a supportive girlfriend.”

“Uh, he’s lucky you’re dating him at all considering you’ve had a strict no-jock rule in place since the moment you realized boys existed.”

“I already told you Jeremy’s an exception to the rule. He’s nothing like my dad...” My voice trailed off because my father was the last thing I wanted to talk about. Not that there was much to say.

My mom got knocked up and then abandoned by a superstar football player in college. She’d thought he was her fairy tale, but instead he’d turned out to be the villain in those cautionary tales parents told their teenage daughters to scare them into wearing protection. I’d grown up being taught never to trust boys with killer smiles and strong right arms and to run in the opposite direction if a guy’s life revolved around a sport. I’d always followed my mom’s advice—until this summer.

Jeremy might have been a hockey star at my new school, but I’d never felt like he was some cardboard cutout jock who couldn’t be trusted. I’d come across plenty of them over the years, and he was different.

We’d met at the library over the break. I’d run in there to shelter from a sudden downpour and found him volunteering in the children’s section,

reading books to wide-eyed little kids. I hadn't realized he was an athlete at the time, or I never would have given him a chance. But we'd been drawn together from the start, and the universe kept throwing us into each other's paths over the summer. I'd well and truly fallen for him by the time I found out he was the captain of Sunshine Prep's hockey team, the Saints. Dating him might have broken my rule, but who was I to mess with fate?

"I mean, I seriously hope he's nothing like your dad." As always, Mia didn't sound convinced. She was a hockey nut, so you'd think she'd be Jeremy's biggest fan. But she'd been warning me to be careful ever since she found out we were dating.

"He's not," I insisted. "Jeremy's kind and sweet and thoughtful. You know I wouldn't be with him if he wasn't."

"Kind, sweet, and thoughtful are not the adjectives I'd use to describe Jeremy Hoffman. Are you sure you didn't break your no-jock rule just to piss off your mom for ditching you here?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Because you know I wouldn't judge you if that was the reason..."

"That's not why I'm with him."

"Are you sure? Because he can be *such* a jock."

"He's not that bad."

Mia stopped and turned to me.

"Vi, everyone at school thinks he walks on water. Hell, *he* thinks he walks on water."

Yeah, my cousin's opinion of Jeremy really wasn't good. I could tell she was only trying to look out for me though. She knew why I'd spent so many years avoiding athletes at all costs. "Technically, he does kind of walk on water," I said. "It's just a little frozen..."

Mia rolled her eyes but then laughed. "I'm just saying maybe you don't know him all that well. You only started dating this summer."

Mia was right, but we'd shared an incredible few months together, and meeting Jeremy had actually made my forced move across the country seem worth it. It's not like I was completely oblivious to what she was hinting at though. I had certainly seen a different side to him since school started, especially when we were in public. As captain of the hockey team, he had so many people relying on him and looking up to him. I couldn't imagine what it must be like to live with the weight of a whole town's expectations

on his shoulders. Jeremy was a good guy though. Mia just needed a little longer to see it too.

“Well, we won’t be dating at all if I’m any later to his game. Come on.” I grabbed Mia’s hand and dragged her toward the rink. As we finally caught sight of the ice, a raucous cheer rippled through the crowd. I shuddered, and not just because I was beginning to think it might actually be warmer *outside*. I was not a fan of hockey.

I’d only been to one game before, years ago, but it hadn’t taken me long to realize the sport wasn’t for me. I couldn’t understand why anyone would volunteer to play in a literal freezer. I could never keep track of the puck as it whipped around the ice, and the game itself was so violent. The players and fans both seemed to get more excited for a brutal collision or a fight than they did for a goal. Also, did I mention the cold?

“I miss the sun.”

Mia laughed and hooked her arm through mine. “We’ll make a hockey fan of you yet.”

“Doubtful,” I grumbled, but Mia probably didn’t hear me over the noise of the crowd. The excitement in the arena was electric, and I was sure Jeremy would be relishing the intense atmosphere.

Mia dragged me up into the stands, grinning broadly at a couple of guys who had torn their shirts off and painted the number twenty-three across their chests. She winked at one of them as she went, and the two guys elbowed each other as they waved back.

“Are you here for the game or the eye candy?” I asked.

“Can’t it be both?” There was a wicked glint in my cousin’s eyes, and she tucked her lone streak of pink hair behind her ear as she glanced back at the topless guys. Mia could be such a flirt and was never the least bit afraid of talking to guys. I wished I had half her confidence. I certainly never would have spoken to Jeremy if he hadn’t approached me first.

“You’re terrible,” I told her.

“I know,” she replied with a laugh. The sound was carefree and contagious, and it surprised me that people often commented that we had similar laughs. It seemed like everything else about us was different. Especially our looks. While I had the same deep red hair and pale skin as my mom, Mia was tanned and blonde like hers. I’d only ever seen my aunt in pictures around my uncle Luke’s house. I’d never had a chance to meet her as she’d passed away when Mia and I were both babies. I guessed that

was another thing we had in common—we both grew up with only one parent.

When we finally found some free seats, I turned my attention to the game and searched for Jeremy. The players were whizzing across the ice so fast with their faces mostly covered by helmets it was almost impossible to distinguish between them. Sunshine Prep's colors were white and gold, so I was confused to find one team was in black while the other was in red. I hadn't been to a Saints game before though, so I wondered if maybe Jeremy's team was playing in an alternate uniform.

I was shaken from my thoughts as two players collided with a loud thud, sending the crowd wild. One of the players went flying, but the other stayed on his feet. He was wearing the number twenty-three, and I glanced back at the shirtless fans who were delirious with excitement. Clearly this was their favorite player, and it didn't take long for me to realize why. With his opponent sprawled at his feet, the number twenty-three took off. He glided effortlessly across the ice, weaving between rival players like they weren't there at all. I knew he was skating at a breathtaking pace, but it almost felt like everything was happening in slow motion and the roar of the crowd seemed to dull around me. As someone who hated hockey, even I had to admit this guy was impressive.

As if to confirm my appraisal, the number twenty-three dodged past one final defenseman and flicked the puck past the goalie. The siren behind the net blared, and the fans around us screamed. They couldn't get enough of this guy. Even I couldn't seem to take my eyes off him.

"Uh, Violet?"

"Yeah?" Mia's tone was urgent enough that I managed to pull my eyes away from the game and focus on her.

"What time did you say Jeremy's game started?"

"At three. Why?"

"That can't be right."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, I hate to tell you this, but we're not at the Saints game. This is a Devils game."

"What?" I quickly glanced at the scoreboard, and my heart sank when I read the two team names displayed there. Mia was right. We weren't at a Sunshine Prep game. Instead, we'd accidentally turned up to watch their biggest rivals, the Ransom Devils.

“This can’t be right,” I murmured. I’d only been living in Sunshine Hills a few months, but I’d heard all about Ransom, the town across the river. While Sunshine Hills was full of large imposing mansions, golf courses, and country clubs, Ransom was more industrial and working class. Ransom High and Sunshine Hills Prep were just as contrasting. The rivalry between them was entrenched and bitter, and while it impacted pretty much anything the two schools took part in, it started and ended with hockey.

“You’re certain the game started at three?” Mia said.

“Uh, I think so.”

“Are we at the wrong place then?”

I pulled out my phone to double-check the message Jeremy had sent me last night with the details. I’d been half asleep when I first read it, but I was certain I hadn’t got the time or place wrong.

But the moment I opened the message, I swore. “His game was at one, Mia. I missed it...” And Jeremy hadn’t texted me since, which was definitely a bad sign.

“It was an honest mistake, Vi. He’ll understand.”

Another crashing sound pulled our attention back to the ice as number twenty-three slammed a player into the boards surrounding the rink and then stood over his unfortunate opponent for a few seconds, glaring down at him. This guy seemed to enjoy hitting other players more than actually playing the game.

He didn’t have much time to revel in his aggressive display though because he instantly found himself engulfed by an angry mob of opposing players. In turn, his teammates quickly rushed to his aid, and the umpires started frantically blowing their whistles and waving their arms trying to stop the ensuing scuffle.

Mia started fanning her face. “That’s hot.”

I shoved my shoulder into hers. “You’ve clearly lived in the cold for too long,” I said. “You’re losing it.”

“What?” she protested. “I like it a little rough.”

“Uh, Mia, are we still talking about hockey?”

“Of course!” She pressed her hand to her chest in a show of feigned shock and then waved her hand at the crowd around us, who were only cheering louder as the umpires struggled to end the commotion on the ice. “And I’m not the only one who likes it.”

All I could do was sigh in response. I really was out of my depth here.

“My poor, hockey-deprived Violet,” Mia continued. “How much you still have to learn about living in Sunshine Hills. It’s okay, we’ll get you there eventually.” She slung an arm over my shoulder and returned her attention to the game. The brawl had finally ended, and number twenty-three was making his way off the ice.

“Speaking of hot and rough,” Mia said. “That’s one of the Darling Devils. He’s going to the penalty box for the hit that started that fight.”

“The who?”

“The Darling Devils. You know, the Darling brothers.” She spoke like she was stating something painfully obvious.

“And who exactly are they?”

“You’ve really never heard of them?”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I had.”

“Well...” Mia drew the word out, and I could see she was only too happy to explain. “The Darling brothers are three of the best players in the state. They play for the Ransom Devils, and they’re lethal.” Her voice lowered slightly as she continued, but her eyes were still sparkling with excitement. “I’m not just talking about hockey either. They have a pretty bad reputation off the ice too. People around here have a lot to say about those boys.”

I frowned down at the Devils player who had just entered the penalty box. I could just make out the name “Darling” printed across the back of his jersey.

“That’s Reed Darling,” Mia said, nodding in his direction. “He’s the Ransom Devils’ captain. He’s destined for the NHL, but people say he’s an even bigger player off the ice.”

“Sounds like a great guy.” My voice was thick with sarcasm.

“Sure, if bad boy is your type,” Mia continued. “I heard he had to miss school last year because he got sent to juvie.”

“Lovely,” I replied. “I’m sure his mother is very proud.”

Mia smirked. “Well, his mother did something right; he is one fine specimen.” There was a slight smile on her lips, and she was gently tilting her head as she looked down at Reed. Despite the fact Mia clearly believed this guy was trouble, she still couldn’t help but check him out.

“Just because a guy fills out a hockey jersey well doesn’t make him hot,” I added.

Mia uttered a shocked laugh. “You’re only saying that because you haven’t seen his face. And he has this scar on his neck that he got from a bar brawl, which only adds to his rugged, rebellious appeal.”

I honestly didn’t think seeing Reed Darling’s face would make me feel any different. This was a guy who played hockey *and* got into bar fights? I was never going to find a boy like that attractive.

“His brothers are just as bad,” Mia added. “Someone told me they beat up a kid at a party last year just because he looked at Reed the wrong way.”

“Seriously?”

“You’re talking about the Darling brothers, right?”

We turned to look at the girl seated on the other side of Mia as she leaned toward us. Clearly, she’d been listening to our conversation and was eager to chime in. “That’s only the start of what happened at that party. Apparently, after they beat the guy up, one of the Devils made out with his girlfriend.”

Mia’s eyes widened before she turned back to me, a smug grin plastered across her face. “See. Everyone knows about the Darling Devils.”

I didn’t really feel comfortable gossiping about someone I didn’t know, but it certainly sounded like the Darling boys had more than earned their bad reputation, so I just nodded at my cousin. Besides, I didn’t have time to worry about how some degenerate hockey players got their kicks. I had bigger problems right now. “I should call Jeremy and check how his game went.”

“But I haven’t finished telling you all about the Darling Devils. In freshman year, Reed—”

I waved her off. “You can fill me in later.”

“Aw, come on, Violet.” Mia pouted. “Can’t we stay and finish watching the game?”

I released a sigh. “You stay here. I’m going to find somewhere a little quieter to give him a call. I’ll come find you after.”

“I think it would be way more fun if you stayed and let me further your education on hot hockey players,” she said as I stood up.

“Except it feels like you’re only teaching me about the crazy ones.”

“Crazy hot,” she corrected me before she turned and launched back into conversation with the girl beside her. It seemed they had plenty more gossip to share about the so-called Darling Devils.

I made my way down the bleachers and walked away from the ice rink to the concession stand in the front foyer. There were only a couple of people milling around with everyone else engrossed by the game. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called Jeremy. It rang twice but then went straight to voicemail.

“That can’t be good,” I muttered as I lowered my phone and started to text him. I went to sit on one of the benches nearby as I tried to figure out what to say. It didn’t matter how I put it; he was going to be disappointed I missed his game. I kept writing and then rewriting my text, but I couldn’t find a good way to say “I’m sorry, I’m a terrible girlfriend.”

Eventually, I gave up and decided to head back to Mia. Maybe it would be easier if I spoke to Jeremy in person.

As I reentered the arena, a siren blared, and a thunderous cheer shook the building. I glanced up at the scoreboard to see the game had ended, and the Devils had annihilated the other team.

The crowd rose from their seats and started to leave, flooding down the bleachers and swarming toward the exit. I stood to one side and waited for Mia to pass, but I didn’t catch sight of her. It was only as the flow of people started to ebb that I was able to get to the seats. Mia was sitting right where I’d left her, ogling the hockey players who were still making their way off the ice.

“Having fun?” I asked.

She smiled brightly as she jumped up from her seat. “Just trying to get my hot guy hockey fix in while I can.”

I laughed. “You never gawk over the hockey players at our school like this.”

“Yeah, because I’ve spent the last few years in classes with those guys, and I know for a fact they’re pigs.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You know I don’t mean Jeremy,” she said with a look that made it hard to believe her. “Did you talk to him?”

“No. I just got his voicemail.”

“Bummer,” she replied. “Well, he’ll be at the party tonight. You’re coming, right?”

“Uh...”

“Violet. Please don’t tell me you’re planning to stay home on a Saturday night.”



"I wasn't going to," I said. "But my mom said she might be able to video call me tonight."

"Violet Sinclair." Mia's voice had turned serious. "Don't you dare stay home tonight to *call your mom*." She scrunched up her nose as though it were an offense to even consider it. Her voice softened as she continued. "You need to live your life, not wait by the phone for a call you know isn't going to come."

It had been a while since I'd spoken to my mom. Because of the time difference, my best chance of catching her was late in the evening, but she always seemed to get stuck working.

"Maybe it will this time..."

Mia gave me a sad smile. "Maybe." She was nodding, but I knew she was convinced I was going to be disappointed when another night went by with no call from my mom. "Just think about coming. I'm sure your mom won't mind if you reschedule for tomorrow."

I let out a sigh. "Okay, I'll think about it."

"Good." She glanced down at her phone as it lit up with a notification. "That's Grant. He's waiting out front for me..."

I gave her a knowing smile.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. "You know we're just friends."

"Just friends who like to give each other rides to parties?"

"What?" she said with a shrug. "It's not like we're giving each other rides *at* parties. And since we're *just* friends, I'm more than happy to ditch him if there's any chance it will help convince you to come tonight..."

"I told you I'd think about it." I groaned.

"And I know that probably means you're not coming. I'll have no fun without you." Her eyes widened, and she slowly batted her eyelashes. She looked like a puppy sitting at the foot of a table, begging its owner for scraps. "There will be dancing..." She almost sang the words, doing her best to tempt me. I didn't really enjoy parties, but she knew I was a sucker for a good dance floor.

"Please..." Mia wasn't giving up.

"Ugh, okay, fine. I'll meet you there."

"Perfect." She gave me an innocent smile, like she hadn't just gotten her way by unfairly dangling a dancing carrot in front of me.

We started down the bleachers together. The arena had almost cleared out, but as we headed down the corridor that led to the lobby, I noticed

some commotion up ahead. It was one of the Ransom players. He was still in his hockey gear and surrounded by a group of girls. He had his back to me, and I could see his surname and number written across his jersey. It was number twenty-three. Reed Darling.

He was tall, at least six feet. And even though he was wearing hockey pads, it was obvious he was packed with muscle. Without his helmet on, I could see he had messy, dark hair. His face was turned away from me though, and a part of me was curious to find out if he was as gorgeous as Mia said. She was clearly right about his reputation when it came to girls. He'd barely left the ice, and already they were swarming him. The way they were giggling with each other as he spoke to one of them made me feel a little sick. He was exactly the kind of guy my mom had warned me about. The reason my no-jock rule existed.

"Those girls don't seem too concerned with his bad reputation," I said to Mia.

She snorted in reply. "I'm not sure why you're surprised, Vi. He's a bad-boy hockey god. He might strike fear into the hearts of most guys, but most girls are handing him their hearts on a silver platter."

"Well, from where I'm standing, it looks like the hockey players in Ransom are pigs too."

I thought I'd kept my voice quiet, but Reed Darling turned to face me, and his deep blue-gray eyes flicked up to meet mine. I was somewhat disappointed to realize Mia was right again. He *was* gorgeous with striking features and the kind of piercing gaze that delved right into the depths of your soul, leaving you a little breathless. No one should look as perfect as this boy, and reputation aside, I could easily see why people loved to talk about him.

There was judgment in the look he gave me though, and his expression was stern, matching the hard planes of his face. The intensity of his glare sent a shiver up my spine, and I quickly glanced away before dragging Mia to the front entrance as fast as I could.

She giggled the moment we were out the door. "I think he heard you."

I shrugged, trying to look unbothered by the prospect. What did it matter if some guy heard me call him a pig? He was acting like one, flirting with all of those girls. They were clearly too distracted by his good looks to be concerned with the fact he was bad news. I just had to forget that, for a moment, I had been a little distracted by him too.

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## VIOLET

“PLEASE, BETTY, NOT NOW,” I begged, as my car exhaled one last broken wheeze and chugged to a stop at the side of the road. As if she hadn’t made her point clear enough, she emphasized her protest to life with a loud and resounding bang.

“No, no, no,” I groaned as I tried to restart the engine.

This day was going from bad to worse. Jeremy still wasn’t answering my calls, and I was running late for the party because I had foolishly waited at home for my mom to call. As usual, something came up, and she had to cancel. I didn’t need my car breaking down on top of everything.

It was dark and below freezing outside, and if the car refused to start again, I knew I wouldn’t last five minutes without the heater on. I had no choice but to get Betty going, so I kept trying to convince her to give life another chance. “I promise I’ll be nicer to you, Betty. I’ll use that wax you like next time I wash you. I’ll give you a nice oil change and check your tire pressure. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I’ll do whatever you want. Just please start.”

Betty chose not to respond, and the engine continued to click. She’d always been a temperamental old thing, but I had a feeling she was on her last legs. The move to Minnesota might have finally finished her off.

I tried restarting her a couple more times before I gave in. It was clear Betty wasn’t going anywhere fast, so I tried calling Mia. There was no answer. I also tried Jeremy, but unsurprisingly, he didn’t pick up either. I even asked ChatGPT what to do, but the AI app simply answered by explaining there were various reasons a car wouldn’t start and advised I consult a mechanic.

I swore and jumped from the car to check under the hood. This wasn't the first time Betty had conked out on me, and I'd always managed to get her going again somehow. Surely, she didn't need to see a mechanic. She was just being difficult. A frigid gust of wind slammed into me as I emerged from the vehicle, and I had to suppress a shiver. The person who named Sunshine Hills must have had a sick sense of humor. There was only one hill, and I was beginning to forget what the sun looked like.

I blew into my frozen hands and jumped up and down on the spot to stay warm as I stared at Betty's engine. I wasn't sure why I thought this might help because I knew absolutely nothing about how cars worked. But I was desperate. I wasn't far from the party, but I didn't want to leave Betty out here in the cold.

I considered calling my uncle for help but immediately rejected the idea. He thought Mia and I were meeting some friends to see a movie tonight. But here I was, on the outskirts of town, about as far from the movie theater as you could get. He would freak if he knew Mia and I were going to a party with no parental supervision. And if I called him for help, he'd find out the truth, and we'd both be grounded for the rest of the year. Luke was taking his position as my temporary guardian far too seriously. He really needn't worry. It wasn't like my mom would care.

I turned on the flashlight on my phone and held it over the car engine. The light did little to help the situation. I couldn't see anything smoking or hissing, and there were no obvious chunks of metal hanging at awkward angles. The engine looked very much like I imagined an engine should, and Betty's mystery illness remained as inexplicable as it had been before.

"Crap. Crap. Crap." I slammed Betty's hood back down. "I thought we were friends," I yelled at her. "How could you do this to me?" To make sure she fully understood my disappointment in her, I swung my foot at one of Betty's wheels.

I swore again as the kick connected with the tire and my toes collided against the tip of my boot. I hopped backward from the car on one foot, only to slip on the icy ground. My breath caught as my feet flew out from beneath me, and I landed in a heap on the side of the road, snow flying up around me.

Luckily, the thick blanket of snow that covered the sidewalk slightly softened my landing. I didn't immediately move to get up. Instead, I stared up at the dark, cloudy sky overhead and started to laugh. This day couldn't

get any worse. I hadn't even wanted to go to the party, and now I'd be lucky if I was ever allowed out of the house again.

"Are you okay?"

A face appeared above me, blocking my view of the sky above. I was wrong. Apparently, my night could get worse. Because it seemed the most beautiful guy I'd ever laid eyes on had just witnessed me yell at my car, kick it, and fall over in the snow. He was peering down at me like he thought I'd lost my mind. He might have been right. I definitely wasn't far off.

His forehead crinkled as he waited for me to respond, and I realized I recognized that forehead. I recognized those eyes. Reed Darling was standing over me, and I suddenly wished the snow I'd landed in would bury me whole.

Despite the fact he'd overheard me calling him a pig only a few hours earlier, his expression didn't brighten or flare with any kind of recognition. He didn't remember me. It was hardly surprising. Guys like him didn't notice girls like me. And I was totally fine with that.

"Well?" He tilted his head as he searched my eyes for an answer. He was probably concerned I'd hit my head too hard. I wondered if perhaps I had. I wasn't feeling particularly lucid right now. This all felt like a bad dream.

"I'm fine," I said, climbing to my feet as quickly as I could. From the way my head began to spin, I suspected I'd been a little too quick.

"Are you sure?" Reed continued. "Because I just saw you yelling at your car and kicking it..."

"Yeah, well, she had it coming," I muttered.

My stomach dipped as I lifted my head to peer up at him. Reed cast an imposing figure from a distance, but up close, he was overwhelming. I often wondered what they fed the kids around here because there were lot of big guys in Sunshine Hills. Reed somehow made the others look puny. If I didn't know he was my age, I would have guessed he was at least in college. There was also something intense about the way he held himself. A kind of cocky self-assurance you only encountered in people who always got their way.

I tried to keep my expression as neutral as possible as I looked into his eyes. It was pretty much my standard reaction whenever I encountered someone this gorgeous. I made myself seem so disinterested in the person

that they either thought I'd lost a few brain cells or that I despised them. And Reed was so attractive I must have been looking at him like he was pure evil. If the rumors Mia had shared were anything to go by, then maybe he was.

I probably should have slowly backed away. I was alone on a dark street with a broken-down car. Not a great time to bump into a guy who clearly had some anger issues. I could even see the scar on his neck Mia said he'd received in a fight. I didn't move a muscle though and was surprised to find I didn't feel all that nervous around him.

"Can I ask why she had it coming, exactly?" He smirked, crossing his arms over his wide chest.

I looked him up and down. There was sweat glistening on his forehead, and his cheeks were flushed. He was wearing exercise gear, and his breath was slightly labored, so I assumed he was out running when he saw my glorious fall onto the sidewalk. Rumors and reputation aside, there was clearly something wrong with him. Anyone who voluntarily went for a run after playing such an intense game of hockey couldn't be normal. Why was he even still talking to me? I'd gotten up from my fall, and I was fine. Perhaps he had a morbid sense of curiosity.

"Why did she have it coming?" I let out a short but slightly manic laugh that must have made him regret asking the question. "Because I'm having a really bad day and she quit on me in my hour of need."

I probably should have stopped there, but the words kept tumbling out. "She had it coming because my boyfriend, my mom, and my cousin won't answer my calls. And I can't call my uncle because I'm not supposed to be out here tonight. Hell, I'm not supposed to be in this freezing, miserable place at all. But here I am, alone, stuck on the side of the road, stuck for my senior year. Just stuck, and there's no one here I can turn to. So, yeah, I kicked my sweet old car, and if she ever starts again, I will profusely apologize, but until then, as far as I'm concerned, she had it coming."

I took in a deep breath as I finished my rant. My frustrations had boiled over and spilled out, but it wasn't just because of tonight. A breakdown like this had been coming ever since my mom dropped me off and left. I just hadn't expected it to take place in a snowdrift in front of the state's most notorious hockey player.

"I'm here," he said, catching me off guard.

"What?"



“You said you’ve got no one here to turn to.” He shrugged, held out his arms, and looked himself up and down. “Well, I’m here.”

I frowned at him because I had no idea why he *was* still here. He’d stumbled on me abusing my car and then watched as I unloaded my emotional baggage into the cold night air. Not to mention that I could still feel snow caked in my disheveled hair, so I must have looked just as unhinged as I sounded. He was here though, and he was smiling like I amused him rather than worried him.

“And, lucky for you, I am,” he continued. “I think I can help.”

“You can help?”

“Yeah, with the car. I know a guy.”

“You know a guy,” I repeated, trying to keep the suspicion subtle in my voice.

“Well, I live with a guy. My dad owns a garage. He’s closed on Saturday nights unless there’s an emergency, but I can call him and ask him to tow your car back to his shop.”

I shook my head. What were the chances I’d break down just as a guy whose dad owned a garage ran past? A part of me felt like my bad luck for the day was finally turning around. But then I remembered Mia’s warnings about this guy and wondered instead if the worst was yet to come.

“Uh, that’s okay,” I stuttered. “I’ve already interrupted your run. I don’t want to bother you anymore. I’m sure I can find someone on Google.”

“Not on a Saturday night in Sunshine Hills.” He chuckled. “There’s only one garage near here: my dad’s.”

My frown deepened as I looked between Reed and my phone. I wasn’t sure if I should believe him. But what reason would he have to lie?

“You don’t trust me, do you?” he asked.

“I mean, you’re just some guy I met on the side of the road, and my mom really ingrained the whole stranger-danger thing into me as a kid.” If I was honest though, my mom probably would prefer it if I was talking to a creepy stranger rather than a jock with a bad reputation.

“Well, you’ve been talking to *just some guy* for a while now,” he replied. “Maybe your sense of stranger danger isn’t quite as ingrained as you think.”

“Or maybe my getaway car is broken...” I nodded in Betty’s direction.

“Right.” He released a breathy laugh. “Well, I’m Reed Darling. Now the stranger has a name.”

“You could still be a danger, Reed Darling.”

“I promise I’m not a danger to you.”

That didn’t mean he wasn’t dangerous at all. Mia certainly thought he was. I kept waiting for some sense of self-preservation to kick in. To feel my sixth sense twinge and tell me to back away from the guy. Apparently, mine was faulty. Not once since we started talking had I felt threatened.

“So, will you let me help you?” he asked.

I hesitated. I needed the help, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted it from a cocky star athlete who apparently just got out of juvie. For all I knew, he was going to steal my car and strip it for parts. Who was I kidding? I couldn’t pay someone to take Betty off my hands.

I’d paused for a fraction too long, and Reed took advantage of the opportunity to pull out his phone and lift it to his ear.

“I didn’t agree, you know...”

But he raised one finger, indicating for me to wait as he listened to the phone ring. As I suspected, he wasn’t someone who took no for an answer. The way he’d disregarded my protest might have pissed me off if I hadn’t been quite so cold and my car not quite so dead.

“Hey, Dad.” Reed’s voice softened a little as he spoke, and his expression became less rigid. “I know it’s Saturday night, but my friend’s car has broken down. Any chance you can take it to the shop?” He paused as he waited for a response. “Don’t worry, I’m sure she won’t even notice.” Reed paused again. “Okay, great.” He then gave his dad the address before he hung up and turned to me. “He’s on his way. He can drop it at the garage, but he won’t be able to look at it until Monday. Is that okay?”

“Yes.” I released a long breath, and all the tension I’d been holding went with it. Now that he’d called his dad, I realized I’d been crazy to even consider turning down his help. Reed Darling might be dangerous, but it appeared he wasn’t all bad. “Thank you.”

“No need for thanks. It was just a phone call.”

It was much more than just a phone call to me. I’d been *this* close to giving up and calling Luke for help. Mia would have never let me hear the end of it if I’d gotten both of us in trouble. She should be thanking Reed too.

“Also, my dad told me to ask you not to judge him,” he continued.

“Why would I judge him?”

“You’ll see.” Reed’s eyes creased at the corners like he was struggling to contain a laugh. “I didn’t catch your name...”

“I didn’t give it. Apparently, I’m the only one who’s concerned about stranger danger.”

He laughed. It was deep and pleasant, and it made me wonder how anyone who made such a comforting sound could be as bad as Mia made him out to be.

“You got me there,” he said. “So...”

“Violet,” I replied. “But all my friends call me Vi.”

“Am I your friend, Violet?”

His voice was friendly, but I swallowed because he was looking at me so intently I struggled to meet his gaze. “Well, if you’re not pranking me with the tow truck thing, I think we can be friends.”

“Good to know.”

As we stood there waiting, I wondered how he wasn’t freezing. His athletic wear was molded to his firm body, and he must have felt the cold despite the fact he’d been running. What was he even doing out here? Surely, he had to be exhausted after the game he played earlier today.

Before I could pluck up the courage to ask him, he put the question to me.

“So, what were you doing out here all alone?”

“Just on my way to a party. What about you? Do you usually go running in the freezing cold on Saturday nights?”

“Only when my damsel-in-distress radar goes off.”

“Oh, and I suppose that makes you Prince Charming?”

“Sorry, princess, but I’m definitely no prince.” Reed flashed me a mischievous grin, which I almost instinctively returned. I managed to resist and rolled my eyes instead. It almost felt like Reed was flirting with me, but, then again, he probably flirted with every girl he found stranded on the side of the road.

“You know, if I was your boyfriend, I’d answer your calls *and* I’d drive you to parties.”

This time, I definitely didn’t feel the urge to smile at him. Instead, my cheeks flushed as I remembered how I’d spilled all my personal problems to him just a few minutes earlier. I didn’t want to dive any deeper into why my boyfriend appeared to be dodging my calls. I still hadn’t heard from

Jeremy since I'd missed his game, and I was trying my best to ignore that depressing fact.

"I can drive myself."

Reed smirked as he eyed my stranded car and the Violet-shaped hole in the snow behind me. "Are you sure about that?" He stepped slightly closer as a set of headlights appeared up ahead. "Because it looks like your car had other plans."

I didn't have a chance to respond as the tow truck finally arrived. The driver jumped out, and I had to suppress a laugh when I caught sight of him. He was dressed in a giant lobster costume.

He was a large guy, built just like his son, with the same deep blue eyes and dark hair, although his was dusted with specks of grey. When he saw the smile on my lips, his expression dimmed.

"I thought you were going to tell her not to laugh, Reed."

Reed was failing to withhold his smile too. "She's laughing at a joke I told, Dad. Not at your glorious lobsterness."

"You cracking a joke? I guess there's a first for everything." His dad grunted before walking over to me. "I'm Danny," he said, holding out his hand.

"Violet," I replied. "I'm sorry for dragging you out here on a Saturday night."

"The shop's on the way to my party," he said. "And it's no problem. I won't be able to take a look at your car until Monday though."

"Reed already told me. And that's totally fine."

"Okay, well, let's hook her up. And we better pray I don't ruin my costume, or Reed's mom will kill me."

Once Betty was safely connected to the truck, Danny offered to give me a ride home. It was remarkably kind of him, considering everything he'd already done, but I wasn't ready to face my uncle just yet. Besides, I was still hoping I'd see Jeremy at the party so I could finally talk to him, and I knew I could catch a ride back with Mia.

"Thanks, but I'm headed to a friend's place near here," I said. "I can make my own way there."

"I'll walk you." Reed spoke with such confidence I didn't know how to say no. I was still surprised he'd stuck around this long and wasn't planning to bail as soon as his dad left. Now he was offering to escort me to the party? He might not be a prince, but apparently, he could be a little

charming when he wanted to. Unless, of course, he had some ulterior motive.

“Well, I’ll leave you kids to it,” Danny said before handing me his card. “Come to the garage Monday, and I’ll let you know what’s wrong with old Betty here.”

“Thanks.” I gave him a smile. “Do you need payment now for the tow?”

He waved me off. “Don’t worry about it. First tow’s free for one of Reed’s friends.” He winked, making me blush, before he headed back to the front of his truck and squeezed his way into the cab, which could barely fit his large red lobster suit.

“That was really kind of your dad,” I said to Reed as we watched him drive off. “And you.”

“Guess it’s lucky we’re friends,” he said.

“Guess so,” I agreed with a smile.

“So, where are we headed?”

I told him the address but then added, “You really don’t have to walk me.”

“It’s not far,” he replied. “And it’s on my way.” He waved his hand, gesturing for me to go ahead, and the two of us walked side by side as we made our way to the party.

I was sure he had better things to be doing with his Saturday night, but I appreciated his company all the same. I didn’t know what I would have done if he hadn’t come along when he had, and I was unbelievably grateful he’d called his dad to help.

“So, you go to Sunshine Hills Prep?” he asked.

My brow creased as I wondered how he knew that. He must have seen my confusion because he quickly explained. “You said you were in senior year, and I haven’t seen you around my school.”

“Ah.” I nodded. “Yeah, I go to Sunshine.”

Given the age and failing health of my car, he was probably wondering how it was possible I went to such an esteemed and expensive school. Betty definitely looked out of place in the Sunshine Prep parking lot. I was certainly the only kid there driving a car older than them. The only reason I was able to go to the school was because my uncle was a teacher there, and my tuition was heavily discounted. There was no way my mom could afford it otherwise.

Reed didn't question my car though. "I'm at Ransom High," he said. He watched me closely as he waited for my response, as if he was expecting me to judge him for it. I hadn't grown up here, so I didn't share the same prejudice against Ransom that most of my peers held.

"I know." I nodded at the Devils logo that was prominently displayed on his top.

He glanced down at his chest and frowned. "I'm surprised you're still talking to me then."

"Why?"

"People from Sunshine Hills and Ransom don't generally play nice."

"Well, I'm not from Sunshine Hills or Ransom."

He glanced at me with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "No, I didn't think you were."

"What gave me away?"

He laughed. "It might have something to do with the fact that you're wearing about ten coats and you're still shivering."

"I wish I was wearing ten coats," I muttered.

"So, where are you from?" he continued. "And how did you end up in this freezing, miserable place?"

I cringed as he once again referenced my deranged rant. "I'm from California. My mom ditched me here for the year to live with my uncle. He teaches at Sunshine Prep."

"Ditched you?"

"Yeah." I sighed. "She got offered her dream job in London and couldn't turn it down. So here I am."

"Stuck," he said, his voice low, almost like he was talking to himself, but then he looked across at me. "I'm sorry, that sucks."

"It's okay," I replied. "I understand why she had to go. Sort of."

I didn't know why I was sharing all this with Reed. A boy I'd just met who, at first glance, seemed to be exactly the kind of guy I did my best to avoid. Before I could dwell on my uncertainty, I heard music drifting toward us from up ahead, and I realized we were almost at the party. As we drew closer, I could see people milling in the front yard, despite the cold, and the party appeared to be in full swing. A few of them shot curious looks in our direction as we reached the front gate, but it was dark enough they probably couldn't make us out clearly.

“This is me,” I said. “Thanks again for tonight. You really came to my rescue.”

“Like I said, my damsel-in-distress radar was pinging.”

I hesitated because I wasn’t quite ready to say goodbye to Reed. Mia had made it sound so simple: Reed Darling was trouble. However, after our brief but eventful encounter, I felt like he might be a little more complicated than that. He was like a good puzzle, and I didn’t want to put it aside until I’d figured it out.

“Do you want to come in?” I asked. “I know it’s a Sunshine party, but the girl hosting it is really nice. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind...”

Reed smiled softly and slowly shook his head. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Besides, I’m still in my running gear.”

It was hard not to feel disappointed. Even more so when he leaned in close and whispered in my ear, “But you have a good night, Sunshine. I hope I proved to you not all hockey players are pigs.”

My eyes widened as I realized he had remembered me after all. I caught the briefest whiff of his cologne, and then he was off, jogging down the road into the night. I stood in a state of shock as I stared after him. There might have been rumors swirling about Reed Darling, but despite everything I’d heard about him, he didn’t seem to live up to his infamous reputation.

Not yet, at least.





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## REED

I WAS SMILING as I jogged back across the river toward home. Violet's reaction when I'd mentioned her pig comment was still clear in my mind—the shocked look in her eyes and the faint pink shine that had flushed her cheeks. I'd definitely caught her off guard. Maybe she thought I hadn't heard her at the ice rink. Or that I didn't recognize her. Impossible.

Violet wasn't the kind of girl you forgot. She had stunning long, deep red hair, and her eyes were such a startling shade of light blue I'd struggled to pull my gaze from them. Her features were delicate, and when she wasn't glaring at me she looked like she could have stepped right out of a fairytale—well, fallen out of one in her case. Between her clumsiness walking on the ice and the way she eyed the snow with such distaste it had been easy to tell she wasn't from around here.

I'd first spotted her well before she'd called me a pig. It was just after we'd won the game and were coming off the ice. I saw her in the stands, and she'd stopped me in my tracks. I should have gone straight to the locker room, but I wanted to get a better look at her. I paused for a little too long, and my sister had rushed up to me with some of her friends. Cammie had just been trying to hit me up for cash, but seeing me surrounded by all those girls must have looked bad to Violet. I imagined it was why she thought I was a pig. If only she knew how terrible my track record with women actually was.

Flurries of snow started to descend as I neared home. I'd cooled down while helping Violet with her car and walking her to the party, but my body wasn't bothered by the chill in the air. Then again, the cold rarely got to me.

I sometimes wondered if my dad was right when he insisted the Darlings were long-lost descendants of the abominable snowman.

In this case, I thought it was something far simpler. I couldn't feel the cold because my heart had been racing ever since I'd leaned close to Violet and whispered in her ear. Sure, she had a boyfriend, thought hockey players were pigs, and lived in Sunshine Hills, so there was no way she'd be interested in me. But she still had me buzzing with more nervous excitement than I experienced before a big game.

It felt easy to be around her, and it was the first time in as long as I could remember that a girl hadn't talked, or attempted to talk, with me about hockey. They were always asking about my games, where I was going to college, or, most often, my prospects of playing in the NHL one day. Sometimes, it felt like girls only saw me for my stick—my *hockey stick*, that was. It was part of the reason I wasn't interested in having a girlfriend. I didn't have the time to dedicate to one, but mostly it was because I never felt like I could trust the motives of the girls who showed an interest in me.

I turned down my street and eased to a light jog as I approached our house. Despite what the kids at Sunshine Prep believed, Ransom was a nice place to live. The homes were respectable, and the people were decent and hard-working. We might not have luxury cars, ridiculous mansions, or a country club on our side of the river, but we weren't terrible people like so many in Sunshine Hills said.

Unfortunately, I was probably part of the problem when it came to our town's bad reputation. Once my brothers and I hit the ice, we fully embraced our roles as the Darling Devils. There was always a new rumor or two spreading about us, and while a lot of them weren't true, I'd abandoned trying to set the record straight long ago. People could think what they liked about us off the ice as long as we were feared on it. Hockey was our life, and if our lethal reputation gave us even the slightest edge, we were all more than happy to play up to it.

Violet didn't seem affected by it though. She hadn't been here that long, so maybe she was yet to develop an aversion to the name Darling. All the other kids at Sunshine Prep knew about my brothers and me. Hell, even people who lived in Sunshine Hills and didn't go to the school tended to avoid us when we ventured into the town.

No one hated us more than the Saints hockey team. Every game we played against them was a major event, and I'd heard there was a dartboard in their locker room with pictures of my brothers and me on it. They all dreamed of taking us down on the ice, but they were either too scared or too untalented to make it happen and we usually beat them. It only made them despise us more, and tensions were particularly high this season because our two teams were forced into sharing a rink while the Saints renovated their own.

Violet might have thought I was a pig, but I had to admit it was a nice change to the fear or the fawning I usually encountered. Hockey was such a big deal at Sunshine Prep though, so it was probably only a matter of time before Violet was throwing darts at my face too.

When I got home, I walked around the back of the house to enter through the sliding doors on the deck. I was surprised to find my brother Grayson on the porch swing. He was sitting in the dark, clutching a can of beer. And despite the fact it was freezing out, he was only wearing a T-shirt and shorts. There really was something wrong with my family and our inability to feel the cold.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked.

"Sunbathing, obviously." Apparently, he was in an even more grumpy mood than normal, and I could almost guarantee he was out here avoiding our younger brother, Parker. His stern expression would have made anyone think we lost today, but I was guessing it was there for another reason. He was sulking because his best friend, Paige, was away for the weekend.

"Obviously," I replied.

Grayson shrugged and ran a hand through his dark hair. Although we were twins and we shared similar features, we weren't identical. Grayson was slightly taller than me, and it didn't seem to matter how many weights I lifted; he'd always been bigger than me and built like the yetis we'd apparently descended from. People had often confused us when we were younger but no one made that mistake any more.

Mostly, it was our personalities that set us apart. While I sometimes felt like I had to pretend to be the dark and scary Darling Devil the world expected me to be, Grayson's stormy demeanor was no act. He was more reserved, and his brow was perpetually furrowed in a way that terrified our opponents, and, well, everyone who didn't really know him. My dad often joked that Grayson had been born scowling.

“So, how was your run?”

I could hear the judgment in his voice. Grayson thought I was an idiot for going running after games, but it was hardly something new. For years I’d been punishing myself by running a few miles immediately after we lost a game. We might have won today, but I hadn’t played my best.

I was also disappointed I’d gotten myself sent to the penalty box for ramming that guy into the boards. Hockey was an aggressive sport, and my brothers and I relished that aspect of the game, but losing control wasn’t acceptable, especially now I was captain of the team. On this occasion, I’d let anger get the better of me. The dude had been talking trash about my little sister, so I couldn’t exactly let him get away with it.

“Run was fine,” I said.

“What took you so long? You didn’t play that badly today.”

“I was helping Violet.”

“Violet?” Gray sat up a little straighter. “Who the hell is Violet?”

“A girl from Sunshine Prep. Her car broke down, and I happened to run past. Figured I’d do my good deed for the day.”

He snorted under his breath.

“What?”

“I’m guessing she was hot then.”

“You really think I’m that vapid?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” He sat back, smirking as he waited for my response. I knew he’d happily sit there all night until he got the answer he wanted.

“Okay, she was hot.”

“Knew it.” His eyes lit with satisfaction.

“But that wasn’t why I stopped.”

“Sure.”

“It wasn’t,” I insisted. “She kicked her car.”

“Ah, of course. Car abuse simply cannot be tolerated.”

I shook my head in frustration. “She kicked her car and fell over. I went to check she was okay.”

Gray was still smirking at me.

Could he tell how much I’d liked Violet even though I’d barely said a word about her? He knew me too well. “I don’t like her.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t. Anyway, she hates hockey players, and she has a boyfriend.”

“Ah. Completely unavailable.”

“That’s right.”

“And probably not interested in you.”

“No.”

“I like the sound of her already.”

“Funny.” I folded my arms across my chest, unimpressed. “But comedian just isn’t a good look for you, Gray.”

Amusement briefly flickered in his eyes. “It’s probably for the best,” he said. “You don’t need to go and get mixed up with some girl from Sunshine Hills. Not when our season is just kicking off and they’re our main rivals for the championship.”

“Yeah.”

“And you know what happened last time you let a girl distract you...”

“I’m not being distracted.”

“Hmm.”

He didn’t seem to believe me, which was fair because, despite what I said, I was struggling to get Violet off my mind. It had been a long time since a girl had caught my attention this way. Since the last time I’d gotten distracted, as Grayson put it, I’d kept my mind laser focused on hockey, allowing very little room for girls to occupy my thoughts. Violet, however, seemed to have forced her way in and made herself at home.

“I’m going to jump in the shower,” I muttered.

Grayson nodded and took another sip of his beer. “Try not to steal all the hot water. Cammie’s due home from training soon and might actually cut off your balls this time.”

I swallowed. “I’ll keep that in mind.” Our sister was always threatening to permanently dismember one of us. I might have joked about it with Grayson, but I’d never do so in front of Cammie. She was the baby of the family and our only sister, but she was ten times scarier than the rest of us. And while my brothers and I were somehow still intact despite her threats, I wasn’t willing to take any risks.

I made my way into the house and was greeted by our Golden Retriever, Stanley. He’d been our family dog for as long as I could remember, but not even his old age stopped his tail from wagging powerfully as he covered me in licks.

“I haven’t been gone *that* long, boy,” I said, chuckling as I tousled the hair behind his ears. That was Stan though. You could be gone only a few minutes, and he’d still be overjoyed to see you when you got back.

I walked through the kitchen as I headed for the stairs. Parker was in there, raiding the pantry—just for a change. He was a year younger than Grayson and I, but I swore the kid ate more than the two of us combined.

“Don’t even think about stealing my Cheerios,” I yelled to him as I passed. They were my favorite thing to snack on after a run.

Parker grinned wickedly at me before returning his focus to the cupboard. He was definitely going to steal my Cheerios now. I should’ve just stayed silent. But I couldn’t be bothered tussling over cereal right now, so I continued upstairs to the bathroom.

Rock music was blasting loudly from Cammie’s bedroom, so I assumed that meant she was already home. Mom must have been out; otherwise, she would have already asked Cammie to turn it down. I wasn’t nearly brave enough to tempt Cammie’s wrath. Besides, she was a lot like Parker and would probably turn it up to spite me.

Cammie was feisty both on and off the ice. With her attitude, she would have made a brilliant hockey player. She’d always been an incredible skater, far more talented than the rest of us. But, while Dad tried to get her to join a team when she was younger, she’d insisted that figure skating was for her.

She’d been obsessed with the sport since the moment she’d donned her first pair of skates. But while the other girls she trained with were all sweet, cute, and friendly, Cammie was a little bit cutthroat. She expected nothing but the best from herself and the guys she skated with, and as a result, she had a knack for tearing through partners. By this point, it was a miracle anyone was brave enough to skate with her at all. But she was that damn good they would have been idiots not to at least try and test her patience.

I hopped in the shower and had barely rinsed my hair when a loud, repetitive banging sounded at the door.

“Reed, I need the shower!” Cammie shouted.

“Give me five!”

“I don’t have five. Gabby’s coming to get me!”

I tried my best to ignore her. I just needed a few minutes to wash my hair, and then the shower was all hers. But Cammie didn’t take no for an answer, and she started pounding on the door again. “Reed!”

“Okay, fine!” I shouted back as I turned off the water. There was little to no chance she’d leave me in peace. I quickly wrapped a towel around my waist before I opened the door.

Cammie gave me an angelic grin as though she hadn't just been trying to beat down the door and rattle the very walls of our house with her shouting.

"Thanks, Reed," she chimed before she dashed past me into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

"You owe me," I shouted through the door. But the water was already running again, so she probably didn't even hear me.

I went to my room and opened the closet but paused before I pulled out my sweats. I was still thinking about Violet. I kept wondering if I'd made a mistake by rejecting her invitation to go into the party with her. No, I was being stupid. It was a Sunshine Hills party, and going inside truly would have been a mistake. There was no way in a million years I'd ever be welcome. That didn't stop me from thinking about it though. From wanting to see Violet again.

My phone rang as I stared blankly into the closet. I was surprised to find it was my dad.

"I've just finished unhooking your friend's car," he said when I answered. "Looks like she left her purse on the front seat. Do you think she needs it?"

"Uh..." I had no idea whether Violet needed her purse or not, and I couldn't exactly message her to ask, but this gave me the perfect excuse to go to the party and see her.

"Yeah, I think she will," I replied before the little voice of reason in my head could remind me what a terrible idea this was. "I'll swing by the shop and grab it for her."

"Okay, son. I'll leave it in the office."

"Thanks, Dad."

I was smiling again as I threw on a pair of jeans and a Henley. Going to a Sunshine Hills party was madness, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

Parker was still in the kitchen when I got back downstairs, his hand deep in my box of Cheerios. I chose to ignore him and, instead, focused on Grayson who had apparently finished sunbathing in a blizzard and was now making himself a sandwich.

"Can you pass me my keys?" I asked, pointing to where they sat on the bench next to him.

He frowned as he glanced up and saw what I was wearing. "You headed out again?"

“Yep. Keys?”

Grayson picked them up off the bench but didn’t immediately hand them over. “Where are you going?”

“You don’t want to know.”

I attempted to grab the keys, but Grayson quickly pulled them out of reach. “Well, now I definitely want to know,” he said, waiting for an explanation.

“Even if it’s something crazy?”

“Oh god.” He sighed. “What now?”

“I’m going to the Sunshine Hills party to see Violet.”

Grayson lifted his eyes to the ceiling. “You’re right, that is crazy.”

“Who’s Violet?” Parker asked.

I had no intention of telling Parker anything, but Grayson responded for me.

“A girl he met on the side of the road when her car broke down,” he said. “A girl who already has a boyfriend and goes to Sunshine Prep.”

“What?” I shrugged as casually as I could. “She left her bag in her car after Dad towed it. She might need it. I’m just doing the right thing and returning it.”

“Of course, you are.” Grayson shook his head.

“Besides, going to a Sunshine Hills party can’t be *that* bad. I mean, we mix with Sunshine Hills kids all the time at bonfire parties.”

“That’s different,” Grayson said. “Everyone knows if they start shit on a bonfire night they’re blacklisted and can’t come back.”

I shrugged again. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“I give it five minutes before those idiots on the Saints have you cornered and start giving you hell.”

“They could try.” I doubted they’d have the balls to confront me, and if they did, I could take care of myself. “But if there’s any sign of trouble, I’ll just give Violet the bag and get out of there.”

“Because you’re so great at just walking away from a bad situation.” Grayson grunted.

“It is a terrible idea.” Parker sounded like he was agreeing with Grayson, but he was grinning widely as he spoke, and his expression had taken on a glint of anticipation. The three of us looked very similar, but I was certain my eyes had never brimmed with the kind of delight Parker’s



overflowed with on the daily. Even Stanley had less enthusiasm than Parker, and our dog spent his life hitting us with his overeager tail.

“So, when are we leaving?” Parker added.

“We?” Grayson’s eyebrows lifted.

“Well, we’re not letting Reed go to a Sunshine Hills party without backup...” Parker glanced at me as he waited for me to agree. There was an expectant look in his eyes, like he knew there was no way I could object.

“Even *if* we all go, it’ll still end in trouble,” Grayson said. “In fact, it’s probably going to increase the chances.”

Parker scoffed. “Stop being so negative, Grumpson.”

Grayson shot him a deadly look, but it did nothing to dampen Parker’s excitement. “Can’t you see our boy Reed here needs our support? He’s finally decided that the constant stream of girls throwing themselves at him isn’t nearly as fun as stalking some girl he met on the side of the road, one who’s already got a boyfriend. Our brother is just trying to follow his heart. Who are we to stop him?”

“It’s not stalking if I was invited to the party.” I grunted. “And I’m not following my heart. I’m just doing Violet a favor.”

“Sorry, did I say heart?” Parker replied. “I meant dick.”

Now Grayson and I were both glaring at him.

“So, are we doing this?” Parker was practically bouncing with excitement. Then again, he could end up coming home with a black eye and a limp tonight, and he’d still be grinning.

“Yes, we’re doing this.” I nodded. “But we’re not going in there to cause trouble. I just want to give Violet her bag.”

“Yeah, okay, Joe Goldberg,” Parker replied.

I went to cuff him across the back of his head, but he jumped from his stool and nimbly avoided my hand. “I’ll get my jacket. This is going to be fun.”

As I watched him leave, I wondered how badly I was going to regret this decision. With Parker on board, anything could happen.

Grayson turned to me once our younger brother was gone. “You’ve had a lot of bad ideas over the years, Reed. But this has got to be one of the worst.”

I shrugged. If it meant I got to see Violet again, I didn’t really care.



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## VIOLET

THE PARTY WAS FAR MORE crowded than I expected. Music was pumping loudly as I entered the house, and I could feel the deep base rattling my bones. It felt as though every kid from our grade was here, which made my stomach twist with apprehension. I was still the new kid and wasn't all that comfortable around these people yet.

I cursed my mom for canceling on me again. I wished she had just called this time. Or that my car had broken down miles away from the house. Anything so I could have avoided the party a while longer. I wondered if I should have purposely taken a wrong turn while walking here with Reed, but that would have meant spending more time alone with him. My cheeks were still warm from the way he'd whispered his parting comment in my ear, so it was probably a good thing I'd come straight to the party.

I sent Jeremy yet another text as I walked through the house. He still hadn't responded to any of my calls or messages, and I was beginning to wonder if maybe he'd lost his phone. Even if he was pissed at me, I didn't think he'd give me the silent treatment for this long.

As I searched the house for my friends, I flashed tight smiles at the people I passed. Even though I had only just joined the school, everyone at Sunshine Prep recognized me because I was dating their hometown hockey hero. It had been quite the surprise on my first day to discover just how idolized Jeremy was. He'd barely mentioned hockey during our summer together, but it was all anyone talked about once school started. Jeremy Hoffman finally getting tied down seemed to be the gossip on everyone's lips.

It made me very self-conscious because I wasn't exactly in the popular crowd at my last school. But I'd somehow ended up popular by proxy at Sunshine Prep, thanks to Jeremy. At least, it appeared like I was popular. Most of the people politely returning my awkward smiles probably had zero interest in me beyond the fact I'd somehow managed to weasel my way into their local superstar's life.

At least they were civil though. Not everyone was quite so happy to play nice with me. The girls in Jeremy's friendship group frequently made me feel like I was encroaching on their territory. Heather was particularly cruel to me. She definitely had her sights set on my boyfriend, and seeing us together brought out a nasty streak in her I thought was reserved for mean girls in movies.

She was sweet as pie when Jeremy was around, but the moment his back was turned, her claws would appear. She was always commenting on how my uncle worked at the school, reminding everyone I wasn't paying my way like the rest of the students. One of her favorite tricks was to point out I didn't look like I came from California before talking at length about how beautiful people from California supposedly were. She said all these things while keeping her perfectly crafted fake smile firmly in place. I wasn't sure why she bothered. If you were going to be a bitch, I figured you might as well embrace it.

Jeremy's friends weren't much better. Each of them had more money than sense and a huge helping of self-entitlement to go with it. They were all on the hockey team with him and acted as though they were better than gods. It didn't help when the kids at our school all bowed down and worshipped them like they were.

Given the kind of people Jeremy was surrounded by, I still had no idea how I'd managed to catch his attention or why he was with me when there were so many girls at school who would kill to be his girlfriend. I often wondered if it was simply because I was someone new in a town filled with girls he'd known his whole life. I kept waiting for some of my shiny appeal to tarnish and for Jeremy to realize I wasn't all that special.

I eventually found Mia in the kitchen with Nicole. The two girls were sitting on the counter, knocking back shots of tequila. Nicole worked with us at Hug in a Mug and was Mia's closest friend. They'd both adopted me with open arms when I'd arrived at the start of summer and were the two people at school who truly made me feel like I had somewhere to belong.

Mia had changed since the game this afternoon and was dressed in a short plaid button-down dress paired with long boots. I never knew what to expect from her. She changed her style as frequently as her hair. One day she'd be dressed like she was headed to a ballet recital, and the next, she'd be sporting heavy boots and head-to-toe leather. Somehow, she always managed to make it all work.

Nicole, on the other hand, dressed far more predictably. She preferred clothes that were darker and more understated, and her long, black hair was always slicked back in a perfect ponytail. She never usually wore much makeup, but tonight she had a smoky look to her brown eyes, which were highlighted with a winged eyeliner.

I was still trying to figure out how to configure my wardrobe for the cold. And while I liked to think my outfits were cute, they were often buried beneath so many jackets I looked more like the Michelin Man than a high school senior.

As she was a fashion designer, my mom was always sending me her latest pieces. Tonight, I was wearing a beautiful white silk top she'd designed. It was perfectly tailored, and I loved the way it looked when I paired it with the distressed wide jeans I had on. But no one would know because, like always, it was hidden away beneath my burly winter coat. I was inside now though, and Mia had promised me dancing, so I could probably lose the jacket.

Mia squealed with delight when she saw me. "You came!"

"I told you I was coming."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd actually turn up." Her excitement didn't last long, and she suddenly thumped me on the shoulder. "You were supposed to be here an hour ago."

"We're just glad you made it." Nicole cut in before Mia could get going. She then handed me one of their tequila shots. "You've got some catching up to do."

I glanced down at the drink. "Aren't we supposed to drink this with lemon and salt?"

Mia was already downing hers, and she scrunched up her nose as she swallowed.

"Pretty sure this isn't a lemon and salt kind of party," Nicole replied. "It's more of an every-man-for-himself affair." She winked before knocking back her tequila. I followed suit, finishing the drink before I could second-

guess myself. It had been a hell of a day, and I'd just survived an encounter with a Devil. One drink couldn't hurt.

"So, what took you so long?" Mia asked as she placed her shot glass down on the countertop.

"My car broke down."

"Shit," Nicole said. "Is Betty okay?"

"No idea. I won't find out till Monday."

"That sucks."

"You should have called," Mia added.

"I did, but you didn't answer."

Mia pulled out her phone to check and grimaced. "Sorry, it's so noisy here. I hope you weren't stuck for too long."

I waved away her concern. "No, not too long. Someone was running past and came to help me, actually."

"That's lucky," Nicole said. "Who was it?"

"Uh, just some guy."

"Some guy?" Mia didn't look impressed. "You let some random guy you met on the side of the road help you?"

"Uh, yeah." Given the way her voice went up an octave as she spoke, I wasn't sure if I should tell her the random guy was Reed Darling.

"This is exactly how all those true crime shows start," she continued. "Did he try to lure you to his car with candy?"

"He wasn't some creepy old man with a van, Mia. He was our age."

"Was it someone from school?"

"Uh." I hesitated before answering. I was a terrible liar, and I hadn't been expecting my cousin to give me such an intense interrogation. "No, not our school."

"What school then?"

My vague answers were only making her more intrigued. "I think he went to Ransom." I muttered, making her eyes grow wide.

"Ransom?" Mia gasped. "Well, you're lucky to be alive."

Yeah, I definitely wasn't telling her it was Reed. "Everything was fine, Mia. He was actually very friendly."

"Of course, he was friendly," Nicole said. "He was probably hitting on you."

"No, he wasn't."

“He definitely was.” Mia gave me a playful nudge. “I told you if Jeremy wasn’t in the picture there’d be a line of Sunshine Prep guys just waiting to ask you out.”

Nicole reached out and touched the ends of my long, red hair. “I think it’s the hair...”

I swatted her hand away, making her grin. “How much have you guys had to drink?”

“A lot.” Mia giggled.

“So, did this Ransom guy have a name?” Nicole asked.

“And was he hot?” Mia added. The concern that had filled her voice when she’d first found out I’d met a guy from Ransom had disappeared. Apparently, it was okay to accept help from strangers in the night if they had a nice set of abs.

I didn’t want to reveal Reed’s name, so I dodged Nicole’s question and reluctantly answered Mia’s instead.

“I guess he was pretty good-looking.”

“Damn, he must have been a total hottie for *you* to admit that,” Mia gushed.

“Well, let’s just say he probably doesn’t have any issues getting girls.”

“Ugh, you’re totally playing this down because of Jeremy, aren’t you?” Nicole complained.

“I’m not.” I drew in a breath and peered around the room. “Speaking of Jeremy. Have you seen him tonight?”

“You don’t know if your boyfriend is here?” Nicole raised an eyebrow and folded her arms across her chest. Like Mia, she didn’t seem to care for Jeremy. I really wished my friends would just give him a shot.

“I haven’t seen him,” Mia said. There was, at least, a hint of sympathy in her voice.

“Me neither,” Nicole added.

“He must be here somewhere. I should go find him.” I poured myself another shot and quickly downed it. That was the one advantage of my car breaking down tonight. I no longer had to drive home.

Nicole also had another shot before she hopped off the kitchen counter. “Well, if he’s in the basement, I’ll let you know. I’m going down there to see if the boys are still playing poker.”

“Try not to steal *all* their money this time,” Mia said with a shake of her head. “You were getting filthy looks for weeks after the last time you

played poker with the boys.”

“It’s not my fault they suck at cards.” Nicole shrugged. “I’ll see you guys later.”

As Nicole headed off in search of her poker game, Mia jumped down from her spot on the counter and grabbed my arm. “Okay, Vi, let’s dance.”

“No, Mia, I need to find Jeremy.”

She huffed. “Jeremy can wait. Plus, if he’s here, you’ll only be on the dance floor a few minutes before he gets jealous and comes to drag you off. Don’t waste your time searching for him. This will be way quicker.”

I ignored her dig at Jeremy. He wouldn’t be jealous. Especially not if he was as upset with me as I expected.

“Come on,” she purred at me. “You’ve had a shitty day, but you’ll feel a lot better after a quick dance. And then we’ll look for him together.”

Dancing did sound a lot more appealing than confronting an angry Jeremy. “I guess we could have *one* dance.”

“That’s the spirit.” Mia didn’t give me a chance to reconsider as she pulled me toward the large open-plan living room where everyone was dancing. We squeezed into the middle of the crowd, and I quickly realized Mia had been right about one thing; it was fun to let loose on the dance floor, and it was a welcome distraction from the anxiety I’d been feeling ever since I’d realized we were going to be late for Jeremy’s game and my day started to go rapidly downhill.

Jeremy didn’t show up to sweep me away, despite Mia’s prediction, and we ended up dancing for song after song. A few guys tried to dance with Mia, but I was almost completely ignored. It was hardly surprising. I felt completely invisible to the male population of Sunshine Hills. No one was willing to cross my boyfriend.

It was fine by me as I was finally enjoying myself. But when I noticed a few Saints hockey players nearby, I was reminded about Jeremy. If they were here, he surely wasn’t far away. I’d put it off long enough. It was time I found him and checked he was okay.

Before I could say anything to Mia, I felt a shift in the atmosphere of the room. The lively and carefree energy turned tense, and a sense of unease rippled across the dance floor as the people around me seemed to freeze in place. It felt like a storm had just rolled in, bringing ominous clouds that cast a shadow over everything and everyone. The people around me were fixated on something behind me.



“Oh my god,” Mia gasped. “What are *they* doing here?”

Following her gaze, I turned and found Reed Darling staring across the room at me. My stomach dropped at the sight of him. He was standing near one of the entrances to the living room, flanked by two guys who were just as tall and imposing as he was. There was no question their presence had caused the apprehension that was now suffocating the room, and a space had formed around them as everyone shrank back.

I swallowed because the friendly expression that had been on Reed’s face when I’d met him earlier was nowhere to be seen. There was nothing kind or playful in his eyes now. Standing there, with his gaze intense and his muscles rippling beneath the fabric of his shirt, he exuded a threatening aura. And the two guys beside him only heightened the sense of danger.

The one on his right towered over everyone in the room, his expression as dark as a cloud full of rain and thunder. And while the guy to Reed’s left looked slightly younger, there was a menacing glint in his eyes and a subtle curve to his lips that suggested he was enjoying the reaction their arrival had caused. I could certainly understand why the three boys had forced everyone to take an instinctive step back. But, as Reed continued to watch me, his mouth twitched as though he was fighting off a smile.

“Why is Reed Darling looking at you that way?” Mia hissed.

I didn’t get a chance to respond as she grabbed my wrist and yanked me away. She pulled me across the crowded dance floor to the door on the opposite side of the room from Reed, which led out to the corridor. I could hear people chattering about the boys’ dramatic arrival as we passed.

“What are the Darling Devils doing here?” one girl gasped, peering past me toward where Reed had made his entrance.

“It’s probably to deal drugs,” the guy next to her said.

“Nah, they like to show up at parties like this to intimidate their competition,” a guy I recognized from my math class replied. “I bet they’re here to make sure our star players can’t play this season...”

“Either that or they’re done with the girls at their school and have come to steal all of ours,” his friend grunted. “Have you heard the way they fly through women?”

“They can steal me,” another girl said with a giggle. “Especially Reed. He’s so hot.”

“Bethany!” the first girl shouted at her.

We moved off before I could hear anything else, but, by the sounds of it, everyone had a theory about Reed and his brothers, and not one of them was good. It was only once we were deeper in the house that Mia slowed. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, finally let go of my wrist, and turned to me.

“Mia, what the hell?” I said, rubbing the skin she’d been grasping so tightly.

“Why was Reed Darling looking at you that way?” She repeated her question with surprising concern.

I frowned slightly, knowing I was going to have to come clean. “Uh, you remember how I told you a guy from Ransom helped me with my car...”

“*Reed Darling* helped you?”

“Yeah, and...”

“And I told you what he’s like,” she interrupted. “How *dangerous* he and his brothers are. Weren’t you terrified?”

“Not really...” I muttered. “He seemed nice.”

“*Nice?*” She shook her head with disbelief before glancing over her shoulder, as if she was afraid she might find Reed standing there. “What do you think they’re doing here? They don’t come to parties this side of the river...”

“Uh, well, I don’t think it’s drugs, girls, or general mayhem,” I started. “I might have invited him...”

“*What?*” She faced me once more.

“I was being polite since he helped me with my car. I didn’t think he’d actually come...” I was suddenly grateful I hadn’t seen Jeremy around tonight. I couldn’t imagine him understanding why I’d invited the captain of his rival hockey team to join us.

“You were being polite?” Mia repeated my words as though the mere concept was impossible to believe.

“What? I can be friendly.”

“I know that. But you chose to be friendly with the scariest guy in a hundred-mile radius. It’s like trying to comprehend a bunny cuddling a rattlesnake.”

“I’m not a bunny, and he’s hardly a rattlesnake.”

“No, he’s worse,” she replied. “He’s a Devil.”

Mia stepped closer to me and put her hands on my shoulders, holding me firmly in place before she continued. "Listen, Vi. Reed Darling is not a nice person. I was trying to tell you at the game, but you ran off before I got a chance..."

"Tell me what?"

"Reed is the reason Jeremy's nose isn't perfectly straight."

"What?"

"He broke your boyfriend's nose, Violet."

I felt the blood drain from my skin. I knew Reed didn't have the best reputation, but if I'd known he'd physically hurt Jeremy, I never would have accepted his help.

"What happened?" I whispered.

"They got into a fight during a hockey game freshman year. It wasn't pretty..."

"I thought fighting was normal in hockey."

"Not like this. People still talk about it, even now. And Jeremy and the rest of the team absolutely hate Reed." I was really beginning to wish I hadn't bailed on Mia's Darling Devils lesson at the game today. Instead, I'd stupidly gone and made friends with the worst of them.

"I think we should get you out of here," Mia continued. "I didn't like the way he was looking at you. And you've clearly lost your mind."

"I haven't lost my mind, Mia."

"You have if you're calling Reed Darling *nice*." She placed a hand against my forehead. "Maybe you're sick."

"I'm not sick." I pushed her hand away. "And I'm not fleeing the party. I still need to find Jeremy."

"Vi, as soon as Jeremy and the other Saints players find out those Darling boys are here, there's going to be chaos. And how do you think your boyfriend is going to react when he hears *you* invited them."

Mia had a point. I hadn't been thinking about Jeremy when I'd invited Reed to the party. I didn't know about their fight then, but even so, I should have known better. Jeremy was already avoiding my calls after I missed his game today. This might be the final straw.

"All the more reason why I should find Jeremy now and talk to him," I said. "Can you help me look—"

I stopped mid-sentence when I saw Mia's eyes widen, and she grabbed my wrist once again. "Darling Devil coming this way."

I went to look over my shoulder, but Mia dragged me toward the stairs. “Quick, get up there,” she ordered.

“But, Mia—”

“Go!” She lifted the little rope that was barricading the staircase and practically pushed me under. “You can’t be seen with him.”

This all felt a little ridiculous, but judging by the reactions of everyone at the party when the Darling brothers arrived, Mia was probably right. I didn’t want Jeremy to see me talking to Reed.

“Okay, okay,” I said as I ducked under the rope and hurried up the stairs. “Thanks, Mia,” I called over my shoulder, but she’d already disappeared into the crowd.

I wasn’t sure how long I needed to wait up here before I went back down again. Perhaps just a couple of minutes until Reed had moved off to another part of the house. As I reached the top of the stairs though, I realized I couldn’t go any farther. At least, I couldn’t if I wanted to avoid the two people furiously making out on the landing. I was either going to have to interrupt them so I could get past, hang out right by them, or head back downstairs and risk running into Reed.

None of those options were appealing. Thankfully, it was dark up here and the couple was so absorbed in one another they hadn’t noticed me hesitating at the top of the stairs. They shifted slightly as the guy pressed the girl against the wall. It freed up just enough space for me to sneak by, but my heart stopped as I moved toward them and their faces became clearer.

That was Jeremy. *My* Jeremy...and Heather.

My stomach plummeted, and I blinked frantically as I desperately tried to process what I was seeing. But there was no denying it—my boyfriend was passionately entangled with the girl he’d told me not to worry about. The one who was supposedly just a friend.

Every ounce of trust I had for him shattered, and my chest tightened with anger and hurt as I looked on, unable to move or speak. I couldn’t seem to look away, and I felt the image of them together branding its way into my memory.

Tears escaped my eyes and slowly spilled down my cheeks. I felt like such a fool. I’d thought Jeremy was an exception. That he was nothing like the stereotypical jocks my mom had warned me about. That he would never

break my heart. Clearly, I'd made a terrible mistake, and the realization was like a sucker punch to the gut.

I didn't know how I would react if they turned to find me there. I wasn't prepared to confront Jeremy. So, instead, I found myself fleeing back downstairs. I couldn't get away from this party fast enough.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I slammed into a hard chest. Two strong hands reached out to grasp me. "You okay there, Sunshine?"

Reed's deep voice rolled through me, soothing me despite the panic clawing at my chest. I glanced up, and his deep-blue eyes were soft as he looked down at me. The cold aggression I'd seen in his gaze as he'd entered the party was gone. That boy had been a stranger. But this boy was the one who'd helped me with my car.

"I..." My voice trailed off as I glanced over my shoulder and up the stairs toward Jeremy. I couldn't see him from here, and a part of me was grateful. I didn't need the dagger lodged firmly in my chest twisting any deeper.

I shook my head. "I'm fine."

I pushed past Reed and continued to the front door. The crowd seemed to part for me as if they could sense my desperation to get away. I didn't stop until I was outside on the street, the freezing night air biting against my exposed skin.

I'd taken my jacket off to dance and left it somewhere inside the house, but I only felt the chill through my thin top for a moment. When I spotted Jeremy's car parked on the side of the road, hot anger began to race through my blood instead.

With purposeful steps, I strode over to his shiny red Mustang. It was parked right across someone's driveway. Usually, I would have shrugged it off as an accident, but tonight, I felt like my eyes were opened, and I finally saw Jeremy for who he was. He simply didn't care. His arrogance knew no bounds. He felt just as entitled to a car space that didn't belong to him as he did to a girl who wasn't his girlfriend.

As I reached the car, I slammed my fists down on the hood. "Jerk!" I followed up with a swift kick to the closest wheel. "I broke my one rule for you, you entitled, inconsiderate, selfish jerk!"

It was lucky his car was a little way down the street so the partygoers who'd spilled onto the front yard couldn't see me. Even if they could, right now I wasn't sure I cared.

“I hate you!” I kicked the tire again. I wasn’t sure if I was angrier at Jeremy for cheating on me or myself for believing he was different. I think it was mostly myself. I shouldn’t have allowed my feelings for him to blind me from what my mom had taught me: never trust a boy who cared more about a game than he could ever care for a girl.

I hadn’t made so much as a scratch on Jeremy’s car, and I wondered if there might be a crowbar back in the house somewhere. There was nothing I would like more than to see the look on Jeremy’s face if he came out to find his baby in pieces.

“I’m beginning to think you don’t like cars...”

I spun to find Reed behind me. He was standing in the middle of the road with one eyebrow lifted and his jacket held out toward me.

“Which is really sad because I happen to love cars.”

My cheeks flashed hot, and I had no idea how to respond. I should have been wary, standing here alone with the guy who’d broken Jeremy’s nose. Instead, I was wondering if he’d consider breaking it again.

Reed didn’t seem too bothered by my silence as he slowly approached and carefully placed his jacket over my shoulders. He was moving with the kind of caution you might use around a wild animal. Is that what I was to him right now? Some feral beast he’d encountered out in the snow? I should have told him not to bother with the jacket because I could no longer feel the cold. But I didn’t have it in me to argue.

“So, is there a reason we’re beating up a brand-new 2024 Ford Mustang?”

“We?”

“I mean, I haven’t done anything yet, but I’ve got a couple of hockey sticks in my truck if you want to do some real damage?”

“You’re going to help me beat up a car?”

“It pretty much goes against my religion, but you clearly need the help...”

Given his reputation, it wasn’t all that surprising Reed was so happy to help. A few minutes ago, I might have just let him. But a wave of exhaustion rushed over me as the fiery anger that had fueled my outburst wore off. Now that I no longer felt the hot adrenaline pulsing through me, the cold night air started to seep through Reed’s jacket, and I pulled it closer around me. As much as I hated Jeremy right now, beating up his car wasn’t going to make things any better.

“What happened?” Reed asked as if he could sense the change in me.

I shook my head. I didn’t want to talk about my anger, my frustration, my embarrassment, or any of the many emotions I was currently struggling to sort through. Thankfully, Reed didn’t push me to respond and was patient as he waited for my answer.

I blew out a breath as I looked back at the house. “Let’s just say I’m never dating another hockey player.”

Reed’s expression faltered when I glanced back at him, and a deep furrow lined his brow. “Never sounds very final.”

“I made that mistake once. I won’t do it again.”

I glanced up and down the street but let out a sigh when I remembered I didn’t have my car. Not that it mattered; I was in no state to drive. Mia wasn’t either. She was my best chance at finding a ride though.

I pulled up her number and gave her a call. The phone rang several times before it went to voicemail. I tried Nicole too, but she didn’t answer either. They probably couldn’t hear their phones over all the noise at the party. That’s why Mia had missed my call earlier, and if anything, the music in the house only seemed to be growing louder.

I bit my lip as I tried to figure out what to do. I just wanted to get home, but there was no way I was going back inside the house to find a ride. Reed hadn’t moved, and he was still watching me with concern in his eyes. My head was already all over the place, but I was finding it even harder to think straight when he looked at me that way.

“Can I drive you home?” he asked.

“It’s fine. I’ll get an Uber.” I started to open the app.

“It’s a Saturday night. You’ll be waiting out in the cold for ages.”

“I can handle the cold.” I couldn’t, but he didn’t need to know that. When the app found my closest driver, my heart sank. It was thirty minutes away. That was far too long. Not only would I be waiting out in the cold, there was also a chance Jeremy would come outside, and I wasn’t prepared to face him yet.

“I’m not letting you get an Uber alone,” Reed said. “Any psycho could be picking you up.”

“I heard you’re the resident psycho around here.”

He gave me a smirk, but a flicker of hurt flashed across his eyes. “And what do you think?”

I hesitated. Reed certainly didn't seem like a psycho to me, but I was hearing more and more concerning rumors about him, and there was no smoke without fire. Right now, I was too cold and exhausted to care. I let out a sigh. "I think I'd like a ride home."

"You got it."

He didn't start to his car straightaway though. Instead, he glanced back at the party with a grimace as the two massive guys I'd seen him with earlier marched out the front gate.

"I should probably apologize in advance," he said.

"Why?"

"Because my brothers will be coming too..."

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## VIOLET

REED'S BROTHERS were even more intimidating up close than they were from a distance. They carried the same cold demeanors that had brought the party to a standstill, and their powerful bodies radiated tension as they stalked down the sidewalk toward us. I could see why Mia was wary of them. Mia and, apparently, everyone in Sunshine Hills.

As I watched the two boys, it was easy to tell they were related to Reed. All three were tall and muscular, and they all had the same blue eyes, strong jaws and dark hair. Their gazes were menacing, and I couldn't help but imagine the fear they could probably instill in others with just a single look. Though I thought the scowl on the larger brother's face seemed even less forgiving, if that were possible. He was just that little bit scarier, and if he had been the one to stop and help me with my car, I certainly would have run in the other direction.

I found myself taking a step closer to Reed as they drew near, and I had to wonder at what point my body had decided he was a natural source of safety, especially considering he had looked just as threatening as his brothers when they first arrived at the house.

"Where the hell did you disappear to, Reed?" one of them asked. If I had to guess, I'd say he was the youngest. Now he was closer, I could see there was a roundness to his face the other two boys didn't have, and his voice wasn't quite as deep as Reed's. He was slightly smaller than his brothers, but saying that was like trying to call a grizzly bear small—he still towered over most normal people.

Sensing my attention on him, his gaze flicked past Reed to me, and a smile began pulling at his lips. His face practically transformed, and a

cheeky grin replaced the rigid expression he'd worn as he walked from the house.

"Violet, I presume..."

"Leave her alone, Parker." Reed groaned.

Parker either didn't hear his brother or didn't care because he stepped forward and offered his hand. "I'm Parker Darling. You'll have to excuse my brothers. They can be so uptight."

The large one grunted while Reed rolled his eyes.

"Also, I believe this is yours," Parker said, reaching out his other hand. I frowned as I realized he had my purse. "I was on official bag duty," he continued, sounding particularly proud of the accomplishment.

"Uh, thanks."

"You left it in your car," Reed explained. "I thought you might need it, which is why we came..."

"Oh..." I flushed, surprised he'd gone to so much trouble for me. "That's really nice of you guys."

"What can I say, us Darling boys are well known for our selfless good deeds." Parker grinned, clearly well aware how untrue that statement was. "And we're especially good to our friends. What do you say, Violet? Want to be friends with us?" His tone was playful, but I couldn't tell if he was being serious or just messing with me. "I'd make a great bestie."

"Ignore my brother," Reed said, stepping between Parker and me. "Let's get you home."

I had no idea what to make of these boys. They seemed so menacing at the party, and no one from school had anything nice to say about them. But they had gone to the effort of bringing my handbag here for me. And Reed had stopped to help a strange girl broken down on the side of the road. Were they really as bad as Mia made them out to be?

Reed lightly placed a hand on my lower back, and I felt a little more at ease around his brothers knowing he was close. He guided me to a pickup truck that was parked a little farther down the road. It was blue and white, and while it had a vintage look about it, the paintwork shone like it was brand-new. Even from the outside, I could tell Reed looked after his car. There wasn't a single scratch on the paintwork, there was no ice crusting over the wipers despite the terrible weather, and the hubcaps were sparkling like they'd just recently been polished.

Reed opened the front passenger side door for me while his brothers piled into the back seat. There wasn't much room for them both in the back, and I might have offered to let one of them take my place, but I was still a little too nervous to instigate a conversation with them. Especially since I'd yet to see the big one crack a smile.

I climbed in the truck while Reed walked around to the driver's seat.

"Man, that was fun," Parker said as Reed got behind the wheel and started the engine. "Those Sunshine Hills guys were wetting themselves when they saw us."

Reed cast a quick glance in my direction. "As I said before, it's best to just ignore Parker."

"We always do," his other brother added in a low voice.

Reed smirked in response. "This is my twin, Grayson. Parker's a year younger than us. Although, with the way he acts, you'd think he was far younger."

"What Reed is really trying to say is I'm the fun one." Parker winked.

The boys all seemed a lot more relaxed now than they had been at the party. Parker was grinning, and Reed had a glint in his eyes as he told me about his brothers. Even Grayson's expression had softened slightly, although his frown was still visible, and he gave me a slight nod in greeting when Reed introduced him.

"Where am I going?" Reed asked me as he took off from the curb.

I told him my address before I fell quiet again. The reality of my current situation was only just starting to sink in. I'd run off from a party I wasn't supposed to be at with three boys I didn't know who had seriously concerning reputations. They'd been nothing but nice to me so far, but who knew how long that would last. Most people in Sunshine Hills wouldn't be waiting around to find out. Still, it felt like a better option than staying behind and confronting Jeremy.

That didn't mean I had to act completely stupid though, so just to be safe, I decided to send Mia and Nicole a message letting them know I'd left the party and how I was getting home. They were going to lose their minds when they checked their phones and found out who I was driving home with, but at least if something bad happened they'd know where I was.

"So, Violet, are you brave, crazy, or both?" Parker asked.

"Parker!" Reed hissed.

“Because the girls that ride with us are usually one of the three.” He was looking at me as though he was genuinely interested in my answer.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m here because I’m desperate,” I replied. “I *really* needed a ride.”

“You weren’t too scared to get in a car with the *Darling Devils*?” He smirked as he spoke their nickname as though it amused him greatly.

“Well, I’d never heard that name until today, so perhaps I haven’t had enough time to work out what’s so scary about it.”

“Interesting.” Parker nodded thoughtfully.

“The guys at my school really seem to hate you, though,” I added.

“They do, don’t they.” Parker said it like it was an achievement.

“That’s because the Saints haven’t won a game against us since Grayson and I joined the hockey team freshman year,” Reed replied.

“Pfft, you barely scraped by with wins until I joined the team,” Parker said. “We all know I’m the not so secret ingredient in the Ransom Devils’ special sauce.”

Reed shook his head and glanced at me. “Sorry, my little brother has absolutely no filter.”

“I’m hardly little,” Parker scoffed.

Reed gave me a look as if to say *see*.

Grayson remained quiet, and he seemed quite content allowing his brothers to do most of the talking. I couldn’t decide if he was just the strong and silent type or if he wasn’t happy about me being here. Perhaps it was because I went to their rival school. Reed seemed to have quickly forgiven the fact I was practically the enemy, but that didn’t mean his brothers would come to the same conclusion.

“So, bestie, I hear you have a boyfriend,” Parker said.

Reed shot him an annoyed look.

“Ex-boyfriend,” I quickly clarified. At least, he would be as soon as I worked up the nerve to talk to him again.

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. What happened?” Parker didn’t sound the least bit sorry for me. In fact, his smile had only grown larger.

“You don’t have to answer that,” Reed said.

“It’s fine.” I drew in a breath. “I guess his head finally grew too big for him, and he decided he was more interested in making out with a fangirl than his girlfriend.”

Parker whistled. “Damn.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that,” Reed added.

I shook my head. “I should have known better than to date the captain of the hockey team.”

The atmosphere in the car suddenly felt tense, and everyone was silent for a few seconds. Reed glanced at me, and I briefly caught a frown creasing his forehead, but then he looked back at the road. Had I said something wrong?

“Wait, what?” Parker’s expression twisted with a mixture of surprise and disgust. “You mean you were dating the captain of the Sunshine Hills Saints?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Jeremy Hoffman?”

“Yes,” I confirmed again.

The boys all shared a look, and it felt like I was missing something. I swallowed nervously as I realized they were probably thinking about the fact Reed had broken Jeremy’s nose.

“Damn, girl,” Parker muttered. “My opinion of you just plummeted.”

“Parker...” Reed gave him a warning glance in the rearview mirror.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I don’t exactly have a very high opinion of myself at the moment either.”

Reed’s frown softened a little and he gave me a sympathetic half smile.

“So, why don’t you like Jeremy?” I asked.

The boys shared another look. I knew from Mia that Reed and Jeremy had a fight on the ice, but I sensed their bad blood ran deeper than that. I was intrigued to hear the Darling brothers’ side of the story.

“It’s *Hoffman*,” Parker said as though that alone answered my question. “He’s the worst.”

Even Grayson uttered a low growl in agreement, and I glanced at Reed to see if he felt the same, but his expression was hard to decipher.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, there’s a little bit of a rivalry between us and the Saints,” Reed explained.

“A *little* rivalry,” Parker gasped. “It’s more than that. Back in freshman year, Hoffman and Reed—”

“Parker, leave it.” Reed was glaring at his brother again as he cut him off. I assumed Parker was going to tell me about the fight, but apparently, it was a touchy subject.

“Okay, okay,” Parker held up his hands. “All I’m saying is Hoffman’s a dick. And now I know what he’s done to my new bestie, I think maybe we should make a quick stop at his house after we drop Violet off.”

There was a look of excitement in Parker’s eyes that left me a little concerned about what he meant by that. It couldn’t be anything good because these boys seemed to really dislike Jeremy. And I couldn’t shake the feeling there was something more than just hockey to blame for their hatred.

“Don’t be an ass, Parker,” Reed said before he whispered to me, “Don’t worry, he’s all talk.”

“Sorry, Reed, I didn’t hear that. Were you complimenting my ass again?” Parker asked.

I might have been feeling down after bringing up Jeremy, but even so, I struggled not to smile.

It wasn’t long before Reed pulled up outside my uncle’s house, and I drew in a deep breath. The porch light was on, and I could see the glow of the TV through the lounge window. Luke must have been waiting up for me, which meant I was going to have to tell him what had happened to my car. I suddenly wasn’t quite so eager to get away from Reed and his brothers.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said as Reed turned off the ignition. “And for bringing me my bag...and for helping with the car.” I was yammering. “Uh, just, thanks.”

Reed nodded. “Anytime, Sunshine.”

I turned in my seat and awkwardly said goodbye to Parker and Grayson. Parker was only too happy to give me a cheery wave in response while Grayson simply acknowledged my departure with another brief nod. It had been a strange ride home, one I wouldn’t forget any time soon.

I climbed out of the truck and was surprised when Reed jumped out after me.

“You don’t have to walk me to my door,” I said as he met me on the sidewalk. “I’ll be okay.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that,” he replied with a smirk. “This is a nice neighborhood. I just want to make sure no more cars are abused tonight.”

“Very funny.” I laughed.

We walked up the driveway together, but I stopped a little way from the house where we were still shielded by the bushes that lined the front yard. If my uncle saw a strange boy dropping me off, I'd only have more questions to answer about what had gone down tonight.

I started to peel Reed's jacket from my arms, already dreading the cold and missing the subtle scent of his aftershave that coated it. But Reed stopped me.

"Keep it on until you get inside."

I rolled my eyes. "I'll be inside in two seconds. Surely, you must be cold."

"Nah, the Darlings are part snowman, so I'm good." One side of his mouth lifted, giving him a crooked smile, which revealed the barest hint of a dimple. It softened him somehow. Who knew devils had dimples.

"Besides, it looks better on you than it ever has on me," he added.

I smiled and shook my head. It felt like this guy had an answer for everything.

"Well, thanks. You don't have to worry though. I'll get it back to you. And again, thank you for being there for me tonight when everything went to hell."

"Not a problem," he said, smiling softly. "I'm sorry everything went to hell for you."

"Well, what did I expect." I tried my best to give a playful shrug despite the fact Jeremy's betrayal was still weighing heavily on me. "Hockey players are pigs, right?"

"Right," Reed replied with a light chuckle. "I can only apologize on behalf of all of us."

He was still smiling at me, but then his face became more earnest, and his blue eyes locked on to mine. "Seriously though," he continued. "Regardless of what my brothers and I think of Hoffman, he shouldn't have done that to you. You deserve better. Much better."

He spoke firmly, and as I stared back at him, I could tell he meant what he said. If the rumors were to be believed, Reed had probably left a trail of brokenhearted girls in his wake over the years. But that just didn't seem to match up with the way he'd treated me tonight, the things he was saying, and the way he was looking at me.

"Thanks" was all I could bring myself to say in response, and even that came out in a hushed whisper.



“Just kiss her already,” Parker yelled from the car.

“And on that note, I need to go pummel my brother,” Reed said with an awkward laugh. “Enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

“You too, Reed.”

I watched him jog back to his truck before I made my way into the house. I’d barely closed the front door behind me when I heard my uncle call out from the living room. “What are you girls doing back so soon?”

“It’s just me,” I replied. This was typical Luke. If I got home late, he’d be annoyed, but because I was home early, he immediately became suspicious. I might have laughed if I wasn’t already dreading this conversation.

“I thought the movie didn’t end for another hour...” Luke continued as I entered the living room. He was sitting on the couch with a beer, watching a hockey game. He was struggling to pull his eyes from the TV even as he spoke to me, so it must have been a good game. I hoped he might be too distracted to get mad.

“Betty broke down,” I said. Though that wasn’t the reason why I was back so soon. I was home early because of Jeremy, but I was hardly about to tell Luke that my boyfriend had cheated on me. Discussing it with my uncle would be the most awkward thing in the world, and I was quite content to spend the rest of the night pretending Jeremy didn’t exist.

“Your car broke down?” Luke finally looked up. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“Mom’s always told me the car is my responsibility,” I said. “So, I got her towed to the nearest garage. I’ll know more on Monday.”

“You got it towed?” Luke’s tone was growing more concerned.

“Yes.” I didn’t want to imagine how he’d react if he knew I’d been on my way to a party too.

“Again, why didn’t you call me?”

“I didn’t want you to worry.”

“If anything, I’m more worried,” he said. “How did you get home? Who towed the car? Where is it?”

“It’s at Danny’s Garage,” I said, fishing Danny’s card out of my pocket and handing it to Luke.

“Danny’s Garage?” Luke frowned as he stared at the business card. “As in Danny Darling’s garage? Did he tow the car?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Luke shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I've heard of him," he said. "Some people say he was involved in organized crime in Minneapolis back in the day."

"What, like the mafia? That doesn't sound right. He looked more like a lobster than a mobster tonight." Luke was now staring at me like I was speaking in another language. "He was on his way to a costume party," I quickly explained.

Luke just grunted in response. "And how did you get home?" he continued. "Did he drive you?"

"No, his son did." As soon as I answered, I immediately knew I'd made a mistake.

"His son?" Luke sounded even more shocked than when he thought I'd gotten my car towed by an infamous gangster. I silently cursed myself. I should have lied and told him one of my friends picked me up. I wasn't thinking clearly though. Jeremy was to blame. There was no room in my head for logical thoughts when the image of Jeremy and Heather kept popping up.

"It's fine, Luke. Reed was really helpful."

"Reed...Darling..." Luke's voice had gone quiet as he peered up at me from the business card. Clearly, he knew about the whole Darling Devil thing.

"Yeah, like I said," I continued as casually as I could, "he's the son of Danny who owns the garage."

Luke seemed to be holding his breath, and his face was going a little pink. Being a teacher at Sunshine Prep, he heard all the rumors that went around school—good and bad. It was one of the major downfalls of having a teacher for an uncle.

"Breathe, Luke," I murmured.

He finally released the breath and shook his head. "Those Darling boys are trouble."

"Well, I was *in* trouble, and Reed and his brothers helped me."

"Reed *and* his brothers?" I really wasn't doing myself any favors here. I just needed to stop talking before I made this much worse for myself. "You were in the car with several boys?" Luke rubbed a hand down his face like he'd just aged ten years.

"It was fine. I'm sorry I didn't call, but I'm home now, and I'm safe. I promise you don't have to worry."

“Vi, I’m meant to be looking out for you. I can’t have you getting in cars with strange boys...”

“Mom wouldn’t care.”

“Your mom’s not the one looking after you right now.”

I slowly nodded as tears stung my eyes. Luke could be a bit blunt at times, but I knew it was only because he cared. But, after everything else I’d dealt with this evening, the reminder that my mom was thousands of miles away when I needed a shoulder to cry on was a little too much to handle. I needed to get out of there before I burst into tears for real.

“I’m going to go to bed,” I said.

I turned and made my way toward the stairs, but Luke came after me. “Vi, hold up a sec.”

I didn’t feel like facing him again, and I felt too tired to argue. I wanted nothing more than to continue up to my room, bury my head under my pillow, and pretend I hadn’t heard him. But Luke was my uncle. He was going out of his way to look after me, and I couldn’t shut him out like I might have done with my mom. With a sigh, I stopped on the stairs and turned to him.

“I know I’m not your mom,” he said. “I might not have the same rules as her or react the same way as she would, but I’m trying my best to take care of you.”

“It’s okay, Uncle Luke. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“I just don’t like thinking of you trying to do that all on your own,” he continued. “If you’re ever in trouble, you can call me. I know Lydia didn’t give you much choice about coming to live here for your senior year, but you’re not alone. You can trust me.”

“I do trust you, and if I’d needed you, I would have called you,” I replied. “But this trust thing goes both ways. Mom was rarely around back home, and I’ve taken care of myself for a long time. You need to trust me too.”

“Okay,” he replied. “I’ll try my best.”

My face must have betrayed my surprise because he chuckled and said, “I’m not always the evil dictator Mia makes me out to be, you know.”

I smiled. “She doesn’t think that.” Well, not all the time, at least.

He gave me a skeptical look, but thankfully he didn’t press the matter. “Where is my wayward child this evening then? I thought she was meeting you at the movies.”

“Uh...” That was another part of my cover story I’d overlooked. “I messaged her to let her know about Betty. She and Nicole went on ahead without me. I’m sure she’ll still be home by curfew.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Luke grunted. “Anyway, I’ll let you get to bed.”

“Okay, good night.”

I continued up the stairs while Luke returned to the living room. “And don’t worry about the car repairs,” he called as he went. “We’ll talk with your mom and sort something out.”

I didn’t share his optimism. My mom was all about fostering my independence, and when my grandma had given me the car, Mom had made it clear that it was up to me to take care of it. I’d always had to cover things like fuel and getting it serviced, and I was quite certain my responsibility didn’t end at repairs. I was going to have to dip into my savings to cover the cost, and there was no way I was accepting any help from Luke. He’d already done enough for me this year. That was a problem for Monday though. I just had to hope it was a quick and simple fix.

As soon as I made it to my room, I collapsed onto my bed. I’d only been lying there for a minute or two before my phone buzzed with an incoming message. It was probably Mia, having finally checked her phone. My skin went cold when I saw it was from Jeremy.

Jeremy: Sorry I missed your calls earlier. Forgot my phone at home so had to swing past to grab it. Just got to the party. Where are you?

I’d barely finished reading the message before I threw my phone across the room. My eyes stung with moisture once again, and I clenched them shut, trying to stop the tears from falling.

I wasn’t just hurt by Jeremy’s actions. I was angry. And the worst part? He still had no idea I was aware of what he’d done. Was he really going to pretend he hadn’t cheated on me? And if he wasn’t planning on telling me what happened tonight, did that mean he’d done this before?

My mind was racing so fast I could barely make sense of my thoughts. How long had it taken before he’d grown bored of me? Or had he been doing this from the very start? I didn’t know, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

There were a few things I was certain of though. I was right; hockey players were pigs. My mom was right; jocks couldn’t be trusted. And Reed

was right; I deserved better.

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## VIOLET

JEREMY GAVE me a ride to school on Monday morning, and I sat in nervous silence the whole way. He still had no idea I'd seen him with Heather on Saturday night, and I was seriously regretting not dumping him via text. I'd decided to do it in person, but since I'd worked at the coffee shop all day Sunday, this was the first chance I'd had to speak with him.

I knew it was naive, but a small part of me still hoped he might be honest and come clean about what he'd done. That maybe he'd profusely apologize, insist this had all been some terrible mistake, and tell me he still wanted to be together. But no, instead, he was happily chatting about the goal he'd scored on Saturday and acting as though everything was normal. He didn't even seem to notice I hadn't been at the game.

He also didn't notice my odd silence, and not once did he ask why I hadn't called or texted him since Saturday night. Did he seriously not care?

I glanced down at my phone, which was constantly vibrating with messages from Mia and Nicole.

Mia: Have you done it yet?

Nicole: Please tell me you have.

Nicole: I hope he cried...

Both girls knew exactly what had happened between Jeremy and me. Mia had barged into my room the moment she got home on Saturday night and spent most of the night either freaking out about the fact I'd caught a ride home with the Darling Devils or planning an epic takedown of my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. I'd told Nicole the whole story during our shift at

the coffee shop yesterday. They were both pissed at Jeremy, but neither of them seemed particularly surprised. I imagined it was killing Mia not to drop an “I told you so” on me. Thankfully, she managed to hold it in. I was already well aware what an idiot I had been.

Mia: I hope he didn't cry. Like that jerk needs an ounce of sympathy!!!

I buried my phone deep in my backpack so it couldn't distract me anymore. Seeing the texts from the girls wasn't making this any easier, and I was running out of time. It needed to happen before we reached school because there was no way I was having this conversation with Jeremy once we left the car and there was potential for an audience.

As I looked up from my bag, the large open gates to Sunshine Prep appeared ahead. We were already at school. I had less time than I thought.

“Jeremy?” I said, interrupting him mid-sentence.

I was a little surprised by how annoyed he looked, but then I remembered I'd just disturbed him while he was talking about hockey. Over the summer, it felt like we talked about everything but my least favorite sport, but once school started, it didn't take me long to realize you couldn't stop Jeremy once he was telling a story about one of his games. Right now, I didn't care, and I forged on.

“We need to talk.”

He laughed and released a loud breath. “We *are* talking.” We were in the parking lot now, and he'd just pulled into a free space. “You know you should never tell a guy you want to talk. It makes them think you're about to break up with them.”

“I am breaking up with you.”

It was lucky he'd stopped the car because his head whipped toward me so fast we probably would have crashed if he'd still been driving.

“You what?”

“I don't think we should be in a relationship anymore.”

He grunted and let out an irritated sigh. “Is this because I didn't answer your calls on Saturday after the game? I already told you I left my phone at home.”

“It's not about the phone.”

“You sure?”



“You think I’d break up with you because you didn’t answer your phone a few times?”

“I don’t know. You girls can get a bit irrational sometimes. Is it that time of the month?”

“Oh my god.” I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. We were breaking up because of him cheating. Not because of a few missed phone calls and certainly not because of my period.

He let out a sigh. “I know what this is about.”

“You do?” I opened my eyes to look at him once more.

“It’s about what happened at my game.” He nodded solemnly. “I’d never taken you for the jealous type, Vivi.”

“Jealous type? What are you talking about?”

“She just came up to hug me after the game,” he continued. “Nothing else happened. You know how excited some of the girls get when we win.”

I didn’t know who had hugged him, and I didn’t care. I’d gotten used to seeing girls throw themselves at Jeremy, especially once hockey season started. I’d always shrugged it off as no big deal, but after seeing him with Heather on Saturday night, I didn’t want to imagine how many fangirls Jeremy had “hugged” over the last few months.

“I wasn’t even at your game!” I shouted. My outburst shocked him and surprised even me. But I was on a roll now. “This isn’t about a few missed calls or some puck bunny at one of your games. This is about the fact you had your tongue down another girl’s throat at Summer’s party Saturday night!”

He reared back, his eyes widening even farther. “That’s a lie. Did your cousin tell you that? Because you know she only wants to break us up.”

“No one told me. I saw it myself.”

“You weren’t at the party—”

“Yeah, I was. And I left when I saw you and Heather at the top of the stairs making out.”

He swallowed, and his eyes grew panicked as he realized there was no way he could talk his way out of this.

“You obviously don’t want a girlfriend,” I continued. “So, you don’t need to worry anymore. You’re free.”

“I don’t want that.” He reached out to me, but I shied away. “Look, Saturday night was a mistake. I’d had too many drinks. Heather caught me

off guard. You clearly saw us at the wrong moment because I pushed her away as soon as she tried to kiss me. Vi, you're the only girl I want."

My mouth dropped open as I tried to comprehend the nerve of this guy. How could he twist the story so shamelessly? How could he lie to me so easily? I saw them kissing. I saw the way he pressed her against the wall. I'd stared in horror for long enough to know there had been absolutely no objection on Jeremy's behalf.

I honestly couldn't understand how I had fallen for this guy. What had I seen in him over the summer? How had I ignored all the glaring red flags he'd been waving in my face since school started this year? I'd been defending him and justifying his actions for far too long, and that needed to stop now.

"Well, this girl *only wants* to be with someone who is honest. Perhaps if your story about Saturday night were true. Perhaps if you'd been up front about it rather than lie about it. Maybe then, I could have found some way to forgive you. But it's too late."

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want to lose you, Vivi."

God, I hated that nickname. And hearing Jeremy say it now gave me the ick so bad I wanted to peel my skin from my bones. He must have taken my silence for consideration because he reached out toward me again. "Please. Just give me a chance to explain. We can work this out..."

I shrugged off his grasp. "You've had your chance to explain, Jeremy. It doesn't change anything. We're over." I didn't wait for him to respond, and I jumped from his car before he could come up with something else to say.

I started across the parking lot toward school, but then I heard feet pounding on the pavement behind me. Before I could turn around, Jeremy grabbed my arm and spun me to face him.

"You don't just get to say we're over," he growled. His cheeks were flushed with anger, and his eyes were a little wild. I'd heard people at school say Jeremy was an aggressive hockey player, but this was the first time I'd seen that side of him myself.

As I jerked my arm out of his grasp, I used a little too much power and stumbled back, slipping slightly on the icy ground. Luckily, there was a car right behind me that stopped me from falling.

"Vi..." Jeremy reached out for me, but I pressed my back flat against the car to avoid his touch.

"Get away from me."

“If we could just talk...”

“No, Jeremy. We’re done.”

I turned and continued toward school, but he called after me. “You’re going to regret walking away from me. From us.”

It sounded like both a promise and a threat, and I pushed down a shiver that crept up my spine.

I couldn’t get away from Jeremy fast enough. Other students in the parking lot were staring at us, which didn’t help. So, I picked up my pace and ducked my head as I made my way up to the school’s main entrance. Thankfully, I found the girls waiting for me there.

“Are you okay?” Mia asked as she and Nicole rushed down the front steps to meet me.

“What happened?” Nicole added with a worried glance past me to where Jeremy still stood in the parking lot. A crowd of people had already gathered around him, and I could see some girls trying to console him by tenderly rubbing his arms. That hadn’t taken long. His head was hung low, and he looked truly devastated. Surely, he wasn’t that upset. If I didn’t hate him quite so much, I might have been impressed by what a good actor he was.

Mia’s gentle touch on my arm brought me back to reality, and I turned my eyes to her. “I’ll feel much better once he’s out of my sight,” I said.

“It didn’t go well, did it?” Mia’s voice was low and understanding.

“No.” I let out a heavy sigh. “I confronted him about Saturday night, and he lied and tried to talk his way out of it. If I hadn’t already wanted to break up with him, I think that conversation alone would have put me over the edge.”

“So, it’s over?” Mia confirmed.

“Yeah, it’s over. Although, he wanted to stay together.” I shook my head. “What kind of guy cheats on you and still wants to be your boyfriend? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“The kind of guy that’s used to getting what he wants,” Nicole replied.

“And he obviously wanted the best of both worlds,” Mia added, her tone laced with disgust. “Such a selfish jerk.”

“Yeah,” I agreed before wrapping my arms around myself as a sudden chill ran through me. I felt like such a fool for falling for his charms. For giving him a chance when I should have known better. Breaking up with Jeremy was painful, but it was the knowledge I’d brought this on myself

that was the hardest part to bear. How could I be shocked and upset when he was just doing what jocks did? It was like getting mad at a cat for chasing a mouse. It was in his nature to cheat, and I'd just been stupid enough to think he could be any different.

I was surprised when Nicole wrapped an arm over my shoulders. She wasn't the most affectionate person, and yet she didn't seem the least bit reluctant as she went to guide me up the steps to the school entrance.

"I know it's hard, but it's going to get better," she said.

"I hope so," I replied. "Because I am done with dating, and I will be one hundred percent sticking to my no-jock rule from now on. *No exceptions.*"

The two girls shared a concerned look.

"You can't just give up on dating," Mia said. "Not because of Jeremy."

"Sure, I can." I had no interest in risking my heart with another boy any time soon. Dating Jeremy had been a mistake, and I should have run from him the moment he'd shown me his hockey skates. Like my mom, I'd learned that lesson the hard way. And, as painful as it was, I was determined to make sure I never made the same mistake again.

Thankfully, I managed to avoid Jeremy for the rest of the school day. We had different classes, which helped, but I also steered clear of the cafeteria at lunch. I knew I would have seen him there, and while I briefly considered marching in with my head held high, Nicole offered me an escape route, which I was more than willing to take.

She insisted she couldn't possibly eat lunch with the masses today because she needed to keep a low profile after her exploits on Saturday night. She had emptied the pockets of every boy stupid enough to face her in a poker game at the party, and she claimed she needed to avoid her disgruntled opponents at all costs. Nicole was not someone who got nervous about confrontation, so I knew she was doing it for me, and I was grateful.

It was surprising how quickly word of my breakup with Jeremy spread through the school. People were whispering about it in my classes after lunch. And before the day was done, I even heard a couple of girls gushing over the fact they might have a chance with Jeremy now he was single. I was almost tempted to tell them their chances weren't any different because he didn't appear to believe in exclusivity.

When the bell finally rang at the end of the day, I hurried to the teacher's parking lot to find Luke. He was giving me a ride to the garage to

check on my car. And after the day I'd had, I was really hoping Reed's dad was going to give me some good news.

I jumped up and down to keep myself warm as I waited by the car for my uncle. I probably shouldn't have rushed outside, because Luke was always slow to finish his day, but I'd desperately wanted to get out of school and away from prying eyes and gossiping mouths. But, the longer I stood out in the cold, the more I regretted that decision. I was never going to get used to the winters here.

Just when I was considering retreating back inside, the lights on the car flashed, and I heard the familiar clicking sound of the vehicle unlocking. I turned to find Mia walking toward me with the car keys in her hand.

"Where's Luke?" I asked.

"He got called into an urgent meeting," she replied. "He told me he was going to have to stay late so we should take the car home. Want to drive?" She tossed the keys at me before I had a chance to respond, and I only just managed to catch them.

"Uh, sure," I said, but then I shook my head. "Wait, he wants us to go straight home? What about Betty?"

"He said to tell you he'd take you to the garage in the morning."

"He wants me to wait another night to check on Betty?"

Mia shrugged. "Well, he can't go with you tonight, and I think he wants to be there to make sure she's not being held in a mafia hideout."

I rubbed my forehead. I might have only spent a short time with Reed's dad, but I felt pretty confident Danny Darling's garage wasn't a front for organized crime. At the very least, I would have expected Reed to be driving a much nicer car if his dad was some mobster like Luke had heard.

"How are you after today?" Mia asked.

I hadn't seen her since lunch, and not all that much had changed during the last classes of the day. "If you're asking whether I'm still resisting the urge to key Jeremy's car, I am."

"Are you sure?" she continued. "I overheard a few girls chatting just now. They were all sympathetic toward Jeremy and didn't know he cheated on you. From the way they were talking, it was as though you were the one who broke his heart."

I let out a humorless laugh. "So, I'm the bad guy?"

"Well, obviously, you're not..."

But apparently the rest of the school didn't see it that way. I should have expected this. People were always going to take Jeremy's side. He was the boy they idolized, and I was just the new girl.

"I could tell people the truth about what happened," Mia suggested.

"What's the point?" I replied. "Even if they believe you, he'll score a few goals in his next game, and then no one will care." That was yet another reason why dating a jock was a terrible idea. People were far more forgiving of their heroes.

She gave me a sad smile. "Things will be better tomorrow."

I didn't agree. If anything, things would probably be worse. I was sure that, by tomorrow, everyone at school would know about my breakup with Jeremy and be silently judging me for it. On top of all that, I now had to wait another day before I could check on Betty.

As I hopped in Luke's car, I made a swift decision. "Screw it," I said, pulling out my phone and punching in the directions to Danny's Garage.

"Screw what?" Mia said.

"I'm going to see Betty."

"Uh, Vi, did you miss the part about the mafia hideout?"

I waved off her concern. "Luke worries too much." I preferred to go without him, anyway. I didn't want Luke feeling obliged to help pay for any repairs I might need, especially since I knew he'd struggle to afford it.

"What about my concerns?" Mia asked before lowering her voice. "You know the Darlings are bad news."

Although I'd heard so many negative things about Danny and his sons, I found I didn't share Mia's concerns. I'd been alone with Reed and his brothers on Saturday night and had survived unscathed. Visiting their dad's garage in broad daylight hardly felt like the perilous task she was making it out to be. I'd be lying though if I said I was completely without nerves. My decision to go to the garage had awoken one lone butterfly in my stomach, and it was gently fluttering about because there was a chance I might see Reed again.

"Well, I've always got that pepper spray Luke gave me as a welcome-to-Minnesota gift," I replied. "I'll make sure to keep it handy."

"I think we'd all prefer if you didn't need to use that," Mia grumbled. She crossed her arms over her chest and sat back in her seat but didn't say anything else. That was about as close to approval as I was going to get from Mia, so I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

It turned out Danny's Garage wasn't too far from school, but from the way Mia complained as we crossed over the river and into Ransom, you'd think we were trekking from the Shire to Mordor. It was the first time I'd entered our neighboring town, and immediately I felt like it wasn't nearly as bad as Mia and the other kids at Sunshine Prep made it out to be. We passed cozy cafés and cute-looking dress shops and a tiny bookstore that was crammed with so many novels they seemed to spill out the front door and onto the street.

The way people in Sunshine Hills whispered about Ransom made it sound like the bridge across the river was a gateway to another world. Ransom might have lacked the obvious opulence of Sunshine Hills, but I found myself drawn to its simple charm and welcoming atmosphere all the same.

When we reached our destination, I found a parking space on the other side of the road from the garage and left the car running for a minute as I gathered my thoughts. The garage looked surprisingly modern. It had freshly painted charcoal walls with white trim, and the "Danny's Garage" sign was displayed neatly above the wide entrance.

"This is exactly what a mafia hideout pretending to be a garage *would* look like," Mia said as she studied the building.

"Please stop calling it that," I grumbled. Despite the confidence I'd portrayed to Mia about coming to check on Betty, it was only now we'd arrived that I began to realize this might not be the best idea. I didn't know the first thing about cars, and there was every chance I'd have no idea what Danny was talking about when he explained what was wrong with Betty. Mia didn't know any more than me, so she'd be just as useless if I brought her inside.

I probably should have just come back with Luke in the morning, but Danny was expecting me, and I didn't want to wait another day. Besides, I was here now, and I was genuinely worried Luke would try to pay for my repairs if he came with me. This was my car and my problem to fix.

"Do you think one of the *Devils* will be there?" Mia murmured. "Maybe you'll see Reed again?"

I'd been doing my best to avoid the thought. But every time it entered my mind, another butterfly awoke in my stomach.

"I'm sure he won't be there," I replied even though there was no way I could know.

Still, I glanced at myself in the rearview mirror and swallowed. I looked a mess. There were shadows under my tired eyes, and strands of hairs were sticking out at odd angles. I looked like the day had steamrolled me—because it had.

I ran a hand through my hair but quickly gave up on trying to fix it. I wasn't sure why I cared how I looked anyway. I was just here to find out what was wrong with my car.

"But what if he is there?" Mia continued.

"It won't matter. I'm not here to see Reed. I'm here to see his dad." I turned off the car engine before I could reconsider and placed a firm hand against my stomach in the hopes of settling the jitters I could feel there. Surely, I wasn't this nervous to see Reed again, was I?

Mia went to unbuckle her seat belt as I undid mine, but I shook my head at her. "Uh, you're not coming with me."

"Of course, I am. I'm not letting you go in *there* alone."

"I'm a big girl, Mia. It's fine."

"You need backup."

"Yes, because if Danny Darling really is a fearsome mobster, he'll obviously be terrified of you."

"I can be scary," Mia insisted.

"I'm sure you can be, but I really don't need anyone to hold my hand. Danny seemed really nice the other night." She looked prepared to argue, so I quickly continued. "Besides, if we're both in there, who's going to call the cops when we don't return?"

She scowled at me. "That's not even slightly funny."

"I thought it was." I smirked. "Tell you what, if I'm not back in ten minutes, you can send in a search party."

"Vi..."

I jumped out of the car before she could object. She didn't follow after me, and I suspected she really was worried she might have to call the cops.

There were several cars parked outside the garage, and the smell of gasoline and oil lingered in the air. A large open roller door marked the entrance, and the sounds of tools clanging and scraping metal echoed from within. As I made my way inside, those pesky butterflies suddenly multiplied. Reed was here, and he was looking even more appealing than I remembered. Wearing a set of dark navy coveralls, he was bent over the



engine of a car. There was a smear of grease on his cheek, and my fingers itched to wipe it off.

He was so focused on the car he was working on he didn't notice my entrance. I took advantage of that and headed straight for the office that was off to one side. My tongue felt glued to the roof of my mouth, and my stomach churned, sending a wave of nerves coursing through me. The adrenaline pulsing in my veins made me feel exhilarated and terrified all at once.

I guessed I had my answer. Yes, I really was that nervous to see Reed again. The more concerning question though was why.

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## REED

I KNEW Violet had entered my dad's garage without even looking. The back of my neck prickled to alert me, but by the time I glanced up from the car I was working on, she was already making her way into the office. I'd been anxiously awaiting her arrival. Partly because I was eager to see her again but also because it was almost time for hockey practice, and if I stayed here much longer, I was going to be late. I never came into the garage on a Monday after school. It usually wasn't worth it because there was so little time before I had to be on the ice. But I'd made an exception today.

I had to fight the urge to follow Violet. It wasn't as if she'd come here to see me. She just wanted to know what was wrong with her car. Still, I couldn't seem to help myself, and after only a few minutes, I found myself drifting over to the office.

Through the window, I could see my dad talking to Violet, detailing all the repairs her car needed. Her brow was knitted together, and she was slowly nodding along as she listened. The slightly vacant look in her eyes revealed she didn't have the slightest clue what my dad was saying, but from the way she gently bit her lower lip, I could tell she was desperately trying to understand.

She was wearing her school uniform today. It consisted of a shapeless knit sweater in a deep shade of green and a pleated tartan skirt that fell to her knees. I'd seen the Sunshine Prep uniform plenty of times before, and she was the first person who managed to look good despite it. But then again, she probably looked good in anything.

I waited outside the office, letting my father and Violet finish their conversation. I made an effort not to watch them too closely and focused on the cars in the garage instead. I would have preferred to watch Violet talk, but I didn't want to give Parker's stalker comment from Saturday night any more credence.

"Reed." Violet startled as she came out of the office and found me leaning against the wall by the door.

"Hey, Sunshine," I said, giving her a smile as I stood tall. "It's good to see you again."

Her cheeks flushed a pretty shade of pink in response, and she quickly averted her eyes. She brushed her fingers through her long, red hair a couple of times as though she was trying to straighten it, and I felt the need to reach out and do the same. I longed to look directly into her bright blue eyes, but she was struggling to meet my gaze as she clutched my dad's quote to her chest. I got the impression she'd been hoping she wouldn't bump into me here. I didn't let that derail me though.

"So, you spoke to my dad about Betty?" I asked.

Her eyes flashed back to meet mine once more. "You remembered her name?"

"I never forget a car."

The corner of her lips curved. "You really like this stuff then, huh?" She waved a hand at garage surrounding us.

"Is it that obvious?"

"I mean, you're working in your dad's garage after school. And I don't see your brothers around, so I'm guessing that means you're here because you want to be."

"You've got that right," I agreed. "I'm exactly where I want to be." The truth was, right now, I just wanted to be wherever she was.

What she'd said about the garage was true too. My brothers weren't interested in cars like I was. Grayson occasionally came to give my dad a hand when he needed some extra cash, but Parker would rather take a puck to the balls than stick his head under the hood of a car. All he really cared about was hockey and girls.

"What did my dad say about Betty?" I tried to sound genuine, but I already knew the situation with Violet's old car. I'd helped my dad check it over, but I didn't want her to know I was quite so interested.

Violet responded by handing me the quote my dad had given her. There was a lot wrong with Betty, and the long list of repairs was going to be expensive. When my eyes reached the bottom of the paper though, I saw my dad had come up with a very reasonable quote. If anything, he'd been a little too generous. But that was just like my dad; he did so many favors I sometimes wondered how he was still in business. I guessed that was what kept his customers coming back time after time.

"I know there's a lot of work that needs to be done," Violet said as my eyes skimmed over the page. "Your dad suggested I leave some of the less serious repairs for now though. If I pick up some extra shifts at work over Christmas, I might be able to come back for the rest in the new year."

When I looked up from the quote, Violet's eyes were downcast, and her cheeks flushed again. She seemed ashamed she couldn't afford to pay for all the repairs at once, and I was surprised to hear she was covering the costs herself. Most kids from Sunshine Hills would probably just hand over their parents' credit cards if they found themselves in Violet's position. Then again, most kids from Sunshine Prep weren't driving old clunkers like Betty.

I didn't like the idea of Violet delaying some of the repairs and taking the risk of breaking down again. Especially seeing as it was the middle of winter. Before I could tell her that, I stopped myself. She'd probably think I was trying to convince her to spend more money at my family's business. Maybe I could ask Dad if there was something I could do to help.

"Sounds like you guys have come up with a sensible plan," I said, despite my reservations, and handed the quote back to her. "She's in good hands here."

"I think so too." Violet smiled at me, but the expression seemed slightly strained. It was clear there was more than just car troubles weighing on her. I didn't blame her after everything that happened Saturday night.

"Are you doing okay after the weekend?" I asked.

"I haven't assaulted any more cars if that's what you're wondering."

"It's not, but that's good to know." I smirked. "So..."

She crossed her arms over her chest, a fleeting look of vulnerability flashing in her eyes. "I ended things with Jeremy today."

She said it confidently, but I could tell it still hurt her to admit. And while I didn't want Violet to be in pain, I could have cheered in response.

“Hoffman is an idiot,” I replied. “My offer to give his car a makeover with my hockey stick is always open. I’m sure my brothers would be happy to lend us a hand...”

“Thanks.” She cocked her head to the side as she studied me. “Given your love for cars, I would have expected you to suggest another makeover to his face instead.”

“That’s always an option, I guess.” I laughed awkwardly and did my best to shrug off her comment about my infamous run-in with Jeremy’s nose. Violet was the last person I wanted to talk about that with. I didn’t want her to think I was some violent thug who solved all his problems with his fists. It never really bothered me that everyone else seemed to think it, but Violet made me care.

What happened with Jeremy had always been blown out of proportion anyway. Talk to a kid from Sunshine Prep and they’d tell you I brutally blindsided Jeremy with a cheap shot from behind. But that was far from the truth. I had to admit I’d let him get under my skin, but all I’d done was give him a hard check against the boards. Perhaps I’d used a little too much force. But how was I to know his helmet would come flying off and he’d end up with a broken nose? The suspension I got almost put me out for the season, so I’d say I came out of it even worse than he did.

“But perhaps an even better revenge would be for you to move on with someone else...”

“Perhaps.” Her eyes seemed to glitter in response, and for a second, I wondered if I should volunteer as tribute. But then she slowly started moving toward the exit. I wasn’t ready to let her go just yet, so I fell into step beside her.

“So, I guess all this stuff with Jeremy means you’re still boycotting hockey players for the rest of your life then?” The question had been on my mind ever since Saturday night when Violet had suggested she’d never make the mistake of dating another hockey player again. I was really hoping she just meant Sunshine Prep hockey players.

She didn’t hesitate to answer. “Most definitely. Lifelong boycott.”

It was hard not to flinch, and I seriously began to wonder whether my dreams of playing in the NHL were worth it. She was completely oblivious to my inner turmoil though.

“I should probably go,” she said. “Mia’s waiting for me, and if I’m not back soon, she’ll send out a search party. I’ll see you around, Reed.”

She gave me a small smile in farewell, but I found myself reaching out to her. She stopped in her tracks and turned to me, a curious look in her eyes. Heat surged where my fingers lightly pressed against her arm, and I quickly dropped my hand like I'd been burned.

"Uh..." I didn't know what to say. I hadn't been thinking when I'd moved to stop her. All I knew was I hadn't been ready to say goodbye. Not when I couldn't be sure when I would get to see her again.

She pressed her hand against her forehead. "Sorry, you're probably wondering about your jacket."

I wasn't. In fact, I quite liked the idea of her keeping it.

"I forgot to bring it today," she continued. "But I'll make sure to remember when I come back for my car."

She'd be coming back. The words chimed like a sweet song in my ears. But the sound quickly dimmed when I realized there was no guarantee I'd be here to see her, and it could be at least a week before her car repairs were done. I wasn't sure I could wait that long.

"Or you could bring it this Saturday night," I said. "There's a bonfire party at a place on the outskirts of town. They only happen a few nights a year, but everyone from both our schools will be there. It's kind of like a rite of passage if you live in Sunshine Hills or Ransom. Nobody misses a bonfire night." I was rambling, and I hoped my sales pitch didn't sound too desperate. I guessed this was what happened when you liked a girl you had no chance with.

"A bonfire night?" she slowly repeated. "I'm not sure..."

"Well, it's going to be a very cold night for me if you don't turn up with my jacket."

"But I thought you were part snowman."

I released a breathy laugh. "Just think about the bonfire," I said. "You won't regret it."

"Okay," she finally agreed. "But I'm not making any promises, so please wear another jacket just in case. I don't want to spend the night worrying about you jacketless and freezing in some field."

"You'd worry about me? That's so sweet."

"I..." She laughed and shook her head. "I'm going to go now."

I still didn't want to say goodbye to Violet, but at least I knew there was a chance I'd see her again soon. "Have a good night, Sunshine."

She playfully rolled her eyes at the nickname and responded with a quick wave. Then, she was gone from the garage before I could think of a legitimate reason to keep her talking any longer.

“You really like her, huh?”

I jumped and turned to find my dad standing in the doorway of his office.

“She’s just a friend.”

My dad smirked. “Uh-huh.”

I narrowed my eyes on him, but he turned his gaze to the clock on the wall. “Are you going to practice today? Or are you planning on hanging around here until she comes back?”

“Shit.” I’d totally lost track of time. I was definitely going to be late, and Coach would be pissed. He wouldn’t be the only one. As captain of the team, I was supposed to be setting the standard for the team and yelling at them when they were late. Not the other way around.

Just this once though, it had been worth it.

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As expected, Coach was out for blood when I arrived on the ice fifteen minutes after practice had started. I was already on his bad side after I spent time in the penalty box during the game on Saturday, so he didn’t take my tardiness lightly. He yelled at me for wasting everyone’s time, and he was only too happy to remind me how important our upcoming games were. The season was just kicking off, but in a few weeks, we would play our biggest game of the year against the Sunshine Prep Saints. They were the one team who had any chance of beating us to the championship this year, and Coach Ray made it sound like my lack of punctuality was going to cost us the whole season.

I was used to Coach yelling, but it was rare that he directed his anger squarely at me. It was harder to take than I expected. This was my senior year, my final year playing high-school hockey, and as captain, I didn’t want to let anyone down. The one upshot of his rant was that I doubted anyone else on the team would be stupid enough to turn up late to training again.



“Hope she was worth it,” Grayson muttered to me when Coach finally ran out of steam.

I gave him a smile. “Totally worth it.”

Grayson grunted before skating off. It was hard to tell if he was signaling his approval or disappointment.

Coach Ray rode us harder than ever that practice, and I knew it was because I’d put him in a bad mood. Once it was all over and we filed into the locker room, I apologized to my teammates. But none of them would hear it.

“It’s not your fault,” Owen said. “Coach has been itching to put us through our paces for weeks.” It was Owen’s first year on the team, so I knew he was probably just trying to make me feel better. His brother, Matt, my best friend, was standing right beside him, smirking as if he found the punishing practice hilarious.

“It was bound to happen eventually, Reed,” Matt added with a grin. “You haven’t been late for something since we were in kindergarten. I swear, you’ll turn up early to your own funeral.”

“What are you talking about? I was never late for kindergarten.”

“Of course not.” Matt laughed. He was probably the one person on the team I’d accept any crap from. But that was only because he had gathered far too much dirt on me over the years.

“Why *were* you late?” Parker asked from the other side of the locker room. His eyes danced wickedly as though he already knew the answer. I hadn’t told him I was heading to the garage to see Violet before practice, and I had no intention of letting him in on the truth now.

“Car troubles,” I replied, shrugging my shoulders. It was somewhat true. There were car troubles. Just not mine.

“Funny, you only serviced your car last week.” Parker clearly didn’t believe me, but thankfully he didn’t press for answers. He seemed content with letting me know he was suspicious of my story.

I changed quickly and left the locker room with my brothers. We had almost reached the front doors to the center when they swung inward, and a handful of Saints players strolled through the entrance.

No one was happy about the fact we were sharing a rink this season. But, seeing as Sunshine Prep was renovating the already monstrous arena on their campus, we couldn’t be sure how long the arrangement would last. I’d played a few games there in previous seasons, and I had no idea why

they thought it needed improving. It was already incredible. Knowing the pretentious pricks that went to that school, they were probably importing ice direct from Switzerland.

"I still can't believe we're stuck training in this dump," one of the Sunshine Prep players said as the doors swung shut behind them. Before he could say anything else, his teammate spotted us and elbowed him in the ribs. They all froze, and I saw a flash of fear in the eyes of the guy who had spoken. They were probably freshman. All the kids on the Saints were scared of us, but at least the older guys managed to hide it a little better.

I stared back at them, keeping my expression cold and hard. I knew my brothers' faces mirrored my own. I'd never been all that fond of the reputation we'd developed over the years, but in moments like these, it felt worth it.

"If you don't like it, you're welcome to leave at any time," I said.

"We're not going anywhere." Jeremy Hoffman appeared from the back of the group, puffing his chest out like the little superhero he believed he was. He was wearing that ever-present superior smirk of his, and a low growl rumbled from deep in my chest. I had plenty of good reasons for despising the captain of the Saints, but knowing what he did to Violet made the hatred flooding my veins burn even hotter.

He signaled for his teammates to keep moving into the arena, but as he passed by me, he slammed his shoulder into mine.

"Watch it, Hoffman," I hissed at him.

"Or what, Darling?" he barked back, spinning round to face me.

My jaw tightened, and my hands clenched. I was desperate to wipe the smirk off his stupid face, and I might have done just that, but Grayson grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me outside before I got the chance. Parker followed right behind him, my brothers making certain I didn't do anything I'd regret. They knew how important this season was to me, and I couldn't let anything derail it. If I took my anger out on Hoffman, like I so badly wanted to, I could face serious consequences.

"What are you thinking?" Grayson hissed, finally letting go of me as we reached my car.

"That someone needs to shut Hoffman up."

"Yeah, that's true," Parker replied, folding his arms over his chest. "But you know what happened last time you took on Hoffman. And Coach has already told us that anyone who starts shit with the Saints while we're

sharing the rink gets benched. You don't want to get on his bad side." There was a serious look in his eyes, which showed my brother knew just how close I'd been to messing up. Parker was the last person I'd expect to come down so hard on me, but if I couldn't play, then the whole team would be screwed. And hockey was the one thing in life Parker took seriously.

"I wasn't going to do anything."

Parker's eyebrows shot up with disbelief. "Dude, you growled at him like a mountain lion about to launch into battle."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm allowed to growl."

"Pretty sure the only time growling is allowed is in one of those dirty books Mom likes to read," he replied. "Back me up here, Gray."

"I don't know how you know what's in Mom's books," Grayson said to Parker before turning to me. "But he's right about starting shit. If you get benched this season, or worse, suspended like freshman year, you can kiss your spot on the Raiders next year goodbye. Hoffman's not worth it. Don't ruin your future because of him. Or because of a girl you just met."

"I told you I wasn't going to do anything." I threw my hands up in the air, trying to prove my innocence. I wondered what Grayson would think if he knew I'd been questioning all my career goals to get around Violet's no-hockey-players rule.

"Only because we intervened," Grayson replied. I went to argue again, but my brother continued. "Save the dramatics for the ice. If you want to make Hoffman pay for what he did to Violet, and everything else, do it at our game against them in a few weeks."

I exhaled loudly, the tension in my shoulders releasing with the breath. "Okay, you're right."

"I usually am," Grayson replied.

Once they were sure I'd finally regained my cool, my brothers ditched their gear in Grayson's car, and I slowly made my way toward my truck. I might not have made Hoffman regret cheating on Violet tonight, but I was certainly going to make him pay for it at our game. I just wished I didn't have to wait so long to teach him a lesson.



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## VIOLET

IT WAS AMAZING how quickly you could become repulsed by someone you once thought might be the love of your life. One moment, all you can think about is his warm brown eyes and soft dark hair. The next, you realize his hair is actually a little greasy, and his eyes are closer to the color of mud than honey. Even his voice, which was once soft and melodic suddenly sounds more like the whining purr of a drone.

My newfound feelings of disgust for Jeremy were only exacerbated in the week following our breakup as he seemed to embrace the egotistical jock stereotype I'd always tried to avoid. Gone was the sweet boy I'd fallen for over the summer, and out of the shadows emerged a new beast—*Jerkemy*.

I couldn't seem to escape him. It was like he was everywhere. At school, he seemed a little bit louder than usual in classes and laughed slightly harder in the corridors when I was near. His sweet summer smiles had disappeared, and in their place, I saw leering looks as he checked out every girl that passed. It made me want to throw up.

He had a constant rotation of girls hooked on his arm, "consoling" him. And given the ease with which he joked and laughed with his friends, it appeared as though I was already nothing more than a distant memory. I wished I could forget our relationship just as easily, but I was still trying to figure out exactly who I'd been dating these last few months.

"If hockey doesn't work out for him, Jeremy should go into politics," Nicole said as the two of us watched his latest performance at lunch. "That guy knows how to spin a story in his favor."

Jeremy had been telling anyone who would listen to him, which was, well, everyone at school, how I'd broken his heart. And he was currently lamenting the sad tale to some junior who'd sauntered over to his table. He had an arm draped over her shoulders, and while his eyes were big and heartfelt when he looked at her, he kept turning to wink at his sniggering friends.

"Surely she's not falling for that act," I said.

"*You* fell for that act," Nicole replied.

"He wasn't nearly this obnoxious and this obvious around me, was he?" I didn't give Nicole a chance to answer my hypothetical question because a part of me already knew what she'd say. "Besides, that girl looks smarter than me. Ten bucks says she tries to get away from him asap."

"Get away from him?" Nicole snorted. "Ten bucks says she tries to get closer."

I turned in my chair to continue watching the show. I kept waiting for the girl to scoff and walk off or, better still, laugh at how pathetic Jeremy was. But instead, her eyes were growing wider and filling with sympathy.

"Oh no," I groaned as she pulled him in for a hug.

"Winner!" Nicole crowed. "She barely lasted a minute. You should already know never to bet against me."

"Apparently, I'm determined to learn things the hard way this year," I grumbled as I turned my attention to my lunch and took a bite of my pizza slice. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Jeremy can charm anyone. It's only now I see his talent for what it really is: *manipulation*."

Nicole nodded. "He sure knows exactly what to say to make someone like him."

"Totally," I agreed. "And I fell for his act hook, line, and sinker."

"Don't beat yourself up. He is very convincing when he wants to be," Nicole replied.

"I guess." It still didn't make me feel much better. I should have known something was off with Jeremy once I realized my friends didn't like him. The one consolation was that I was free of him now.

"Hey," Mia said as she joined us. She plopped down onto the seat beside me, letting out a sigh as she placed her lunch tray on the table. Her nose scrunched as she scrutinized the salad on her plate.

"What's wrong?" I asked as she picked up her fork and started poking at the food.

“They only had salad left. A salad! Do I look like a rabbit?” She practically yelled the words as she stabbed a piece of lettuce and lifted it in the air. “This is what happens when you have a debating meeting at lunch.”

I laughed and swapped her plate with mine. “Here.”

“Vi, I can’t take your pizza.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind salad, and I already had a slice. Plus, I owe you after getting you in trouble with Luke.”

My uncle wasn’t happy when he found out I’d gone to Danny’s Garage without him, and he’d accused poor Mia of being an accomplice. She hadn’t even gone inside, and she certainly hadn’t wanted to be there. And yet, she’d landed in trouble right beside me.

By some miracle, neither one of us were grounded, and I think it was mostly because I’d reminded Luke that we were supposed to be building trust. He needed to have confidence in my ability to take care of these things myself. However, he also reminded me that I had to meet him halfway and trust him enough to actually follow his advice every now and then. It was a typical Luke response, but I understood where he was coming from, and he hadn’t mentioned it since. Still, I hated I’d gotten Mia in trouble.

“You sure?” Mia asked. “I think Dad’s already over it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I said. “Besides, I’ve suddenly lost my appetite.”

Mia glanced in Jeremy’s direction before giving me a sympathetic look. I didn’t need to follow her gaze to know he was still chatting up the junior girl. “Don’t let him get to you,” she said. “I’m beginning to think he’s only putting on such a big show so he can win you back.”

“What?” I shook my head in disbelief. “You can’t be serious.”

“Haven’t you noticed the way he’s always checking to see if you’re watching?”

“No...”

“Well, he’s been doing it all week. And the way he keeps going on about how much he still cares for you. He’s clearly trying to get you back.”

“How can he be trying to get me back if he hasn’t even talked to me?”

Mia shrugged. “He’s probably biding his time. Giving you a few days to calm down and realize how much you miss him.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen.”

“Obviously. But he doesn’t know that.”

I couldn't decide if Mia was reading the situation completely wrong or if Jeremy was arrogant enough to believe I might be able to get past what he'd done. I prayed, for both our sakes, he wasn't planning to win me back. There was no way I was giving him another chance.

"Let's just hope you're wrong," I finally said to Mia.

"I don't think I am," she replied. "But I hope so too." She sighed and gave me a grateful smile as she went to take a bite of the pizza I'd given her. "Enough about Jeremy. We have much more important things to talk about. Like Violet's first bonfire party this Saturday. You're coming, right?"

I groaned. "Not you too."

Her brow furrowed with confusion as she glanced at Nicole. "Have you already started trying to convince her to come with us?"

"Nope. Not me," Nicole replied. "I figured I'd wait for you. You're far more persuasive."

Mia turned to me, an expectant look on her face. She clearly wanted to know who had mentioned the party to me, but I wasn't ready to tell her about Reed's invite. I decided it would be better to try to avoid the whole thing entirely.

"The fact you think I need persuading tells me everything I need to know about bonfire nights. Besides, it's been a tough week. I don't think I'm in a bonfire party mood."

"But they're so fun," Mia replied. "Pretty much everyone goes. From Sunshine Hills and Ransom. You can't miss it."

"It sounds like a recipe for disaster," I said. "I thought kids from Sunshine Hills and Ransom hated each other." I could still remember the tension in the room at Summer's party when Reed and his brothers arrived.

"Not on bonfire nights," Nicole explained. "They're kind of like a neutral territory, and since the parties are so good, no wants to mess that up."

"That's right," Mia added. "Annabelle Doyle's family owns a huge farm outside town, and she hosts the parties out in one of the fields with her brother, Jasper. He goes to Ransom, but she's here on a scholarship. They have friends at both schools, so they make it work. Anyone who starts shit on bonfire nights is banned from returning. Please come, I promise you'll have a good time."

"What if Jeremy's there?"



“If you worry about that, you won’t go to a party for the rest of your senior year,” Mia said. “Besides, it’s in a big-ass field, and there will be tons of people, so it shouldn’t be hard to avoid him.”

I still didn’t feel convinced, and it didn’t help that I knew Reed was going to be there. He made me nervous, and I wasn’t quite sure why. He’d been nothing but nice to me so far despite the fact Mia was adamant I should steer well clear of him. I hadn’t listened to her warnings about Jeremy, and that turned out to be a huge mistake. So, Reed was just going to have to survive without his jacket a while longer.

“I still think I’d rather spend Saturday night with a tub of ice cream,” I said. “But you guys go, and you can tell me all about it on Sunday.”

The end-of-lunch bell rang before Mia could say anything else, and her eyes narrowed on me. “This conversation isn’t over,” she said. “I’ll convince you yet.”

“We’ll see,” I murmured, but I didn’t like her chances.

The cafeteria emptied quickly, and the three of us all had different classes, so we went our separate ways. I hurried to my locker to pick up the books I needed, but I froze when I rounded the corner and it came into view down the corridor. Jeremy was leaning against my locker, waiting for me.

I briefly considered turning around and running in the opposite direction. But Mia’s advice was still clear in my mind. She’d told me not to let him get to me, so I squared my shoulders and continued to my locker.

“What do you want, Jeremy?” I demanded when I reached him. My words were laced with hostility, but he seemed completely unaffected by them. He gave me a timid smile as if my sharp tone was nothing more than a gentle breeze passing by. Just a few days ago, I might have melted at that smile. But not now. Not anymore.

“I wanted to see how you were doing,” he said.

A few people glanced our way as they passed, but thankfully no one was within earshot as they were all too busy hurrying to their next class.

“I’m doing fine,” I said. “And I’m late for class.”

I reached for my locker door, and he reluctantly edged out of my way.

“I’ll walk you there,” he suggested. Was he really not going to take the hint?

I did my best to ignore him, but it was a little difficult when he was leaning against the locker next to mine, watching me search for my books mere inches away.

“Please,” he said. “Can we just talk for a sec?”

I stubbornly kept my gaze on the contents of my locker. “What’s there to talk about? We’re over.”

“Come on, Vi. Don’t be like that. We belong together, you know that. Yes, I messed up, but you’ll get over it.”

My blood started to boil, thick and hot with anger. I couldn’t believe the nerve of him. He’d been openly flirting with another girl in the cafeteria moments ago. Was he seriously delusional enough to think he still had a chance with me? Any talk of us getting back together needed to come to an end, so I turned to him.

“Jeremy, you cheated on me. If that’s not a sign we don’t belong together, then I don’t know what is. I’m not over it. I don’t plan to get over it. We’re done, and nothing is going to change that.”

He visibly winced. “How many times do I have to tell you it was a mistake? I’d had a few drinks, and I wasn’t thinking. I would never do that to you again.”

“I know,” I said. “Because I won’t give you the chance.”

“Violet.” His voice grew lower and shook slightly, revealing the intensity of his emotions. “I fell for you this summer, and you’re the only girl I want to be with. I know I’m not perfect, but give me a chance, and I’ll show you I can be better.”

“I fell for someone this summer too,” I replied. “But it wasn’t the guy standing before me.”

My hands were shaky as I shoved my books into my bag. Did he really have to stand so close while he professed his feelings for me?

“I’m still the same guy,” he insisted.

He reached for me again, but I stepped back from him. “Just leave me alone, Jeremy.”

He grunted, and the tenderness in his eyes vanished. “I can see you’re still angry,” he said flatly. “And I’m trying to be understanding, but I can only be patient for so long.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing this week? Being patient?”

“You need to get over this, Vivi. Or you will lose me. And like I told you before, you’ll regret it.”

“My name is Violet. And I’m quite sure I’ll never regret it.” I slammed my locker shut and walked away before Jeremy could get another word in.

He must have lost his mind if he thought I'd get back with him. Especially when the way he'd acted this week made me question if he'd ever cared about me at all. Did he honestly believe that parading around school with other girls would make me reconsider? That I could get over him cheating so fast?

More importantly, was I seriously going to miss a night out with my friends to curl up with a tub of ice cream and mourn the loss of this jerk? The bonfire was looking more and more appealing. And I refused to let a stupid hockey player ruin another night for me.

I just had to ignore the fact it had been a certain rival hockey captain that had invited me to the bonfire in the first place.

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## REED

“WHY ARE YOU SO NERVOUS?”

“I’m not.” I didn’t look at Parker as I answered, keeping my eyes locked firmly on the road ahead.

“You look more nervous than a beauty queen who’s waiting for the judges to announce the winner of the pageant.”

I rolled my eyes. Mom had been watching some Miss World-style pageant on TV last night, and although Parker had complained about it, he’d clearly been paying attention.

“I must not look nervous at all then,” I replied. “Those beauty queens are masters of composure.”

“I never said you were a good beauty queen.” Parker smirked in response.

I cursed Grayson for deciding to drive Paige to the bonfire party tonight, leaving me stuck with the world’s most annoying sibling. Luckily, we’d just arrived at the Doyles’ property, so I wouldn’t be trapped for much longer. I turned off the engine and eagerly jumped from the vehicle. It was a cloudless night, so the air was crisp and cold. I welcomed the chill though; at least I was no longer cooped up with Parker.

“You’re nervous because your *girlfriend* might be here tonight, right?” It seemed there was no escaping Parker as he walked around the front of the truck to join me. He’d been badgering me about Violet the entire way here, and I seriously wished he’d never found out about her.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I growled.

“But you want her to be. I bet she is coming tonight. Bonfire parties are the one and only time Sunshine Prep kids slum it with us.”

I leaned against my truck, trying to ignore Parker as I waited for Grayson to arrive. He'd left just after us, so I knew he couldn't be too far behind. But apparently, he'd decided to drive like a grandma tonight because his headlights were nowhere in sight.

"Can't you bother your own friends with this crap?" I asked.

"Probably," Parker replied. "Getting under your skin is much more fun though."

"Fun for you maybe."

I turned to look across the large snowy field to where the party was already in full swing. My gaze was drawn to the large bonfire in the distance and the dancing flames that illuminated the woods beyond in an amber glow. In the summer, we usually parked much closer to the fire, often drinking on the back of our trucks. But the snow was starting to pile up, so everyone had to park by the road and trudge across the white, icy field.

There were already a lot of cars here. It was lucky this place was in the middle of nowhere or some nosy parent probably would have put an end to these parties a long time ago. There wasn't a whole lot to do around Ransom or Sunshine Hills, especially in the middle of winter, which was probably why kids at both schools were so keen to keep the peace here. We were onto a good thing, and no one wanted to ruin it.

I released a sigh as Grayson finally pulled up in front of my truck. He usually hated parties, so I was impressed he'd agreed to come tonight. It was lucky Paige was at our place this afternoon. The way her face lit up as soon as the bonfire was mentioned pretty much left Grayson with no choice. He always did whatever he could to make Paige happy.

She was smiling brightly as she emerged from his car, her short, dark hair hidden under a massive pair of fluffy earmuffs. She was wearing leather boots with a smart woolen coat and a scarf draped around her neck. Paige was always trying new things, and her most recent mini-obsession was knitting. The scarf was clearly one of her latest creations. It was a wild mishmash of multiple different colors and was so long she was almost tripping over it. I might have told her it looked ridiculous, but Grayson probably would have taken the damn thing off her neck and strangled me with it.

He was struggling to keep his eyes off her, and it was a miracle he'd been able to drive here without getting in an accident. She was completely oblivious to his attention as she linked her arm through his and the two of

them walked over to meet us. I would have told Grayson to make a move on her a long time ago except I'd never been able to figure out what Paige felt for him in return. She didn't really seem interested in guys or dating and had always appeared content with their friendship.

"You guys didn't kill each other!" Paige clapped her hands together to congratulate Parker and me. Her cheeks were already pink from the cold, but she seemed even more bubbly than normal. Probably because she'd managed to convince Grayson to come out for once.

"I do have *some* self-restraint," I replied.

"Oh, I know." Paige's eyes twinkled as she laughed. "That didn't stop me from betting Gray five bucks you'd thump Parker on the drive out here though." She looked hopefully between the two of us as if waiting for confirmation.

Parker let out a sad sigh. "Alas, I was not thumped. Sorry to disappoint you, Paige. I did try my best to piss him off."

"I'm sure you did." She giggled. "But the night's not over yet." She turned to Grayson. "Double or nothing; Reed thumps Parker before the night is through."

I rolled my eyes. "Do you realize how annoying Parker will be if he knows there's money on the line?"

Paige continued to smile at Grayson. "What do you think, Gray? Does Reed have enough restraint?"

"I think the real question is whether Parker is *that* annoying," Grayson replied. "And he most definitely is. So, odds are, I'm going to lose this bet."

"Yep," Paige chirped. She kept staring at him as she waited for him to agree.

"Fine," Grayson grumbled. "But you better take me for ice cream with your winnings."

"Done." She held out her hand to shake on their bet, and Grayson begrudgingly took it. "I swear, Gray. Only you could be thinking about ice cream when we're standing in the middle of a blizzard."

"This is hardly a blizzard. There's not a cloud in the sky, and it's barely cold," he grunted. "Besides, I like ice cream."

"I know." She laughed and nudged Grayson's shoulder, but as she did, she slipped on a patch of ice and nearly lost her footing. Grayson instantly reached out and grabbed her around the waist, stopping her from falling, and supported her until she righted herself.

“Whoops.” Paige giggled before turning to us. “Now, are we heading over to the bonfire, or are we going to stay in the parking lot and freeze?”

She didn’t need to say any more than that to get us moving. Grayson may have worshipped the ground Paige walked on, but I would have done almost anything for her too. She’d spent a lot of time at our place over the years, and I sometimes had to remind myself she wasn’t actually a part of our family. Even Parker was sweet to her and spared her the crap he constantly dished out to everyone else.

I was tense as we approached the bonfire. I wasn’t sure if Violet was coming, but I’d spent the whole day hoping she would. So far, I couldn’t see any sign of her, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t here.

Parker didn’t stay with us for long, and as soon as we reached the fire, he made a beeline for a group of girls sitting on one of the benches surrounding the blaze. When Paige spotted a couple of her friends, she waved and hurried toward them, turning back to us as she did.

“You coming, Gray?” she called out.

Grayson let out a pained sigh as he watched her join her friends. “Remind me why we came again?”

“Because bonfire nights are fun,” I replied, trying my best to sound convincing.

He grunted, like he knew I was full of shit. Despite what I’d told Violet, I didn’t enjoy these things. Mostly because we had to mix with Sunshine Prep students, and I pretty much hated everything to do with Sunshine Hills. I’d had a change of heart this past week. There was at least one thing I liked about that place now. Violet. I was doing a terrible job at keeping those feelings hidden though, and I was sure Grayson could see right through me.

“You better go find your girl,” he said. “And I guess I better go have some fun,” he added before following after Paige. I suspected it would be about five minutes before he ended up standing on the edge of the crowd, scowling at everyone.

“You’re here.” Matt appeared at my side, holding two bottles of beer. He wasn’t even trying to cover the surprise in his eyes. “You haven’t come to one of these in ages. I thought they might have finally banned you.”

“No, I’m not banned. But it’s probably only a matter of time...” There might have been a sketchy truce between Ransom and Sunshine Prep on bonfire nights, but that tenuous agreement always felt a little too close to



breaking whenever I made an appearance. The Saints players harbored a deep and burning hatred for me. And sure, I hated them too, but despite what most people thought about me, I didn't purposefully seek out confrontations. It was hard to enjoy a party when you spent the entire time waiting for the tension in the air to finally snap.

Matt offered me one of his beers, but I waved it away. "Can't, I'm driving."

"Ah, more for me then." He grinned. "So...what prompted you to grace us with your presence tonight?"

Even though Matt was my best friend, I didn't exactly feel like telling him I'd come for one reason only. Because I wanted to catch a glimpse of a girl who literally had a rule against spending time with me. Well, not me specifically, but guys like me. Either way, Matt would think I was pathetic. It was hard enough for me to think about the fact that Violet would never be interested in me let alone say those words out loud.

"Parker wanted to come," I answered. "You know he'll only start trouble if someone doesn't keep an eye on him."

"True." Matt nodded. "He's never been particularly good at steering clear of trouble. Then again, neither have you."

"No idea what you're talking about."

Matt smirked as he took a swig of his beer. "Sure, of course, you don't."

We walked closer to the bonfire as we talked. It was built up high tonight, and the heat radiating off it was intense. Benches, chairs, and thick logs surrounded the fire as they always did, but no one was really sitting on them as most people hung back to avoid the heat.

"I see Parker's wasted no time..." Matt said, tilting his head toward my brother. Parker had his arms wrapped around the shoulders of two Sunshine Prep girls. It was almost like he wanted to start shit with the Saints. I spotted a few guys from their team watching my brother and they didn't look happy.

I swore under my breath. Parker was going to get us booted in record time. There was a cocky curve to his mouth as well, like he knew just how much he was pissing off the enemy. Luckily, a few moments later, one of the girls slapped Parker across the face, and the other shrugged off his arm. He watched them walk away, not the least bit bothered by their rebuff.

Matt snorted at my side. "And here I thought your brother was a player."

“He wishes.” I considered leaving Parker to his own devices, but I knew I couldn’t trust him to behave. I’d only end up regretting it when I eventually had to clear up whatever mess he was certain to create. “I better go talk to him.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Matt said with a sympathetic laugh before he headed over to a group of our teammates who were hanging out nearby.

I wished I could do the same. With a groan, I walked in the opposite direction toward Parker. “Tell me you’re not trying to start a fight tonight,” I said as I came up beside him.

“I’m not trying to start a fight tonight.”

“Seriously, Parker.”

“What?” He faked a yawn. “This bonfire’s so boring.”

“You’ve been here five minutes. And you’re the one who wanted to come.”

“Actually, I think you were the one who was extra eager tonight, stalker Joe.”

“I’m not a stalker,” I growled. “Just quit trying to start shit. You know I’ll end up being the one who has to finish it...”

“You worry too much,” he scoffed. “The Saints won’t start anything. I heard they really had to fight for their win today, and they all look pretty broken.” Parker slowly started to smile. “Besides, I figured you wouldn’t mind if I distracted them a little, especially Hoffman. I noticed a certain redhead is here, and I thought you might want to chat with her without being interrupted...”

He nodded to the other side of the bonfire, and as I followed his gaze, I caught a flash of the blue eyes and red hair I’d been longing to see. Violet was smiling brightly as she talked with another girl, and when my eyes settled on her, my heart rate skyrocketed, and my hands went clammy like I was standing too close to the flames.

She looked beautiful tonight, especially with the soft glow of the firelight dancing across her features. Her hair flowed in loose waves down her back, and her cheeks were rosy from the heat of the fire. She was dressed like she was ready for an expedition to the Arctic, rather than a night out in Ransom, but I thought she looked cute bundled under all those clothes. Even with her ridiculously large puffer jacket, she kept holding her hands out toward the fire and inching closer to it. I got the feeling this girl could be in the middle of a scorching desert and still feel the cold.

Parker had been right when he'd taunted me in the car earlier. I was nervous about seeing Violet again. But the anxiety was mixed with excitement. She might have sworn off hockey players, but that didn't seem to matter to me as I watched her through the fire. I only needed her to like one hockey player: me.

"Like I said, I make an excellent distraction..." I could practically hear the smirk on Parker's face, and I dragged my gaze away from Violet to scowl at him. "So, are you going to get your girl?" he added.

"Just stay out of trouble."

"I'm afraid I can't promise that. Can you?"

As I looked back at Violet, I wasn't sure I could.

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## VIOLET

“REED DARLING IS WATCHING YOU, *AGAIN*.”

Mia’s words made my stomach dip as I followed her gaze past the dancing flames of the bonfire and found Reed staring intently at me. His expression was closed, and with the flickering glow of the fire between us, he looked as devilishly handsome as he was dangerous. He stood with his younger brother, and the people around them seemed to be giving them a wide berth. As our eyes met, Reed appeared to fight back a smile, and I quickly glanced away.

I wrapped my arms a little tighter around my body, doing my best to pretend that one look from Reed hadn’t raised my temperature more than the bonfire between us. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mia’s eyes narrowed at me with suspicion. “And now he’s smiling. Why is he smiling at you, Vi?”

My cheeks warmed in response, and as much as I would have liked to blame the heat radiating from the roaring bonfire, I knew it had everything to do with Reed. I was tempted to look over at him again, but I somehow managed to keep my eyes firmly on Mia. I couldn’t let myself get trapped in his gaze once more.

“Well...” she prompted.

I still hadn’t told Mia that Reed had mentioned I should come tonight. She was extremely wary of him, so I knew she would only take it the wrong way. Given the critical look in her eyes, she was already leaping to conclusions.

“He’s probably just being friendly,” I said. “I told you he helped me with my car.”

“Vi, there is absolutely nothing friendly about that boy. And I doubt he looks at his *friends* that way. Hell, he probably doesn’t have any.”

I really wished Nicole were here already. She might have put a stop to Mia’s interrogation.

“Maybe he’s not as bad as you think,” I suggested.

“Don’t let that gorgeous face and beautiful body blind you from the fact that boy is one hundred percent trouble,” she replied. “He doesn’t play by the same rules as the rest of us.”

“It was just a look. You’re reading too much into it.”

“I’m not,” she insisted before lowering her voice. “If one of the Darling Devils was looking at me that way, I’d be running in the opposite direction as fast as my legs could carry me...”

“Oh, and how exactly is he looking at me?”

“Like if you smiled back at him, he’d leap right through those flames, pick you up, and carry you back to his cave like some barbarian.”

I rolled my eyes at her but swallowed a lump that had formed in my throat. “Well, thankfully, none of that is going to happen. I don’t even want to look at another guy right now, and I’m definitely not smiling at any. Not after Jeremy.”

“Yeah, I know.” Her face fell as she nodded. “Where is Captain Douche tonight?”

“I haven’t seen him, thankfully.” I was still reeling from our confrontation yesterday. The way he’d behaved all week, flirting with girls while pretending to be the victim, only to then turn around and expect me to just forgive him, left me with an ominous feeling in my gut. Jeremy wasn’t going to accept this breakup easily. He always got what he wanted. And if he still wanted me, I feared it was going to take something extreme to make him give up on us.

“You’re not considering getting back with him, are you?”

“What? No, of course not.” My eyes darted back to meet Mia’s. “I will never be able to look at him the same way after what he did. And I’d definitely never be able to trust him. I just need to move on.” I only wished it were that easy. Recovering from your boyfriend cheating on you wasn’t a simple matter, especially when you had to see him at school every day. The fact he wanted me back was only going to make it harder still.

“Yeah, well, it seems to me there’s another hockey player who would gladly volunteer to assist with that...”

“Mia!” I gasped.

“What?” she replied. “I know Reed Darling is bad news, and he’s a total player. And I know you’ve written off hockey players for life. But Reed is incredibly hot, and he seems interested in you. It would kill Jeremy to see you with him too, so I’m sure we could make an exception for one night.”

She went to continue, but I cut her off. “You literally just told me I should be running away from Reed Darling. Now you want me to date him?”

“I didn’t say that. Dating him would be a terrible idea.”

“What? But you think kissing him would be a good one?”

“Uh, Vi...”

“Because I’m not kissing anyone tonight.”

“Vi...”

“Also, I’m not just done with guys who play hockey; I’m done with any guys who have big egos.”

“Violet...”

“And I bet Reed Darling has one of the biggest around!”

For a moment, the world went silent, and then a voice rumbled behind me. “I hope you’re talking about my big heart there, Sunshine.”

I squeezed my eyes shut as I realized it was Reed. We’d only met twice, but I instantly recognized his deep tone.

“Didn’t realize I’d made such a *big* impression.”

I officially wanted to die. I also wanted to kill Mia for not trying harder to warn me Reed was coming. A true friend would have tackled me to the ground if that’s what it took to shut me up. As I opened my eyes, I found her looking over my shoulder at Reed, a sparkle of mischief in her gaze. She might be intimidated by the guy, but right now, it appeared like she was trying not to laugh. *Traitor.*

“Oh, look, there’s Nicole,” she said. “I’ll be back in a sec...”

I gaped at her, my eyes narrowing with disbelief. How could she have bailed on me? Especially when I’d just embarrassed myself so thoroughly. She was meant to be whisking me away, saving me from the Devil. Not abandoning me with him just when I needed her the most.

I had no choice but to face Reed, and I reluctantly turned to him, my dread growing a little more with each slow movement. I couldn’t believe he’d overheard me talking about him. *Again.* I wasn’t sure how much he’d

heard, but at least this time, I could be grateful I hadn't been calling him a pig. Not that saying he had a big ego was much better.

"Hi," he said once I was facing him. I half expected to find a look of disappointment or annoyance on his face. But instead, he seemed amused. "So, if it wasn't my big heart you were talking about, was it another part of me?"

My eyes widened as I realized what he was inferring, and I quickly started to stutter. "No. I—"

"Because, honestly, that's one rumor about me I'm okay with."

"Reed! I was talking about your ego. And, by the sounds of it, I was right."

He grinned, allowing the dimple on his cheek to pop. It was only on one cheek, which somehow made its impact more devastating. "Okay, that's fair. At least give me a chance to clear my name."

I hesitated. I got the feeling that once you were drawn into Reed Darling's orbit there would be no escaping it. Like getting sucked into a black hole that would eventually spit you back out with a broken heart and a bunch of emotional scars. He was too intense. Too good-looking. And, despite his bad reputation, I imagined that girls who got too close to Reed Darling inevitably fell for him and suffered the consequences. Spending more time with Reed, even as a friend, could only lead to disaster.

"Look, Reed, I'm sure you're a great guy."

"Uh-oh," he replied, somehow still managing to smile.

I did my best to power on. "But I already told you I've sworn off hockey players. In fact, I have a very long-standing no-jock rule and, this time, I'm making *no* exceptions. Besides, from what I hear, hockey isn't the only reason I should be staying away from you."

"Mm, but surely you've changed your mind since meeting me?"

I folded my arms over my chest. "I thought you were trying to prove you didn't have a big ego?"

"Nah, I just wanted to spend more time with you. You were right. I have a big ego."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Big ego or not, Reed could certainly be charming. Then again, Jeremy had been too.

"So, you can't even be friends with a hockey player?" he asked.

I tilted my head to the side as I studied him. I didn't think guys like Reed were capable of being friends with girls, and I was all too aware of



that fact after what happened with Jeremy and Heather. “Why would you want to be friends with me? It’s not like we have anything in common.”

“That’s overrated.”

“But I don’t like hockey, and it’s the thing you live and breathe.”

Reed released a soft laugh. “I just want to hang out with you. I’m not asking you to rewatch game tapes with me.”

I blanched because that was in fact something Jeremy had made me do before. Reed made it sound like my lack of interest in the sport was no big deal. But I’d dated a hockey player, so I knew how important it was. I was never going to be the kind of girl that idolized him or was desperate to wear his jersey to a game. I certainly hadn’t wanted to wear Jeremy’s and quickly changed the subject on the few occasions he’d asked me to. Looking back now, I wondered if perhaps even then I’d sensed Jeremy wasn’t the guy for me.

“So, what do you think?” Reed asked.

My eyes narrowed on him. “You get your way a lot, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” He tucked his hands into his pockets and grinned at me in a way that confirmed he most definitely did. It was hard not to be lured in by him when he smiled. But I knew I had to stay strong. We barely knew the first thing about each other, and I refused to be pulled in by another jock.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but my stance on hockey players isn’t going to change.”

He didn’t look the least bit bothered as he gave me a one-shouldered shrug. “Guess I’ll just have to keep proving to you I’m not like all the other hockey guys.”

I already knew it wouldn’t take much for Reed to prove he was different. He certainly wasn’t an average guy—but I hadn’t yet decided if it was for better or worse. Given the things Mia had heard, he was probably worse. But I was struggling to believe every terrible thing people said about Reed Darling was true.

A high-pitched giggle caught my attention. I glanced past Reed and caught sight of Jeremy. He was sitting on a log near the bonfire with Heather perched on his lap. His arms were wrapped around her, and his hands were resting on her legs in such an intimate way there was little doubt they were here together.

Even though I was done with Jeremy, it was still hard to watch. He clearly didn't regret what he'd done even though he'd told me it was just a drunken mistake. What made it worse was the way Jeremy's eyes were focused on me. His expression was smug as he gave me a knowing look, like he was expecting me to stalk over to him and stake my claim.

Did he think he could make me so jealous I'd just take him back? Did he think inflicting more pain on me would convince me to forgive him? Maybe Mia was right. This was all part of some sick plan to win me back. What was it going to take to make him realize we were done?

Anger clouded my vision, and I was struggling to think straight. Jeremy looked so sickeningly satisfied as he took in my reaction, but then he noticed Reed. When his gaze landed on his hockey rival, Jeremy's expression faltered, and a wild look entered his eyes. Mia's words from earlier in the night flashed across my mind, and I felt a sudden sense of clarity. I knew exactly how to show Jeremy we were over.

I turned to Reed before I could come to my senses and grasped the front of his jacket, pulling him toward me. He came easily, but I knew he would have had no problem resisting if he'd truly objected. He instinctively wrapped his hands around my waist as though he'd done it a thousand times before. Knowing his reputation with girls, he probably had. I didn't need any more encouragement than that, and I lifted myself up onto my toes and kissed him.

Despite his hands settling on my waist, I could tell I'd caught him by surprise. It took him a moment to react, but when he did return the kiss, it was so intense I almost forgot to breathe. His lips were hot against mine, and a rush of warmth spread through my body as my heart beat faster and faster. I felt him grasp me tighter, but I wanted him closer still. The way the faint hint of cologne on his neck mixed with the bonfire smoke and snow was intoxicating. The kiss had been fueled by anger, but that quickly faded into something else—something more—and suddenly nothing else seemed to matter other than the connection between us. The snowy field we stood in felt like it had gone up in deliciously hot flames. If this was what it felt like to kiss a devil, then send me straight to hell.

A breath later and the kiss was over. Reed was ripped from my lips as Jeremy forced his way between us, and I stumbled back a step.

"Get away from her," Jeremy shouted, giving Reed a hefty shove to the chest.

“Jeremy!” I called out his name in shock. I’m not sure what I’d thought was going to happen after I kissed Reed. I’d wanted to show Jeremy I was moving on. To prove I wasn’t his to toy with. Maybe I’d been trying to make him hate me enough that he’d just leave me alone. But I’d never thought he’d react this way. Over Jeremy’s shoulder, I could see Heather storming away. I guess she hadn’t expected him to react that way either.

Reed barely looked concerned by the six-foot ball of muscle before him. Jeremy was a big guy, but Reed was bigger. And instead of returning my ex’s icy stare, Reed was ignoring Jeremy and looking at me with concern.

“Don’t look at her!” Jeremy growled, giving Reed another shove.

Reed’s eyes flashed with anger as he finally focused on Jeremy. “Careful, Hoffman. You know by now you don’t want to make me mad.”

“I don’t give a shit about you. That’s my girlfriend you’re harassing.”

“Harassing?” Reed’s voice had taken on a dangerous tone.

“Girlfriend?” I spluttered the word in disbelief as I pushed my way between the two of them. “I’m not your girlfriend, Jeremy. Not anymore.”

We were drawing a lot of attention, and it seemed everyone gathered near the bonfire was turning to watch the commotion. I might have been embarrassed if I wasn’t so incensed.

“Just get away from him, Violet.” Jeremy reached out for me, but I found myself shying away from him and closer to Reed. Jeremy noticed, and his hands formed fists at his sides. “I know you were only trying to get my attention,” he continued in a calm but threatening tone. “Well, you’ve got it. Let’s go.”

He held out his hand once more, but I ignored it. “I didn’t do this to get your attention, Jeremy!”

“Well, why else would you be kissing *him*?”

“Because I...” The last thing I wanted was to give Jeremy the satisfaction of knowing I’d only kissed Reed because of him. “I’ve moved on, Jeremy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Jeremy’s eyes were cold as his lips formed a cruel smile. “You’d just be another puck bunny to him, you know that, right?” He’d raised his voice, so everyone surrounding us could hear. The enthralled crowd was growing now, and it felt like the entire party had gathered to watch.

“It’s not like that. I...” I pursed my suddenly dry lips as I tried to come up with an explanation. A part of me wanted to take back what I’d done so I

could abate Jeremy's anger and defuse the situation. But there was no going back now. I'd kissed Reed Darling in front of everyone, and Jeremy still hadn't got the message. I needed to double down if he was ever going to leave me alone. "We're together." I blurted out before I could think better of it.

"Together?" Jeremy spat. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Uh—" I didn't know what to say. How had I gotten myself into this situation? I was standing in front of our resident hockey bad boy, and I had just claimed we were in a relationship in front of a crowd of stunned students from both our schools. I really should have taken a moment to come up with a better excuse for kissing him. Reed probably thought I was a complete psycho, and so would everyone else when he revealed that I was lying. I couldn't bear to think of the smug look that would light up Jeremy's face when Reed denied it was true. I wished I had a moment to talk to Reed. To beg him to play along, just for now.

But then I felt a strong arm wrap around my waist, and I was pulled against the hard planes of Reed's chest. I went stiff as he held me tightly to him.

"Surely you're not that stupid, Hoffman." Reed said. "She shouldn't have to spell it out..."

I slowly looked up at Reed, and as he caught my gaze, his hard expression softened. "Violet's my girlfriend."

My body relaxed into his grasp, and I was so overcome with gratitude I felt like I could kiss him. Again.

"You don't do girlfriends." Jeremy scoffed.

"I do now," Reed replied.

Jeremy was going red in the face, and his chest swelled up like he was preparing to launch himself at Reed. I tensed because I was right in his line of fire.

Reed must have noticed because he eased himself in front of me so I was protected. "I hope you're not going to start a fight here, Hoffman," he said. "You don't want to get banned from bonfire nights, do you? Although, maybe I could take one for the team and kick you out myself."

Jeremy's eyes narrowed on Reed before he finally seemed to put a leash on his anger. He moved his attention to me. "You're not seriously dating this jerk, are you, Vi?"

“Yes, I am.” I moved out from behind Reed, and his arm instinctively found my waist once again as I stood next to him.

“What about us?” Jeremy demanded.

Reed seemed to tense slightly against me, like he was holding his breath as he waited for my response.

“There is no us, Jeremy.”

“You’re really going to throw away everything we have for five minutes of fun with a Darling Devil? I thought you were better than that.”

Reed tensed again, but this time, I could see it was because his hands were clenched. He looked like he was about to step toward Jeremy, but I gently placed a hand on his chest to keep him close. The irony of Jeremy’s comment hadn’t escaped me. He’d already thrown away everything we had for a bit of fun with Heather, but in his eyes, I was the villain. I might as well embrace that fact.

“What can I say?” I slowly turned and smiled up at Reed. “I guess I’ve finally found the kind of hockey player whose jersey I want to wear.” It was such a low blow, and I knew I’d struck close to home when I glanced at Jeremy and saw the hurt in his eyes. A flicker of doubt shot through me as I wondered if I’d gone too far. But it disappeared a moment later when Jeremy’s shocked expression returned to one of anger and disgust.

“Don’t come crying to me when this Devil breaks your heart.” He shot me one last scathing look before abruptly turning to leave. His fury filled the air, sizzling with such intensity that even the nearby bonfire seemed dim in comparison, as he stormed away.

*What the hell had I just done?*



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## REED

### WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?

One moment Violet was telling me I had absolutely no hope with her, the next she was kissing me and pretending to be my girlfriend. My arms were still wrapped snugly around her body as the two of us watched Hoffman march away. I felt a familiar urge to punch the guy in the face. But there was a time and a place, and with Violet between us, it was definitely not the time.

I wasn't quite sure how I'd ended up in this position or at what point I'd decided I was going to go along with Violet's charade and pretend we were together. Now that I thought about it, I realized I hadn't really considered it at all. It just seemed like the natural thing to do. I certainly didn't regret it. When Jeremy had questioned her and insulted her and I saw the panic in her eyes, I would have done just about anything to help her. Pissing off Hoffman was just a bonus.

It was obvious she'd only kissed me to make him jealous, and yet it had been impossible not to get caught up in the moment when her lips were against mine. I could still feel the lingering warmth of our kiss. It had ignited a fire within me that had been dormant for far longer than I cared to admit. Even now I could feel the sparks and embers crackling contently because Violet remained within my grasp.

"I'm really sorry you got caught up in that," Violet murmured. I reluctantly allowed her to disentangle herself from my arms, but I couldn't stop myself from touching her altogether, so I took hold of her hand.

She glanced down at our interlocked fingers in confusion.

“Got to keep up appearances, right?” I said, lowering my voice. The eyes of the entire party still seemed to be on us.

“Maybe we should get out of here, babe,” I added a little louder.

Violet frowned at the nickname but didn’t complain as I steered her away from the fire in the direction of the track that cut through the snow and led back to my truck. I had no intention of staying at the party now. Especially not when Hoffman was clearly itching for a fight. He’d probably gone to gather a posse of his Saints teammates to back him up. He’d never had the balls to take me on himself.

I sent my brothers a message as we walked, suggesting they call it a night too. Even though fights were off-limits at bonfire parties, I couldn’t be sure Hoffman wouldn’t try to take out his anger on Grayson and Parker if he saw them there. The dude was a loose cannon.

It was only once we reached my truck that Violet let go of my hand. She dropped it abruptly, as if it had given her an electric jolt, and she seemed lost in thought as she stared down at her fingers.

“Want me to drop you home?” I suggested since I knew she still didn’t have her car.

She nodded slowly, but I could see she wasn’t listening closely. Her attention had turned back to the bonfire behind us. The rhythmic beat of the music and the soft sounds of laughter and cheerful chatter echoed across the field but felt as though they were drifting to us from another world. It was cold and dark standing on the side of the road by my truck, yet I felt far more comfortable here with Violet than I had at the party.

I went to open the passenger door for her, but she started to pace. “Oh god. Oh god,” she muttered to herself. “This is such a mess.”

“It’s going to be okay, Sunshine.”

“Okay?” She spun to face me. “No, it’s not going to be okay. Everyone thinks we’re dating.”

I scratched the back of my neck. “Yeah, well, I’m sure there are worse things in life, right?”

She clearly didn’t agree because her head dropped into her hands. “This is a total disaster.”

“I’m trying really hard not to take that personally.” I laughed but only to hide the fact that her reaction to the concept of dating me had genuinely hurt.



She didn't seem to hear me as she'd returned to her pacing. She was also muttering things under her breath, but I couldn't hear them clearly. I caught the odd swear word, so I was fairly certain she was still just freaking out. In my experience, girls generally reacted better than this after kissing me.

"So, are you getting in?" I asked, gesturing toward the open door of my truck. I had a bad feeling Violet would be out here muttering like a crazy person all night if I didn't do something.

She kept pacing like she hadn't heard me but then suddenly stopped and looked my way. "Why did you help me out back there?"

"That's what you're worried about right now?"

"It's one of many things," she replied. "Why did you do it?"

"Why don't we talk about this in the truck where it's a little warmer."

She looked ready to argue but then realized I was right. Probably because she was shaking and her lips were practically blue. It was a whole lot colder now we were away from the fire, and while it didn't bother me much, it was clearly getting to Violet.

"Okay, fine," she replied as she quickly climbed into the passenger seat.

I closed the door behind her before I made my way around to the other side of the truck. I moved slowly, giving myself as much time as possible to come up with an answer to Violet's question. The truth was, while we'd only just met, I'd never felt this way about any girl before. I barely knew her, but already I wanted to do anything I could to make her smile. And anything to stop her feeling sad. Swooping in to save Violet from her cheating ex was a no-brainer for me. I couldn't tell her any of that though. She'd think I was some lovesick sap, and I knew she didn't feel the same way about me.

"So..." She pushed me for an answer the moment I sat in the driver's seat.

I'd barely had a chance to close the door behind me. "So..." I turned on the ignition and cranked the heat, continuing my delay tactics.

"Why did you help me?" She folded her arms across her chest, and there was an unimpressed look on her face. I was starting to think she should be a little more grateful.

"You mean why did I save you from embarrassing yourself in front of your ex? I believe the words you're looking for are *thank you*."

"I'm serious, Reed. Why would you do that?" Her eyes were narrowed as if she was certain I had some ulterior motive. "You didn't have to."

"Maybe I just did it out of the goodness of my heart?"

"Maybe," she murmured. "But that seems highly unlikely..."

"Well, maybe I've got a question for you," I shot back. "Why did you kiss me?"

I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear it from her. Her plan to make Hoffman jealous had clearly worked, but given her reaction and the way she was freaking out, a small part of me wondered if perhaps she'd been just as affected by the kiss as me.

"And, if I remember correctly, you were the one who concocted the whole story about us dating," I continued. "After you attacked me with your lips, that is."

"It was hardly an attack, and I didn't hear you complaining."

"Oh, I wasn't complaining. The kiss was great. Maybe we should do it again."

Violet's lips twitched as though she was struggling to withhold a smile. But any look of amusement was quickly gone as her eyes filled with concern once again. "Let's just forget about that entirely and focus on the real problem."

"Which is?"

"How people are going to react when they find out the truth."

"That you're a great kisser?"

"No, Reed." She was starting to sound exasperated. "That we're not really dating, and it was all a lie."

"Ah." That terrible truth.

"I'm sorry I kissed you," she started. "But I wasn't thinking straight at the time. I just wanted Jeremy to see I was moving on. He wants to get back together, and he won't take no for answer, so I had to do something."

As much as I hated Jeremy, I didn't blame him for not wanting to give Violet up without a fight.

"I didn't realize he'd storm over and confront us," she continued. "I just figured he'd see us together and finally realize I was done with him." She let out a heavy sigh. "But once he finds out we weren't *really* kissing. Aren't *really* dating. He's going to think he still has a chance."

She groaned and placed her head in her hands. "Then there's the whole puck bunny thing. I don't want people thinking that about me."

As Violet spoke, I was struggling to stop myself from interrupting her so I could tell her that *I* wasn't sorry she'd kissed me. That it felt one hundred percent real to me. With every word, this girl was shattering my heart but making it beat harder at the same time.

"There might be a way we can avoid all of that," I said. An idea was forming in my mind, and I couldn't stop it from bursting out.

"What? How?" Her hands fell away from her face, and a glimmer of hope shone in her eyes.

"It should be quite easy really. Just date me." I shrugged like it was no big deal, but my heart was on tenterhooks as I waited for her response.

Her shoulders slouched, and she slowly exhaled like my response hadn't been the one she was hoping for. Again, it was the reaction I expected but not the one I wanted. "I already told you, Reed, I'm done with hockey players."

"You can't be *that* done with hockey players. You just kissed one..."

"Yes, but that was a mistake."

*Ouch.* Another punch to the gut. I was taking some serious punishment here, but I was still standing. Had I really been the only one to feel fireworks exploding when we'd kissed? Apparently, so.

"Besides, I'm not ready for another boyfriend," she continued. "Not after Jeremy..."

"Yeah, I know that. Obviously. I'm not looking for a relationship either." That was actually the truth. At least, it had been until I'd met Violet. "We'd only be pretending to date." From the casual way I said it, you'd think it was a totally obvious and totally normal thing to do. "We just have to live the lie for a little while."

"Pretend to date?" She let out an uncomfortable laugh.

"Yeah. We can just act like we're together until Jeremy gets the picture. Technically you won't be breaking your rule because we're not really dating." The more I thought about it, the more appealing the idea became. I got to date Violet without the risk of heartbreak that came with a real relationship.

She still didn't look convinced, so I continued. "Seeing us together clearly drives Hoffman crazy. Isn't there a small part of you that wants to make him pay for what he did to you?"

"No, of course not."

"Really?"

“Okay, maybe a small part,” she admitted. “But what do you get out of pretending to date me?”

The simple truth: I wanted to help her. Plus, I’d also get to spend more time with her, and hopefully, I’d have a chance to show her I wasn’t the arrogant jock she thought I was. Of course, I couldn’t tell her that, so I racked my brains for a believable excuse.

“Being your friend isn’t reason enough?”

“We’ve met three times,” she replied. “We’re acquaintances, at best.”

I’d never hated a word so much in my life.

“You know you’d have to stop hooking up with other girls, right?” she said.

“You say that like I’m some kind of animal with no restraint.”

She lifted one shoulder like she thought perhaps I was. Maybe it was going to take even more work than I first thought to shed my bad reputation in Violet’s eyes. I glanced out the window as I tried to think of how I was going to dig my way out of the hole I’d been shoveling myself into so enthusiastically. Violet wasn’t going to accept I was doing this out of pure kindness, and I could hardly admit something as crazy as the truth—that I liked her and wanted to date her for real. She’d been more than clear she didn’t see me that way. No, if she was going to buy into this fake relationship, I was going to have to give her an answer she’d believe. She was already so convinced I was a serial womanizer. Perhaps I needed to use that to my advantage.

I swallowed and tried to withhold a grimace as I played my hand. “Maybe you’re right about the girls...”

“What do you mean?”

I slowly turned back to face her. “Well, this is going to sound a little conceited, but being captain of the hockey team comes with its fair share of... Uh, let’s call them distractions.”

She tilted her head at me. “A little conceited?”

“Okay, a lot.” I scratched the stubble on the side of my face as I tried to figure out how I could make this more plausible. “It’s true though,” I started. “And it’s been worse lately because we have our winter formal coming up at school. I haven’t asked anyone yet, so I can’t walk ten feet around Ransom without girls coming up and asking me who I’m going with or doing everything they can to get asked.”

“That doesn’t really sound like a problem. Just ask someone and it will stop.”

“If only it were that easy,” I continued. “This is my senior year. My final season playing high-school hockey. That needs to be my one and only focus right now, so I don’t have the time for girls, dating, or dances. Plus, the winter formal’s a big deal for some people; I wouldn’t want to lead anyone on.”

If my ultimate goal was to change Violet’s perception of me, I wasn’t making a very good start. In my desperate efforts to keep her invested in this fake relationship, I was portraying myself as everything she despised—a hockey-obsessed manwhore. Whether I liked it or not, it seemed to be working. Violet was nodding along with my explanation like it all made perfect sense.

“So, you’re saying you’d take me to the winter formal?”

“Uh, yeah.” I liked the sound of that. “I know you’re not interested in me that way and I’m the last guy you’d want to date, so I won’t have to worry about you getting the wrong idea.”

“I suppose that’s true.” She laughed. “So, when is this dance?”

“Last weekend of November, so just a few weeks away.”

“Just a few weeks...” she murmured to herself as she considered it.

“Long enough to show Jeremy you’ve moved on but not so long you get sick of my face.”

She let out an easy laugh. “I’m sure that won’t happen.”

My heart leaped up like an overeager puppy. *Down, boy, that doesn’t mean she likes us.* It seemed she was beginning to come around to the whole idea though.

“So, what do you say? Want to be my fake girlfriend?”

She glanced into her open hands as if they held the answer to my question. “I can’t believe I’m even considering this.”

“That’s not a no.”

“It’s not,” she replied, finally lifting her eyes to meet mine. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“Really?” It was almost impossible to keep the shock from my voice, and I spluttered out a cough to try to hide the emotion “I mean, this is really going to help us both, I’m sure of it.”

She nodded in agreement, but her eyes held a hint of suspicion. “I hope so,” she said. “But after your winter formal, we’re ‘breaking up.’” She

emphasized her point by making quotation marks in the air with her fingers. “And then you can return to being *distracted* by puck bunnies.”

“Sounds good to me,” I lied. I was already well and truly distracted by Violet, and a few weeks in a fake relationship with her was only going to cement that fact.

I was pleased I’d managed to get Violet to agree to a fake relationship and that I’d get to spend more time with her despite her reservations about me. But I was seriously concerned about the way I’d persuaded her.

If she hadn’t been completely convinced I was a player before this, surely there would be no doubt in her mind now. The whole reason I wanted this fake relationship was so she could see the real me, beyond hockey and the Darling Devils’ infamous reputation. She’d never give me a genuine chance if she thought I was anything like her ex.

“We should probably figure out how this is all going to work,” she said. “Like a game plan. I’m working tomorrow at Hug in a Mug, and it’s usually quiet on a Sunday morning. Why don’t you come by, and we can discuss the logistics.”

“Logistics? That doesn’t sound very romantic.” I was usually a big fan of having a well-thought-out game plan, but I much preferred how things had been working with Violet so far: kiss first and figure out the rest later.

“It’s not supposed to be romantic,” she replied with a smile. “Obviously.”

I was growing more and more concerned it was going to be impossible to swing this situation around in my favor. What if our fake relationship ended up putting me thoroughly in the friend zone. That would be even worse than Violet thinking I was a conceited arrogant jock.

“So, tomorrow morning?” she asked.

“Sure. I have something first thing, but I’ll come by after that.”

“Okay, great.” She reached for the door handle.

“Wait, I thought I was giving you a ride?”

“No need,” she replied, holding up her phone. “My cousin just sent me a message. She’s leaving now. Thanks anyway.”

“Hold on a minute, Sunshine,” I said as she jumped from the truck. “One more thing. Weren’t you supposed to bring my jacket tonight?”

She shrugged, and a wry smile pulled at her lips. “I’m your girlfriend now, aren’t I? I think that means I get to keep it.”

With that, she closed the door and hurried off into the darkness. And I was left trying to ignore how much I'd enjoyed it when she called herself my girlfriend.

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## VIOLET

“IS HE HERE YET?” Mia asked as she came out of the back room.

I was beginning to regret telling her about my agreement with Reed. She’d been asking me about it all morning while we worked at Hug in a Mug. I was already on edge as I waited for him to arrive for our logistics meeting, but the more Mia talked about it, the more nervous I became. What if this was all a terrible mistake? Was I just setting myself up to get screwed over by another jock? And where the hell was Reed? Maybe he’d changed his mind and wasn’t going to show at all. If he took much longer, I was going to talk myself out of the whole crazy idea.

“We didn’t agree on a time,” I replied, doing my best not to glance at the clock. I was getting seriously worked up, and I felt my heart skip a beat every time the bell above the front door chimed and a new customer came in. All Reed and I were doing was meeting to discuss our fake relationship, so there was no reason for me to be this anxious. I hadn’t even felt this way on my first few dates with Jeremy.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea,” Nicole said. She’d also heard about my deal with the devil. While Mia, at least, seemed excited by the potential for drama it might cause, Nicole couldn’t see any positives. She was probably right. But I had to keep reminding myself that I’d done this for a good reason. To keep my sleezy ex-boyfriend off my back. And I had to believe it was going to work even if my friends thought that was delusional.

“Aren’t you worried about him?” Nicole continued. “Like, being alone with him?”

I shrugged. "I've been alone with him before, and nothing bad happened."

"I guess." Nicole wasn't convinced. "But we're talking about a guy who apparently intimidated his math teacher into giving him an A last year. A guy who got caught stealing a car in sixth grade. We're talking about a Darling Devil."

I was starting to lose track of all the different rumors I'd heard about Reed. None of them were good, and while he'd only ever been nice to me, the constant barrage of shocking stories that swirled around about him kept me uncertain. Perhaps now that I was his fake girlfriend, it was time I got to the bottom of some of this gossip and worked out who the real man behind the myth was.

I shrugged at Nicole. "People seem to have a lot to say about Reed and his family. I'm not really sure what to believe. It can't all be true, can it?"

Nicole pursed her lips like she thought I was being naive. "I'm just trying to make sure you know what you're getting yourself into. Some of it's *definitely* true. Like, you can see the scar on his neck. He got that in an underground street fight, you know."

"I thought he got it in a bar brawl," Mia said.

"Is there a difference?" I asked.

"If you're talking about Reed Darling, you're both wrong about the scar." A girl I recognized from school had just come up to return her empty coffee mug. She leaned across the counter and lowered her voice as if she were about to reveal some big secret. "My mom works at the hospital. She told me he came in because a girl threw an ice skate at him and there wasn't a cover on the blade."

"Oh my gosh," Mia's eyes went wide, and from the look on her face, it seemed as though she much preferred this version of the story. Of all the rumors I'd heard, Reed's scar was probably the one that intrigued me the most. Nicole was right. You could clearly see the evidence of the scar on his neck and shoulder, so there was no doubting its existence. But no one could agree on its origin. Clearly only one of the girls' explanations could be true.

"Ouch," Nicole added. "Why would she do that?"

"Probably an angry ex," Mia suggested.

"Couldn't be," the girl replied. "Everyone knows the Darling Devils don't date. My bet is he led her on and broke her heart. That boy's a total player." I couldn't deny the girl's theory made sense. Reed had pretty much

admitted that his reputation as a player was accurate when he'd told me about the scores of girls "distracting" him from hockey. Jeremy had also seemed shocked by the concept of Reed having a girlfriend. Probably because they ended up throwing ice skates at him.

I looked between Nicole and Mia as the other girl turned and left the café. "He doesn't even go to our school or live in Sunshine Hills. How does everyone know this stuff about him?"

"It's Reed Darling," Mia said as if that alone were answer enough.

"He's captain of the enemy," Nicole clarified. "Not to mention, he's one of the best hockey players in the state. And you know by now how much this place cares about hockey."

"When you add on top of that the way he acts and the way he looks," Mia continued, "people are naturally going to want to talk about him. And now, I guess, they'll want to talk about you too."

"Lucky me," I grumbled. I wanted to curse myself for acting so rashly last night. I'd done the sensible thing and told Reed we couldn't be friends. But then I'd gone and kissed him and gotten myself into this whole mess. I couldn't quite bring myself to regret the kiss though. I kept thinking about the way it had made my heart flutter and skin tingle. The look on Jeremy's face hadn't hurt either.

My heart leaped again as the café's front doorbell rang once more, and the door opened. This time, Reed stepped inside. It was as if he'd known we were talking about him, and he'd chosen that exact moment to make his appearance. The sight of him caused nerves to ripple through my entire body. But it wasn't for any of the reasons I'd been anxious before. His face was dark as he stood in the doorway, his huge frame almost obscuring the entire entrance. His eyes were narrowed as if he was staring down the entire café. He was just as intimidating and overwhelming as he had been when he'd arrived at Summer's party with his brothers.

Maybe Mia was right. I probably should have been running in the opposite direction as fast as my legs could carry me. But then his gaze landed on me, and his icy exterior thawed. Amusement played across his lips and danced in his eyes. Suddenly, it was hard to remember why I'd felt intimidated at all.

I drew in a deep breath, giving myself a moment to settle my jittering nerves, and went to meet him at the counter. "You came," I said, releasing a near silent sigh.

“You don’t need to sound quite so surprised. I take dates with my girlfriend extremely seriously.”

“Fake girlfriend,” I muttered.

He grinned, making his lone dimple pop. I did my best not to frown at the small indent in his cheek. Why couldn’t he be just a touch less appealing?

I was distracted because there were a couple of girls sitting at a table behind Reed. They kept laughing and shooting Reed flirtatious smiles. Was this an example of the reception he received everywhere he went? It seemed people were either fleeing from him, brandishing their pitchforks, or throwing themselves at his feet in the hopes they’d catch his attention.

“So, you ready to get logistical?” he asked.

“Logistical?” I looked at him once more, but it took me a moment to remember what he was talking about. It was a little hard to focus when I could still hear the girls whispering about him just a few feet away.

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat before lowering his voice. “You know, about our relationship.”

“Right. Yes.”

“Is now a good time?” he added.

“Yeah, just give me a sec. Why don’t you go grab a seat, and I’ll bring you over a coffee. How do you take it?”

“You should know my coffee order, *babe*.” He gave me a wink before walking over to one of the booths.

I glared at the back of his neck as he moved away from the counter. How was I supposed to know how a Darling Devil liked his coffee? Probably tall, dark, and strong. That was no fun though, and I grinned as an image of the perfect drink for Reed formed in my mind. As his fake girlfriend, I knew just what he needed.

“I’m going to take a quick break,” I told Mia and Nicole once I’d finished making Reed’s coffee.

“No problem,” Nicole said. “It’s very slow in here.”

“True.” It had been quiet all morning, but I was hardly going to complain. I loved it when I got to work with my two best friends—and it was especially fun when we weren’t too busy.

“I won’t be long,” I said before I headed over to meet Reed with his drink in hand. I placed it down on the table before him, and his eyes widened with shock.

“What on earth is that?”

“It’s your favorite,” I said as sweetly as I could. “A strawberry Frappuccino with whipped cream, marshmallows, and sprinkles on top.”

“You know I have a reputation to uphold...” he murmured, keeping his voice low.

“I thought it couldn’t get any worse.”

“I guess that’s true.” He laughed before lifting the tall glass and putting the rainbow-colored straw to his lips. He looked pleasantly surprised as he took a sip.

“Well, it might look like a unicorn threw up in my glass, but it tastes pretty good,” he said as he went back for more. “I do love strawberries, and you can’t go wrong with sprinkles.”

I laughed at his description. When I’d come up with the concoction, I’d been going for something a five-year-old girl might serve up to her imaginary pet unicorn, so unicorn vomit wasn’t exactly far off. I was surprised he’d even given it a go, let alone liked it.

“Not too sweet?” I asked.

“Nope.” He flashed me a smile even though the straw was still firmly stuck between his lips. “This is exactly what I wanted.”

My cheeks flushed because for a moment I wasn’t all that certain he was talking about his coffee. At least, a part of me seemed to hope he wasn’t talking about the coffee. I quickly pushed the thought away as I remembered Nicole and Mia were watching us closely. I didn’t look their way to check, but I schooled my expression to become more serious and focused on the task at hand.

“So...we’re really doing this?” I asked. “Pretending to be in a relationship?”

“Unless you’ve changed your mind?”

I was slightly terrified by the whole thing, but after the way Jeremy had treated me last night, I wasn’t sure I could back out. No, I needed to go through with this, so I shook my head. “I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Good.”

“But we need rules,” I quickly added.

His expression dimmed. “Okay, what kind of rules?” He really didn’t seem to like the sound of that. I guessed it wasn’t surprising when it seemed there were very few rules he actually followed in life.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Rules about things we are and aren't comfortable with. Rules to make sure this doesn't get out of hand."

"Didn't you already break your most sacred rule by being in this relationship? No hockey players, remember."

"Yes," I reluctantly admitted. "And look what a mess we're in because I broke that rule. We're making rules and sticking to them from here on."

"Fine." He let out a long sigh. "Give me an example."

"Okay." I said, with a firm nod. "Rule number one: no flirting."

"What?" His face almost scrunched in disgust.

"No flirting."

"But how are we supposed to convince people we're in a relationship if we can't flirt?"

He had a point. "Okay, then, no flirting unless there are other people around and we need to keep up the act."

Reed still didn't look certain and already seemed worried about how this was going to work. I could understand why it might be hard for him. A guy like Reed would probably chat up a streetlight if it had long hair.

"Okay, what else," he asked.

"Uh, no kissing."

"It's a bit late for that, don't you think?" he said with a hint of a smile. "You already well and truly broke that rule."

"I wasn't thinking clearly when that happened." I shot back. And if we repeated that mistake, I wasn't sure I would ever think clearly again. Reed's lips were far too skilled, and I'd enjoyed it far too much. Kissing was what had gotten me into this in the first place; it would only make things messier, and it was exactly why we needed to put these rules in place.

"No kissing," I repeated.

"Again, how are we supposed to convince people we're dating?" he replied.

"I'm sure holding hands is more than enough."

"Did you have a rule about *only* holding hands with Hoffman?"

"No, I guess not," I muttered. I felt myself shudder slightly as I recalled the way Jeremy was often so possessive in public. He always had an arm around my shoulder or a hand on my butt. He got even more handsy when he was drunk. I didn't want to tell Reed any of that though.

Reed leaned back in his seat and exhaled as he placed his hands on his head. "I mean, we can try it," he said before leaning forward once more and

lowering his voice. "But I don't think Jeremy is going to get the message if I'm not even allowed to kiss you on the cheek..."

"Okay, fine, you can kiss me on the cheek. But only if it's necessary."

He shook his head. "These rules are kind of taking all the fun out of our relationship."

"You can have all the fun you like with your puck bunnies after the winter formal. And it's a *fake* relationship."

"Right. That's what I meant."

I wasn't convinced, and my eyes narrowed on him as he took another sip of his Frappuccino. He'd demolished the drink, and a loud slurping noise sounded as he sucked up the last of the liquid through the straw.

"Do you have any rules for me?" I asked.

"I think we have enough already," he replied. "Let's get onto the important stuff. Where should we go for our first date?"

"Date?" I practically squeaked the word.

"Yeah." Reed's expression brightened as he continued. "To prove to your ex you've moved on to someone better." I had a feeling Reed was all too happy to show Jeremy what an upgrade he was.

"Right." I swallowed as nerves bubbled up in my throat. "Are you really sure you want to do this? It seems like a whole lot of effort on your part, especially when you're supposed to be fully focused on hockey. Are the girls at your school really that bad?"

"Yes," he replied without hesitation. "They're a nightmare. Now, our date. Can you think of somewhere Hoffman will see us?"

"Uh." Reed was clearly someone who wasn't easily deterred when he had his mind set on something. "Well, I can think of one location where Jeremy would definitely see us," I said. "And it will piss him off for sure."

"Good," Reed said, his face turning stern. "After the way he treated you, Hoffman deserves a little payback."

"Well, Jeremy hated that I never showed an interest in his hockey," I explained. "I was usually working and couldn't make it to his preseason games, and he was always complaining that other players' girlfriends went to watch their practices but I never did."

Reed's eyebrows shot up. "I mean, I guess I can understand he'd want you to come to his games. But practices?"

I shrugged.

"You don't even like hockey..."

“Jeremy’s all about appearances,” I said. “I guess he just wanted the perfect little hockey girlfriend on his arm. But, clearly, I didn’t cut it.”

“Perfect is overrated,” Reed replied.

“Maybe.” It was hard not to feel the opposite. Perhaps if I’d been a little closer to perfect, then Jeremy wouldn’t have felt the need to cheat.

“So, you think you should come to one of my practices?” Reed asked.

“Uh, yeah?” I couldn’t have sounded less certain.

Reed chuckled as he took in my expression. “Hey, you were the one who came up with the idea.”

“Sorry, I know.” I squared my shoulders a little more and pushed down my anxiety at the idea of parading our imaginary relationship in front of my ex. “Yes, I think I should come to your next practice. You guys have the ice at the arena before the Saints, right?”

“Yep, and we’ve got practice tomorrow night,” he replied. “It’s fairly safe to say we’ll be seen by Jeremy or at least some of the guys on his team.”

I swallowed down the nerves that were refusing to stay buried. “Okay, I’ll see you there tomorrow night then.”

“It’s a date.” Reed grinned.

“A fake date.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

I shook my head at him. I still didn’t know what to make of the guy sitting across from me.

“What?” he asked. I must have been staring at him too long.

“I don’t know.” I hesitated, unsure whether I wanted to dive into the apparent dark side of Reed Darling. “I’ve heard *a lot* of stuff about you is all, and most of it isn’t good. But the few times we’ve met, you’ve gone out of your way to help me. I’m just trying to figure out who is the real Reed Darling.”

He laughed softly to himself and shook his head. “Well, now that we’re dating, maybe I’ll get a chance to show you.”

“True,” I replied. “But it’s just that some of the things I’ve heard are somewhat...concerning.”

“And do you believe everything you’ve heard?”

I didn’t answer straightaway. It felt unlikely that *everything* I’d heard about Reed was true, but that didn’t mean none of it was, especially given



so many people had warned me about him. As I watched him, I got the impression he'd be disappointed if I admitted that.

"I guess not *everything*," I said. "But how am I supposed to know what's true and what's not?"

"How about this," he said. "Every date we go on, you can ask me about one of the rumors you've heard. I'll answer you honestly, and if you don't believe me, I can show you the receipts."

"Do I get to ask you about one today?"

"I thought this was a planning session, not a date," he replied.

"I mean, there's coffee and talking."

"But no flirting," he replied. "Because that's strictly against the rules. I'm not sure any date can really be considered a date without flirting."

I opened my mouth to object, but he continued.

"And I also don't think it can be considered a date when there's zero chance we'll kiss at the end of it..."

"I kissed you last night. Doesn't that count?"

Warmth filled his eyes, and the memory of our kiss almost seemed to dance in his gaze. But the look was fleeting, and his smile quickly faded as he composed himself. He sounded more serious as he continued. "You really do want to know all my deep dark secrets, don't you?"

"I'm just trying to make sure I'm not fake dating a criminal."

"Fair enough." He nodded. "Give me a rumor, and I'll tell you if it's true or not."

My eyes dipped to the neck of his sweatshirt. I could see a hint of the scar the girls had been talking about earlier disappearing beneath his collar. Although I was intrigued, I didn't feel comfortable asking him about it. It felt very personal, and a part of me didn't want to hear about how he'd broken some poor girl's heart enough to make her attack him with a deadly weapon. Instead, I decided to go with one of the first things Mia had told me about Reed.

"Did you miss school last year because you had to spend time in juvie?" I asked.

"Juvie?" His jaw seemed to clench a little, but he smiled. "Is that rumor still going around?"

"That's not an answer."

"No, I didn't go to juvie. Last year, my dad had to move my grandma into a nursing home just as my junior year was starting. He needed help

getting her settled and for someone to help out at the garage while he took time off. I volunteered, kept up with my classes online, and missed some school as a result.”

“Well, why would people assume you were in juvie?”

“Because I’m a Darling.” He pulled out his phone and started scrolling through it. “Either that or Parker was messing with everyone.”

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting your proof.” He turned the phone to face me and flicked through several pictures of him, Danny, and an elderly lady. A few of the pictures were selfies of the three of them, but there was one particularly cute one where Reed and his grandma were hugging. She was completely dwarfed by his massive size as she looked up at him adoringly.

“These are just pictures of you and your grandma, Reed. Maybe you went to juvie the week after these were taken.”

He rolled his eyes and pulled his phone away from me. “Going to need just a little bit of trust here, Sunshine. Or I could call my mom, and you can ask her?”

“No, no. It’s okay,” I quickly answered. I imagined that would be a very awkward conversation.

“Glad to hear it,” he replied.

The bell above the door sounded, and when I glanced over my shoulder, I was surprised to find the café had filled with people while Reed and I had been talking. I’d been so consumed in our conversation I hadn’t noticed. Mia and Nicole seemed to have everything under control, but I still felt guilty I’d taken such a long break.

“I should get back to work soon,” I said. “It’s getting busy in here.”

Reed smiled. “That’s fine. If we’ve missed anything, I’m sure we can talk about it on our date tomorrow.”

“Fake date.”

“Of course.”

It wasn’t the first time I’d had to correct him, and I was worried about how easily the edges of our agreement might blur over time even with my attempts at implementing strict rules. I was also a little worried about how much Reed seemed to be enjoying our arrangement so far. Given the way I’d lost track of time while we’d been sitting here, maybe I wasn’t hating it as much as I’d first thought I would either. I decided to make another addition to our rule book.

“Reed, before we go, there’s just one more thing,”

“Okay...” He suddenly sounded nervous, and I didn’t blame him because I probably looked a little sick as I thought about how to voice what I was thinking.

“We should promise each other that we won’t let any feelings get in the way of our arrangement.”

I slowly looked up at him, and his uncertain expression mirrored my own. “No feelings?”

“No feelings,” I replied. “Think of it as the golden rule. This isn’t a real relationship, and it’s never going to be. I’m not ready to date again after what happened with Jeremy, and I can’t afford to get my heart stomped on all over again.”

“Yeah, I get it.” Reed slowly began to nod, and it looked like he genuinely understood. “Okay, no feelings,” he agreed. “And I promise I won’t stomp on your heart if you don’t stomp on mine.”

I didn’t think there was any danger of that, but I nodded all the same. “Deal. And then in a few weeks, you can go back to your girls, and I’ll go back to avoiding hockey like the plague.”

“Sure” was all he said in response.

I blew out a breath, feeling more at ease now we had our golden rule to guide us through this minefield.

With that delicate conversation out of the way, the two of us stood from the booth at the same time. I was about to turn and walk away, but then I noticed there were a few kids from school seated nearby who were watching us. What would they think if I just left Reed standing there alone? I was supposed to be his girlfriend after all. I needed to act like it. But what about the rules I’d just—

Before I could fret any longer, Reed stepped forward and gently placed his hand on my waist. He leaned toward me and brushed a featherlight kiss against my cheek. His touch was so gentle but somehow still held an intensity that left me breathless. I was taken completely by surprise, but his lips were gone before I could react.

Had he already broken a rule? Or had we agreed that a kiss on the cheek was okay when necessary? I couldn’t remember. All I could think about was the feel of his lips on my skin. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly as he took in my wide eyes, and I quickly hid my shock as best I could.

“Uh, did that qualify as necessary?” I whispered. His face was still close to mine, and his hand still rested on my waist.

“Yes,” he murmured. “Definitely.” He brushed past me and made his way to the door. I stood frozen to the spot for a few seconds before quickly snapping to my senses and hurrying back behind the counter to return to work.

I was suddenly feeling very glad I’d decided to add our golden rule to the game plan at the last minute but also a little more worried I was going to have to work hard to enforce it.

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## REED

“HEY, Reed. Is that your girl over there?”

I skidded to a stop, the ice flying up from my skates, as I looked in the direction Matt had nodded toward. Violet was standing at the edge of the rink, and she lifted her hand slightly to wave. I was surprised to see her here so early. I’d told her she only needed to make an appearance for the last few minutes of practice. Given her feelings about hockey, I knew this would be boring for her to watch. Plus, we only needed Hoffman to see us leaving the center together, so it wouldn’t have mattered if she’d arrived a little later.

I still couldn’t believe Violet’s ex had expected her to watch him train. I knew she was set on avoiding jocks, specifically those with big egos, so I couldn’t fathom how she’d ended up with a guy who had one bigger than the rink we played on.

“Yeah, that’s her,” I replied, smiling in her direction as I raised my stick to return her greeting. I was genuinely excited to see her, but slightly nervous too. I’d enjoyed our tactics meeting far more than I should have yesterday, and the little golden rule she’d thrown in at the end had me worried. She didn’t want any feelings involved, but I was already well on my way to breaking that crucial part of our agreement.

“Dude, you are such a goner.” Matt laughed, and I realized I must have looked like a total loser waving my stick in the air at Violet. I shoved my shoulder into him as I went to skate off, but it only made Matt laugh harder.

I hadn’t told anyone the truth about me and Violet and how our relationship was fake. Not even Grayson, and I usually told him everything. I think a part of me just didn’t want to admit it out loud. Matt was right. I

was a goner—and I had been ever since I'd seen her swing her foot at her car.

The guys were all grilling me about her in the locker room before practice. We'd made quite a scene with our kiss on Saturday night, so everyone was understandably curious. Even at school, people had been asking me all day about the new girl from Sunshine Hills, and I'd been more than happy to tell them she was my girlfriend.

Matt, especially, had been asking a lot of questions about her. It was fair enough considering I hadn't shown any interest in dating since freshman year, and suddenly I was going out with our biggest rival's ex-girlfriend. It had all happened so fast, and Matt seemed to realize something didn't quite add up. Surely, he'd never guess our relationship was a complete lie. I could barely believe it myself.

Coach barked at us to grab a quick drink, so while the rest of the team headed over to the bench, I skated across to Violet.

As I approached, she greeted me with a slightly anxious smile. She looked cute tonight with a large jacket that seemed to swallow her whole. Every time I saw her, I swore she'd become smaller. Either that or her clothes got bigger. I couldn't deny that winter in Minnesota was cold, but I'd never seen anyone layer on jackets the way Violet did.

"Having fun?" she asked, nodding in the direction of the ice.

"Always." I pulled my helmet from my head and grinned at her. "But I think the more important question is: are you?"

She shrugged. "I only got here a few minutes ago, but it's not as bad as I thought it would be."

"Are you talking about me or the hockey?"

"Uh, both?"

"So, what you're saying is, you're not all that impressed by my hockey skills."

"I didn't say that. It seems like you know what you're doing."

"Jeez." I ran a hand through my hair. "That's like the nice way of saying I'm simply adequate."

"Well, I meant it in a good way."

I couldn't hold back my grimace.

"Okay." She slowly started to smile. "What I meant to say is I've never had my breath taken away quite like I did when I first saw how you handle that stick. I've been swooning ever since..."

I burst out laughing. "Yeah, that's much better."

She rolled her eyes, but there was still a playful smile on her lips.

"If you want to be impressed by someone's stick skills, you should have been watching me," Parker said as he attempted to shoulder me out of the way and take my place. The little shit.

"Hey. Parker, right?" she said.

"The one and only." His broad shoulders straightened with confidence. "It's nice to see you again, Violet."

"Yeah, you too."

"So, what do you say? Want me to show you my skills?" he asked.

I really struggled not to shove him out of the way. The only reason I held back was because I didn't want him to know how much he was getting to me.

"We better still be talking about hockey," I warned.

Violet didn't seem nearly so bothered by him though, and she released a bright laugh. "I'll keep an eye out for you," she replied.

"Well, in that case, I might just have to show off a little bit," Parker replied as though he didn't already spend every minute he was on the ice doing just that. "So, what brings you to our practice tonight?"

She shot me a cautious glance, and I realized she was probably wondering how much of the truth I'd told my brothers.

"She came to meet me here because we're headed to dinner together after practice," I answered for her. "Isn't that right, babe?"

Violet frowned slightly, but I gave her a look that encouraged her to play along. I could hardly tell my brother she was here just so we could show ourselves off in front of her ex. And Parker would have called bullshit if he thought I'd asked her here simply to watch us practice. Dinner was the only thing I could think of that made sense.

"Yeah, dinner, right," Violet said, quickly masking her surprise.

When Coach started yelling at us from across the ice, I knew we'd pushed our break too long.

"That's our cue," Parker said, winking at Violet before skating off.

I gave her a quick smile. "I won't be too much longer," I said. "Enjoy swooning over my stick skills..."

"I wasn't actually..."

I grinned and skated away before she could finish the sentence. I knew perfectly well she'd been joking. Still, I enjoyed making her worry, for a



few moments at least, that I might actually think she'd meant it.

I approached the last fifteen minutes of training with renewed vigor. There was something about knowing Violet was watching me that made me want to work even harder than usual. I chose to ignore the fact that she didn't seem particularly interested in hockey. My efforts couldn't have been subtle because Matt skated up to me as we were headed off the ice at the end of practice.

"Trying to impress a certain someone?" he asked with a smirk.

"Don't know what you mean." I shrugged, trying to act cool as I sat on the bench and pulled off my helmet.

"Well, if you were, it seems you failed," Matt added.

I looked up, and he nodded toward the entrance to the rink. "Looks like you've got some competition."

My stomach twisted as I followed his gaze and saw Violet talking to Hoffman. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she didn't look happy to be anywhere near her ex, let alone speaking with him. The sight of them together stirred something inside me. Was it anger? Jealousy? Nerves? Something else? All I knew was Violet looked uncomfortable. We were supposed to be making sure Hoffman saw us together, and I hated that she was having to confront him on her own.

"What's Hoffman playing at?" Matt continued. "Saints players aren't allowed in here until we've finished our practice."

"I'm not sure," I said. "But I'm going to find out."

"Need backup?"

"With Hoffman?" I scoffed. "Nah, I'll catch you in the locker room."

I didn't wait for a response before I headed over to join Violet.

"Just leave me alone, Jeremy." I caught Violet trying to end the conversation as I arrived at her side. Now I was closer, I could see she wasn't just slightly uncomfortable around Jeremy. Every inch of her body seemed to radiate with disgust and anger, and even though she was speaking softly, her words were laced with venom.

I didn't hesitate as I slung my arm over Violet's shoulder. Her body was stiff beneath me, but the moment she glanced up into my eyes, she relaxed, and I could clearly see how grateful she was.

"The arena's closed to Saints during our practice, Hoffman," I bit out coldly as I turned to face Jeremy. "You know that."

Hoffman's eyes narrowed on my arm draped over Violet's shoulders, and it took him a moment to fully turn his attention to me. "Apparently, the rule doesn't apply to *all* Saints." He glanced at Violet.

"Violet might go to your school, but that doesn't make her a part of your team," I replied. "Besides, we've already made you an honorary Devil, haven't we, babe?"

Violet nodded, but the movement looked strained as though she was struggling to keep calm and play along with our act. Clearly, whatever Jeremy was saying to her before I arrived had rattled her.

"So, what are you doing here?" I pressed Hoffman.

The guy had the gall to smirk at me. "Just checking on my girl," he said. "I got to practice early and saw her come inside. Thought she might have been looking for me..."

"I already told you; I didn't come here for you." Violet's words were edged with steel and her gaze far colder than the ice beside us. For someone so sweet, she was also someone I didn't want to get on the wrong side of.

The smirk slipped slightly from Hoffman's face. "I find that hard to believe."

"Well, believe it," she continued, pressing into me a little more. "I came here to watch my boyfriend. We're going to dinner, and I arrived early so I could catch the end of his practice."

I gave Violet a warm smile and was pleased when she returned it. She might have been tense when I first came up to her, but she'd certainly relaxed since I'd shown up. It felt good to know she trusted me.

"Speaking of dinner, we better head off so we don't miss our reservation," I added.

"Yeah, of course," Violet replied.

"Catch you around, Hoffman." I didn't bother looking his way again as I steered Violet in the opposite direction. I needed to go to the locker room and change, but I didn't want to leave Violet anywhere near that guy. She was glancing over her shoulder and still seemed uncomfortable despite the fact he was walking away.

"What was Hoffman saying to you back there?" I asked.

"Nothing I haven't already heard," she muttered. "He still seems to think I'm eventually going to forgive him and take him back." She paused, and the frown she'd been flashing ever since I'd first seen her talking to Jeremy deepened. "Maybe this isn't working."

I struggled not to panic. It was way too soon for Violet to be giving up on our fake relationship. I needed more time with her. To show I was more than the hockey-playing meathead she thought I was.

"This is only our first date," I quickly replied. "Right now, he probably still thinks you're just trying to make him jealous. We just need to show him we're serious. Once he realizes that, he'll leave you alone."

"You think?"

"For sure. If we suddenly stop dating now, he'd probably think we broke up because you still want him."

Violet was quiet as she considered what I'd said, and I did my best not to blurt out something else to try to convince her. The last thing I needed was to sound desperate.

Finally, she responded, "Maybe you're right."

I felt like I could breathe again.

When we arrived at the locker room, I paused by the door. My muscles ached with exhaustion, and I needed a long hot shower before we went to dinner, but I was reluctant to leave Violet alone for any longer than necessary with Hoffman lurking about.

She glanced up at me and raised an eyebrow as though she could see exactly what I'd been thinking. "I don't need a babysitter, Reed. I'll be fine out here on my own. You go and get changed."

Despite what she said, she still seemed shaken from our confrontation with Jeremy.

"Unless, of course, you want to take me in there with you," she continued. "And introduce me to your half-naked teammates."

My hands clenched tightly around the handle of my hockey stick. Violet must have noticed my reaction because she laughed. "Just go get changed, Reed. I'll be waiting out here when you're done."

I grunted before turning toward the locker room, but Violet stopped me.

"Reed, wait," she said, reaching out to touch my arm. "Thanks for backing me up with Jeremy. You're a good fake boyfriend." I smiled down at her, trying my best not to flinch at the sound of the word fake.

I had the world's quickest shower and changed in record time. Once again, I was far from subtle, and all the guys noticed.

"What's the rush, Reed?" Matt asked, not even attempting to cover his smirk. He'd always been the nice guy on the team unless, of course, the

opportunity arose to taunt me. I guessed that was the price of being his best friend. My other teammates were enjoying it just as much.

“Never seen Reed move so fast.”

“Nothing stops a Darling when he wants to score.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with the hot redhead waiting outside, would it, Cap?”

“Hey, hot redhead has a name.” Parker countered. “It’s Violet.” I was somewhat surprised he’d come to my defense, but then he continued. “And it has *everything* to do with her...”

A few of the guys laughed, but thankfully I was done getting changed. I pointed a finger at all of them as I went to leave the room. “Keep this up, and I’ll make Coach give us extra sprints next practice.”

That only made them laugh more, and I pushed through the door and escaped into the corridor. As captain, it was very rare that I became the butt of the team’s locker-room jokes. Usually, it was only Parker, Grayson, and Matt who had the balls to give me shit that way. I didn’t mind so much today. Not when I couldn’t deny they were right; I was rushing because I couldn’t wait to see Violet again.

She was staring off into the distance when I emerged from the locker room but perked up when she saw me. “That was quick.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to keep my girlfriend waiting.” I took her hand in mine, just in case Hoffman was still around. At least, that’s what I told myself. It had nothing to do with how much I liked the way her slender fingers fit between mine. *Absolutely nothing.*

“Girlfriend?” She glanced briefly at our interlocked hands but didn’t pull away. “Don’t make me correct you again. You know we’re alone out here, right?”

“I know.” I shrugged. “I’m just practicing.”

Violet’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t argue, and I was convinced I saw the hint of a smile on her lips. We made our way toward the arena exit, and her grasp on my hand tightened when we walked past a few Saints players who had just arrived. They were all glaring at her like she was their enemy too, and she was clearly uncomfortable around them.

“Are you okay?” I asked once we were outside.

“Yeah, I guess.” She slowly released a breath. “It’s just, even though I knew Jeremy would be pissed about seeing us together, I didn’t really think

about how the rest of his team would take it. It's like I've made an enemy out of everyone in Sunshine Hills."

"That's the thing about teams," I said. "We tend to stick together. But if it makes you feel any better, those guys were mostly glaring at me."

"I'm not so sure about that."

Unlike me, Violet couldn't have been used to so much negative attention. She was sweet and fun, and I couldn't imagine anyone ever having a reason to so much as look at her wrong. She didn't deserve to be treated this way by Hoffman or his teammates. There wasn't a whole lot else I could do to help her though. I could always threaten them, but that would just make them even more angry at her.

"If you like, we could go kick a few Saints players' cars?" I suggested.

A snort escaped her as she failed to hold back her laughter, and her eyes twinkled as she glanced up at me. "I think my car-abusing days are over."

"I'm glad to hear it, Sunshine."

She turned her eyes up toward the sky but she appeared to be fighting a smile. It was like she couldn't decide if I amused her or annoyed her.

When we reached my truck, I opened the door for her to climb inside. "So, where am I taking you for dinner?" I asked. Her car would be in the shop for a couple more days, so I'd told her I'd give her a ride home after practice.

"Dinner?"

"You know, that big meal you eat at the end of the day. I was thinking we go to Nino's. They have the best pizza around here."

"I know what dinner is." She seemed to be leaning more toward annoyed with me right now. "But don't you think me coming to your practice was enough fake dating for today?"

We couldn't have spent much more than twenty minutes together tonight, and that was never going to be enough.

"I told my brother we were getting food," I replied. "If I head home too soon, Parker's going to think something's up."

"Is that a problem?"

"Well, he isn't great with secrets and has a very big mouth. He can't be trusted with the truth about us."

"Ah."

"Plus, it will be good if we're seen out together. There are always a few kids from school at Nino's on a Monday night, and we want our

relationship to look convincing, right?”

As if my stomach knew exactly what we were talking about, it gave a small grumble of complaint. It was pretty loud, and I couldn't even attempt to hide it.

Violet smiled as she caught the sound. “I guess we could grab a quick bite to eat.”

“Done.” I grinned as she pulled herself into the truck, and I closed the door behind her. Our dinner date might not be real, and I might have had to coerce Violet into it, but my stupid heart couldn't help feeling excited because I had a little more time with her tonight.

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## VIOLET

AS REED DROVE us to the restaurant, I was still recovering from my encounter with Jeremy at the rink and struggling to get it off my mind. The way he'd spoken to me today was worryingly similar to the night of the bonfire and when he'd cornered me at school. He didn't seem to understand why I was done with him. He was convinced it was only a matter of time before I forgave him and came crawling back into his arms.

I hadn't expected him to hold on to our relationship so tightly, especially once he knew I was with someone else. But seeing me with Reed only seemed to fuel his desire to win me back. Was it because he really cared about me, or was he just too proud to lose me to his nemesis? I just had to hope Reed was right and, by the time our agreement was over, Jeremy would get the message and move on.

"Any news on my car?" I asked, trying to take my mind off Jeremy.

"It's almost done." Reed smiled brightly. "You'll probably get a call from my dad tomorrow."

"That's great." I released a relieved breath. I couldn't wait to be done relying on other people for rides. "So, how often do you work at your dad's garage?"

"I was there pretty much every day over the summer break but much less often now school is back." Reed's voice was edged with disappointment. He really seemed to love cars.

"Sounds like you really miss it."

"Yeah, I do," he said. "If I wasn't so devoted to hockey, I'd happily follow in my dad's footsteps and work on cars."

"Why don't you then?"



“Because I love hockey just as much,” he replied. “I’m already committed to play for the Ryker Raiders next year. They have one of the top hockey programs in the country, and I’ll have a really good chance of going pro if I do well there. I can always come back to cars in the future. That’s what my dad did.”

“What do you mean?”

“My dad captained the Raiders back when he was in college. He was on track to play in the NHL, but he blew out his knee before he was drafted. It ended his career.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine what he went through. He came to terms with it a long time ago though. He’s happy now, and he loves what he does.”

“So, at what point did your dad turn to a life of organized crime in Minneapolis?”

Reed laughed and rolled his eyes. “Is that your rumor of the day?”

“Uh, sure.” Having met Danny, I was pretty confident I knew this rumor was false already, but I liked hearing Reed talk about his family. Plus, I couldn’t think of another rumor I wanted to ask about. There were so many I was losing track. I should make a list.

“No, my dad has never been involved in organized crime,” he replied, shaking his head in disbelief at the concept. “Although, next time you’re wondering whether someone is the son of a mobster, it’s probably best not to ask them so up front like that.”

“I mean, I didn’t actually believe he was a mobster. Where does a rumor like that even come from?”

“Beats me.” Reed shrugged. “My dad’s never even lived in Minneapolis. He and my mom met in high school, fell in love, and, aside from a few years in college, they’ve been here pretty much ever since.”

Reed’s face seemed to light up as he spoke about his mom and dad. It sounded like he came from such a loving family with parents who cared about each other and siblings who had his back. When I’d first heard about Reed, I would have probably predicted he came from a broken dysfunctional home. However, his was in much better shape than my own. I had my own elite sporting father to blame for that. I hoped Reed would turn out more like his dad than mine once he got to the big leagues.

“That’s so nice,” I said. “And it’s great that you’re still able to follow the same path as your dad by playing for the same team as him.”

“Yeah, it’s become a bit of a family tradition.” Reed’s smile didn’t fade as he spoke. Grayson’s going there next year too, and my uncle played for the Raiders before he went to the NHL. But hopefully I won’t be emulating my dad too closely,” he said. “I happen to like my knee just how it is.”

As we pulled up outside Nino’s, I saw a group of kids our age gathered outside with more seated at tables inside the restaurant. I recognized some of them but not all, so it could have been a mixture of people from Sunshine Prep and Ransom High.

My stomach tightened as I considered what we were about to do. It had been one thing to pretend we were in a relationship at the ice rink in front of Jeremy and Reed’s teammates. But the restaurant felt infinitely more intimate with so many more watchful eyes. We were going to have to make sure we looked like a couple for an entire meal in front of all these people, and I couldn’t work out if I was excited or terrified about that.

When we got out of the truck and started for the entrance, Reed reached out to me. He gave me an encouraging smile as he took my hand. “You don’t have to look quite so nervous.”

“I know,” I murmured, already feeling better now he was holding my hand. I wasn’t sure what it was about Reed, but despite all the negative things people said about him, he had a way of making me feel at ease with just a single word or the slightest touch even when I was panicking on the inside.

As we entered the restaurant, it felt like everyone turned to look our way. A few tried to hide their shock at seeing Reed and I together, but most just outright gawked at us.

I wasn’t sure why anyone would be surprised. Our kiss had hardly been covert at the bonfire on Saturday night. But I supposed it was one thing to know I’d kissed a Darling Devil and another to actually see us on a date. It seemed his reputation for avoiding girlfriends was widely known, even more so than I had realized. Like Jeremy, most people probably assumed I was just some puck-bunny fling to Reed.

“Everyone’s staring,” I whispered. This was the whole reason we were here—to put on a show. But that didn’t mean I was comfortable with it.

“They’ll get over it.” Reed didn’t appear that bothered as he looked past me to our curious spectators, but as his gaze darkened and turned a little threatening, people began to avert their eyes and became more interested in their food.

It was easy to forget about Reed's reputation when I was alone with him. But it was all too obvious when he was around anyone he didn't consider a close friend. I wondered how on earth I'd managed to end up in that category.

A server showed us to a free booth, which was thankfully toward the back of the restaurant and away from prying eyes. Nerves prickled on my skin as I wondered whether Reed might try to cuddle up beside me and continue our act. But, as if he could sense that I was already a little overwhelmed, he slid into the booth across from me.

As the server placed our menus on the table, she leaned in slightly to Reed, batting her false eyelashes at him. "Just let me know if you need anything," she purred.

I got the impression she was offering things that weren't on the menu, but Reed barely seemed to notice. He wasn't even looking at her. It wasn't until the girl was gone that he relaxed. His dark scowl disappeared and was replaced by a sense of weariness. I couldn't tell if he was exhausted from his training, faking our relationship, or playing the part of the big, bad Devil people loved to gossip about. It was probably a combination of the three.

"Why do you do that?" I asked him.

"Do what?"

"You know. One minute you're laughing with me; the next, you're scowling at everyone."

"Just giving them what they want." Reed attempted a half smile and shrugged. "You've heard how people talk about me. I've got a reputation to live up to."

"So, is any of it real, or is it all just an act?"

"I..." His expression was thoughtful. "I guess I'd rather be feared than loved."

His eyes were still distant, and I tried to read the emotion flickering in his gaze. "Really? Why?"

"It's easier," he replied. "No one can screw you over if you don't give them the chance."

His response hit me square in the chest. It was like Reed had voiced the way I'd been feeling most of my life about my dad abandoning us. It had caused me to write off any guy who seemed even remotely similar to him. Reed appeared to be writing off almost everyone but close friends and family, and I wondered what could have caused him to have such a pessimistic

view of people. Had he been hurt or betrayed by someone too? Or had he simply been on the bad side of people for so long he'd forgotten they could be good?

"So, you distrust everyone because some of them might disappoint you?" I asked.

"Pretty much," he replied. "It's been working for me for a while." His response appeared flippant, but there was still a flicker of hurt in his eyes. I wished he'd open up to me more, but his expression closed, and I got the feeling he was done with this conversation.

"Well, you don't scare me, Reed Darling."

"Good," he said. "You're the last person I'd ever want to scare."

The intimate way he was looking at me caused my cheeks to flush, and I was glad a table separated us. I wasn't sure I'd be able to hide the way his words had filled my stomach with butterflies if he was sitting right at my side or if his arm was wrapped around me, holding me close.

Thankfully, our server returned to take our order, saving me from having to come up with a coherent response. Instead, I sat there, stunned speechless as Reed listed off the food he wanted. Jeremy had always eaten a lot, but it was nothing compared to what Reed was ordering. It was like he'd requested everything on the menu.

"Are you really going to eat all of that?" I asked as the server walked away.

"Sure, I'm starving."

"You ordered enough to feed your entire hockey team," I replied. "And then some."

He laughed. "I'm pretty sure every guy on my team would eat at least that much at Nino's, especially after a hard training session. Besides, pizza's my favorite."

"Yeah, me too."

We shared a smile, but Reed's brow began to crinkle as he looked up from our table. Where the server had stood just moments ago, there were now two large guys at the edge of our booth. They were both dressed in sweats that had the Ransom Devils logo across the front. While I didn't recognize them, I was guessing they were on Reed's hockey team.

"Got room for a couple more?" one of them asked.

"Kinda on a date here, Matt," Reed replied.

“Dude, you’re just saying that because you’re scared we’ll embarrass you. And you’d be right, but you can’t hide Violet from us forever.” Matt was grinning as he held out his hand to me. “I’m Matt Cleaver. Reed’s best friend.”

“Violet,” I replied, taking his hand.

“And this is my brother, Owen.” Matt waved at the guy standing next to him. “We’re on the team with Reed.”

“Hey,” Owen said. He greeted me with a warm smile, but his eyes betrayed a hint of nerves as he glanced at Reed. “I hope we’re not interrupting.”

“Don’t worry.” Matt brushed off his brother’s concern and didn’t give anyone a chance to respond as he slid into the booth beside Reed, gesturing for him to scoot farther around the circular booth to make space.

With a begrudging sigh, Reed started to shuffle toward me. Given the size of the two guys joining us at the table, Reed ended up pressed right against me.

“Is this okay?” he murmured softly in my ear so the other two wouldn’t hear.

“It’s fine,” I replied, trying to give him a smile. He was talking about the fact his friends had crashed our dinner, but I was much more concerned about his sudden proximity. Those butterflies were still fluttering wildly, and my skin tingled from his closeness. It made me shift uneasily in my seat as I tried to forget the feeling, but that only made me more worried he’d notice. That his friends would notice. Reed and I were supposed to be in a relationship, so I couldn’t let myself turn into a quivering mess just because he sat next to me.

I wasn’t even sure why I was feeling this way. This was a *fake* relationship with an expiry date. There was no flirting and no kissing, and of course, we had the golden rule: no feelings allowed. Anything sweet that Reed said to me or any intimate looks he flashed my way were all just part of the act. None of it was real. Once I remembered that, I started to calm, and the fluttering in my stomach eased.

Before the butterflies could return, I quickly turned my focus back to Matt and Owen. “So, guys, I was promised some embarrassment?” I said to Reed’s friends.

Matt’s eyes lit up while Reed started to groan. “One wrong word from either of you, and you’re getting booted from the table,” he warned.

Matt's playful smile only grew wider. "You know that bad-temper shit doesn't work on us," he replied before speaking to me. "Did you know Reed used to bring an apple for our kindergarten teacher every day?"

"Aww." I smiled in Reed's direction. "That's really sweet."

The look Reed was giving his friend was downright terrifying.

Matt hardly noticed. "Sweet?" he repeated. "Okay, clearly, I need to dig a little deeper here... How about the time you called our teacher mom?"

"I was seven, and it was clearly an accident," Reed growled.

"There was that time you fell off a treadmill?"

"And you just stood there and laughed. Truly a terrible friend."

"Oh, I've got one." Matt's eyes lit up. "Remember the day you showed up to English to do your book report and pulled one of your mom's dirty books from your bag?"

"Hey, that wasn't my fault. Parker was playing a prank."

"Sure, it was *Parker*."

Anyone else would have been cowering under Reed's glare, but it didn't deter Matt, and even Owen, who seemed a lot quieter, was laughing along. It appeared his friends knew Reed was all bark and no bite. And the more I got to know him, the more I too was realizing his tough exterior was just a façade.

"I think I prefer these stories to the others I've been told about you, Reed," I said.

Matt chuckled. "Heard a few of the rumors, have you?"

"Kinda hard not to," I replied.

"Well, I'm impressed you were willing to give him a chance seeing as he spends his summers fighting bears in cages."

"It is pretty impressive that he can bench press over four hundred pounds," Owen added with a sarcastic smirk.

"Bullshit," Matt laughed. "That one *definitely* isn't true. Reed can barely lift his own arm."

Reed sighed and lowered his head into his hands, but his two friends just laughed harder. It was difficult not to get caught up and smile along with them. Considering how deliberately Reed shut out most people, moments like these made me feel privileged he let his guard down around me.

"It sounds like you guys have been friends a while," I said.

“Yep, best friends since our first day of school,” Matt replied. “We both had the same Spider-Man lunchboxes, and I simply can’t ignore a sign from fate.”

“How cute,” I said.

“Not cute. Manly. Totally manly,” Matt replied, making me laugh. Even Reed had managed to break into a slight smile.

“What about you, Violet?” Owen asked. “You’re new to the area, right?”

I’d been briefly distracted while we were chatting and joking about Reed, but now they were all focused on me, I felt slightly nervous again. These boys were all very big and very good-looking. It was a little overwhelming to have their full attention on me.

“Where are you from originally?” Matt asked.

“California, and I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to the cold.”

“Oh yeah, I imagine it must be brutal if you grew up in California,” Owen said. “How’d you end up in Minnesota?”

“Uh.” I hesitated. Generally, I liked to avoid getting into that sob story. I gave the quickest explanation I could. “My mom’s working overseas this year,” I explained. “I came up here to live with my uncle. Well, I was dropped off up here.”

I couldn’t help but sound bitter and twisted about the whole thing. I guessed that was because I was bitter and twisted about the whole thing. Reed’s face was serious now as he looked at me with concern in his eyes.

“Well,” Matt said, breaking the silence. “It won’t be long before you’ve got ice in your veins like the rest of us.”

I was only too grateful that the pizza arrived, and the boys turned their attention to the food. I didn’t feel like unloading about my mom to these guys. I’d been doing so well at keeping my feelings of disappointment and abandonment all bottled up since I arrived in Sunshine Hills. They were always there though, lurking beneath the surface. Even Mia didn’t truly know how I felt. She was my cousin, and I didn’t want her to think I wasn’t grateful to be living with her this year—because I was. I guessed, sometimes, it was easier to talk to strangers about these things.

Reed was still watching me closely, and I wondered if perhaps he could see that I was still thinking about my mom. I quickly turned to my own food. “This looks great.”

“It is,” Reed replied before he quickly swatted Matt’s hand away. “Hands off.”

Reed started to eat his pizza in a rush, and I wasn’t sure if it was because he was trying to make sure his friends didn’t steal his food, if he was desperate to get me out of there, or if that was simply how he ate.

We were both finished before his friends’ food arrived, and Reed excused us from the table. “We should probably head out,” he said, glancing at me to check I was okay with it.

I gave him a small nod before turning to Matt and Owen. “It was nice to meet you guys.”

“You too,” they replied.

Reed insisted on paying for our meal, and as much as I wanted to object, I knew I probably couldn’t protest too much in front of his friends. I waited until we were back in his truck before I said anything.

“I can transfer you the money for dinner,” I said.

“Don’t be silly. It’s the least I can do after my friends gate-crashed our date.”

“Fake date,” I corrected. “And I didn’t mind. Your friends are nice.”

“They’re okay.” It sounded as though he was struggling to agree right now. “Owen can be a bit quiet around new people, and Matt’s great when he’s not trying to embarrass me.”

“Well, I don’t think he was trying too hard. He was hardly spilling terrible, dark secrets from your past.”

“For now,” he grumbled.

As he went to turn on the ignition, I reached out and rested my hand on his arm. “Thanks again for tonight, Reed.”

“Seriously, it’s fine,” he said. “I’m glad I got to introduce you to Nino’s. And, I guess, Matt and Owen too.”

I laughed. “No, I don’t mean that. Thank you again for being there when Jeremy confronted me. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem,” he replied. “I’m just doing my job.”

“Right.” *Of course.* I gave a quick shake of my head, feeling silly for thinking there had been anything more behind his actions than that. When I was around Reed, it was easy to get caught up in the moment and forget this wasn’t a normal situation. I guessed he was just better than me at playing the part of a doting partner.



He'd done exactly what I needed from him. What I wanted. So why did a part of me feel disappointed?

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## REED

I FELT LIKE SUCH AN IDIOT. I'd just arrived home after my date with Violet but couldn't bring myself to get out of the truck. Our first fake date had been somewhat successful, but I was still thinking about how she'd frozen up when I moved to sit closer to her in the booth at Nino's. She'd seemed fine when I put my arm around her at the ice rink in front of Jeremy. I'd even got the impression she liked it. But it must have just been a part of our act to show her ex we were serious. An act she'd momentarily forgotten to continue in front of my friends at the pizza restaurant.

It felt like I'd seen her true feelings in that moment because as soon as our legs had brushed against each other she'd responded as if she wanted to get out of the booth and flee. It was probably because she remembered I was just an arrogant, unappealing jock who she would otherwise be completely avoiding.

I, on the other hand, couldn't get enough of her. When she was close, like she had been at the restaurant, I found it almost impossible not to try to get closer still. Every time she held my hand, touched my arm, or even just brushed against me, my stomach flipped, and every time I breathed in the sweet scent of her shampoo or watched her tuck her bright red hair behind her ear, I had to remind myself she wasn't truly mine. I hung off her every word when she spoke, and when she smiled, I could feel myself falling deeper and deeper. I was in serious trouble because I was only becoming more certain she was never going to look at me the same way.

I sighed as I reluctantly summoned the energy to climb out of the safety of the truck and head inside.

“How was dinner with Violet?” Parker asked as I entered through the back door and came into the kitchen. It was a simple question, but Parker had somehow packed it full of suggestion and innuendo.

“Dinner was good,” I grunted, trying my best to ignore the smug grin on my brother’s face.

“Who’s Violet?” Cammie asked as she pulled her head out of the fridge and closed the door. I hadn’t even noticed she was there.

“Reed’s girlfriend,” Parker answered, his grin only growing smugger.

Cammie’s mouth dropped open as she turned to me. “*You* have a girlfriend?”

“You don’t have to sound so surprised.”

“Of course, I do,” Cammie replied. “I thought you didn’t date. Who is this girl that’s finally tied you down?”

“She goes to Sunshine Prep,” Parker said. He was enjoying this all way too much.

“What?” Cammie gasped. “Why? Isn’t like every girl at Ransom chasing you?”

“No, of course not.”

She laughed. “Are you really that oblivious?”

“He’s not oblivious,” Grayson said, entering the kitchen. “Reed’s just too focused on hockey to worry about shit like that.”

“Oh god. Not you too,” I grumbled. Gray was, at least, coming to my defense, but I still didn’t feel like having a kitchen meeting with all my siblings to chat about my love life. Especially not when my relationship wasn’t real, and I was starting to lose hope it ever could be.

“Well, I’m just glad to see Reed’s finally focused on getting into someone’s pants,” Parker said.

“I’m not getting into anyone’s pants!” I yelled. It was bad enough people I didn’t know said that crap about me. I didn’t need to hear it from my family even if they were just winding me up.

To make things worse, my mom took that moment to enter the kitchen. “Glad to hear it, Reedy,” she said, giving me a pat on the shoulder as she grabbed her keys off the table and left the room again.

Silence followed, but then my siblings all burst into laughter once she was out the door. Even Grayson couldn’t contain himself. Parker was laughing so hard he was clutching his belly. I hoped it gave him a stomachache.

I glared at them all. “I don’t know how any of you have friends,” I said before following my mom out of the kitchen.

I headed straight for my room, desperate to get away from everyone, and flopped down on my bed. Unfortunately, Grayson didn’t get the message.

“You all right?” he asked, leaning against the doorway. I really should have closed the door.

With a sigh, I rolled to face him. It took a lot to make my brother smile, let alone laugh. But he was still smirking after Mom’s comment downstairs.

“I’ll survive,” I replied. It was hardly the worst thing my mom had heard come out of my mouth over the years. If anything, she’d probably be disappointed by the idea I wasn’t intently pursuing women. Our mom gave the Bennet mother in *Pride and Prejudice* a run for her money. She was far too eager to see her kids in happy, meaningful relationships, and if we’d been born a few centuries ago, I had no doubt she’d have us all married off by now.

“Think I’m just glad she didn’t hear the part about the girlfriend,” I said as Grayson entered the room and sat on my desk chair.

“Yeah, she’d be planning the wedding already.” Gray chuckled under his breath. “At the very least, you’d be forced to bring her to family dinner on Sunday night.”

“I really don’t want to subject Violet to that.”

“I wouldn’t either although Paige would probably like someone to keep her company. Darling family dinners can be a lot.”

“Nah, Paige loves it.” She had been coming to our family dinners every Sunday for years. She was the only one of our friends Mom allowed us to invite, and I was convinced it was because she was secretly trying to get Grayson and Paige together.

“Well, maybe you’ll think about bringing Violet when you’ve been dating a little longer,” Grayson added. “Though, I think you’ll struggle to avoid it once Mom finds out about her. It’s a miracle she hasn’t heard already.”

I nodded, but I was struggling to meet his eyes because I hated lying to Gray. Parker might be a loudmouth, but I knew Gray would keep it to himself if I told him the truth. I wasn’t really sure why I hadn’t just been straight with him from the beginning. Probably because I didn’t want to admit I was living a lie.

I knew I wouldn't be able to hide it from him for long, so I drew in a breath and finally came out with the truth. "We're not really dating."

"What?"

I slowly sat up straight on my bed. "Violet and me. We're not really dating. Our relationship isn't real."

Grayson's eyebrows pulled together. "What are you talking about?"

I took my time as I tried my best to explain how Violet and I had come to our arrangement. I told him what really happened at the bonfire. How Violet wanted to get Hoffman off her back and how I'd pretended I wanted to stop girls from throwing themselves at me when in reality I just wanted to spend more time with her. However, I almost immediately regretted opening up to Grayson because the judgment in his eyes was clear.

"This can only end badly. You know that, right?" My brother had never been one to sugarcoat things.

"Probably not my best idea," I agreed. "But I really like her. And with her refusing to date hockey players and all the crap people say about me, this is the only way I'd ever have a chance with her."

Grayson rubbed his fingers along the ridge of his nose as though he was regretting his decision to follow me in here. "I thought Parker was the only brother I had to worry about," he finally said.

"You don't have to worry about me. I've got a handle on the situation."

"A handle on the situation? It sounds like you're already half in love with the girl."

His words struck me silent because I wasn't sure I could deny them.

Grayson must have realized that because he let out a weary sigh. "Just don't get your heart broken. You didn't do too well the last time..."

I narrowed my eyes on him, and Grayson lifted his hands to signal he wouldn't go any further down that road.

"All I'm saying is be careful" he added before he stood and started from the room.

"Gray?"

He paused by the door.

"Please don't mention this to anyone. I feel stupid enough as it is chasing a girl like this."

He gave me a brief nod, turned, and left. Once he was gone, I collapsed back down onto the bed. I hated that Grayson had brought up Natalie, but he was right about me needing to be careful. I hadn't let myself feel this

way about a girl in a long time, and now I finally had, I'd unfortunately fallen for a girl who was adamant I was the wrong guy for her. I could only hope things ended differently this time than they did in freshman year.

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At school the next day, I noticed a lot of people giving me curious looks. The attention wasn't entirely unusual, but I had a feeling the hushed whispers that followed me today had little to do with a ridiculous new rumor or my latest performance on the ice. I suspected it was because I'd been seen out on a date with Violet last night.

"I don't know why you're surprised." Matt said when I brought it up with him. "Of course, people are going to talk." We were slowly making our way to our lockers after lunch, where it had felt like the entire cafeteria was focused on me. "Showing up at Nino's with Violet last night was about as official as you can get. You might as well have thrown your jersey on her."

"Yeah, Violet isn't really into hockey, so I can't imagine she'd be too keen on that."

Matt laughed. "Well, hockey aversion aside, she seems cool. And by the way she was looking at you last night, I'd say she's really into you."

I tried my best to ignore his comment. Matt didn't know my relationship with Violet wasn't real. Whatever he thought he saw in her eyes when she looked at me couldn't be real either.

"Did she really call you a pig the first time you met?" I wished I hadn't told him that, but it had accidentally come out when I'd been trying to explain how I'd ended up dating Hoffman's ex-girlfriend. I needed to watch what I said if I didn't want Matt to get suspicious.

"Yeah, we got off to a slightly rocky start."

Matt grinned. "Sounds like she had you all figured out from day one."

"Why am I friends with you again?"

He laughed, but chose to ignore my question "Anyway, I think you're good together. Even if she is from Sunshine Prep and hates hockey."

I really wished he'd move on from talking about Violet, because the longer he did, the more guilty I felt that I hadn't told my best friend the

truth. I didn't have it in me though. Especially not after the reaction I'd gotten from Grayson.

"I'm just doing my best not to scare her off," I replied. It was particularly hard because of the strength of my feelings for her. If she knew I wasn't playing pretend, we'd be over faster than I could blink.

"A challenge for you, I'm sure." He smirked. "Especially given all the shit she'll have heard about you."

"I'm working on that," I said. I was doing my best to put any worries she had about the rumor mill to bed. "I think she knows most of the rumors aren't true."

"But not all of them. Just last week, I heard a new one. Apparently you made some freshman wet his pants because you looked at him the wrong way."

I grimaced. "Actually, I think that one might be true."

"Seriously?"

"What?" I shrugged. "I can't help it if people think I'm terrifying."

"Poor kid." Matt shook his head. "If only he knew the truth that you're really more of a cuddly bear than a grizzly one."

"No one must ever know," I joked.

"So, when are you seeing her again?"

Apparently, we were talking about Violet again. "Tomorrow night," I replied. "There's a few things left to do on her car, then I'm going to drop it off at her place after school."

"Didn't realize Danny did drop-offs." Matt was smirking again.

"He doesn't."

"Like I said, Darling, you're just a big cuddly teddy bear."

I grunted in reply. Mostly because I knew there was little point arguing.

I managed to keep Matt off the topic of Violet until we eventually went our separate ways to our next classes. When I arrived at English lit, I took my usual seat at the back of the room. I was actually glad to be in class for once. I needed the distraction. But only a moment passed before the seat beside me was filled and my peace was over.

"What's this I hear about you falling in love with a Sunshine Hills girl?" Paige asked, beaming up at me.

It seemed like Violet was all anyone wanted to talk about today. It was bigger news than if I'd just announced I was skipping college and heading



straight for the NHL. I knew it had been a while since I'd dated anyone, but it wasn't *that* shocking, was it?

"Grayson been gossiping again, has he?" I could only hope he hadn't told Paige too much about Violet and me.

Paige let out a light laugh. It was so genuine and filled with delight. "Grayson? Gossiping?"

"It's been known to happen."

"Are you sure?" she asked, tilting her head. "I think he'd rather have his tongue removed than wag it around with something as useless as gossip."

She had a point. Grayson hated talking about other people. But then again, he hated talking at all unless it was totally necessary.

"So, you've heard all the chatter today then?" I asked. "I didn't realize so many people saw us at Nino's last night."

"Well, that, and Parker did a whole Instagram story last night about the fact you'd found love."

Damn it. Of course, my younger brother was the one to blame. It was rare that he wasn't. I'd muted Parker on Instagram months ago because his posts were incessant and, like him, they drove me crazy. I should have known it would come back to bite me in the ass.

"I'm going to kill him."

"That seems fair," Paige replied with a grin. "I'm sure most of the school saw it after all."

"You're really not making me feel any less murderous."

"Oh, come on, Reed. You wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Why do people keep saying that today," I mumbled.

"What?" She sounded innocent enough, but her eyes sparkled in reaction. "Maybe because it's true."

"It's not. You've seen me play. Our opponents have been known to fake injuries to avoid coming up against me. The rest tend to dodge the puck at all costs when I'm on the ice."

"You sound like Parker."

"Please never say that."

"Besides," she continued, totally ignoring me. "I like to think the aggression you display on the ice is just another one of your hockey skills. It's something you only use in games. You're nothing like that off the ice."

"Yeah, well, I don't need the idiots at our school knowing that."

She let out a sigh. "I hate that you're always trying to be something you're not. Grayson hates it too."

"If Grayson has a problem with me, he can tell me himself. Plus, he's just as much a Darling Devil as I am."

Paige laughed, and her eyes sparkled. "That's because Grayson's scowl genuinely *is* terrifying. But you're an ooey-gooey marshmallow on the inside, and Gray and I both wish everyone else knew it."

I lowered my head into my hands. "Can we please talk about something else."

"Naw, but this is so much fun."

I glanced up at her, my eyes pleading with her to give me a break.

She simply winked. "Does Violet know?"

"Know what?"

"About your soft fluffy center?"

I glared at Paige, which only made her face light up even more. "We haven't known each other very long," I replied. "She's heard more about my devilish reputation than my squishy inner core."

"Well, just tell her the Reed Darling she's heard about isn't the real Reed Darling."

"I've told her I like to maintain a certain level of infamy for hockey."

"I'm not talking about hockey," she said. "I'm talking about the fact everyone thinks you're some serial heartbreaker when really you're the one who got—"

"I don't want to talk about that with Violet. I don't want to talk about that with anyone."

"I'm just saying, if you opened up to her, she'd be able to understand why you've got such an unfair reputation," Paige continued. "I know it's been a while since you let anyone in, especially a girl like Violet. But freshman year was a long time ago—"

"Okay!" I interrupted her again. "Okay, I'll think about it."

Paige shot me a skeptical glance, clearly unsure whether to believe me. She was right to be suspicious. I had no intention of telling Violet the embarrassing and painful details of my breakup with Natalie. I was already worried I'd bitten off more than I could handle with this fake relationship. Opening myself up even more was just asking for trouble.

"Good." Paige nodded as though her work was done. "Now, when do I get to meet her. Is she coming to family dinner on Sunday night?"

“What? No!” I almost choked on the words. But then my eyes narrowed with suspicion. Grayson had also mentioned bringing Violet to family dinner. The two of them had definitely been talking—or plotting, more like it. “It’s too early to subject her to my family,” I added.

“Don’t be silly. I’m sure she’ll love them.”

“Then it’s too early to subject her to you.”

She laughed. “She’s going to love me too.”

I didn’t know a single person who didn’t love Paige. She was impossible to dislike. Though, with all these questions she was asking about Violet, I was beginning to wonder if perhaps it was easier than I thought.

I’d instinctively dismissed the idea of Violet coming to family dinner, but as I considered it, I was surprised to find I enjoyed the thought of her getting to know my family. My house was chaos, and my family, especially my siblings, were a lot to handle. Still, I had a feeling she’d fit right in. Besides, it wouldn’t be long before my mom found out about Violet and personally invited her. Especially now that Parker had publicly announced my relationship status on social media.

Perhaps I should ask Violet to come. I’d have to think of a way to link it to our agreement so she didn’t become suspicious about why I wanted her there. And there was also the chance my family would scare her off. But a stupid part of me wanted to take the risk. There was nowhere I was more myself than at home. If I did somehow find the courage to open up to Violet as Paige suggested, that was the best place to do it.

“You really like her, don’t you?” Paige’s voice pulled me from my thoughts, and I glanced across at her.

“I barely know her.” I shrugged.

She shook her head but retained her gentle smile. How could she see through me so easily?

“Whatever, Reed,” she said with a wink. “I look forward to meeting Violet on Sunday.”



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## VIOLET

WHEN I'D ENDED things with Jeremy, it had caused quite a stir at school, but it paled in comparison to the backlash I faced now word had spread I was dating an infamous Darling Devil.

"I hear she's dating Reed Darling," one girl whispered behind me in math.

"Apparently, that's why her and Jeremy broke up," her friend replied. "How could she do that to him?"

"I know, right? Why would anyone choose a Ransom Devil over Jeremy Hoffman?"

"I mean, have you *seen* Reed Darling? I'd never date him in a million years, but he sure is pretty to look at..."

"And Jeremy's not?"

I turned and shot the girls a scowl, but they weren't deterred.

"What are you looking at, Devil worshipper?" one of them said.

That lovely nickname was a new development, and I really hoped it didn't catch on.

"Not that it's any of your business," I replied. "But I only started dating Reed after Jeremy and I broke up. And if you want to know *why* we broke up, why don't you ask Jeremy and Heather." I quickly turned back to my desk so the girls wouldn't see how my cheeks were heated with anger.

They weren't the first people I'd caught talking about me, and I doubted they'd be the last. No one at school knew Jeremy had cheated on me. Apart from Mia and Nicole, I hadn't told anyone the full details of our breakup. I knew it wouldn't do me any good. Even if people at this school knew the

truth, they would still take Jeremy's side. He could do no wrong in their eyes. I didn't matter.

As the week wore on, I hoped people would lose interest in the gossip. But when Wednesday came around, it still felt like the whispers followed me everywhere I went, and girls and guys alike were constantly shooting me dirty looks. I couldn't decide what people thought was worse: the fact I'd broken up with Jeremy or that I was now supposedly dating his biggest rival. It was probably a mixture of both.

I hung back at the end of my last class for the day and waited for the corridors to clear a little before I made my way to my locker. I knew it was silly, and Mia would probably tell me I should stop letting people get to me. But I just didn't want to deal with any more attention.

The hallways were mostly clear when I eventually left the classroom. No one stuck around for long once school was finished, and it felt like I could finally breathe a little easier after such a difficult day. That was until I arrived at my locker.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I gasped.

Glaring at me from my locker door was a cartoon devil drawn in black permanent marker. The image took up most of the surface, and a bitter taste filled my mouth as I stared at it in shock and dismay. I grabbed a tissue from my bag and attempted to clean off the graffiti. But no matter how vigorously I rubbed, the marker refused to budge.

I couldn't win. If I had simply kissed Reed on Saturday night and walked away, I would have been called a puck bunny. But since everyone thought I was dating him, I was a traitor. I knew kids at Sunshine Prep loved their hockey, but I was beginning to realize it was more than just a sport to them. There were probably cults with less passionate followers. Not for the first time since the bonfire, I wondered how the hell I'd gotten myself into this mess.

"I don't even like hockey," I grumbled as I continued to scrub at the marker. I'd managed to blur the image a little, but it was still clearly there.

"They shouldn't have done that. Are you okay?"

Jeremy's voice did nothing to ease the tension in my chest, and I tried not to shudder as he came to stand beside me. "Go away, Jeremy."

He ignored me as he leaned against the locker beside mine, making himself at home. "I miss you, Vivi."

"Funny, I don't miss you."

He let out a sigh. "You know, you're going to stop being angry with me eventually," he said. "And when we do finally get back together, you're going to regret ever getting involved with Reed Darling. He's not really worth all this trouble, is he?"

He nodded at the devil drawing on my locker. His voice sounded gentle, and his eyes looked kind. I think he actually believed he was trying to help me. But his act didn't work on me anymore. Whatever way he dressed them up, his words were arrogant, entitled, and a little threatening. Besides, it didn't matter what he said; his voice now made my skin crawl, and his gaze made me squirm.

"He's a hell of a lot less trouble than you, Jeremy."

He let out a soft laugh as though my insult barely affected him.

"Come on, Violet," he said. "I know we've had our ups and downs, but let's just put the past behind us and pick up where we left off. You belong with me, not some Devil like Darling."

"Forget it, Jeremy." I ripped open my locker and shoved my books into my bag. "I don't know how much clearer I can be. I'm with Reed now, and we are never, ever, getting back together."

I slammed the locker door and marched away, but he called after me. "It doesn't have to be this way, Violet."

I continued to ignore him, and I could feel his eyes on me until I disappeared around the corner.

It should have felt good to know that my agreement with Reed was clearly getting to Jeremy, but instead, I just felt frustrated and angry. Our fake relationship only seemed to be spurring Jeremy's desire to win me back. Even quoting Taylor Swift didn't get the message across.

"You okay?" Mia asked when I finally caught up to her and Nicole outside the front entrance. Nicole was giving us a ride home from school because my car was still at Danny's Garage.

"Do I look that bad?" I certainly felt it after my run-in with Jeremy. The thought made me instinctively glance over my shoulder to make sure he hadn't followed me out here.

"Not at all," Nicole said. "But your eyes *are* a little wild."

That wasn't surprising.

"Someone drew a devil on my locker, and Jeremy cornered me." I scrunched up my nose. The devil thing I could live with but not Jeremy. "He's still trying to convince me to ditch Reed and take him back."

"Of course, he is." Mia rolled her eyes. "Seeing you with his biggest rival is clearly driving him crazy."

"It won't be long before he's outside your house, holding a boom box over his head, and serenading you with love songs," Nicole added.

"Please don't say that," I groaned as we started across the parking lot toward Nicole's car.

"You're not enjoying his suffering, even just a little bit?" Mia asked.

"It's hard to enjoy it when he's trying so hard to get us back together," I replied. "I was really hoping he would have got the picture by now and let me go."

"That's probably going to take more than one date," Mia said. "He's a competitive guy, and seeing you with Reed was always going to make him react this way. At least to start with."

I drew in a deep breath and slowly blew it out. Mia was only reminding me how stupid I'd been to think this was a good idea in the first place.

"You've just got to stick it out with Reed," Nicole said. "Soon enough, Jeremy will realize you've moved on and that he's got no chance."

"And focus on the suffering," Mia said. "All the suffering."

I gave her a small smile. "He did look slightly tormented."

"That's the spirit."

With my car still out of commission, transportation options for me and Mia were limited to either Nicole or Luke. Neither option was particularly appealing. Nicole always insisted on listening to heavy metal as loud as her stereo would go while Luke preferred monotonous sports podcasts. I could barely escape hockey at school, so I didn't need to be bombarded by an in-depth analysis of it on the way home too.

As Nicole drove us home, I longed for the usual poppy tunes that Mia and I would sing along to. My ears were ringing by the time we stepped out of the car.

"Her music is the worst," Mia groaned as we waved goodbye to Nicole.

"*Terrible*," I agreed.

"When are you getting your car back?"

"Should be any day now."

"You've been saying that for over a week. I..." Mia's voice trailed off, and she nodded behind me. I turned, and a huge smile lit up my face as I saw Betty parked on the side of the road with Reed leaning casually against her.



“She’s ready?” I squealed with excitement.

“Thank God.” Mia laughed, but her expression sobered as she glanced over at Reed. She still didn’t seem sure about him. “I’ll catch you inside,” she said before hurrying toward the house.

I didn’t hesitate any longer as I ran to meet Reed. His smile was as broad as mine, as he pushed off the car and tucked his hands into his pockets “Yep, she’s all done,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We got her finished this morning, and I wanted to surprise you.”

“You didn’t have to drive her here, Reed. I haven’t even paid your dad yet.”

He waved a hand at me. “Don’t worry about it. Dad’s comped you the whole job anyway.”

“What?” I frowned. “Why would he do that?”

“Just a perk of being my girlfriend, I guess.”

“Reed, I don’t expect him to fix my car for free.” I paused as my eyes fell to Betty’s tires. They looked brand-new. Danny had suggested I change the tires, but I’d put that job on the long list of things I was planning to do at a later date, when I had more money saved up. “Reed, I was going to wait to change the tires...”

“Yeah, about that...” Reed started. “There was no way we could let Betty leave the garage without snow tires. Actually, we weren’t comfortable with you saving any of the other problems for later.”

“What do you mean?”

“Betty has a clean bill of health,” he said. “Everything’s fixed.”

“It’s all done?” I tried to swallow my shock and surprise, but the words still came out as squeaked disbelief. “Your dad did *all* the repairs? For free?”

“Ah, yeah.” Reed rubbed the side of his neck as though my reaction was making him uncomfortable. Maybe his dad wasn’t as happy to fix Betty for free as Reed was making out.

“Please, I insist, just let me pay for the repairs.”

He shook his head though. “You can insist all you want, but like I said, you got the ‘Reed Darling girlfriend’ special. Dad won’t hear of you paying for it.”

“But I’m not even your real girlfriend.” I instinctively lowered my voice as I said it.

“It’s fine, Sunshine. Seriously.”

I folded my arms over my chest. I really wasn’t comfortable with this, but I didn’t want to sound ungrateful. “Well, will you thank him for me?”

“You can do it yourself on Saturday at my game, if you’re free?”

“You’ve got a game on Saturday?”

“In the afternoon. I’m well aware of your opinions on hockey, but it would probably help with this whole fake relationship thing if you were there.”

“Oh,” I murmured. “I guess so, but I don’t think I can come. I’m scheduled to work this Saturday afternoon.”

“Okay, no problem.” His relaxed response was such a stark contrast to the way Jeremy would have replied if I’d told him I couldn’t make a game. I had no doubt he would have suggested I change my shift and then made me feel guilty when I couldn’t.

“How about Sunday night then? Would you like to come over for family dinner?”

“Family dinner?” I struggled to hide my surprise.

“Uh, yeah.” He glanced away from me, and while he’d sounded confident at first, he now seemed uncertain. Was he already regretting the invitation?

“We should probably do something together this weekend if we’re going to keep up this relationship ruse,” he said. “Plus, my mom found out we were dating. She got all excited and wants to meet you. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her we’re not for real. I know it’s a lot to ask though, so we can figure out something else if you want.”

“Your family doesn’t know about our...arrangement?”

“Only Grayson does,” he replied. “I didn’t want to tell my parents, and my other siblings can’t be trusted.”

“You’re talking about Parker, right?”

“And my younger sister, Cammie.”

“There’s another one of you?”

Reed laughed. “Yeah, and she’s the scariest one of us all.”

I drew in a breath as I considered his request. I was definitely anxious about the idea of going to Reed’s house for a family dinner. We were only pretending to date, and meeting the family was most definitely something you did with a real boyfriend.

In my experience, getting introduced to your boyfriend's family, fake or not, was also a very stressful experience. At least, it had been with Jeremy's parents. They'd taken us out to a restaurant, and they grilled me with questions for the first half of it, and then we pretty much sat in silence for the second half. The whole thing had been completely awkward, and I wasn't sure I was prepared to subject myself to something like that again.

"I'm taking your silence for a hell no," Reed said.

"Sorry, it's not that." I hadn't realized I'd been quiet for quite so long. "I was just thinking about the last family dinner I went to for a guy. It didn't go very well."

"Well, I'm going to assume you're talking about Hoffman, in which case I can guarantee that says more about him and his family than you."

I slowly nodded. "It was like interviewing for a job I wasn't qualified for."

"Well, you can be sure dinner at my house won't feel like that."

Still, I hesitated. What if Reed's family hated me as much as Jeremy's? It shouldn't matter since our relationship wasn't real and would be over soon, but a part of me still wanted them to like me.

"Remind me, how exactly does this help our fake relationship?" I asked.

"Well, you'd be helping me out by getting my mom off my back about meeting you," he said. "But I was thinking we could take some pictures of us together for social media. I barely post about anything other than hockey, so if I put something up showing us together, with my family, that would definitely prove we're serious." He was rambling a bit, which was totally unlike him.

"I guess we can't really show off our relationship at your school," I added. "This could be good way to get the message across to all those girls chasing you. Are they still giving you a hard time about the winter formal?" I did my best to sound unaffected, but my stomach twisted uncomfortably as I spoke.

"Uh, sure."

I felt conflicted by the thought of other girls throwing themselves at Reed, and I wished I hadn't brought it up. It was a strange position to be in. I shouldn't be bothered about it because he wasn't really my boyfriend, but those girls didn't know that our relationship was fake. And all I could think was that they needed to back off.

"I guess I better come over for family dinner then," I said before I could reconsider.

"Great." Reed grinned. "I'll swing by and pick you up on Sunday."

Reed's truck came rumbling down the street, and as it pulled up behind Betty, I could see Parker behind the wheel. His eyes lit up when he saw the two of us, and I had a bad feeling he was cooking up some kind of mischief.

"That's my ride." Reed didn't hesitate as he made his way toward the truck. He was probably worried about what Parker had planned too.

"Okay, well, I guess I'll see you on Sunday," I said.

"See you then." He grinned before he climbed into the truck.

I released a sigh as I watched him drive away. I hadn't expected to see Reed today, and I found I was disappointed our meeting had been so brief.

I was delighted to get Betty back though, and I couldn't help but smile as I looked at her. It had been incredibly generous of Reed's dad to fix my car free of charge and sweet of Reed to drop it off to me.

"So, Betty has returned," Mia said when I entered the house. She was waiting in the front living room, standing suspiciously close to the window. She'd clearly been peering through the curtain.

"She has." I smirked. "Enjoy the show?"

"I was only looking out for you." She collapsed onto the couch. "Had to make sure you didn't get abducted by a Darling Devil."

"He wasn't going to abduct me. He brought me my car."

She shrugged as if that did little to convince her. "Reed doesn't seem nearly so scary when he's smiling," she commented. "And he smiles a lot when you're around..."

My eyes narrowed on her. "He's just playing the part of my fake boyfriend."

"And those pining looks were just him playing the part too?"

"There were no pining looks!"

"There were so pining looks. Reed is totally hot for you."

"He's not even lukewarm for me."

"He's a boiling kettle about to start whistling."

Now she was just being ridiculous.

"Hey, Violet," Uncle Luke called from the hallway. "Is that your car out on the street?"

"Yep," I called back. "She's all fixed."

Luke appeared in the doorway, a familiar look of suspicion etched on his face. "I was supposed to come with you to pay the invoice."

"I told you I had it covered," I replied. He'd insisted on helping out, but I'd constantly refused. Apparently, the decision about who was paying for the repairs had been made for us. But there was no way I could tell Luke that without him worrying why my repairs were free.

"How did it get here?" he questioned, folding his arms across his chest.

I glanced at Mia, unsure how to answer. She simply grimaced and averted her eyes, like she didn't want to get involved.

"Uh..." I paused, giving myself one more chance to come up with a believable story. But there was no point in lying to Luke. He'd find out eventually. "Reed dropped it off."

"Reed Darling was here?"

"Well, he was outside. He just dropped off the car and left. All part of the service, I guess."

"All part of the service, huh?" Luke repeated my answer, almost too himself. "You sure there's nothing else I need to know?"

"Nope." I smiled sweetly.

He didn't look convinced, but he eventually nodded. "Okay, well, I'm glad you got your car back." He studied me and Mia for a few seconds longer before he gave up and left the room.

As soon as he was gone, I released a loud breath, and Mia fell into fits of hushed laughter.

"Oh my god," she gasped. "I don't even want to know how much my dad would freak out if he knew you were dating Reed Darling."

"We're not really dating," I hissed at her. "And keep your voice down."

"You know what I mean."

I relaxed back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. "With the way gossip spreads at our school, he's probably already heard something."

"He can't have heard," Mia said. "If he had, you'd be locked in your room right now, and he'd be escorting you to and from school. That's what he'd do if he found out I was dating one of the Darling Devils."

"I guess it's different with me." I shrugged. "I'm just his niece."

"You're not *just* his niece," Mia argued. "You're like his adopted second daughter. He'd go to bat for you just as viciously as he would for me if he needed to."

My cheeks flushed, and I slowly nodded. Mia didn't know how much it meant to me to hear her say that. To know I had at least one parental figure in my corner. Especially when I'd barely heard from my mom other than a few texts in weeks. She had some big show she was preparing for, and apparently that took precedence over checking in on her daughter. It was hardly something new, but at least when we'd lived together, I'd see her briefly in the mornings and when she came home at night.

"I guess he hasn't heard then," I agreed. "Might be hard to stop him finding out when Reed comes to pick me up on Sunday."

"What?" Mia gasped. "Where's he taking you?"

"Uh, family dinner at his house."

Mia's eyes widened with surprise. "You're having dinner with his family?"

I'd been a little unsure about my decision to accept Reed's invite but also somewhat intrigued to meet his family and see what he was like in his natural habitat. But Mia's reaction only increased my doubt.

"Apparently," I replied. "Why? Do you think I should be worried?"

"You're having dinner with the whole Darling family." Mia snorted. "Venturing into the heart of the Devils' lair. Oh no, I'm sure you've got nothing to worry about at all."

I wished she could have been just slightly more convincing.



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## REED

I DIDN'T OFTEN GET nervous. Especially not when meeting people. But, as I stood on Violet's front doorstep on Sunday evening, I found my body betraying me. My stomach churned with anxiety, and my heart was beating loudly enough I feared it might give me away. This need to make a good first impression was an unfamiliar feeling, and I could already tell I was failing.

"Right on time," Violet said, giving me a warm smile as she opened the door. She was dressed in a pair of jeans and a fitted top that showed a flash of her stomach. Her hair fell in soft waves, vibrant against the light pallor of her skin. She was beautiful tonight. She was beautiful every time I saw her. It was difficult to appreciate though when her uncle had appeared in the corridor behind her like a dark and foreboding shadow.

My throat tightened at the sight of Luke's fierce scowl. He certainly had the intimidating-parent glare down to a fine art. If he stalked around town looking at people that way, he easily could have passed for a Darling Devil. Unfortunately, it was probably my reputation as a Darling Devil that had caused the disapproving look in the first place.

"Un, hello, Mr. Sinclair," I said, raising a hand to wave over Violet's shoulder. She was standing right in the doorway, blocking my path, and it didn't seem like she was going to invite me in. "I'm Reed," I added. "It's nice to meet you."

Violet's uncle took a few steps closer until he was standing just a few feet behind her. He hadn't taken his eyes off me, and they scanned me up and down.

"I wish I could say the same about you."



“Luke!” Violet hissed, glancing over her shoulder at him. “Don’t be so rude. I thought you said you were going to trust me.”

“It’s him I don’t trust,” Luke grumbled in reply.

“That’s fair,” I said. “You don’t know me, but I promise to look after Violet this evening and be on my best behavior.”

My words did little to reassure him though. In fact, I think his expression had only grown darker. If that was possible.

“Uh, let’s just go,” Violet said. “Quick.” She was probably concerned if we stayed any longer Luke might go all Rapunzel on her and lock her away in a tower for the rest of her life. He turned his attention to me one last time as Violet went to leave. “You hurt so much as a single hair on her head, and I’ll go straight to your hockey coach. You’ll be lucky if you ever step foot on the ice again.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, with a firm nod. I had no doubt he’d follow through. It wasn’t something I was worried about though. I had no intention of doing anything to hurt Violet.

Violet shot her uncle one more glare before taking me by the hand and dragging me from the house.

“Sorry about that,” she said once we were in my car.

“No need to be sorry. Although, for a minute there, I thought I was going to have to add to my bad reputation by kidnapping you and smuggling you out of there.”

“I thought that too,” she agreed with a smile. “My uncle can be a bit...”

“Protective?” I guessed.

“I was going to go with crazy.”

“Ah.” I chuckled. “It’s not crazy to look out for someone you love.”

A hint of surprise flickered in her gaze, but it was gone within a moment as she turned to look out the car window. She seemed fine on the drive home, but as I pulled up to the house, I could tell she was nervous. Her hands had started fidgeting, and she kept checking her phone like she was hoping it would light up with a message that provided a reason for her to bail.

“We don’t have to do this if you don’t want,” I said as we approached the front door of my house. “I understand if it’s a bit much...”

The worry in Violet’s eyes faded as she looked at me, though I suspected she was just preparing for our performance, and she gave me a

warm smile. "Reed Darling, are you nervous about introducing me to your family?"

"No, of course not."

"Because you don't have to worry. I'll be the perfect fake girlfriend. By the end of the night, they'll all think I'm madly in love with you."

*If only.* Was it too much to hope that might actually happen?

"Well, to be honest, I'm more concerned my family will scare you off."

She shook her head. "I've come this far with a Darling Devil. Pretty sure that means I don't scare easy."

"Hmm. I guess we'll see," I replied. "But don't say I didn't warn you..."

I pulled Violet inside the house before she could reconsider.

"Hey, we're home," I called out.

Cammie immediately barreled down the stairs. She screeched to a halt in front of Violet and tilted her head like she was inspecting her.

"Uh, hi," Violet said, clearly a little uncomfortable with my sister's strange greeting.

"Sorry." Cammie quickly shook her head. "I was just trying to work out what's wrong with you."

"What?" Violet laughed nervously, glancing my way.

"You're dating my brother. There has to be something wrong with you. I'm Cammie, by the way." Cammie barely drew in a breath before she turned her attention to Reed. "She's way too pretty for you, Reed. What did you do, pay her to be your girlfriend?"

Violet let out another uncomfortable laugh. "I could have been paid for all of this?"

Cammie grinned. "Well, there has to be some benefit to dating my brother."

"Oh, there are some benefits," Parker said, coming down the stairs. "She's already gotten to meet me, after all."

"You're here!" My mom walked right up to Violet and gathered her in a hug.

I thought Violet might stiffen up but was surprised by how she relaxed into the embrace. I shouldn't have been all that shocked. My mom did give the best hugs.

"It's so nice to finally meet you, Violet," she said.

"Mom," I groaned. "You've known about her for less than a week."

“Yes, and you made me wait all that time before introducing us. She was scolding me but barely took her eyes off Violet.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Darling.”

“Call me Amy. Please.”

“Amy,” Violet repeated.

“Oh, and look how beautiful you are. Especially when you smile,” Mom continued.

Violet’s cheeks were growing pinker by the second. We’d barely made it through the front door, but she’d already been subjected to my family’s complete lack of filter. If I could convince Violet to date me for real after this experience, it would be a miracle. I should have known this was a bad idea.

“That’s what I said,” Cammie added. “Reed can’t actually be dating her.” If only my sister knew how close to the truth she was.

“Oh, nonsense,” Mom said, coming to my defense. “Any girl would be lucky to date my Reedy. Right, Violet?”

“Uh, right.”

“Now, why don’t you make yourselves comfortable in the living room?” Mom said, leading the way. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

Violet smirked slightly as she glanced my way. “Reedy?”

“My mom is the one and only person allowed to call me that,” I muttered.

“But why? It’s so cute.”

“Funny,” I grumbled. “Maybe we should just go back to your house and hang out with Luke. That might be more enjoyable for me.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said with a smile before she took my hand and nodded in the direction of the living room. “Let’s go, Reedy.”

I laughed and led her into the room, trying my best to steady my racing heart, which had taken off at a gallop the moment she intertwined her fingers with mine. Mom had disappeared into the kitchen and probably dragged Cammie along with her. I imagined she was afraid my little sister was going to say something to embarrass Violet. If anyone in my family was going to scare Violet away, it would be Cammie. I hadn’t been lying when I told Violet my sister was the scariest Darling of all.

Parker had thrown himself down on an armchair, and Grayson was already on the couch watching TV with Paige. Her legs were curled up in

Grayson's lap, and my brother was sitting so rigidly he couldn't have looked more awkward if he tried.

Paige jumped up the moment we entered the room. She couldn't contain her excitement as she dashed over to meet Violet. "Hi, I'm Paige." She pulled Violet into an even more enthusiastic hug than my mom.

Violet gave her a warm smile once she'd been released from Paige's grip. "I'm Violet."

"Oh, I know that. Reed's told me all about you."

"Has he now?" Violet tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and her eyes danced with curiosity.

"She practically waterboarded me," I grumbled.

Paige laughed. "Oh, please. It doesn't take that much to get you to spill all your deep dark feelings."

"Deep dark feelings?" Violet lifted an eyebrow at me. I sincerely hoped she wasn't taking Paige's chatter seriously. I didn't want her to know I'd broken the golden rule.

"Well, he might not have dark feelings." Paige laughed. "But they're definitely deep."

I officially wanted to kill Paige. She was clearly trying to remind me about our conversation in class the other day when she'd tried to convince me to open up to Violet about my last relationship. If anything, she was putting me off the idea even more.

Violet seemed to sense we were treading on uncomfortable territory and quickly changed the subject. "So, are you related to Reed too?" she asked.

"No, I'm more of an unofficial Darling who gate-crashes family dinner every week. Grayson's my bestie, aren't you, Gray?"

Grayson grunted in response from his spot on the couch, like he took personal offense to the word bestie. Paige was completely oblivious though. She grabbed Violet by the hand and dragged her toward the couch. I felt somewhat relieved when the girls sat down and I saw there wasn't room for me. While Violet had seemed comfortable so far, I was still scarred by the way she'd frozen up when I'd sat close to her at Nino's. I didn't want the same thing to happen tonight in front of my whole family.

If anyone was acting uncomfortable, it was me. My family was to blame. They all seemed set on embarrassing me, in their own unique ways, and I was on edge as I waited to see who would strike next.

"We didn't see you at the game yesterday, Violet," Parker said.

“Yeah, I was sorry to miss it,” she replied. “I had work.”

“Where do you work?” Paige asked.

“Hug in a Mug.”

“Oh, I don’t drink coffee, but they have the best choc chip muffins in there,” Paige gushed. “I’ll have to come visit you sometime and get one.”

“If you think the muffins are good, you should try the cookies,” Violet replied. “They’re always so soft and gooey inside.”

“Yum, who doesn’t like it when they turn out all soft and gooey on the inside.” Paige flashed me a devious smile, and I glared back at her as discreetly as I could. She was really trying to wind me up now. Either she didn’t notice my displeasure or she totally ignored it, because she continued talking to Violet. “When do you work next? I’ll come swing by.”

Despite the intensity of my family, Violet seemed to be taking it all in stride. She especially seemed to be warming to Paige. Though that was hardly a surprise. There was nothing I could do to stop the two of them from chatting, so I concentrated on scowling at my brothers instead. Well, at Parker, mostly. He looked ready to pounce on any opportunity to embarrass me while Grayson seemed quite content to sit back and watch the shitshow unfold before him. That, and he kept getting distracted by the game on TV. He probably wasn’t paying much attention to the rest of us.

When Cammie finally came into the room, there was a look of glee on her face. “Mom burned dinner,” she announced. It wasn’t the first time and probably wouldn’t be the last. My mom was incredible at momming but not so good at cooking. “She’s ordering pizza, but it could be a while.”

“We have to wait?” Parker groaned. “I’m going to eat my hand if I don’t get fed soon.”

“No self-cannibalism on family dinner nights,” Mom shouted from the kitchen.

“Oh, because it’s totally cool any other night of the week,” Parker grumbled.

With dinner delayed, this seemed like the most opportune time for Violet and I to escape. Who knew how long we’d have to wait for a pizza on a Sunday night, and as much as I wanted Violet to meet my family, staying out here felt like tempting fate. I knew it was only a matter of time before one of them said something truly mortifying about me. Or worse, something that might expose my feelings for Violet.

I walked over and grabbed Violet by the hand. “Why don’t I give you a tour of the house while we wait?”

“Ohhh, taking her on a ‘tour,’” Parker trilled.

I raised my middle finger toward him but didn’t take my eyes off Violet. “That okay with you?”

“Sure,” she said, allowing me to help her from the couch.

Keeping hold of her hand, I guided her from the room. I quickly showed her around the downstairs rooms before taking her upstairs to my bedroom. Mom had a rule about keeping the door open when we had girls in our rooms, but I hadn’t needed to follow it for years. I considered leaving the door open for a moment but then decided against it. Parker and the rest of my siblings couldn’t be trusted, and I didn’t need any of them spying on us. Plus, I was already adhering to too many rules when it came to Violet.

Once I’d closed the door, Violet hesitated just inside the entrance. “So, this is where Reed Darling sleeps, huh?”

I peered around the space, wondering how it must look to her. It was relatively clean, and other than a few hockey trophies on my bookshelf, it didn’t have a whole lot of personality to it. The walls were blue, my quilt cover was plaid, and there were a couple of pictures of me and my teammates from years past.

She suddenly gasped and raced over to my bed. “Who’s this?” she cooed as she sat down next to Stanley who was curled up near my pillow.

“Oh.” I laughed, relieved she hadn’t found something incriminating. “That’s Stanley. Like the cup.”

“You named your dog after a tumbler?” She looked confused as she ruffled the dog’s fur and scratched behind his ears. I decided not to correct her. There was no need to go into any more detail about how I’d named our family dog after the NHL’s most coveted trophy, the Stanley Cup. It would only remind her what a big part of my life hockey was.

“Be careful,” I said instead of answering her question. “He’s a shameless attention hog, and once you start petting him, he’s unlikely to leave you alone for the rest of the night.”

“Aw, he sounds just like the rest of you. Only cuter.”

“Much cuter,” I agreed. I cautiously approached the bed and sat down beside her. I was pleasantly surprised she didn’t flinch or stiffen at my presence, but I had left a decent gap between us, and she was probably too

distracted by the dog. She started giggling as Stan reached up and licked her cheek.

“Watch out. He’s been known to try and slip unsuspecting petters the tongue.”

“I’m sure I’d survive.” Violet beamed. “Wouldn’t I?” She addressed the dog, who took that as an invitation to lick her once more. She laughed again before she returned to inspecting my room. “This isn’t what I expected from the big bad captain of the Ransom Devils.”

“Really? What exactly did you expect?”

“Well, with your reputation, I was picturing shelves filled with the hearts of your enemies.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Usually I would have been embarrassed or even angry to think about how Violet had to listen to such terrible things about me all the time. But it made me happy to hear her joke about it, like maybe she was learning just how ridiculous some of these rumors were.

“Don’t they know I devour my enemies whole?”

She laughed easily, and the sound made my heart do a small flip. I itched to move closer to her, but I somehow managed to stay put.

“Speaking of enemies.” Her expression grew more serious, and her voice quietened as she continued. “I have another rumor for you. Is it true you were jumped by a group of players from another team last year and you were the only one to walk away?”

I swallowed. It wasn’t a particularly nice memory, and one I didn’t want to recount. But I’d promised I’d be honest with Violet about any rumors she’d heard about me.

“That one’s half true,” I muttered. “A few players from Pinecrest High followed me to my car after our game. They weren’t happy about losing and decided they wanted to take out their anger with their fists. I might be bigger than a lot of guys, but sometimes being known as a Darling Devil puts a target on your back. And although some people might try to tell you otherwise, I can’t take on four guys alone.”

“So, you were really attacked by *four* guys.” Her eyes were wide with distress. “Weren’t you scared?”

I smiled. Violet was probably the only person in the world, outside my family, who thought I was capable of the emotion. Who might actually worry if I was. “I think the word you’re looking for is pissed. It was right before the playoffs, and I didn’t want to get an injury. They got a few good

punches in, and I landed a couple in return, but I still came out of it with some pretty bad bruising. They ran off when they saw my brothers coming though, so they didn't do too much damage."

"They just ran off? I heard you left them lying unconscious."

"Not quite. But I'm glad to hear you think I could manage it."

She rolled her eyes. "I guess I'll have to tell Chrissy from econ she was wrong."

"Thanks."

"No problem," she continued. "I'll make sure she knows you didn't fight off four guys. In fact, you took on the whole team, and I saw their hearts displayed on your shelf with my very own eyes."

"Geez, Sunshine. Are you trying to make my reputation worse?"

"I wouldn't dream of it." She flashed a playful grin before her expression turned serious again. "You and your brothers really look out for each other, don't you?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "They might drive me crazy most of the time, but I know they always have my back."

"They don't seem so bad—when they're not donning their Devil masks."

I chuckled. "Be honest, my whole family is even more terrifying when they're smiling. I'm surprised they haven't already driven you away. They can be a lot, especially my siblings."

"I like them," she replied with a warm smile. "Even your siblings."

"Even Parker?"

"Even Parker." She laughed. "You weren't kidding about how intense they are, but they seem fun. I wish I grew up with a brother or sister. Mia's the closest thing I've got."

"You two seem pretty close."

"Yeah." Her expression softened as she looked down at Stanley who she was still gently petting. "Mia's the best. We lived near each other growing up, and when she and my uncle Luke moved out here a few years ago, I missed her so much. I wasn't exactly keen on the idea of moving to Sunshine Hills to finish school, but it's where my mom and Luke are from originally. And I do love living with Mia and my uncle."

"Do you miss your mom?"

"I-I do." She stumbled over her response, like it wasn't a simple question to answer.



“What’s she like?”

“Uh.” Violet paused. “She’s a bit of a workaholic, which is great if you’re her employer. Not so great if you’re her offspring. She’s always been too busy to pack lunches for school or make sure I get my homework done. I know she loves me, but she struggles to juggle it all.”

“What about your dad?”

She scoffed. “Next question.”

It was obviously a sensitive subject, and I immediately regretted asking her about him. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, you weren’t.” She shook her head. “I just don’t know my father, so there’s not much to say. My mom dated him in college. She got pregnant, and then he wanted nothing to do with us. He was a star football player who didn’t want to let anything get in the way of his career. I don’t think he ever did make it to the NFL, but he has his own family now, and I’m nothing more than a dirty secret to him.”

My heart sank at how matter-of-factly she spoke of her relationship with her dad. I was so close to my family, and I couldn’t imagine what it would have been like to grow up with a father who didn’t want me and a mother who was too busy for me.

It was also a glimpse into the reasons why I might never stand a chance with Violet. I’d thought Jeremy was the one who put her off hockey players for life, but her father had probably cemented her distrust of jocks long before Hoffman showed up.

“That must be hard.”

“It’s fine,” she said with a shrug. “You can’t miss what you’ve never known.”

Stan nuzzled Violet’s cheek again, making her smile return. My mom was right about Violet’s smile; it really was beautiful.

“I take it you’re a dog person, then?” I asked, sensing it was time to change the subject.

“Dog, cat, bird...reptile.”

“So, if I had a pet snake...”

“I’d be totally cool with it.”

I was suddenly glad we weren’t having this conversation downstairs. I could only imagine the terrible jokes Parker would be making.

“Do you have a pet snake?” she continued.

“Ha, no. Mom would freak.”

“My mom isn’t a fan of reptiles either. You should have seen the way she lost it when I brought home a bearded dragon after I got my first paycheck. Poor Puff.”

“She made you take him back?”

“No, but he disappeared under suspicious circumstances not long after I got him. He somehow escaped his enclosure, got down the stairs, and went out the front. Funnily enough, the kid next door got a bearded dragon the following week.”

“Highly suspicious.”

“I know, right?” Her eyes crinkled at the corners as she laughed. Her amusement was contagious, and it was almost impossible not to smile at her in return.

It suddenly felt like the space between us had shrunk. I didn’t know whether I’d edged closer to her or she’d moved toward me, but the gap between us on the bed was gone, and I glanced down at where our legs lightly brushed together. She leaned into my shoulder slightly as she laughed, seeming far more relaxed and at ease than any other time we’d been together.

Maybe it was because she’d shared something so personal with me, but it felt like the connection between us had grown. Guilt also churned in my gut because there was still so much I was keeping from her. I itched to let her know how I really felt about her, but I was still worried about scaring her off.

“I’m really glad you’re here tonight, Sunshine.” It wasn’t much of a revelation, but at least it was something. Still, Violet slowly peered up at me, and the atmosphere in the room seemed to change. It became charged and tense, and I struggled to draw in a breath as I looked into her blue eyes. There was no doubt she felt the shift between us too because her cheeks pinkened and her teeth lightly dug into her lower lip.

How I wished it were my teeth rather than hers.

I found myself leaning toward her, unable to fight the pull between us. But a loud pounding on the door made me jerk backward. My cheeks flushed as I dragged my gaze away from Violet.

“You know the rules, Reedy,” Parker yelled through the door. “Doors open when there’s a girl in your room. Also, Dad’s gone to pick up the pizza. Should be here in five.”

The silence that followed Parker was awkward, and I coughed lightly, trying to break the tension. "Guess we better head downstairs."

"Guess so," Violet replied, but she wouldn't meet my gaze.

I wasn't sure what had just happened between us, but whatever it was, it didn't seem like either one of us had been going to stop it. One thing was certain though: I'd never wanted to kill my brother more in my life.

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## VIOLET

I WASN'T sure what had just happened. One moment Reed and I were joking around, and the next, it felt like the whole world had shifted. We were staring into each other's eyes, and my breathing had stilled, but my heart was racing. Something about being with Reed in his home was different from every other time I'd been with him. The connection between us didn't feel like something we'd contrived. It felt natural, exciting, and safe.

Something had changed while our eyes were locked together. In that moment, I'd forgotten Reed was just my fake boyfriend. Forbidden feelings had rippled through my body as though a kaleidoscope of butterflies had been set loose within me. I silently urged them to get back in their cage. I was not going to let one brief moment cause me to break the most important rule of our arrangement.

I followed Reed from his room and back downstairs to the family living area. Parker had quickly returned to the room after banging on Reed's door. I wasn't sure whether I should be grateful he'd ruined the moment between Reed and me or not. I couldn't afford to let the boundaries of our fake relationship blur even slightly. Getting involved with another hockey player was the last thing I wanted. Still, this wasn't the first time a moment with Reed had turned my mind a little foggy as to the reasons why.

All but one seat was free as we walked into the living room, and I awkwardly glanced around, trying to figure out where we would both sit. The thought of having to sit on Reed's lap was too much to handle right now. Thankfully, Reed made the decision for us and sat on the floor beside the chair, leaving it free for me.

“Have fun upstairs?” Cammie asked, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively and grinning in the mischievous way she and Parker seemed to have trademarked.

My cheeks flushed, and I quickly glanced to the corner of the room where Reed’s mom was sitting. Her head was bowed, and her eyes were focused on her book. There was a topless man in a kilt on the front cover, and he appeared to be distracting her enough that she wasn’t listening.

“Violet met Stanley.” Reed said, smartly ignoring the cheeky intent behind Cammie’s question.

“He’s adorable,” I quickly added. I was much more comfortable talking about cute dogs than fending off innuendo from Reed’s siblings.

“Right answer,” Paige said with a grin. “Reed ghosted a girl once because she didn’t like dogs.”

I spluttered out a nervous laugh and turned to Reed. “Seriously?”

“What?” he protested. “That was in middle school. And it’s a total red flag. I stand by the decision, and I’d do the same thing today.”

I was suddenly counting myself lucky I loved dogs. And wondering how many girls Reed had ghosted over the years.

Parker scoffed at Reed and flipped a hand through the air. “Your standards are too high.”

“Says the guy with no standards at all,” Cammie fired at him.

“I can’t help it,” Parker replied as he relaxed back into his chair. “I have a lot of love to give.”

Cammie groaned. “Mom, are you sure Parker wasn’t swapped in the hospital?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Amy replied though she didn’t look up from the novel she was reading. Apparently, she was listening after all. I couldn’t imagine talking this way around my own mom. Not in a million years. None of Reed’s siblings seemed the least bit bothered, and his mom didn’t seem to mind either.

“I think you might be wrong,” Cammie argued before turning to Parker again. “You’re such a pig. You know that, right?”

“Oink, oink.” Parker grinned.

Reed and I shared a look, and I struggled to withhold a laugh. I could tell we were both thinking about the first thing he’d heard me say. I guess I hadn’t been totally off base when I’d called hockey players pigs. I’d just directed the comment at the wrong Darling brother.

Cammie rolled her eyes. "I should be grateful Reed's all shackled up now. That's one less brother my friends will be throwing themselves at. It's so embarrassing."

"Your friends don't throw themselves at me," Reed said.

"Uh, they do. It's just like Grayson was saying the other day, you're too caught up with hockey to notice. I guess you have been since—"

Grayson reached past Paige and lightly thwacked Cammie across the back of the head. Cammie scowled in his direction, but Grayson was already leaning back on the couch, his focus returned to the game on the TV. I wasn't sure what had just happened, but it felt like Grayson was concerned about what Cammie was going to say. Either that or he just thought she was talking too much.

Before I could find out, Danny's voice echoed from somewhere deeper in the house. "Food's here!"

The Darling kids all jumped from their seats, jostling with each other as they raced toward his voice. The chaos of this family was something else; it was a stark contrast to the quiet, lazy evenings I spent with Luke and Mia. My nights at home with Mom didn't even slightly compare. Mostly because I was lucky if I even saw her. She was always either at an event, working late, or busy in her office.

Reed and I were the last ones to reach the dining room, and I took a seat between him and his dad.

"It's great to see you again, Violet," Danny said. "How's the car getting on?"

"The car's much better." I smiled. "Thank you so much for fixing her. It really was too generous."

A slight frown crossed Danny's brow, and he glanced at Reed before he quickly smothered the expression. "Uh, no problem," he replied. "I'm happy I could help."

I glanced at Reed, wondering why his dad seemed slightly unsure, but he nodded at the pizza boxes on the table. "Better dig in, or there'll be none left. It's every man for himself at mealtimes around here."

I laughed but took his advice and grabbed a few slices. Reed wasn't joking. He and his brothers had their plates piled high in seconds. I had no idea how they could eat so much.

"So, Violet," Amy said. "Tell us about the first time you and Reed met."

"Oh yeah, tell us," Paige added, clapping her hands together.

She was sitting across the table from me next to Grayson, who leaned back in his seat with his arm draped across the back of Paige's chair. Even though Paige had said they were best friends, they could easily be mistaken for a couple.

"Uh...we met when my car broke down." I decided that was a much safer place to start than when I spotted Reed flirting with a bunch of girls and called him a pig. We hadn't officially met then anyway.

"I came to her rescue," Reed said with a proud smile.

"Actually, I think your dad was the one who did the rescuing," I replied.

Danny laughed. "Yes, and I did it in such style. Don't try and steal my moment, son."

"You do make a great lobster." Reed nodded in agreement. "But I'm pretty sure I was the gallant knight in shining armor."

"No way. You'd have been useless without my noble steed."

"Are you talking about your tow truck?" Reed laughed. "It's hardly noble."

"Sorry, Reed," I added. "I have to say, I think Danny and his tow truck are the real heroes here. You can't rescue a girl without a steed."

"Okay. Okay. I'll make sure I bring one next time." He grinned at me, and I smiled back.

Sitting around the dinner table with Reed and his family made me question how he'd ever developed such a bad reputation. I wondered what people would say if I told them about this side of him. Like most other Reed Darling rumors, I imagined it would morph into something completely different and ridiculous.

"Aww, you guys are so cute," Paige cooed.

Reed and I both flushed and glanced away from each other.

"See?" Paige continued, turning her phone around to show us. She'd taken a picture of us smiling at one another, and, I had to admit, we looked surprisingly like a couple. Reed's eyes were soft as he gazed at me, and my own almost sparkled. Was that really how I looked when I stared at Reed?

"I'm sorry about Paige," Reed said. "She's worse than the paparazzi."

"Hey," Paige complained. "Someone had to capture the moment..."

"Well, I'm very unimpressed," Reed said before lowering his voice and grinning. "Send it to me."

"I will." Paige laughed. "I'll call it the damsel and her knight in shining armor."



“Look, I think we all know *I’m* the real knight in this family,” Parker added, making everyone groan.

“Dude, you’re the one the girls need rescuing from,” Cammie said.

Even Reed’s mom and dad joined in with the laughter that erupted from the table.

It was impossible not to get caught up in the whirlwind energy of the Darling family dinner. One moment, they were bickering, and the next, they were all laughing. It was definitely not boring, and by the time it was over, I was sad to leave.

Each one of them hugged me as I left. All except Grayson, that was. He just caught my eye and gave me a simple nod. I knew Reed had told his twin about our fake relationship, so I wondered if his aloof attitude toward me meant he didn’t approve of what we were doing.

“Gray’s not a hugger,” Reed said when I brought it up on the drive back to my place. “But he liked you. I could tell.”

“He barely said anything to me.”

Reed chuckled. “He barely says anything to anyone.”

“But he knows I’m not really your girlfriend...”

“They *all* liked you,” Reed insisted. “Including Grayson. I think you’ve been unofficially adopted by my family.”

I didn’t know how I felt about that. A part of me was honored by how quickly and easily the Darling family had made me feel at home, but another part of me regretted going tonight at all. Seeing Reed with his family and getting to know them all was going to make it so much harder when this was all over.

“I really liked them too,” I murmured.

Reed reached out and took my hand, giving it a light squeeze. It sent gentle tingles racing across my skin, and my stomach dipped like I was about to go over the edge of a rollercoaster’s first drop.

“Thank you for inviting me,” I said, smiling across at him. “I really liked being your girlfriend tonight, Reed.”

“Don’t you mean fake girlfriend?”

My heart skipped a beat. The rollercoaster it was happily riding had malfunctioned at exactly the wrong time. I wasn’t supposed to be the one slipping up like that. I was supposed to be correcting *him*. But ever since that moment in Reed’s room, I’d been feeling less and less like his fake girlfriend and more like his real one.

The way he'd reminded me about the fake part of this relationship showed nothing had changed for him. He was still focused on our agreement. Just pretending to be with me to keep the horde of eligible bachelorettes off his back and helping me fend off my ex.

I couldn't afford to let myself feel this way. Reed didn't want a relationship, or any kind of serious attachment. That was the whole reason he'd signed up for this arrangement in the first place. We'd agreed not to let any feelings get in the way, and I was determined not to be the one who broke the golden rule.

"Yeah, of course," I agreed. "That's what I meant. Fake girlfriend." I smiled at him but gently pulled my hand away from his and pretended to check something on my phone. "Speaking of our fake relationship, when's our next fake date."

He didn't answer straightaway, and his eyes were fixed on the road ahead. Eventually, he answered with a shrug.

"Matt's hosting a victory party on Saturday night," he said. "There will be a ton of Ransom kids there. We should go and be seen together."

The idea of attending a Ransom party made my chest tighten. That was like going behind enemy lines. I might not be as invested in the heated rivalry between our schools as the rest of the students, but that didn't mean I'd be welcome at a Ransom party.

"How can you say it's a victory party when you haven't even won yet?" I asked.

"We'll win," Reed said with a confident smile. "So, you in?"

I hesitated. I wasn't crazy about the idea, but Reed was obviously keen for the girls at his school to see more of us. He'd been helping me with Jeremy, so it was only fair I held up my side of our bargain. "Yeah, I'll come."

"Great." He swallowed before he continued. "Is there anything you need from your fake boyfriend for this week?"

I considered whether we should make an appearance together somewhere. Maybe I could change my shift at work and show up at his hockey practice again or perhaps have him pick me up from school one afternoon. But as I thought more about it, I realized the main reason I wanted another meetup with Reed was nothing to do with our deal. I just wanted to spend more time with him, which was a clear sign I shouldn't.

After tonight, I needed some time to try to regroup. The line between what was real and what was fake in our relationship had blurred a little. And I didn't want to see Reed again until that haziness disappeared and the line became crystal clear once more.

"Nothing this week," I replied.

"Oh." He almost sounded disappointed.

"Yeah, I have a busy week, and I'm scheduled to work a lot. But I'll see you at the party on the weekend?"

"Yeah, I'll see you then."

I jumped from the car before either one of us had a chance to say anything else. I had far too many emotions competing for my attention, and I didn't know what might come out of my mouth. The smartest thing I could do right now was get some distance from Reed and put him from my mind—at least for tonight.

I did my best to be quiet as I snuck inside the house and up to my room. I didn't want to face either Mia or Luke and the interrogation I was sure awaited me. By some miracle, I managed to avoid the two of them, but I didn't breathe easy until I was in my room with the door closed.

I started to get ready for bed, and as I changed, my phone vibrated with an alert. I'd been tagged in a picture on Instagram. I quickly opened the app, surprised to find that not only was Reed Darling now following me but he'd also tagged me in a picture. It was the one Paige had taken of the two of us at the dinner table.

It was the perfect photo. We both looked so happy, and below the picture, Reed had shared a two-word caption: "My girl." It made my heart leap into my throat, but it immediately plummeted right back down to earth. The caption wasn't real. Neither was the photo. It was just a reminder that the whole reason Reed invited me to dinner tonight was so we could pretend to be a couple in front of his family and show it off on social media.

Still, I stared at the photo and the boy in the center of it far longer than I should have.



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## REED

I SERIOUSLY STRUGGLED NOT SEEING Violet that week. It was a little surprising how much I missed her, but it was probably because dinner on Sunday had gone so well, and I was feeling cautiously optimistic.

Violet seemed to really enjoy spending time with me and my family, and for the first time, I'd noticed signs that maybe she could see me as more than just her fake boyfriend. She'd called herself my girlfriend, albeit by accident, but there had also been that moment in my room. I'd been sure we were going to kiss until Parker interrupted us.

Still, I wasn't getting my hopes up. At the end of the night, Violet was very quick to remind me of our arrangement and practically fled the car when I dropped her home. I definitely still had work to do. And there was still a chance I'd lose her completely if I came on too strong.

I couldn't wait until Saturday for our next fake date, so I racked my brains for a way to see Violet before then. I kept drafting messages to her with various reasons why we needed to meet up, but I deleted them all before I had the balls to send them. She'd made it clear she was too busy this week to see me, and I didn't want to be the nagging fake boyfriend—nobody liked that guy.

However, by Thursday, I was getting desperate, and, after school finished, I found myself standing outside Hug in a Mug. Apparently, Parker had been right about me being a stalker.

When I walked inside, I saw Violet's cousin, Mia, working behind the counter. She was busy serving another customer, and as the lady picked up her coffee and left, Mia turned her focus to me with a warm smile. The

expression quickly vanished though when her eyes met mine and she realized who I was.

“What are you doing here?” Mia’s voice contained a mixture of disbelief and disapproval. It was the first time we’d spoken, and while I’d thought she might be somewhat surprised to see me here, I wasn’t expecting such an adverse reaction. She obviously didn’t like me. Or, at least, she didn’t trust me.

“Hey, Mia.”

“You know my name?” The look she was giving me was filled with suspicion. Like most people, Mia had probably already formed a poor opinion of me, but as Violet’s cousin and best friend, she was most definitely someone I wanted on team Reed. I just had to hope she could see past the Darling Devil rumors and give me a chance.

“Of course, I know your name. You’re Violet’s cousin.” I cleared my throat and lowered my voice as I continued. “Also, it’s on your name badge.”

“Oh yeah, right.” She flushed as she glanced down at her badge.

“You having a good day?” I asked in a vain attempt at sounding friendly.

“Sure, now what can I get you?” Mia’s answer came quickly as though she wanted to wrap up our interaction as fast as possible.

“Uh...” I looked up at the menu on the wall behind her. I had no idea what to get. I never drank coffee, and I couldn’t remember the name of the multicolored concoction Violet had made me last time I was here.

“You did come here for a coffee, right?” Mia said after I’d been staring blankly at the wall for too long.

“Of course.” I lied. “What’s Violet’s favorite drink?”

“You want an iced white chocolate mocha with a dash of cinnamon?” she said, letting out a soft laugh.

“Sounds great.” At least this one didn’t sound like it was pink.

Mia smirked in response but nodded before she went to make the drink. She kept glancing over her shoulder at me as she worked. Her eyes were sharp and inquisitive, almost as if she were trying to figure me out. While it was clear she didn’t think much of me, I was hopeful that coming here wouldn’t make her opinion any worse.

“Here you go,” she said, placing my coffee on the counter in front of me. “But this isn’t what you actually came for, is it?”

Yep, Mia was onto me. I took a long sip of my drink as I tried to come up with a reply and was pleased to find it tasted just as good as Violet's unicorn coffee.

"A guy can't swing past his favorite coffee shop for an iced white chocolate mocha with a dash of cinnamon?"

She raised an eyebrow at me, but the corner of her mouth also lifted a fraction. It was the first hint I'd gotten that Mia hadn't completely written me off.

"A guy can," she said. "But if the guy in question never usually comes here and happens to be pretending to date my cousin, it feels like a bit of a coincidence."

"Will you keep it down?" I hissed, giving a quick glance around the café. Thankfully, there was just an elderly couple in a booth on the far side of the room, and they were deep in conversation.

Mia smirked. "You're a lot jumpier than I expected..."

"I'm not jumpy," I growled.

That only seemed to make the sly smile on Mia's lips grow bigger, and my reaction appeared to have relaxed her a little. "Violet's not working today," she said.

Damn. I hadn't seen her yet, so I wasn't surprised, but it was hard not to be visibly disappointed. I did my best to hide it. "I told you I'm just here for coffee. Sweet, sweet cinnamon coffee."

Mia folded her arms across her chest and looked at me like I'd just insulted her intelligence.

"Okay, maybe I'm here for Violet."

"Obviously." She laughed. "You know, you could have just messaged her in advance and saved yourself the trouble, right?"

I was well aware of that, but the many, many messages I'd drafted and then deleted proved it wasn't that simple. I couldn't just ask Violet to meet up without having a good reason. Coming to the coffee shop was supposed to be subtle, but clearly that was not my forte.

"How's she doing this week?" I asked, ignoring Mia's question.

"She's okay." Mia frowned though, and I immediately started to worry.

"What's wrong?"

"She just seems a bit out of sorts," she said. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Is it Hoffman?"

“Maybe,” she said before shaking her head. “But I don’t think it’s that. Jeremy’s just being Jeremy. He keeps trying to pull her aside to talk, but I’ve been helping her dodge him.”

I tightened my grasp on my coffee cup, and I tried to think of a response that didn’t make me sound like a psycho. I was supposed to be helping her convince Jeremy to back off, but for some reason, she was going it alone this week.

“You like her, don’t you?” Mia said, taking me by surprise.

“Uh, of course, I do. She’s my girlfriend.”

“Fake girlfriend,” Mia corrected.

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. “Not you too.”

“See! You totally like her.” She gasped. “And not just as a fake girlfriend.”

“Will you please not squeal that so loud?” I glanced around the room again as I tried to quiet her. There was still barely anyone in here, but you could never be too careful.

“Sorry.” She lowered her voice. “So...?”

After Violet, her cousin was just about the worst person I could admit my feelings to. But, for some reason, I let them spill out without a fight. Denying them would probably only convince her more anyway.

“Okay, I like her,” I said. “Hell, I more than like her, but she’s not interested in dating another hockey player.”

“No, she’s not interested in dating someone who will break her heart,” Mia clarified. “If you’re the kind of guy she can count on, the hockey stuff won’t matter.”

I swallowed, desperately hoping she was right. Would Violet really consider me if I could prove I’d never hurt her? If I could prove she was the most important thing to me?

“You’re pretty much the last guy I’d tell her to go for,” Mia continued.

“Gee, thanks.”

“But she seems to disagree.”

“She does?” I couldn’t keep the excitement from my voice. “Has she said something to you?” I sounded like a teenage girl, gushing over their first crush. I wondered if Mia thought the same thing because she was smirking at me.

“She says I should give you a chance. She doesn’t think you’re the guy everyone portrays you as.” She cocked her head as though she was still



trying to work out whether Violet was right about that. “Well? Are you?”

“I would never hurt Violet, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I think I might actually believe you.” She was still studying me closely, but I must have said something she approved of because she gave a slight nod and started to smile. “You should tell her how you feel.”

“I should?” I struggled not to sound shocked. Mia didn’t appear to be my biggest fan, so I was surprised she wasn’t telling me to leave her cousin alone. “But she doesn’t feel the same way, does she?” I dared to ask.

“Well, I don’t know...” Mia paused as she took a moment to consider it. Every second of silence stretched for an eternity as I anxiously waited for her to continue. “Vi’s like a steel trap about that sort of stuff. There’s no way she’d actually tell me how she’s feeling. But—”

“But...”

“I’ve caught her looking at that photo you posted of the two of you at dinner several times this week. She’s definitely feeling something.”

I didn’t want to put too much weight on Mia’s words. My head told me that Violet would never let herself break her own golden rule. But my heart didn’t seem to care. It was like it had been given the puck with an opportunity for a breakaway. There was no defense in its way, and it was off and racing toward the goal.

I opened and closed my mouth several times, unsure what to say next. My gut instinct was to tell Mia she was wrong. But what if she was right? What if I really did have a chance to be with Violet?

“Just think about it,” Mia said. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

I frowned because the worst thing that could happen was I’d lose Violet, and that was exactly what I wanted to avoid. I didn’t want to risk scaring her off by telling her how I felt, especially when she’d already been so clear she wasn’t interested in a real relationship, especially not with a hockey player.

I’d always been fearless about most things in my life, both on and off the ice, but I’d learned the hard way that it was better and safer to guard your heart. The thought of opening up to Violet only to have her reject me was terrifying. And despite what Mia said, I knew I had to be sure about Violet’s feelings before I told her mine.

The problem was our fake relationship had an expiration date, and I was running out of time. I had one week to figure out if Violet shared my

feelings; one more week to prove to her that not all hockey players were bad and that if she was going to make an exception it should be for me.

"I'll think about it," I said, but then I tilted my head as I looked at Mia. "I know you don't trust me. Why are you encouraging me to pursue your friend?"

"Because I think there's a chance Vi might be right about you," she said. "And if the worst thing about you is that you broke Jeremy's nose, well, that might just make you my hero."

"I'm no hero."

"Well, I'm not so sure you're the villain either."

Her comment left me stunned. I couldn't remember the last time someone other than Violet was willing to give me a chance or even considered I might not be the terrible person everyone made me out to be.

She drew in a breath before she continued. "But, either way, I will do horrible things to you if you break my cousin's heart. You know that, right?"

"You don't need to worry. I would never do that."

"Good."

"Also, please don't say anything to Violet about all this. I don't want to freak her out, and I'd like to be the one to tell her when the time is right."

"You think I'd go and ruin your dramatic outpouring of love? Please..." Mia pretended to zip her lips shut. "Don't stress. Your secret is safe with me."

I wasn't completely certain if I could believe her, but I didn't have much choice other than to nod in agreement.

I left the coffee shop, uncertain what I was going to do. I didn't want to get hurt, but it was hard to ignore the small scrap of hope Mia had given me. And I just kept wondering if Violet felt the same way.

I turned to walk back to my truck, but I paused after I'd only taken a few steps. Jeremy Hoffman was walking toward me. He strode down the sidewalk like he owned the place. To be fair, his family name was plastered across numerous shops and businesses that lined the road. It was no wonder he always had such a smug look on his face.

When he caught sight of me, his arrogant grin twisted into a scowl. I wasn't in the mood to deal with Jeremy, but he didn't break stride as he approached.

"Get back to your side of the river, Reed. You're not welcome here."

I folded my arms over my chest and gave him a hard look in return. "You might own half of Sunshine Hills, Hoffman, but I'm pretty sure the sidewalk is fair game."

His expression only darkened, and several people gave us concerned looks as they walked past. With the tension radiating between us, they were probably concerned we were about to fight.

"I know you're only messing with Violet to get to me," he said. "Well, you've had your fun. Now give her back."

"She's not an object," I replied. "And it's not my fault you were stupid enough to lose her in the first place."

"Yeah, well, at least I'm confident enough in my hockey skills not to use a girl to try and win a game."

I coughed out a laugh. "You think I'm using Violet to help me beat you?"

"We're playing each other next week. What more reason do you need? Unless..."

"Unless what?" I growled.

"Ah, I know what this is about." Jeremy's smug smile had returned.

"You don't know shit, Hoffman."

"I know you better than most people, Darling." He smirked. "We used to be friends once, remember."

Looking at Jeremy now, it was almost impossible to recall that time when girls and school rivalries didn't matter; all we cared about was seeing our team win each weekend. We'd both played for the same youth club, and the fact we lived on different sides of the river never crossed our minds. That all changed once we were both in high school and started playing for our respective varsity teams. It hadn't taken long for Jeremy to turn into the jerk who stood before me today. For our friendship to turn to bitter rivalry. Hockey wasn't to blame for that though.

"And as your old friend," he continued. "I can tell exactly why you're screwing around with Violet. This is about Natalie, isn't it?"

I instinctively took a step closer to him, and he edged backward, probably noticing how tightly my fists were clenched. "Don't say another word, Hoffman."

"Oh, come on, Reed." He laughed, and the sound made my blood simmer. "That was freshman year. I really thought you'd be over it by now."

Unfortunately for both of us, I wasn't ever going to get over the fact my first girlfriend had cheated on me with my oldest friend. At the time, I'd thought she was the one. And Jeremy knew it. That didn't stop Natalie and him from running around behind my back for almost our entire freshman year.

I knew he was just trying to get to me, but he was doing an excellent job. I was close to boiling point now, but I took a deep breath to calm myself. Things were going to get ugly if I didn't.

"That's ancient history," I replied. "I don't need anyone or anything to help me beat you on the ice, and I certainly don't need to date your ex-girlfriend for revenge. I'm pretty sure I got that when I messed up your nose."

Jeremy stood a little taller and pushed out his chest. "Try that again. I dare you."

He was just acting tough. Jeremy knew I wouldn't break his nose again because I'd gotten in so much shit the last time. It was seriously tempting though.

I eased the urge by reminding myself that his nose was no longer perfectly straight. It still gave me great satisfaction. And I liked to think of it as a sign that you could never fully trust anyone—sometimes, not even your friends.

"I'll save it for our game," I said. "And despite what you might think, you're the last person Violet and I are concerned with. But I am so glad to hear how much it bothers you."

"It's not a bother." He shrugged. "I'm just trying to save you a repeat of the heartache. She'll come crawling back eventually. They always choose me in the end..."

"If I were you, I'd stop worrying about Violet and me and start worrying about the game. See you on the ice, Hoffman."

I stalked away before he could get another word in. It was taking a lot of effort to control my anger right now, and he was only going to keep pushing me until I went over the edge. I didn't like dredging up the past, but it was Jeremy's continued interest in Violet that concerned me the most. He'd ruined my relationship with a girl once before, and I had no intention of letting that happen again.



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## REED

“JUST MESSAGE HER,” Grayson said. “This is getting ridiculous.”

It was Friday afternoon, and I’d been hiding in my room since school finished. My brother clearly hadn’t caught the hint my closed door was supposed to provide—leave me alone.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I replied, keeping my attention on the book I was holding. I was supposed to be reading it for English, but I hadn’t managed to comprehend a single paragraph since I’d opened it over an hour ago. I was way too in my head right now.

“Violet. She’s clearly the reason you’ve been in a mood all week.”

“I’m not in a mood.”

“You’re in *such* a mood,” Grayson said. “You’ve been moping around the house since Monday. And even though we’ve got our biggest game of the season against the Saints in just over a week, you’ve been like a zombie at training. It’s got to stop. Just send her a message.”

As much as I tried to deny it, Gray was right. I’d started the week feeling disappointed I wouldn’t get to see Violet until Saturday, but as the days dragged on, I’d only gotten worse. I found myself missing her more and more, and I was growing increasingly worried that our remaining time together was rapidly coming to an end. All I wanted was to stop playing pretend and for our relationship to be real. But it was hard to convince her of that when I hadn’t seen her all week.

My run-in with Jeremy and conversation with Mia hadn’t helped much with my mood either. The two of them had left me with a strange mixture of fear and cautious optimism. After talking to Mia, I was curious to see if there was any foundation to the sliver of hope she’d given me. But my

interaction with Hoffman and his reminder about my freshman-year heartbreak had left me worried I was headed down a familiar path with Violet.

I knew I shouldn't listen to him, and he was clearly still trying to win Violet back. But it was hard not to let his words get under my skin.

"You're lucky it's me in here trying to give you a pep talk and not Paige," Grayson continued. "Even she's noticed something's up, and she's been threatening to come up here and talk to you ever since she came over today. I figured you'd prefer to talk with someone who knows the truth..."

I grunted and finally placed my book down to focus on my brother. He was threatening me with Paige, so it wasn't like I had much choice. And he was right; I'd rather talk to him about this. "I can't just message her. We're not really dating, so I need a good reason."

"You don't need a good reason," he replied. "People text people all the time."

"I guess," I conceded.

"And while you're at it, tell her how you feel," Gray added.

Now he was just being ridiculous. I'd thoroughly considered Mia's similar advice and decided now wasn't the right time. Why risk scaring her off before I really had to. There was still a week left for me to turn this relationship from fake to real without putting my heart on the chopping block.

"I can't tell her," I said. "I don't even know if she likes me that way."

Grayson shook his head. "Have your balls gone on vacation?"

"Shut up."

"It certainly sounds like they have."

"Okay, fine. My balls are in Bermuda. I'm not going to tell Violet how I feel and risk ruining everything."

"So, what, you're just going to sit in your room and sulk?"

"It's working well for me so far."

"No, it's not. Text her. Or man up and call her. You can speak to her without professing your undying love..."

"Yeah, and what would I say?"

He lifted one eyebrow. "Do I look like a dating guru to you?"

"There's practically a glowing halo behind your head." I grinned because he was the last person anyone should ever ask for dating advice.

He rolled his eyes. "Well, this dating guru says to tell her the truth."

“Nope, anything but that.”

“Then tell her you have a fake dating emergency.”

“A fake dating emergency?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, clearly starting to get frustrated with the whole thing. “Just tell her whatever will convince her to see you.”

I started tapping my fingers against my lips. “You know what, I can probably work with this.”

“Finally,” he grumbled.

Grabbing my phone, I called Violet before I could reconsider and started pacing as it rang. I thought I might have a little time to think about what to say, but she answered on the second ring.

“Reed?” She sounded confused and also slightly breathless.

“Sunshine.” I didn’t know how I’d done it, but I’d somehow managed to sound quite nonchalant. My heart was racing like Coach had just made me do sprints though. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Uh, sort of...”

“Not at all,” another girl called out in the background. It must have been Mia.

I chuckled under my breath. “So, which is it?”

“You’re not interrupting,” she replied, sounding slightly surer of herself this time.

“Ah, but now you have my interest piqued. What exactly are you doing over there?”

“Moving furniture.”

“Really?” I laughed. “Why?”

“Mia didn’t like the feng shui in her room.”

“It was totally off!” Mia shouted.

“She has a lot of heavy furniture,” Violet added. I could practically hear her eye roll from here.

“Well, I happen to know someone who’s great at moving furniture...” The opportunity was almost too perfect, and my stupid little heart started dancing.

“Thanks, Reed. But I wouldn’t ask you to do that, and we’re pretty much done now anyway.”

“Oh.” So much for my dancing heart. It practically tripped and fell over its two left feet.

“Was there a reason you called?”



I was derailed. This wasn't a situation I was used to. Probably because I didn't talk to girls that often, and when I did, I wasn't nervous because I didn't care. It was different with Violet.

Grayson waved his hands at me, encouraging me to continue.

"Uh, yeah," I finally and oh so eloquently responded. "I wanted to see if you're free."

"Really? Why?"

"Yeah, uh, I have a fake dating emergency." It felt so stupid as I said it out loud. How come it hadn't sounded that dumb coming from Grayson? Probably because he hadn't been serious. He slammed a hand against his forehead, making me grimace. Even he thought I was an idiot.

"A fake dating emergency?" Violet's soft voice sounded puzzled, and I didn't blame her.

"Yep, that's right." I was going to have to run with it. "I'm going bowling with Grayson, Paige, and a bunch of friends tonight. I just realized they're all going to think something's up if I'm not out with my girlfriend on a Friday night."

"Bowling?" Grayson hissed, obviously unimpressed he was being dragged into this.

I waved him off before turning away so I couldn't see the annoyed look in his eyes. He'd gotten me into this mess, so he was going to have to live with the consequences.

"You're asking me to go bowling with you?" Violet said, her tone still far more uncertain than I would have liked.

"Yes." I was committed to the bowling excuse now. There was no backing out. "Are you free?"

There were scraping and rustling sounds on the other end of the line, and I thought she might have dropped the phone. But then Mia's voice came through the speaker. "She is free, and she'd be happy to come."

I laughed. "Okay, thanks, Mia." We barely knew each other, but she was being the best wingwoman ever.

"No problem," Mia replied. "Just give her twenty minutes to get ready and then feel free to swing by and pick her up."

"I can speak for myself," Violet complained in the background.

There were more rustling sounds, and I guessed the girls were fighting over the phone. "You there, Reed?" Finally, I heard Violet's voice clearly once more.

“Yeah, I’m here.” I smiled. “So...”

“So, I guess I’ll see you in twenty minutes.”

“Great, I’ll see you then.”

I hung up the phone, a wide smile on my face as I turned to Grayson who was still scowling at me. “Better go tell Paige the exciting news. We’re going bowling.”

“I heard,” Grayson replied, but he didn’t complain as he skulked off to find Paige. Now I had to round up a crowd, or Violet would know something was up.

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“Does bowling really constitute a fake dating emergency?” Violet asked as we walked through the parking lot to the bowling alley. She’d been poking holes in the excuse I’d used to get her here ever since I’d picked her up. It was like she could smell the stench of my desperation to see her radiating from me.

“Afraid so,” I said.

“But does it really matter if your friends aren’t fully convinced?”

“Not especially,” I said. “I’m more concerned about everyone else. The bowling alley is usually packed with kids from Ransom this time of year, and they’ll notice if I turn up without you.”

A group of girls was standing outside the front of the alley, and they all started giggling at each other as we passed. I really hated when they did that, and I wasn’t the only one who seemed to have noticed.

Violet was frowning in their direction. “And by everyone else, you mean the girls...”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Did the Instagram post help at all?” She sounded somewhat flustered.

“A little,” I said. “I definitely heard more people at school talking about us after the weekend. But maybe we need to post a few more pictures to make sure everyone gets the message.”

“Well, we haven’t got long left.”

I did my best to ignore her comment, but my stomach clenched uneasily at the mention of our impending fake breakup. I could not handle the thought of only having one more week with her.

The sound of bowling balls thundering down the alleys and clashing pins greeted us as we walked through the entrance. It wasn't as busy here tonight as I'd expected, so it was easy to spot Grayson and Paige who were hanging out near the lanes. Paige was chatting animatedly with my brother while he was scowling at some kid who had committed the crime of entering their general vicinity. I doubted Grayson was scowling at the kid on purpose. That was just the way he looked when he was forced to do something against his will.

I'd had no luck convincing any of my friends to come tonight. To be fair, I'd only given them thirty minutes' notice, it was a Friday night, and I was sure they all had much better things to do than unwittingly help convince a girl to like me.

"I thought you said a whole bunch of your friends were coming." Violet was frowning as we approached my brother and Paige.

"I'm sure they're just running late," I replied. There was a small chance some of the guys hadn't seen my message and could still rock up.

"Violet," Paige squealed before she ran toward us and gave her a hug.

At first, Violet appeared surprised by Paige's enthusiasm, but she quickly seemed to accept it and smiled brightly as she hugged her in return.

"This is so fun," Paige continued. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"Yeah, me too," Violet replied as Paige took hold of her hand and led her over to the shoe rental counter. As I watched the two of them, I had to wonder if roping Grayson and Paige into this had been a mistake. Knowing Paige, she'd monopolize Violet all night, and I'd get very little alone time with her.

"I still can't believe you're making me do this," Grayson grumbled as we followed after the girls.

"Sorry, I freaked out and suggested the first thing that came to mind."

"Bowling was the first thing that came to mind? We never go bowling."

"Like I said, I freaked out."

"Yeah, well, you owe me."

"Noted."

When we got our shoes, the girl behind the counter smirked as I told her my size. I recognized her from school, but I couldn't recall her name. Tiffany, maybe? I didn't really care. I was too focused on the way Violet's eyes lit up as she and Paige joked over how silly their bowling shoes looked.

Tiffany coughed, drawing my attention once more. “Here you go, Reed.”

I gave her a tight smile in thanks, but when I went to take the shoes, she didn’t release them. Instead, she leaned across the counter toward me. “You know what they say about guys with big feet...”

“They make great clowns,” I replied coldly.

Tiffany’s expression shuttered as she took in my hard gaze, but before she could respond, Paige snatched the shoes from her hands. “His girlfriend is standing right there, Abigail!”

I guess I’d been way off with the name, but that was the least of my concerns. My gaze went straight to Violet who was glaring at the girl. Was she pretending to be upset because that was her job as my fake girlfriend, or was she genuinely concerned to overhear a girl flirting with me? Either way, the timing sucked. I was trying to show Violet that I wasn’t some relentless player. There was no way she’d consider dating me for real if she thought we couldn’t even go bowling without girls hitting on me. She’d think I was just as bad as every other jock she’d sworn off.

Paige slammed the shoes into my chest. “I can’t take you guys anywhere,” she complained before walking over to Grayson.

I was slightly nervous as I approached Violet. “Sorry about that.”

She smiled though and slipped an arm around my waist. “Don’t worry about it, *babe*.”

My forehead creased as I looked into her eyes. She gave me a playful wink, and I realized this was just for show. She probably thought Tiffany, sorry, Abigail, could overhear us.

“We should go find our lane,” I said, placing my arm over her shoulder and joining in the act. I’d take almost any opportunity to hold Violet close to me. I was hardly about to miss this one—even if it was pretend.

She lowered her voice as we walked off. “Is it working?”

I couldn’t bring myself to turn and check. Not when Violet was so perfectly tucked under my arm. “I’m sure it is,” I replied. “You better stay close though to really stake your claim.”

She rolled her eyes and released a soft laugh. “Fielding pickup lines like that, I can see why you’d fake a relationship to avoid girls.”

“Yeah,” I murmured in agreement. Although, it wasn’t all bad. Not when that cringeworthy pickup line had landed Violet in my arms.

We reached our lane, and she pulled her arm from around me as she went to sit and change her shoes.

“Didn’t you say this place was packed with Ransom students on a Friday night?” Violet said as I sat beside her and kicked off my own shoes. She was frowning as she looked around.

“What? It is...”

“Reed, the only person I’ve seen who’s our age was the girl with the foot fetish back there—and she works here. Everyone else looks like they’re about twelve years old.”

I swallowed as I glanced down the line of bowling lanes at the various groups. She was right. There was nobody our age here. How was I supposed to know no one went to the bowling alley anymore and it had turned into the local preteen hangout? I guessed it made sense seeing as I hadn’t been here in years.

“It’s still early,” I said. “I’m sure half the senior class will be here later in the evening.”

“You sure about that?” Violet was far from convinced.

This was not going well so far, and I was getting dangerously close to being exposed. What had I been thinking when I’d come up with this plan? Surely, it was only a matter of time before Violet worked out I’d made up the whole fake dating emergency. If she hadn’t already.

“Reed’s right,” Grayson said suddenly. “It’s still early. There will be a ton of seniors here later for sure.”

I gave my brother a grateful nod. He obviously didn’t actually believe what he’d said, but hopefully it would go a long way toward persuading Violet.

“Oh, okay, if you say so,” she replied, flashing Grayson a cautious smile before she went to find a bowling ball. I wondered if she was still worried Grayson didn’t like her. There was no way he would have helped me out just then if he didn’t.

“You actually make a pretty good wingman, Gray,” I said, watching Violet join Paige over by the rack of balls. The two of them quickly slipped into conversation, laughing as they tried out balls in different sizes, weights, and colors.

“Don’t thank me,” he replied. “I just couldn’t bear to watch this car crash any longer.”

“Oh god, it’s not that bad, is it?”

He cracked a small grin. "I'm joking. You know I always have your back."

I pulled my attention from Violet to look at my brother. "I know. Just didn't realize that extended to girl troubles."

"Well, it's been a while since I've had a chance."

"True."

"And I can see how important this one is to you."

"Thanks, guru." I nodded at my brother and smiled, but he simply rolled his eyes and wandered away to grab a ball for himself. I probably shouldn't push my luck with Gray tonight. He was already doing a lot for me.

As soon as we started playing, I stopped worrying so much about whether Violet was going to catch on to my emergency date ploy. Bowling was actually quite fun, and I seemed to have a natural talent for it. Grayson wasn't having as much success. He bowled with far too much strength. I was surprised he didn't dent the lane every time he flung his ball toward the pins.

"This isn't shotput," I told him after a particularly bad throw.

"Aww, Gray, it's okay," Paige said, patting him on the arm. "You can't be great at everything."

He grunted in reply. The frown he was currently wearing had been known to send guys his size running in the opposite direction, but Paige's smile simply widened.

"Do you need some pointers?" she asked even though her score was barely better than his.

"I'm going to get a drink," he replied, stalking off without another word.

Violet gave Paige a worried look. "Is he okay?"

"Oh, totally."

"He doesn't look okay."

Paige laughed. "No, he doesn't. But messing with Gray when he gets in one of his moods is far too much fun. Guess I better go after him."

She skipped off after my brother, completely unconcerned by the fact she had practically just taunted a bear. But then again, Paige was probably the only one of us who could get away with it.

"He's not the only one who sucks at bowling," Violet said as she prepared for her next shot.

"You don't suck."

“I’m only three points ahead of Grayson.”

“Paige isn’t doing much better.”

She shrugged. “Meanwhile, you’re playing like you’re secretly signed up to a bowling league,” she continued. “Do you come here every Friday night to practice and play in tournaments? Is that why you’re so good?”

“No.”

“I bet you do.”

“I swear I don’t.”

“Who’s the team, Reed?”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s no team.”

“Ouch, I’m sure the Gutter Gang will be devastated when they hear you were too embarrassed to admit you’re part of their team.”

“The Gutter Gang?”

“Wrong name, huh?” She tapped her fingers against her chin. “Hm. Let me guess. The Bowling Stones?”

“Wrong again.” I grinned, starting to play along.

“Britney Spares? Split Happens?”

“Actually,” I lowered my voice. “If you must know, I bowl with my grandma’s team, the Ball Busters.”

Violet burst out laughing. “Seriously? I was right?”

“No.” I shook my head, pretending to look disappointed. “Grandma would never let a guy on her team.”

“Brutal,” she replied, still chuckling.

We were both grinning brightly at one another and, in moments like these, it was far too easy to forget our relationship wasn’t real.

I wondered if Violet was thinking the same thing because she quickly cleared her throat and glanced away. “I should probably take my turn,” she said, facing the lane once more.

I wasn’t ready for the moment to be over, so I stepped up to stand at her side. “How about I give you a few pointers?”

She lifted one eyebrow as she glanced up at me. “Are you saying I need help?”

“No, not at all,” I replied. “I just think it’s a good opportunity to put on a bit of a show for our onlookers here.” I kept my voice low although there was no chance of anyone hearing us. There was also little chance anyone was watching us, but I needed to find some reason to stay close to her.

“Right,” she whispered. Her gaze briefly darted around the bowling alley, but she didn’t protest. Maybe she hadn’t noticed that everyone else here was far too busy with their own game to take any interest in what we were doing. Or, maybe, she didn’t care.

I lined myself up behind her and gently placed one hand on her waist, using the other to help guide the ball. “Is this okay?”

“Uh-huh.” Her voice was a little softer. A little higher. Did my closeness affect her as much as it did me? The subtle scent of her sweet shampoo was intoxicating and making me feel slightly lightheaded. It took all of my self-control not to dip my head closer so I could breathe it in more deeply.

“So, we line the ball up with the pins,” I said, my voice sounding far rougher than I intended. “And then use a steady and straight swing before you make sure to release the ball smoothly.”

She peered up at me over her shoulder. Her face was so close to mine, and it would have been so easy for us to kiss. It had been far too long since the first and only time I’d felt her lips against mine, and I desperately wanted to kiss her again.

“It actually sounds like you know what you’re talking about,” she said with half a smile.

“Not really.” I smirked. “I’m just making it up as I go. To be honest, the Reed Darling bowling method is a bit less refined. Just swing your arm, release the ball, and hope it goes where you want.”

A laugh escaped her lips, and I felt her body gently shaking against mine. “The Reed Darling method does seem more like my style.”

She was still looking up at me, her beautiful blue eyes sparkling as she smiled. I wished I could lean closer to her, and the way she was looking at me was almost urging me to do so, pulling me in like a doomed moth enchanted by a bright but fatal flame.

“Uh, should I give it a go then?” Violet’s whispered words shook me out of my trance, and I feared I’d been staring at her in silence for too long.

“Sure,” I mumbled. “Let’s see it.”

I let her step away from me, and I instantly missed having her in my arms.

She took a dramatically deep breath and nodded at me firmly. There was a focused look in her eyes as she turned to face the lane. She positioned herself carefully, adjusting the grip on her ball before swinging it swiftly and releasing it from her fingertips in one smooth motion. We both watched



in nervous excitement as it barreled down the lane, heading directly for the middle pin. The ball connected with a resounding crash and sent the pins flying in every direction. She'd bowled a strike.

Violet's hands shot up into the air as she squealed with excitement, and I couldn't seem to help myself. One minute, I was standing behind her, and the next, she was back in my arms. I lifted her up and spun her around in celebration. She laughed freely as I cheered along with her.

It was only as the shock and elation began to wear off that we both seemed to realize the intimacy of what we were doing. I slowly lowered her to the ground, but that only seemed to heighten the intensity of the moment as she slipped through my arms. Every brush of her body against mine was pure torture.

She didn't jump away from me as soon as her feet touched down on the floor like I expected. Instead, she stood there, staring up into my eyes once again. I was back where I wanted to be, and I knew I could have stayed standing there with her forever. How could my heart be beating so fast when all we were doing was looking at each other? And how could the connection between us feel so real when this was all supposed to be fake? Surely this wasn't completely one-sided?

"Are we interrupting something?" Paige asked, causing Violet to finally break away from me.

"No," Violet squeaked.

Yes, my thoughts screamed. I shot Paige my dirtiest scowl, but she took a sip of soda through her straw like she was completely innocent of any wrongdoing. Grayson was smirking slightly from behind her, so I gave him an equally hard look. He was no longer my favorite wingman.

I didn't know if I would have another chance to get close to Violet tonight, but it didn't matter to me. I just liked spending time with her. As the night went on, it felt more and more natural, like we'd known each other for years rather than mere weeks. We finished our game, which I inevitably won, but it swelled my heart to see Violet celebrating her second-place finish and have her thank me for my excellent coaching. Grayson, of course, wasn't quite as happy.

After the four of us had grabbed a bite to eat, I gave Violet a ride home, and the hardest part of the night arrived. We pulled up outside her house, and, yet again, I was thinking about kissing her. I was chafing at the restraints of our fake relationship, and a part of me wanted to call the whole

thing off, admit I'd made up all that stuff about girls chasing me to be their formal date, and tell her how I truly felt. But I couldn't stop worrying I might scare her off if I did. The thought was enough to hold me back.

"So, be honest," Violet said. "Was tonight really the emergency you made it out to be? Because your friends never showed up, and despite what you and Grayson said, I didn't see a single person our age at the bowling alley."

I considered trying to convince her once again and cover up how tragic I was, but I didn't have it in me. I was starting to hate this whole arrangement, but I was still too scared to blow it up.

"Reed?" she asked when I didn't answer right away.

I had to say something quick. Surely a little bit of truth wouldn't hurt, right? "Okay," I said. "I guess there wasn't really a fake dating emergency."

Her eyes widened with surprise like she hadn't actually expected me to admit it.

"So, why did you drag me bowling?"

"Because I missed you." The words were out of my mouth before I could consider them. Before I could realize how risky they were. Tonight had been great, and while my heart kept telling me there was a chance Violet would return my feelings, my head was in firm disagreement.

She frowned and shook her head so slightly I wasn't sure if I'd really seen it. "You're not allowed to miss me."

Her response was like a dagger to the chest. Why would she say that if she had feelings for me? If she wasn't still fully focused on our arrangement?

"Can't a guy miss his fake girlfriend?" I said it more with hope than anything else.

"Reed..." Her gaze fell to the floor. "We agreed we wouldn't let feelings get in the way of this."

"Yeah, I know."

"You're not feeling anything for me, are you?" I really wished she didn't sound quite so disapproving. She slowly peered up at me, her eyes wide and studying me closely as she waited for my response.

It should have been the easiest question in the world. The answer was a resounding yes, but I knew that wasn't what she wanted to hear. The way she'd reacted to being told I missed her had made that very clear.

"No, no, of course not," I replied.

“But you miss me?”

“Yeah, uh, no,” I stammered. “What I meant was I just wanted to see you. We’ve been having fun hanging out these last couple of weeks. It was Friday night, and I had nothing to do.”

I thought I’d made some progress with Violet tonight, but I could feel it all slipping quickly through my fingers as I rambled on. Each time I opened my mouth, I seemed to be making things worse, and I was internally screaming at myself to stop talking, rewind, and take the opportunity to tell Violet everything I wanted to. But it was too late. And I was too pathetic. Apparently, I had no problem facing off against 200-pound hockey players on the ice, but when it came to exposing my heart, I was a complete and total coward. I’d never been badly injured on the ice though, and I guessed I was still recovering from the pain I’d experienced off it.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Okay.” She looked thoughtful but then shot me a weak smile. “You’re right, it has been fun. And tonight was fun too. Thanks for inviting me.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied. “We still on for tomorrow night?” I hoped I didn’t sound too eager, but she was acting slightly cagey, and I was genuinely starting to worry she might be reconsidering our whole agreement. She was far too attached to her stupid golden rule.

“The victory party? Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Great.” My shoulders relaxed as relief pulsed through me. “I’ll see you then.”

The words were barely from my mouth before she’d jumped from the car. She was up the driveway and into the house before I could even consider getting out and walking with her.

“Nice going, Reed,” I grumbled to myself. Not for the first time, as soon as things started feeling even a little bit real, she literally fled the scene.

I’d tried my best not to come on too strong. I’d sent out the tiniest of feelers to try to get a sense of what was going on inside her head without revealing too much of what was going on in mine. But even that had freaked her out.

Something had inspired me to test Violet’s feelings tonight though. I hadn’t risked it all without thinking. When she’d been in my arms in the bowling alley and was gazing up at me, there was no mistaking the look in her eyes. She’d been thinking about kissing me. I knew it.

Maybe I hadn't completely screwed this up just yet. We still had one more week as a fake couple. But if I was going to win Violet over, I needed to make her realize some rules were meant to be broken—even golden ones.

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## VIOLET

I WAS SHOCKED I didn't get fired during my shift at Hug in a Mug on Saturday. I dropped an empty coffee mug, spilled three drinks, and messed up far too many people's coffee orders. My mind was most definitely not on work. Even Nicole had noticed something was off and asked me if I wanted to talk about it, but I'd just pretended I was tired, not spiraling after my fake bowling date with Reed.

Ever since I'd had dinner with the Darling family, I'd been doing my best to try to avoid Reed and the confusing, swirling emotions that bubbled up inside me whenever he was near. I was doing such a good job of it too, and then he had to go and ruin all my hard work. Just one fake bowling date, and the confusion was back; the line between fake and real was blurry as ever. No matter how hard I tried to hide from it or deny it, I knew I was starting to develop feelings for Reed that I wasn't supposed to.

I was somewhat glad Mia hadn't been scheduled to work with us because she wouldn't have let me suffer in silence so easily. She'd been all over me on Friday night after I got back from bowling, wanting to hear every last detail about the date. It was surprising seeing as she'd been so opposed to Reed only a few days ago.

I'd somehow managed to dodge most of her questions about the date. But it didn't stop me from obsessing over it as I drifted off to sleep last night. And the same thoughts continued to consume my mind today, distracting me as I tried and failed to serve coffee to my unlucky customers.

The only thing confusing me more than my own feelings were Reed's. He had told me he missed me, and even though he denied it, I kept coming

back to the same question: was Reed developing feelings beyond the boundaries of our fake relationship too?

The way he'd held me at the bowling alley and gazed into my eyes had felt so incredibly real. I'd gotten lost in the moment, and I hoped the way I responded to his touch and gazed back at him hadn't made him think I was breaking the rules. I was afraid to admit that even to myself, let alone Reed.

I was almost hoping the Devils lost their game on Saturday afternoon. Then the victory party would be canceled, and I could get back to avoiding Reed and hiding from all these questions and feelings I was too scared to face. Unfortunately, Reed and his team won easily, of course, and I was still grappling with my emotions as I got ready for the party that night.

Mia wandered into my room while I was searching for something to wear. I'd been standing in front of my closet for ages, unable to make a decision. The clothing you chose sent a message, and I had no idea what I wanted to communicate to Reed that night. But Mia shouldered me out of the way when she realized I was struggling.

"You can't make me wear that," I said when she held up the shortest dress I owned. It was a piece my mom had designed and one I'd never worn before. It was more of a top than a dress, and it was so shimmery it reminded me of a disco ball. It definitely wasn't my style, and the only reason it was in Minnesota was because my mom had thrown a pile of her latest pieces in my suitcase before we left. Seeing it now made me miss her. We'd had a brief chat a couple of days ago, but like always, she'd had to cut our call short.

"But it's so cute," Mia said, holding it up to her chest.

"It's snowing outside."

"Well, I was going to suggest you wear a jacket and boots with it."

"Still not happening."

Mia gave me her best pout. "You told me I could help you get ready."

"No, I said you could keep me company while I got ready. You were the one who pushed me out of the way and started raiding my closet like a bargain hunter at Black Friday sales."

"I just want to help."

"I know, but I'm trying to convince people I'm *not* a puck bunny, not that I'm their one true queen."

Mia snorted. "Violet Sinclair, queen of the puck bunnies. It has a nice ring to it."

“Better than Devil worshipper, I guess.”

“I kind of like that one too,” Mia replied with a laugh. “So, no to the dress?” She lifted it up one more time and wiggled the hanger in the air like that might miraculously make me change my mind.

“Definitely not,” I replied. “And, if you insist on helping, you’re limited to jeans and tops.”

“You’re no fun.” Mia’s shoulders sunk in defeat, and she trudged back to the closet.

“Why are you so interested in how I look tonight, anyway?” I asked as she riffled through my clothes.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You just seem to have changed your tune about Reed and this whole fake relationship thing.”

“You told me I should give him a chance, so I’m doing that.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “It’s just that you’ve been telling me to stay away from him for weeks, and now you’re getting me all dressed up for him.”

“Well, you’re only pretending to date the guy, so I’ve got nothing to worry about... right?” She glanced over her shoulder as she waited for my response. It felt like she was digging for information and wanted me to disagree.

“Right.”

She rolled her eyes before focusing on the closet again. “Oh, I know!” She reached out and grabbed my hand before she dragged me into the corridor.

“What are we doing?”

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of this sooner.” She only let go of me once we were in her room. “Okay, I have an outfit that fits your overly strict restrictions. But, before I show it to you, you have to promise me you’ll wear it.”

“Why would I do that?” I laughed. “It only makes me more concerned about what you have in mind.”

“I promise you won’t feel uncomfortable wearing it.”

“Mia...”

“Just tell me you’ll wear it. It’s too perfect for you, and you know I’m not going to back down.” From the way she was looking at me, I had a



feeling she might just try to wrestle me to the ground and force me into the clothes if I refused. So, I reluctantly gave in.

“Okay, fine. But if it’s another short dress...”

“It’s not,” she quickly replied.

I was relieved when Mia pulled out a pair of denim jeans and a maroon long-sleeved top. It looked innocent enough, but from the glint in Mia’s eyes, I still felt like I should be worried.

“Why am I suspicious right now?” I asked as I took the clothes from her to try on.

“Don’t be! I would never make you wear something that wouldn’t look great on you.”

“No,” I agreed. “But you would make me wear something that flashes my ass.”

She rolled her eyes. “That was one dress.”

“Yeah. The last one.”

“Just put the clothes on, Vi.”

“Okay. Okay.”

I shimmied my way into the jeans before pulling the top on over my head. When I looked in the mirror, I was pleasantly surprised. The jeans fit perfectly and hugged my curves in all the right places. While the top was soft and luxurious against my skin, and the color complimented my complexion perfectly. With the way it enhanced my features, it was almost as if the outfit was made for me.

“This is my never-fail first-base outfit,” Mia said, grinning proudly from beside me.

“What?” I gasped.

“I never fail to reach first base with a guy when I wear this top,” she explained. “It’s got a proven track record.”

“Gross, Mia. You can’t make me wear your make-out top.”

“Uh, I can, and I will. You look great.”

“This isn’t even a real date. And I’m not trying to get to any bases with Reed.”

That didn’t mean I hadn’t been thinking about it though. Especially after last night when my skin had come alive at the feel of his hand on my waist and my lips had itched to reach up to his. I’d been imagining what it would be like to kiss him again ever since and recalling our kiss at the bonfire a whole lot more than I should, too. Had it really been as spine-tingling as I

remembered? I tried to convince myself it wasn't, because I knew I shouldn't be thinking about Reed that way, but it was too hard. The kiss really was that good.

"Oh my god, you're thinking about it now, aren't you?" Mia smirked.

"No, of course not." I quickly busied myself rummaging through the jewelry collection on Mia's dresser.

"Well, maybe you should be," she suggested and passed me a necklace. It was perfect for the outfit and, knowing her, probably a key part of the superstition that went along with the top and jeans. "I bet he's an incredible kisser..."

I ignored the necklace in her outstretched hands. "Okay, now I'm certain you've changed your tune about Reed. What happened to him being a big scary Darling Devil that I should avoid at all costs?"

"Well, you keep telling me he's not like the rumors say," Mia said. "And if he's half as great as you seem to think, maybe you should give him a chance."

"I've never said he's *great*," I muttered.

"Except you kind of have." She gave me a knowing smile. "The way you've been acting says even more than your words could. You like him, don't you?"

I hesitated. It wasn't as simple as that. After everything I'd been through with Jeremy, I'd be an idiot to fall for another hockey player, to even consider another relationship with one. But each time I saw Reed, my feelings seemed to grow and intensify. I'd been trying so hard to ignore them or pretend they weren't there, but I was beginning to realize that might be impossible.

Mia was the one person I could talk to about this, and while I wasn't sure if I was ready to vocalize how I felt, I didn't think I could keep my internal struggle to myself either. Reed and I only had one week left together. If I didn't face my feelings now, he might be gone from my life before I got a chance to explore them.

"Okay." I sighed. "I might like him..."

"I knew it." Mia practically touched the ceiling as she jumped in celebration.

"But it doesn't matter because I'm not dating another hockey player. I can't. I'm done with cocky jocks for good."

“I know you have your reasons for that rule,” Mia said. “But you made an exception for Jeremy...”

“Yeah, and look how that turned out.”

“Okay, so you picked the wrong player, and perhaps you’re right to be cautious where hockey stars are involved. Hell, you’re right to be cautious with any guy. But they aren’t *all* bad. And Reed is not Jeremy.”

“No.” That we could definitely agree on. “But, even if I was crazy enough to forget my rule and date another hockey player, Reed doesn’t like me that way.”

At least, that’s what I told Mia. But it could get confusing when we were together, sharing laughs that felt as easy as breathing and smiles that made my heart glow warm with happiness. Sometimes when we held hands, I could feel his skin sparking just like mine. And then there were a few moments, like in his room and at the bowling alley, when it had seemed certain we would kiss. All of this pointed toward Reed returning my feelings. But I couldn’t tell if these moments were just a part of our arrangement or the beginning of something real.

“Are you sure he doesn’t like you?” Mia asked.

“He can’t,” I replied. “We promised each other we wouldn’t get feelings.”

“You developed feelings,” she replied.

“I’m an idiot.”

“Well, you know there’s one surefire way to find out...”

“There is?”

“Yeah,” she said. “You just tell him how *you* feel.”

“No way!” I instinctively shouted. There was still every chance he’d simply laugh in my face. And every time I thought it might be worth the risk, every time I thought maybe he might be somewhat interested in me, I kept coming back to one simple fact: Reed Darling didn’t want a real relationship. It was why he agreed to this whole mess in the first place.

“He’s made it pretty clear he’s not interested in dating right now,” I added. “That’s why I was the perfect candidate for a fake relationship... I didn’t want a real one either. Especially not with someone like him.”

“I’m still not convinced,” Mia said.

“I don’t know what else to tell you. But I’m definitely not going to confess my feelings to him. I was barely even able to share them with you.”

Mia lifted her hands in defeat. "In that case, I see no other option. You're just going to have to kiss him again."

"What? How is that the next logical step?"

"Because a kiss can tell you everything you need to know about how another person feels. You can't fake chemistry, and if this relationship really is just pretend, he won't be into it."

"I don't know, Mia. Will I really be able to tell what he's feeling from a kiss alone? He seemed pretty into our kiss at the bonfire... Are you saying he wanted to date me even then?"

"It's not *just* about the kiss," she said. "It's the whole package. How he looks you in the eyes before and after, how he holds you, all that stuff. Just trust me; kiss him, and you'll know."

My heart pounded with anticipation. The first time we'd kissed was incredible. But I'd been fueled by anger then, and I knew I didn't have any feelings for Reed at the time. What would it be like if we kissed again? Would it intensify my feelings for him or only add to my confusion?

"What if I'm only setting myself up to get hurt again?" I asked.

"I guess you have to decide if he's worth the risk. And whether you're willing to take the risk," she said.

Mia was asking me to be brave, but I wasn't sure I was capable. Putting my heart out there, to see if my feelings were returned, felt like launching out of a plane with a shoddy parachute you'd found on Marketplace—there was every chance it wouldn't open to catch your fall.

"But if you want to stay cautious, then you're already in the perfect situation to pull this off," she continued.

"I am?"

"Yep. The whole reason you're going to this party with him is because the girls at his school are coming on to him too hard and you need to show off your relationship, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"And so, all you have to do is pretend like they're making eyes at him and suggest you two kiss to send them a message. If, by some miracle, he doesn't seem into it, you can just say you were only being a good fake girlfriend. Reed is none the wiser, and no one gets hurt."

"I guess so."

"I know so," she added. "Now, let's fix your hair and makeup. We don't want you to be late." I sighed and allowed Mia to finish preparing me for

the party. There was really no point fighting her. It was a battle I knew I'd lose.

Once Mia was finished, I had to admit she'd done an amazing job. She'd left my long, red hair loose, and the earthy tones she'd used for my makeup highlighted my eyes nicely. I'd expected her to go for some kind of bold glamour look, but she must have realized how much I'd hate it and settled for something more subtle.

"Thanks, Mia," I said, smiling at her in the mirror's reflection. She'd somehow managed to achieve the perfect balance of accentuating my features without also making it look like I'd tried too hard.

"You're hot." She grinned appreciatively. "Tell Reed he can thank me later."

"Of course, that's the first thing I'll tell him." I glanced at the time on my phone. Reed was supposed to be here to pick me up ten minutes ago, and I was surprised I hadn't received a message saying he was running late.

"What is it?" Mia asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," I replied, double-checking my phone to see if I'd missed a call or text. "Reed's just running late."

"Uh, about that..." Mia tucked her hands into her pockets, a guilty look on her face. "He might be here already."

"What?"

"Yeah, he arrived when I went downstairs to grab my hair straightener. I wasn't done with you yet, so I told him to wait in the living room."

"Mia," I groaned. "Why didn't you tell me? What if Luke's in there grilling him?"

"Uh, I think he is..."

"Are you kidding me?" I quickly grabbed my bag off the bed and raced downstairs. Ten minutes with Luke and it wouldn't matter what I felt for Reed. Fake or not, our relationship would probably be over.

I hurried to the living room but stopped by the door when I heard laughing coming from within. I cautiously edged into the room and saw Reed was sitting in an armchair chatting freely with Luke who was on the couch opposite. There was no pained look in Reed's eyes and no anger, disgust, or suspicion on Luke's face. The two of them were both smiling and talking.

Reed jumped up from his chair as soon as he saw me enter the room. His eyes lit up, and he gave me a warm smile. He started to walk toward me

but bumped into the coffee table and almost tripped.

I spluttered out a laugh. He was blushing, and it was actually really cute.

“Hey,” he said, his deep voice rumbling and all too familiar as he came to stand before me.

“Hey, yourself. Are you okay? That coffee table nearly took you out.”

“I’ll survive,” he said, still slightly red in the cheeks. “You look gorgeous.”

My cheeks flushed just as bright as his at the compliment. The moment didn’t last long though because Luke cleared his throat.

“The coffee table won’t be the only thing injuring you if you keep looking at my niece that way.”

There was the Luke I knew and loved. I guessed whatever joke he and Reed had been sharing before I came in was short-lived.

“Uncle Luke, don’t—” I started to complain.

“It’s okay, Violet,” Luke said, lifting himself off the couch and coming to stand near us. “I’m only joking.”

“You are?” Now I was even more confused than when I’d seen them laughing and chatting together.

“Well, no, I’m not joking. I’m actually deadly serious,” he said, raising an eyebrow at Reed. “But don’t worry, I’d give the same threat to any boy who takes you out. I think this one might actually be all right though.”

“You do?” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“Yeah.” Luke shrugged. “Reed and I just had a little chat, and I think we’ve come to an understanding. And, while I’m not going to go so far as to say I totally trust him yet, I do trust you. And if you like Reed, then I guess I like Reed too.”

He made his point by giving Reed a firm slap on the back, and I couldn’t help but let a grin pull at my lips. Reed also seemed to be holding back a smirk, and he gave me a subtle wink.

“Okay...” I said, unsure what exactly had just happened. “Thanks, Luke.”

He nodded before turning to Reed. “Just remember, you do anything to upset Violet, and the coffee table will be the least of your problems.”

I expected Reed to look embarrassed or concerned, at the very least. But he turned to Luke and smiled. “Understood. I’ll be the perfect gentlemen.”

“Right, well, I think that’s enough threats for one night. We’ll see you later, Luke.” I practically dragged Reed away before my uncle could get in another word.

Mia was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, grinning wickedly as she watched us. “Have fun tonight, kids,” she said.

“Bye, Mia,” I replied without stopping. After Luke’s performance, I didn’t want to stick around to see what else my cousin had to say. It would probably have been something about my first-base outfit.

As soon as we got to Reed’s truck, I grabbed his arm to stop him. “Okay, what was that between you and Luke?” I glanced over my shoulder as I spoke to make sure Mia and my uncle weren’t watching us leave through the windows. The blinds in the living room quickly jerked shut, and I shot a glare in that direction. It had to be Mia, and I really hoped it wasn’t Luke too.

“What do you mean?” Reed asked, a look of deliberate thoughtfulness on his face.

“You know what I mean. Last time you came over and Luke was here he almost kicked you out before you walked through the door. Tonight, you’re in there laughing together.”

“It was nothing,” he said. “We were just bonding.”

“Bonding? Over what?”

“Well, it seems Luke used to play a bit of hockey when he was in school around here. He heard we destroyed the Summit High Vikings in our game today and was very happy about it. I guess they were his rival team back in the day.”

I shook my head in disbelief. What was it about hockey in this place?

“So, you’re saying one quick conversation about hockey and you’re suddenly the apple of my uncle’s eye.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Reed continued. “The first time I met Luke, he clearly didn’t like me, but you whisked me away before I got a chance to change his mind. I decided to arrive a little early tonight so I could talk to Luke one on one.”

“And say what?”

“And say that there’s nothing for him to worry about. Because I really care about you and I’d never do anything to hurt you.”

Reed said it casually, like it was the most normal thing in the world. He reached out and opened the door of his truck, gesturing for me to get in, but

I was frozen in place. Had he really meant the things he'd told Luke, or was he just saying them to avoid hassle from my uncle. I wasn't sure I could handle the answer. Either way, it was one of the sweetest things a boyfriend, fake or real, had ever said to me.

I simply smiled at him and nodded before I climbed into the truck and let him close the door. I was still a little unsure about what had just happened, but what I did know was I was more nervous about this party than ever before because maybe Mia was right. Maybe it was time to take a risk on Reed.

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## VIOLET

REED and I were both quiet as we drove to the other side of the river for the party. We usually talked with such ease, but my thoughts felt tangled, and I was at a loss for what to say. Everything had been so much simpler when all I'd seen him as was my fake boyfriend. It was so much more complicated now, and I'd almost forgotten how to act around him.

"So, the party tonight's at Matt's?" I asked. It was the only thing I could think to say.

"It is."

"You seemed awfully confident you were going to win today."

"Because we always win," Reed replied. "As captain, I do whatever it takes to make sure of that."

I shook my head. "So cocky."

"Just a little." A grin spread across his face, and his eyes shone with mischief as he glanced at me. I wished my heart didn't thump quite so hard when he looked at me that way, and I did my best to appear unaffected.

He was still smiling as he focused back on the road.

"So, what does a Ransom Devils victory party look like?" I continued. "It won't be too crazy, will it?"

"Nah, not too crazy. Matt would kill anyone who trashed his parents' place."

"Okay, it's just... I'm a little nervous."

"You don't need to be," he said. "I won't leave your side."

I slowly nodded. It was comforting to hear that, especially since I barely knew anyone who went to Ransom. Jeremy had never stuck with me at

parties even when I'd first started at Sunshine Prep. But I'd always had Mia and Nicole as backup, and they wouldn't be with me tonight.

That wasn't the only reason I was nervous. Mia's advice kept running through my mind, and I had no idea where this night was going to end up. Was I going to open up to Reed about what I was feeling? Was I going to kiss him? Was I going to flee the party with a broken heart? Maybe it would be none of those things. Or maybe it would be all three.

By the time we arrived at the party, the street was already filled with cars. Reed drove right by them and parked in the driveway of the house that was overflowing with people.

"Best friend privileges," Reed explained as he pulled on the handbrake. "I get to park in the driveway, but I also have to help clean up in the morning, so it's not always worth it."

"Yeah, I can imagine."

A wave of nerves hit me as I looked out the window at all the people milling in the front yard. When I'd agreed to come, I knew I might feel out of place, but it seemed so much more daunting now we were here.

"We don't have to go inside if you don't want," Reed said, watching me.

My thoughts must have been clearly etched on my face. "No, it's fine," I said. "We've got to show the girls of Ransom you're a taken man, right?"

"Sure," he agreed. "But let me know if you're not comfortable at any point. We can just bail and go home if that's what you want."

"Okay." I nodded, hoping it wouldn't come to that. "I'll let you know."

Reed jumped from the truck and came around to meet me as I got out. He gave me a warm smile as he took my hand. "You really do look beautiful tonight, Sunshine. I'm glad you're here with me."

"Thanks." Despite the freezing night air, I could feel myself flushing. I really struggled to accept compliments, especially when they came from Reed.

He gave me another soft smile before he nodded in the direction of the house. "Come on."

As we made our way inside, Reed's demeanor changed. He seemed taller, larger, like he had grown in stature the minute he entered the building. Everyone we saw appeared to take a step back to give him plenty of room to pass by, and while I was aware he intimidated the kids at Sunshine Prep, I hadn't realized he was treated with a similar kind of

caution by Ransom High kids too. While the reaction at my school was caused by fear and distrust, here it seemed people had a quiet sense of respect for Reed. The guys nodded to him as he passed, and girls swallowed nervously or shot him seductive smiles. If I hadn't been on Reed's arm, would they have been throwing themselves into his path?

I missed Reed's smile when he was acting like this. He was always so soft and easygoing when it was just us or when he was around his family and close friends. I'd forgotten this darker side of him existed because we'd spent so much time around people he trusted, and I had to remind myself it was mostly just an act to maintain a certain reputation.

He quickly relaxed when we made it to the back of the house, where there was a den full of people hanging out, many of whom I recognized as guys from his hockey team.

"Finally," Matt said, slapping Reed on the back in greeting. "I was worried you were going to bail on tonight."

"Would I do that?" Reed asked.

"Yes. Yes, you would," Matt replied with a laugh before he turned his attention on me. "Hey, Violet. We missed you at our game today."

"Sorry, I had to work. Sounds like you did just fine without me though."

"Ah, but who knows how many more goals we would have scored if you'd been there to cheer us on." He winked. "Come on, let's introduce you to some other victorious Devils."

Matt threw an arm over my shoulder and led me away from Reed. Nerves rippled through me as our hands parted, but Reed stayed close while Matt went around introducing me to everyone. I remembered Owen from the pizza restaurant, but the names of the rest of the players went in one ear and out the other. They seemed like a nice group of guys, and I was surprised by how welcoming they all were. It had always felt like Jeremy's friends simply put up with me. I'd only been here a few minutes, and these guys were embracing me as if I were one of their own.

When we got to the far end of the room, I grinned as Paige launched from Grayson's side to come and hug me. We'd known each other less than a week, and yet it felt like we'd been friends forever.

"You don't have a drink," she said, almost instantly. "Do you want to go grab one?"

"Uh, sure," I said, nodding for her to lead the way.

She linked her arm through mine and pulled me toward the other side of the den where there was a table stacked with drinks. Reed went to follow us, but Paige waved him off. "We'll be back in a second. Your girl will be just fine with me." She tugged me away before he could argue.

"Took you guys long enough to get here," Paige said as we approached the drinks table. "I swear, we left the house at the same time as Reed, and that was ages ago."

It was no surprise Paige had been hanging out at the Darling family's house beforehand. It seemed like she and Grayson did everything together.

"We got a little held up," I explained. "Reed and my uncle were having a bit of one-on-one time."

"Oh no." Paige laughed softly. "How did that go?"

"Surprisingly well," I said. "Reed really made an effort to impress him."

I stole a quick glance over my shoulder at Reed. He was chatting with Matt now, but, as if he sensed I was looking, his gaze immediately drifted to me.

"You okay?" he mouthed.

I smiled back at him and nodded. He winked at me and continued his conversation with Matt. Given the animated way his friend was swinging an invisible hockey stick through the air, I had to assume they were reliving parts of today's game.

"Well, that's Reed," Paige said. "He's always happy to go out of his way for people he cares about."

It was hard to argue with her. Reed had gone out of his way to help me a few times now. But I could never be sure if it was part of his efforts to maintain our fake relationship or something more.

"And I can tell he really cares about you," Paige continued.

That got my attention, and I quickly faced her again. "You can?"

"Of course." She nodded as she pulled two premixed drinks from the mini fridge. "Like, the way he fixed your car was the sweetest thing I've ever heard."

I frowned as she passed me one of the glass bottles. "You mean when he helped me get my car towed?"

"Well, that too, but no, I'm talking about how he spent hours working at his dad's garage to get all the repairs done."

"Wait, what?" I stammered. "Reed was the one who fixed my car?"

Paige seemed confused as she took a sip of her drink. "You didn't know?"

"Reed said it was his dad. He told me Danny didn't want to charge me."

"Typical," Paige muttered. "It wasn't his dad. Reed worked on it himself and put in extra hours to cover the cost of the parts. Grayson told me he was there every night. He was even late to hockey practice a couple of times."

My mouth dropped open as I stared at her. "Why didn't he tell me? I never would have let him do that for me if I'd known."

"That's probably why he kept it to himself." Paige lifted her eyes to the ceiling. "I swear these Darling boys are impossible."

"I can't believe he did that."

"It's like I told you," she said with a smile. "He must really care about you."

Reed wasn't supposed to care about me, but if Paige was telling the truth about him fixing Betty, how could I deny that he did? What could he have to gain from secretly repairing my car for me? Why would he do that if all he cared about was scaring off his groupies? And, after what I'd just learned, how was I supposed to keep acting like this relationship was only pretend and that I didn't care for him too?

"My friend Bonnie just got here," Paige said, shaking me from my thoughts. She was looking down at her phone. "I need to go find her. Will you be okay if I leave you with Reed and the boys?"

"Uh, yeah, of course," I said, nodding at her to go ahead. As she left, I slowly turned back to face the room. My heart swelled with a mixture of nerves and excitement when I caught sight of Reed. He was still talking to Matt, and he looked so handsome as he released an easy laugh. Whatever happened going forward, I felt lucky I'd gotten to be his girlfriend these last few weeks, even if it was all for show.

When he saw me watching him and that Paige had disappeared, he waved me over. As I approached, his smile seemed to get brighter, and I found myself wondering how I'd managed to keep such firm boundaries between us for so long. How I hadn't fallen deeply in love with this boy the moment I met him. I wondered if perhaps I had and I'd just been too stubborn to recognize my feelings for what they were.

"Hey," he said when I reached him. "I'm glad you're back. I've been wanting to show my girlfriend off."

My stomach turned uncomfortably at his words. He sounded so genuine as though he was truly proud to have me by his side. But it was also exactly the type of comment my fake boyfriend would make. While it sounded nice, it hinted at one of the real reasons we were together in the first place—to keep his female fans off his back.

I did my best to shake off my doubts. I'd already given in to my feelings for him, and I hoped he was feeling the same thing. There was no going back now.

"Do you want to go dance?" I suggested.

"Reed doesn't dance." Matt laughed.

But Reed ignored his friend, keeping his focus on me. "Maybe I was just waiting for the right partner." He held out a hand toward me, and as I slipped my fingers into his grasp, my world felt complete.

He led me back through the house to the living room where everyone was dancing. It felt like every eye in the room was on us as we made our way through the crowd, but Reed didn't seem to notice. His attention was entirely on me as he pulled me tightly against him. With our bodies pressed so close together, it was hard to think.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded because my mouth was dry, and my words felt stuck in my throat. My whole body was alight with energy, and every time we shifted to the music my stomach dipped and then soared like a flock of birds taking flight. If this was what it felt like to dance with Reed, kissing him, now I had developed feelings, might be a terrible idea. I was starting to doubt Mia's plan, and realizing just how much it would hurt if we kissed and he didn't feel the same way.

I threaded my arms around his neck as we danced, and my fingers lightly brushed against the scar there. The faint line was clearly healed, so it must have been there for years. I swallowed as I remembered all the possible explanations people had come up with for the origin of Reed's scar. It was a rumor I hadn't yet asked him about, but one I had been thinking about more than any other. While he'd disproved most of the rumors I'd heard over the last few weeks, either by telling me the truth directly or just by showing he wasn't that kind of guy, the truth about his scar still remained a mystery.

I slowly peered up at him, and as our gazes locked, a familiar warmth spread through me. "What happened here?" I murmured, my fingers

brushing against his scar once more. I couldn't help but notice his reaction.

A subtle shiver rippled through his body. He closed his eyes for a moment, and I wasn't sure if he was going to reply.

"There are rumors..." I added when he hadn't said anything for a few moments.

"I didn't know people still talked about it," he murmured, opening his eyes to look at me again. He cleared his throat. "What have you heard?" His voice was lower, huskier somehow. I couldn't tell if it was in reaction to my touch or if perhaps he was worried about the story behind his scar.

"Several things," I replied. "One of the explanations involved a girl and an ice skate..."

He visibly swallowed as he returned my curious gaze. "I guess they got one right for once..."

My stomach twisted uncomfortably as I saw anxiety in his eyes. Was this really one of the few rumors that was actually true? I'd heard Reed got his scar because he'd broken some poor girl's heart and she'd thrown the skate at him in a rage. I'd hoped that, like most of the other rumors, it would turn out to be false.

"What happened?" I asked, but I was no longer certain I wanted to know.

We'd all but stopped dancing as we spoke, and Reed kept glancing around like he was worried we'd be overheard. "I'd rather we didn't talk about it here."

Was the truth really that bad? I was about to ask him why, but the sound of shouting coming from outside stopped me. Everyone on the dance floor froze and looked in the direction of the noise. It was muffled at first, but then one bellowed word rang clear: "Cops!"

It echoed through the room like an alarm, rippling across the dance floor until total chaos erupted. Everyone burst back to life and started scrambling for the nearest exit. A mix of panicked voices and excited laughter filled the air, and I felt like I was caught in the midst of a stampede.

Reed caged me in his arms, barging his way through the frantic crowd and back out to the den. I was surprised to find that all the guys from the hockey team were still there. Had they not heard the commotion or seen the people racing to get out of the house?

"Are the cops really here?" Matt asked as he fell into step beside Reed.



Before Reed could reply, Matt's question was answered as a familiar flash of red and blue light illuminated the next room. It must have been coming through a window. The police were in the front driveway.

"I guess so," Reed grunted. "But don't worry, man. I'll help you sort it out. We just need to make sure every Devils player that's here gets out without being seen."

"They want to help, too," Matt replied.

"They're not helping anyone if the entire team gets benched for our game next week. Get them out of here, now."

While the rest of the kids at the party seemed to be enjoying the adrenaline rush of running from the cops, it appeared the consequences of getting caught were a lot greater for the hockey team. Matt nodded firmly at Reed before gathering the other members of the team. Reed was still on a mission though, and he kept a hand placed firmly on my lower back as he guided me over to where Paige and his brothers were waiting.

He chuckled his keys at Parker, who grabbed them easily out of the air. "Take the girls home."

"What? No way," Parker replied. "I'm staying to help."

"I don't have time to argue, Parker," Reed said. "Take them home, and make sure none of you are caught."

There was a sinking feeling in my chest as I realized Reed wasn't coming too. Of course, he wasn't. There was no way he would leave Matt to face the cops alone.

He stared Parker down as he waited for his younger brother to agree. Parker must have known Reed was serious because he caved far quicker than I expected, and he gave Reed a serious nod. "Okay, you got it."

Relief flashed in Reed's eyes, but then he winced. "Wait, my truck's parked out front..."

"Take mine instead." Grayson handed over his keys. "It's parked around the corner. Paige knows where it is."

"You're staying?" Paige asked, her eyes were wide with concern although she didn't look surprised.

Grayson nodded. "Someone needs to keep Reed out of trouble."

Reed shot him a scowl but didn't argue. I imagined even Reed thought twice about taking his twin brother on.

I said a rushed goodbye to Reed before I followed Paige and Parker to the back door of the house. I glanced over my shoulder before we reached it

and found Reed was already talking seriously with Matt. This might have been his best friend's house, but Reed looked like he was taking charge. I hoped Grayson wouldn't have to go to any great lengths to keep his brother from getting in trouble, like he'd suggested.

When we got outside, there were still kids dashing in every direction. Some were hopping over the back fence and running into the woods behind Matt's house while a few others had even climbed up into the trees as if the cops wouldn't think to shine their flashlights a few feet above their heads. I even heard a few giggles coming from a small pink and white children's playhouse, and it looked like at least three people had squeezed themselves inside the tiny toy home to hide. The backyard and the woods beyond still echoed with both screams and laughter.

Parker didn't sprint across the grass like everyone else though. He walked casually but with authority as he guided me and Paige toward the back fence to a gate that was partially obstructed by an overgrown bush.

"You don't think they'll get in trouble, do you?" I asked, peering back toward the house.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Paige said, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. "This isn't the first time."

"Yeah, don't worry," Parker agreed. "Grayson's scowl will probably make the cops turn and run in the other direction. I can't believe Reed put me on babysitting duty."

"Hey!" Paige and I both complained at once.

"Just joking," Parker grinned. "Sort of."

His relaxed attitude made me feel a little better. If Parker wasn't worried, I shouldn't be either, right?

We managed to get back to Grayson's car without incident, and by the time we reached it, the street had turned quiet. I was guessing that meant most of the partygoers had either left or were in hiding. Parker didn't seem too concerned about racing for the car or darting between trees as I'd seen some kids do. I couldn't decide if he was brave, stupid, or just arrogant enough that he really didn't think he could get in trouble.

Parker dropped Paige home first. She lived just a few streets from Matt, but she didn't look particularly pleased to be back at her house so soon. We still hadn't heard from Grayson or Reed, and we exchanged phone numbers before she got out of the car so we could text each other the moment we heard anything about the party.

It was only as Parker pulled up outside my house that a text finally came through.

Reed: All good here. There were no cops. It was a prank by some Saints players. They even brought their own fake siren.

I released a sigh of relief. "It was a prank," I told Parker, and I noticed his grasp on the steering wheel loosen. Apparently, he'd been more worried than he had let on.

"I'm going to kill those Saints," Parker grumbled before I'd even explained who was behind the prank. "I was about to score with the hottest girl in our year. Their timing couldn't have been worse."

"And on that note, I'm going to go," I replied. "Thanks for driving me home, Parker. I know you wanted to stay, so I really appreciate it."

He shrugged like it was no big deal. "You're Reed's girl," he replied. "That makes you family."

I had no idea how to respond. It humbled me to know how easily Parker, and all Reed's family and friends, had accepted me. But it also filled me with guilt knowing we were deceiving them all. I desperately wished what Parker had said was true. That I really was Reed's girl.

I smiled at him before stepping out of the car and making my way to the house. I waited until I was in my room before I replied to Reed's message.

Me: Glad you're okay. What happened?

Reed: Not much. They ran off as soon as Matt, Grayson, and I went out front to confront them.

Reed: Sorry our night was ruined. I still owe you the story of how I got my scar. Can you meet me at the rink tomorrow morning? There's something I need to show you to help explain.

I frowned down at my phone. In all the excitement of fleeing Matt's house, I'd completely forgotten Reed had been about to tell me what happened with his scar. I drew in a breath before I responded.

Me: I have work at 11, but I can meet you before?

Reed: Great. Come by just after 10.

Reed: And please promise you won't think less of me...

I stared at his final message and tried to figure out what he could mean by that. Was the story of how he got his scar really so terrible? And if it was, did I even want to hear his explanation? Nothing had gone according to plan tonight, and I wasn't sure I was ready to face any more surprises. But I guessed that was a problem for tomorrow.

Whatever Reed had to show me, I just hoped I wouldn't think less of him too.

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## VIOLET

AN INVOLUNTARY SHUDDER ran through me as I pushed through the front doors of the ice arena. This morning was bitterly cold, and the thick layer of fresh snow that had fallen overnight seemed like a sign from the universe that perhaps I was better off staying home today; perhaps I was better off not knowing the truth behind Reed's scar.

I'd considered texting him several times to say I couldn't make it this morning. I had to get to work soon anyway. However, my curiosity had won out over my dread, and here I was, mentally preparing myself for whatever explanation Reed had in store.

I'd arrived a little early to the arena since I'd given myself extra time to navigate the snowy roads this morning. I wasn't sure if Reed was here already or where exactly we were supposed to meet, but I figured he'd be inside near the ice.

The center was quiet this morning, with only a few people hanging about, but as I approached the ice, I heard high-pitched squeals of laughter and the sounds of blades scraping against the smooth firm surface. It was coming from a group of young girls who were skating around the wide perimeter of the rink. They were so tiny I was surprised they could walk, let alone skate, and most of them clung to support frames for stability.

"Look at me, Reedy," one girl cried, as she skated past with no support. "I'm doing it."

"That's great, Amelie."

My jaw dropped as Reed skated up beside the tiny girl and cheered her on. It looked like Reed was teaching the kids to skate. Surely this wasn't

related to the injury he'd received? And why would he be worried I'd think less of him for it?

I continued to watch as Reed gave the small children pointers, supporting them when they needed it and praising them when they'd done well. His gentle gestures and kind words radiated a sense of genuine care that would have surprised anyone who didn't truly know him. It was certainly a stark contrast to the guy who intimidated pretty much everyone he met or the Devil who took to the ice every weekend. I'd come here today, bracing myself for bad news, but it was difficult to keep that in mind as I watched him playfully lift one of the girls into the air and spin her around.

Eventually, the class came to an end, and as Reed called the group together and said his goodbyes, two of the little girls grabbed his legs and gave him loving hugs. He smiled affectionately down at them and patted them awkwardly on their heads.

"I'll see you girls next week," he said. Again, I struggled to believe what I was seeing. How was it that no one knew the big bad Devil Reed Darling taught little girls to skate.

He hadn't realized I was here yet, and when he turned from waving farewell to the kids, he finally caught me watching. His cheeks turned slightly pink, but his expression was stoic as he moved across the ice toward me.

"So, is this what you wanted me to see?" I asked.

"Uh, no." He scratched the back of his neck and glanced toward the retreating figures of his tiny little students. "You're early."

"Wait, that wasn't why you asked me here?"

"To see me teach a beginner's figure skating class? No, that's not what I wanted to show you."

"Figure skating?"

Reed's cheeks turned pinker still.

"Why would you teach figure skating?"

"It's a long story."

I crossed my arms as I waited for him to continue. He'd dragged me here on a Sunday morning, and he couldn't leave me hanging now.

"Meet me by my bag," he said, nodding at the entrance to the rink. He skated off before I could refuse, and with a sigh, I walked to meet him.

When I reached him, he was pulling another set of ice skates from his bag. “You’re the same size shoe as my sister,” he said, offering them to me.

“And you know that because...”

“We went bowling together,” he replied. “Not because I have a thing for feet.”

“Now, that would be a good rumor.” I smirked. “Maybe I’ll have to start that one on my own.”

“Don’t you dare.”

I laughed before frowning down at the skates. “You don’t actually want me to put those on, do you? I’ve never skated before.”

“I guess it’s lucky I’m a good teacher.” He thrust the skates closer to me, but I didn’t take them. The thought of stepping onto the ice filled me with dread; it seemed like a disaster waiting to happen.

“How about you explain why you brought me here instead?”

“Tell you what,” Reed replied. “Come for one lap of the rink, and I’ll show you.” He held my gaze, and I had a feeling he was determined to get his way.

“Okay, fine.” I accepted the skates from him. It was one lap of the rink. How bad could it be?

It only took two seconds on the ice for me to realize it would be terrible. My skates wobbled as soon as I stepped onto the rink, and when I tried to push away from the boards, they instantly slipped out from under me, sending my feet flying up into the air. I was falling faster than I could blink, but instead of slamming onto the cold, hard ice, I felt Reed’s strong arms wrap around me.

“You’re supposed to wait for your teacher before you launch yourself onto the ice,” he said with a laugh. My heart was already racing with adrenaline from slipping, and the feel of his strong arms keeping me upright only made me more breathless.

“I didn’t realize it would be so difficult,” I replied. “You make it look easy.”

“Probably because I learned to skate before I could walk.”

“Well, I—” For the second time, my skates slipped out from under me, and my breath was stolen from my lungs. Reed gripped my waist tightly as he supported me, once again stopping me from landing on the ground. Reed had already seen me fall in the snow. I could only imagine how much more painful and embarrassing it would be to hit the ice in front of him.



“I’m beginning to think your explanation isn’t worth this,” I said as he steadied me.

He grinned. “You’re doing better than you think.”

“Not likely,” I muttered, which only made his smile grow wider.

I did my best not to look at him or, more specifically, his smile as we continued to skate. Whenever I glanced his way, I tended to send myself sprawling, which was something I very much wanted to avoid.

Reed was sweet as we skated and kept trying to encourage me. But I was a terrible student and constantly on the verge of pulling the two of us down. The only plus to the whole experience was the fact he didn’t let go of me once. That was definitely something I could get used to.

It was only after we finished our lap and I was safely holding on to the boards again that Reed started talking. “The story behind my scar is a little embarrassing,” he said. “I don’t like to talk about it. And if you ever tell anyone, I’m not sure I’ll be able to forgive you.” He was speaking quickly, and his usual confident demeanor was replaced by a hint of hesitation. Was he nervous?

“Is it really that bad?” I asked.

“It is,” he muttered. “But I guess I should just rip off the Band-Aid.”

I was genuinely beginning to worry.

“So, you were right, the scar was caused by an ice skate,” he began.

He’d told me as much last night, and I instinctively gripped the boards beside me a little tighter as I motioned for him to go on.

“And the skate did belong to a girl...”

“Okay...” I braced myself for what was coming.

“But that girl was my sister.”

It took a moment for the revelation to sink in. “Wait, are you serious?” I glanced at the scar again. “Cammie was the one who did that to you?”

“Yes, but it’s not what you think,” he added. “She didn’t throw the skate at me.”

“Then what happened?”

Reed drew in a breath before he continued. “When we were younger, my dad would work every Sunday morning, and my mom didn’t trust us boys to stay home alone, so my brothers and I would get dragged to Cammie’s figure skating lessons. We had the choice of joining in the lesson or sitting in the bleachers doing homework. I chose to pick out a pair of figure skates.”

He was struggling to meet my eyes, and it was clear he was embarrassed. I wasn't sure why it would be such a big deal.

"Grayson outright refused to try, and Parker lasted half a lesson before he was kicked out for distracting the girls in class. But I was surprised to find I liked it. I picked up the moves easily, and I enjoyed focusing on the intricacies of skating rather than just the puck and my hockey stick. I didn't do it all that long. My dad eventually hired someone to help with his workload so my brothers and I could stay home.

"I thought my figure skating days were over, but then Cammie needed a partner to practice with for a contest, so I offered to help. She's an incredible skater, but she goes through partners like she's trying to find a new outfit." He pulled down his top to reveal his scar. "We fell while we were practicing a particularly challenging lift. She accidentally cut me with her skate. That's how I got the scar."

"You were figure skating?"

"Yes." He grimaced. "And if anyone ever found out, it's safe to say I'd never hear the end of it. I've been doing my best to hide the fact I've been covering Cammie's figure skating class for the last couple of weeks. If anyone ever found out I could actually figure skate myself, I'd be laughed off the ice at my next game."

"So, you don't normally teach the class?"

"No, it's only temporary. Cammie's got a new partner, and they have extra training sessions at the moment. I wouldn't be doing it if she hadn't begged me. Especially this season when a Saints player could walk in here at any moment."

I leaned against the boards as I peered up at him. "You seriously expect me to believe you're a secret figure skater?"

"I'm not a secret figure skater. I just got injured doing it."

"Hmm, okay." I pretended to look thoughtful. "So, did you ever have to wear Lycra?"

He closed his eyes and gave a deep sigh. "No, I never wore Lycra. I just practiced Cammie's routine with her. I never actually performed."

"What music did you dance to? It was *Swan Lake*, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't *Swan Lake*." He'd opened his eyes now, and I could see a hint of amusement dancing in them. He could tell I was enjoying this.

"Look, to be honest, this is difficult to believe," I said. "I think I'm going to need to see the receipts for this rumor, Reed." I was totally

messing with him because the truth was I believed every word. I just wanted to actually see him skate.

I think he must have realized that because he cocked his head at me and raised an eyebrow. “Seriously, Sunshine?”

“Seriously.” I grinned back at him.

He shook his head but returned my smile before he shot away across the ice at lightning speed. It was only now I’d tried ice-skating myself that I could really appreciate just how talented Reed must be. He made it look so simple. As easy as if he were walking or running but with infinitely more power, speed, and grace. It reminded me of the first time I’d seen him skate when I’d showed up to the wrong game. He glided all the way to the far side of the rink before curving his way along the boards and speeding back toward me. I wasn’t exactly sure what he was doing, but as he drew closer to me, he launched himself up in the air and spun effortlessly in a full circle before landing neatly on one skate.

I’d completely stopped breathing, and my eyes were wide with shock. “What was that?” I gasped as Reed came to a sudden stop before me.

“An Axel,” he replied.

“That doesn’t look like something most hockey players can do.”

“Because they can’t.” Reed grinned, almost proudly. “Although, Parker would probably try to tell you otherwise.”

“Well, it was incredible.”

“Thanks.”

“But, if Parker thinks he could do it, then I’m going to have to see the whole routine before I’m fully convinced.”

“No way,” Reed replied with a laugh. “No one will ever see me do that routine. My reputation would be destroyed.”

“Not even me?”

“Sorry, Sunshine. But I would have to be out of my mind to embarrass myself like that. It would be the death of the Darling Devils.”

“Well, now, I really want to see it.”

Reed simply smiled and shook his head, and I knew there was nothing I could say to convince him to show me the routine. It had been worth a try though. He might have been embarrassed, but if the full routine was half as impressive as that one single jump, I imagined it would be pretty spectacular.

“So, I guess you didn’t get the scar from a heartbroken and angry ex-girlfriend throwing an ice skate at you.”

The smile dropped from his face, and he eyed me closely. “You believed that rumor, didn’t you?”

I shrugged.

“Well, just so you know, I’d never hurt a girl that way.”

“Perhaps not intentionally,” I agreed. “But I would have thought it came with the territory when you have so many girls throwing themselves at you.”

“Violet.” His voice lowered, and a shiver went down my spine as he said my name. “Despite what everyone says, I’m not some player. There’s only one girl I care about, and she’s standing right in front of me...”

My eyes widened, and I stood before him stunned.

He didn’t wait for a response, and instead he held out his hands toward me. “Now, are you going to give this skating thing another try?”

I hesitated. Not because I was terrified of falling on the ice but because I was terrified I was falling for him. Every moment I spent with him, I could feel the protective barriers I’d erected around my heart slipping away.

It was impossible to resist him, and I reached out and took his hands once more. “Don’t let me fall,” I said.

“Never,” he replied.

He was skating backward, smiling at me as I glided after him. The longer he held me, the more I began to wonder if perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to fall after all.

We were halfway around the rink when the lights suddenly flicked off. I gasped and stumbled forward, but Reed’s strong arms wrapped around me. It was only dark for a moment before soft colored lights flared above, and gentle music started in the background.

I smiled at the way the lights reflected across the ice around us. It certainly felt romantic, and as I looked into Reed’s eyes again, my heart fluttered. His arms were gripping me tightly, and we were close enough now that I no longer felt unsteady on my feet. The pretty lights and music created the perfect backdrop for a kiss, but I had been wanting to kiss him well before this moment.

“Does the rink normally plunge into darkness on a Sunday morning?” I murmured to him.

“Only when the center manager spots a guy who needs serious help impressing a girl.”

“I don’t think you need much help with that...”

Our bodies seemed magnetized to one another, and I could feel us shifting closer, both unable to fight the pull. The anticipation that hung in the air created a beautifully perfect tension between us, and I didn’t think I could stop what was about to happen even if I tried. Reed lightly placed one hand on the side of my face, rubbing his thumb against my cheek. Gone were the jokes and the banter, and I felt exposed as I looked into his eyes. There was nothing fake about the way my heart pounded. I wanted Reed. And there wasn’t a single part of me that could deny it anymore. His eyes sparkled, and he smiled as he lowered his lips to mine. Our first kiss had been filled with fire, but this time it felt different. Perfect. The moment was ethereal, and as our lips met, it was as light and delicate as snowflakes caressing my skin. Each touch was gentle as if we were handling something precious. Something tenuous and new that could disappear if you looked at it too closely or held on to it too hard.

But a breath later, those tentative first kisses gave way to something deeper, more intense—a collision of desire and longing. As if we’d both been holding back these feelings for too long and they had swelled up into a storm that, once released, couldn’t be controlled. The heat of our breaths mingled in perfect harmony with the frosty air surrounding us. Reed kissed me like I was as essential to him as the air we breathed.

Sounds of chatter drifted over to us, and I heard someone shouting Reed’s name. He pulled away, and as I regained my breath, I realized there was a group of kids giggling as they watched us from the side of the rink. They were all dressed up in costumes and holding balloons. It looked like they were here for a birthday party. I guessed that explained the lights.

An elderly woman was glaring at us as she shooed us from the ice.

“Sorry, Deb! We were just leaving,” Reed shouted to her before gently guiding me from the rink. His cheeks were slightly hot from embarrassment, but he didn’t take his hands or eyes off me until I was safely off the ice.

“Apparently, I don’t have a fifty-year-old wingwoman,” Reed murmured.

“Apparently not,” I agreed with a laugh.

I was all too happy to remove my skates, but I immediately missed the feel of Reed's hand in mine and the warmth of having him hold me close.

Once my shoes were back on, I glanced at my phone and swore under my breath. "I need to get to work."

I hated the idea of racing off immediately after the moment we'd just shared, but I didn't have much of a choice. All I wanted right now was to kiss Reed again, but I was going to have to wait.

"When can I see you again?" he asked.

"Uh, tomorrow? I could meet you after you're done with training?"

"Perfect."

We both hesitated, unsure how to part. Did I go in for another kiss? A hug? Did we shake hands? There were a few kids still watching us from the ice and giggling, so a full-blown make-out session was most definitely out of the picture. But Reed quickly made the decision for us both and gently brushed a kiss against my cheek.

It reminded me of the first time he'd kissed me there on the day I'd laid out the rules of our fake relationship. Oh, how things had changed since then. And the simplest kiss now sent my heart and head spinning.

As I dashed from the ice rink, all I could think was how perfect this morning had been, how much I liked Reed, and how I'd well and truly gone and broken my golden rule.



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## VIOLET

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you got chased by the cops *and* made out with a Darling Devil this weekend. The most exciting thing I did was sit at home and watch a Minnesota Wild game with my dad," Mia complained as we made our way to the cafeteria for lunch on Monday. I'd told her about my kiss with Reed on Sunday night, and she hadn't stopped talking about it since.

"How is that fair?" she continued.

"Do you have to talk about it so loudly?" I hissed.

"Talk about what?" she replied with a wide grin and projected her voice even farther down the hallway. "Your steamy ice kiss with Reed freaking Darling?"

"Stop!" I gasped, slapping her on the arm.

"What's the problem? I'm surprised you're not shouting it from the rooftops yourself."

I shook my head at her. "Well, that would be a bit odd seeing as everyone is supposed to think we're in a relationship already. Plus, I'm more worried about people thinking I got chased by the cops. It was just some Saints players pulling a prank."

"True," she replied. "I'm impressed they had the balls to do it. Although I guess it's not that unusual."

"What do you mean?"

"Every season before the Saints and the Devils play each other, they try to psych the other team out and get in their heads," Mia explained. "Last year, some of our players snuck into Ransom High and covered the grounds in Saints posters and glued angel feathers all over their devil mascot."



“Angel feathers?”

“Well, it was supposed to look like an angel,” she clarified. “I’m assuming the feathers came from some unfortunate local chickens.”

“Wow.” I shook my head. “They take this hockey rival thing really seriously, don’t they?”

“It is serious!” Mia gasped. “The Devils got payback by padlocking every entrance to our ice rink so the team couldn’t practice the day before the game.”

“Okay, okay. So, when are they playing each other?”

“Uh, the game’s this weekend. You didn’t know?”

I shook my head. This was the first I’d heard about it. Given how hockey crazy everyone at school was, I must have been the only person completely oblivious to the fact the game was coming up. The strangest thing was that Reed hadn’t mentioned it once.

“So, tell me about the kiss again,” Mia said. “How steamy are we talking? I need details.”

“Oh my gosh, stop saying steamy. I’m not giving you details.”

“Come on. I haven’t kissed anyone in forever.”

“Nope.”

“At least tell me how Reed reacted when you guys kissed. I was the one who told you to do it, after all.”

Mia did make a valid argument. She’d convinced me that kissing Reed would help me find out whether he had feelings for me or not. In the end, he made it pretty clear even before we kissed. But I guessed I owed Mia some form of answer. “He reacted like it meant something to him,” I said. “Like it was real.”

“Why can’t I have something real?” She sighed dreamily in response. “Hell, I’d take something fake at this point.”

As we passed Mia’s locker, she decided she needed to stop and grab some lip balm. “So does all this mean you guys are done playing pretend?” she asked as she rummaged through her bag.

“Maybe.” My brow furrowed. “I’m not sure. We didn’t exactly get a chance to talk about it.”

“But you’ll talk about it when you meet up tonight, right? And make it official?”

“Uh, I don’t know, Mia.” I was surprised by how uncertain her question made me feel. I’d thought a lot about the kiss since Sunday morning, but

until now, I had avoided thinking about what it meant going forward. Was our fake relationship now over? Was that what Reed wanted? Was I really about to start dating another hockey player? These were all questions I didn't need to answer when I was living happily in a perfect post-kiss bubble.

"Right, I get it," she replied with a mischievous grin. "There won't be much *talking* when you see him tonight."

"You know that's not what I mean," I said. "But you're probably right. I do need to talk to him."

Mia seemed to sense the change in my mood because she reached out and rubbed my arm. "I don't think you have anything to worry about. You know he cares about you."

"I think so." I nodded. "That doesn't mean he wants a relationship with me."

"And what about you?" she said. "Are you sure you want one with him? You seemed pretty set on sticking to your no-jock rule after Jeremy..."

"I thought you wanted me to go for it."

"I'm just playing devil's advocate..."

I shook my head at her.

"Seriously, though," she continued. "You shouldn't feel like you have to rush into another relationship. I'm sure Reed would wait if that's what you wanted."

I fell silent as I considered what she said. I'd been so caught up in my feelings I hadn't really thought about whether I was rushing into things with Reed. Whether I was ready to break my own rule again and get into another relationship. But when I considered the alternative, the thought of not being with Reed, I felt a little empty inside.

"I want to be with him, Mia. I want to be with him for real."

Her face had been serious, but a wide smile suddenly lit up her features. "Good. Because I'm almost certain he wants the same thing."

When she finally found her lip balm, she closed her locker and skipped off toward the cafeteria. I had to jog to catch up with her.

"You're very invested in this," I said. "Reed and I, that is."

"Oh, I'm totally invested. I didn't do enough to help you avoid Jerkemy. And I think Reed might be good for you."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

I didn't have a chance to wonder if she was right because Mia's face scrunched with distaste. "Speaking of Jerkemy..."

I followed her line of vision to where my ex was lingering at the entrance to the cafeteria. When he spotted us coming toward him, he straightened and forced out a friendly smile. It was obvious he wanted to talk to me, but I could think of nothing worse. Ducking into the girls' bathroom felt like a far more appealing option.

"Cover for me?" I begged Mia.

"With pleasure," she replied.

I disappeared into the closest bathroom and released a relieved breath as I heard Mia loudly telling Jeremy he must have imagined seeing me with her. He'd tried to corner me a few times last week, and apparently, he was going to keep trying this week too. I'd been dodging him as best I could. Was Jeremy ever going to accept I'd moved on? Maybe he would now that I actually had.

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When I arrived at the ice arena for Reed's practice that evening, I couldn't tell if the goose bumps on my skin were from the cold or the nerves I was feeling at the thought of seeing him again. I was definitely anxious but also filled with excitement and anticipation all at once.

Only a day had passed since we'd kissed on the ice, but that day had stretched on like forever, and it had felt like tonight was never going to come. I wasn't exactly sure where we stood after our kiss. But I did know I was done with our fake relationship, and I was hopeful he was too.

I hurried across the parking lot, driven by both my desperation to see Reed and my desperation to get out of the cold. But just as I reached the front door to the arena, someone behind me grabbed the door handle, pulling it open for me. I was already so on edge and full of adrenaline that the gesture took me by surprise. My pulse quickened further still when I saw Jeremy propping the door open.

"After you," he said, waving me through the door. I glared at him for a second, not sure I wanted to accept even the smallest gesture of help from him, but then I took a breath and stepped through the entrance.

“Violet, hold on,” he called after me, but I ignored him and kept walking. At least, I tried to.

Jeremy grabbed my arm and yanked me to a stop. “Look, I know you don’t want to speak to me, but this is important.”

I ripped myself from his grasp. “I’ve got nothing to say to you, Jeremy.”

“Please, Violet. You need to hear this.”

“Now’s not a good time. I’m already running late.”

I started to walk away from him, but this time, I was stopped in my tracks by Jeremy’s voice. “He’s using you!”

He’d shouted it so loudly several people who were hanging out in the foyer glanced our way. It felt like I was always cold these days, but the chill his words sent down my spine caused my whole body to shiver.

I slowly turned to face him. I didn’t want to make a scene, especially when I knew Reed would soon be finished with practice and could show up any minute. Tonight wasn’t supposed to be about my ex, and I knew I should ignore him and just keep walking. But something made me hesitate, and there was a feeling in my gut that told me I should at least hear him out.

I glanced around to make sure we weren’t drawing any more attention and took a few steps toward him.

“What are you talking about?”

Jeremy tentatively edged closer to me as though he was worried a single wrong word might spook me. “Look, I know I messed up,” he said, readjusting the large bag slung over his shoulder. “And I know you hate me. But I still care about you, and I can’t sit by and do nothing anymore. Reed Darling is using you, Violet. He’s using you to get to me. To get in my head and throw me off my game.”

I sighed and shook my head. Was Jeremy so arrogant he thought this was all about him?

“My relationship with Reed has nothing to do with you.” I replied tightly. It might have started that way, but I liked to believe it didn’t anymore.

“Come on, Violet. Don’t you think it’s just a little convenient Reed suddenly decided to date the ex-girlfriend of his biggest rival?”

“Jeremy, stop...”

“And that he started going out with you right before we faced off on the ice in the biggest game of the season. You know we have a game against

each other this weekend, right?”

My stomach dipped because that was something I’d only learned today. Was this why Reed hadn’t mentioned it? Had he deliberately kept it from me?

Jeremy must have assumed my silence meant I didn’t know, so he continued. “Reed and I are playing each other this Saturday, Violet.” He repeated it a little softer this time as though he was gently trying to make it sink in. One part stuck with me in particular: the game was this Saturday.

That was the same Saturday as Reed’s winter formal. The final day of our fake relationship. I wanted to ignore Jeremy’s accusation, but a lump was forming in my throat. The fact my arrangement with Reed was due to end immediately after such a big game between him and Jeremy felt off.

“This game means a lot to everyone,” Jeremy added. “But it’s different for Reed. He will do *anything* to win.”

From the way he was looking at me, I knew he meant I was that *anything*. I drew my arms around myself, wishing I could just shut out what Jeremy was saying.

“Why would he do that?” The words rushed out of me. “Why would Reed go to such lengths to get an edge in a game of hockey?”

Jeremy’s lips twisted in a look of sympathy. “He hasn’t told you, has he?”

“Told me what?”

“That Reed and I used to be friends.”

“What?” His words bounced around in my mind, but no matter which way I considered them, I failed to believe they were true. Reed and Jeremy hated each other. I’d heard plenty of shocking things about Reed over the last few weeks, but somehow this was the least believable of them all. Everything else my ex was saying at least seemed plausible, but this was just a step too far.

Jeremy released a long, hard sigh. “It’s true. Ever since we were kids. We were inseparable on and off the ice.”

“But didn’t he break your nose a few years ago?”

“He did.” Jeremy nodded solemnly. “All because a girl he liked happened to pick me over him. Natalie and I got together in freshman year, and Reed couldn’t handle it. He tried to steal her away from me, but when he realized he couldn’t, he got his revenge another way. He’s been out to get me ever since.”

Silence hung between us. I didn't want to let Jeremy's words get to me, but I couldn't seem to shake the things he'd told me. "I-I don't believe you." I could barely get the words out.

"I'm telling the truth. Here, I'll show you..."

He took me by the arm and pulled me toward one of the trophy cases that lined the walls by the entrance. He walked straight up to the glass and pressed a finger firmly against it. There were countless awards, statues, and pictures in the cabinet, but Jeremy was pointing at a large wooden trophy that took pride of place on one shelf. Above it, there was a picture of a hockey team. The kids in the picture must have been around twelve at the time, and right in the center were Jeremy and Reed with their arms around each other's shoulders and wide grins on their faces.

Anyone who knew the pair would have recognized it as them immediately, but any doubts I might have had were quashed when I saw both their names listed at the bottom of the photo, side by side.

I quickly shook my head. "No, you can't have been friends. He would have told me."

"Like he told you about Natalie? And the game this weekend?"

Jeremy lifted a hand and gently rubbed my arm as I stood staring into the trophy cabinet in stunned silence. I wanted to deny everything he had said, but as I stared at a younger version of Reed, I wasn't sure I could. There was no denying what I saw in the photo. A clear bond between Jeremy and Reed.

"He wasn't always a Darling Devil," Jeremy murmured. "Once upon a time, he was very different. The day he broke my nose was the day everything changed..."

His words caused an involuntary shiver to run down my back. Jeremy must have taken my reaction as acceptance, and he sounded slightly more confident when he continued.

"I'm sorry, Violet, but you can't trust him. Everything Reed has said to you or done for you has all been to make you fall in love with him so he can get his revenge. He wants to destroy my game and steal my girl. He wants to take everything from me."

My mind started to spiral as I thought it over. If Jeremy was right, that meant everything about my relationship with Reed had been fake—even the parts I'd felt certain were real. Him going out of his way to help me with my car, inviting me to family dinner, and kissing me on the ice. Had Reed

been playing me since the moment we met? I wasn't sure what to believe or what to think. But I was staring at a photo of Jeremy and Reed together. A photo of something I thought was impossible. And all I could think as I looked at it was, maybe, I didn't know as much as I thought.

Was this why Reed had been so quick to agree to our arrangement? Because I wasn't the only one who had wanted Jeremy to pay. Because I was Reed's perfect revenge.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It's not true. I know it isn't." No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make myself sound convinced.

"I'm really sorry, Vi," Jeremy said, the look of sympathy returning to his face. "I wish it wasn't."

He walked off without another word, leaving me still staring at the photo that sparked a thousand questions and just as many doubts.

Jeremy had said that Reed Darling would do anything to win, and Reed had once told me something similar: that it was his job as captain to do whatever it took to guarantee victory. Could I really just be a tool to help Reed achieve that? A way to make Jeremy pay for a perceived wrong years ago? Was it possible that Reed only kissed me yesterday to make me foolishly believe this could be real?

I'd been coming here in the hopes of ending our fake relationship. I thought I was ready to take a risk and see what we could be when all the rules and restrictions were stripped away. But now I wasn't so sure.

There were so many questions churning through my mind, most of which I was afraid to have answered. This was exactly what I'd wanted to avoid and why I didn't want another relationship. But, more importantly, this was why I had my rule against dating jocks. Never trust boys with killer smiles and strong right arms, my mom had always told me. And run in the opposite direction if a guy's life revolved around a sport.

I didn't want Jeremy to be right, but deep down, a part of me already believed he was. Amid the haze of emotions and uncertainty that was clouding my mind, a single thought shone clearly. As much as my heart might resist, I knew I needed to put a stop to this before I got really hurt.





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## REED

“YOU NEED to stop smiling like that,” Grayson said. “It’s freaking people out.”

A few of the rookies who were sitting on a bench on the other side of the locker room were staring uneasily at me. To be fair, Grayson had a point. I’d been staring off into space with a wide grin on my face because training was finally over for the evening, and I was about to see Violet again.

“Yeah, dude,” Parker said from the other side of me. “It’s especially weird when most of the guys are only wearing towels...”

The smile quickly dropped from my face, and I thumped my younger brother.

“Hey,” Parker complained, rubbing his arm.

“Go find someone else to annoy.” I finished packing away my gear and threw my bag over my shoulder. “I’ll see you both at home later.”

“Have fun with *Violet*,” Parker crooned.

I shot him a scowl, but I couldn’t manage to keep it on my face for long. My chest felt like it was glowing with warmth as I left the locker room. And each step I took seemed to spread the heat further as my anticipation built. I knew it was early days and that Violet and I still hadn’t talked about what we were doing moving forward. But a kiss like that could only mean good things, right?

I expected to find Violet waiting for me by the ice, but as I walked past and found no sign of her, I decided to head for the front entrance. A few Sunshine Prep players were arriving for practice, and they all shot me cold and menacing scowls as we passed. The game this weekend was going to be

brutal, and I knew losing wasn't an option. My teammates and I wouldn't be able to show our faces around the rink again if we didn't beat the Saints.

I was nearing the foyer when I spotted Hoffman heading toward me. God, I hated him. Even the way he walked pissed me off. It was more of a strut than a walk. His chin was always lifted toward the ceiling, and he seemed to thrust his arms away from his body, as if he was trying to make himself appear bigger.

When he spotted me up ahead, he made a beeline for me. I was not in the mood for a confrontation with him. Especially when I was about to meet Violet. But I squared my shoulders as he approached. I had no idea what to expect out of him, but I had to be prepared for anything.

"Ready for our game on Saturday?" he asked with a smirk.

I gave him a cold stare in response, refusing to engage in his games. "What are you playing at, Hoffman?"

"Just being polite," he replied. "It's going to be a hard week for you when I win the game and my girl back."

"Good luck with that," I scoffed before shouldering past him.

There was an especially smarmy look on Hoffman's face I didn't like. That was hardly unusual though. The only thing I liked about Jeremy's face was his crooked nose.

I continued on my way to the foyer in search of Violet, and I smiled when I found her standing near one of the trophy cabinets. She looked lost in thought as she stared aimlessly through the glass. I hoped she hadn't been waiting for me too long.

"Hey, Sunshine," I said when I reached her.

"Hey," she murmured. When she turned from the glass to face me, her gaze stayed low, and I felt a pang of anxiety in my chest when her eyes didn't meet mine.

"Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah."

"You sure?"

"Yep."

Her downcast eyes and one-word answers told a different story though. She didn't seem okay at all. What could have upset her? Maybe it was because Jeremy was lurking around the arena.

"Has Jeremy been bothering you again?"

She shook her head.

“What then? It’s me, Violet. You can talk to me.”

A sick feeling swirled in my stomach as she continued to avoid my gaze. She was closed up, keeping her thoughts and feelings deep within herself, protecting them. Could she be having second thoughts about us? Had our kiss been too much for her? Was she regretting breaking all her rules? She’d had a day to consider it now, and perhaps she’d had a change of heart since then.

She drew in a breath. “So, you’re playing the Saints this weekend?”

It certainly wasn’t what I’d expected her to say, and I was still trying to figure out what was bothering her. It was probably another rumor. The game was the last thing I wanted to talk about right now, and it felt like she was just trying to distract me.

“Yeah, that’s right...” I replied with some caution.

“It sounds like it’s a big game.”

“The biggest.”

Her eyes drifted to the trophy cabinet beside us, and she traced her fingers across the glass as she spoke. “I guess it’s important that you win, then?”

“It’s important we win every game.” I was still watching her closely, trying to figure her out. “But you’re right. Losing really isn’t an option this Saturday. I’d do just about anything to win.”

“Anything?”

“Uh, almost. Anything legal, that is. You haven’t heard a rumor I threatened the refs or something, have you?”

“No,” she replied softly.

“That’s a relief.” I gave an uncomfortable laugh, unsure where this line of questioning had come from. “So, will you be able to make it?”

“I’m not sure,” she murmured, lowering her fingers from the glass.

Maybe she had to work. She always seemed to be scheduled at the coffee shop when I played. “Well, it might be a good game for you to come to if you can,” I suggested. “If you’re going to see me beat anyone, who better than your ex?”

Her eyes suddenly whipped up, and the pain and sorrow I saw there filled me with dread.

“What?” I asked her.

She gave a slight shake of her head, but I could see she was suffering. Her lips were tightly shut, and her shoulders were slumped. My mind raced

as I tried to figure out why she was reacting this way. All I'd done was ask her to come to my hockey game. What was so bad about that?

"I don't think I can do this anymore," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"This." She waved her hand between the two of us. "I never wanted to get involved with another hockey player. This was meant to be a simple, straightforward arrangement, but it's gotten out of hand."

Her words were like a dagger to my chest. This was exactly why I'd been so cautious about telling her how I felt. I knew she wasn't interested in dating another hockey player, but I'd stupidly opened up to her and kissed her, and now she was running scared.

"It's my fault," she continued. "I never should have started this thing with you in the first place."

The delicate threads holding us together were unraveling, and I didn't know how to keep them from falling apart.

"Violet, you know I'm not like these other guys that you're so wary of."

"Do I?" she replied.

Her words punched me in the gut, but I kept soldiering on, trying to fix whatever was broken between us.

"Yes, you do," I said, more firmly. "Because I'm not. I know I might have come on too strong, and I know that's scary after you've been hurt so badly. But can't you see that I will never do that to you. I'm nothing like Jeremy, and I'm nothing like your dad. Forget your rules. We're perfect for each other."

She was shaking her head, and while I could tell she was thinking a million things, she didn't say one of them out loud.

"Please, Violet, talk to me. I can't fix this if you don't talk to me."

"There's nothing to fix," she said. "I know our arrangement was meant to end this weekend, but I think it's best if we call it off now."

"I'm pretty sure our arrangement ended when we kissed yesterday," I replied. "Because everything became real."

"It's never been real, Reed. It can't have been."

"No, Violet. The truth is, it's never been fake. Not for me."

Her expression was torn, and evidence of her pain flashed across her face. With the way she was reacting and the vulnerability in her gaze, I knew for sure she had developed feelings for me as well. I thought—*hoped*—that she would finally believe what I was trying to tell her. But she

blinked, and a resolute look entered her eyes. “I wish I could believe you,” she whispered. “But I heard a rumor you couldn’t be trusted. And I think it might have been right.”

“Violet...”

“This is for the best,” she said. “I’m done pretending.”

She wrapped her arms around herself and pushed through the front entrance before heading out into the light snow that was drifting across the parking lot. She never once looked back, and with each step she took, my heart clenched tighter, like it was slowly being crushed by a vice.

I’d messed up. I knew Violet was scared of getting her heart broken again. I’d been through the same thing, and I’d been protecting myself in just the same way since freshman year. But I couldn’t resist telling her how I felt, and it had ruined everything. I usually knew just how to fix things. It was why I enjoyed working on cars. But our relationship wasn’t as simple as a broken engine. And, for once, I didn’t know what to do.



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## VIOLET

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER *than to fall for another hockey player*. I'd been beating myself up with that same thought all week. Athletes weren't like us normal people. They lived their lives like they were playing by a different set of rules and all that mattered was winning the game. *I should have known better.*

No matter how many times I repeated that phrase in my mind, I still jumped back and forth all week about whether I'd done the right thing in breaking things off with Reed. I didn't want to believe what Jeremy had told me, but I kept coming to the same conclusion. Our fake relationship was all too convenient, and the reasoning Jeremy gave made far too much sense.

His warnings about Reed reminded me exactly why I was so wary of jocks. To them, I would always come in second to their own pride and the game they loved so much. The allure of victory was always their ultimate motivation, and it blinded them to everything else. A relationship built on that was always going to end in disappointment and heartache.

Reed's words at the ice arena had also hit me hard. I'd already decided to end our relationship early, but the way he'd confirmed he'd do practically anything to win and then suggested I come to the game to watch him beat Jeremy had only solidified the decision in my mind. It made me feel like everything Jeremy had said was true. And it made the thought of dating another hockey player fill me with such a clawing sense of claustrophobia that I'd needed to get out of the arena, out of my fake relationship, and as far away from the feelings I had for Reed as possible.

Even if Reed did harbor some feelings for me too, we'd only known each other a few weeks. Could they really eclipse his hatred for my ex and his determination to defeat him in their upcoming game?

He'd tried to contact me constantly this week, but I'd ignored every call. I didn't know whether I could believe a single thing that came out of his mouth, and it felt much safer to keep my distance entirely. I couldn't risk seeing him or even hearing his voice because I knew it would test my resolve to the breaking point. I had to stay strong.

However, reminders of Reed followed me constantly at school. The game and the rivalry between the Devils and the Saints was all anyone talked about. By Friday, I was more aware than ever before of just how much this game meant to the team and everyone else at school. The corridors had been transformed with gold and white streamers hanging from every surface. And if I didn't already hate Jeremy's face enough, every wall was plastered with posters of the Saints players, and everywhere I went, there he was, leering back at me.

Even the teachers were excited for the game, some going so far as to wear golden outfits in support. Luke must have been the odd one out. He either forgot his school had such a big game coming up or he was wearing a red tie in protest. Reed had certainly made an impression on him, and I didn't have the heart to tell my uncle it had all been a big, fat lie.

When the school day ended on Friday, I was relieved to escape beyond the walls that were practically bursting with school spirit. Mia had a debate meet tonight, so I walked to my car alone once the final bell rang. As I reached Betty, I noticed a tall figure leaning against her. My heart skipped a beat when I realized it was a Darling Devil, just not the one I might have expected.

"Grayson?" I said as I approached him. "What are you doing here?"

He eased himself off my car as he straightened. Even though he was only slightly taller than Reed, it felt like he was towering over me. And despite the fact he was behind enemy lines, he held himself calmly and confidently. He was wearing his Ransom Devils sweats, making no effort to hide his identity from the many Sunshine Prep students who were walking past through the parking lot, either whispering about him or shooting him death glares. I wondered if he even noticed because he had no reaction. Maybe he was so used to being despised by people in Sunshine Hills that the negative attention just deflected straight off him.



“I’m here to talk about you and Reed,” he said.

“Well, I’m sorry you came all the way over here, but I’ve got nothing to say.”

Grayson was standing right in front of my driver’s side door, and while I knew he wouldn’t stop me from getting in the car, I didn’t exactly feel like moving him out the way. A small part of me was also intrigued by what he had come to say despite what I’d just told him.

“Reed’s a mess, Violet.”

“He is?” My chest clenched. Reed wasn’t the only one.

Grayson nodded. “He’s been a mess all week. I pretty much have to drag him out of bed to get him to school each morning. And he’s all over the place at training. I’m worried about him.”

My arms instinctively crossed over my chest, skepticism creeping into my thoughts. “Are you sure you’re not just worried about the game this weekend?”

Grayson frowned at me as though the concept that he would lie to me or try to trick me was completely foreign to him. “No, that’s not what I mean. Why would you say that?”

I hesitated before I answered. I didn’t want to discuss what Jeremy had told me with Grayson. He’d only deny it to protect his brother. But also, I still felt a little ashamed that my ex’s words had gotten to me so easily.

“I just know that the game is the most important thing to Reed right now.”

Grayson’s trademark frown was still creasing his forehead, but his expression somehow seemed softer. “Do you really believe that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

He shook his head, like he was disappointed in me. “Because if you knew Reed at all, you would know that’s bullshit,” he replied. “There’s plenty that matters more to him than the game. Like his family, his friends. And now, you.”

His answer cut me deeply, and I struggled to stop tears from welling in my eyes. I thought I knew Reed. I thought I might be one of the few people who actually saw the real him. But the doubt Jeremy had cast over our time together had made me question absolutely everything.

“Look, Violet,” Grayson continued. “I don’t know what you’re feeling, and I’m sure you have your reasons for not being with Reed. But I do know

how he's feeling. He cares about you. He has done since the first time he saw you kicking your car."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he told me. I've known about the fake relationship from the start, and the only reason he agreed to that was because he liked you. Because he knew about your stance on hockey players, and he thought this deal was his only chance at spending time with you."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off.

"I tried to convince him to tell you the truth, but he wouldn't. He was worried if he came on too strong he'd scare you away, and it seems that's exactly what's happened."

His stare was penetrating, cutting through all the excuses I'd used to convince myself Reed was a bad idea like a razor-sharp knife. Grayson was right. I was scared. But I wasn't running away because Reed had come on too strong like he suggested. I was terrified because *my* feelings for Reed were too strong, and I couldn't risk repeating past mistakes. I'd been screwed over by a hockey player before, and the risk that was going to happen again felt too great. So, yes, I'd fled at the first sign of trouble. But that didn't mean it wasn't the right decision. Not when, despite Grayson's attempts at reassuring me, I still harbored lingering doubts about what Reed's true intentions were.

"I'm sorry, Grayson," I whispered. "It's just not going to work out. But, good luck with your game tomorrow."

He nodded as though he had nothing left to say. "I'm sorry, too." He shrugged. "Just think about what I've said. So many people see the worst in Reed, but I didn't think you were one of them."

He turned and made his way back to his truck. I stayed rooted to the spot until he'd pulled out of the parking lot and disappeared around the corner. His parting words had caused a lump to form in my throat. I'd thought the same. That I'd never let myself get swayed by the wild rumors and gossip that constantly followed Reed around. I'd never been put off by his reputation. Until now.

If I'd been confused and upset before, my conversation with Grayson had only made it worse. But like he said himself, he didn't know what I was feeling, and I did have reasons for not wanting to be with Reed. But with every day that passed, those reasons were becoming harder and harder to justify. For all I knew though, Grayson just wanted me to come to their

game so Reed could shake off whatever was distracting him and play well enough to beat Jeremy and the Saints. Either way, I wasn't going to be there to find out.

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"You're really not coming?" Mia asked. She was waiting by the counter at Hug in a Mug, dressed in warm clothes with her bright school scarf looped around her neck.

"I know you hate them both," she said. "And you probably hope the ice rink melts, their sticks break, and they are cursed by a bad case of jock itch. But this is the biggest game of the season. Everyone from school will be there..."

"Jock itch, really?" I smirked.

"It was either that or crabs." She leaned against the counter, adjusting her bag across her shoulder. "Would it really be that bad to come to the game?"

"Yeah, it really would," I said. "Besides, can't you see I'm working?"

She lifted an eyebrow as she surveyed the clean countertops, the freshly swept floors, and the empty café. Even the coffee machine was sparkling clean as it had barely been used today. "There's no one here, Vi. The whole town's at the game, and the weather's so terrible I doubt you're going to get customers anytime soon. I'm sure Nicole can cover for you."

"I totally can," Nicole called out from the storeroom.

I still couldn't bring myself to contemplate it. I was trying to avoid the feelings that bubbled up inside me whenever I thought about Reed, so watching him play hockey certainly wasn't going to help with that. "I think you should come," Mia said. "I still refuse to believe Reed didn't have real feelings for you."

"I told you about his history with Jeremy..."

"Yeah, but does that really matter? You were using him to get to Jeremy too, if I recall."

"And I was totally up front about that," I murmured. "Why did he keep all this stuff from me?"

She shrugged. "I can't answer that, Vi. But it's not like he went out of his way to pursue you and trick you into dating him. You were the one who

kissed him at the bonfire. The poor guy was just standing there minding his own business, and bam, your tongue was down his throat.”

“Mia,” I groaned. “You’re not helping.”

She let out a sigh and seemed to relax a little. “I’m just trying to make you realize that things between you and Reed aren’t as black-and-white as you think. Does it really matter why you both got into this fake relationship at the start if the feelings at the end were real?”

I knew she was talking sense, but I wasn’t in a very rational place right now. Maybe Reed had developed feelings for me over time, like I had for him, but that still didn’t explain why he was keeping so much from me. Jeremy’s story seemed to fill in those gaps.

Mia looked like she wanted to continue trying to convince me, but she could probably see how drained I was and thought better of it.

“I don’t have to go to the game,” she said, sympathy in her expression. “Do you want me to stay here?”

“And ruin your date with Grant? I don’t think so.”

She gave me a small smile. He’d finally asked her out. It might have only been to see a hockey game together, but I knew she was over the moon.

“Do I look okay?” she asked.

“Gorgeous,” I replied. “And you’re not even wearing your first-base outfit.”

She folded her arms and raised an eyebrow at me. “Uh, only because you ruined its magic by not kissing Reed that night. I’m still angry at you about that, by the way.”

“I kissed him the next day.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find another piece of lucky clothing to replace it.”

“Oh, I have,” she replied. “I’m wearing my lucky lingerie.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

Mia laughed at my shocked expression. “Head out of the gutter, Vi. I didn’t say my *get lucky* lingerie.” She shook her head. “I was wearing this bra when Grant asked me out. I’m sure he’ll ask me on a second date since I’m wearing it today.”

“I’m sure he will too.”

She laughed once more, but as she glanced up at the clock, she swore. “I’m going to be late. Are you sure you don’t mind if I take your car?”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I’m using it.”

“Thanks. I owe you.” She rushed over to give me a hug. “I’ll text you updates about the game and boo whenever Reed or Jeremy have the puck.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Sure, I do.” She smiled. “I’ll see you later.”

And then she was gone. The café felt so much emptier without her in it, and I really wished we had some more customers to take my mind off Reed and the game. Nicole was doing inventory out back, so I couldn’t even chat with her to fill the silence. That left me alone with the many thoughts I was trying my best to avoid.

I decided to wipe down all the tables again to pass the time. And once that was done, I went over the chairs and menus too. I was interrupted by just one brave customer who had ventured out in the storm for a cup of coffee. They must have been the only person within a twenty-mile radius not at the hockey game. But serving them was a nice distraction, and I was relieved that all they wanted to talk about was the weather. Once they left, the silence returned, so I decided to clean and organize the storage shelves. This place was going to be sparkling before my shift was over.

When the bell above the front door chimed, I turned, hoping to see another customer, but I was surprised to find Paige bursting into the café.

“Paige?” I gasped. “What are you doing?” The big game had already started. Surely, she should be at the arena watching Grayson and the other Darling boys play.

“What am *I* doing?” she said through panted breaths. “The more important question is, what are *you* doing?”

“Uh, I’m working.”

“Obviously,” she said. “But why aren’t you at the game?”

“Uh...” I was still getting over the shock of seeing her here. “Because Reed and I aren’t together anymore.”

“Yes, I heard. But he’s playing terribly, and I know it’s because you guys broke up. I don’t know what happened, no one will tell me, but I’m guessing he messed up somehow. Is there any way you can forgive him? I think he needs you there.”

I paused as I considered the best way to answer. I wasn’t sure how much Paige knew about my arrangement with Reed, but at this point there was no point in hiding the truth.

“There’s nothing to forgive. Reed and I were never really in a relationship, Paige.”

The way her eyebrows pulled together in a confused frown told me she’d been completely in the dark about our deal. “What do you mean?”

“We were only pretending to date.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Well, you might think it sounds ridiculous, but I needed to show my ex I’d moved on, so Reed agreed to help. And Reed...” I hesitated as the words stuck in my throat. “He had his reasons too.”

“Which were?” Paige prompted.

I didn’t know anymore. Reed had originally said it was to keep his adoring female fans off his back, Jeremy had told me it was for revenge, and just yesterday, Grayson said it was because Reed had liked me all along. I knew which one I wanted to believe, but that wasn’t the one I thought was genuine.

“My ex is the captain of the Sunshine Prep Saints, Jeremy Hoffman,” I said “Reed never mentioned it, but I recently found out he and Jeremy have a nasty history. I thought Reed was pretending to date me to ward off other girls, so he could concentrate on hockey, but I now know the real reason was to get back at Jeremy.”

Paige’s expression shifted back and forth between confusion and thoughtfulness as I spoke.

“Get back at him for what?”

“I guess Reed and Jeremy both liked the same girl a while back, but she chose Jeremy.”

Paige shook her head and then let out a hushed laugh. “Are you talking about what happened with Natalie?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s not the way it went down,” she said, softly smiling at me.

“It isn’t?”

“No, not at all.” She leaned forward on the counter and placed her hands on mine. “Reed and Natalie started dating in freshman year. Reed was totally head over heels for her. It was really cute.” She laughed again at the memory, but then her face fell.

“It didn’t take long before Jeremy got jealous,” she continued. “I don’t know why. Maybe he didn’t like sharing his best friend. Maybe he

genuinely liked Natalie. Or maybe the friendly competition on the ice that had been the basis of their friendship for years finally boiled over.”

She was watching me closely as she spoke, like she was trying to gauge my reaction. I kept my face as neutral as possible, but my heart was beating at a record pace, and my mind was racing even faster.

“If you ask me,” Paige said with a shake of her head. “Jeremy’s just a dick. But whatever the reason, he went after Natalie. They ended up getting together behind Reed’s back, and he didn’t find out for months. Reed was heartbroken when he eventually caught them.”

I was struggling to keep my emotions under wraps. This wasn’t the story Jeremy had told me at all. Of course, he was actually the bad guy in this situation. Deep down, I’d known he was just saying those things to get to me, but I’d let them wedge their way under my skin. I’d been too scared to take a leap of faith with Reed, so I’d welcomed Jeremy’s attempts to clip my wings. There was still one thing that didn’t sit right with me though.

“If that’s true, why didn’t Reed just tell me?”

Paige rolled her eyes. “I *tried* to get him to,” she said. “But he never talks about it with anyone. He really changed after what Jeremy and Natalie did to him. He shut almost everyone out and threw every piece of himself into hockey. The Darling Devil rumors started to build up, and he embraced them, claiming it was good for his reputation on the ice. But really, he was just hiding the real Reed Darling from the world so he wouldn’t suffer similar heartache again. That was until he met you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve watched him come to life again these last few weeks, and I know it was because of you, Violet. Despite all the walls he puts up, you somehow got through to him, and he fell for you.”

As she spoke, my throat constricted, and a mix of conflicting emotions flooded my chest. It tore me up to learn Reed had experienced a similar heartache to me. But it felt even worse to know that while Reed had put his heart on the line and told me how he felt I’d been too scared to do the same. My instincts had urged me to flee at the first sign of danger, and I hadn’t been brave enough to stick around when there was even the slightest chance what Jeremy told me was true. And I’d foolishly believed this game was more important to Reed than I was.

“Whatever was going on with this fake relationship,” Paige continued. “I don’t buy it. I think you’ve fallen for him too.”

I knew I couldn't deny my feelings any longer. They were growing and swelling inside of me, bursting out of the box I'd desperately tried to lock them in, as if they had a life of their own.

"Everything I felt for him was real," I whispered.

Paige's face lit up with a warm smile. "Then what are you waiting around here for?"

I hesitated. I felt like a baby bird standing at the edge of a precipice, trying to decide whether fear would hold me back or I would jump and try to fly.

"Trust me, Violet. Reed would never hurt you. Just give him a chance, and I know he'll prove that to you."

She bit her lower lip as I thought over what she'd said. Paige was right. After what she'd told me today, the least I could do was give Reed a chance. If he genuinely returned my feelings and he ended up losing his big game because I allowed my fear of being hurt to hold me back, then I would never forgive myself.

I refused to be scared anymore, and I felt my resolve strengthen within me. "Do you think we can still make the game?"

"Yes." Paige clapped her hands together with excitement. "If we leave now, we can get there for the final period."

I glanced over my shoulder, surprised to find Nicole had emerged from the storeroom and was leaning against the door frame.

"Go," she said as she caught my gaze. "Go get your guy."

I shot her a grin before I turned to Paige. "Any chance I could get a ride?"





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## REED

MY MIND WASN'T FOCUSED on hockey as we hit the ice for our game against Sunshine Prep. I'd always been so good at compartmentalizing any distractions and ignoring whatever was happening in my life away from the rink. But today was different because hockey was the whole reason Violet had ended things with me.

It didn't help that we were playing her ex-boyfriend today. Just the way Hoffman puffed his chest out as he skated only a few feet from me was enough to spike the hot adrenaline that was already pulsing through my blood.

"Don't do anything stupid," Grayson warned as we were warming up.

I was scowling across the ice at Hoffman, so it wasn't hard to tell where my head was at.

"I hate that guy."

"I know," Grayson replied. "I do too, but don't let your anger get the better of you today. I know you'd like nothing more than to smash his nose again, but let's make him suffer where it's going to hurt the most. Let's just win the game."

I nodded, knowing my brother was right. As much as I might hate the very ice Hoffman skated on, I wouldn't be doing myself any favors if I allowed resentment to cloud my mind. I'd paid the price for that once before, and the consequences would be far worse if I made the same mistake twice. The Ryker Raiders wouldn't be happy if I got suspended again, and I refused to have my college career derailed by anyone, let alone Jeremy Hoffman. If I wanted to wipe that smarmy smirk off his stupid face,

the best course of action was to channel my anger into helping my team beat the Saints fair and square.

"I'm just glad hockey's a contact sport," I muttered as Grayson skated away.

I imagined Hoffman was thinking the same thing because he caught my eye across the ice and grinned. Yeah, this game wasn't going to be pretty at all.

Unfortunately, as much as I tried, I couldn't seem to harness my anger and redirect it into my warm-up. I was still tired and distracted, and no amount of visualizing myself checking Jeremy to the floor and scoring the winning goal could focus my mind. My muscles refused to cooperate as if they too were giving in to the agitation coursing through my body. I was making silly mistakes, letting my mind drift at key moments, and forgetting where on the ice I needed to be. Given the concerned looks Grayson kept sending me, I knew my poor performance wasn't going unnoticed. The game hadn't even started, and I was already acting like a total rookie.

"You've got this, don't you?" my brother asked as we went to join the rest of the team for our pregame pep talk.

"I'm fine."

"You're not acting fine."

"Well, I am." I glanced up at the crowd. It was stupid to think Violet might come after everything that had happened. But a part of me still stupidly hoped she showed. She hadn't texted me back all week, and she'd dodged all of my calls. I considered showing up at her doorstep and begging her to reconsider, but I knew it was my over eagerness that had scared her away in the first place. I had no idea how to win her back. Maybe there was no way. All I did know was that standing here on the ice didn't give me the same rush as usual because I knew it was part of the reason we weren't together.

"You know she's not coming," Grayson said.

"I know."

"And even if she were here, you're not together anymore."

"I know."

"This is *the* most important game of the season. No one will stop us from winning the division if we beat Sunshine Prep. Not to mention, there could be scouts watching. And do I have to remind you that this is the Saints we're playing. We *can't* let them win."

*“I know.”*

Grayson fell quiet as Coach Ray called for everyone’s attention, but I could see my brother’s focus wasn’t on Ray’s words. He continued to shoot me worried looks, and I knew I hadn’t done much to convince him I was okay. I’d never gone into a game with such a lack of focus before, and I needed to get my head in the right space fast because the first face-off was just a few minutes away.

Once Coach Ray had said his piece, we returned to the ice for the game. The division of red and gold in the stands couldn’t have been more obvious as I scanned the crowd. The rivalry between our teams was clear for all to see, and Grayson’s words rang in my ears. I knew how important this game was to everyone around me.

But as the first period got underway, I was still struggling to focus, and I was playing even worse than I had been in the warm-up. I fumbled the puck, my passes were off, and I ended up on my ass more times in the first few minutes than I usually did in entire games. It was a good thing the rest of my team was on point, because, right now, I was letting everyone down. Still, despite the urgent issue of my embarrassingly bad performance, I still found myself regularly glancing at the spectators, hoping to see a flash of red hair.

Parker scored a goal within the first ten minutes, and Matt added another before the first break. In the second period, the Saints improved significantly. My teammates were getting tired, probably from carrying me the entire first period, and Sunshine Prep scored two goals of their own, leaving the game tied. My shocking performance was summed up in the dying seconds of the period when I accidentally passed the puck directly to Jeremy, giving him a free chance at a goal. He easily fired a shot past our goalie, putting Sunshine Prep ahead by one. As the siren blared around me and Saints players and fans celebrated, I could almost hear the collective groan of my teammates. We were losing, with one period to go, and it was all because of me.

My shoulders were hunched, and my head hung low as we skated from the ice at the end of the period, disappointment weighing heavily on me. This was the worst I’d played in a long time. I was letting myself down, my team down, and my school down. And I was already bracing myself for the grueling run that I would put myself through as punishment when the game was over.

“What the hell is going on out there?” Coach Ray demanded, falling into step beside me as I made my way to the locker room. There was a mix of concern, frustration, and disbelief in his hard eyes as he waited for my response.

I couldn’t give him a good answer, so I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You’ve been having the best season of your life until today. What’s changed?”

*Everything* had changed. But this wasn’t exactly the right time to delve into my relationship troubles, and Coach Ray was not the right person to do it with, so I remained silent.

“Look, Reed.” He put a firm hand on my shoulder and gripped it tightly. “I know you have a history with this team and their captain. But you can’t let it distract you. We need you at your best out there.”

“I know,” I grumbled. “I’ll try.” I was already trying as hard as I could. I just didn’t seem capable of my best today. But I had no choice other than to keep going.

“You’re our captain,” he finished. “Don’t let us down.”

As we returned to the ice for the third period, I wasn’t feeling any different. The “do better” lecture I’d received hadn’t sparked a fire in me like I was sure Coach was hoping, and even his dramatic team-rallying cry in the locker room hadn’t psyched me up. I took a few deep breaths and tried to calm my pounding heart and relax my chest as I skated to center ice. My team needed me to sort myself out. All I had to do was hold it together for twenty minutes. I could fall apart again after the game.

I repeated that mantra over and over in my head, and just when I started to think it might be working, one of the Saints players knocked his shoulder into mine.

“Watch it,” I growled. Of course, it was Hoffman.

“You’ve been terrible today,” he said with a smirk.

“You’re only up by one goal.”

“Yeah, because of you.” He laughed. “Thanks for passing me the puck by the way. Easiest goal I’ve ever scored. I’m surprised your teammates didn’t leave you in the locker room for the third period.”

“You wish.”

“What’s up with you today, anyway,” he continued. “I hope there’s not something wrong with you and Violet?” He lifted his head to glance around

at the cheering crowd. "I haven't seen her up in the stands. Is there trouble in paradise?"

I knew he was baiting me, but I was still struggling to keep my cool.

"Don't talk about Violet."

"Aw, don't be like that." Hoffman's eyes lit with glee. "I'm just worried about her is all. She looked so upset when I spoke to her the other day."

I narrowed my eyes on him. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, just the little chat I had with Violet on Monday before practice. I thought it was time someone told her why you're really dating her."

Monday before practice? That was exactly when Violet had ended things with me. "What did you say to her, Hoffman?"

"I told her you're clearly just out for revenge, like you have been ever since Natalie picked me over you."

"That's not what happened, and you know it."

"Isn't it?" He smirked. "Well, that's what I told Violet."

"So, you lied."

He shrugged. "I don't think the finer details really mattered to Violet. Not when she realized that your obsession for revenge had led you to go after the one thing—the one person—that would get to me the most. *Her*."

"That's not true."

"That's not what Violet thinks. No, she thinks these last few weeks have all been about one thing for you—throwing me off my game so you can win today."

I had no idea how I didn't lay him out right there. My vision blurred with a red haze. The amount of anger radiating through my body right now couldn't possibly be healthy. After Violet ended our fake relationship, I was convinced it was because I'd come on too strong. When I'd revealed my feelings to her and kissed her on the ice, the connection between us had been unlike anything I'd ever experienced, and I thought that had sent her running scared. But it seemed Jeremy was the one to push her over the edge by telling her I was exactly the kind of guy she wanted nothing to do with—a hockey-obsessed jerk who only cared about the game.

Jeremy seemed to realize how much he was getting to me because he started to smile.

"I don't need to date a girl to beat you, Hoffman," I said.

"Perhaps not," he agreed. "But she did seem quite convinced when we spoke. It kind of makes me feel like I've won today no matter the result..."

Hoffman waited a moment, as if he were hoping I'd lose my cool. He seemed disappointed when I didn't react. Clearly, he'd been doing his best to get me banned for the rest of the game—if not the season. I was angry, but I wasn't stupid.

"It doesn't matter what you said, Hoffman. I'm still going to win both the girl and the game today." Based on the way I'd been playing and everything he'd just told me, that was going to be easier said than done. I just desperately wanted to wipe the self-satisfied look from his face. However, my remark only seemed to fuel it.

"Except you can't win both." Jeremy couldn't have sounded more delighted. "If you beat me, you'll only prove to Violet I was right. She'll know for sure you only care about the game, and you'll lose her for good."

"It's not as simple as that."

"Isn't it?" He was far too pleased with himself as he skated away from me to take his position at center ice for the face-off.

Normally, anger and rage only fueled my performance on the ice, but I could feel the seed of doubt Hoffman had planted growing into something ugly beneath my skin. He was just trying to get in my head. I knew that. I only wished it wasn't working. Would I really lose Violet forever if we beat the Saints today?

Now I knew what Hoffman had told Violet, surely, I could just go to her after the game and talk to her. Regardless of whether we won or lost, I'd just tell her that everything she'd heard from her lying ex-boyfriend was false. But what if that wasn't enough? I'd tried to talk to her the day she'd ended things with me, and she hadn't listened. And she'd been avoiding me all week. There had to be a way for me to show her that she was the most important thing to me. Not hockey, not petty rivalries. Only her.

As I slid into position opposite Jeremy, a sudden burst of awareness tingled the back of my neck. I looked up into the stands, and my eyes were immediately drawn to Violet.

My heart stopped beating. It was as if she were the only one in the crowded stands.

She was here. She had come. And as I stared into her bright blue eyes, I knew what I had to do, how to show her what she meant to me. If there was a choice between winning the game or the girl, she needed to know I'd choose her every time.

Even if it spelled the end of the Darling Devils.

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## VIOLET

THE ATMOSPHERE at the arena was palpable as we arrived. It was frenzied and fractious, and I had a feeling the excited cheers coming from the crowd could morph into fury and frustration at any second. The stands were overflowing with people, and the red and gold colors of our two schools clashed together like waves fighting to get to the shore first. The rivalry between the teams was fiercer than ever, and I imagined it was only adding to the intensity of the game.

As Paige and I ascended the stairs to find a seat in the stands, we heard a shout.

“Thank God, you’re back!” Cammie was standing a few steps ahead of us, and she quickly rushed down them to meet us. “Took you long enough,” she said to Paige. “He’s still playing terribly, by the way.”

“Hopefully not for much longer...” Paige said, giving me an encouraging smile.

Cammie also turned her attention to me, but I didn’t receive a warm welcome like Paige. Instead, Cammie punched me in the arm. “What the hell? Why’d you break up with Reed?”

“Uh, ouch!” I rubbed the tender spot where she’d thumped me. Cammie was stronger than she looked. “It’s a long story.”

“Well, I hope you’ve come to your senses,” she replied. “Reed can be an idiot, but he really likes you.”

I gave her a tight smile, unsure how to respond. Thankfully, the players started making their way back onto the ice, distracting her.

“Reed better get his act together. He’s been playing like total crap.”

“He has?”

“Yeah, and the Devils are losing three to two. The third period is just about to start, so it’s not over yet, but if they don’t do something quick, they’re going to lose to Sunshine Prep for the first time in forever.”

I followed Cammie’s gaze down to the rink just as Reed appeared on the ice. It was never difficult to spot Reed. Even among a crowd of guys in the same uniform, he stood out because of his sheer size and stature. But something seemed off today. Whenever I saw him in public, he usually radiated a sense of power and confidence. And both times I’d seen him skate, he had displayed effortless skill and grace, probably a result of the figure skating lessons he was so embarrassed about. But, right now, his shoulders were slumped, and his head was bowed low. He looked far from confident.

I watched as Jeremy skated past him and purposefully knocked his shoulder into Reed’s. I sucked in a breath as Reed spun to face him. The two of them started talking, and with every word Jeremy spoke, Reed seemed to grow even more uncomfortable. I could almost see his hands clenching tighter around his hockey stick. It looked like it was taking everything in him not to lash out with his fists.

By some miracle, they didn’t come to blows, and after what felt like an eternity, Jeremy turned away from Reed and skated to the center of the ice rink. A few moments later, Reed followed after him, taking up a position directly opposite his rival.

“It’s Jeremy against Reed in the face-off to start the final period,” Cammie said, practically rubbing her hands together in anticipation. “If this doesn’t wake Reed up, I don’t know what will.”

My stomach tensed at her words. The animosity between the Devils and Saints was clear to see on the ice and in the stands. But the rivalry between these two guys was a different level entirely. I just hoped Reed was capable of getting through the rest of the game without injuring Jeremy again.

But then something shifted in Reed’s stance, and he slowly lifted his eyes to the stands. He found me straightaway. The arena was packed, but it felt like I was the only one he could see. A weight seemed to lift from his shoulders as we locked eyes, the corner of his mouth twitched, and a look of determination entered his gaze before he turned to face Jeremy once more.

My breath caught in my throat as Reed dropped his stick, threw his gloves down on the ground, and peeled his helmet from his head.

“Oh no, I think they’re going to fight,” Paige said, her voice laced with panic and concern.

Jeremy stood tall opposite Reed, but it looked like he was recoiling slightly, and my chest filled with dread. Was Paige right?

Some fans a few rows back began cheering at the top of their lungs. “Fight! Fight! Fight!” It was the same group of shirtless guys I’d seen the first time I’d watched Reed play when I accidentally attended one of his games. Their shirts were missing today too, and the number twenty-three was once again painted over their chests. There was an excited look in their eyes and they were clearly desperate for the boys to fight.

“Reed’s not that stupid, is he?” Cammie said, a look of genuine concern in her eyes as she glanced at me. “If he lays one hand on Hoffman, he can kiss college hockey goodbye. They’ll think he hasn’t learned from his mistake in freshman year.” As she returned her focus to the ice, she started yelling. “He’s not worth it, Reed. Just play the game!”

All I could think was that Reed had broken Jeremy’s nose once before because of a girl. And, now, because of me, he was going to make that same mistake again.

But the determined look in Reed’s eyes hadn’t dampened, and as he took a step toward Jeremy, Paige reached out and grabbed my hand. Even Jeremy seemed to flinch, but then Reed paused. He lowered one knee to the ice as if he were giving a dramatic bow.

The whole arena went silent. Even Reed’s superfans behind me stopped chanting. It was like the entire world was holding its breath.

Then Reed started moving.

He swooped one leg around him as he rose and began gracefully gliding backward, the sound of his blades slicing through the ice filling the silent and shocked arena. The players and umpires had all stopped to watch him. And everyone was either confused or shocked as he began effortlessly weaving around the outskirts of the rink, his arms wide and his jersey billowing from the speed. Then Reed leaped into the air, spun in a complete circle, and landed perfectly on one skate. It was the same jump he’d shown me last weekend. The one that most definitely wasn’t a hockey maneuver.

The entire arena gasped, and I heard one of Reed’s superfans mutter behind me: “What the hell was that?”

“What is he doing?” Paige squealed as Reed continued to glide around the ice, lifting one leg in the air behind him. He wobbled slightly, like this

move was even more challenging than the last, but he still pulled it off.

“Oh my god.” I lifted a hand to my mouth in surprise. “It’s the routine.” I turned to Cammie. “He’s doing your routine.” I didn’t know whether to cringe, cry, or laugh. Reed looked ridiculous doing the figure skating maneuvers in his hockey gear, but he was such an incredible skater that he somehow made it work.

“What?” Cammie grabbed my arm but kept her eyes on Reed, and realization slowly dawned in them. “No!” she protested, lifting her hands to cover her eyes. “Why would he do that? This is so embarrassing. I’m never going to be able to show my face at school again.”

“Doesn’t he care about the game?” Paige asked.

“I think...” I hesitated, unsure if I was confident enough to voice my thoughts out loud or confident enough to believe it was true. “I think it’s for me,” I said, the words almost a whisper. “He’s showing me that I’m more important than the game.”

“Well, can’t he just tell you that?” Cammie replied before she started shouting at the ice. “Reed, stop! Go back and fight Hoffman now, or I’ll break *your* nose!”

But Reed was never one for half measures, and he didn’t let up. He landed another spin, and this time, instead of shocked silence, people started clapping. As he performed his next move, more spectators joined in the applause. Even the shirtless Devils fans started whistling and shouting their approval, and before I knew it, every person in our section of the arena was on their feet cheering for Reed.

Music began to blare from the speakers surrounding the rink, which only hyped up the crowd even more and spurred Reed on. Finally, the umpires shook themselves into action, and they shot across the ice toward him. But Reed was too fast and too skilled. He easily dodged around them, keeping well out of their reach as he continued twirling and leaping through the air. A few of his teammates seemed to be lending a helping hand by shifting just at the right moment to block the umpires from getting to their captain.

As Reed’s routine came to a close and he fell down onto his knees, the crowd went wild. Even the Saints supporters were clapping. Reed finally looked up, his eyes met mine, and he blew me a kiss. In that moment, I knew beyond doubt that all of it was for me, and it felt like my heart exploded. There was a nervous smile on his lips, and he didn’t seem the

least bit worried about the game or what the routine might have done to his infamous reputation. He had sacrificed it all for me.

One of the umpires finally grabbed him by the arm and began directing him toward the penalty box. Reed waved and bowed to the crowd as he went.

“I have to talk to him,” I said. I could feel my heart pounding against my chest, a mix of worry and guilt swirling within me. Had he messed up the entire game for his team with that performance? Was he even going to bother playing once he was let back on the ice? I refused to let him lose this game because of me. I was here because Paige had insisted he needed my support to be at his best. But my presence only seemed to be doing the opposite.

“Go,” Paige insisted. “You better hurry. He might not be in the box for long.”

I nodded, but just as I was about to make my way to the stairs, I paused. “I’m just missing one thing.”

I turned to face the shirtless Devils fans in the row behind us and reached past one of them to grab the red hockey jersey off the back of his seat. “Mind if I borrow this?”

He shrugged before nodding his approval. I held it up and smiled when I saw the name and number on the back: Darling, number twenty-three. Reed had just tried to prove hockey wasn’t the most important thing to him. I needed to show him that if it mattered to him, it mattered to me.

I threw the jersey over my head before I raced down the bleachers and around the rink until I was directly behind the penalty box where Reed was sitting.

When I reached it, I threw my fists against the Perspex separating us.

“What the hell was that?” I yelled.

Reed’s eyes looked worried as he turned, but the moment he saw me in his jersey, a smile spread across his face. “You wearing my number, Sunshine?”

“Maybe.”

He came over and pressed his hands against the glass between us. “It looks good on you. Does this mean you’re a hockey fan now?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Uh, I don’t think that was hockey I was just watching. What were you doing out there?”

A cheer went up from the crowd, but it was followed by a groan as a Saints player shot wide of the goal. The game had started again, and with Reed off the ice, the Devils were a player down, and the Saints appeared to be taking full advantage.

“I heard what Jeremy told you,” Reed said. “None of it is true, but there was no way I was going to let him come between us, so I had no other choice...”

“But to show everyone the routine?”

He nodded.

“You said you’d never let anyone see it. That it would destroy your reputation and you’d have to be out of your mind to embarrass yourself like that.”

“Maybe I have lost my mind.” He grinned. “But I don’t care. I don’t care about any of that. All I care about is you, Violet. I just needed to let you know, that nothing is more important than you. Especially not this game.”

“I believe you.” His smile slowly grew as I spoke. “But I’m not letting you lose today because of me. You need to go back out there and win.”

Reed looked ready to argue. “But—”

“I told you I believe you,” I said softly. “I know you wouldn’t use me just to win this game and get back at Jeremy. You were right. I was scared of being hurt again, and I ran. But I don’t want to be scared anymore. Not if it means I can’t be with you.”

“You want to be with me?”

I glanced down at the Devils jersey I was wearing, before looking back up into his eyes. “That night at the bonfire, I told Jeremy I’d finally found a guy whose jersey I wanted to wear. I didn’t know it then, but that wasn’t a lie. I want to be with you Reed. For real.”

His face lit in such a large, beaming smile I couldn’t help but return it.

“But only if you win the game,” I said. “I didn’t come here to watch you lose.”

A thunderous cheer sounded around the arena, and I looked past Reed to see the entire Sunshine Prep team celebrating with Jeremy. He’d scored another goal, pulling the Saints ahead by two.

“Looks like I have some work to do then.” Reed grinned, and there was such a determined look in his eyes I almost felt sorry for the Saints players

—almost. As Reed was released from the box, I turned back to the bleachers, quickly finding the nearest seat so I wouldn't miss a moment.

When play restarted, Reed seemed like a different person than the one I'd seen trudging onto the ice just after I'd arrived. He erupted back into the fray like he was going into battle, and it was incredible to witness how quickly he took charge of the game.

He was barking orders at his teammates and challenging Saints players for the puck, leaving them sprawled on the ice at his feet. It looked like the small black disc was glued to his stick as he weaved around his opponents, and every pass he whipped across the ice to his fellow Devils found its mark.

It didn't take long for Reed's influence to pay off. He shared passes with both Grayson and Parker to move the puck up the ice before sending a pinpoint shot past the goalie into the corner of the net. A cheer went up from the crowd as the siren behind the goal wailed, and nervous anticipation flooded my veins. The Devils were now only down by one.

Reed continued to help his team dominate the game, and I could see Jeremy becoming more and more frustrated. He just couldn't keep up with Reed when he was playing with this much skill and determination. My ex's annoyance reached another level as Reed scored again to tie the game at four goals each. This time, the goal was all about sheer power. Reed had received the puck right in the center of the ice, and although it looked like he was way too far from the goal, Reed sent his shot flying past the goalie before he could even see it.

The Devils didn't have it all their own way after that, and as the minutes ticked away, I was growing increasingly nervous. Anything could still happen, and if the Saints managed to score another goal and the Devils lost the game, Reed would still be blamed.

With less than a minute left on the clock, Reed dazzled the crowd with some lightning-quick stick handling as he weaved and maneuvered the puck around almost every Saints player on the ice. Eventually, there was only Jeremy between Reed and the goal. As they closed in on each other, Reed pretended to shoot the puck, but then he subtly flicked it to Parker who was racing past his right side.

Jeremy didn't change course, and he deliberately slammed his forearm into Reed's chest even though he no longer had the puck. The Devils fans around me jumped to their feet and shouted in disgust while chaos erupted



on the ice as the Ransom players surrounded Jeremy. But I only had eyes for Reed, who was lying motionless on the ground.

I wanted to run down from the bleachers, scale the glass, and rush onto the ice to check he was okay, but just as I started for the steps, Reed slowly climbed to his feet.

The umpires had managed to separate Reed's teammates from Jeremy, who was now being pushed toward the penalty box, his face red with anger. He glared at Reed as he passed, but when Reed turned, I saw a smile tug at the corners of his lips, and he sent Jeremy a taunting wink.

The Saints were now down a player, and it was Ransom's turn to take advantage. Despite the seconds on the clock speeding toward zero, Reed was calm and composed. Only a few moments after the game restarted, he regained possession of the puck and shot off down the ice with it. The defenders tried to block him, but with a quick feint and a burst of speed, he raced toward the goal effortlessly. The Saints desperately tried to keep up, but he was unstoppable.

When he sent the puck past the goalie and into the net, scoring the winning goal, he was mobbed by his teammates, and the cheers from the Ransom fans were deafening. I joined in with them, shouting as loudly as I could, hoping Reed could hear me at the bottom of the pile of Devils celebrating on the ice.

When Reed came off the ice after the game, he found me immediately and swooped me up in his arms. I laughed, my cheeks growing warm as he spun me around because it felt like the entire arena was watching us, and I could still hear people cheering Reed on.

"Everyone is going to think you're up for an encore of your performance," I said.

"They might be waiting awhile," he replied.

"Shame."

He laughed and lowered me to my feet once more. "So, I won the game..."

"You did."

"I guess that means you're stuck with me."

"I guess so." I reached up and pressed a kiss to the corner of his lips before I nodded behind him. "I think you might be needed."

Reed's coach was waving him over, and there was a hard look on his face. Reed let out a grunt. "I don't think he wants to compliment my Axel."

“Hmm. Maybe not.”

“Can I come find you once I’m done? If I survive Coach Ray.”

“Sure.” I smiled. “I’ll wait out front. I need a ride, and I was thinking I could grab one with my boyfriend if that’s okay?”

The beaming smile that lit up his face might have been the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. “Yeah, I think that’s okay.”

I was grinning as I watched him go. Apparently, I was a hockey fan after all. I’d just needed the right guy to cheer for.

The parking lot had transformed as I made my way outside. The storm that had swept through town earlier in the day had blown over, but the entire lot was now covered in a new blanket of snow. It was like a fresh canvas, waiting for new footprints to pave their way across it. And as I looked out at the snow, I couldn’t help but feel like Reed and I were getting a fresh start too. Today felt like a new beginning, a chance to create new memories and leave some of the more painful ones behind. And I was excited to see where our footprints would lead us next.

Unfortunately, Jeremy found me while I was waiting for Reed. His face twisted in a scowl as he made his way toward me. I thought he might have snuck off in shame after Sunshine Prep’s defeat, but apparently that was just wishful thinking.

“He’ll be done with you now he’s got what he wanted,” Jeremy said.

I didn’t get a chance to respond because Reed arrived at my side, placing his arm across the back of my shoulders. “Actually, I think we’re just getting started,” he said. “Aren’t we, Sunshine?”

“I’d say so.” I reached up and placed a kiss on his cheek. “You were amazing out there, by the way.”

“There was a girl in the stands I was trying to impress.”

Jeremy scoffed and hitched his hockey bag up on his shoulder. “I don’t know what I ever saw in you anyway, Violet.” His words might have been harsh, but there was regret evident in his eyes. He walked away without looking back, and as I watched him leave, I breathed a little easier. I didn’t think Jeremy would be bothering me again. It seemed Reed and I had finally achieved the goal I’d set out to accomplish with our fake relationship. In the end though, it had taken something real to get the job done.

Reed pulled me a little closer as he gazed down at me. “I think I could easily come up with a list of things he saw in you.”

“I don’t need a list.” I laughed.

“Are you sure? Because I’m more than happy to write one up and pass it on to him.”

“Maybe we should just leave it at humiliating him on the ice today.”

“Hmm. Maybe we probably shouldn’t talk about humiliations on the ice for a while, considering my little mid-game show.”

I grinned.

“But, you’re right, that did feel pretty good.” Reed returned my smile. “Do you know what would feel even better?”

“What?”

“This.” As he leaned down and pulled me in for a kiss, light flurries of snow began to flutter down around us. The moment was kind of perfect, and for the first time since I’d moved to Sunshine Hills, I didn’t mind the cold. I’d changed my mind about a lot of things today. It turned out the cold had its own beauty, hockey was kind of addictive, and hockey players weren’t so bad after all—well, one of them, at least.

# EPILOGUE

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REED

I ONCE AGAIN FOUND MYSELF stuck in the living room of Violet's house speaking with her uncle Luke. We might have reached a tentative truce when it came to Violet, but I still got the feeling he had to bite his tongue now and again. At least he hadn't threatened me tonight. Although, there was still plenty of time for that.

"I hear you had quite an eventful game today," Luke said.

"Yes, sir."

"Please call me Luke."

"Yes, sir, uh, Luke."

Luke was struggling to withhold a smile. "Sir Luke." He pondered it for a moment. "I kind of like the sound of that."

I grinned in reply.

"I know I teach at Sunshine Hills Prep, but I have to admit I was glad to hear you gave us a beating on the ice."

"You are?"

He lowered his voice. "Just between you and me, the boys on our team have serious egos. I think it was about time they got put in their place."

"I think so too," I agreed. One guy in particular, but I didn't say that aloud. I was still furious with Hoffman and hated him a little more for the way he'd tried to destroy my relationship with Violet and completely throw off my game. It did make the win so much sweeter though. I was never going to forget the sight of him sitting in the penalty box with his head in his hands as we celebrated our victory.

"She shouldn't be too much longer," Luke said, nodding toward the stairs.

“It’s no problem,” I replied, taking a sip of the water Luke had given me on my arrival.

Violet picked that exact moment to walk down the stairs, and I started choking on my drink. Luke rushed over to slap me on the back. “You okay, kid?”

I nodded, unable to take my eyes off Violet. She was always beautiful, but tonight, she looked like a vision that had walked right out of my dreams. Her red hair was long and flowing down her back, and the dress she wore was such a light shade of blue it reminded me of ice on the surface of a lake on a bright sunny day.

“You look incredible, Violet,” I said, stepping toward her and accidentally slamming my shin into the coffee table. *Not again.* I tripped forward but somehow still managed to keep to my feet. That coffee table was going to be the death of me.

Luke chuckled behind me while Violet struggled not to laugh too. Her eyes were bright with happiness, which at least made my embarrassment worthwhile.

“You scrub up well yourself,” she said, nodding at my outfit. It was one of my dad’s suits from back when he was in college. There was no way he could squeeze himself into it now, but it fit me like a glove.

“Thanks,” I replied. “You ready to go?”

She nodded, and I held my arm out as I approached her.

“You two be good,” Luke said as she linked her arm with mine. “I want Violet home by midnight. And there will be no funny business.”

“Funny business?” Mia chimed in. I’d been so focused on Violet I hadn’t noticed her cousin sitting on the stairs. “Like a comedy act?”

“You know what I mean,” Luke growled.

“I really don’t, Dad. Maybe you should spell it out for Violet and Reed?”

“Uh, that won’t be necessary,” Violet said, shooting her cousin a scowl. “We get the message. No funny business, promise.”

She practically dragged me to the door in her rush to get away. She was probably concerned Luke would take Mia’s words to heart and start giving us a detailed breakdown of what he considered to be funny business. It was something I was more than happy to avoid too.

I was still chuckling when we reached my car.

“You think that was funny?” Violet asked.

“I mean, I would love to hear Luke’s explanation someday.”

“I pray that never happens,” she said, pointing a finger in my direction. “So, please don’t encourage him.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I grinned.

I felt genuinely happy while driving us to the dance, and I caught Violet grinning at me when we reached the school parking lot.

“What?” I asked, as I turned the engine off.

“You were humming.”

“Humming?”

“Yeah, to the radio.”

“It was a good song.” I said despite having no idea what had been playing.

“If you were humming along to the song, then you were totally off-key.”

“Didn’t realize I had such a judgmental audience.”

“I’m not judging. It was cute.”

“Cute?” I gasped. “Nobody calls me cute.” Although, after my surprise performance on the ice earlier today, I was probably going to get called a lot of new things.

Violet leaned across the center console, still smiling. “And what are you going to do if I call you cute again?”

“Hmm...” I moved in so our lips were nearly touching. “Why don’t you say it and find out?”

She bit her lip. “You’re cute.”

“Right. That’s it.” I sat back. “No kisses for you for the rest of the night.”

“What?” Her face dropped.

I jumped from the truck and walked around to meet her.

“You can’t be serious,” she said after I opened the passenger door for her, and she started to climb from the truck.

“Deadly serious. I don’t joke about kisses.”

“But, Reed...”

Before her feet could touch the ground, I scooped her up in my arms, laughing as I twirled her around and pulled her close.

“Okay, I’m kidding,” I said before kissing her firmly. I placed my forehead against hers as I drew back enough to speak. “You can call me whatever you want, Sunshine. As long as you call me yours.”

She smiled and kissed me once more. "I'm not going to argue with that."

"I think I just threw up."

I groaned at the sound of Parker's voice behind me, and Violet's cheeks turned pink, but her smile didn't fall as she looked past me to my brother.

"Hey, Parker."

"What she meant to say is go away, Parker," I added. My younger brother simply ignored me and slung an arm over Violet's shoulders before guiding her toward the school gym where the winter formal was being held.

"You look ravishing tonight, Vi," I overheard him say. "Has dipshit told you that?"

Violet laughed. "In his own words, yeah."

I slowly followed along behind the two of them, wishing I could just punch my brother and take his place.

"Well, I hope he's treating you well," Parker continued.

"He's been the perfect gentlemen."

Parker snorted. "I'll believe that when I see it."

"Where's your date tonight?" Violet asked.

"I don't do dates." He shrugged. "You have to ask weeks in advance, and by the time the event actually comes around, I'm usually sick of the girl I invited."

"Give it a rest, Parker." I took that moment to step in, stealing my girl from his arms. "You're going to give us Darling boys a bad reputation."

"What bad reputation?" Parker smirked in response. "You know, after today, they've started calling you Reed the Darling Dancer, right?"

That was probably to be expected. I'd told Violet if anyone saw me do that routine it would be the death of the Darling Devils. It actually came as a relief to find out I might have been right. I was happy for that nickname to die.

When we reached the school gym, Parker said his farewells with a wink. "Have fun, you two. I know I plan to."

I shook my head as I watched him walk over to a group of girls. I had no idea what possessed my brother sometimes.

"Do you want to get a drink?" Violet asked, nodding toward one of the tables.

"Actually." I turned and held my hand out to her. "I was hoping we could dance."



“I thought you didn’t like dancing,” she replied.

“I like dancing with you.”

She smiled and took my hand. We’d arrived to the formal reasonably late, and the place was packed with other students. I would have much preferred it to be just the two of us, but I wasn’t going to complain. There was no better feeling in the world than having Violet in my arms.

As we made our way through the crowd to the dance floor, I heard a few whispers following after us. Some people were commenting on my game today while others on the beautiful girl at my side.

“There’s Reed Darling. Did you see him today?” I heard one kid say. I recognized him from tryouts this year, but he hadn’t been good enough to make the squad.

It didn’t take a huge leap of the imagination to guess how his friend might respond. I might have won us the game, but it was my other performance on the ice that had people talking.

“Yeah, he was incredible. Did you see how high he could jump?”

Wait? They were impressed with my routine?

“I know,” his friend replied. “I heard the reason he’s the best player in the state is because he took figure skating lessons. I’m thinking of taking some.”

“I was thinking the same thing!”

I struggled not to roll my eyes as I listened to the two of them. Despite what Parker said, apparently, not even breaking into a figure skating routine in the middle of a hockey game could completely destroy my reputation. I guessed the Darling Devils were here to stay.

We reached the center of the dance floor, and I wrapped my arms around Violet. The music was slow, and as we swayed together, she released a contented sigh and rested her head on my chest. I couldn’t help but hold her a little tighter. I’d experienced a lot of highs today and enjoyed some unforgettable moments, but this one seemed to top them all. Because in this moment, Violet felt truly mine.

As the song changed, Violet lifted her head and nodded past me. “There’s your other brother.”

I glanced over to see Grayson dancing slowly with Paige. She was held somewhat awkwardly in his arms, and I imagined it was probably because he was trying his best not to step on her feet. I didn’t really like dancing, but at least I wasn’t as bad at it as Gray.

“He’s not a very good dancer,” I explained, focusing on Violet once more. “Paige’s toes are in grave danger tonight.”

“Guess we can’t all leap through the air as gracefully as a ballerina,” she joked, making me narrow my eyes at her.

“Not funny.”

She laughed before returning her attention to Grayson. She tilted her head as she watched them. “I don’t think Paige is complaining.”

I glanced over once more to see Paige smiling up at Gray. I’d seen her look at him like that a million times before, but I usually tried my best not to read into it too much. Paige was just a happy, smiley person.

“Do you think they’d ever get together?” Violet continued.

I shook my head. “Doubt it. He’s too stubborn, and she’s too oblivious.”

“Too oblivious to what?”

I let out a sigh. “To the fact my brother’s madly in love with her.”

She frowned slightly but then looked thoughtful. “You never know. They might figure it out.”

“Maybe.”

I heard Paige squeak, and I cringed. “There goes a toe.”

“Poor Paige.” Violet grimaced.

“Poor Paige,” I agreed. “But I have to be honest, I didn’t drag you out here to talk about my brother.”

“You didn’t?” She laughed lightly.

“Nope. I was thinking I’d trap you on the dance floor so you could regale me with compliments on my win today.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, I especially liked the grand finale.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mm, I was very impressed how you slid onto your knees before blowing me a kiss.”

“You’re talking about the figure skating,” I grumbled.

“Oh, you mean you were talking the game?” she asked. There was a look of innocence on her face but a cheeky glint in her eyes.

I struggled to withhold a growl. “I wasn’t talking about the game *or* the figure skating, Sunshine. I was talking about the part where I won you over.”

She laughed. “I’m fairly certain you won me over long before you started figure skating in a silly hockey game.”

“Silly hockey game?” It seemed there were still certain things I needed to convince Violet of. “It’s okay. I’ll make a hockey fan out of you yet.”

She smirked as she looked me in the eyes. “Maybe you already have.”

As we continued to dance, she wrapped her hands around my neck, and her fingertips started trailing softly against my skin, sending a delightful shiver down my spine. I definitely liked dancing with Violet. In fact, I thought it might just be my favorite thing.

“You know, I heard a very interesting rumor about you today,” she said, pulling back to look at me.

“Really? I didn’t realize there were any left.”

“Oh, I’m sure there are plenty more that remain unanswered.” She laughed. “But this one I’m extremely curious about.”

“Okay...” I probably should have been worried, but she was still smiling up at me. It was hard to believe she might be about to ask me something uncomfortable when she looked at me that way.

“Well, I heard a rumor you might like me.”

“Interesting.” I grinned before pulling her close to me and, in one swift move, dipping her low to the ground. I was sure we were attracting far too much attention from the students dancing around us. But right now, I felt too light to care.

I leaned in close and whispered in her ear, “That one, I’m afraid, is true.”

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*The End*

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Thank you so much for reading *Rival Darling*.

Reed & Violet’s story may be over, but this isn’t the last of the Darling Devils.

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Alexandra Moody is an Australian author who writes romance novels for young adults. She lives in Adelaide with her husband, their three kids and naughty dog. When she's not busy writing, you'll find her reading or spending time with her family. She loves to travel, is addicted to caffeine and has a love/hate relationship with the gym. She can often be found on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#).

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