



THE BEST KIND OF FOREVER

CELESTE BRIARS

THE BEST KIND OF FOREVER

A REAPERS NOVEL

BOOK 1

CELESTE BRIARS

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The Best Kind Of Forever

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THE BEST KIND OF FOREVER

BY CELESTE BRIARS

A Reapers novel

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*To any readers who believe they've never been enough for
love. You are enough.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello, dear readers!

For the best reading experience, I've listed below some potential triggers included in this book. While the story is mainly lighthearted, there are undertones of more serious issues that some readers may find upsetting. Please read at your own discretion.

Content Warnings:

Suicide

Depression

Emotional abuse

Parental abuse/neglect

Death of a loved one

Explicit sexual content

Emetophobia

Alcohol consumption

Body image issues

PLAYLIST

Theme Song: Your Man – Down With Webster

1. Bling Bling – ALTÉGO
2. Let It All Go – Birdy & RHODES
3. I Think You're the Devil – Ellee Duke
4. Legendary – Welshly Arms
5. Wonderland – Taylor Swift
6. Skin – Rihanna
7. MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT – Elley Duhé
8. Blue – Madison Beer
9. Devil I Know – Allie X
10. MONEY ON THE DASH – Elley Duhé & Whethan
11. Way Down We Go – KALEO
12. How Do I Say Goodbye – Dean Lewis
13. Do Me – Kim Petras
14. Crying On The Dancefloor – Sam Feldt, Jonas Blue, Endless Summer & Violet Days
15. Wicked – GRANT
16. Love and War – Fleurie
17. Silence – Marshmello (feat. Khalid)
18. Fire on Fire – Sam Smith

THICK THIGHS RUIN LIVES

HAYES

Tits or ass: that's the eternal question. That's the question I've been asked my entire life, by friends, flings, teammates, my ex-girlfriend. I'm not going to lie. For a long time, I was a tits man. But tonight, I think my answer is gonna change.

And that's thanks to the girl's thighs currently straddling me. They're lean with muscle, and it's clear she sticks to a rigorous workout regimen. I'm a thigh guy. Definitely. Is it wrong that I want her to crush my head with them? I really shouldn't be thinking about this when I should be wining and dining sponsors, especially since my next year in the NHL is up in the air. But she's wearing such a short dress, so short that from this angle, I can see practically everything.

Her lips ghost the shell of my ear, and her tongue tickles the column of my throat, doing wonders for my hard-on. I understand that I'm fully making out with a girl at a sponsor party. I understand that there's media around every corner covering the new merger between the Reapers team and Voltage Sports Drinks. I should be mingling instead of acquainting myself with the inside of some girl's mouth.

I don't care, though. I need the distraction. Reputation wise, this season's been shit for me, and it's only just started.

It's my second season playing for the Riverside Reapers. I was drafted to the team my senior year of college. It's been my dream to go pro since I was little. My parents signed me up for

minor ice hockey when I was eight, and I've been playing ever since.

When you enter the spotlight, there are so many rules that people don't tell you. Rules like you need to make yourself presentable in front of the press. You can't be caught doing anything that would shine a negative light on the team.

I'm lucky that my behavior off the ice hasn't affected my playing time during games. Just last week I got into a fight with a prick who was macking on some uninterested girl at a bar. Granted, he deserved getting his face rearranged, but the cameras only captured the physicality of it all. The tabloids don't care why I punched a guy; they just care that I did it. And I'm no stranger to getting into fights.

I'm violent when I get on the ice. I've already spent the most time in the penalty box my first season than any of my teammates combined. I'm not afraid to hit, I'm not afraid to strike, I'm not afraid to engage in a brawl if some douche gets under my skin. I don't deal with my anger well.

That's probably in part due to my shitty excuse for a father. Oh, and the fact my mom is dead. Sherry passed away of cancer when I was eight, and it broke my dad. He became distant, closed off, a shell of the man I remember from my childhood. I didn't realize I'd lost two parents that day.

I don't think my mom was even planning on telling us she had breast cancer. The only reason I found out was because my dad got a call from the hospital after she was admitted for fainting. Thankfully, she was outside when it happened, and our neighbors managed to get to her in time. Then the doctors told him everything. We all knew she had been acting a little off more than usual—curt answers, lapses in memory and judgment, distancing herself from us. I chalked it up to her being stressed with work.

I was wrong.

After she died, my father abandoned me and my sister. I had to take care of my younger sister, Faye, while I juggled school and hockey. We still had a roof to live under because of the monthly paychecks our dad sent us, but besides that, he

wasn't in our lives. He disappeared to some faraway, forest-grown part of the Michigan mountains where he made sure his tracks weren't traceable. He wasn't there for any of Faye's milestones. He wasn't there to see me off to college. He wasn't even there to cheer me on at my first NHL game. The only contact he's maintained is the occasional text whenever he needs something.

There are a handful of websites dedicated to capturing all the mistakes I've made, and some of the diehard Reapers' fans have collectively formed a brigade to share in a universal dislike for me. If the stands came equipped with tomatoes—which I'm thankful they don't—I'm pretty sure the only person people would be aiming at is me.

I never thought that so many people would be interested in my sex life...or maybe "disgusted" is the right word. When you sleep with a different girl every day for the entire month of March, it doesn't give the best impression.

I want to forget this whole week. I want to stop feeling. The alcohol's already helped a bit with both, but if I can rely on one thing in this damned world, it's good sex.

In my defense, I haven't slept with anyone in sixty days. And that's a deliberate abstinence, okay? I haven't really been able to trust anyone after my ex-girlfriend, Macy, broke up with me.

I caught her cheating on me with her coworker, who she'd apparently been seeing behind my back for the duration of our relationship. We were together for two years. TWO.

She then admitted to only using me for my money, my name, and my fame.

She dumped me before I could break up with her. She threw all my shit out her window—at least the shit she hadn't burned yet—and topped everything off with a few glitter bombs and a passionately worded Notes app paragraph on her Insta story.

The girl in front of me is shaking the bed with how much she's bouncing on top of me. We went from a fifteen-minute

make out sesh to her riding me like rent was fucking due.

I'm not sure I even asked what her name was. She knew my name, though. Sponsor parties are always crawling with puck bunnies.

I can't stop staring in awe at the way her perfectly proportioned tits recoil as she fully clenches around me, her head lolling back, dark hair spilling down her shoulders like ink.

My hands are gripping her thighs so tightly that red marks are rising in their wake. I love when girls are loud, but fuck, is she *loud*. I bet the whole party downstairs can hear us, despite the outdated EDM music playing. Her moans are heaven-sent, and they unravel the knot of desire in my stomach. She's rolling her hips and playing with the curve of her breast, two images that rev the static inside of my brain. The warmth in my groin intensifies, erupting into a fire that sears every inch of me. Her perky ass slaps against the tops of my thighs.

I'm close to coming. My dick is practically begging me to release inside of her, and it's a good thing I snagged a few condoms before leaving the house because no matter what dude you talk to, pulling out rarely works.

The minute I saw her across the room, I think a part of me knew how the night was going to end. Before I even got the chance to talk with my teammates, her hand was stroking me. Yeah, self-control has never been my strong suit.

"Fuck..." I groan, though I think it comes out more like a frustrated growl.

We move together in a synchronized pattern of movements, and I watch her pick up the pace. Her pussy squeezes up and down my length as she nears her climax, and when she comes down hard on the hilt of my pubic bone, an avalanche of arousal suffocates me. The tip of my dick tingles, and it feels like a supernova is exploding in my veins, coloring my vision with constellations. Before I know it, I'm spilling myself into the latex in hot, wet bursts.

When I get up to dispose of the condom, she has the bedsheets pulled up to her chest.

“Are you coming back to bed?” she asks, hope playing in her umber eyes.

“I should probably head back to the party. You know, rub shoulders with some sponsors, maybe a few geriatric sugar daddies,” I joke, but her lack of laughter hits me in the face like a wicked slapshot.

“Oh, right. Will I see you again?”

My cock loves the idea of seeing her again, but I really shouldn't be entertaining a relationship with everything going on. This was a one-time thing.

A wrecking ball of anxiety swings to the center of my chest, making the air in my lungs diminish. “Sure, I can get you tickets to an upcoming game.”

I take my time getting dressed, because I'm definitely not in a rush to get back to the party.

My response must've been convincing enough because she perks up, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “That would be great. Uh, can I see your phone?”

I hand my phone over to her, slowly slipping one pant leg on at a time so I don't look like I'm in a hurry to get out of here.

Look, I don't want to hurt her feelings, alright? I know she's gonna put her number in there, and I'm not going to stop her. I'll just let her down nice and easy over text. That way I don't have to deal with the tears and the yelling.

She hands me back the device, exposing her tits as she reaches down to pick up her shirt. “I put my number in there. I hope you use it.”

I'm only able to nod because I'm currently contemplating how moral it would be if I proposed we go for a second round.

Verdict: not moral.

I shake the thought from my addled brain, say a quick goodbye, and give her a half-hearted hug. Then I slip out of the bedroom, ready to sprint for the exit to evade any prying eyes. And I foolishly think I'm in the clear before I come face to face with the last person I wanted to run into.

The top buttons of my shirt are undone, my hair's a mess from the girl gouging her fingers through it, and I'm pretty sure I saw at least three hickeys decorating my neck in the mirror.

"Coach?" I sputter, the air around me seeming strangely distilled.

"Hollings, I—"

Coach takes in my disheveled state, and then his eyes turn as round as frisbees.

"Please tell me that's not Sienna Talavera's bedroom," he bellows, that one vein on his forehead pulsing with a mind of its own.

Who?

My back goes as stiff as a board when I hear that drill sergeant voice of his, like it's a conditioned response. "I...I don't know, sir."

I've never heard that name in my entire life.

"Sienna. Talavera," he reiterates slowly. Those behemoth arms of his are barred over his chest, reminding me how easy it'd be for him to squash me like a cartoon mouse.

I wait for him to elaborate, and judging by the death glare he's giving me, I know I just fucked up. My hands are so clammy that I keep wiping them on my pant legs, my heart is galloping like a racehorse in my chest, and my stomach is seconds away from revolting the hors d'oeuvres I polished off an hour ago.

Coach expels what I think is supposed to be a cleansing breath, but his nostrils are still flared. "Son, Raymond Talavera owns the sports drink company sponsoring our team," he explains.

Fuck me.

“Coach, I swear, I had no idea,” I blurt, desperate to temper the anxiety racing through me at warp speed.

“Hollings, this cannot get out, do you understand? If Raymond hears that you slept with his daughter, he’ll pull, and we need his sponsorship. We need the media coverage, especially with all the negative traffic from *your* fuckups.”

“I promise I won’t say anything, Coach.”

“If it comes down to it, the team owner will have no problem picking Talavera over you. Every player is tradeable, expendable.”

“Understood.”

Shit. I can’t get traded. I can’t imagine the rest of my NHL career—if I even have one—without my teammates. Not only would I have to move, but I’d have to somehow seamlessly weave my way into already-lasting relationships.

“And Sienna? Do you think she’ll talk?” he asks.

“I’ll take care of it. Plus, she knows the game.” Right? Sure I’d offered to get her tickets to the next game, which she clearly doesn’t need, but we parted with a hug. We both knew the deal going into the night.

“I—it won’t happen again.”

How have I fucked up...fucking? I’m great at fucking. If I wasn’t a professional hockey player, I could probably make it as a porn star.

“It better not. And I better see you working your ass off at practice tomorrow.”

I nod, trying to keep my nerves from catapulting themselves up my throat.

“Look, Hollings. I want to give you a piece of advice. And I’m only saying this because I truly want you to succeed, okay?”

That doesn’t sound good.

The redness in his face has started to fade. “You need to start cleaning up your act. All of these headlines are shining a negative light on the team. The bar fights, the constant partying, the waves of women, your hostility with the paparazzi. You’re not likeable. I can’t be babysitting you all the time. You’re not a rookie anymore. You need to start setting a good example for first-time players. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” I say, my voice hiking a pitch louder than intended. Anxiety batters at my chest like exploding shrapnel, and I fear that my knees are going to give out despite my back being against the wall.

Coach knits his furry eyebrows together, deepening that wrinkle on his forehead. “I expect you to be a strait-laced hockey player for the rest of the season,” he explains, and just like that, my world full of carefree living and endless drinks has just been turned on its axis.

“And *do not*, under any circumstances, repeat what happened here tonight.”

THE FOOLPROOF PLAN

HAYES

I never signed up for a Dr. Phil session with my teammates, but everyone thought I would benefit from a nice, cold, hard intervention about my current antics.

“My life is over,” I groan, plopping onto the couch.

Me and some of my teammates live in a multimillion-dollar, Victorian-style home. The sun peaks in the eastern window at exactly eleven in the morning, and it bathes the inside in a wreath of warm colors—like the yellow of the ginkgo trees growing outside our home rink, or the brilliant orange of the honeysuckles nestled down by the riverbank, or even the crimson burning bushes peppered along the I-80.

The interior is arguably more beautiful than the exterior. The leather couch is big enough to seat the entire team, and its vermillion backside matches the intricately designed curtains sandwiching the floor-to-ceiling window in the middle of the room.

Rosewood chairs line the massive dining table, complementing a cedar fireplace that’s always running since the weather’s changed. And as if the ginormous flat-screen television isn’t enough, a crystal chandelier hanging from the vaulted ceiling ties everything together.

“Your life’s not over,” Bristol, our captain, says, bringing me a cup of what looks to be tea.

He’s been going through a weird grandma phase lately.

NOT LIKE THAT.

What I meant is that he has this strange fascination with chamomile tea, gluten-free cookie recipes, and crocheting.

Our group consists of Bristol Brenner, center; me, right-winger; Fulton Cazzarelli, left-winger; Casen Strader, right defenseman; Kit Langley, left defenseman; and Gage Arlington, our goalie.

Bristol Brenner is my best friend, my wingman, and most importantly, the guy who usually ends up cleaning up my messes. (Not that I ask him to; he's just that good of a guy.)

He's my emergency contact whenever I need a quick getaway from a one-night stand gone wrong, or for when I get shit-faced and need a ride at two in the morning because I got into a scuffle at a local watering hole. Oh, and if I end up breaking my leg trying to turn my mattress into a stair-friendly sled. Which only happened once.

Bristol is way more put together than I am. He's a year older than me, and one of the best forwards the Riverside Reapers has ever seen. We've actually been friends since third grade, and it was just luck that we got drafted to the same team.

I remember the first time I met him. It was my first day of third grade, and during snack time, he came up to me and stole one of my peanut butter crackers. With no warning or anything. Then just ate it in front of me with this look like, *Yeah, bitch, and I'd do it again.*

The next day, I decided to get back at him by uncapping all his Crayola markers so he couldn't participate in arts and crafts. He didn't seem to think I was very funny, considering he spent the entire afternoon insulting me in extremely colorful expletives. Expletives that were at least sixth grade level.

He didn't bother me for the next few days, but little did I know what he was cooking up. Not only did that crotch goblin glue me to my seat, but he also planted a stolen teddy bear in my cubby, drew a bunch of ill-proportioned dicks on my desk, and told my crush, Lizzie Vanderburk, that I had head lice.

Needless to say, we spent a lot of time after class with Ms. Finch. And then we started to realize that we had a lot in common. For example, we both liked hockey, and we both wanted to grow up to become NHL players.

Over the years, I've seen him through his share of ups and downs too. But the biggest difference between me and Bristol is that he's resilient, and he always springs back. He's left that irresponsible and careless past of his behind, and now he's the face of the Riverside Reapers for a reason. I, on the other hand, am still paying for the careless mistakes I've made, and I'm not sure if I'll ever live down my playboy reputation.

Speaking of playboys, Casen Strader is the farthest thing from. He's the team-appointed lover of the group.

Fuck, that sounds wrong.

I mean he's the only guy in the group who's currently in a long-term relationship. He and his girlfriend are coming up on seven years. They're so in love that it makes me sick sometimes, and I know he's planning on proposing soon. This is his fourth season in the NHL, and he's made quite the reputation for himself as the Reapers' notorious, rough-and-tumble defenseman. Don't tell him I said this, but deep down, he's secretly a huge teddy bear. Pretty sure I haven't seen the man kill a fly.

Fulton Cazzarelli is the baby of the group. He's a year younger than me, and he's a rookie. We all joke that he's like a golden retriever: overly friendly, innocent, eats food off the floor. He always wants to know what everyone's up to, and more often than not, he usually has no idea what's going on. But that apparently does it for a bunch of chicks—the whole clueless, boy-next-door vibe.

Gage Arlington is his partner in crime. He's more extroverted, more irresponsible, and the only other person besides me willing to break the law for fun. He also has no sense of direction. We've lived in the house for two years now, and he couldn't guide us home from the grocery store that's a two-minute drive away. If he was dropped into some remote part of the Amazon rainforest and told to survive for twenty-

four hours, I'm pretty sure he'd perish. But aside from his affinity for getting lost, he's a helluva good goalie. Just like Fulton, this is his first year.

And finally, there's Kit Langley. Kit lived in Brazil with his family before coming over to the United States. He's a trust fund baby, and he played for UMich before getting drafted to the team. I have this theory that Kit's one of those kids who peaked in high school, but his brain never developed past sixteen, so he's eternally stuck with a teenage mindset. He's one cocky bastard, but he always brings his A game.

"You're gonna get through this, H," Casen consoles, clapping me on the back and giving my shoulders a good shake.

Hopelessness flares up in my chest, melting into hands of fire that stretch around my throat. "I don't know."

I feel sick. Everything's on the line for me right now, and I can't lose this. I can't. Hockey is all I have.

"This is my last strike. Three and I'm out. I don't know how I can possibly turn my image around. Every hockey fan hates me."

More like five strikes, but I digress. Like I promised Coach, none of my teammates know I slept with our biggest sponsor's daughter.

"That's not true. Not every hockey fan." Although Bristol's belief in me is appreciated, it's misplaced. He's always seen the good in me. He sees the good in people in general. He always gives everyone the benefit of the doubt, even if they don't deserve it.

I lather my hand through the front of my hair, letting the strands fall back into place. "Remember that time I was trying to buy sriracha at the grocery store and that old lady started beating me up with her purse?"

Bristol snorts, covering his mouth upon seeing my deadpan stare. "Uh...yeah...that was very unfortunate."

"Or that time some girl backed over my foot while I was standing in the KFC parking lot?"

To be fair, both instances happened around the time that news article about me dumping pop music's next idol came out. And then I showed up to an event with two dates the following week.

Bristol smashes his lips together to silence the chuckle building in his throat. "Okay, so your image needs a little work," he says. "There are going to be so many chances for you to redeem yourself, but you have to start believing that you can change. None of this works if you don't believe."

"You do realize how you sound, right? Believe in yourself? What kind of motivational bullshit is that?" My tone has more of a kick to it than I intended but come on. He doesn't really think an attitude adjustment and a makeover is gonna fix everything, does he?

"The kind of bullshit that's gonna get you out of this weird slump," he replies, ticking his head.

"But I—"

"Just hear me out, 'kay? I think I know a way we can get you back into the public's good graces."

"What? What plan could you *possibly* have that'll get everyone to like me again?" I harrumph, hitting him with a stilted glare.

"Donate half a million dollars to charity?" Gage suggests.

Fulton's eyes light up. "Adopt a shelter full of dogs?"

Kit rubs his hands together maniacally. "Auction off your body for a wild night with the Reapers' very own stallion?"

"You could get a girlfriend," Bristol offers.

"You want me to get a girlfriend?" I exclaim, taking in the ten unblinking eyes around the room.

A girlfriend? That's the stupidest idea anyone's come up with, and Kit once proposed that I fake my own death to get away from a stage-five clinger.

I'd rather be strapped to a gurney and thrown into the mouth of an active volcano than flaunt my love life again for

the whole world to see.

Been there, done that, and it ended with me getting my heart publicly shattered.

Bristol thrusts his phone in my face, showing me a photo of some NHL player with his wife and kids, and under it is a plethora of supportive comments and heart emojis. “Just think about it, H. When you’re in a relationship, you’re automatically more likeable. And a girlfriend could help keep you out of trouble. Plus, being committed shows people that you’re caring and you’re not just some rabid dog looking to sniff every fire hydrant and mark it as his own.”

“If your next talk consists of you convincing me to be a dad, I’ll punch you in the taint,” I growl, the beginnings of a migraine buzzing around my skull like an angry hive.

I’m not interested in being with some girl for the sake of the cameras. My one and only relationship was a complete trainwreck. It’s clear now that serious relationships and I don’t click. I’m usually a commitment-phobe, and the first person I changed for just so happened to end up breaking my heart. I’m not going through that again.

“Yeah, H. You could benefit from getting into a relationship. It’s nice to have someone to look after you, to talk to, to fuck on occasion—or, you know, whenever you want,” Kit chimes in, inspecting his cup of tea like the goddamn thing’s been poisoned.

“I don’t need help in the sex department,” I grumble.

If only they knew what I did last night.

When I was in college, I used to go out every night and collect redheads, brunettes, and blonds like Pokémon. If she had a short enough skirt, I’d chase after her. That’s all it took. But then I got serious with Macy, and I never thought about other girls.

“You know, sex can help you get your mojo back,” Gage adds, waggling his eyebrows.

“Yeah, I was in a rut for a long time and then got some of the best head of my life,” Kit says, his lips quirking into a

devilish smirk. “This girl’s tongue was crazy. Like it was so long it could—”

“Alright! I think Hayes gets it,” Bristol intervenes, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. “There could be a lot of benefits to entering a new relationship is all I’m saying. Unless there’s another way you’d like to play America’s golden boy? Maybe donate a liver to someone in need?”

I don’t like the idea, but maybe they’re right. *Come on, Hayes. Be realistic. Would you rather have your NHL career be over in the snap of a finger, or would you rather stick it out for a few months with some girl?* Plus, a fake relationship will distract me from the colossal mistake I made with Sienna—here’s to hoping it’ll never see the light of day—and it’ll take attention away from some of my less-than-stellar behavior recently.

Now all I have to do is run it by my agent and Coach, and then I can get my life back on track again. I took an acting class in college. How hard could this be?

DON'T SCREW THE POOCH

HAYES

A pparently, harder than I thought. It's dawned on me that I have no idea how to be a good fake boyfriend. I mean, if you asked Macy, she'd probably tell you that I was the worst boyfriend in the entire world. I don't know how I'm going to make this "relationship" seem real to the fans. I don't even know what girl would be crazy enough to go along with this plan. I'm banking my reputation on the potential chemistry I might have with some stranger. And sure, my reputation basically has the value equivalent of a used condom on the grimy tiles of a gas station bathroom, but I need to believe there can be some way to turn my image around.

I've been too nervous to call Ethan Blythe, my agent, because I know all too well the verbal beatdown he's going to unleash on me. Do I tell him about sleeping with Sienna? Do I add fuel to the already ceiling-high flames?

I've spent the entire morning locked away in my room, looking at media coverage of other NHL players and their significant others. I was miserable when I was with Macy. I don't want to give someone else the same power she had over me for the majority of our relationship. I like my strings unattached, loose, with no chance of them ever being tied into an impossible sailor's knot.

The sound of a knock peals from the other side of my door, and it nearly makes me throw my phone.

"Yeah? What?"

“You good in there? Or should I put on a gas mask before I have my nose hairs singed off by the stink?”

Thank God. It’s only Bristol. I don’t think I could endure Kit’s cynicism or Fulton’s idiocy this morning.

I glance around my room at the piles of dirty clothes and day-old dishes that I haven’t had the energy to clean, then I give myself a quick sniff test and actually recoil.

“I’m good. No need to come in or check up on me. Just... uh...getting ready for practice,” I shout at him, realizing that I probably *should* start getting my bag together. If I can find it in this toxic wasteland.

There’s a long pause. Bristol has an expert bullshit detector, and right now, it’s going off and alerting everyone in a ten-mile radius.

“You know, H, we can always come up with another plan if you’re uncomfortable with the idea of a fake relationship,” he says.

“It’s fine, Bri. It’ll work. I’m just a little off my game.”

Even though I can’t see his face, I know skepticism is projecting off him like the Bat Signal.

A glob of nerves collides in my throat, and I just barely manage to choke them down before Bristol acquiesces and continues off down the hall. Crisis averted.

I change into a fresh shirt and a baggy pair of shorts, slather on some deodorant, and run a comb through my bedhead. I would’ve taken a shower, but I’m cutting it close on time. And judging by the lack of incessant yelling coming from downstairs, the guys must’ve already left. Gathering up my hockey bag, I contemplate if I should eat before heading to the rink.

As if to answer, my stomach rumbles, begging for sustenance. I guess waiting isn’t an option.

I clamber down the stairs and head into the kitchen to make myself a bowl of cereal. We only have Shredded Wheat since Kit’s on a health kick, but it’s better than nothing. I

glumly look down at the tiny, pillow-shaped biscuits trying to drown themselves in overpriced oat milk.

I'm right there with you, little guys.

With a hefty sigh, I finish my entire serving of soggy wheats in complete silence, contemplating my life.

Then I hear it: the ringing of my phone. And I know exactly who it is without having to look at the Caller ID.

I immediately pick up, soldier through my nervous system trying to actively shut down my body, and I take a deep breath. "Ethan."

"Hayes. I would say it's a pleasure, but we both know that under these circumstances, it's not."

Ouch.

Embarrassment singes my cheeks as I stir the milk around in my bowl. *Rip the Band-Aid off, Hayes.* "Is now a bad time to tell you that I might've slept with Talavera's daughter?"

"Excuse me?"

Put the Band-Aid back on.

"Press is already fucking abysmal," he berates. "Do you know what would happen if the public found out you risked your team's sponsorship? People already see you as an immature playboy who doesn't know how to control his temper."

My balls practically shrivel up at the bite in his tone.

"I know. Fuck," I say, knotting my free hand in my hair, frustration crackling up each vertebra of my spine. "I think I can fix this. You just have to give me a chance."

Ethan's voice tinkles with laughter. "How? What brilliant plan have you concocted that'll make the world fall back in love with you overnight?"

I don't blame him for having doubts. This plan will either make or break me. And it sounds pretty ridiculous when I say it out loud.

My jaw pulses. “A fake relationship. I rebrand myself as the doting boyfriend. I put all my effort and time into building a relationship for the fans, and I stay away from getting into trouble. It’ll show I’ve grown up—that I’m not just some crazy party boy trying to relive his glory days.”

Ethan pauses, and it’s either because he’s actually considering my idea, or he’s putting me on mute so he can laugh his ass off.

After a painfully long few seconds, he speaks again. “That’s not the worst idea I’ve heard. Relationships are like catnip to the public. I don’t have any doubt that you’ll manage to pull in some good press if you focus on cultivating this fake relationship.”

Yes! Hayes: One. Press: Zero.

“That being said, however, this means no more partying, no more women, no more fighting. Do you think you can handle this? Change won’t happen overnight. It’ll take the public some getting used to you being in a relationship. You can’t just abandon the mission because you’re bored or you’re not seeing results right away.”

“I understand. I’m determined to see this through, Ethan. Not just for me, but for the team.”

I owe it to the guys. I owe it to myself. I’m twenty-three for crying out loud. I need to start acting like it.

“If you’re sure about this, then I’d get to work sooner than later,” he advises.

Hope cannons through me as I lug the strap of my hockey bag over my shoulder. “Don’t worry. This will be easy. Getting girls to fall in love with me is a subject I’m well-versed in.”

A PITY PARTY FOR ONE

AERIS

I hate September fourth. It doesn't matter what year it is, what day it is, or where I am: September fourth will always be the day my brother committed suicide.

This is the seventh anniversary of his death. Seven years, and the pain is still as fresh as the day he left me.

I was the first one to find him. Roden promised to drive me over to my friend's house so we could pregame before a party, but I couldn't find him, and I panicked.

When me and my brother were little, we used to play upstairs in the attic. My mother and father would argue a lot, and the attic was a safe haven for us. We pretended we were wanderers exploring barren lands, using cardboard boxes as imaginary forts to protect ourselves from the evil ruler that was hell-bent on capturing us—who just so happened to have the same name as my dad.

Michael.

My dad isn't a kind man. He isn't capable of love. When I was little, the only reason he'd talk to me was to admonish me. It was like he felt constantly burdened by his children. Children he *helped* bring into this world. Roden was born mute, but my father was adamant there must be some way to fix him. Roden quickly became ostracized by his peers because of his disability, leading him to fall down a rabbit hole of depression.

My brother was trapped in that six-foot-deep hole, with only me trying to tug him up by a lifeline. In the end, I

couldn't. I wasn't strong enough.

There was nobody to stand up to my father except me. My mother, Elaine, sacrificed her autonomy and her relationship with her own children to please my father. She cared for my brother, and it was obvious that when he became depressed, she wanted to help. But my father refused to get him the help he needed, and my mom obeyed him and stood idly by as her first-born withered into a shell of his former self.

Roden was older than me by two years, but I was always his protector. Always. Until the night I found him hanging from one of the rafter beams. He didn't leave a note, and that was what broke me the most. I didn't know how he was feeling in his last moments. I didn't get to say *goodbye*.

I failed my brother. I wasn't enough to make him stay in this world. I should've fought harder for him. It feels like I've spent my whole life fighting—fighting for my father's love, fighting for my mother's support. Eventually, it's just easier to give up.

A mosaic of prismatic colors pedals past my vision, and my mind is as foggy as condensation on glass when I place my lips to the rim of my shot glass. I've already put away five drinks, and the night's still young, so I'll probably be here until the bartender kicks me out.

I kill my drink with a toss of my head, and it's like a tumbleweed of fire rolling down my throat, warmth spidering to every part of my body. I cringe at the initial taste, but that doesn't stop me from flagging down the bartender for another shot. I need to stop feeling. I need to stop thinking. Heat welts me from every direction, almost strong enough to cancel out the musty scent of body odor and alcohol wafting off the inebriated crowd.

I'm at a bar and lounge called Mickey's that I frequent. The atmosphere is way too lively for my liking tonight, and I feel like I must be the only one here trying to drink themselves to an early grave.

"Maybe you should slow down," a voice says from behind me. It's thick, like crushed velvet, and it has a honeyed

undertone to it. It's nice, and it definitely belongs to a male.

But as pleasant as the voice is to listen to, the advice is unwelcome.

"Did you know it's rude to stick your nose in other people's business?" I ask, indignation swirling inside of my chest like a cinder.

There's a shuffling noise to my side, and judging by the displaced air, the intruder is now sitting directly next to me.

"Did you know that binge drinking can result in alcohol poisoning?"

I down the rest of my glass despite his warning. "Maybe that's the goal."

"You want to spend the rest of the night getting your stomach pumped in the ER?"

I snort, feeling heat bloom up the back of my neck. "Sounds exciting."

"I know you didn't ask for my advice, or my help, but what kind of Samaritan would I be if I let you get five hundred dollars in debt from a completely avoidable trip to the hospital?" he says.

I school my expression to the best of my ability, but my tone is clipped when I speak. I haven't looked at my annoyer yet, and I'd prefer to keep eye contact limited at this point. "Don't worry, nobody's watching your selfless act of kindness. You don't need to pretend to care."

"Who said anything about pretending?"

I hate the way my curiosity betrays me, because hook, line, and sinker, that gets me to turn right toward him.

He's a disturbingly attractive man—the kind of attractive you only see on billboards or movie screens. He looks to be about six foot three, and just going off the wideness of his shoulders, there's no question in hell that he'd be able to throw me across the room like a ragdoll right now if he wanted to.

His eyes are blue and enticing, like the undercurrents of a churning sea. I feel like he's a stare away from tricking me to dive into their misty depths and drown below treacherous waves.

His blond hair falls from its middle part and frames the sharp blades of his cheeks. He has a jawline that could grate cheese, as well as huge biceps that bulge outwards. If that's any indication of his muscle distribution, he probably has a matching set of abs that are about as solid as a barbecue grill under that flimsy shirt of his.

Oh, and I think he has dimples. Maybe. Jury's out.

"You're..." I slur, my cheeks turning rosy. *Come on, brain! Work! Form sentences!*

"Dashingly handsome? Super muscular? A young Leonardo DiCaprio?" Mystery Guy says, a full-throated chuckle breaching his very kissable lips. They're plush and pink, and his lower one is slightly bigger than the top. I watch with rapt focus as his tongue slides out to wet them, then disappears behind a row of pearly-white teeth.

My own heart is thudding in my ears like a caged bird. I was going to agree with him, but the next set of words out of my mouth aren't anywhere close to a compliment.

"...full of yourself," I finish.

That was supposed to be an inside thought, Aeris. AN INSIDE ONE.

"I like to think of it as having a healthy confidence," he muses.

I laugh, but it comes out humiliatingly flat. "More like being flippantly cocky."

He raises an eyebrow. "Is that your way of calling me attractive?"

Attractive? ATTRACTIVE? Are you kidding me? He's the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on.

"How did you possibly get that from what I just said?"

His cheeks puff out a little from the coy grin that crests between them. “You can tell a lot about a person from what they *don’t* say,” he tells me.

“You’re not hideously ugly, but don’t get a big head, alright?” I grumble.

“Oh, there’s plenty about me that’s big besides my head.”

As if on cue, my eyes slide down to his crotch, and then I immediately avert my gaze. My nervousness elicits a laugh from him, one that has his shoulders shaking and his voice thick with gravel.

“I’m not making you nervous, am I?” he drawls, scooting an inch closer to me, just waiting for me to walk right into his trap.

“You’re not making me nervous. You’re not even all that. If I had to guess how big your penis was, I’d say a three-inch punisher at best.”

Oh, God. Why did I just say that? The last thing this conversation needed was the addition of a discussion about male genitalia. ABORT!

He scrubs a large hand down his face, catching on the stubble dusting his jaw. “Damn, that’s being generous. I normally can’t get it up most days.”

I want to crawl into a hole and die. Embarrassment grips my body as any and all words rut against my throat, so I settle for a good, old-fashioned smile. But I don’t think it’s very charming. More like one of those awkward smiles people give each other when they’re passing one another in the grocery store.

Upon seeing my flustered expression, he corrects himself. “It’s a joke. I’m joking.”

“Riggght. Right.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes, both of us unsure how to continue the conversation, both particularly interested in the conveyor belt of people moving through the small space.

Finally, he caves.

“Are you here by yourself?” he asks.

Look, I’m smart enough to know I should *never* answer that question if a stranger asks, but there’s something that seems trustworthy about this guy. Then again, I’m pretty sure girls said the same thing about Ted Bundy, and, well...

I take another sip from my drink to occupy my mouth, nodding my head.

“And how much have you had to drink?” he hedges, folding his arms over his chest, testing the tight sleeves of his shirt. He’s looking at me expectantly, those baby blue eyes of his shimmering with concern as his lips bow into a frown—a frown that still happens to be attractive, mind you.

I blink owlishly, holding my fingers up and swaying a bit in my seat. “I...uh...I lost count,” I whisper.

The muscle in his jaw moves in tight circles, and he claps his hands together and points them right at me. “Let me guess. You’ve just been broken up with?”

I shake my head.

“You’re hiding from your boyfriend because you caught him using a lava lamp as a butt plug?”

A laugh sneaks its way out of my mouth, and as much as I want to frown, the corners of my lips give way to a smile. “I wish,” I reply.

“You wish you caught your boyfriend bumping his ugly with a household object?”

I glide my hand through my hair, suddenly wishing I hadn’t finished my drink so quickly, but if I order another, my bank account is going to cry. I probably won’t even have enough for groceries this week.

“I wish it was as simple as boy problems.”

My knight in shining armor casts me an easygoing grin. “Does this mean you don’t have a boyfriend?”

He guns me down with a look that has my lungs decompressing all the air out of my body, and I swallow the

leftover alcohol greasing my throat.

“Is that your way of flirting with me? Dazzling me with an award-winning smile and hoping my jeans will just fly off like tear-away pants?”

“Actually, most women tell me I don’t even need to smile. One look at me and they’re as naked as the day they were born.”

“Oh, how charming.”

He winks at me. “It’s a gift, really.”

Nerves wring my stomach, and heat spreads through me like a well-trained wildfire. I have no doubt in my mind that this guy has a roster full of ladies. Hell, his Friday nights probably consist of orgies galore.

“Well, your gift isn’t needed here. I’m doing perfectly fine, thank you.” I gesture to the accumulation of empty shot glasses stacked near me.

A lie. A lie that tastes worse than the bite of tequila.

He turns to face me, outstretching one arm against the bar counter, boxing me in from making a quick getaway. “Who says I was flirting with you?” he quips, spying the motion my tongue makes as it flicks out over my bottom lip.

There’s something in the way he’s staring at me—something that puts my entire body on high alert, and something that has my vagina rubbing her nonexistent hands together in the belief that she’s about to get some tonight. Which, she’s not.

A retort struggles to climb up my esophagus.

He leans in just a smidge, enough for his minty breath to feather over my face. “If I was flirting with you, you’d know.”

Heel, girl!

I steer my head away to hide the growing blush on my cheeks. Would I mind this mystery guy taking me in the bathroom and bending me over the sink? No. Do I think

there's a good chance of that happening tonight? Definitely not.

"So, what's the real reason you're here?" he finally asks, and the pain of the night returns.

I've found that when people ask how you're doing, a lot of times they don't really care how you answer. They only ask to be polite.

So I do the stupid thing and answer him truthfully, because I'm never going to see him again, and I need to get this weight off my chest before I shatter into a million pieces.

Poor guy. I'm not even giving him a chance to run.

Tears slather my cheeks with a warm wetness that intermingles with the spoiled air. "My brother. He, um, died seven years ago. His name was Roden. He was dealing with a lot mentally, and I didn't get him the help he needed."

I don't bother looking over, nor do I bother with wiping the snot on my face. I don't tell many people about what happened to Roden. One, I don't like to relive it. Two, it's not my story to tell. When my grandmother on my mother's side passed away, the kids in elementary school only said one thing to me, and that was "I'm sorry." I get it. I mean, there's really no perfect way to respond to that.

But "sorry" is an empty word. It doesn't mean anything. It's a placeholder that people use because they could not *possibly* imagine what it's like to lose a best friend, a platonic soulmate, or the only other person in the universe who understands you. It was me and Roden against the world—against my parents. So color me surprised when the first word out of this stranger's mouth isn't the S-word.

"My mother died of cancer when I was eight."

Are we sharing sob stories with each other? I don't know what I'm supposed to say to that. Shit, I can't say the S-word now.

"She was my best friend. She was also the best person I've ever met. She was caring and kind, and it was hard seeing her grow sicker. I wish I could've given her the life that she gave

me. And I know we're strangers, but I'm all too familiar with that guilt you're describing—that feeling that it should've been you instead."

"It feels like you're rubbing it in their face by being alive...like you're disrespecting them by moving on. I always feel guilty when I'm happy, because I know Roden wasn't for the majority of his life."

"That's valid, and even though I didn't know your brother, I think he'd want you to live your life and be happy."

He orders a shot for himself and downs it, but given his size, I don't think it's gonna do anything for him.

I blow a rebellious curl out of my eyes and nod, wanting to leave the hotseat as soon as possible.

"Is your dad in the picture?" I inquire.

A tight breath hurls out of him, his upper body tensing. "No. Richard, or more suitably, *Dick*, is the bane of my existence. Let's just say he won't be winning any Father of the Year awards. What about your dad?" he asks.

"I'm pretty much in the same boat as you. My dad is a misogynistic piece of shit. And my mom, well, she's emotionally MIA. They were never there for my brother. I was the only support he had."

I stave the emotion fogging up my eyes. I don't want to get into the gritty details, so I pivot the conversation back to him. "Do you have any siblings?"

His mouth rights itself into a smile. "I have a sister named Faye. She's on the other side of the country right now going to college at UPenn. She's smart, hardworking, and a way better person than I'll ever be. She's studying early childhood education so that when she graduates, she can work with kids."

"Wow. She sounds amazing," I admit in awe, running my finger along the rim of my empty shot glass.

"She really is."

My teeth touch as the tiny flutters stampeding through me metamorphosize into eagle-sized butterflies. “I don’t think you’re right, though. About being a bad person,” I add meekly.

His eyebrows bounce up. “I didn’t say I was a bad person.”

“It was implied.”

“Uh-huh. And how do you know I’m not a bad person?”

“I don’t know. I guess...I just get this feeling.”

He chuckles, and it’s an addicting symphony in my ears. It’s what I imagine heaven sounds like if it could be bottled and brought down to Earth.

“Do you live nearby? Maybe I should take you home,” he offers, splaying the back of his hand to my forehead. “Yeah, you’re a little flushed.”

If I was in my right mind, I’d never agree to go to a second location with a stranger. But I’m not in my right mind. Hell, if the world has plans for me to get murdered tonight, then so be it.

The alcohol is starting to curdle in my stomach, and I can taste bile bleeding into my throat.

“I live a few blocks away,” I reply, nearly tumbling face-first into his lap when I try to push myself out of my seat. He steadies me by the waist, and sparks crackle over my skin from his touch.

“Can you walk?” he rumbles, doing his best not to tighten his grip too much. His hands cover a large portion of my sides, with his extended thumb brushing the underwire of my bra. I’m half-aware that he’s close to touching my tits right now, and so is he, because he’s averting his eyes.

I nod, apparently having reverted to my cavewoman vocabulary. Without another word, Mystery Guy is sweeping me out of the doors of the bar.

BEER BEFORE LIQUOR, NEVER...

HAYES

When my boys told me to scope out Mickey's, I was immediately approached by a handful of girls who knew my name. But as attractive as they were, I couldn't keep my eyes off the lonely girl at the bar. Even with that dark parasol hanging over her, she caught my attention the moment I stepped into the place.

Autumn-colored ringlets fall softly in place on the middle of her back, her bangs framing a round face. Her eyes are dark, slathered in kohl that clings to the crescents of her lids and rides the length of luscious, dark lashes. She has a soft jawline and cherubic cheeks. And if my eyes don't deceive me, I can make out a few faint freckles that bridge over her nose.

I don't mean to unnerve her, but I can't stop staring at her body. She has curves in all the right places. Her cleavage is spilling out of her too-small top—one that I admire with a half-lidded gaze—and the hem of it ends just above her navel, where a sliver of tantalizing stomach extends into the waistband of her jeans. Did I mention she has a belly button piercing?

Outside the bar, I'm glad for the nightly chill that seems to be reining in my rising body temperature. The sky is a shawl of endless space, save for the milky stars that hang over our heads like sandbags. Moonlight filters in from the leaves above, casting its opalescent brilliance across overgrown vegetation in little streams.

Once we make our way to the sidewalk, the terrain lets up a bit and she gains her footing back. I plan on getting her home safe, then I'll head back to the house and lie to the guys about accomplishing my mission for the night. I couldn't just leave her there, not with how drunk she was. I know plenty of bottom-feeders who would've taken advantage of the situation.

The girl in front of me is a wobbly mess, so I'm doing the majority of the navigating for her. She shivers in the little number she has on, tufts of breath slipping through her lips and swirling through the air before being pulled apart by a relentless breeze. I shrug my jacket off and wrap it around her shoulders, earning me a tiny half smile.

"Thank you," she says quietly, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth as she concentrates on putting one foot in front of the other.

It dawns on me that I never got her name.

"What's your name?" I ask, not wanting to let my arms fall away, not wanting to stop touching her. I gamble with myself and decide to keep a light hand pressed to the small of her back for some extra support.

"Aer," she replies, a slight tremor to her vocal cords, one I'm hoping is from the cold and not my presence.

"Air?" I ask, making a stupid motion with my hands. "Like, O2?"

A laugh breaks free from her throat, and although it's at my expense, I can't help but love the way it sounds. Hoarse and full, melodic even.

"Aer," she corrects, dragging her tongue across her teeth. "Short for Aeris."

The name suits her. It's beautiful, just like she is, but I want to call her something that's uniquely mine.

"I think I'll call you Stacks," I decide.

Her brow crumples. "Huh?"

"You know, like a shortstack. Because you're short."

“Oh, har har. Very funny,” she monotones, making a show of turning her head up. “I’m not that short.”

My voice frays slightly. “I’m not making fun of you. I think it’s cute.”

She stops walking, then stares up at me through her lashes. “What’s *your* name?”

Her breath is warm as it settles over my neck. Her lips are full, red—maybe even swollen, if I didn’t know any better. I want to kiss her so badly. And she smells so good, like lavender mixed with a hint of strawberry. I inhale her like she’s an aphrodisiac.

I’m staring into melted pools of toffee—the kind of eyes that feel like September, like a warm breeze winnowing through the air, or like the coziness of a crackling fireplace.

And her touch...don’t get me started on her *touch*. I want it everywhere and all at once, scouring every inch of me. I want to know her body like the back of my hand, so I don’t have to open my eyes to find all the ways to make her come undone.

The desirous flower inside of me blossoms into an untamable fervor. I can feel a carnal ache in the marrow of my bones, feel the butterflies stir restlessly in the pit of my belly.

“Uh, it’s Hayes,” I respond, starting to walk, hoping she catches on and mirrors my strides.

Fascination dances in her caramelized eyes, and she hiccups, lolling her head against my sternum. Her six-inch heels give her some height, but without them, I’d guess she’d hit somewhere beneath my pectorals.

“And here I was going to call you Talls.”

She doesn’t know who I am? I mean, not everyone is a hockey fan, so I guess it’s not impossible to believe. I thought for sure she would’ve heard my name with all the publicity I’ve gotten recently, but I guess not. It’s...refreshing...to be myself around someone—the version of myself not attached to peoples’ expectations.

She's stopped moving, so I usher her forward a bit, but she seems pretty content with taking a break and falling asleep on my chest.

"You said you lived down here, right?" It's starting to get colder, and at the snail-like pace we're moving, we might contract hypothermia by the time we get to her place.

"Yep!" she says, popping the P. "It's the pink one."

"Okay, stay with me, Stacks. Just a little farther."

A lazy smile steals purchase over her mouth, and the tension stacked in her body melts a little. "I guess that's not so bad."

"What?" I humor her.

"My nickname."

I stop in my tracks. I don't know what it is about this girl, but she gets all my wires crossed.

"My mom would've liked you," I say.

It's true, she would've gotten along great with Aeris. Aeris might be small in stature, but she commands the attention of the room like a big shot. Sherry valued authenticity in a person. She said it was something inherent, and she could sniff out an ingenuine disposition after just one interaction.

If you'd told me that some drunk chick at a bar would get me to open up about my mother, I would've never believed you. I never talk about her. Whenever I think about my mom, I think about the fact that she went the one place I couldn't follow. It's nice that, for once, I can acknowledge her without the subsequent grief that always follows.

"Your mother...I would've...She sounds—"

Aeris' words are cut off by something, but I'm too distracted to notice that she's come to a shaky halt. Once I note the lack of a small person by my side, I turn around and quickly sprint back to her, holding her by both her arms.

"What's wrong? Why did you stop?" My heart and breath seem to be operating in the wrong rhythm.

She looks a lot paler than she did back at the bar. Her lips part, and the last thing I expect her to do is burp in my face. It seems to startle her, and I have to stifle a laugh.

“I’m so sorry,” she says in a rush, her lower lip quivering, her hands covering her face.

I gently move her hands away, using my index finger to lift her chin up. Her red-rimmed eyes are as large as discs, and they swim with water. “You’re fine. You’re okay. Do you want me to carry you the rest of the way?”

She shakes her head, hugging her arms around her midsection.

“It’s really no big deal. I think I can see your house from here.”

“I don’t...” I watch her throat work as she swallows, and then I hear her stomach emit a loud gurgle.

My tone is steeped with alarm. “Aeris, are you okay?”

That ivory pallor of hers has turned into a concerning shade of green.

Oh, shit.

I try to move her toward the bushes as quickly as I can without making her dizzy, but we barely make it a few steps before she throws up all over me.

STUCK BETWEEN A COCK AND A HARD PLACE

AERIS

I've officially hit rock bottom.

This is the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to me. Hayes should've left me at the bar to die.

I'm hunched over the bushes in the middle of the sidewalk, emptying the contents of my stomach from the last twenty-four hours. Hayes rubs soothing circles on my back, even holding my hair out of my face. Oncoming torrents of sweat drench my skin, and rivulets of half-digested food expel from me, splattering the patchy grass.

It takes me forever to finish retching, but when I do, I can barely even look at Hayes. His white shirt is a motley shade of brown, and it's already starting to smell.

Worry teeters on the precipice of my hyperactive mind. "I'm so sorry. Oh my God. I can't believe I just did that," I cry, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "I'll buy you a new shirt, I promise—"

Concern rings in his voice. "Aeris, it's okay. Now, I'm going to repeat what I asked you, okay?"

Once the nausea starts to subside and the dizziness becomes manageable, I nod obediently.

"Are you feeling fine, or do you need me to carry you the rest of the way?"

"I can walk."

“Okay,” Hayes says, his fingers still placating me with their gentle eddying on my back.

Once we make it to my doorstep, Hayes idles behind me, like he’s a vampire that needs to be invited inside.

With the door still open, I gesture for him to come inside.

He doesn’t move.

“You can come in,” I tell him in case he needs some kind of verbal confirmation.

“You don’t know me. I’m not going to come inside your house.”

I place two hands on my hips. “Are you a serial killer?”

“No, but...”

“Then you have my permission to come inside.”

He opens his mouth to argue, but I cut him off before he can get trapped in that pretty head of his.

“I’m not sending you all the way home like that. At least clean up, okay? Then you can be on your merry way.”

I have a feeling that Hayes is a naturally stubborn person, but lucky for me, he stops resisting. I throw his dirty shirt in the laundry, quickly brush my teeth, then I open my shower up to him.

I forfeit a sigh, flopping onto my back on my bed.

This was not how I pictured the night ending. I wouldn’t have been against a little light groping and a sloppy makeout sesh. I also wouldn’t have resisted a terrible one-night stand that I’d inevitably have to buy Plan B for in the morning. But this...this is scraping the bottom of the barrel. This is something my dignity will never recover from. Would it be rude of me to sneak out of my own house? I need to get a passport, change my name, dye my hair, and relocate to Mexico as soon as humanly possible.

And to make matters worse, I can’t seem to get out of my form-fitting clothes. Why are trivial tasks so much harder when you’re drunk? I hate it.

I shimmy my hips without fully sitting up, trying to do some kind of hop-jump combination to get my jeans to release my legs from their denim prisons. My pants are clinging to me like Saran wrap, and the more I struggle, the more my frustration ratchets. Amidst the battle, I've lost a heel, and the other one is moments from rocketing off to the other side of my room.

I feel something fuzzy slither around my leg, and I look down through graying vision to pinpoint my tuxedo cat, Crunchwrap, nuzzling against me. And yes, she's named after the Crunchwrap Supreme from Taco Bell.

I abandon my mission of freeing my lady bits, picking Crunch up and holding her Lion King-style over top of me.

"I messed up tonight, girl. Big time." Heat prickles the back of my neck, hot tears loom in my eyes, and regret begins to snowball through me.

"If Roden saw me now, he'd be so disappointed." I blink away the moisture on my lower lash line that's threatening to leave streaky evidence through my foundation.

Crunch stares at me with her demonic, yellow eyes, blinking slowly like she can secretly understand every word I'm saying. I'm holding her under her armpits so the top half of her looks a little smushed, and she usually hates being held this way—with her arms sticking straight out—but she isn't hissing or batting at me. Cats are attuned to their owner's emotions, right? God, this must be her way of pitying me.

"This guy I met, Hayes, he seems like a great guy. But I can't let him in—not that I think I stand a chance with him after tonight," I explain, a single tear slipping from the threshold of my weary eyes. My heart aches like it's been wrung out to dry, and there's this unsettled flicker in my belly that I know isn't from the alcohol.

Crunch meows at me, turning her head to lick at the scruff of her neck.

"He's beautiful. He really is. Oh, God. And I think I made a comment about his penis," I mumble. "Like, yeah, I joked

that it was small, but it looks a lot bigger than average.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” I hear Hayes say from the bathroom doorway, and I shriek, flinging my cat to the floor.

I’m not sure why I was expecting him to magically come out clothed, but the only thing he’s wearing is a towel slung low on his hips.

Hayes is a statue carved from the finest of marble. His lack of pants makes for a very clear show of the hard V-line he has, no doubt leading to a mouthwatering sight at the apex of his bulging thighs.

The taut ripples of his abs glisten from leftover water, and I can’t tear my eyes away from the corded ropes of muscle that band themselves around his arms. His bicep looks to be the equivalent size of my head. *My head*. I don’t think his hand would strain to wrap fully around my neck.

He’s barrel-chested, and there’s tiny, illegible scripture scrawled above his left pectoral. I don’t see any other tattoos marring his skin—until he gives me a brief flash of his back. And wow, what a back it is. All winding ridges and dips, accompanied by a thinly drawn tree that scales the length of his spine.

It must have hurt like hell to get a tattoo straight on the bone. If Hayes deals with pain so well, I wonder where he exceeds in other departments. And don’t get me started on his ass. All I can make out are two soft dimples resting right above the juiciest globes I’ve ever seen.

His hair is unkempt and waterlogged, and I get this urge to drag my nails along his scalp. There’s a teasing crinkle below his aquamarine eyes as he waits for me to herd all my runaway thoughts and form a coherent sentence.

A hot, white flash of embarrassment careens through me. “How much of that did you hear?” I hyperventilate.

Laughter thunders in his chest. “Just the part about my apparently bigger-than-average dick.”

Heat crawls into my cheeks and turns the tips of my ears red. “Please ignore me. I’m heavily intoxicated right now. I

don't mean a word I'm saying," I say, albeit the conviction sounds weak.

His eyebrows jump to his hairline. "So you don't think I have a bigger-than-average dick?"

The gears in my mind turn, my brain finally able to function at least enough to hold my tongue.

"I...didn't *not* say that."

His stare is stormy and intense, and his tongue peeks through his lips to periodically hydrate them. I wouldn't mind denting the lower one with my teeth. Jesus, I need to be spayed.

"You're adorable when you blush, you know that?" A flirtatious lilt skirts along his tone.

Of course his comment makes me blush even harder.

I've never been good with accepting compliments, so I decide to change the subject as discreetly as possible. "Your, uh, clothes have about two hours before they'll be done," I inform him.

"Thank you again for letting me borrow your washer and dryer." There's a genuineness that hangs off every word he says—something that's been foreign to me in all my twenty-three years of existing on this godforsaken planet.

I don't have the best track record with guys. My last ex, Wilder Mason, was a manipulator, but I was so blindly in love with him that I tricked myself into making up excuses for the way he treated me. I thought it was normal for him to always ask me where I'd be and who I'd been with. I thought it was normal for him to regulate how much I ate and what I wore. I hate my body because of the way he treated me. When I wasn't in the mood to be intimate with him, he'd guilt-trip me, tell me I was being selfish by not tending to his needs, and convince me that no guy would ever want a girl who wasn't sex-crazy.

I became Wilder's puppet, his prisoner. He isolated me from all my friends, even my family. He yearned for control, and my eagerness to please him made me the perfect target for

his manipulation. After a while, I wanted out, but I was too afraid to leave. I was afraid of what he would've done. I was afraid that he was going to *hit* me.

When my brother died, Wilder was the only one I could turn to. My relationship with my parents was too strained at the time. But after hearing about Roden's suicide, he packed up all his things and left. A selfish part of me was relieved to be free of him, but the neglected part of me suffered without a support system. Wilder promised me he'd always be there for me, no matter what happened. That he'd always love me.

I've been chasing after love my entire life, wanting that gratification of meaning something to another person. But life doesn't work that way. People don't work that way.

Wilder destroyed the hopeless romantic in me. He destroyed my hope for love. And now I stay far away from any of those feelings, because I already know how the story ends. I already know that heartache is waiting for me at the finish line.

As much as I want to let Hayes in, I can't. I don't think I'd survive another person abandoning me. First my brother, and then Wilder. The two people I loved most at one point in my life. I hate love. I didn't used to, but I do.

You either love too little and watch everything you've built slip through your fingers like sand in an hourglass, or you love too much, and that heap of sand weighs your chest down until you can't breathe. Love isn't black and white. It's a murky gray, a bleak landscape devoid of effervescent life. And it's my crucible.

"It's the least I can do since I ruined them," I remind him, my hand badgering at the roots of my ratty hair. I feel greasy and disgusting. I haven't taken a shower in two days, my deodorant has definitely worn off by now, and I'm almost positive I'm rocking a whole raccoon eye look.

Hayes sits down next to me, the mattress giving way to his weight. "You need to stop being so hard on yourself," he chastises, startling me when he reaches out to hold my hand.

The raised scars on his palm send a lance of electricity through my arm, but I don't pull away.

This is the closest I've been to him, so I take advantage of the proximity. Through a sleepy gaze, I memorize every part of him—his ambrosial cologne, his well-defined dimples, the forefront curl in his blond hair, the way his upper canines hang a bit lower than the rest of his teeth, the cerulean ring around his pupils.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” I blurt out, and the minute those words windmill out of me, I want to slap a return to sender sticker on them.

Great. Good going, Aeris.

His seafoam irises turn a deeper shade as he ponders me, spotlighting the veins of gold branching out from his pupils. “Why wouldn't I be nice to you?” he inquires.

I slam my lips together, withdrawing my arm from his grasp. “Because you don't know me.”

“What's your last name?” he asks, his voice sporting a warmth that's enough to rid the goose bumps on my arms.

“Relera. Why?”

“I'm getting to know you, Aeris. Plus, I need to know the name of the beautiful girl who let me escort her home.”

That line shouldn't have worked on me...but it did. And I'm not ashamed to admit it.

“What do you do for work?” he continues.

“I'm a content writer for a social media company called Your Ass Is Grass, which specializes in promoting unique vegan recipes,” I say, picking at my wrist—a nervous habit I've entertained various times before.

He cocks an eyebrow. “No way. Seriously? That's the coolest thing I've ever heard,” he remarks, and I can tell he means every word of it.

“It's not too bad.”

““Not too bad”? Aeris, that's awesome.”

I manage to untangle the words caught on my tongue.
“What do you do for work?”

His teeth lock in place, and he rubs the length of his neck.
“I’m, uh...I’m a personal trainer.”

That explains the muscles.

“Look, Hayes, you don’t have to do this. I’m not asking you to talk with me. I can be...a lot...sometimes.”

Ah, and the waterworks are right on time. Despondency wades through my bloodstream, subsequently siphoning all the air out of my lungs. My chest feels tight, my breath is bated, and tears swipe at the backs of my eyes.

“I know. I want to,” Hayes counters. “And I don’t scare easily.”

You should, I say to myself.

But instead, all I offer him is a watery smile. I begin to fumble with the zipper on the back of my corset, but my poor coordination hinders me from making any progress. My arms oscillate around, and I twist aimlessly from side to side, probably looking like a fish out of water.

With a groan, I turn my back to Hayes.

“Can you, uh...can you help me?” I ask timidly, gesturing to the death trap currently cutting off all my circulation. It’s pulled so tight that my boobs are barely contained, swelling over the tops of the sewn-in bra cups.

He gulps thickly, and I catch him blushing out of the corner of my eye. His long fingers make quick work of the zipper. My top is off within the second, and I cross my arms over my exposed chest just as Hayes disappears into the bathroom.

Once I’m in a T-shirt and some sweatpants, I call out to Hayes that the coast is clear. I hear a clanking noise come from the other side of the door, and when he emerges, he’s double-fisting a bottle of Tylenol and a glass of water.

“I, uh, found a glass in your medicine cabinet.” He hands the drink to me, along with a few pills.

“Thanks,” I say, swallowing them back and hoping that they work faster than advertised. The more conscious I become, the more the queasiness flows.

“Do you have any crackers? Maybe they’ll help with the nausea.”

The acid in my gut sloshes around, and I place a hand on my stomach, as if I’m making some kind of unspoken truce with it. “Crackers probably aren’t the best idea.”

Hayes nods, leaning his shoulder against the wall.

The silence in the room is entirely too loud, but I’m too nervous to say much of anything. I’m afraid I’ll word-vomit on him. Or, you know, actually vomit on him...again.

Finally, after what seems like a millennium, my voice cracks when it tastes the air. “You should probably get going after your clothes dry. I wouldn’t want to keep you.”

Disappointment flashes across his features like a broken roll of film. “Right,” he agrees, though his mouth falls into a hard line.

“Right.”

The truth is, I don’t want Hayes to leave. I don’t want to be alone. Hayes is the first person since my brother’s death who’s made life feel a little less hopeless. But as much as I wouldn’t mind falling asleep in his arms, listening to the soft patter of his heart, I’m never going to allow myself to feel that vulnerable ever again.

THE MORNING AFTER

AERIS

S unlight peters through the slits in my blinds as warmth fills me to the tips of my toes, trickling down the length of my spine. When I muster the courage to pry my eyes open, my head feels like it's been crushed by an industrial car compactor, and my mouth is as dry as sandpaper.

I groan, thrashing in my swelter of sheets.

Did I imagine last night? Did I hallucinate the whole thing? I guess it doesn't matter, because I never got Hayes' number—*if* he was a real person.

I jackknife to a sitting position, wiping the dried drool at the corner of my mouth. I reach for my phone and take in the giant eleven on my home screen.

I really don't want to get out of bed. I want to hibernate like bears do in the winter and sleep for days. Bears don't have to deal with feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness—at least, I don't think they do.

But thanks to the water I kept nursing last night and my biologically tiny bladder, I'm going to have to get out of bed one way or another.

I wobble down the hallway and into the bathroom, narrowly tripping over a curled ball of fluff in the center of the floor.

Crunchwrap stares at me, hisses, then saunters out of the room. Little shit.

I'm in the bathroom for longer than I would've liked, mostly because I almost fall asleep on the toilet. The second I step into the hallway, the intoxicating scent of maple bacon ambushes my nostrils, making my mouth water.

Why do I smell bacon?

Once I round the corner, I'm pleasantly surprised to find a blond giant hunched over my stove, humming to himself under his breath. There's no denying whose back that belongs to. Hayes is in my kitchen, cooking me breakfast. Did I enter some parallel universe? This can't be happening.

He's ditched the towel for his clean set of clothes, and now that the lighting is more than subpar, I can appreciate the way the fabric clings to every bundle of muscle. I watch with hooded eyes as he reaches up to grab something from the cabinet, making the hem of his shirt ride up, exposing a sliver of washboard abs. The faint happy trail disappearing beneath the waistband of his pants magnetizes me.

Dear Lord, give me strength. Make me think about anything else besides riding Hayes like it's the Kentucky Derby.

"Hayes?" I pipe up, his name barely leaving my lips.

Hayes finishes shoveling the last of the sizzling bacon onto a plate, his whole face lighting up as his gaze lands and softens on me. "You're awake," he chirps, loading up his arms with multiple dishes of breakfast foods.

Not only has he cooked bacon, but there's a stack of chocolate chip pancakes, a bowl of fruit salad, and a side of scrambled eggs.

Confusion claws at my chest. "I don't remember having this much food in the house," I comment, a little notch forming between my brows.

"You didn't. I went grocery shopping."

"You went grocery shopping?"

He nods his head. "I've had my fair share of bad hangovers, and you seemed like you could use some cheering

up.”

“You didn’t have to do anything for me,” I insist, shaking my head.

Hayes plies me with a disarming grin, one that births a firestorm inside of me. A cloying warmth leaps to life in my heart, maintaining a fuzzy circulation in my veins.

“I wanted to.”

His words are so simple, so straightforward, yet it’s the most beautiful proclamation my ears have ever heard.

Say thank you, Aeris.

My cheeks flush, and I struggle to suck in a single atom of oxygen. “I...”

He must descry my uneasiness because he takes the reins of the conversation. “How are you feeling? Think you can stomach some food?”

I open my mouth to answer him, but my stomach lets out a deafening growl instead.

A hearty chuckle rocks his beefy frame. “I’ll take that as a yes,” he says, pulling my chair out for me.

Blushing, I shuffle over to him, planting my ass in my seat without objection. There’s a tangled mess of nerves writhing inside of me, and that’s the last thing I want to feel at a ripe eleven in the morning.

I wait patiently as Hayes sits across from me, but the moment I pick up my fork, all my ladylike manners fly out the window. Oh my God. The chocolate chips from the pancakes melt on my tongue, and the sweetness pairs perfectly with the salt from the bacon.

“This is incredible,” I mumble through my food, shielding my mouth with my hand.

Hayes shrugs bashfully. “I went through a Master Chef stage at one point. It’s nowhere near Gordon Ramsay approved, but it’s not half bad.”

I bob my head enthusiastically, spearing a chunk of pancake and a crispy piece of bacon. Once the medley of flavors inundates my tastebuds, an orgasmic moan escapes me, and I slouch against the back of the chair.

Hayes bristles. “Jesus, you’re going to kill me.”

“What?”

He pushes his empty plate away from him, which I swore was just filled to the brim with food. His Adam’s apple slides in his throat. “I—never mind.”

The second I’m done with my food, Hayes is up and out of his seat, and in two quick strides, he’s standing right next to me. The sight of him hits me like a freight train, and it urges me up from my chair.

His calloused hand ghosts over the contour of my cheek. “Can I kiss you?”

I’m so close to him that I can see the disproportionate reflection of myself in his pupils, can smell the sweet aftertaste of chocolate on his breath, can feel the heat radiating off his body in tidal waves.

His eyes travel over my lips, conduits of anxiety zinging through every inch of me. I accept his invitation with a wordless confirmation, rising to my tiptoes and twining my arms behind his neck, slowly leaning in. I wait for him, anticipate him, and I thank my adrenaline for keeping me interlocked in his grasp.

A melting pot of colors breaks through me when our lips acquaint themselves with each other, and I inhale him like the weight of the world has suddenly lifted off my shoulders. He tastes like a warm afternoon, and I’m afraid that if I risk a glance away, he’ll fade into the backdrop of my imagination.

I want to hold him closer; I want to deepen the kiss. His tongue prods at the seam of my lips, requesting passage, and I let him slip deeper into my mouth, allowing him complete access to the very threads of my DNA.

His hand snakes around my throat, applying the slightest pressure on either side of my windpipe, and my breath

pinches. I delve my fingers into his back, scraping my nails through the soft material of his shirt. My peaked nipples brush against his chest as viscous arousal saturates my panties.

A growl rumbles in the back of his throat, and he clamps his hands down on my waist, pulling me into him. I flaunt my clavicle to him, mewling when his lips leech on to the bone. He pulls the thin skin between his teeth, sucking, gnawing, then soothing the purpling bite mark with a lap of his tongue.

Tiny aftershocks quiver through my body from the blast of his touch. “I...want...”

“What do you want, Aeris?” Hayes teases, stroking his hand up my stomach, lingering just below my tits. The bass of his voice throws accelerant on the fire of lust blazing through me.

“I—”

I’m interrupted by the blaring ring of Hayes’ phone.

He lets it go for a few rings, then picks it up with a soft groan, disengaging himself from our entanglement.

I fight off a frown, willing the warmth in my groin to subside.

Holy shit. Why did I let him kiss me? This is going to end badly, I just know it. My number one rule is to never let anyone in. And what’s the first thing I do? I let someone in.

Hayes looks agitated as he listens to the voice on the other side of the speaker, and his reply is brusque. “Okay, I’m on my way.”

Once he hangs up, regret simmers in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I have to get to pr—I have to go.”

I gnash my teeth together. “It’s okay. I appreciate you making breakfast,” I tell him.

“Do you have your phone on you?”

I slip the device from the back pocket of my sweatpants, unlocking it and handing it to him.

His fingers work at lightning speed, and when he hands it back to me, his contact information is broadcasted across the screen. “Call me, okay?”

The corners of my mouth hook up into a smile. “Okay.”

His lips make one last pass at my cheek, and then he’s out the door, headed to God knows where. I don’t know if I’ll see him again. When people leave, they usually don’t come back. That’s something I’ve come to accept—that people will leave no matter how hard you beg them to stay.

HOCKEY? I HARDLY KNOW HER

HAYES

I try my best to ignore the warning signs of a colossal headache, but pain has already claimed its home behind my eyes. Anger is a quick-acting agent inside of me, and it short-circuits every nerve inside of my body.

My game is off today, and Coach can tell. I hadn't realized how much time had passed during breakfast. This was the first practice I've ever been late for.

"Hollings, what the hell is going on with you?" Coach barks, his tone laden with aggravation.

Coach takes pride in his hockey team. His real name is John Labanowski. He was a center for the Tennessee Chasers, but he had to retire after he suffered an injury to his ACL during his sixth season in the NHL. Coach was good, probably one of the best players the Tennessee Chasers had ever seen. He was a big inspiration for me when I got into hockey.

I take my mouthguard out, skating to a halt. "I'm sorry, Coach."

He crooks a finger, beckoning me over. Fuck.

My thumb runs over the bitten stubs of my fingernails, my knuckles losing more and more color as frustration furrows my brow.

"Please tell me your late night consisted of you finding a way to solve this hiccup with Talavera's daughter."

"It actually did."

Coach's hands form a steeple underneath his whiskery chin. "I don't need to know the details, son, but I'm assuming your agent has already debriefed you on what to do?"

"We had a...rather long conversation about it," I admit sheepishly.

"Look, I'm glad the team will start getting some good press, but the game is tomorrow, and by the looks of it, you're not playing anywhere near your full potential," he carps, and his voice slices into me like the snap of a hundred violin strings in an empty auditorium. "I get you have a life outside of hockey, but hockey should be your main focus. You know that. I've been patient with you, lenient. This is a privilege."

He's right. This is a privilege. I'm lucky to be here, and I have to convince the hockey world that I belong on the Reapers. I worked my ass off to get here. I can't let some bad press deter me. I need to think about my reputation. If I want a long-standing career in the NHL, I'm going have to rebrand my image, just like Bristol told me.

I need to convince Aeris to be in a relationship with me. She's my ticket to keeping my spot on the Reapers. She's my ticket to gaining back my respect. But if I'm going to keep hockey at the forefront of my mind, I can't get wrapped up in some pesky feelings for her.

"You've got my focus. I promise."

Coach has been like a father figure to me, and all I want to do is make him and my team proud. Everyone on the Reapers is taking a chance on me, despite the bad publicity I've brought them. This is my life. This is all that matters.

His eyes scrutinize me, and I feel like I'm a specimen under his microscope. "I'll believe it when I see it. I have no problem demoting you to fourth line, do you hear me? Not second, not third, *fourth*. If you're gonna play like an amateur, I'll make sure your playing time gets cut in half."

"Understood, Coach," I reply, the cavorting of my heart the only medium keeping me alert.

Determination feeds every step when I skate back onto the ice. Coach has us go through a series of shooting, passing, and defensive drills before calling practice.

Bristol sidles up to me, bumping his hip against mine. “Dude, the fans are going crazy,” he tells me, his speech slightly impaired by the hindrance of his mouth guard.

I cant my head, confused. “About?”

Bristol’s lips gather into a proud grin, and he whacks my helmet with his glove. “The girl you were spotted with last night.”

My jelly-like joints feel like they’ve just experienced a ten-story drop. Not even my skates can keep my knees from buckling. “Pictures are already out?”

“Not just out—trending. And not just pictures. I’ve seen some pretty intricate fan cams. My Instagram feed is full of your annoyingly attractive face.”

I skate over to the sidelines, picking up my water bottle and squirting water into my mouth, then dousing the rest of it over my face. Cold liquid ribbons down my neck and over the shelf of my collarbone. I need to cool down.

“I guess that’s good. The plan working, I mean.”

“It’s better than good, H. You looked genuinely happy talking to her.” Bristol takes his helmet off and shakes his sweat-drenched locks. “Are you going to tell her?”

My tongue plays along the bottom of my lip. “Tell her?”

“That you need to fake date her?” Bristol follows up, an imperceptible tic to his jaw.

I prop my chin on the end of my stick, letting it take a bit of my weight. “I mean, yeah, that’s the plan,” I disclose, but his uncertainty sets a flutter in my gut, like a loose cannon of confetti has gone off inside me.

“I wouldn’t do that,” a voice pipes up from behind me. It’s Kit.

“Why not?” I ask.

“It won’t be believable. People can sniff out a fake relationship from miles away, especially hockey fans. If they find out you’re putting on a show to get in their good graces, they’re going to have even more of a reason to hate you,” he explains matter-of-factly, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “If she knows, it might influence how authentic her actions are.”

My confidence gutters. “Shit.”

I didn’t think I was gonna have to lie to her about it. I don’t know if I can. Aeris is a good person. She doesn’t deserve to be lied to. She’s already suffered through so much, and the last thing I’d want to do is add to her suffering. But then again, if I don’t switch this narrative around soon, I can say goodbye to my life with the Reapers when I get traded.

Bristol is just as stunned as I am, because he’s giving Kit a *what the hell?* look.

Kit doesn’t seem fazed by either of our reactions. Then again, he’s not really the most empathetic person.

“I don’t know, Kit...” My heart presses painfully against my ribcage, threatening to burst out *Alien* style.

“You don’t have to, but if you really want to make this stunt believable, I’d keep my mouth shut.”

“I feel guilty for not being upfront with her.”

Disgust contorts Kit’s features. “Why? You just met her, right? You don’t owe her anything.”

“You don’t have feelings for her, do you?” Bristol probes, hoisting an eyebrow.

My stomach migrates to my throat. “I barely know her.”

It’s true: I don’t know Aeris that well. I guess I feel connected to her because we’re both familiar with death. But I can’t let that connection get in the way of everything I’ve worked so hard to attain—my career, my reputation. This is a means to an end. I’m not emotionally prepared to get hurt again, and I’d be damned if I let Aeris know she was the first girl in a while to have pierced the tiniest hole in my armor.

“Good. Feelings make stuff messy. Think of this like a business transaction. You dote on her in public, the fans go wild for this soft side of you, and you remake a name for yourself. They’ll forget all about how badly you’ve fucked up in the past. Now you have them rooting for you instead of praying for your downfall.”

My nerves scream at me to reconsider, probably wanting to grab me by the collar of my jersey and shake until some sense lodges itself into my brain. “What if things turn real?”

The crease in Bristol’s forehead deepens. “On your end or hers?”

“Both? I don’t know.”

“Then they become real,” Kit replies. “But if I know you, H—which I do—I know that’s the last thing you want right now.”

Kit’s words ring through me like alarm bells. I shouldn’t have even spoken that into existence. I won’t allow things to turn real. This is a fake relationship. Aeris will be my pretend girlfriend, and nothing more. I’ve dealt with plenty of girls during my time with the Reapers. I’ve trudged through heartbreak and revenge and the occasional attempted break-in. What’s a sweet little thing like Aeris going to do to me?

**SOME SECRETS ARE BETTER LEFT
HIDDEN**

AERIS

I swing my legs against the side of my pink comforter, my hands clawing for anything that can act as a stress ball.

Lila, my best friend, has somehow convinced me to go with her to a hockey game tonight. I know jackshit about hockey. Roden was more interested in the arts, and the only sport my father watched religiously was football.

Lila and I have been best friends ever since my freshman year of college. We met at a house party that I'd been dragged to by my roommate—who wasn't the nicest person, and who also used my hand towels to dry her vibrators without telling me.

After my roommate left me to fend for myself among upperclassmen, Lila found me like the unsuspecting mouse I was in a flock full of hungry hawks. She took me under her wing that night and introduced me to all of her friends, which was a welcome change from cowering in the corner and pretending to text on my phone.

I'm lucky to have found Lila. She's helped me cope with my brother's death and the estrangement from my parents. I don't know where I'd be without her.

I'm used to Lila being able to ease my worries fairly quickly, but the more I think about Hayes' curt departure and the fact that he hasn't texted me back yet, the more it continues to nourish my unease.

She must've picked up on my tortured expression because her hands are on her hips and her head is tilted. "What's up,

Aer-Bear? You've been quiet this whole time," she whines.

Anxiety beats like a second heart in my head, and my qualms express themselves through irregular breaths. "Remember that guy I mentioned to you?"

"The guy you tossed your cookies all over?"

"Yes...that guy..."

She minces over to her makeup vanity on wheels, picks up an eyeshadow palette, and lifts some of the charcoal powder onto my eyelids. "What about him, love?"

"I texted him, but I haven't heard back from him yet."

Once Lila gives me some room to breathe, I lean down and pick up Crunch, setting her in my lap. She chirps happily, then walks in a circle before burrowing into a little ball.

"Oh, sweetie." Lila uses her thumb to tilt my chin up. "Guys are dogs. They lead girls on because they don't know what they want, and then they let you down gently by claiming that 'You're a good girl, and I'm not ready for a relationship.' Even though the entire time you were together, he treated you like you were his girlfriend. Even kissed you on the forehead!"

"Uh..."

She exhales abrasively, her makeup brush flittering in and out of my peripheral. "Sorry, unresolved trauma. Maybe he's just been busy," she supplies, her butterscotch ringlets bouncing against her shoulders. "Do you know what he does for work?"

"He said he's a personal trainer," I say, trying to tamp down the dose of anxiety suffusing through my veins.

"Maybe he got into a car accident on his way to work, broke all the bones in his body, had to be airlifted to the hospital, and hasn't been able to use his phone?"

I laugh for what feels like the first time in forever, and the panic in my heart immediately thaws into a lukewarm splendor.

"Maybe it was something I said."

Lila swats my arm, making me yelp. Crunch shoots straight up into the air, her needle-thin claws piercing my legs, and she zooms out of the room before I have time to pet her back into submission.

“Stop finding ways to blame yourself. This is on him. If he can’t see how incredible you are, then he doesn’t deserve a second of your time, okay?” she growls, practically flaying me alive with her stone-cold gaze.

Angry Lila is scary. She’s never unleashed her full wrath on me, but I did witness her tearing into a pledge during a frat party after he drunkenly poured his drink all over some girl. If I hadn’t stopped her, she probably would’ve harvested his balls and hung them over her rearview mirror like a pair of fuzzy dice.

“Okay.”

“Uh-huh. Say it once more, with feeling.”

“Okay?”

“Close enough,” she sighs, standing back to admire her work. “Perfect! You look beautiful as always.”

She hands me a mirror, bouncing on the balls of her feet excitedly.

She’s gone for a smoky eye—which seems a little intense for a hockey game, but looks gorgeous, nonetheless—a touch of blush on my cheeks, a brush of mascara on my lashes, and a shiny gloss that enhances my Cupid’s bow.

My hair has a slight wave to it as it cascades down my shoulders, ending at the hem of my cropped jersey top. The top was Lila’s idea. She’s gotten me to step out of my comfort zone and experiment more with outfits that don’t solely consist of oversized shirts and sweatpants. I’ve also tried my luck at a pair of bootcut jeans, ones that will hopefully slide off my legs without resistance. And no heels tonight. Or ever again.

Lila’s hair is curled into full corkscrews, and she’s donned a clean, natural makeup look. Her pink bodycon dress hugs her poised and elegant body, revealing tan, long legs. The neckline is low—a Lila Perkins special—and it accentuates every curve

of her perky cleavage. Lila dresses up for every occasion. Nothing is ever plain and simple with her. She doesn't mind the stares or the scandalized whispers. She's confident in her body, and she doesn't like to be relegated to stupid, sexist clothing etiquette.

I pick at the grime hugged to the underside of my fingernail. "Do you think I should text him again?"

"How about we forget about dumb boys and try to have fun tonight?" she proposes, yanking my arms and pulling me from my sulking.



LILA STARTS her parade of apologies as she ducks down in front of a row of people, snacks spilling out from the cradle of her arms.

"So that's why it took you ten minutes to come back," I snicker, snatching a kernel of popcorn from her and popping it in my mouth.

She rolls her eyes, ripping open a packet of Skittles and dumping at least half of it down her gullet. I don't know how she doesn't chew them one by one. I don't even know if she tastes them. "Food is the best part of any sports game. Aside from the hot players."

I stare down at the empty rink, crinkling my nose. "Eh, hockey players aren't really my type."

"Really?" she exclaims through a mouthful of food. "Have you seen their butts?"

Have I seen their butts? I can admit that it's not the first thing I usually notice, but consider my interest piqued. I glance around to take in the atmosphere, mentally taking note of all the fans decked out in blue and black merchandise. Some are holding up glittery signs; others are waving foam fingers.

Something about being surrounded by comradery feels comforting. I sit through Lila's ten-minute spiel about the rules

of the game, but I honestly don't know how much information I'll retain. I lost her at "They can beat each other up."

The announcer's boisterous voice soon fills the entire stadium, stirring a rumbling amidst the crowd, hoots and hollers harpooning the glacial air. A crescendo vibrates in my bones, and the overhead lights flash in accordance with the epic beats of what I can only assume is the hockey team's theme song. Particles from the ice swirl in the diaphanous light beams, lifting up in a fragile mist. A cracking animation feathers out from the center of the rink, and a large, black shape descends from the rafters. It isn't until the spotlights illuminate the extravagant image that I realize it's a giant grim reaper. Which makes a lot of sense now, considering the team is...the Riverside Reapers.

There are a few prerecorded cracks of thunder that reverberate in the arena, and the lights mimic a flash of lightning, backlighting the glowing red eyes in the skull of the reaper. Cheers erupt all around me, and everyone unanimously clambers to their feet, clapping in collective elation. The lights still, and the announcer's voice deluges my ears again, clear as day.

"Please welcome your Riverside Reapers!"

And one by one, tiny hockey players—well, tiny from where I'm sitting—exit the tunnel, skating around the perimeter of the rink and raising their arms up, rousing the audience. Some of the fans' voices rise to decibel levels, and I think I momentarily lose hearing in one ear.

The players spend about thirty minutes warming up before any of the actual playing starts. The game commences at the sound of the buzzer, and streaks of jerseys all shoot out to their designated zones. The puck is placed in the center of the rink, and the jumbotron zeroes in on the two players hovering on either side of the puck. The guy on the Reapers is handsome from what I can tell—brown hair that curls under his helmet, honeysuckle eyes, and a perfectly sloped nose. I'm not granted much time to gawk before movement stutters past my vision in rapid afterimages. The puck ping-pongs between players at a speed I didn't know was possible.

Number thirty-six, Brenner, careens across the ice, practically moving at the speed of sound, and he closes in on the opposing team's goal, but he doesn't take the shot. He passes to another player, number eighteen, Hollings, who does some kind of fake-out trick before wrenching his arm on a diagonal and sinking the puck into the net.

Everyone bursts into a hurricane of frenzied euphoria. Even Lila is at the edge of her seat. She's all endearment and enthusiasm, the two folding into one another on the canvas of her face.

When the camera pans to the first scorer of the evening, my heart sinks into the soles of my shoes, and every contradictory emotion crashes into me like waves against a rocky outcrop. There, definitely not in a full-body cast from a life-threatening car accident, is Hayes, giving the spectators a smirk that spells disaster.

No. Fucking. Way.

WELCOME TO THE DANGER ZONE

HAYES

Holy shit. I've never scored the first goal of any game since the season's started.

The crowd is absolutely insane. The puck is back in play, and this time during the faceoff, a player from the Colorado Caracals zips off with it. The burning in my legs is a welcome sensation, and as much as my lungs ache, I'd rather hurt the next day and know I worked my ass off than come away unscathed. I cut number fifty-five off, body checking him into the boards, allowing Fulton to scoop up the abandoned puck.

A chorus of cries rattles my eardrums, but the second Fulton gets an inch away from the goal line, a hulking defenseman smashes him into the plexiglass. The cries evolve into disappointed groans. I know my teammates can handle themselves. Hell, some of the guys are larger than I am, but when they're on the receiving end of some brutal hits, my vision turns red. It's some kind of weird, primal reaction inside of me that makes me want to rip my gloves off and scatter teeth all over the ice.

Some Speedy Gonzalez motherfucker flashes past me with the puck, and judging by the uptick in boos and slimy insults, the Colorado Caracals just scored a goal. The Caracals are good. They have some of the fastest skaters in the whole NHL on their team, which I thought was an exaggeration until now. A litany of swears ricochet from my throat, and I blink the sweat from my eyes, my heart probably hastening to a concerning rate. This is going to be a long game.



WE'RE on to the second period, and it's 2-1. I skate alongside Kit, picking up speed to stay in his passing range, and the second he spies an opposing player bulldozing to get to him, he passes me the puck. I'm more nervous than usual, which unfortunately makes me less aware, and I cover a good portion of ice before someone egresses from my blind spot and rams into me with the force of a pickup truck.

I don't know why, but I feel compelled to look up before I suffer a face-smashing courtesy of The Incredible Hulk, and my eyes gridlock with a pair of mocha-colored ones that I would recognize anywhere.

"Aeris?"

But before I can double-confirm it's her, an overwhelming pain cocoons my entire body. My vision comes in tides, and my muscles groan from the force of the collision. God, I forgot how much it hurt to be bitch-punted into the boards.

What is she doing here? Aeris didn't strike me as a sports fan, much less a hockey fan. I texted her back before I left the locker room, but I don't know if she saw it yet. The timing of my responses could definitely use some work.

I don't know why I expected to keep my day job a secret from her. Of course she was going to find out. It's kind of hard not to, especially since Riverside prides itself on its hockey team.

The third period goes by in a flash, and before I know it, the Caracals have evened the score. It's 2-2 now. We're down to the last five minutes. Whoever scores the next goal wins, and I'm determined to end the night on a high note.

Anticipation wrestles with my guts and ties them into ribbons. Bristol has the puck, but he's flanked on either side by red and white jerseys, and he's a second away from getting kebabbed. He flings the puck in my direction, and I dance around with it before ultimately deciding to pass it to Casen. Relief funnels through me when Casen gains some distance,

nearing the Caracal's goal. There's a swarm of players on his tail, and if he doesn't make this goal, there won't be enough time for a redo.

I bend over, dropping my gloved hands to my knees, squinting through a sheen of sweat. Casen's silhouette dwindles to a six-inch-tall version of him, and I see the goal lights flash red just as the buzzer signals the end of the game.

We won. My teammates hightail it over to Casen, pumping their sticks in the air and roaring their superiority over the opposing team. I should be over the moon, but I haven't even lifted off the ground. Something—or someone—is preventing me from riding out my postgame high.



THE COLD OUTSIDE is no match for the blizzard in my chest. The air shrouds my arms, raising hair and gooseflesh in its wake. The crescent moon blocks out all light from the nursery of stars in the sky, with only the haze from the high-power lamps to guide me through the endless dark.

I need to find Aeris. Why is she here? When I told her who I was, she didn't seem to have any idea I played hockey. And now, out of nowhere, she shows up to the one place I least expected to see her. Did she know who I was this entire time? Was she putting on a show?

My teammates are probably already at Beer Comes Trouble—the bar we always hit up after games. The place is teeming with puck bunnies, and I've been grateful for the easy accessibility a few nights in particular. But the last thing on my mind right now is celebrating.

I've been pacing back and forth for twenty minutes in this damn parking lot trying to catch Aeris. I've texted her ten times telling her we need to talk.

My phone dings, but when I open it, the incoming message isn't from Aeris.

DAD: Good game, son. Can we talk?

Can we talk? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I don't hear from my father in months, and suddenly he's trying to play nice with me? What's next, we're having brunch together and holding hands as we skip off into the sunset? I'd rather have my prostate exam performed by Wolverine.

Frustration balloons inside of me, and I stab aggressively at the keyboard.

ME: Not a good idea.

DAD: Please, Hayes. I just need five minutes.

ME: You don't deserve five minutes.

DAD: I know I messed up, but I want to make things right between us.

Hatred threatens to drag me to the cusp of no return and throw me down a dark, bottomless pit. The adrenaline inside of me is amplifying my desire to pelt the concrete with my phone, but this is the third one I've bought this year, and I don't want to waste any more money. And yes, if you were wondering, all three times were in response to something idiotic my father said.

ME: Why now? After all this time?

DAD: I don't want to waste any more time where we aren't a family again. It shouldn't have taken me this long to realize it, I know. One more chance. If you give me that, and I can't earn your trust back, you'll never hear from me again.

Without another thought, I pocket my phone. I can't deal with my father *and* Aeris right now.

Speaking of Aeris, I manage to catch sight of her chestnut waves swinging behind her like a pendulum as she exits the parking lot. I push my way past some straggling families coming out of the game, and my long legs carry me over to her in two strides.

Jesus, I forget how small she is. Not just compared to me. Her blond friend has at least seven inches on her, and that's probably without the heels. She's smiling at something her

friend must've said before she's struck shellshocked at the sight of me.

"Did you know?" I ask, trying to catalogue the emotion passing through her. I've already learned that she isn't the best at hiding how she's feeling, which can be both a blessing and a curse.

"Excuse me?" An iciness lurks under the surface of her tone.

"Did you know who I was?" I repeat, irritation blistering behind my eyes, a searing sensation shooting through me like a five-alarm fire.

To my surprise, she bites back with enough intensity to shake me to the core.

"No, Hayes, I didn't know who you were. And no thanks to you *lying* to me about what you did for work," she hisses, her narrowed eyes terrorizing me.

The knot in my throat bobs. "You didn't know?"

"No, asshole. And why would it matter if I knew or not?"

"Can we go somewhere more private?"

Aeris considers me for a second, but she eventually nods her head, although I wouldn't put it past her to eat me alive when we're alone.

I lead her to a more private part of the parking lot, hand on her bare back, which is cold to the touch. The tip of her nose is red, her skin has been robbed of color, and she hasn't stopped shivering.

I pull her into me, wrapping my arms around her frame, hopefully engulfing her in a decent amount of heat. I tend to run warm.

She only allows me a breath of time before she pulls away from me. "Why the fuck did you lie to me, Hayes?"

Guilt roots in the bottom of my stomach, elongating into tendrils that choke my body in a vise grip. "I'm sorry. I

shouldn't have lied to you. I've told women in the past about my career, and they've used me for fame."

"So that gives you a pass to lie to me?"

"Of course not. I should've been honest with you from the beginning."

Unbridled fury rises in her like bubbles in champagne. "Were you ghosting me or something? Did you think you could get away with lying to me because you never intended to talk to me again?"

I gently tip her chin up so I can meet her eyes, and my heart goes all slippery, wanting to jump out of my body and land in her arms. "No, Aeris. That wasn't my intention at all. I was so busy with practice I haven't had a moment to text you, but you haven't left my mind."

"How can I trust you?"

"I don't know, but I promise, no more secrets."

Another fucking lie.

"No more secrets," she parrots.

I honestly wasn't expecting her to give me a second chance, but I needed that fucking kick, because it's shown me just how high the stakes are now.

A sigh billows from her chapped lips, and either her anger's been snuffed out or the cold has finally gotten to her, because she nuzzles into the bulk of my arms. That fragrant lavender and strawberry mix of hers engulfs me, pulling me back to the night I met her.

I can barely hear my own breath over the blood pistoning through my ears. I need to go through with the plan. Ask her out, dumbass. The sooner we play it up for the cameras, the sooner I can get back to my former life before everything went downhill.

Even though I know this is all fake, this feeling is foreign to me...this *nervousness*. I only get nervous before a game. I don't get nervous around women.

I continue to hold her in my arms, and I will my words to shoot out of me and construct themselves into a sentence. “I wanted to ask you out. Properly. On a date,” I mumble against the crown of her head.

Aeris pulls back slightly, moistening her bottom lip. God, what I wouldn’t give to have her tongue in my mouth again right now, tracing the inside of my cheek, running along the blunt edges of my teeth. I remember how life-changing that kiss was. Hell, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since.

“A date?”

“A date,” I repeat confidently. “You. Me. Maybe some handholding.”

I can tell she’s intrigued, but there’s also a part of her that’s wary, and I don’t blame her. I lied to her, then ghosted her. I was an asshole. And I’m still technically lying to her.

I don’t know how long I’m waiting for her to answer, but it feels like I have to swallow each everlasting second.

She steals a few glimpses at me, then eventually gives me a nod that diffuses the tension in my shoulders.

“I’d love to go on a date with you,” she finishes.

I hold her face in my hands, brushing my nose with hers, my parted lips mere inches away from slanting over her pretty mouth. Our breaths mingle, and I can smell the mintiness on her tongue, like she’d popped a piece of gum halfway through the game.

I want to kiss her. And judging by the heavy pants racking her chest, I know she wants this just as badly as I do.

But my self-restraint must be at an all-time high because I don’t kiss her. I pull away the minute she leans in, and it’s not because I want to be a tease. It’s because I’m afraid what will happen if I lose myself in her.

“I’ll pick you up at seven tomorrow.”

THE FUTURE'S NEVER LOOKED SO GOOD

AERIS

My pulse is off the charts, and I'm sweating so much that I can feel it seep into every pore. If I wasn't wearing a dress, I would have major pit stains. My stomach's been a mess all day, so I haven't been able to eat anything. I've only been in heels for five minutes, but my feet are already starting to ache. Maybe this was a bad idea.

After Hayes dropped that nuclear-sized truth bomb on me, I did some digging on him. He got drafted to the Reapers when he was a senior in college, and according to some fan sites, he's been playing hockey since he was eight, he's allergic to shellfish, and his birthday is on November twelfth.

There were also some...interesting headlines that I came across. Headlines about Hayes' love life. Look, I know we're not together, and whatever *this* is may not even evolve into anything. But I can't help but think about all the beautiful women who are constantly around him.

I glance down at my phone to check the time, and as soon as the digital six turns into a seven, there's a knock at my door. Punctual. He's punctual. That's an attractive quality.

Modulating my breathing like pregnant women do when they're in labor, I smooth the nonexistent wrinkles in my dress. I'm wearing a tight, red dress that zips up the middle and hugs every little lump and curve. The neckline is sinfully low, allowing my breasts to strain against the fabric. My hair is knotted into an elegant updo, little wisps curling down the length of my face, and I've woven some gemmy bobby pins

throughout the strands. It took me three YouTube tutorials and a whole can of hairspray to get my hair to stay in place.

Stuffing down the monsoon of nerves inside me, I hesitantly open the door, my eyes going as wide as saucers at the sight of Hayes in a suit. *A suit.*

I know I've already seen him half-naked, but I don't think I'll ever get tired of looking at his body. Hayes has one of those torsos that taper down to a slimmer waist and thighs that could probably crush a watermelon without much effort. His dirty-blond hair is gelled back, his face is clean-shaven, and he's wearing a heady cologne that sends a streak of pleasure between my legs.

Hayes hazards a look at me, and his cheeks go so warm they could give Arizona heat a run for its money.

"You look beautiful," he says, a dimple developing at the corner of his lips. There's a rustling coming from his hands, and that's when I take in the bouquet of flowers he's brought me.

No guy has ever given me flowers. Wilder certainly never did, not even on our anniversary or Valentine's Day.

"You brought me flowers?" I gasp, taking them from him and inhaling deeply. He went with a pink, purple, and white color palette. It looks like there are some carnations, lilacs, and roses in the mix. They're stunning, and the gesture releases butterflies to reside in my belly.

"You like them? I didn't know what kind of flowers you liked, and I didn't want to ask you because it would ruin the surprise."

I blush something fierce. "They're perfect." I wave him inside, ambling over to the kitchen in search of a vase to put them in.

A friendly meow comes from the mass of fur weaving in and out of his legs, and he crouches down, scratching Crunch behind the ear.

"She must really like you. She's usually never this social with anyone," I tell him, grabbing a vase from the top shelf of

my cabinet. I'm glad I'm wearing heels, otherwise I'd embarrass myself by teetering on my tiptoes.

"I've always wanted a pet," he confesses, having switched to rubbing the white spot underneath her chin.

I lean over the sink, cutting the stems at an angle. "Dog person?"

"Cat person," he corrects.

Oh, wow. Did it just get hot in here?

"Well, you're welcome to come over and see Crunch whenever you want," I laugh, setting the flowers in the vase and fluffing their petals.

Hayes waltzes over to me, pulling me into his hard body. My heart skips a beat under his touch, and my breath catches in my throat.

"When I come over, it won't be to see your cat, Aeris." His voice is rich, warm, growly, oozing with a pinch of arrogance that the lower half of me can't resist. That tone of his sends a tingle to every one of my erogenous zones.

I foolishly think he's about to kiss me—just like I had last night after the game—but he doesn't. He nips at the hinge of my jaw, then lashes his tongue over the stretch of skin below my ear, pulling my lobe into his mouth and sucking.

I moan in surprise as I involuntarily tilt my head back, squeezing my thighs together. Oh my God. Forget dinner. We should skip straight to dessert.

I'm lost on cloud nine before he rips me from my Hayes-haze, planting a peck on my cheek.

"We should go. We don't want to be late to our reservation."



THE RESTAURANT that Hayes takes me to is a lot fancier than I expected. Pasta La Vista: a dining establishment that

specializes in some of the best pasta dishes in Riverside. Once I stepped through those lavish double doors, I was like Dorothy in Oz. Curtains of red velvet cascade down the sides of elongated glass, drawing into a burgundy bow in the stained center. Tables of white silk sit dispersed among the spacious area, a luminous, crystal chandelier shimmering sensationally across an impractically tall ceiling. Potted plants are stationed at every entrance, and an extensive number of waiters and waitresses wander the restaurant.

I slide into my side of the booth, wiping my clammy palms on my dress. Our waiter comes by with a set of menus and a complimentary basket of bread, and my leg won't stop bouncing against the underside of the table.

I'm not going to be able to afford anything on this menu. The water alone is five dollars. FIVE.

A frown christens my lips. "Everything looks so..."

"Pretentious?" Hayes chuckles, his Colgate-bright grin shining underneath the recessed lighting.

"Expensive," I murmur quietly, suddenly feeling *very* out of place. Not only among all these people, but with Hayes.

When I did some deep diving on him, there was always a leggy blond or a busty brunette attached to him in photos. They had thin, toned bodies, and their skin had a permanent sun-kissed look. I don't tan easily. I don't have lean muscle on my body. I have a soft belly, stretchmarks on my thighs, and acne scars. I'm not Hayes' usual type.

Hayes lowers his menu, reaching across the table and enveloping my hand in his. "I want you to order whatever you want, okay? It doesn't matter how much it costs."

"Hayes..."

His fingers give my palm a tight squeeze, slinging tiny jolts up my forearms. "I'm serious, Aeris. It's my treat."

I close my mouth because I have a feeling arguing with Hayes won't get me anywhere. He doesn't let go of my hand until our food arrives, and I immediately yearn for his touch again.

He ordered a medium-rare steak, a bowl of tomato rigatoni, a spring salad, and sautéed sweet potatoes. Those are like four separate meals that could last me a whole week. I have no idea how he's gonna eat all of that in one sitting. I've decided on fettucine alfredo, which may or may not be a good idea considering fatty foods don't agree with me.

Hayes picks up his fork and begins separating his cut of steak into pieces. "So, what made you pursue being a content writer?"

I'm halfway through chewing my pasta, so I awkwardly hold my hand to my mouth before swallowing. "Uh, I majored in English in college. I've always liked to write, but I didn't have the bandwidth to become an author."

Mirth festers in his chalcedony irises. "Jeez, I could've used you in college. I sucked at English. Barely passed my GE class." He switches his focus to his potatoes, hoovering up five chunks in a single bite.

"What did you major in?"

Sports medicine. Thank you, creepy fanpages.

"Sports medicine," he echoes.

Silence passes between us for a while, and once I force down a wad of buttery noodles, I open my mouth to finally say something.

"Tell me about Roden," Hayes interjects.

A mask of confusion adheres to my face. "Roden?"

Hayes remembered my brother's name?

"You mentioned him at the bar."

"Well, he die—"

"No, Aeris. Tell me *about* him."

Oh. Nobody's ever asked to hear about Roden. It's...I've never really talked about him without being impinged by a smokescreen of grief. It's always there, you know? But for the first time in forever, the air in my lungs feels crisp.

A calming sense of euphoria reclaims the tense hold of my shoulders. “Roden was...*is*...the best person in the entire world. He was creative and kind and he cared about everyone. He loved to draw. God, he was so good at it. He loved drawing people, specifically. We’d always hang out by the park and sit there for hours, and he’d fill up his entire sketchbook. I begged him to teach me how to draw, but I never quite captured people like he could.”

“He sounds incredible. I wish I could’ve met him.”

I wish you could’ve too.

I grapple for anything to respond with, but all my words get lost in translation, slowly blinking out of existence.

“Tell me about your mother,” I eventually say.

Hayes twirls around a piece of lettuce. “She’s caring, just like your brother. She was the one who comforted me whenever I felt down, who always cooked me chocolate chip pancakes on my birthday, and who took me to my first hockey game. She never, *ever* asked for anything for herself. If she was hurting, she would paint on the brightest smile and pretend everything was okay. She didn’t ever want to be a burden. I wish she knew that I would’ve taken all the pain in the world to make things even a little bit better for her.”

“Oh, Hayes. She sounds lovely. I’m so sorry.”

He nods, but I don’t think he’s up for much conversation anymore. He busies himself by piling an inhuman amount of noodles onto his fork. I need to change the subject.

“You’re really talented, you know that?” I compliment, prodding at my half-eaten meal.

“You think so?” he teases, the sexual tension between us thickening, becoming so palpable you could cut it with a butter knife.

Thanks to the adequate lighting, my blush has nowhere to hide. “Yeah, you’re a great player. Definitely better than some other players in the league.”

Hayes snorts loudly, erecting some displeased stares from neighboring tables, and a granny across from us gives me the evil eye. “Thanks, Stacks. That means a lot coming from you.”

He points the tines of his fork at me, a lopsided smirk pushing his cheeks back. “I like how honest you are. You’re a tell-it-to-their-face kind of honest, and in my line of work, that can be rare. But there’s also this part of you that worries you’re being too straightforward, and it’s endearing.”

I choke on a noodle, my pulse and heart in a head-to-head race.

“Oh,” is all I can muster, partly because I don’t know what else to say, partly because I’m still wheezing for air.

Hayes lifts his napkin from his lap, dabbing at his lips. He’s somehow cleaned every one of his plates in record time while I’ve barely made a dent in my pasta.

“Come on. I want to show you something.”



THE DARK SKYLINE overhead crumbles under congregations of storm clouds, and the beginnings of rain start to fall around me, settling like crystals atop my wind-blown hair. The night is silent, nothing but the hum of fireflies with gossamer wings to fill the void, painting cysts of starlight in little spurts of luminescence.

My breath plumes out in front of me, and even though Hayes gave me his suit jacket, I haven’t stopped shivering. We pass a few quaint shops lining the sidewalk, and he leads me to a clearing nestled in the heart of downtown. A menagerie of maroon and goldenrod leaves shoot into the atmosphere like fiery snowflakes, swirling in an array of hues from gnarled tree branches. Twinkling lights bathe the area in an unearthly glow, one that I allow to warm the cracks in my toes and the clefts of my ears and the crooks of my elbows.

An old-fashioned fountain decorates the center of the quad, with a mossy stone basin that wraps around the engraved base.

Bubbling water spills from the top tier, glistening from the moon rays bouncing off the nearby roof shingles. My heels scuff over arbitrary spurts of grass growing through the cracks in the cement. There's a man taking refuge under an awning, playing his guitar and singing the acapella notes of a love song.

"Wow," I breathe, taking in the breathtaking scenery. Riverside is nowhere near postcard worthy. It's more urban than countryside, and there aren't a lot of hidden places that I've found to be a sanctuary from the bustle of the city. But this—this is amazing.

The only other people in the vicinity are an old couple sitting on a wooden bench, and they look so unconditionally in love with each other that jealousy torpedoes toward my heart.

I know I shouldn't be jealous of the elderly, okay? They're sweet, and they always have Werther's Original candies on them. But at one point in my life, I had imagined me and Wilder growing old together, sitting on our matching wicker chairs and bickering over which child of ours would get married first. Ha. I was delusional back then.

The promise of tears touches the backs of my eyes, and I have to silently pray that they go away before Hayes notices the glossiness.

"Dance with me." It's not a request.

My voice is clotted with surprise. "What?"

Hayes extends his arm out to me, giving me a not-so-graceful bow. It looks wonky considering his towering height, but it manages to make me chuckle all the same.

Panic fleets across my reddening face. "I...don't know how to dance."

It's true. It's not an excuse. The first time I danced with someone was my freshman winter formal, and my date had a bruised toenail that ended up falling off because I'd stepped on his feet so many times.

Hayes makes a *psh* sound. "Everyone can dance."

I have a feeling he's not going to let me get out of this, so I relent with a pump of my shoulders. "Your funeral."

The instrumental bridge of the song permeates my ears, accompanied by the harmonious pluck of guitar strings, seeming to send me to my own slice of heaven. The whole world fades away into a chasm of darkness, nothing but the docile glow of the lights to cast Hayes' head in a golden halo.

My feet are off the ground in a second. I feel like I'm flying through the air, all my worries freefalling past me with each somehow elegant twist of my body. It's as if time's frozen around us—the past, present, and future ceasing to exist. With an outstretched arm, Hayes twirls me around him, and I follow suit, flares bursting in my veins. I welcome the lightheaded dizziness, letting it lift me higher into the clouds. My hair has fallen from its diamond-shaped pins, tumbling down my back in waves.

Hayes draws me closer to him, leading me through the sweet-sounding notes of the love song. He's a surprisingly good dancer. I match my stride to his, the fluid motions becoming second nature. We move together in a choreographed dance, each of us knowing exactly where to plant our feet, our bodies melding together. His arms are an extension of himself, just like on the ice, and he holds himself with confident sophistication as he sways me to the rhythm. His hand lays delicately on my waist, the other furred in my fingers.

Without warning, he spins me around and tilts me, his hand supporting the small of my back. My breath breaks, and I stare at him incredulously, having some kind of existential crisis and out-of-body experience at the same time. I'm dancing with the handsomest, sweetest guy I've ever met. This kind of shit only happens in fairytales.

Hayes slowly brings me back up, his eyes roving hungrily over my lips. I waste no time in pressing my mouth to his, our tongues tangling together as I swallow the moan that tumbles from his throat. His hands slide over my hip dips, brushing the bottom of my ass, and a black hole of desire opens inside of me, making my core constrict.

I really wish we weren't in public right now.

Hey, sex-crazed Aeris. Level-headed Aeris here. DO NOT FALL FOR HIM. I know you get attached easily, and that probably has something to do with your daddy issues, but this will only end badly for you, okay? Remember Wilder. Remember the hell he put you through. Remember how he weaponized your vulnerability. Remember that empty feeling that plagued you when he walked away. Don't make the same mistake.

I pull away abruptly, for once acknowledging that flashing red panic button on my mental dashboard.

Hayes is an NHL player. I'm a girl from Oregon who sits behind a screen all day for work. We're from two different worlds. Not only that, but his career is demanding. He's always on the move, always uprooting, and who's to say he won't abandon me when he's had his fun?

He has a reputation for a reason—a reputation that's screaming at me to run, to forget all about him before I'm tossed aside like another one of his conquests. He doesn't do serious, and I shouldn't either. If I get attached to him, I won't be able to protect myself from all the pain that comes with caring about someone. All my heart has ever done is land me in hot water. And I don't need any more burns to add to my collection.

Hayes' wide-eyed stare perforates me, my lip gloss smudged all over his lips, a slight flush infusing in his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Aeris. I—"

I cut him off. "You didn't do anything wrong. It's just—it's getting late."

He nods in agreement, but disappointment clouds him like a second skin.

What am I doing?

THE FUCKUP OF THE HOUR

HAYES

It's been a week, and I haven't heard a peep from Aeris. I even triple texted her. I keep replaying everything I did during the date. I remembered to hold the door for her, I remembered the sidewalk rule. It's an unspoken rule that if you don't hear back from your date the next day, there usually won't be a second one.

"You've barely touched your drink," Bristol says, his voice reeling me back to the present.

I look down at the full beer in front of me, but the thought of downing it makes my stomach churn. "Sorry. I've been kinda out of it recently," I mumble, scratching my thumbnail against the wood grain of the table.

The guys wanted to go to Beer Comes Trouble for trivia night since pitchers are only twelve dollars. The place is packed with people, the booming chatter drowning out the sound of a basketball game on TV.

Casen takes a swig from his beer. "This wouldn't be about that smokin' hot display you put on for the paparazzi a few days ago, would it?"

My cheeks steam as panic swarms inside of me. "What are you talking about?"

Gage passes his phone over to me, where a bold headline frames a picture of me and Aeris entering Pasta La Vista. I click through the attached photos of us—a few of me walking her into the restaurant, us sitting at our table, her lips edged into a full-fledged grin at something amusing I must've said

but don't remember. They even have pictures of her with my suit jacket around her shoulders. We look damn good together, even if it is all fake.

HAYES HOLLINGS: IS THE NOTORIOUS REAPERS' STALLION BACK TO HIS PLAYBOY WAYS, OR COULD THIS BE THE GIRL TO FINALLY TAME HIM?

Did I mention how much I fucking hate the paparazzi?

Fulton's eyes are alight with intrigue. "You seriously didn't see any of the photos? You guys were trending on Twitter. The fans are obsessed with this mystery girl of yours."

A flash flood of guilt wrecks me from the inside out. "I had no idea."

"Don't worry, it's mostly good things," Casen reassures.

"Did you go public with the relationship yet?" Kit asks as the puck bunny on his lap slobbers all over his neck.

My teeth worry at my bottom lip. "No...we've only been on one date."

Kit's expression is all hard lines, his tone point-blank. "Then pick up the pace, bro. Do you want to get traded?"

"No," I mutter under my breath, hating the constant reminder. If I rush too fast and scare Aeris, I'll have to start from scratch with a different girl. But I think the thing that freaks me out the most is that I don't want a different girl.

"So get it done."

I can't wait for the day someone comes along and knocks Kit on his ass.

Casen's brows stitch together in sympathy. "Maybe you won't be traded," he offers, but even I know that's generous thinking.

Bristol swallows the rest of the contents in his glass, slamming it back down on the table. Every head swivels in his direction, and he has that I'm-about-to-give-a-lecture look on his face.

“I overheard Coach in his office earlier today. Hayes isn’t the only one on the chopping block. The team hasn’t won the Stanley Cup since 2018. We should all be worried.”

Fuck me. How can this night get any worse?

Fulton drags a French fry through a dollop of ketchup, popping it into his mouth. “I’d pull out all the stops if I were you. Maybe read *How To Woo a Girl in Ten Days*.”

I want to laugh, but that’s the first helpful idea anyone’s given me. “Is that a real book?”

“Yeah, and why are *you* reading it?” Casen asks, squinting suspiciously.

Fulton goes to open his mouth, but Gage beats him to it.

“Because he’s in love with the barista who makes him a latte foam heart every time he goes to Deja Brew!” Gage yells, eliciting stares from some of the people around us.

Fulton smacks Gage on the arm so hard he winces. “That wasn’t a secret to share with the class,” he hisses through gritted teeth, glaring daggers at him.

“Aw, does Fully have a little crush?” Kit sings, barking out a laugh when Fulton reaches across Bristol and tries to strangle him.

While Bristol plays peacekeeper, my mind keeps going back to Aeris. I wish I knew what she was thinking right now.

As if she can hear my thoughts, my phone pings in my pocket, and I open it to find a text notification from her.

AERIS: Can we talk?

A LEAP OF MUCH-NEEDED FAITH

AERIS

“Am I making the stupidest decision of my life?” I whine, planting my face into a pillow.

I feel Lila’s hand surf over my hair, running some of the strands between her fingers. “You’re scared, love,” she explains in that motherly tone of hers, and when I conjure enough courage to look up at her, her sage eyes are sympathetic.

The sigh that exits me seems much older than I am, like it’s been bottled inside for years. “Why? Why can’t I just give him a chance?” The shakiness of my voice forewarns that I’m seconds away from turning into a sobbing mess.

“It’s scary. Letting people in is scary. Wilder made himself look like a good guy and still broke your trust. And now you have Hayes, who has a bit of a reputation, trying to poke his way through the cracks in your guard. It makes sense that you’d be hesitant.”

It feels like liquid nitrogen is tunneling through my bloodstream and numbing my nerve endings. The rational part of my brain knows not everyone’s out to get me, yet I still believe that a little disappointment in the beginning outweighs a lot of inevitable heartache in the end.

“He’s not a bad guy,” I whisper, not even sure why I can’t say the words out loud. Maybe it’s because I’m afraid to feed that frightened, caged animal inside of me. Because if I feed it, I give it power—I give it a reason to sink its claws deeper into me and never let go.

“I don’t think he is,” Lila concurs.

With a strangled intake of air, I force myself onto my hipbones. Filminess whitens my visions, and my cotton mouth tries to find a single droplet of saliva that will sustain me for the next few minutes. “What would you do in my situation?”

“I’m not you,” Lila coos, and the mollifying ministrations she’s making on my arms are becoming fruitless.

I cycle between sadness, confusion, self-pity, anger, and guilty rumination as the silence bridges between us. Call it my Five Stages.

Sadness: I just want to let him in.

Confusion: Why can’t I get out of my own head?

Self-pity: I’ll never be able to trust him.

Anger: I’m a coward, and I don’t deserve to be loved.

Guilt rumination: I shouldn’t have pulled away that night.

Hugging my arms around my midsection, I squeeze my eyes shut to banish the moisture in them.

I feel the couch cushion shift, then I hear Lila’s footsteps pad somewhere to the left of me. When she comes back, I open my eyes to find a carton of Ben & Jerry’s in her hands.

She has my favorite flavor—chocolate chip cookie dough—and she pops the lid off, scooping a generous mound onto a spoon for me. I’m half-surprised when she lodges it into my mouth without warning, but as soon as it melts on my tongue, it hits the spot right away.

I start my tireless journey to carve a decent-sized dent in the carton as Lila’s eyes remain glued to my every movement. My stomach clenches painfully since this is the first thing I’ve eaten all day, and I’ll probably regret it in the morning, but that’s not enough incentive to stop me.

“Do you want some?” I mumble through a mouthful of cream and cookie and chocolate.

Lila laughs. “That’s okay, love. I got it for you.”

“You bought it for me?”

“You were running out.”

Oh, God. She’s going to make me cry. I can’t stand it when people do nice things for me. I think it’s probably because I’ve convinced myself that I don’t deserve it—you know, a good ol’ trauma response from failing my brother.

I propel myself into Lila with the force of a bull, bringing her into a rib-crushing, breath-squeezing kind of hug. She lurches back a bit, but once I feel her arms wrap around me, my worries dissipate just a little. “Thank you. For taking care of me.”

“I will *always* take care of you, Aer-Bear. My best friend deserves to be happy, to fall in love, to live a fulfilled life. Don’t rob yourself of that. It’s okay to *feel*. Your heart is my favorite part of you. I don’t want to see it broken, but I don’t also want to see it atrophy from disuse. Take that leap of faith.”

A cold panic shimmies up my spine. She’s right. You know how when you’re drowning—or, I hope you don’t know—you try your hardest not to swallow any water? Because the more water you swallow, the harder it is to breathe. Did you also know that you have to let a little water in to allow yourself to swim back up to the surface?

I think that’s what I have to do—endure a moment of pain in return for a lifetime of pleasure. Besides, there’s no guarantee I’ll find myself drowning. To drown, I have to lose control in the water. But there are things that help you stay afloat to prevent that from ever happening. Things like life jackets. Maybe Hayes is my life jacket.

Without a word, I scramble for my phone, my thumbs typing furiously away at the keyboard.

Lila looks concerned, and maybe a tad bit frightened. “What are you doing?”

Once I hit that send button, my first smile of the week emerges. “I’m taking a leap.”

THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL RELATIONSHIP

HAYES

Once I got that text from Aeris, I drove like a speed demon over to her place. I ran a stop sign and almost flattened a kid on his bike, but I had to see her. Her text was vague.

I kill the engine with a twist of my key, hearing it scantily sputter to a stop. I unbuckle my seatbelt, but I don't open my door.

She's just a girl.

She understands what I've been through.

You'll find another.

I want her.

With a final groan, I make my way to her doorstep, rapping my knuckles against the off-white partition. I feel like I'm gonna puke.

Is she going to break things off? Did I somehow find a way to screw up another good thing in my life? Maybe the date was too much for her. Maybe things were moving too fast.

When she doesn't open the door right away, I knock continuously until a meow sounds from the other side, then I'm hit with a pall of warm air.

There, standing in front of me, is a sight that I'll never tire of seeing. Aeris, at that five-foot-one height of hers, looking up at me like I hold all the answers to the world. This time,

though, she has her hair in a messy bun and a tiny, cotton pajama set on.

Okay, I don't know why I expected her to sleep in a head-to-toe onesie like some kind of moth in a cocoon, but this is a new development.

I'm enraptured by the way her long lashes flutter against her brow ridge, how upon closer inspection, I can make out a freckle on her collarbone. The shorts are, um, short. So short that I can't help but ogle at her creamy thighs. And Jesus, the neckline of her top isn't leaving much to my imagination. Her large tits pillow over her bra cups, ones that I *distinctly* remember looking good in that corset the first night I met her.

I shake my head, swallowing the boulder in my throat. "Are you okay?"

There's a red rim around her puffy eyes, and her cheeks look flushed.

Has she been crying?

She bites down on her lip, not pulling away until it's a shade darker. "I'm okay," she squeaks unconvincingly, opening the door wider so I can come in.

I take in the sight of a half-eaten carton of ice cream on her coffee table and a black-and-white cat cantering over to me. Ice cream is a code red. At least, it is in the Hollings household. Faye only breaks out the hard stuff when she's really hurting inside, like when her spineless ex-boyfriend broke up with her over text. I may or may not have gone over to his house that night and broken his nose.

"You're scaring me, Stacks."

"I'm sorry."

There it is. Those two words send a grenade the size of Texas spiraling into my chest. She's made up her mind. This will probably be the last time I see her, speak with her.

But then she continues talking.

"For scaring you," she clarifies, walking over to the couch and patting the spot next to her.

Oh?

I follow her like a puppy with its tail between its legs. I wait to let her speak, but it feels like she's taking an eternity to get the words out.

She finally sips in a full breath.

"I'm sorry I haven't texted you all week. I wanted to—I did. I've just been...nervous about starting something with you." She fidgets with the hem of her tank top. Her fingernails are short and slightly bloody, like she's been chewing them to the quick.

"I don't want you to feel pressured to do anything," I immediately blurt out.

"I know."

"Okay."

"I wanted to tell you that..." She trails off, and even though the gloss over her eyes is hardly noticeable, it still sends a sucker punch to my gut.

"You don't have to—"

"I want to give this thing between us a chance."

Come again? Did she just say what I think she said?

"A-are you sure?" I ask her, failing to camouflage the confusion blending into my words.

She nods her head, and there's a warmth tucked away in the saffron flecks of her eyes. God, she's so beautiful. I want to spend lazy afternoons counting the freckles on her face, then see if she has them anywhere else on her body.

"I'm—that's great."

Ever since we shared that dance together, things have been becoming more and more real. This is the first time I'm not thinking about my hockey career or my reputation. All that exists in this moment is me and her.

I can tell my words don't seem to assuage her fear, so I grab her hand, squeezing her palm and breezing my thumb

over the back of her knuckles. She lets out a small gasp from the contact but doesn't pull away. Those kissable lips of hers jack up into a small smile—a smile that I've missed seeing for the past week.

Aeris is heartbreakingly appetizing in all the right ways, like an addiction in the making. I'm starving for a single taste of her—whatever she's willing to give me, even if that means I'll be on my knees for whoever knows how long.

"I thought you were gonna break it off." I chuckle awkwardly, already starting to feel heat rise in my cheeks.

"Oh, uh, no. Sorry if it sounded that way."

"You never have to apologize for what you're feeling. Ever," I whisper, moving my hand to caress her cheek, wiping away the leftover water lingering beneath her eye. "I want you to feel like you can tell me anything, okay? I'm here for you. Whatever you need. I'm not planning on going anywhere."

"Thank you, Hayes. I-I want to be able to open up to you; I've just been hurt in the past."

She's been hurt in the past? Look, I have no idea what dickmuppet broke her heart, but if I find him, I have no problem giving him a one-way ticket to the ICU. Aeris isn't even technically mine, but I already feel this possessiveness over her that scares me.

"I'm so sorry, Aeris," I say, and it feels like the air has gone cold around me.

She shrugs away from my hand. "It's okay. I just don't really want to talk about it."

I rest my arms in my lap, though I'd much rather be holding her. "That's okay. What *do* you want to do?"

And then she looks at me, and those whiskey-colored eyes drop to my lips.

"I want to kiss you," she breathes.

All my blood rushes south, and my dick twitches against the grain of my jeans. As much as I want to kiss her right now,

I know her emotions are all over the place, and the last thing I'd ever do is take advantage of her.

“Let's rediscuss that kiss when you're feeling better, yeah?”

A disappointed frown makes its debut, but she nods in agreement.

I cup both sides of her face, pulling her into me so I can kiss her forehead, and then I walk out of her house with a renewed sense of hope humming in my bones.

DRINK OR DARE

AERIS

Drink or Dare: a rite of passage for twenty-somethings, and a surefire way to get drunk.

Or: a fool's way into spilling their guts.

When Hayes told me that we were going to hang out with the guys tonight, I was expecting a movie and some snacks, but nothing this hardcore.

“Guys, this is Aeris. Aeris, these are the guys,” Hayes introduces us.

I wave awkwardly to the room full of ripped, intimidating hockey players. I was nervous to meet them before, but now I'm one ill-timed comment away from panicking.

“Hi, Aeris,” they say in unison, like they're greeting a newcomer at an AA meeting.

Josette—Casen's girlfriend—was going to join us, but she had to work late tonight, so it's only me in a house full of six guys.

“So you're the girl who has our boy pussy-whipped,” Gage says, making the color in my cheeks deepen.

Hayes flips him off, but he's wearing a matching blush.

The coffee table is lined from end to end with red solo cups, a dare on the bottom of each one. If you get a dare you refuse to do, you have to drink.

Everyone's gathered around in a sort of football huddle, and the seriousness on each of their faces has me already

regretting whatever stomach-turning ride I'm about to embark on.

Gage eyes everyone up and down like he's a lion gauging the weakest gazelle in the herd. "You guys all know how this works. Remember: no dares will be completed without consent from the other party, if necessary."

"So, who wants to go first?" he asks, mischief curling around his words.

Oh, God. Kill me now. Have my cart go off the tracks in some *Final Destination*-esque death scene.

Kit doesn't even look fazed when he volunteers himself. He picks up the cup situated farthest from him, holding it over his head so he can glance at the dare.

"Give a lap dance to someone of your choosing. Clothes optional," he reads, the mirth in his eyes ascending to dangerous levels.

Most of the faces around the circle look curious, but a few are fearful. I don't blame them. I'd be terrified if I was on the receiving end too. And Kit doesn't strike me as the type to back down from a dare.

No, no, no. I'm the only girl in the entire group. Please don't pick me. Please. Don't. Pick. Me.

The second Kit looks at me, a low rumble comes from Hayes' chest.

"Don't even think about it," he growls, eliciting unfettered laughter from the group, and Bristol and Casen seem to share some kind of complicit look with each other.

Kit holds his hands up in surrender. "Your girl is safe, H."

Your girl.

That doesn't sound half bad.

Warmth pumps through me at the term of endearment, my breath and heart boxing it out in the ring of my ribs.

"Are all of these dares sexual?" I whisper to Hayes.

Hayes flashes me that trademark grin of his. “God, I hope not.”

The arrogance in his tone isn’t a good sign, but neither is the heat pooling between my legs. Thank you, Hayes’ stupid audiobook narrator voice. Why does he have to be irresistible all the time? And why am I hoping that I get a dare just as sexual as Kit’s?

Look, we’ve kissed, but we haven’t done a lot of sexual stuff with each other yet. It’s not that I don’t want to—trust me, I do—but I only want to initiate it if he makes it clear he’s on board.

“Fully, do you give me consent to give you the best lap dance you’ll ever experience?” Kit asks, glowing with excitement.

Fulton’s laugh is brittle. “Me? Really?”

“Yes, you.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re about as virginal as the olive oil we have in the cabinet.”

Fulton grumbles something under his breath, but he doesn’t refute Kit’s statement. “Fine. Yes, I give you consent.”

Kit claps his hands together. “It’s your lucky day. I’ve been practicing my Magic Mike moves, and you won’t even have to pay me anything.”

Everyone retreats from the huddle and sits down on the couch except for Kit, who’s dragging a kitchen chair into the center of the living room. He extends an arm out and bows, and with a sigh, Fulton shuffles over and takes his new throne.

If I had walked into the room right now, with no context, I would’ve thought Fulton was involved in some sort of hostage situation. His hands are gripping the ever-loving life out of his seat, and his face has turned this sickly white color that looks strangely akin to a zombie bite victim.

“Please don’t get any of this on video,” he groans.

“Too late,” Gage says, already holding up his phone camera, flash on and everything.

And with a beat, the ridiculously raunchy music starts playing, and Kit begins to sway his hips from side to side. He sticks one leg out, then slowly rolls up, making an effort to wiggle his ass and push his chest out. Oh my God. It’s like I’ve been transported to a strip club in Las Vegas, but not a good one. A scary one. A *very* scary one.

I don’t think we’re a minute through the song—that’s how long and torturous this feels. This would be a good type of psychological torture for governments to employ wherever torture is even legal these days.

“I’m scared,” I mumble to Hayes.

“Really?”

I’m so close to Hayes’ body that I can feel his breath against my skin, can pick up on the exact moment the slow-burning desire in his steel-blue eyes kicks up.

“I don’t know. This is pretty hot,” he jokes, throwing an arm over my shoulder.

The contact alone has somehow launched my thoughts into the ozone layer, and my arousal is up there in orbit with all the secret things I fantasize about Hayes doing to me. He’s so pretty. The kind of pretty you never get tired of looking at. But I think he’d look a lot prettier with his head between my thigh—

“Oh, no. He’s taken his shirt off,” I hear Hayes whisper, and my eyes snap up to find Kit, in fact, with his shirt off. Then I’m met with a lot of olive, inked skin. And abs. Abs stacked on abs. He’s whipping his shirt around his head like a lasso, simultaneously grinding on Fulton with an undulation of his hips.

I can’t hold back my laughter anymore.

“Take your pants off!” Gage shouts giddily, and his request is followed by some agreeable catcalls.

“Do not take your pants off!” Fulton yells, glaring at Kit.

Kit shushes him with a finger, then finishes off the number by bending down and twerking in his face.

I don't even know what to say, but then the song fades out and Fulton claims his spot on the end of the couch. Wheezing laughter breaks out between Bristol and Casen, and the two are red in the face with each knee slap and windshield wiper chortle.

Kit slips his shirt back on, throws a few kisses to the crowd, then slumps down in the adjacent armchair. "That was fun, Fully. Same time next week?"

"If we're doing this again, you better feel me up next time," Fulton mutters.

Once Casen catches his breath and wipes the tears from his eyes, he stands up. "I'll go."

Each step is imbued with hesitancy as he approaches the cups, and he picks up the fate that lies in that plastic, red hole of doom. "Eat a raw egg or take a shot of ketchup," he announces.

My face screws up in disgust.

"Yeah, no. That's a big, fat no." Casen downs his drink as quickly as he can, nearly sputtering when he comes back up for air. "Jesus. Is this straight tequila?"

"Yes, yes it is," Kit replies with a proud nod.

Casen rolls his eyes before sitting back down, and Bristol jumps to the table, snatching a cup for himself. "Let your teammates go through your hidden camera roll and post something to your Instagram."

"Ohhh, this is a good one," Kit snickers.

Bristol hands his phone over to Hayes. "I'll let *Hayes* choose one, with agreement from everyone. But it has to be appropriate, and it can't get me in trouble with Coach or my agent," he explains, armed with a dark look and an even deadlier scowl.

Everyone scrambles around Hayes, and some conspiratorial murmurs wend their way into the atmosphere.

Hayes throws his head back, a raucous chuckle barging out of him. He's picked the most horrifyingly unflattering picture of Bristol he could find. It's a photo of him taken with one of those fisheye lenses, and he's in nothing but a speedo, eating a banana, with his bare feet hogging the whole bottom half of the frame.

He shows the phone to Bristol. "Dude, why does this exist? Like, I get taking it for fun. But why would you keep it?"

"You're not uploading that to the internet," Bristol growls, grabbing the device out of Hayes' hands.

"Twenty-four hours. After twenty-four hours, we'll take it down," Hayes negotiates, holding his arms up. Some of the guys have to hold back their laughter.

"It's really not that bad," I pipe up, biting back the inelegant chuckle that's storming inside of me. I don't know why Bristol didn't delete that image the *second* he took it. A Navy SEAL team couldn't waterboard that picture out of me.

After a minute of arguing from both sides, Bristol begrudgingly agrees to twelve hours, and the guys are losing their minds as all the likes start to flood in.

Fulton's smirk is infectious, and he points at the screen like an iPad toddler. "Look, this comment says, 'Bristol, I want to suck on your toes—'"

"Okay! Aeris, I think you should go," Gage says loudly.

I swallow the coil of anticipation in my throat, reaching for the drink that's going to get my blood rushing in either one of two ways—humiliation or arousal.

The second I read the dare, I want to will this nightmarish experience out of existence. This was a bad idea. It's like when you make the wrong decision in a story-based videogame, and you have to live with a domino effect of consequences.

My heart feels like it's been drop-kicked out of my chest, and I chew my bottom lip. I can't do this, can I?

"What does it say?" Casen asks.

Here goes nothing.

“Lick whipped cream off the person sitting next to you. Anywhere below the neck,” I recite, my pulse hiccupping, mortification a missile aimed directly at me.

I consider the potential outcomes. One, and the most reasonable option, is that I drink and don’t subject myself to this twisted game. Two, I pick Bristol, and things become really awkward. Or three—and *my favorite option*—I pick Hayes.

Gage’s mouth parts into an *O* shape, same with Kit’s.

Heat erodes my insides, and not the good kind of heat. The feverish, disgusting, sticky kind of heat that dials my libido up a few notches while simultaneously making me feel like I’m a second away from passing out.

“What will it be, Aeris?” Gage asks.

“I...”

I want to do the dare. I want to lick whipped cream off Hayes so badly, in some X-rated places if we didn’t have an audience to entertain. Luckily, before I can answer, Hayes says with a wink in my direction, “If she wants to do it, I’ll be her willing participant.”

I’m as quiet as a church mouse when I nod my head.

I blink, and there’s a can of whipped cream in my hand, and Hayes’ shirt has already been discarded. Oh, how I’ve missed staring at those magnificent muscles of his—the glistening bulge of his pectorals to the clean-cut ridges winding through his abs. Hayes Hollings is ruination, and he wears sin like the snug fit of a leather jacket around his shoulders.

Kit sticks two fingers in his mouth and whistles, and the rest of the guys eagerly wait for me to make the first move.

Gage shakes off thermal waves of my concern. “Don’t worry. None of this is going on camera. Right, guys?”

“Right,” they all respond.

There's a driving need in Hayes' eyes, one that rips my own desire from deep within me, and it trembles in my bloodstream, making me want to take his mouth and kiss him with raw abandon.

I spray a line of white confectionary down his hard stomach, watching as his body contracts from the cold. I can't hear any of the guys when I'm trapped in his intoxicating thrall, which is a good thing for both my dignity and the slicked surface of my pussy.

Without thinking, I dart my tongue out to lick up the whipped cream, exploring those eight squares of muscle with each drawn-out flick. Hayes throws his head back against the couch, and I'm close enough to hear the quietest moan rising at the base of his throat. He adjusts his hips ever so slightly as I feel his length hardening against my breasts.

What I wouldn't give to have the rest of the guys evacuate the premises as soon as possible. The gusset of my panties is soaked by the time I've cleaned the broad sweep of his skin. Lust-fueled flames whirl in my chest, descending into my gut, and my thoughts feel like they've all fractured into a million different pieces. I can't believe I just did that.

Kit fans himself. "Wow, that was..."

"Damn, is anyone else hot in here?" Gage teases.

Hayes' pupils seem to swallow his irises, a hungry gleam to them. The rest of the guys have already moved on to Fulton's dare.

I rise to my feet, ready to reoccupy my spot next to Hayes, but he grabs my wrist and stops me.

"Sit on my lap," he orders, his tone rife with urgency.

Before I have the chance to protest, he yanks me onto his thighs, and the force evokes a surprised yip from me.

"What—"

His lips play along the shell of my ear, and his breath fires off electrical impulses in my brain. "Don't move, or the guys

are going to see the raging hard-on I have right now, and I'll never hear the end of it."

BLTS AND BODACIOUS BEAUTIES

HAYES

That game of Drink or Dare hasn't left the back of my mind. It's a constant reminder of how addictive Aeris Relera is—how one wrong move can lead to a Chernobyl-sized disaster. After she went home, I took a shower and jacked off to that image of her on her knees in front of me. I don't know why I haven't made a move.

I don't want to hurt her, but with this big plan lingering over my head, I know I'm going to. It's too late to come clean, so I'm gonna show her that what I'm feeling is more than sexual. More than an arrangement.

It's just more of everything. And that scares me as much as it draws me in.

I've decided to take her on a nice picnic date. Something relaxing, something...less intensive than a five-course meal. Ethan called to tell me that he's been pleased with the positive publicity from my stunt so far. He said he would've talked to me in person but he's on some business trip in Oregon trying to schmooze potential clients at this well-established country club.

I'm not sure if I'll ever tell her about the fake relationship stuff. I mean, my feelings for her are real. I don't need to upset her by talking about something that never even happened, right?

This is the first time in a long time that my name hasn't been dragged through the mud. I'm in the public's good graces. I haven't gotten into fights. I've been killing it out on

the ice. It's only been two weeks, but a lot has changed since Aeris came into my life.

Everything is great with my teammates. In fact, the Reapers have been doing so well that there's a good chance of us making it to playoffs this year. Coach is beyond thrilled, and so are the rest of the guys. I can taste the victory. We're close, closer than we've been in a long time. I'm not ready to go down without a fight.

I tuck the BLTs I've made into the checkered cushion of the picnic basket—a real, antique-looking picnic basket. The great thing about Bristol's grandma phase is all the cool stuff he's thrifted so far. Though, he did come back with one of those creepy porcelain dolls, and I have a sneaking suspicion that it might be haunted.

I'm just about to head out of the house when I hear the sound of a throat clearing. Bristol sits with his legs propped up on the coffee table, flipping through some old book that looks like it's as old as the Salem witch trials.

“A picnic, huh?”

“Is it a bad idea?” I ask, my eyes jumping between him and the basket, only compounding the panic knifing through my body.

“No, no,” Bristol insists, his eyes aflame with curiosity. “I’ve just never seen you work so hard for a girl before.”

Ouch. I mean, he's not wrong, but he didn't have to word it like *that*. I don't know what kind of voodoo witch shit Aeris has put me under. I'm rethinking all my womanizing ways. Hell, I didn't think I'd even want to be exclusive with anyone after Macy, but Aeris has proven me wrong.

Holy shit, she domesticated me.

Bristol sets his book face down. “You really like her, don't you?”

Her unspoken name burns on my tongue like rum. Her perfume is an addictive aroma that electrifies every hormone in my body, and the sensual set of her mouth makes me think the most detestable thoughts. She's poison in my veins, and I

can feel it killing me slowly. So yes, to put it in simple terms, I like her.

“I do. I really do.”

“I’m glad, H. You’re happy. Happier than you’ve been in a long time.”

My heart grows to twice its size, and a smile needles at my lips. “I am,” I sigh, already wishing I was at her doorstep, kissing her in my arms. God, I want to take this feeling and shoot it directly into my veins like an addict.

“Are you going to tell her the truth?” he asks.

And there’s the million-dollar question. I should tell her. That’s what any respectable gentleman would do, especially if he cares about the person he’s hurting. But...it’s too risky now. My improved behavior, my improved reputation, could all go poof at the snap of a slender, well-manicured finger.

Anxiety clangs through me, harsh and jarring, enough to apparently tie my tongue.

Bristol knows what my silence means, and he shakes his head like he’s a parent castigating their badly behaved child. “If she finds out, she’s going to be even more hurt.”

“You think I don’t know that, Bri?”

“The truth always has a way of coming out. Are you going to be the one comforting her when it does, or will you be the one she keeps at an arm’s distance?”

Bile congeals in the back of my throat. He’s right. Fuck. Why does he have to be right? Maybe I can milk this thing for a little longer, then I’ll tell her. A two-week relationship is nothing. The entire hockey world will forget all about it within days, and I’ll be back to being thought of as the unpredictable hothead who has a new flavor of woman each week.

“You know how this ends,” he warns, his jaw clenched. “And if saving your image means more to you than hurting an innocent girl, maybe you need to rethink your priorities.”



I CAN'T LET Aeris peek into the hellscape that is my mind. I can't let her know that I'm still reeling from Bristol's words. I want to enjoy this time with her, and nothing kills the mood faster than self-doubt.

Compartmentalize, Hayes.

When Aeris climbs into the passenger seat, my eyes are making pitstops all over her body, taking time on a few parts in between. She's wearing a flowy sundress that's a beautiful cream color. The ruffled bodice has a distractingly low neckline, and the hem of the dress flares out over her knees, displaying her gorgeous legs. Gold leaves dangle from her ears, and a matching necklace disappears into the cleft of her breasts.

"Oh, God. Did I overdress?" she asks, setting her purse on the car floor.

"Not at all. You look amazing."

She releases the tension in her shoulders, and a larger-than-life smile skims over her peachy lips. "Thank you."

I start to pull out of her driveway and onto the main road, turning on the radio to put us both at ease. I can't take my eyes off her, which won't bode well if I end up running over some poor pedestrian.

I'm planning to pop the label question today. I would've done it sooner, but I didn't want to scare her off by moving too fast. I just hope she wants the real thing.

Thanks to a lot of "Carpool Karaoke" with Faye, I can make out the starting notes of Taylor Swift's "Enchanted." It must be one of Aeris' favorite songs, because she immediately turns up the volume.

"I love this song!" she shouts over the music, bobbing her head to the rhythm, dancing against the confines of her seatbelt.

She looks so happy, so carefree. She's lip-syncing along, her mouth wide open, her teeth glistening from the apricot streaks of sunlight splicing through the window. She's a work of moving art, and I'll forever be in awe of her.

Aeris bunches her hand into a fist and uses it as a makeshift microphone, making me laugh. Her singing voice is God awful, and it kind of sounds like a cat being run over repeatedly, but I wouldn't mind listening to it for the rest of my life. After the song ends, we waste a bit of time talking since the destination is about thirty minutes from town.

"The team's looking really good this season," she comments, admiration saturating her words. She's ditched her wedges and has her legs outstretched on the dashboard, pointing and flexing her painted toes.

"The guys are really stepping up their game. Fully's had a helluva good season for a rookie," I say.

Her cheeks glow. "Your first season wasn't *that* bad."

"Did you not see the video of me eating shit when I flew over the boards and into my own teammates?"

"In your defense, ice skating is hard."

A chuckle jumps up my throat. "You've tried?"

"Mm-hm. I went a few months ago. My legs got stuck in a split, and I ripped my pants," she recalls.

"God, the money I would've paid to see that."

"To see me rip my pants?" she exclaims.

"To see what color underwear you were wearing that day."

She gives me a playful whack on the arm, and her touch sends my thoughts into overdrive, lust torching my vision in an aurora borealis of colors.

Stop thinking about the underwear she's wearing right now, dude.

"They were Day of the Week underwear."

"Stacks, those are the *sexiest* kind of underwear."

“You have a pair for yourself, then?”

“I’m wearing Tuesday right now,” I joke.

“It’s Thursday,” she deadpans.

I try to subtly adjust the lower half of myself. This conversation definitely isn’t hot enough to warrant an untimely boner. “That’s why I need them.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna need some proof to believe you.”

Oh, fuck.

Her words transmit an unruly tingle to my now-throbbing cock, and I absentmindedly white-knuckle the steering wheel. I need to change the subject before I’m too hard to focus on driving. “How’s work?”

“It’s great! The captions go by pretty fast when I’m on a roll. My boss lets my voice shine through so they’re less preachy and more relatable. We’re doing a campaign that puts out a new recipe for smoothie bowls each day of the month of September. It’s called ‘Let’s Smoothie-Move to Better Health.’”

“A smoothie bowl? Isn’t that just a smoothie...in a bowl?”

A grin nudges her mouth. “Yep! But you can decorate them. You can dye the açai blue and style it into waves, then sprinkle your granola on and use it for the sand. I like to add little blueberry dolphins in there for a special touch.”

“I didn’t know you were so artistic.”

“Oh, gosh. Hardly. I have the artistic talent of a toddler. But I do love anything that has to do with arts and crafts. I can’t say I’m very good at ceramics, though. My so-called mug turned out to have five holes in it and the durability of a wafer. Even the oven couldn’t save it.”

I’d probably get two full sips out of that mug, but I’d buy it off Aeris in a heartbeat if I could. I’ve always loved when people aren’t afraid to talk about their passions. And something about always having a little piece of her when she’s away makes my heart swoon.

I don't swoon, okay? No part of me has ever swooned. I brood. That's it.

"Why a vegan company? If you're not vegan." I noted the way she inhaled the bacon I made for her during her hangover.

"I don't know. It pays the bills? And I guess it's interesting to hear people's perspectives about the meat industry. They make some good points, you know? And that documentary about how hot dogs are really made was pretty scarring."

"So, you're a non-vegan working for a vegan company, you love flowers, Taylor Swift, cats, and making questionable art pieces. What else don't I know about you?" The ever-present flapping sensation in my chest feels a lot like infatuation. Or maybe it's heartburn.

"Oh, um..." She hesitates, scrunching her nose like she's thinking extra hard. "I refuse to eat the orange Skittles because they taste the worst. I have an irrational fear of mascots. My favorite color is green, but specifically forest green. I cheated one time on a math test in high school, and I still have nightmares about it. I secretly love reality television. And...I think that crocheted bucket hats are the best fashion trend to have ever existed."

I can't help but laugh, because that was the most Aeris answer to come out of her mouth. "That explains a lot."

"Explains what?"

"How weird you are."

Not weird. In fact, all of those facts are going into my memory bank as we speak. Aeris usually has a way of distracting me, but I know I'll remember every detail she told me.

Aeris sticks her tongue out. "You like it."

"I love it," I agree, and a blush stains that alabaster skin of hers. A blush that not even one of her well-angled head turns can hide.

"What about you? What's the superstar NHL player hiding from his fans?" Her brows dip up and down as she smirks

mischievously.

I know she meant it as a joke, but now I can't stop thinking about the career-ending secret I've been harboring. You know, the one that brands our relationship with a capital "Fake." My confidence has taken an unforeseen plunge, and nerves wriggle around in my body.

"I think mint chocolate-chip ice cream tastes like toothpaste. I'm deathly afraid of heights. My favorite color is gold, like the little flecks in your eyes. When I was younger, Faye's hamster seemed lonely, so I brought him over to play with the neighbor's dog. The dog ended up eating him right in front of me, and I never told Faye what happened. And...I've always secretly wanted a nipple piercing."

"Honestly? I'm all in support of you getting a nipple piercing."

I slap my hand against the steering wheel. "Right! Thank you. The guys were giving me so much shit for it. Piercings are hot."

"I've never found guys with piercings that hot, but I think you could definitely change my mind," she flirts.

"Aeris, was that a compliment?"

"And...I revoke it."

"Nope, you can't. You already gave it to me. I'll cherish it for the rest of my life," I declare, pretending to snatch her invisible compliment out of the air and place it over my heart.

Instead of fighting me, she only rolls her eyes, but I don't miss the hint of a smile on her lips.

"Do you want to work at your job for the rest of your life?" I ask.

Aeris fiddles with the scalloped trim on her dress. "I mean, I wouldn't be opposed to it. I have this unrealistic fantasy that I'll meet a billionaire at the grocery store when we bond over our love for pickles, and that he'll be so obsessed with me that he'll offer me a room in his mansion," she says. "And then

we'll eventually get married, adopt five cats, and have two children. Preferably a boy and a girl."

I'm not a billionaire, and I don't particularly like pickles, but I think I am obsessed with Aeris. Just a little bit.

"That sounds very...romance-y. Let me guess, he's also a Mafia boss who'll kill anyone who touches you?"

Aeris gasps dramatically. "You read romance books?"

"My sister does," I correct. "Though I'm not going to lie and say I haven't read one while taking a bubble bath before."

"Knowing you read has made you ten times more attractive."

"Ten times? That seems like a lot," I mutter.

She penetrates me with a fully loaded stare, one that would be frightening if she didn't look so adorable. "Yeah, I subtracted four points for being annoying. And cocky. And freakishly persistent."

I feign hurt. "But those are all of my best qualities."

"Best might be stretching it," she says.

I click on the turn signal and take a right. "If you have a different opinion, I'd love to hear it."

"Nice try. I've already inflated your ego enough today."

"Fine, but I'm only letting you off the hook because we're here."

When we round the hill, a large glade comes into view. The space sits amidst a bank of low-lying boulders and elderberry bushes, bordered by a copse of sycamores and a thick, blanketed underbrush. Sunbeams stream through the window and fall in lacework over Aeris' shoulders, highlighting that perfect side profile of hers, weaving into strands of her hair. Her eyes widen upon taking in the picture of paradise, and then she looks at me with affection so strong that it strikes my heart, maybe even stopping it for a second.

DESSERT'S ON ME

AERIS

When we get out of the car, the crisp air pervades my nostrils, and a slight breeze whispers over my skin, making the hem of my dress billow. The sorbet sky is clear with the exception of a few clouds, and if I look hard enough, I can faintly see a studding of stars throughout the backdrop of space.

Hayes leads me over to the center of the clearing, and once we find a nice spot to settle in that's not ridden with rocks and overgrown roots, we plant our stake. There's absolutely no one in the area, which gives us some much-wanted privacy. He begins to set out our spread on the checkered blanket, and I'm at a loss for words when the food keeps coming, like the basket is some bottomless hole.

There's a fruit salad, a charcuterie board, two BLTs, a jug of lemonade, and a container of snickerdoodles. Everything looks homemade, and I surmise that Hayes must have employed his cooking skills.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, giving my knee a small squeeze.

I nod, because I'm still trying to wrap my head around the fact that a person can be so considerate. Wilder never took me on dates, and whenever I'd ask him why, he'd turn the narrative on me and tell me I was being too clingy, or that I was asking too much of him. He told me couples didn't need to go on dates to prove that they cared for each other. He told

me I should be grateful he even made time for me with his start-up business taking off.

Once I shake myself out of that depressing trip down memory lane, I notice the beads of sweat starting at Hayes' hairline, the cords of his neck straining, the curl of his shoulders. He looks...nervous? That can't be possible, right? I'm the least intimidating person in the tri-state area. Also, the man plays professional hockey for a living. Surely he'd be used to a little bit of nerves.

"Are you okay?" I ask, alarm dipping low in my belly.

He gives me a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm okay. Are you okay?"

"I'd be better if you weren't sitting so far away from me," I say, gesturing to the three large, square lengths of blanket between us. He's close enough that he can extend his arm to reach me, but his body itself is practically on the other side of the blanket.

Upon my answer, he scoots closer to me, dousing me in that sandalwood scent of his. I'm close enough that I can see the soft, fluctuating pulse in his throat, see the swell of his chest as he breathes. The rays from the sun glisten over the strong arch of his cheekbones, painting his face in marigold brushstrokes. Most things are uglier up close, but not him. Not Hayes Hollings.

I pop a strawberry into my mouth. "You don't need to be nervous."

He gets to work on his sandwich. "What makes you think I'm nervous?"

"The way you're avoiding me like I have the plague." There's no frustration in my voice, no judgment—it's just a keen observation.

"Okay, maybe you make me a *little* nervous," Hayes admits, crunching down on a ribbon of perfectly cooked bacon.

"I do?" I cock my head to the side, genuine curiosity breaking over the syllables.

“You do,” he reaffirms, covering my hand with his. “You’re amazing, Aeris. You’re one of my favorite people to be around. I’m not going to say you always know what to say, but you always know how to make me laugh. You make the dull days brighter. And I love how big your heart is, even when you wish it was smaller.”

I didn’t know Hayes felt that way about me. I’ve always had low self-esteem, which was only augmented thanks to Wilder. I really should forward him my therapy bill.

I must’ve gone brain dead for a few seconds because a frown manifests on Hayes’ lips.

“Was that too much?”

I shake my head, wrapping my fingers around his hand. “No, no. It’s just...nobody’s ever said anything like that to me before. Not my ex, not my parents...”

“I’m sorry that you’ve lived the majority of your life without knowing how extraordinary you are,” he says, pressing his forehead against mine, “but I’m glad that I got to be the first to tell you.”

My heart graduates from a jog to a sprint. “I’m glad you got to be the first too.”

“I, um, didn’t have a big speech prepared or anything, but I wanted to ask you to officially be my girlfriend.”

Girlfriend. That’s—that’s a big deal. A deal that I thought I’d be panicking over...but I’m not. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever felt surer of anything in my entire life. For once, I’m not thinking about all the ways things could go wrong. For once, I’m basking in the moment, and I’m letting my heart lead instead of my head.

“Hayes, I would *love* to be your girlfriend,” I reply, my body moving of its own accord to kiss him.

I impulsively wind my hands into his hair, running them over his scalp gently. His lips move against mine, and he runs his tongue over my teeth, the contact sending shockwaves into the pit of my stomach. His hands map the expanse of my

curves as he holds me closer, relishing the moment, like he's afraid to break away in case time will steal the memory.

I want him to touch me. I want him to kiss me everywhere, starting at my mouth, taking a snaking detour down the length of my body, and ending at my pussy. I squeeze my legs together, already feeling liquid desire lubricate my clit.

"I want you to touch me," I say.

"I thought I was touching you." He nods at his hands, which are still very much on my waist.

"I mean like...*touch me*, touch me."

"You think I don't want to *touch you*, touch you?"

I extract myself from Hayes' grasp. "No?"

I'm expecting him to say something, but he doesn't. Instead, he reaches for the strawberry lemonade holding down one of the corners of the blanket.

He dips his index finger into the pink liquid, swirling it around for good measure, then holds it out in front of me.

"Suck," he orders, his tone bringing a shiver to the surface of my skin.

"What?"

"Stop thinking. Just su—"

I do as he says, closing my lips around his finger, hollowing my cheeks and sucking.

An audible sound rolls out of Hayes, somewhere between a grunt and a groan. The cut of his biceps tautens, and his jaw clenches so tightly he might have pulverized his molars.

"What do you want me to say, Aeris? Do you want me to tell you how every time you flash me that better-than-sex smile of yours, I grow hard? How you're the only thing on my mind when I have my hand wrapped around my cock in the shower? How I want those perfect breasts of yours in my mouth while you fuck my hand with your pussy?"

I lean forward just an inch, trailing my fingers up his leg, cupping the engorged bulge in his pants. He hisses under my touch, and his breath verges on the edge of a moan.

“You don’t think these past weeks have been torture for me, Hayes? Trying not to think about your tongue in my cunt while I’m lying in bed at night, surrounded by the lingering smell of you on my clothes? Trying not to imagine what you look like coming?” I say, a spark of uncontrollable want lighting a fire under my feet. “You have no idea how many times I’ve fantasized about your breath growing faint, your muscles tensing so hard that sweat breaks out over every inch of you, and the way your eyes will cloud with breakneck need when you ride out your orgasm.”

His bravado plummets to a shaky whisper, an animalistic sparkle in his eyes. “You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this.”

Hayes immediately leans forward, marrying his lips to mine. Intertwined, the two of us are nothing but the most naked parts of our souls. My arms cling to him like he’s my salvation, and when he applies the tiniest bit of pressure, my hips buck against him. We’re both lost in the essence of each other, savoring swollen lips and whimpers of affection. I can’t get over how seamlessly we fit together, as if I’d been carved from his very being, perfected for him.

I discard his shirt, which he doesn’t oppose to. My fingers brush against his pectorals, trailing over hardened muscle, descending to the plane of his abs. He growls into my neck, and the low sound reverberates through me like a gunshot.

He gently lowers me onto the blanket, simultaneously pushing plates of food out of the way. The weight of his body pins me against the ground, and he devours my neck in a trail of open-mouthed kisses. A groan wrestles its way from my throat, my nails leaving half-moon crescents in his back.

I pull at the waistband of his jeans, bringing his body closer to mine, brushing the crease of his V-line with my pelvis. I can feel his dick quiver from the close proximity to my pussy.

His mouth moves down the valley of my breasts and the length of my stomach, lifting my dress up to lick the cold metal of my belly button piercing. I clench mounds of dirt through the blanket.

He helps me out of my thong, rumbling his approval of the nude lace. His large hands support my lifted hips on either side, and he kisses one hipbone, then moves to the other with a languid pace, lips pressed softly against the flesh. He takes his sweet time teasing me, knowing how starved I am for his mouth, his fingers.

“Fuck,” he pants, his fingers brushing against my damp cunt. “Look at you, soaking the blanket like such a greedy girl. How long have you been like this?”

I hold my admission back as embarrassment cartwheels in my lower gut.

“Aeris.”

“I-I don’t know. A while,” I answer him.

Hayes shakes his head, swirling my arousal with his knuckle. “You should’ve told me. I would’ve taken care of it.”

“Don’t you like me like this?”

“You have no idea how much I like you like this.”

I spread my legs wide so he can drink in every part of me, and he does—he practically swallows me whole.

“Then fuck me,” I say, the mounting warmth in my groin growing more and more irrepressible.

Hayes makes a noise in the back of his throat, something half-human and half-animal, and there’s pre-cum staining his crotch. “The first time we fuck, Aeris, won’t be in the middle of a field.”

I whimper but nod, falling back against the soft earth.

“But I can think of another way to please you,” he drawls, and before I have time to form a coherent thought, a cold chill whooshes over my exposed sex, and his head is between my

thighs. Stars twinkle in my vision, my head becoming fuzzy, my legs wrapping up over his shoulders.

His tongue dips in and out of me, paying special attention to my drenched labia. He teases his way over the sensitive area, arousing every nerve inside of me, my hormones igniting into a small electrical fire.

“Do you like when I fuck your pretty pussy with my tongue?” he murmurs against the hood of my clit, lightly taking a lip between his teeth and pulling.

Pleasure compresses in my stomach, and I yank roughly on his hair, making him quicken his pace. “Yes, Hayes.”

His tongue circles my nub in expert strokes, spearing into my slick folds. Every movement he performs is methodical. One hand shoots out to grip my thigh, hard enough to leave a bright red print. My legs squeeze his head in retaliation. He presses his other hand down on my abdomen to keep me from squirming.

“I don’t want to hear my name unless you’re screaming it.”

I open my eyes long enough to catch my cum glistening on his lips, and the sight alone has me close to combusting. Hayes is slurping up every drop of my wetness like I’m the first meal he’s had in weeks.

“Hayes...” It comes out as a breathy moan, and I know that’s not good enough.

“Close, but not quite.”

He adds two fingers, stretching out my walls, flicking back and forth before I feel him slide another digit in. Oh my God. The pressure feels so good. I haven’t had someone inside of me in such a long time, and now all of that pent-up sexual frustration is slowly leaving my body.

He works me with his fingers and mouth. His tongue moves in a figure-eight over my bundle of nerves, edging me closer to my orgasm.

“Hayes!” My voice is shaky, same with my legs, and I can’t fight the way my eyes roll back.

“That’s better, Stacks. Let it all out,” he coos. “Let me feel you come on my tongue.”

In the matter of seconds, he locates my G-spot, and I combust into a firework of screaming colors and scalding sensations, leaving me with a high I have no intention of letting go.

He lifts my lower back up so I’m parallel to the ground, then kisses me with an intensity and brightness that until now has been a foreign feeling to me—the kind of feeling that love songs are written about, what romance novels are made of. I can taste my own salty slick on his tongue, but when it’s undercut by the sweetness of his mouth, it doesn’t bother me.

Hayes Hollings just rocked my fucking world.

**WHO KNEW THE DEVIL WAS A
MIDDLE-AGED MAN?**

AERIS

I feel like I'm glowing.

I stumble into my house with a giddy smile on my face, still somehow sex-drunk from the afternoon. I toe my wedges off and plonk my keys down on the coffee table, falling back onto the couch with a happy sigh.

Crunch rubs against my leg as she starts to purr up a storm, her raised tail flicking back and forth. I palm my phone, planning on sending a thank-you text to Hayes—for the food and the orgasm—but my screen flashes with the name of an incoming caller who I never thought I'd hear from again.

Everything inside of me freezes, and my thumb automatically hovers over the decline button. I haven't spoken to my father in over a year. Roden was the only thing keeping our family together—"keeping" being a loose word here—and once he was gone, I wanted nothing to do with my parents. When Roden died, I think my dad saw it as a way out. He abandoned me when I needed him, and my mother followed suit.

So why, after all this time, could my dad possibly be calling me?

Against my better judgment and my skyrocketing pulse, I answer, but I don't say anything.

"Why have you been photographed with Hayes Hollings?"

Not even a hello. He hasn't cared how I'm doing since he left me to pick up the pieces of myself that Roden shattered

with his death. There's been this aching, empty hole inside of me that's grown with each passing day, and my father's absence only widened it. I've been doing so well mentally since Hayes came into my life. But this—this one impromptu phone call—has erased weeks of progress, sending me three steps backwards.

Anger cracks through me like a clap of thunder, swallowing my body in hellfire. I wipe the unshed tears from my eyes.

"Why are you calling me?"

Venom curls my dad's voice into a hiss, and I can practically feel him spit on me through the phone. "Is it true? Are the rumors true? Are you seeing him?"

Why does he care? He never cared before. In fact, he stopped caring the day Roden died.

"Why does it matter?" I growl.

"You need to stop seeing him."

"Oh, that's rich. How could you possibly think you're entitled to make demands like that?"

I clench my hands into fists, and when I dig my fingernails into my palm, the warmth of blood signals that I must've broken the skin. I'm not going to entertain this. He has the *audacity* to demand that I listen to him? He thinks he has the right to just walk back into my life—like he wasn't the worst father in the whole world, like I didn't used to hide from him as a child because I was afraid of what he'd do to me?

"I'm your father, Aeris."

Father? Yeah, right. The fear that's been force-fed to me this entire time is slowly turning into anger.

"You're giving yourself *a lot* of fucking credit," I snarl maliciously, hauling myself off the couch and onto my feet. The motion scares Crunch off to another section of the house, and I try to calm myself by pacing around the living room.

"You haven't *been* a father. You were never there for me. When I needed you the most, you left me! You made Mom

turn her back on me. I had nobody. Nobody in the entire world, and all I needed was for you to hug me. For you to tell me everything was going to be okay. But you couldn't even do that."

He pauses, and the only sound I can hear on his end is heavy breathing.

"You have no idea what your mother and I have been through since Roden's death."

I hate myself for the tears that clog my vision, betrayal puncturing my chest like an icicle. "Don't—don't you *dare* say his name. You have no right."

"No matter what you think of me, I loved your brother," my father says.

"You were ashamed of Roden. You never paid any attention to him. You were never there for him. He did everything to try and please you, even though you never deserved an ounce of his respect." The truth tastes bitter on my tongue, and it goes down about as easy as cough medicine.

I have to brace myself against the wall to stop my head from spinning, to stop my knees from buckling underneath me.

"I'm not going to waste my breath arguing with you when I could be doing more productive things. I don't want our family name to be dragged through the mud more than it already has with your brother's selfish act. I thought I was doing something good by trying to warn you, but I realize you're still the spoiled brat you've always been—refusing my help."

Help? He seriously thinks he's *ever* helped me?

My tone is measured. "Warn me about what?"

"Whatever delusions you've been indulging in, let me be the one to give you a reality check. Hayes is using you. I overheard that he slept with a sponsor's daughter, and he's afraid word will get out, so he's trying to amend his reputation now to lessen the blow."

My stomach sours, and I'm glad I didn't eat a lot of food earlier, otherwise it would've all come back up.

What the *hell* is he talking about? How does he know that? How does he even know who Hayes is? My father isn't interested in sports, and I highly doubt he'd pick up a sudden liking for hockey just to deliver this fun little tidbit to me.

My vision is so blurred by the fumes of rage that I don't even know if my father is telling the truth. This is probably a ruse to make it seem like he cares about me, to lure me back into a false sense of security so I'm dependent on him like I was when I was a child.

How is it that he still continues to torture me, even hundreds of miles away? I expected him to have this power over me when I was little, not when I'm a full-grown woman. I'm tired. I'm tired of all of it.

"Where's your proof?"

"My proof?"

Shock follows the heel of his words. It's like my tongue is on a warpath, designed specifically to hurt him. "Yes. A picture? Do you have anything for me? 'Cause I sure as shit am not taking your words at face value."

My father's a serial liar, and Hayes promised me there would be no more secrets between us.

"I don't need proof. If you were smart, you would take my word for it," he sneers.

Fury shoehorns its way into my heart. "You haven't given me a reason to believe a word you've said in the past. Why would I believe you now?"

"It would be a mistake if you didn't. Though you're pretty familiar with mistakes, aren't you, Aeris?"

This is not a conversation I'm going to have. I'm not going to give my dad the satisfaction of knowing his words cut me bone deep.

"Goodbye, Michael."

I'm a second from hanging up, but his last words leave me with an overwhelming fear that refuses to be extinguished.

“He’s not who you think he is.”

ALL DOUBT, NO BENEFIT

AERIS

H *e's not who you think he is.*

I haven't been able to get those words out of my head. They've been circling my thoughts like a vulture waiting for its next meal to drop. I can't sleep, I can't eat, I can't focus on my work.

I'm outside of Hayes' house right now, but I don't even know what I'm supposed to say to him. I can't just walk up and ask, "Hey, you're not hiding anything from me, are you? Maybe a life-changing secret that'll show me your true colors?"

I trust Hayes; I do. I mean, yeah, he lied to me about his occupation, but with good reason and explained why. My dad's just trying to scare me. He's probably trying to ruin the only good thing I have in my life right now.

I come to my senses and start inching away from the door, but not before I hear it swing open. I freeze in my tracks, slowly turn to look over my shoulder, and try to plaster on the most convincing smile I can.

"Aeris? Did you need something?"

It's Bristol. Thank God.

"Oh, uh, I...I was just leaving," I stammer, awkwardly jerking my thumb toward my car. I'm not ready for an interrogation. I'm barely holding it together just standing here.

"You were hanging out on our porch for five minutes... because you were 'just leaving'?" he asks, leaning his

shoulder against the door frame. Does hockey require some kind of height requirement? Why are all hockey players so tall and buff?

Anxiety lights a fuse in my veins, threatening to scorch me to a crisp. “How did you know how long I was out here?”

He gestures to the device next to the door that I somehow didn’t notice.

“Ring Doorbell,” he says, tousling his hair back with a swoop of his hand. “Was pretty helpful when we had that crazed fan turned stalker a few months back.”

Stupid Ring Doorbell.

“Mm-hm.” I tuck my hands into my jean pockets, evading his gaze to the best of my ability. Jesus. It feels so hot out here. Why is it so hot? I’m sweating like a pig, my heart’s racing about a million beats per minute, and there’s not enough saliva in my mouth to help me form more than a one-word response.

Thankfully, Bristol doesn’t comment on my clear nervousness. Either he’s polite, or he’s not super perceptive. “Were you looking for Hayes?”

“Ah, I, yes?”

“I think he’s at lunch with his agent right now. Can I give him a message?”

“Oh, no. That’s okay. Thank you.” We both stare at each other for an unusually long amount of time, neither of us moving, and then I finally rally the courage to scuffle a few inches back. God, kill me now. Have a sinkhole open underneath me.

“Why don’t you come inside?” Bristol proposes, angling his body so I have clear passage. “Hayes should be back within the hour.”

Wait for him? And tell him what? That I let my father infiltrate my mind and poison all my thoughts like some kind of egg-laying parasite? No, Aeri. Respectfully decline. Tell him you have to bathe your cat. Tell him you have jury duty,

and you may or may not be in the process of putting away a serial killer. TELL HIM ANYTHING.

“Okay.”

Agh! No!

I politely make my way past Bristol, and once my feet step over the imaginary line I’ve drawn in the imaginary sand, my fight or flight response kicks in. This is bad. If I don’t tell Hayes the truth, he’ll know I’m hiding something. If I do tell him the truth, he’ll think I don’t trust him. There is no winning in this situation.

“Do you want some tea?” Bristol offers, walking over to the open-plan kitchen.

“I’m okay. Thank you.” I shrug my purse off my shoulder and sit down on the couch.

With a heavy stare, I watch as Bristol turns the burner on and places a kettle on the stovetop.

“I’ll make some just in case.”

I trade my aimless fidgeting and focus on a distressed hole in my jeans, curling my fingers around the white threads. “So...”

“Why are you really here, Aeris? You look upset.” The brazenness of Bristol’s words cut me like the serrated edge of a knife, and I stiffen, drawing in a breath that fails to slow my stumbling heart rate.

“I...I guess I’m just having second thoughts,” I answer in a timid voice, flinching upon hearing my insecurities fizzle to the surface.

“Second thoughts about your relationship with Hayes?” Bristol takes a seat across from me, and even though he’d presumably be on Hayes’ side, he’s looking at me with a kind glimmer in his eyes.

More nerves take flight in my stomach, and I scratch my fingernail against my knee through a lattice of fraying strands. “I guess...”

“I know you aren’t asking for my two cents, or my advice, but I’d be a terrible friend if I didn’t tell you how much Hayes likes you. I’ve never seen him this way with anyone before. He never stops talking about you. He’s the happiest I’ve ever seen him.”

He talks about me? He’s over-the-moon-happy to be with me? I’m so stupid for even tricking myself into thinking I had something to worry about.

“It’s hard for me to be completely vulnerable with him. And it’s not because I don’t feel safe with him. I just...haven’t had the best luck with relationships in the past.” The tears have yet to materialize, but if this conversation turns into a therapy session, they’re going to make a very unwanted appearance.

And suddenly, my pants aren’t a sufficient distraction anymore.

Bristol nods. “That’s understandable. Hayes is still getting used to the relationship scene. He means well, but I don’t think he really has a clue what he’s doing. If something’s bothering you, you should talk to him.”

“Even if it might cause an argument?”

“Arguments are healthy for couples to have. And I know Hayes has a bit of a temper, but I assure you that he’d never do anything to make you regret opening up to him. Communication is important to him. You’re important to him. Whatever it is that you want to discuss with him, he’d be more than happy to hear you out. A relationship only works if both parties are honest and receptive.”

My breath stalls. “You’re right.”

He then leans into me, lowering his voice to a whisper. “I know I’m not Hayes, but I know him well enough. I’m all ears if you need some extra help.”

Bristol doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who would lie, much less lie to save his friend’s ass if said friend was being an idiot. Maybe being honest with him will help me tackle this thing with Hayes.

A bomb of anxiety detonates against my breastbone. “Hayes hasn’t slept with a sponsor’s daughter, has he?”

Oh my God. I can’t believe I just said that aloud.

He pauses to think, then eventually shakes his head. “Not that I know of.”

Whew. That’s a good thing, right? I should be relieved, so why do I still feel so...yucky? Maybe my body’s subconsciously projecting from the gross aftertaste that my father left with his half-assed rumors. Hayes didn’t sleep with a sponsor’s daughter, and he’s definitely not using me to better his image. Case closed, never to be reopened for as long as I live.

I open my mouth to blubber about how stupid I was, but Bristol cuts me off.

“I’ve been where you are. Your fears and doubts are valid. I don’t know how much Hayes has told you, but he got out of a two-year relationship about six months ago. She was a self-made influencer, and the only reason she was with him was to piggyback off his fame. He found out the hard way when he caught her cheating.”

I hadn’t realized how hurt Hayes must have felt from that betrayal. When he brought it up to me at the game, I don’t think I fully grasped the extent of how badly this girl fucked him over. And now I feel like a piece of shit for letting some unsubstantiated rumor get to me.

“If you decide to go ahead and ask him, I don’t think he’d be mad at you. I think he’d feel bad for making you worry, or for giving you that impression. Yeah, he’s a bit of a ladies’ man, but I really think he’s trying to change for that special someone. For you, maybe.”

The twinge of panic that had been rippling through me is nothing but a lusterless hum now. “Thank you, Bristol. For talking me down from the ledge.”

“Of course. You’re family now. The guys and I will always be here if you need us.”

I lunge into Bristol and wrap my arms around him in a bear hug, genuinely meaning it with every fiber of my being. The slight breath I punch out of him dissolves into a chuckle, and he returns my embrace with a tight squeeze.

“Aeris?” The husky timbre of a deep voice kisses my ears, and it’s second nature for me to register the handsome face behind the equally seductive drawl.

I pull back from the hug, homing in on the sight of Hayes dressed in a blue button-down and tight-fitting pants. A jacket is folded over his arm, and his hair is free of product, fringing down the sides of his temples.

Instead of greeting him like a sane person, I run at him and jump into his arms, meshing my lips to his. He sighs into my mouth, his arms tightening around me, and the hungry pressure from my tongue draws his out from its hiding place.

When we pull away, he’s flushed.

“What was that for?” he pants.

“I missed you,” I tell him, my calves straining from standing on my tiptoes. He cranks his neck down to look me in the eyes.

He fingers a wisp of my hair, brushing his knuckles against my cheekbone. “You came to my house to tell me you missed me?”

I beam from ear to ear, probably lighting up brighter than the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. “I’d cross the ocean to tell you I missed you.”

A smile adorns his mouth, warmth crystallizing in his eyes.

“Come on. Let’s go upstairs.” He leads me by the hand, nodding to Bristol as he makes a beeline for his room, practically dislodging my arm from its socket with the way he’s pulling me.

Once we’re out of ear and eyesight, he locks the door, breathing a sigh of relief.

I’m about to question why we were moving at *Fast and Furious* speed, but then I glance down at the huge boner he’s

sporting, and everything falls into place.

“You do unspeakable things to me, Aeris Relera,” he says huskily, pulling me flush against his body.

My heart’s doing a fifty-yard dash in my chest, and my vision spins with a solar system of stars. I adjust my hips slightly, allowing his ever-growing erection to nestle against my stomach.

“Use your words, Hayes Hollings,” I purr, my voice as soft as buttercream.

His fingers come down roughly on my sides, and he skates his teeth together, his features tightening like the drawstring of a bow. The muscles in his upper body ripple under his shirt as he tries to leash the last bit of his self-control.

“Let’s just say that I haven’t been able to stop thinking about that sweet fucking nectar between your legs, and I can’t wait until I’m nose-deep inside your gorgeous pussy again—until I can wear your scent like my new favorite cologne.”

**THE SADDEST EYES ARE THE
PRETTIEST**

HAYES

From the moment Aeris kissed me, I'd been fighting a semi. Now she's in my room, looking like a wet dream in her jeans and oversized sweatshirt, and my dick's harder than steel.

"I never thanked you for the picnic," she says, and I'm so distracted by the pleasure swamping my gut that I can barely focus on her face.

"Aeris, you don't—"

She severs my words by working the buttons on my shirt with her fingers, her tongue wetting the bottom of her lip.

Thank me for the pic—oh. OH.

"You don't ha—"

Her hand shoots out to cover my mouth, and my heart flip-flops under her touch. There's a hint of the devil in her eyes.

"Hayes, please shut up."

I nod, letting her peel my shirt off, and she runs her hands up my stomach, her fingernails lightly marking my skin. I help her out of her hoodie, revealing a small tank top that barely contains her breasts and showcases that luscious jewel in her belly.

I groan into her mouth, capturing her lips in a sloppy kiss that shows her exactly where I want this afterschool special to go. Her pebbled nipples are giving me a high salute from the

chill coming through the vents, and she presses her cleavage up against my chest.

Her voice is low and husky. “I’m going to make you feel good.”

I’ve never been a religious person before, but after today, I think I’m gonna need to go to confessional.

I stay pressed up against my door, hoping that nobody in the house can hear what’s about to transpire. The lower half of me is mashed against her abdomen, and when she rolls her hips, I have to bite my tongue to stop from moaning.

I arch against her. “Are you sure?”

She hums, and it’s a buzz against my mouth. “I’m sure.”

In one fluid motion, my pants are at my ankles, and she slides my boxers down. My dick springs out immediately, slapping against my stomach. A noise of surprise sails out of her, and a stroke of blush turns her skin an incendiary red. I’m bigger than average. And no, that’s not me tooting my own horn. It’s a widely known fact.

I expect Aeris to change her mind, but she doesn’t. Everything is a blur. One second, she’s in front of me, and the next, she’s down on her knees.

Her lips suction around the head of my cock, and they’re pillow soft. She begins to slowly move up and down my shaft, not fully taking me, only clamping halfway and squeezing slightly as her mouth slips up my length. Saliva helps with the traction she’s created, and her tongue laves at the vein running along the underside of my dick.

“Holy...*fuck*.”

I feel my thighs grow hot, and then suddenly, my whole body is ablaze. Oh my God. She knows exactly what to do with her tongue, exactly how to stroke me, and she swirls it around the tip, licking up pre-cum.

She removes herself from my appendage, and I already miss the warmth of her mouth. “Go on, Hayes. *Beg* me,” she

commands, still sexy as fuck with a string of spit hanging from her chin.

I'm so caught off guard that I can't possibly form a response to that. Who knew Aeris Relera had a dominant side to her?

"I may be the one on my knees, but you're going to be the one begging."

"Please, Stacks." My dick's in so much pain, and Aeris' mouth is the only relief that I'm interested in chasing. Not to mention that this whole assertive thing she has going on really does it for me.

"Please *what*?"

I let my hand start to stimulate me, but it's subpar at best, and I have no idea how I'm going to masturbate anymore without thinking about her plush lips. "Please suck me fucking *dry*. You have no idea how long I've waited for your tonsils to know what the tip of my dick feels like. How long I've wanted to splatter my cum over those perfect freckles of yours," I growl lowly.

She takes me fully into her mouth this time, her cheeks puffing out slightly. She gags when I hit the back of her throat, but she continues to milk my granite-hard erection, adding a hand to pump the base. Her eyes water, and more saliva ropes down her chin. Her fingers don't fully connect around my girth; a few good inches of space exists between her index finger and thumb.

If she continues like this, I'm gonna blow my load in two minutes.

Desire breaks over me as I brace myself against the door. "Fuck, yeah," I moan, a little too loudly. "Just like that."

I shut my eyes completely, welcoming a prolonged span of darkness. I can hear the murmur of electricity pulsating through my veins, alighting my body, my impending orgasm rising from the ashes of pure pleasure. Orange and red flames devour me whole, choking me. I gasp for the sweet release of air, but an intense wall of heat slams into me instead.

I throw my head back. “Aeris, I—fuck—I’m going to come.”

Her name on my tongue is a dangerous combination, and I just pulled the trigger. She somehow sees that as a challenge to make me come faster. I nearly disintegrate when she cups my balls and massages them in her palms.

She then moves one hand to knead my ass, her thumb lightly brushing over my asshole, and that’s all I need before I’m coming so hard I can’t see straight.

Her eyes darken as she looks up at me through her lashes and swallows. She then wipes away the cum trickling down her chin, flashing me a provocative smile.

Oh my God. That was, undeniably, the best head I’ve ever gotten. Once I pull my boxers back up, I lead Aeris over to my bed, lying down and patting my bare chest.

“Come here.”

She snuggles up next to me, resting her ear over my heart, using her finger to lackadaisically trace the outline of my abs. I kiss the crown of her head, using one hand to gently comb through her hair.

“I talked with my agent today. He said I should go on a podcast and answer some questions about our relationship, but I didn’t want to agree to anything before talking with you,” I say, wishing I could hold her in my arms forever.

When I was with Macy, my career was the most important thing to her. With Aeris, I don’t feel like I need to put on a show.

“Do you want to do it?” she asks, propping her chin on my chest so she can look at me.

“Tell the entire world that Aeris Relera is mine? Fuck yeah, I wanna do it.”

“If you’re sure, then I’m going to support you,” Aeris promises, pride layered in her tone, a light-hearted smile tilting over her mouth.

I hook my finger under her chin, pulling her in to me so I can kiss her. I can taste my own saltiness on her tongue, and even though she just emptied everything out of me, my dick wants to go for a second round.

When she draws back, she runs her hand over the Roman numerals above my chest. “What does this tattoo mean?”

I take in a deep breath from the bottom of my lungs. “It’s the date my mother died.”

“Oh, Hayes...”

“It’s okay. I got it to remember her.”

I’d really rather not ruin the moment by thinking about my dead mom.

“What about the tree? On your back?” she inquires.

“I knew you were staring at my back that night,” I jest.

Aeris flicks me on the arm as she rolls her lips together. “I wasn’t *staring*. I was *observing*.”

I laugh. “The tree represents resilience and growth. I try to look at it every now and then to remind myself that I’m more than my struggles. And when you were *observing* me, you were also drooling a bit.”

“I’d be offended if you weren’t right.”

I grab her small hand, interlacing our fingers together. Macy never asked me about my tattoos—no girl has. When I talk with Aeris, it’s like I get a break from the harsh reality of the world, and for just a moment, get to live in a bubble of pure bliss. Spending time with her has never felt like an obligation. And when time flies, the only thing I want to do is rewind the clock.

“Thank you, Aeris. For always being there. For being so understanding,” I say, and a foreign feeling prowls out from the shadows of my tortured consciousness—a feeling dangerously close to love.

She sits up on the bed, crossing her legs and placing her hands in her lap. “I don’t want there to be any secrets between

us.”

I cover a dry choke with a cough—hopefully well enough—and I slide my back up against my headboard. No more secrets. And that includes the huge secret of me only pursuing her in the beginning to fix my reputation. The huge secret I’m too afraid to tell her because I know she’ll leave if she finds out.

I don’t think I could ever tell her. It would ruin her. It would ruin everything we’ve built together, and I don’t want any of that to go away.

I’m half-expecting her to start grilling me over everything I’ve done in my twenty-three years of life, but *she* starts talking.

Aeris takes a fortifying breath, interlocking her toilworn eyes with mine, ones I swear I can see moisture in. It’s crazy how quickly her demeanor has changed, and it’s making the bud in my throat grow to the size of a tumor. What is she about to tell me? Why is she so upset?

Her lower lip pops out with a tremble, and she looks about seconds away from crying. “Promise you won’t be mad, okay?” Her voice is small and unsure, almost like she knows she shouldn’t be asking in the first place.

Not a great start.

“I promise,” I tell her. And I do...to the best of my ability.

Her confidence languishes and her guard lowers, revealing the shell of a girl who’s been broken one too many times. I hate seeing Aeris sad. I want to fix whatever it is that’s bothering her, but I need to remember that I’m here to listen, not to come up with a solution to all her problems.

“I had an ex named Wilder. We dated for two years. There were, um, there were a lot of things wrong with our relationship. He was manipulative and cruel and judgmental, and I cared for him a lot more than he cared for me. I’m honestly not even sure why I stayed with him for as long as I did. I did everything I could to make him happy. I dressed differently, I ate the food that he suggested, I didn’t talk when

we were around his friends. There was one point when I would've done anything he asked of me.

“When Roden passed, Wilder abandoned me when I needed him the most. I don't know why, and I don't think I'll ever know. I kept blaming myself for driving him away—convincing myself that it was my fault he no longer wanted to be with me. *I* always took the fall for *his* mistakes. In my eyes, he could do no wrong, and that did a number on my self-esteem.

“So when I first started seeing you, I was worried about being vulnerable around another person. I was afraid I'd have a Wilder 2.0 on my hands. He always had an opinion on my body, and there are lingering parts of me that still believe his toxic words. I'm sorry I've waited this long to tell you, Hayes. But that was the reason I was so hesitant to go out with you.”

Wow. Aeris just dropped a lot on me, but I think what hurts the most is her not seeing herself the way I see her. Yeah, I'm fucking angry over her douche of an ex, but we'll get to that later.

“Oh, Stacks,” I whisper, reaching my arm out to graze her knee. When she doesn't flinch away, I settle my hand on her leg, hoping that the gesture will at least soothe her a little bit. “I'm sorry you went through that. And I feel so honored that you trusted me enough to tell me.”

“I know that you're nothing like him. I'm sorry that I held back from you in the beginning.” The pain in her tone is strong enough to topple a small fleet of ships, and she dismisses the water in her eyes with a rub of her hand.

“No, you don't need to apologize for anything,” I tell her, pulling her quailing frame into my steady one, letting her bury her face in the junction of my neck.

“You're so incredible, Hayes. I just wish I looked better for you.”

Wrath kickstarts a fire in my chest. “Stop.”

Uh-oh. There's that notorious Hollings temper, rearing its ugly head. I need to get my anger under control. I can't just be

blowing my top whenever Aeris needs me to stay calm.

She pulls away from me to sniffle. “But—”

The growl in my voice is unintended, but I don’t apologize for letting it slip out. “No buts. I’m not going to sit here and listen to you talk badly about yourself.”

Tears travel an errant path down her cheeks, watery pearls adhering to her lashes. A tiny sob sputters out of her, and she tries to twist away from me, but I hold her still. I wipe the wet space below her eye with my thumb, then delicately glide it over the dark circles.

“Aeris, do you trust me?” I ask tenderly.

She nods, but the deflated look on her face makes my heart feel like it’s cracked in half and is spilling out onto the floorboards.

“Undress for me.”

A frown underlines the curve of her brows. “What?”

“Do you trust me?” I repeat, stripping my voice of its natural roughness.

She hesitates for a second, but then starts removing her clothing until all that’s left is her stunning, naked body. Everything about her is perfect, all the way down to that trimmed triangle of hair just above the sweetest pussy I’ve ever tasted. Just the sight of her sends my body into full throttle, pleasure kindling in the pit of my stomach.

She covers her chest with her arms, looking anywhere but at my eyes. I get up from the bed, then shed my boxers so we’re on an equal playing field.

I kneel down in front of her, resting my hands on her waist. “Tell me which parts of your body you don’t like,” I command, looking up at her, watching as curiosity eclipses her expression.

“Hayes, I’m not going to—”

“Tell me which parts of your body you don’t like.”

She's quiet for a beat, but then her lips start to move. "I...I don't like my stretchmarks," she says, shuffling her feet a little, still holding her arms against her torso.

I run my hand over her thighs, noting the raised texture of the scars, letting my finger stray over each individual branch of lightning. My lips travel over the marks, and I press a cluster of kisses against her flawless skin. "Your stretchmarks are beautiful. Your body had to adjust for a change in weight and growth, and I think that's pretty amazing. Scars are reminders of what we've endured, but also reminders of what we've overcome."

"They're still so raw and red. They stand out."

"They don't stand out, Aeris. *You* stand out. Everything about you is captivating. You have this effect on people that I can't explain. You light up every room you walk into. It's like every emotion you feel is projected off you. When you're happy, it's contagious. And when you're sad, I feel it in my own heart. So when people look at you, they aren't judging you, okay? They're envious."

I have no idea if any of this is mitigating her worries. I hope it is. I hope I can take some of her pain. She pauses long enough for my doubts to burgeon, but then she blows out a breath and pinches her lips together.

Her next set of words barely come out. "M-my...stomach. I don't like my stomach."

When her hand moves over the area, I gently push it aside. I plant an array of kisses all over her belly, feeling her shiver under my mouth. "I love your stomach."

"It's not flat," she cuts in.

"Do you think I care if it's flat?"

I beat her to the answer by kitten-licking her piercing, and I move my hands down to stop her legs from trembling.

"You have a soft belly. That's all it is. You need to eat. You should be consuming at least two thousand calories every day. I don't care where those calories come from. If you want to eat

your weight in chicken nuggets, I'll buy you every single bag."

Since I'm still on my knees, I can't get a good look at her face, so I have no idea what she's thinking right now. But judging by the silence, she's either plotting my murder or suppressing sobs.

"I never want you to hide from me. I want every part of you, as you come. You're beautiful, and I'll remind you every day until you believe me."

"You might be waiting a while, then," she warns.

"You think I'm gonna be deterred by some waiting?"

Tears break through her eyes. "I just won't be able to..."

I stand up and cradle the side of her face. "Hey, I don't expect you to suddenly love yourself overnight. I just want you to know that I'll do whatever I can to help you get there."

She glances at my hand and shrinks away from me. Her fingers wordlessly come up to touch the little bumps on her cheeks, her mouth depositing a weighted sigh. "I don't want you to touch my acne scars. I've tried everything to get rid of them, but nothing's worked. I hate them, Hayes. I hate that I always feel the need to wear makeup. I can't even go grocery shopping without putting concealer on."

My hand inches toward her scars, and I wait for her to give me consent to touch there.

When she gives me a cautious nod, I familiarize myself with the pockmarked skin, seeing nothing wrong with the remarkable girl in front of me. "You don't need to wear makeup, Aeris. Your rawness is gorgeous. Your scars are natural, and I love them because they're a part of you."

"You don't need to say all of this stuff," she mumbles.

"I know. I want to. And since you're my favorite subject, I'm never going to shut up."

AN INSIGHT INTO THE MADNESS

October 5th, Sunday, 2:38 p.m.

HAYES: You feeling better today?

AERIS: I am, thank you. You ever thought about becoming a life coach or a motivational speaker?

HAYES: Can't say it's ever really crossed my mind. I didn't realize you liked listening to me talk so much.
smirking face emoji

AERIS: Ugh, and that's what I get for complimenting you.

HAYES: Hey, I love it when you compliment me. And stroke my ego.

AERIS: I'm pretty sure you like it when I stroke a lot of things.

HAYES: Gasp. Aeris, you naughty vixen. Are you sexting with me right now?

AERIS: Nope, just stating a hard fact.

HAYES: Hard. Ha.

AERIS: You're a child, you know that?

HAYES: Come on. Lighten up. Play with me.

AERIS: Play with yourself.

HAYES: Only if you watch.

AERIS: I hate you.

HAYES: I'd hope so. Don't need you falling in love with me. *kissy face emoji*

AERIS: Oh, don't worry. That won't be a problem.

HAYES: Confident, are we?

AERIS: Very.

HAYES: And why's that?

AERIS: Because you'll be the one falling for me.

OCTOBER 10TH, Friday, 5:55 p.m.

AERIS: Does underwear go bad? Like, is it bad if I still wear the underwear I had in high school? I wash them and everything. Underwear's just so expensive.

HAYES: If you wanted me to buy you panties, you should've just asked.

AERIS: THAT WAS FOR LILA. Please erase that message right now.

HAYES: Hmm, I think I'll keep it. I mean, it's a solid question. I can ask the guys if they know the answer?

AERIS: YOU WOULDN'T DARE.

HAYES: I won't if you tell me what color lace you want.

AERIS: I prefer granny panties.

HAYES: You joke, but you wouldn't look half bad in those.

AERIS: Do you have some granny kink I don't know about?

HAYES: So what if I did? Don't kink shame me.

AERIS: You're not buying me underwear.

HAYES: Oh, good thinking. Don't want to waste money when they're just gonna come off anyways.

AERIS: HAYES!

OCTOBER 15TH, Wednesday, 11:05 a.m.

HAYES: I miss you.

AERIS: I miss you too.

HAYES: Do you realize we're three thousand miles away from each other?

AERIS: It's an away game. You'll live.

HAYES: Why must you hurt me, Stacks?

AERIS: Aw, do you need me to kiss it better?

HAYES: Wait, I didn't know that was on the table. Yes, please.

AERIS:

AERIS:

HAYES: Hello?

AERIS: Sorry, I was trying to get a feather out of Crunch's mouth.

HAYES: I told you to stop buying her feather toys.

AERIS: But she loves them!

HAYES: Yeah, and that must've been why she barfed in my shoes.

AERIS: LMAO. Yeah, that was...sorry.

HAYES: I know one way you can make it up to me.

AERIS: If you say phone sex, I'll castrate you.

HAYES: Zoom sex?

AERIS:

HAYES: Just over the clothes stuff?

AERIS: Goodbyeeee, Hayes. Good luck on your game.
winky face emoji

OCTOBER 20TH, Monday, 9:46 a.m.

HAYES: I'm here to cash in on my prize.

AERIS: What prize?

HAYES: *screenshot attached*

AERIS: I was very drunk when I said that.

HAYES: And I won that game of darts fair and square.

AERIS: You almost hit me in the eye.

HAYES: You were standing in my way!

AERIS: I WAS NEXT TO YOU?

HAYES: My depth perception isn't that great.

AERIS: You play hockey for a living.

HAYES: Just give me my prize, woman.

AERIS: I'm not getting your jersey number tattooed on my ass.

HAYES: It would be so hot, though.

AERIS: Maybe for you. Not when I'm old and wrinkly.

HAYES: On the contrary, you'll look even more beautiful when you're old and wrinkly.

AERIS: Kiss ass, much?

HAYES: I do love kissing your ass.

AERIS: You're disgusting.

HAYES: And you're incorrigible.

AERIS: What can I say? It's a part of my charm.

HAYES: Your charm is distracting me, and I'm at practice.

AERIS: Oh, I'm sorry. Afraid you'll ruin your boxers?

HAYES: Actually, yes.

AERIS: You're the one who brought up my ass in the first place.

HAYES: Can you blame me? You have a great ass-et.

AERIS: You're a pun away from being blocked.

HAYES: Jokes on you, that was the only pun I had.

AERIS: You're lucky you're cute.

HAYES: I am, aren't I?

ALL SPONSORS, PLEASE STAND UP

AERIS

The team has a sponsorship party today, and Hayes asked me if I would join him. I'm not really one for huge social events, but I wanted to be there to support him.

The restaurant that the guys rented for the night is stunning. The whole hockey team is here, along with a hundred odd faces I don't recognize.

I've gone for a little black dress with strappy heels. Simple, and dare I say, sophisticated. This is Hayes' and my first public outing as a couple, so when we showed up to the venue, all eyes were on us, and there were cameras blinding my retinas everywhere we turned. I've seen the fan cams, the speculative posts, even the strongly worded opinions of some exceptionally bitter people. I'm just glad that the majority of the fans seem to be accepting of our relationship.

It was daunting at first, but when we got into the meat of things...it was still daunting as hell. I never realized how big of a deal Hayes was. People haven't stopped showering him with praise, and I'm thankful they barely acknowledged me because I haven't been media trained like the team has. I just know I would've said something embarrassing.

Lila also accompanied me tonight, mostly because I begged her to be my getaway from all things hockey, and also because she's apparently been talking to someone on the team. She still refuses to tell me who, claiming that "it'll jinx things" if she reveals his identity. I have a feeling I won't know until they're either breaking up or getting married.

The place looks incredible. Round tables are embellished in white cloth, with little centerpieces of jasmine-scented candles and homemade bouquets of wildflowers, lilacs, and green sprigs. The lighting is only slightly dark, with the majority of illumination coming from the blue-orange flames burning at the wicks. There's a whole buffet table spread with enough food to feed a small village—fruit platters, a chocolate fountain, and dishes of overflowing entrées. There's also a tower of champagne glasses calling my name.

I don't know why I feel so nervous. I've never been to a party as fancy as this before. As guests start to mill about, I take in their thousand-dollar dresses and equally expensive jewelry. I also take a flute of champagne and swallow it down in one drink. A precaution to calm my nerves, hopefully.

A little kid with sticky hands and messy hair bounds over to us, tugging on Hayes's suit jacket.

"Mister Hayes, can I pwease get your autogwaph?" he asks, holding out a folded napkin and a ballpoint pen.

"Of course, Little Man." Hayes crouches down so he's eye level with the kid, taking the napkin and scribbling his signature over it.

"What's your name?"

"Grayson!"

"That's a sick name. You a big fan of hockey, Grayson?"

The boy nods like a bobblehead. "The biggest!"

"We need more fans like you. You're what keeps the team going," he says, drawing a smiley face next to his name. "Are you going to be at the upcoming game?"

"Yeah, me and my daddy!" The boy points to a man in a powder-blue suit with a proud smile on his face.

Hayes ruffles the kid's hair. "Make sure to come find me so I can give you a puck."

The child bounces up and down excitedly, clutching the napkin to his chest. "Thank woo!" he squeals.

His father comes over to us, a megawatt grin cutting across timeworn features, streaks of silver dappling his hair, and crow's feet bordering his eyes. He pats his boy's head in an effort to calm his giddiness. Grubby hands fist the dog-eared napkin, reaching up in a silent plea for his dad to stow it away in the safe pocket of his suit.

"Hayes, big fan." The man sticks his hand out, and Hayes shakes it firmly.

"Thank you," Hayes replies. "You have quite the enthusiastic little rascal here."

"Oh, don't I know it. All he's been talking about for the past year is wanting to play youth hockey."

Watching Hayes work so well with kids makes my heart glug along like an old-timey oil machine. He'll be an incredible father one day. I'm not a big fan of kids, okay? But after witnessing this interaction, their gremlin meter has decreased just a little.

"Youth hockey is a great idea. If Little Man is serious about it, it's a great way to introduce him to the sport. I played when I was eight, and it kickstarted my love for hockey."

The young boy looks up at his father, enthusiasm gleaming in wide eyes. "Pwease, Daddy. Can I pway?"

"We'll have to see what's available in Oregon, Squirt," he says, pressing his son close to his leg.

"You're from Oregon?" Hayes asks, curiosity needling the tight line of his brow.

"Yep. Born and raised. We drove down here yesterday."

"Just for this party?"

"We're big fans of the Reapers. And once we got an invite, we couldn't pass up the opportunity. It's a lot different than watching from behind glass."

Scarlet melts into Hayes' cheeks, a barely-there blush in the low light of the candles, and he squats down to his haunches again. "Well, I'm glad I got to meet you, Grayson."

Grayson—who I’m assuming has come down from his adrenaline high—now turtles in on himself and shies behind his father’s body.

“Looks like someone could use a nap,” the man chuckles, smoothing down his son’s rogue locks, ones that have been slicked into spikes from sweaty, chocolate-stained palms.

Hayes’ hand shoots out. “Well, it was nice meeting you...”

“Joshua,” he finishes, shaking Hayes’ hand with vigor.

I watch as the two exchange pleasantries before Joshua shepherds Grayson toward the exit, the two bobbing like buoys amongst a sea of partygoers before being swept away.

“I didn’t know you were so good with children.”

Hayes gifts me a knee-weakening grin. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“Is that so?” I volley.

“Oh, yeah. I’m like one of those Tootsie Pops you have to lick to get to the center of.”

“So you’re saying that I’ll eventually get to your ooey-gooney center if I keep licking enough?”

“In the right places,” he drawls, cupping my face in his hands and planting a soft, slow kiss to my lips. He licks the silk of my mouth, tasting the acrid citrus on my tongue from the champagne, and my arms come up to braid around his neck.

When we pull away, my eyes fly open in surprise. “What was that for?”

“I can’t give my beautiful girlfriend a kiss?” he teases as he thumbs the fabric of my dress. “Also, this dress is my new favorite. I’m going to need you to wear this from here on out. For every occasion.”

“Every occasion, huh?”

“Every occasion,” he repeats, making hot coals burn in the bed of my sternum. “Though I’m pretty sure you could turn me on even dressed in a potato sack.”

I swear Hayes must've been blessed with endless charisma because every time he compliments me, my ovaries all simultaneously explode. I need them intact and uninfluenced, okay? We don't need a miniature Hayes running around and wreaking havoc.

After making a few rounds, I need a break from the small talk and civil handshakes. It feels like my mouth's permanently stuck from all the smiling I've done. I definitely won't remember any of these people in the morning.

"I have no idea how you do this all day," I grumble, exhaustion beginning to steamroll through me as I rub my temples.

"It's definitely not the most exciting part of the job," he laughs, the cadence like unfiltered magic in my ears. "We mostly come for the food."

"I could go for some food," I say.

I need to busy my mouth, preferably with eating rather than talking. Even after having some time to adjust, my heart hasn't stopped racing from the nerves. I don't think my body's fully differentiated between an actual threat and an anxiety-inducing party—which I've experienced plenty of thanks to my impressionable college years.

"Good, because I'm starving." Hayes hooks his arm through mine and leads me over to the buffet table.

What I thought was going to be a quick stop actually turns into a thirty-minute stop. Hayes makes himself a plate of food ranging from crab cakes to pull-apart meatball sliders to miniature spinach quiches. He's like a walking garbage disposal.

"Thank you for coming, Aeris. It really means a lot," he mumbles through the flaky exterior of a quiche.

"Of course. I've been having a great time."

He calls my bluff. "Oh, really? You didn't strike me as a fan of black-tie events."

An indignant noise huffs out of me as I pick up a brownie bite. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I love listening to old guys boast about their cryptocurrency and all the MILFs they’ve been fucking.”

Hayes swallows a slider in one bite, brushing some crumbs from his mouth. “Jesus, that’s something I definitely didn’t need to know.”

“Yeah, imagine hearing the gritty details.”

“I thought you liked dirty talk.”

“Yeah, if the talk isn’t coming from someone who’s a Life Alert away from going to the afterlife.”

“Are you saying you won’t be attracted to me when I’m older?”

I cut him a curious glance. “You might age like spoiled milk. I have no idea.”

He mock-gasps, clutching his imaginary pearls. “Hey, my hair isn’t going to recede until I’m at least eighty.”

“Eighty is being generous. And who knows, maybe you’ll even get a beer gut.” I thrust my finger into his hard abdomen for emphasis, then frown. “Okay, probably not. You’ll have the hottest eight-pack in the nursing home. Ugh, screw you and your fast metabolism.”

He scarfs down the rest of his food, then throws his plate in the garbage. “I don’t know what to tell you, Stacks. I’m a well-oiled machine.”

“If you flex, I’ll walk out of here. Right now.”

He winks. “Ah, you’re right. I wouldn’t want the gun show to blow you away.”

I simply shake my head, chuckling under my breath as Hayes drags me over to meet a few more people. I shake hands and smile demurely as we rotate from cluster to cluster, finally ending our pilgrimage at a large, intimidating man. He’s gathered a small throng of people with whatever fascinating story he’s telling, and they all burst out into laughter like there’s some kind of cue card in the distance.

The stoic-faced man greets Hayes with a smile, then glances at me.

“Coach, this is Aeris, my girlfriend. Aeris, this is my coach,” Hayes says, looking about as nervous as I feel.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you,” I greet, holding out my hand.

Coach gives it a firm shake. “It’s nice to meet you, Aeris. I hope you’ve been keeping Hayes here out of trouble.”

I don’t know why, but the overwhelming urge to curtsy takes over my body. “Yes, sir. He’s been great. Playing very well.”

Jesus. Why am I so stiff? Those weren’t even complete sentences.

Coach’s chuckle is deep enough to make my bones vibrate in my skin. “You a fan of hockey, Aeris?” he grills.

“Uh...I mostly go to support Hayes,” I laugh, giving Hayes’ arm a squeeze, hoping the gesture takes away from the redness occupying my cheeks.

“I like you already.”

What do I say to that? Thank you? Is it weird if I return the compliment? Yeah...maybe less words are better.

“Oh, uh, thank you.”

Thankfully, Casen enters the conversation and eases the spotlight off of me. Coach excuses himself and finishes greeting the rest of the guests while I turn my attention to the alluring girl on Casen’s arm. Her wild curls are barely tamed as they flare down her shoulders, and her features remind me of an old Hollywood starlet. A sleeveless, royal-blue dress clings to her toned body, no lump or wrinkle in sight, ending just below the knees. Mesh material shaped like sugar-pulled flames hold her cleavage up, and she’s wearing a swoop of finely cut diamonds against her chest. Diamonds that match the 24-carat ring on her slender finger. This must be Josie, and Casen must’ve proposed.

“Aeris, right? It’s so nice to meet you!” Her titanium arms wrap around me in a hug that definitely cracks something.

She's a lot stronger than she looks.

"Oh, the pleasure is mine," I say, slightly off-kilter from the physical and social encroachment.

When we pull away, I can't help but gawk at the blinding gem. "Congratulations on the engagement."

She holds her hand up and wiggles her fingers. "Thank you! It's beautiful, isn't it? I waited seven years for this idiot to propose."

Casen narrows his eyes playfully. "Hey, I got around to it, didn't I?"

"You did," she laughs, drawing his arm over the front of her body.

"How did you two meet?"

"We met in high school, but we hated each other at first," Casen answers.

Josie nods in agreement. "I couldn't stand him. We were classmates in history, and he cheated off my final. When the teacher found our answers to be the exact same, they failed both of us and had us attend detention for an entire month. All of it went on our permanent record. Casen refused to admit he cheated. And because of this, we both had to retake the class. We were at each other's throats for a while before the tension turned into something salvageable. And here we are, seven years later." She punctuates the end of her story with a loved-up nuzzle to his chest.

I can't imagine spending seven years of my life with another person. You would know everything about them by that point. I like the stability of that, though. They're a few of the lucky ones to have found their lifelong partner early. "Wow, that sounds like a roller coaster."

"It was, but it was worth every turn," Josie confesses, a look of longing drifting over her features.

"It sounds like—"

The sight of a girl jockeying her way through a crowd of people halts my sentence. Her slender body hurtles toward us,

and her cat-like eyes do a foxtrot around the group before landing on Hayes.

“Hayes, can we talk?”

Who is this girl? And how does she know Hayes?

She has flawless, golden skin, a button nose, and pink lips that look like they’ve been permanently bee-stung. Her bone structure had to have been sculpted by an artist. She’s wearing a satiny-looking pink slip, and a small, gold necklace—which I can only assume costs more than the down payment of my entire apartment—rests on her chest. Her small boobs are perfectly proportioned to her lean body. She looks like a model. Actually, she looks like one of those super clean girls that you never imagine ever having to poop. Like Kendall Jenner.

Hayes’ voice tips into the realm of shock. “Now?”

“Now.” She practically snaps at him, but it’s juxtaposed by a polite smile that has a hundred watts of power behind it.

His throat rolls with a gulp, and he mouths a *sorry* before following the girl into a more private section of the restaurant.

I do my best to ignore the envy coming to a boiling point inside of me, watching as her nightshade, pin-straight hair disappears among the sea of people.

“Who was that?” I ask Casen, anxiety using my internal organs as its own punching bag.

Casen scratches at his beard. “Uh, I think her name is Sienna. She’s one of our sponsor’s daughters.”

Sponsor? Daughter? Sponsor’s daughter?

Oh my God. Could my dad have been telling the truth?

A BLAST FROM THE NOT-SO-DISTANT PAST

HAYES

“Hayes.” The glower on Sienna’s face is harrowing enough to dry up my throat.

Shit. I was dumber than I thought to believe I could avoid her the entire night. Of course she’d be here. Of course she’d want to talk to me. Of course my mistake would come back to bite me in the ass. And now Aeris is going to have so many questions.

“Sienna. I...uh, hi,” I stammer, my fingers reaching up to loosen my tie, the room suddenly feeling a hundred degrees hotter.

“So that was it? You were just going to ghost me?” she exclaims, her tone toeing between hurt and anger.

In hindsight, I should’ve been upfront with her about the nature of our fling, but a part of me was worried that she’d spill to her father and he’d pull his sponsor.

I suck down a lungful of air as regret sinks like stones in my stomach. “I’m sorry, Sienna. I thought it was obvious I wasn’t looking for anything serious.”

It’s a weak argument, I’m aware. I don’t really know what else to say to her right now.

Wisps of sadness fall over her face. “You used me, Hayes.”

“I’m really sorry. It was never my intention to make you feel that way.” A dagger slips between my ribs at the implication of her words.

“I’m not...mad at you. I’m just disappointed.”

That makes two of us.

I go to open my mouth, but nothing seems to come out. Sienna’s a sweet girl. She didn’t deserve to get caught in the crossfire.

“Your new girl is beautiful,” she says, offering me the smallest of smiles. “She’s really lucky.”

“And the next guy who meets you will be just as lucky,” I tell her, my guilt defusing just a little as her cheeks pinken.

She turns away from me, but not before she adds over her shoulder, “I’m not going to tell my father, by the way.”

“You’re not?”

“I know how much his sponsorship means to the team. I’m not going to let some hurt feelings get in the way of things. You never promised we were going to form any kind of relationship. It was wishful thinking on my part.”

My eyes latch onto her teary ones, and my arms bracket her in a hug. “It wasn’t wishful thinking. If things were different, I’d be happy to see things through with you. But...” My words are muffled into the back of her dress.

She pulls away with a sniff. “But you really like that girl.”

My vocal cords chafe together, and the organ in my chest feels like it’s two beats away from caving in completely. “I do. I *really* like her.”

Sienna wipes away an unbidden tear on her cheek. “I wish you both the best. Just promise me something, Hayes.”

“What?” I ask.

“Promise me you’ll be honest with her. Girls are simple. All we want is honesty.”

“I promise,” I respond, hating how easy the lies are starting to become.

FOOL ME ONCE, FOOL ME TWICE

AERIS

“**W**hy do you look constipated?” Lila asks me, grabbing a champagne flute off one of the waiter’s trays and downing it in a single gulp.

“I don’t look...constipated,” I grumble. I’m so tense that my muscles feel like they’ve been brutally bent out of shape.

“Yes, you do. Spill.”

“Hayes just got swept away by the most stunning girl in existence. Like, she won the genetic lottery. Like, her face is so symmetrical that she had to have been created in a lab for those proportions to work.”

Lila hums, smoothing out the front of her dress. She’s wearing a violet dress that emphasizes her hourglass figure, with a high slit showing off her enviable legs.

“Do you think something happened between them?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I reply. The way that girl looked at Hayes will be forever branded into my memory. There was definitely some lust in there. And anger.

Hayes and I weren’t exclusively together until weeks after we started seeing each other. He could’ve very well gotten his fix with some other girls when he was talking to me. I can’t be mad at him for that. He never promised me anything. He was a free agent at that time. I’m jealous as fuck, but I can’t be angry with him.

“Look, love. I know you get self-conscious thinking about the girls Hayes has been with, but you’re the one he’s with now. Officially. That’s a big deal. And if I’m any romance expert—which I am—I can tell Hayes is head over heels just by the way he looks at you.”

My heart flexes. “You really think so?”

Lila bops me on the nose. “Even a blind person could see how infatuated he is with you.”

As much as I hate to admit it, I’m terrified how serious things are going to get between me and Hayes as our relationship progresses. More complications are bound to come up. That’s what happens when you start to peel away your emotional baggage.

I snatch a glass of champagne, forcing the liquid down my throat as it settles heavily in my belly. “You don’t think I’m gonna crash and burn when this is all over, do you?”

Stop overthinking, Aeris. Enjoy the present. Don’t worry about the future.

“You worry too much, Aer-Bear. Stop trying to sabotage yourself. I know you think this is too good to be true, but this is the standard for a lot of people. You’ve just known disappointment your whole life, so you’ve grown to accept that’s what you deserve. But it’s not. What you really deserve is happiness.”

The nerves taking me for a tailspin start to wane. I always feel so much better when I talk my problems out with Lila. If modeling doesn’t work out for her, she should seriously consider becoming a licensed therapist.

After a long half hour, Lila’s already made three friends while I haven’t moved from my spot by the buffet table. I keep sneaking chocolate-covered strawberries to avoid having to introduce myself to anyone.

Hayes reappears around the corner, brandishing an apologetic grimace. “Sorry about that. Uh, we just had to talk about some things.”

I don't have a right to be angry. But I am. Beneath my wayward indignation is a pool of sadness, and betrayal flits across my face. "Who was that, Hayes?"

"She was just a girl."

"A girl you slept with?"

The tendons in Hayes' arms writhe, and his jaw ticks. "I did sleep with her. Before I met you," he admits. "But I haven't seen her since. I haven't even thought about her."

I cross my arms over my chest. "You don't have feelings for her?"

"I don't. I told her that I didn't mean to give her the wrong impression, but that I'm happy with *you*, Aeris."

He turned a girl as beautiful as her down...for me?

Look, Hayes could be hiding more from me, but I truly don't think he is. Trust is a two-way street. We're never going to get anywhere if I let my insecurities get in the middle of things.

I inch open the slats of his fingers to merge our hands together. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I trust you. If you say that's what happened, then that's what happened."

He brings the back of my hand to his mouth and plants a kiss between my knuckles. "Are you ready to head home?"

"I thought you'd never ask."



WHEN WE RETURN TO HAYES', I barely have enough energy to stay awake. I'm stuffed from the all-you-can-eat buffet, and I can already feel blisters forming on my feet from the overuse of my heels. The rest of the guys stagger their way to their respective bedrooms.

I'm about to make my way upstairs, but Hayes catches me mid-step.

He removes his suit jacket and lays it on the dining table. "I was hoping we could stay up for a little."

I yawn, stretching my arms above my head. "Stay up? Why?"

"Why do you think, Aeris? I haven't been able to stop staring at you the entire night. You, in that tiny dress...*fuck*. You've been driving me crazy."

"Hayes, I'm bloated and gross and need a shower."

He stalks toward me with the gait of a ravenous predator. He pulls my face toward his, close enough for our lips to flirt, and I can feel his breath dust over my skin.

"Do you think that's a turn off for me?" he whispers into my mouth.

"Y-yes?"

The muscles in his upper body coil like a snake waiting to strike. "Try again."

"You want me like this?" I have a day's worth of stink on me, and my makeup is starting to rub off.

He leads my hand to the monster tenting the front of his pants. "Does that answer your question?"

Blood rushes to my cheeks as my eyes go wide. And suddenly, lust explodes inside me like a grenade. A grenade that Hayes just pulled the pin to.

"Upstairs. Now," he growls.

Even despite my off-the-charts libido, I decide to tease him, slowly dragging myself up the stairs as if the mere action is draining every cell of energy in my body. It takes all of Hayes two seconds to break his resolve and chase after me. He spans me on the ass, and my yelp turns into a bunch of champagne-fueled giggles as I wind-sprint up the steps.

The minute we make it to his bedroom, he slams the door shut, eating up the space between us one intimidating stride at

a time. I walk backwards until I hit the edge of the bed, then hoist myself up onto the mattress.

A chord of anticipation thrums inside of me.

“I want you to touch yourself, Aeris.”

I comply immediately, lifting my hips up as one of my hands snakes up to grab my tit. I start to massage my breast, tweaking my nipple through the thin fabric of my dress.

I close my eyes, his voice wading through my ears.

“What do you think about when you touch yourself?”

“You,” I reply, rolling the bud between my fingers, lightning striking my core in varying degrees of intensity.

Hayes watches me, spellbound, and he helps me slide out of my dress, revealing the black, lacy thong riding high on my waist. There’s a damp spot over my sex, and it spurs Hayes to release a throaty groan. My underwear is the next thing to go.

“Do you think about my tongue stretching that gorgeous pussy out?”

“Yes,” I gasp. My hand travels south and cups the outside of my vagina, the familiar wetness loosening a pained breath from my lungs. If only Hayes could feel me right now.

“In detail, Stacks.”

“I think about how your tongue makes my legs shake, how when you lick me and fuck me with your fingers, I want to combust into a million pieces.”

Hayes makes a guttural noise at my declaration, his erection pleading to be freed from the confinement of his pants, and when he finally sheds the restrictive barrier, his dick is twitching in the palm of his hand.

Thanks to his lack of pants—and now, lack of underwear—I can see his abs contract as he starts to rub his length, pumping his hand back and forth. He throws his head back, his Adam’s apple wobbling in his throat, his jaw squared.

My fingers flick against my pussy, salaciously parting my entrance, and there’s a squelching sound that echoes through

the room.

“Jesus.” Hayes’ hand speeds up, bulbs of pre-cum beading down his thick, pulsating shaft. “Do I always make you this wet?”

“This if all for you, Hayes.” My digits curl against the roof of my clit, and I know that once I disengage myself, I’m going to leak onto the bed. When I start to moan loudly, my free hand comes up to cover my mouth, absorbing the sound.

“Aeris, remove your hand.”

“But the guys will hea—”

“I want to hear every pretty noise out of that mouth of yours,” Hayes orders, evoking a full-body shiver. I slowly remove my hand upon his instruction. Hayes’ orgasm is just out of reach, and I’m literally watching him come undone before me. He doesn’t care how loud he is, and that just quickens my impending climax.

I’ve memorized his sequenced throbs, his shallowed breathing, the straining of his eyes as they roll back into his head. My skin is ripe with goose bumps as I circle against my walls. We’re both staring at each other—to the best of our ability—and the prolonged eye contact adds to the pressure in my cunt.

“Fuck, you look so good.”

My fingers flutter around, and the minute I crook them against my G-spot, my orgasm shatters through me. I cry out, my muscles going lax against the bed, and my hand a sticky mess I hold away from the sheets.

There’s a smoky edge to Hayes’ voice. “There’s that pretty noise. And I can’t wait until that’s my name you’re screaming.”

Once I regain my bearings, I situate myself directly in front of Hayes. “I want you to come on me,” I coo, barely allotting him time to register what’s happening. The coolness from the air combats the warmth of my body, and my nipples pucker from the chill coming through the vents.

His dark eyes look me up and down, and he curves his wrist over the crown of his cock. He leans over me as his stroking becomes forceful, one arm braced against the bed. He slides his large hand up his shaft in a final pump, and I'm close enough to hear the muffled sound of my name spill from his lips. He comes all over my front, a geyser of wetness splattering my tits and stomach.

I wait for him to come back down to Earth to show him just how much I loved him marking me, *saying* my name when he came. The second his eyes seem to clear and his breathing levels out, his gaze is riveted on me.

I use my finger to lazily smear his cum around, sucking his seed into my mouth.

Hayes lets out a low groan before kissing me, not caring for the mess he's made or the musky taste of him on my tongue. It's rough and urgent and impatient, and I love this raw version of us.

When we pull away, he presses his forehead to mine. "I hope I'm coming to the image of you for the rest of my life, Aeris Relera."

"Take a picture, Hollings. It lasts longer."

HOMICIDAL TENDENCIES

HAYES

Aeris came by a few minutes before the game to give me a good luck kiss, and she was wearing my jersey. *Mine*. She looked fucking good with my number on her. I'm definitely going to have fantasies about railing her from behind with my number splayed on her back.

I jog in place in the chute, trying to drown out the announcer's stentorian voice and the rowdy noise from the audience. My hands have already started sweating in my gloves, and my pulse is probably a jump away from certain death.

Bristol's voice shreds the muted silence of the tunnel. "You good?"

"I'm good." I put my mouthguard in, clearing my mind of everything non-hockey.

Here we go.

As soon as I step onto the ice, the glacial chill from the arena has my heart in its cold clutch. Fans scream and cheer upon our arrival, loud enough to quake the earth beneath me.

Honestly, there's nothing quite like hockey. No sport can hold a candle to it. The adrenaline you get flying across the rink, the cold air hitting you in the face, the way your skates kick up bits of ice—it's an otherworldly experience in itself.

We're up against the Atlanta Avocets today. They're a good team, but their defense lacks, and their goaltending is poor. I know my boys, I know it's going to be a challenge, but

I also know we're better. Quentin Cadieux is their center, and he's kind of a wild card. He's a good player, but he makes stupid mistakes—usually the kind that costs his team points.

After the warm-up, I immediately skate to my position, watching Bristol through my helmet's cage. He skates up to the center, hockey stick at the ready. Cadieux is across from him, mirroring his defensive position, and as soon as the ref blows his whistle, the game comes to life.

Bristol manages to snag the puck from Cadieux as he maneuvers his way through bodies upon bodies, dodging to the left and swinging his stick backwards to stay out of the offense's reach. Right as one of the big, burly guys comes zooming toward him, Bristol has the smallest interval of time to reroute the direction of the puck. He passes to me, and the blade of my stick scuttles along the ice against the rubber of the puck. With an expertly timed swing, I send that sucker straight into the net.

The crowd breaks into an uproar, and while everyone returns to their positions, my gaze flips to Aeris. She's on her feet wearing one of the biggest smiles I've ever seen—an "I'm proud of you" smile. One that I've never even gotten from my dad. My heart is racing as fast as a hummingbird's wings.

"That was for you!" I shout, pointing at her. When the Jumbotron captures her face, she turns as red as a fire hydrant.

I skate back to our side of the rink, but not before Cadieux shoulders me and blasts me with a glare colder than the current atmosphere. I can't hear much of anything he's mumbling, but I pick up on a few choice words, like "idiot" and "asshole."

If he thinks he's going to get under my skin with a few playground insults, he's gonna have to try a lot harder than that. I'm the biggest hothead on the ice. And I'll remind everyone of that if I have to.

With the trill of a whistle, Cadieux steals the puck from the center. Kit plows through players to chase the puck, but Cadieux abandons it to go out of his way and pummel Kit into the plexiglass. I know Kit can handle himself. He's taken plenty of beatings, but something about this seems personal

now. Judging by the orchestra of boos that peal through the arena, the Atlanta Avocets just scored a goal. It's 1-1 now.

A groan, a curse, and a sigh all roll into one as I watch Fulton make his way to the center. I know exactly how the rest of the game is going to go: whistle, faceoff—which won't be much of a faceoff—Cadieux shooting like he's on steroids, and the rest of the team icing their bruises in the locker room after the game. And sure enough, Cadieux goes careering down the slippery surface, choosing me as his next target. I'm close enough to touch the puck before I'm thrown up against the plexiglass.

Hushed gasps emanate from the many slack-jawed watchers. We have about a minute left in the first period, and the score is still 1-1.

The second period starts, and we need to focus. Bristol keeps the puck in his possession, then passes to Casen, who then passes to me. I'm skating so fast that Cadieux disappears in a blustery of wind, ice shards, and a fuckton of suck it. And when one of the sasquatch-sized defensemen comes hurtling toward me, I pass the puck to Fulton, who manages to shoot it right between the goalie's legs.

TO BE, OR NOT TO BE, A LIAR

AERIS

“**T**his game seems a lot more violent than the last one I watched.”

Lila currently has a large popcorn, a soft pretzel, and a plate of nachos. She takes a noisy slurp from her slushie. “The Atlanta Avocets are really good,” she says, breaking off a chunk of salted dough.

“You don’t think anyone’s going to get hurt this game, do you?”

“God, I hope so,” Lila mumbles through a mouthful of food, standing up to shout something at the referee.

I shrink lower into my seat to avoid any unwanted attention.

Now seems like a good time to bring up the fact that my father reached out to me about Hayes. Yes, the first part of my father’s statement turned out to be true—with Hayes confirming he slept with Sienna—but I have no idea if anything else my dad said holds any merit. I know I was making an executive decision to disregard his words, okay? But this tiny bud of self-doubt has been niggling at the back of my mind ever since.

Maybe Lila will have some advice as to whether I should tell Hayes. It’s killing me keeping this secret from him, but we’re in such a good place right now that I don’t want to mess things up.

Guilt maims my heart. “Li, I need to tell you something.”

Lila's full-on cussing out the ref, but she turns to me like the nastiest curses didn't just fly out of her mouth.

"What's up?"

The throbbing in my head increases tenfold, and it tightens around my temples like an elastic band. I thought it was from dehydration, but now I know it's definitely from the anxiety pinballing through me.

"My father called to tell me something...about Hayes."

Lila's mouth bends into a frown. "Your father? You mean, the embodiment of all things evil? The man who probably sacrifices newborn children to keep himself young?"

"The one and only," I mutter, drumming my nails against the edge of my seat.

"What did he say to you? Do I have to fly to Oregon and make his murder look like an accident?"

"Not...yet."

Uncertainty smacks me in the face with the force of a sledgehammer. "He told me that Hayes has been using me to save his image."

When Lila looks at me, her stare holds the intensity of a thousand suns. "You're joking, right? That's a load of horseshit!" Her scream is loud enough to garner the attention of the people around us, and I awkwardly shoo them back to their avid watching.

"Do you think I should tell Hayes?" I ask.

I know I should. If it's the right thing to do, then why does it feel so hard? Hayes is going to be so hurt to know I kept this from him. I'm a hypocrite. I asked him to be honest when I can't even be honest myself.

"You don't believe it, do you?"

My initial frustration has ebbed, and now I'm caught in a shower of meteor-sized fears all hailing down around me. "I don't know. I mean, I shouldn't. Hayes has proven to me how

much he cares about me. He wouldn't do anything to hurt me. But my father was half-right. Why would he make this up?"

It makes me sick to think that I'm even entertaining this. It all takes me back to how badly Wilder treated me. I can't believe I have such shit luck with relationships. You never truly know someone's intentions. Wilder didn't put up a front; he wasn't trying to hide how manipulative he was, and I still somehow got hurt.

"This is up to you, Aeris. If he was the one who heard a rumor about you, would you want him to tell you?"

Fuck. I would. And the sinking pit in my stomach tells me I just got the answer I *wasn't* looking for.

CONTROL IS OVERRATED

HAYES

The third period is in full swing. I'm facing off with Cadieux for the first time, and he says something that stokes the fire inside of me.

"Where's that little dime piece of yours, Hollings?" he taunts.

I crack my neck, rolling my shoulders back. "Excuse me?"

Cadieux's grip on his stick tightens, his serpentine eyes sizing me up. "Oh, you know, the girl who's been stuck to your side like a barnacle. I mean, she's not really your type, right? Did you lose a bet? Does she have some dark dirt on you?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about, Cadieux," I growl, heat nesting in the pit of my gut, urging me to stick my toe over the edge. "And if there's a single brain cell in that empty fucking head of yours, I'd watch what you say next."

His reedy grin makes me sick. "I saw those photos of her at the sponsorship party. If what her body looked like in that black dress is any indication of what it's like out of it, I wouldn't mind sticking my dick inside her tight little cunt."

What the fuck did he just say?

I don't even hear the whistle over the hammering of my own heart, and in the blink of an eye, Cadieux is off with the puck. My teammates are yelling at me, same with the fans, anger and disappointment hitting me from all sides. There's a fissure of rage cracking deep inside me, and if I don't close it

soon, the Atlanta Avocets are going to lose a *very* critical player.

I skate over to Cadieux—who's about a few feet from our goal—and something inside of me snaps.

Lunacy rakes through me when my right hook contacts Cadieux's jaw, my fist breaking bone in a crack that can be heard around the world. Blood fountains onto the unblemished ice, tarnishing the surface with an oppressive shade of red, and I can feel my skin split across my knuckles underneath my glove. It burns, but it's not strong enough to counteract the wrath inside me.

It feels like my fury has surpassed the hundred on a high striker, demolishing that bell at the very top. I can handle some trash talk, but when it comes to talking shit about the people I care about, I turn into a monster.

I hit him again—since nobody's rushing over to stop me—and he spews some teeth.

I have to give it to Cadieux, I thought he'd be down for the count, but he's more resilient than I gave him credit for. I have a lot of fighting experience under my belt, and I could spend the rest of the game making Cadieux eat his words, so I'm surprised when he swings at the bottom of my mouth. An ache slingshots through my bones from the force. It's not enough to knock me on my ass, but it's enough for sickle-shaped droplets to spurt from the gash on my lower lip.

Cadieux's next punch barely grazes me, and I take advantage of his inexperience to whale on him some more, giving him a gnarly shiner. Our teammates finally spring to action and pull us apart.

Embers of rage sweep through me, hot enough to burn through skin and muscle. My chest is rising and falling with each hurried breath.

Out of my peripheral, I see Aeris standing up with her hand over her mouth. The full-blown inferno that was rampaging through me has now descended to a warm buzz,

and it's given me a split second to fully process what I've just done. Shit.

Everyone's looking at me like I've just committed a murder in broad daylight.

"Riverside Reapers, number eighteen, five minutes for fighting."

I take out my mouthguard so I can yell at the ref. "This is fucking stupid!" I shout, hostility drenching my voice.

Bristol brushes past me. "Shake it off, man."

The next thing I know, I'm getting up close and personal with the penalty box. I should've just bodychecked Cadieux. I didn't need to ensure a full-out brawl. And now my team might suffer because of my careless mistake.

What's Aeris going to think? Yeah, she knows I have a bit of a temper, but she's never seen it in person. And that was probably one of the worst fights I've gotten into since I've entered the NHL.

One of the opposing players navigates past Fulton and scores a goal, leaving us a point behind with less than ten minutes left in the game. My fists curl in the safety of my gloves, and a curse shoots out of me. I'm breathing like I've just run a marathon, an emotion overload threatening to trample me. The five minutes go by exceedingly fast—thank God—and Bristol scores a goal as soon as I'm let back onto the ice.

It's 3-4. We're down to a minute. A tie isn't great, but I'll take it over losing.

I'm on the offense's heels when the puck is intercepted by Casen, and I race down the length of the rink alongside him. The breath in the stadium is bated, the cold air misting around my face. I don't know where Aeris is, but I can feel her eyes on me like a set of high beams. My heart rate rockets. Just one more goal. Everyone's watching. Everyone's counting on me.

Casen passes the puck to me, and I only have the distance for a single swoop to get it in the goal. There are about three players on my tail. Thirty seconds left on the clock. The

second that beauty is in my eyeline, I keep it in front of me, skating backwards to dodge a lunge from one of the defensemen. I send the puck in at an angle, watching as it flies toward the corner of the net.

But before it can make it in, the goalie's stick comes up and blocks my shot. The buzzer sounds the end of the game. The stands rattle with boos and angry insults alike, nearly taking out my eardrums. My teammates don't crowd around me. Everything stills.

We just lost.



WHEN I FINALLY EXIT THE stadium, the cold cement underneath my well-worn shoes is doing little to extirpate the heat looping through my body. Petrichor perfumes the atmosphere as a duvet of darkness swaddles me. The night sky is gray and sunless, laden with thick storm clouds that blot out the moon and stars. It's going to rain soon, and I don't want to wait around for my clothes to get drenched.

We lost, and it was all my fault. I let Cadieux get in my head. I let the game get personal, and that's the first thing you learn in hockey—to separate your personal life from your life on the ice.

But I couldn't let him get away with all that shit he was saying about Aeris.

The tinny sound of my phone grabs my attention, and Coach's name sprawls across my screen. I pick up without preparing myself for the verbal beatdown I'm about to receive, but when I place the phone to my ear, there's no anger threaded in his tone.

"I'm disappointed in you, son," he says, and his words stab the space between my shoulder blades.

"I'm sorry, Coa—"

"I couldn't find you after the game, so I'm telling you this over the phone," he prefaces, sighing. "Your major misconduct

has resulted in a five-game suspension and a fine of twenty thousand dollars.”

No, no, no. This can’t be happening.

Anger pours into my veins like molten lava. “Coach, are you serious? I didn’t even hit him that hard!”

“I’m sorry, Hayes. But this is the consequence you have to face for being so reckless out there tonight.”

“Please. There has to be something I can do. I need hockey. I need it to distract myself. I can’t just sit and watch my team go on without me.”

Coach’s prior softness has evaporated. “Might I suggest working on yourself before you pull the rest of the team down with you,” he snaps crossly, and then his end of the line cuts out.

FUCK!

I’m so screwed. I don’t care about the money, okay? It’s the suspension that’s going to ruin me. I’ve gotten minor misconducts in the past, but never anything major. I need to cool off before I do something I can’t come back from.

I fish around for my keys, but the silhouette by my car makes me table my departure.

Once I step into the light, my attention homes in on a man I never thought I’d see at any of my hockey games again, much less standing right in front of me now.

“Dad?”

Richard leans against the side of my car, worry lines etched around his mouth, the brim of his hat barely shielding the ruptured blood vessels in his eyes. “Hayes.”

I drop my hockey bag to the ground. “What are you doing here?”

He lifts himself from the exterior of my Porsche, and even though I dwarf him with my height, he has the gall to step closer toward me. He holds an arm out in front of him—like how one would cautiously approach a cornered dog.

“I’m not here to fight with you. I...you weren’t returning any of my texts.”

As soon as the shock wears off, anger stunts my vision in a cosmos of crimson. “Ever think there was a reason for that?” I snap.

My father’s shoulders angle in guilt. “I know you don’t want to talk to me.”

I flash him a glare that the whole hockey world fears, and something sinister stews in my stomach. “Wow, Dad. That’s the first intelligent thing that’s come out of your mouth.”

I don’t have time for whatever half-assed apology my father is going to feed me. I press my key fob in hopes that driving out of here will save me from a headache, but Richard stops me from getting in.

“I know that my apology is long overdue, but I’m here now, son. I’m going to make things right, whether or not you hear me out. I failed you and your sister. I should’ve stepped up after your mother died, but I was so engrossed in my own grief that I couldn’t bring myself to be around reminders of her. And you—you have her eyes. Whenever I looked at you, I saw her.”

His words encase my heart like barbed wire. I never knew that was the reason why my father distanced himself. I’d created this narrative that he did it because he was a selfish bastard who didn’t want the responsibility of looking after two kids. I needed to blame someone for *my* failure as a son, and I transferred that blame onto him.

“I miss you and Faye so much. I miss when we were a family. I’ve been watching the game every week, you know? I’ve been following you through the tabloids. I just wish I’d found the courage to fix things earlier.”

“I...” For someone who’s collected an arsenal of insults for this very moment, words elude me.

My father’s eyes turn shiny, and there’s something more blinding than his grief that shines through pools of gray—something that looks a lot like love. “This is a lot to take in. I

don't expect us to immediately go back to the way things were when your mom was alive. I want to take those first steps with you. I want to be in my incredible son's life."

He wants to be in my life. He wants to be my dad again. Sixteen years I've gone without his support, and sixteen years I've had to look after my little sister while fighting my own battles. But I don't have to fight alone anymore. I don't have to be complacent with the bare minimum.

I taste the salt on my lips before I register that I'm crying. "I was so lost without you. We needed you, and you abandoned us. How will I know you won't leave again when things get hard?"

His face is crestfallen. "I made that mistake once already. I'm not going to do wrong by your mother's memory anymore. She would've wanted us to be a family again. She would be heartbroken to know her death pushed us apart," he explains, inching closer to me step by step.

I feel like I've just crash-landed with no parachute to cushion my fall.

I clear the nerves from my throat, but my voice is still small. "I miss her so much, Dad. I made a promise to her to keep this family together, and I failed. I let my pride get in the way of things. Faye grew up without a father figure because of the decision *I* made," I say.

My father embraces me for the first time since I was a child. My heart rate rises to an uncountable measure, and it's so loud that I'm sure he can hear it resonating in his own chest.

"No, Hayes. You didn't fail. You were the child. It wasn't your responsibility to keep the family together. It was mine."

As comforting as his hug is, for some reason, I pull away. That self-preservation part of me is trying to recalibrate my brain, and my body wants to switch to survival mode. I'm afraid of letting him back in. Not only will I be affected by it, but Faye will be too.

I curb the turmoil trying to pinch more tears from my eyes. “Why didn’t you just explain your reason for leaving? Why did you make us feel like we were the ones in the wrong?”

“I was ashamed. I was supposed to be strong for the both of you. I couldn’t...I couldn’t admit how broken I was. But the minute I walked away from you two, I knew it would be the worst mistake of my life,” he laments.

I rub the heel of my palm into my chest, like it’ll physically appease the pain. “I want to forgive you, but...”

“It’ll take a while,” Richard finishes, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll wait forever for your forgiveness, Hayes. And if you don’t want me in your life, know I’ll be standing by the phone, just in case you need me.”

Every emotion inside me is going haywire. I feel like I’m seconds away from falling apart, but instead of having to peel my powerless body off the ground, I have my father to lean on now.

TO (ALMOST) LOSE AND TO LOVE

AERIS

I raced over to the house as soon as I could. My hands didn't stop shaking during the entire drive over. I'm barely keeping myself together after that melee broke out during the game. That didn't seem like your average, run-of-the-mill scuffle.

The guys say Hayes is doing fine, but that doesn't expunge my coldblooded fear. No, it only exacerbates it. Just because a split lip didn't warrant the need for a gurney doesn't mean he isn't aching from all those hits.

My nerves make a mad dash for my throat, the blood in my ears overpowering the sound of my heart. The voices from the living room carry over to the entrance of the house, and I sprint on unsteady legs to where Hayes is sitting on the couch, an ice pack pressed to his face.

My mind is spinning like a Tilt-A-Whirl, and my gaze cruises over the lacquered blood sheeting down his chin. There's already a bruise forming along his jaw. Oh, God. I can't imagine how much pain he must be in right now.

"Hayes!" I'm careful not to hug him too tightly, and his arms don't wrap around me the way they usually do.

He grimaces, shifting uncomfortably to make room next to him.

"I'm okay," he says, his reddened hand on the back of my head, tethering his fingers in my hair. It's an action that normally pacifies me, but it seems to be doing nothing for my panic.

The guys give us the room to talk in private.

“What happened out there?” I whisper, pressing my forehead to his, our lips just barely touching.

“Oh, you know, normal hockey stuff.”

He’s okay. He doesn’t look as hurt as I thought he was, but I can’t get my emotions under control. Tears drill behind my eyes, and I gulp down the loud sob that wants to desecrate the silence.

“Aeris, I’m okay,” he repeats, a modicum of worry in his eyes.

I can’t think straight. I can’t see straight. I can’t catch my breath. Hayes’ voice is a million miles away from me, and anxiety ensnares me as if I’m an unsuspecting fly caught in the chiffon labyrinth of a spider’s web. When he reaches out to touch me, I backpedal away from him.

“What *really* happened out there?” I ask, but I’m not sure I even want to hear the answer.

“This asshole started insulting you, and I just lost my shit.”

Hayes got into a fight *because* of me?

“You can’t let those kinds of people get to you.” I grab the damp washcloth next to him and wipe away goutts of blood from his knuckles. He winces from the contact, but he doesn’t pull away.

His tongue is sharp, like a double-edged blade. “When it comes to the people I care about, I’m not going to let anything slide.”

There’s something feral about the gleam in his eyes, and it’s partnered with a warning growl in the back of his throat. I decide it’s best not to push him, and in that moment, I also decide not to tell him what my father said. I’m aware hockey’s a violent sport, but there was a part of me that was afraid I’d lose Hayes tonight. I don’t think I’d survive losing him, and that’s why I’m choosing to ignore my dad’s pathetic warning.

“Can I do anything?” I look helplessly at the bandage box and the bottle of painkillers on the coffee table.

“Just be here. With me.”

Even though the couch isn't as wide and comfy as his bed, there's nowhere in the world I'd rather be right now. He lies down with a grimace and makes room for me. I squeeze into the space he's carved out, gently pressing my back to his chest.

“Thank you,” he mumbles sluggishly, tightening his grip on me ever so slightly.

“For what?”

“For staying.”

Judging by the soft snores vibrating against my spine, I'm pretty sure Hayes has already passed out, so I whisper the last words to myself.

“I'll always stay.”



LILA PLOPS DOWN on the couch next to me, a bucket of red vines in her arms from some secret candy stash she must have around my house.

“When are you going to tell me who you've been talking to?” I whine, seizing a piece of licorice before she gives me one of her Medusa glares.

She crooks an eyebrow. “Who do you think it is?”

I bite the red vine in segments Bugs Bunny-style. “Gage?”

“Too young.”

“Foster?”

“Too cute.”

I snort out a laugh. “Too cute? How can someone be too cute?”

She takes a break from her snacking, which means this is a *very* serious topic. “You've seen him. He looks too innocent. I'd destroy that poor boy.”

Horror gains traction on my face. “Excuse me?”

Lila lobbs a red vine at my boobs, disgust splashing across her features. “Not like that, you perv. I’d destroy his *brain*,” she clarifies. “Maybe turn him into a fuckboy, like some kind of final boss girls have to fight off.”

“I doubt that would happen.”

When I don’t reach for the licorice, she swipes the candy from my lap, biting the end off. “You never know. I have a history of breaking hearts and creating monsters.”

I think back to the long list of exes Lila has, and the fourteen of them that she had to block because they used to camp out on the lawn outside her sorority house. “Okay, maybe you have a point,” I agree.

Blowing air out of my cheeks, I mentally cross out the two rookies of the group. “Is it Kit?”

“Seriously?” Lila exclaims, offended.

“He’s your type.”

“He’s the most egotistical guy I’ve ever met. And that’s saying a lot considering I slept with the entire Omega Psi Phi house.”

Jeez, I didn’t think I was this bad of a guesser. My eyes coast over Lila as she reaches for her glass of Dr. Pepper. I have no idea how that girl stays so fit with all the sugar she consumes.

It’s not Gage, Foster, or Kit. It can’t be Casen because he’s engaged. So that means...

I spring to my feet from the couch, rustling Lila’s entire body as I squeal. “You like Bristol!”

I’m not sure if Lila chokes from the airplane-like turbulence or his name, but streams of brown liquid shoot out her nose, and she doubles over in a coughing fit.

I point at her, doing a little dance. “That’s a yes! I knew it!”

“You did *not* know it,” she scoffs, wiping her mouth.

“Oh my God, Li. You two would be so good together. Not to mention you’d make insanely attractive babies.”

“Uh-uh. There will be no *baby* talk. I don’t even know if he likes me back.”

“He’d be stupid not to,” I tell her.

She purses her sangria-colored lips, switching our reality television program to YouTube. “Thanks, Aer-Bear, but I’d much rather focus on that yummy boyfriend of yours than my sad situationship.”

That’s right. Hayes’ interview is today. I told him I’d watch it live. We’ve already been photographed multiple times together, but this is the first time Hayes is actually speaking about our relationship to the press.

I fall back onto my butt. “Fine, but we’re coming back to this.”

Hayes is sitting in a spacious office across from two interviewers, a microphone propped up in front of him, and a neon sign behind him that blares *Knights of the Sound Booth*. According to Lila, they’re the biggest podcast on the platform.

“Thank you for joining us today, Hayes,” the interviewer with the square-framed glasses says. His name is Deacon, according to the tag on his shirt.

“Thank you for having me.”

He looks a lot better. It’s been a week. The wound on his lip has scabbed over, and the bruising on his face has yellowed.

“You got into quite the predicament last game. Care to comment?”

“Quentin Cadieux was talking shit, so I put him in his place,” he says calmly, though aggravation shackles his words, and there’s something predatory in his eyes that makes my veins frost over.

“And what did he say to rile up the Reapers’ notorious hothead?” the other interviewer asks, a single eyebrow poised. His name is Oliver.

“Let’s just say that he insulted someone I really care about.”

“Mm-hm. And would this ‘someone’ be your new girlfriend by chance?”

Hayes flashes a high-voltage grin before answering, “Aeris Relera is my better half.”

My better half.

My pulse jump-starts and my stomach lurches with a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

Lila jumps up from the sofa, her ear-piercing squeal jangling my eardrums. Crunch shoots up from her spot on the cat tower and scampers off into my bedroom.

“Oh my God! Aeris, did you hear that? Look how proud he looks!”

Did I hear that correctly?

“And what is it about this girl that’s so special?”

Hayes forks his hand through his hair. “Everything. There aren’t enough words in the world to describe how incredible she is. I’m pretty sure I’ve laughed with her more than I have in years. She has this softness about her that I don’t think many people are capable of, but she’s equally just as strong.”

Yep, I *definitely* heard that correctly. I feel like I could cry. I might if he keeps talking about me like that. *No, Aeris. Pull it together.*

Oliver places his crossed arms on the table. “And how did you two meet?”

“We met at a bar. She was drinking by herself one night, and she caught my attention from across the room. I asked if I could join her, and I’m lucky she didn’t throw her drink in my face.”

A flurry of laughter fills the studio.

“Are you saying that a heartthrob like yourself has trouble picking up girls?”

Hayes makes a face, but it's good-natured. "Oh, definitely. It can be intimidating being the first one to make the move. You never know how a person will react. I never used to get nervous around women before Aeris, but to this day, I still get butterflies when I'm around her."

The podcast goes on for a bit longer, with Deacon and Oliver asking about everything from his workout routine to his guilty pleasures, but I'm still hung up on every word he said about me.

I need to see Hayes. Now.

**WHO SAID DREAMS DON'T COME
TRUE?**

HAYES

The interview went a lot better than expected. I didn't feel the need to choke anyone out, so that's always a plus. I was planning on goading the guys into grabbing a drink, but I was surprised to find Aeris waiting in my bedroom instead.

I hang up my jacket on the back of the door. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

Aeris has her hands in her lap. "I saw your interview."

"You did?"

"I did."

She walks over to me and lightly touches my arm. Pinpricks line my exposed flesh, calling out for her body to merge with mine—to the point where we can't decipher where one of us ends and the other begins.

"It was perfect, Hayes," she says.

I don't know if she realizes it, but she's donning some pretty irresistible bedroom eyes right now.

"I mean, I *was* going for perfect," I tease, my heart roaring as loud as an exploding landmine.

Without another word, she attacks me with an earth-shattering kiss, raking my bottom lip with her teeth. She sucks the breath out of me, and when I come back up for air, lust fills me like flour in a measuring cup.

I haven't seen her in a week, but it's felt like a lifetime. You'd be surprised how much sexual frustration can build up in just seven days.

I waste no time ripping a line clean down the middle of her shirt, with such force that it makes her voluptuous tits jiggle. I want to pull the pigment from her cheeks and paint every curve of her body; I want to make her see every color of euphoria when she orgasms.

My lips are on her neck, then on her collarbone, then I'm taking the top of her breast between my teeth. A dewdrop of purple blossoms against her flesh, and I soothe the bite with a tender lick.

She rubs the front of her body against me, galvanized to create friction. Aeris angles herself to give me the meat of her thigh to grind myself into, and the way she's rutting her hips over my dick coaxes my balls to tighten.

I undress myself unceremoniously, but I take my time to help her out of her pants. I slide one leg down, then strip off the other. She's wearing plain, cotton underwear—which are already slick with her arousal—and once I remove them, I'm greeted by the glistening sight of her puffy, pink lips.

My cock strains almost painfully, and as badly as I want to give it a firm rub, I keep my hands on the curve of Aeris' waist.

"Aeris, after we're done here, you're not going to remember what other men have felt like inside of you," I say.

My promise seems to rile her up, and she smushes her breasts against my chest, those pretty nipples of hers begging me to suck them in my mouth like I'm feasting on my own personal paradise.

Her teeth graze my earlobe, followed by the whispering of sweet nothings, and I lose any ounce of self-control I have. Aeris' tongue travels the shell of my ear, knowing exactly how to make me fold under her dainty touch—which I do. I'm milliseconds from collapsing to my knees, and I grip her hips roughly in an effort to steady myself.

Her roaming touch, the warmth of her breath on every inch of me, the hunger and eagerness breaking through her gaze—they all work together to create a radioactive cocktail that stirs the ache in my belly.

“Is that so, Hollings? A little cocky much, don’t you think?”

“If I’m cocky for knowing exactly how to please you, then give me a fucking trophy.”

We trip over discarded piles of clothes on the floor, and I push her up against the wall. Not an ideal surface, but I’m too hungry to find a softer one. A surprised moan rends the air, though she’s quick to jump on board as her fingers claw through the scruff of my hair.

I smash my mouth onto hers, teasing her lower lip with my incisors. Our tongues collide in a whirlwind of passion, stroking, taking turns devouring each other. It’s a taste of heaven with a side of hell. A moan gathers at the base of her throat, and I can practically swallow her growing libido. She digs her nails into my back, which I know will leave behind red track marks.

“You want me to fuck you so hard you can’t walk tomorrow?” My dick juts against her stomach.

“Yes, Hayes.” Her hands pull at me greedily, then slide down to pet my cock, catching the pre-cum starting to dribble down my shaft. “Claim every inch of me as yours.”

“Mine,” I growl, punctuating the statement with a kiss to her collarbone. A kiss that just so happens to morph into another hickey marring pristine skin.

“Say it, Aeris. Tell me your pussy is mine and nobody else’s.”

My fingers move meticulously down her body—a slow drag that makes her quiver—and I gently skim her vagina. God, she’s so wet.

A mewl wavers from her lips, and I feel her cunt pulse underneath my touch, my fingers already soaked from the preview her body’s given me.

Her voice hoarsens. “My pussy is yours. And nobody else’s.”

That sounds so good coming out of *her* mouth. My dick twitches at the thought of being coddled by her slick heat, and if I wasn’t so occupied with getting her off first, I’d bury myself to the hilt inside her.

“What do you need from me, Stacks?”

“I need you inside of me. Any part. I don’t care—I just need to *feel* you right now.”

A labored breath pours from my parted lips as I kneel in front of her, watching her through my lashes. I place her leg over my shoulder before leaving a trail of kisses on the inside of her thigh, biting and sucking on a spot dangerously close to her pussy. Aeris moans, wrapping her leg completely around me. The abrupt pressure challenges my balance a little, and the musky scent of her is making me impossibly dizzy with desire.

“Like this?” My fingers circle her clit, then gently part the flaps, collecting wetness as they go as deep as they possibly can. She’s swollen and tight, and her walls cinch around my digits with each trail and flutter.

Her frame rocks forward as the initial breach pilfers a moan from her. “Oh my God. Yes, just like that. More.”

I watch with pride as she squirms under my touch, feeling her standing leg begin to shake uncontrollably.

I stabilize her. “More what?”

“More, *please*.”

My fingers curl to scrape her G-spot, and a whole-body shudder wracks through her. I slowly withdraw them, bringing them to my mouth. Fuck. She tastes so good. I stare at her as I suck, and it drives her crazy.

My heart feels like it’s thrashing around, my head running laps. I worship her like no other goddess exists, and I lick every last bit of her off my fingers. I want to gorge on her for the rest of the night, switch to an Aeris-only diet for the rest of my life.

My thumb travels over her labia, the same path my tongue would usually make, but I'm determined to make her come just by using my fingers. I flitter my fingers around in a fast motion before delving inside her again, feeling her squeeze around my knuckles. My digits slide in and out of her hole, making the wet noises rise in volume.

I love the way her body heaves in my presence, coercing me to savor the sweetness of her supple skin. She bucks her hips against my hand, and I become delirious with each brush against her velvet walls.

"Can you give me an orgasm?" I ask, taking the convulsions of her lower half as a silent yes.

I start steadily pumping my fingers inside of her, matching the rhythm of her shallow breaths, only changing my method to employ a circling pattern when her pussy clenches.

"Oh...oh, fuck. That feels so good. I—Hayes!" she screams as her orgasm surges through her.

She takes a moment to collect herself, her body folded into mine and her legs gleaming with a gush of cum. Once I wipe the residue away, we move to the head of the bed.

She pushes me onto my back. I fall with no objection, my tongue darting out to wet my lips as I anticipate her impure intentions. She gets onto her knees, her ass in the air and her tits swaying against my upright dick, and she kisses her way up my stomach. She takes her sweet time teasing me, the swerve of her tongue extracting a tremor.

"Jesus Christ." The vein in my cock is throbbing, and I know she's purposefully avoiding it. I'm going to cream before I'm even inside of her.

My muscles strain as she finds each one of my weak spots, conquering me within a matter of seconds. Her teeth trap my nipple as she sucks, then bites, then sucks again. I throw my head back against the bed and surrender myself completely, her name leaving my mouth in the form of a whiny moan.

I watch through half-lidded eyes as she begins to straddle me, moving the seam of her clit back and forth over the sticky

head of my cock. My hands find their way to her waist, clinging to her flesh with deep-seated desperation.

My breath stutters. “Aeris, I don’t want you—*fuck*—I don’t want you to feel pressured to do anything.”

“Do you have a condom?”

A slight flash of panic overtakes my face. Yeah, I’m a horny guy, but I don’t carry protection on me like gum. She gently climbs off me so I can reach into the nightstand next to my bed. It takes me about a second to find an XL condom, and I blow out a breath of relief when I do.

I lodge the package between my teeth, opening it with one horizontal motion. Aeris rolls the condom down my length with aching slowness, then she shifts her position until my dick is fully inside of her cunt. I welcome the indescribable pleasure that follows. It’s a maelstrom of fire and ice that incinerates my bones into a fine powder.

She closes her eyes, her walls clenching around my cock. It takes her a moment to adjust to the size, and I experiment with easing myself in and out of her a little more. I can feel the tip of my dick hit her core, filling her, stretching her.

She loses her breath as she begins to ride me at a consistent pace, and the faster she goes, the less the pressure seems to hinder her. She continues to hug my shaft as she moves up and down, her ass slapping against my ball sack, a spark igniting low in my stomach.

“You’re taking me like such a good girl,” I breathe, my hands tightening around her hips.

She moves both of my hands to cup her breasts, and I weigh their heaviness, squeezing them tightly. I take her nipples between my fingers and roll them with the slightest bit of pressure.

“Hayes,” she whimpers, arousal coating her throat.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“I want you to *ruin* me,” she says, her voice doused in erotic undertones.

With a guttural growl, I ease her off me, then, parting her legs gently, reenter her from a different angle. Her hands clench fistfuls of the sheets as I thrust deeper, her caramel hair fanned out beneath her. I can feel her tremble, see the sweat falling down her temples, hear the skittering of her heart.

“Open,” I demand.

Aeris spreads her thighs wider.

“Your mouth.”

She does as I say. I gather some saliva on my tongue, letting it pool into a string of spit that lowers into her mouth. She meets my eyes with the same smoldering intensity, and I watch as her throat moves to swallow.

Fucking hell.

I slide myself in and partway out of her glorious cunt, obsessed with the way her walls contract around my girth, the lubrication from her previous orgasm wetting the latex of the condom.

“You make me feel so good,” she murmurs, barely getting the sentence out between moans.

“Tell me the time and place, and I’ll be inside you for as long as you want.”

I continue to pump, switching between an aggressive forcefulness and a gentle lull, moans and curses littered between each stroke. My body quivers as I quicken the pace, different sensations intermingling to form one potent concoction. Even in my own grogginess, I can tell she’s close.

“Eyes open, Stacks. I want to see them when they roll back,” I tell her.

Her brown eyes go wide, and her teeth dig into her lower lip. “Hayes, I can’t. I can’t have another—”

“Yes, you can.”

I don’t mean for it to come out so commanding, but the vehemence in my voice doesn’t frighten her.

Her entire body shakes with each of my thrusts. “Oh, God. Hayes, I’m going to come!”

I only get a few more in before she’s coming all over my dick, her orgasm rippling through her like a 4.0 earthquake. She looks so gorgeous with her mouth hanging open and sweat blanketing the hollow of her throat. The image alone spurs me on, and a familiar prickle enflames the tip of my cock.

“Ohhh, fuuuck...” I whimper into her neck, the floodgates inside of me opening. My movements become sloppy as I release into the condom.

After taking care of the condom, I drag myself back to bed, making room for Aeris to lay on my chest. She cuddles into me, her hair draped over my pectorals, her hand steadied over my stomach.

“That was better than I imagined,” I sigh, drawing patterns over her upper back with my finger.

Her eyebrows weave into a willowy arch, and she looks up at me curiously. “How often did you imagine that?”

“Do you want me to be honest?”

“Do I?”

I snort. “Probably not.”

Aeris slaps me playfully, but then her expression sober. “Thank you, Hayes,” she says quietly, her voice packed with exhaustion. I know she’s probably seconds away from falling asleep.

“For what?”

She nuzzles closer to me, a tiny sigh parting her lightly bitten lips. “For fixing me,” she mumbles, and those three words bludgeon me into a powdery dust.

“You’re not broken, Aeris.”

She’s not. What is she talking about? Why would she say that about herself?

“I am, though. Nobody’s ever wanted me like you have.”

Anger starts to set up shop in my mind, but it's not directed at her. "Those people have been complete idiots," I snap.

"Hayes—"

I push myself onto my hip bones so I can look at her face, cupping her cheeks with my hands. "I know you'll see yourself the way I see you one day."

A sea of emotions crashes into the shores of her brown eyes. She pauses for a few counts, contemplating, but eventually nods her head.

When my steady lips stretch over her trembling ones, love rattles inside my body like bottled lightning—frenetic and blinding, but in the best way possible. My skin sings under her buttery touch, and it's in that moment that I realize I'd trade everything in the world to stay in her arms a little bit longer.

A GUIDE TO BROKEN HEARTS

AERIS

When I wake up in the morning, I've slept the best I have in a long time—dreamless and well-insulated thanks to Hayes' freakishly warm body. Sunshine spatters the tops of my shoulders, and imprints from the sheet tattoo my arms and torso. I also apparently passed out before I had the chance to get dressed.

I jostle around in the bed, though I don't get very far once I notice Hayes' arms braceleted around me.

"Good morning," he grumbles, the gruffness in his morning voice making me squeeze my legs together. Despite my pussy being sore from last night's escapade, she's ready to jump right back into action, and the close proximity to the droolworthy specimen that is Hayes Hollings has my hormones gearing into full drive.

Braying laughter somersaults out of me. "It's a good morning for someone," I say, pushing my ass back against the hardness gliding between my cheeks.

He unwraps his hand from my ribs and seizes my bare breast, circling over my areola with his finger. "I have a beautiful, naked girl in my bed. Can you blame me?" he whispers.

I let out a keening moan, feeling his erection fully seated against my asshole. "If this is the kind of treatment I get in the morning, I might have to wake up earlier."

"Mmm, is that so?"

The twittering of my heart makes for a staccato beat in my ears, and lust boils deep in my belly. “Oh, yeah.”

I feel Hayes shift beside me, and cold slithers down the curve of my now-exposed back. I turn on my side and prop my head up with my elbow, my eyes gravitating toward the somber expression on his face.

“I talked to my dad. In person. For the first time in years,” he tells me, and I can’t decipher whether his tone is rooted in happiness or disappointment.

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “What did he say?”

“He told me that he wanted to make things right between us—that he wanted to be in my life again. And Faye’s.”

“That’s...good, right?”

“Yeah, I just wasn’t expecting it. I want him to be in both of our lives again. I’m tired of resenting him.” A sigh falls from his lips, heavy, as if crippled with weight.

I reach for his hand and hug his fingers between mine. “You deserve to be happy, Hayes. I’m sorry that you didn’t have your father’s support growing up. You always take care of those around you. Now it’s time for you to let yourself be taken care of.”

Hayes squeezes my palm, and the dark clouds in his eyes lift slightly, only enough to allow me a glimpse of the clear blue underneath. “Thank you, Aeris. I just hope I’m not making the wrong decision—letting him back in,” he worries.

“If he fucks up again, that’s on him. *None* of it is on you, okay?”

“But I—”

“No buts,” I interject, shaking my head. “You’re too hard on yourself. Remember when you told me you hoped that I’d see myself how you see me one day? I’m asking you to do the same. I’m asking you to see that selfless older brother, that incredibly gifted hockey player, that considerate best friend and teammate who’d do anything for the people he cares about.”

With his free hand, he tucks a stray tress of hair behind my ear. “I think you may know me better than anyone in this entire world, Aeris Relera.”

THE BIRTHDAY TO END ALL BIRTHDAYS

November 10th, Friday, 3:04 p.m.

THE SIX DICKS WITH STICKS

GAGE: H, what are we doing for your birthday?

HAYES: Nothing.

BRISTOL: You seriously don't want to do anything?

HAYES: No. And if you cumguzzlers try to throw something, I'll shove my foot so far up each of your asses that you'll be able to taste me in your mouths.

GAGE: Jesus.

FULTON: Come on, you old grump. Can't we at least eat some cake and binge *Westworld* or something?

KIT: Yeah, Hayesy. You only turn twenty-four once.

HAYES: Never call me that. Ever.

FULTON: TWENTY-FOUR? HOLY SHIT, YOU'RE OLD.

GAGE: Dude! That's so rude. Don't say that.

BRISTOL: Just a small get together, H. It won't kill you.

HAYES: No, no, and no. I don't like celebrating my birthday.

CASEN: It's 5-1, buddy. You've been outvoted.

HAYES: Yeah, but since *I'm* the birthday boy, my vote counts for more. So it's actually like 5-15.

KIT: How?

HAYES: For every one of your votes, my vote counts for three times that.

KIT: In what fucked-up universe?

HAYES: This one, bitch.

CASEN: Josie says you're being ridiculous.

FULTON: Ooh, tell Josie I said hi!

CASEN: She says hi back.

GAGE: Ugh, fine. We won't do anything for you, you ungrateful geezer.

HAYES: Good. Thank you. Now stop bugging me about it.

Gage removed Hayes from the conversation

November 10th, Friday, 3:15 p.m.

GAGE: So who's ordering the stripper?

A SISTER-SIZED SURPRISE

AERIS

Hayes' birthday couldn't have come at a better time. Everything is perfect between us.

His teammates have him and Lila on a wild goose chase to find some sweet and sour potato chips that don't exist.

Kit claims the party's going to be lowkey, but streamers and balloons take up every corner of the space, and they've even got a table solely dedicated to gifts. I don't know how Hayes is going to react when he sees...everything. He likes giving surprises, but I don't know if he's a fan of receiving them himself.

I've been poked, prodded, and nearly blinded by a life-sized cutout of Hayes in his hockey uniform. I'll need to take that after the celebration...for scientific reasons.

Josie wipes her hands on her skirt. "I put the chocolate sauce in the fridge," she announces.

Josie's an incredible baker, which is a skill I'd gladly learn if it meant I could distract myself with cream pastries and a coma-inducing amount of powdered sugar. She even made Hayes' cake—chocolate mousse with raspberry filling. She owns her own bakery on Fifth Street called More Flour to You.

"Remind me to hire you for a batch of white chocolate macadamia nut cookies," I say, salivating at the thought.

"Ooh, what's the occasion?" she chirps.

"Oh, you know, just some crazy party. With me. At midnight. On the bathroom floor."

A dainty bubble of laughter pops out of her mouth. “I’d be honored, Aeris.”

“Did someone call for the life of the party?” a very feminine voice asks from the doorway, interrupting our conversation. There’s a gorgeous girl standing in the living room—who looks like she just stepped out of a *Vanity Fair* photoshoot—and a gift bag dangles from her arm.

“Faye!” Kit leads the dogpile that ensues, flattening the poor girl, and this has to be the first time I’ve ever heard a group of full-grown men giggle like a bunch of teenagers.

Faye? Why does that name sound famili—oh. This must be Hayes’ sister.

He’s mentioned his younger sister a few times before, but I never thought I’d get to meet her this soon. There’s a small *oof* that comes from the mound of testosterone, and Faye struggles her way out from all the broad chests and mile-long legs.

She dusts off her hoodie—a baggy, gray one that has UPenn across the front of it.

“Okay, we can’t keep doing that if you guys are going to get any heavier,” she says.

Bristol pretends to clutch his heart. “Ouch, hurtful.”

“Truthful,” she corrects, poking his flat stomach.

Casen sneaks up behind Josie and blows a raspberry against her neck. She giggles and swats at him.

They’re so adorable it only sometimes makes me want to roll into oncoming traffic.

“How’s work going?” Casen asks Faye.

Faye flops down onto the couch. “Oh, it’s great, Case. I mean, the job is only temporary until I graduate, but I need the experience. The kids are a handful, but they’re really great. There’s this one girl who has pretty bad separation anxiety. She used to cry every morning when her mother would drop her off, refuse to play with the other kids, and just wait by the door until pickup time. But I think she’s slowly warming up to me. She hasn’t left my side this whole week.”

“And that’s because you’re the best goddamn teacher in all of Pennsylvania,” Kit says, straightening out a baby picture of Hayes that he got from God knows where.

I never knew Kit had a heart, much less a soft side. It’s weird seeing him act all...loving.

Faye chuckles, and I swear it’s almost identical to Hayes’ laugh. They really don’t look anything alike. Hayes is all blond hair and blue eyes, and Faye is brunette in every sense of the word.

Once Faye realizes I’m in the room, she brings me into a bone-shattering hug. “You must be Aeris,” she squeals. “My brother always talks about you. You’re so much prettier in person!”

“Oh, thank you. But look at you! Hayes doesn’t know you’re coming, does he?”

“Nope, it’s a surprise! I’m only staying for a few hours though. My flight takes off at eight tonight.”

“Whatcha get your brother for his birthday?” Fulton asks, setting out five liters of soda and an eighteen-pack of beer.

Faye digs around in her bag, pulling out an index card with a smile and a wrist flick. She shows it off to the guys like one of those game show presenters, *oohs* and *aahs* splitting their mouths into open gapes.

“It’s a One Free Hug in Public card,” she explains.

“One Free Hug in Public card?” Gage follows up.

“Whenever Hayes tries to hug me in public, I scream and then accuse him of trying to kiss me, making it very loud and clear that I’m his sister. It’s hilarious. You should see the faces of everyone around us. So, this card gives him one time where he can hug me without any repercussions.”

“That’s...that’s gold,” Kit cries, doubling over in laughter, wiping tears from his eyes. “Please tell me you have it on video.”

Faye pours herself a drink over at the snack table. “Oh, I have a whole album of them.”

“I knew you were my favorite Hollings.”

“I also got him a Rolex, but that’s way less interesting.”

A Rolex. That’s...an expensive gift. Why couldn’t I be born rich? Or a trust-fund baby? The least my parents could have done was saddle me with an insane amount of money in return for all the trauma they’ve given me.

The screech of tires outside arrests everyone’s attention, then it’s followed by the death of an engine.

I really hope Hayes doesn’t have a coronary after seeing all of this.

**AN APPLEBEE'S GIFT CARD WOULD'VE
SUFFICED**

HAYES

“Three different 7-Eleven’s,” I growl, tucking my jacket under one arm and using the other to slam the car door. “I’m convinced they don’t exist.”

Lila clucks her tongue in thought. “Maybe they’re seasonal? Or maybe they have to be specially imported from China?”

I sigh, sticking my key into the lock. “If they give me shit for this, I’m going to start spitting in their food.”

All I want to do is lie down and sleep for twelve hours straight. It’s dark in the house for some reason, but I don’t think much of it. I dump my keys onto the small table I know is by the door, and once the lights turn on, I hear a synergetic “Surprise!”

My scream is so high-pitched that my neighbors probably think I’m either being murdered or going through a second puberty. My shoulders deflate as soon as I realize there isn’t some knife-wielding intruder in the house, but my face falls when I notice the decorations and food...and camera.

A camera that just captured my not-so-manly reaction. It’s going to go in the scrapbook for sure.

The group has this scrapbook filled with pictures of us doing stupid shit so that when we’re old and gray, we can look back on those fun times in our early twenties and laugh. But it’s mainly easy blackmail.

There's a picture of Gage totally blacked out during his first NHL party in nothing but his tighty-whities. Then there's that time Fulton got his head stuck in one of those baby swings that you see on kids' playgrounds, and he had to be cut out of it by the fire department. Casen's is of him dressed up in cat ears and a collar after he lost a bet.

Bristol has a whole page dedicated to when he accidentally shaved off one of his eyebrows after watching a YouTube tutorial for manscaping. Kit...I actually don't know what Kit's is. Does he not have anything? No, that can't be true. Or maybe it can. Everything Kit does is stupid, so maybe we just grew tired of always photoing him.

My photos are arguably the most embarrassing. And I'm not a guy who's easy to embarrass, you know? When I was in college, there was this prank war going on between me and Bristol. I think it started when I accidentally cockblocked him on a date—I just wanted to watch *The Notebook* with them, okay?—but he claims I did it on purpose.

That following weekend, our hockey team had a big game against the Santa Barbara Sables. We hadn't been playing well that whole season, so we really needed to turn things around. That's when I started bulking up a lot and hitting the gym more regularly so I could take on some of the bigger players.

Bristol, being the class clown he was at the time, thought it would be *oh so funny* to put laxatives in my protein drink before the game. It was, in fact, *not funny*. I was in the bathroom for a good three hours after the game. And that's a secret I'm taking with me to my grave.

I've entered the Seventh Circle of Hell. I must have. A surprise party. And not just any surprise party, but a *birthday* surprise party. A wonderful mixture of the two things I hate most.

I've never liked my birthday. I mean, I guess that's a lie. I liked it when my mother was still alive. I loved it, actually. I loved waking up to the smell of her chocolate chip pancakes in the morning. She made me feel so special, so loved. So when

she died... a part of me died with her. And a part of me began to resent my birthday.

I've told the guys that when November twelfth comes around, I don't want to do anything. I don't accept gifts. If I even see something resembling a birthday dessert of any kind, I lose my mind. I never told them why. It's not because I don't trust them, I just don't really talk about my mom with anyone.

I miss her so much some days that I would do anything to be with her again, even for a second, even if that meant a lifetime of pain for my father and my sister. It's selfish of me, I know. I've grieved her for over half my life.

"Big brother!" A pair of small arms swing around my neck, and I'm too afraid to remove whoever is clinging to me like a koala.

I immediately do a double take, unlatch Faye from my body, and stare at her in sheer disbelief. "Faye? You're here?"

"Didn't expect us to fly ya sister out, did ya?" Kit says, patting me on the chest.

"You're really here," I echo back to my sister.

Since she lives in Pennsylvania, we rarely ever see each other. Our schedules are so busy that we only get together for the holidays.

"I'm here." She hugs me again, and this time, I stay in her arms for what feels like forever. My dad working on himself, my sister being here...everything's perfect. Well, almost perfect.

That's when I spot Aeris, and a swirling mass of electricity breaks out into brilliant displays of color in my body. I've been falling harder and harder for her, which I didn't think was possible. I'm whipped for her, and I'll shout it from the rooftops, even despite my slight fear of heights.

I give her a quick peck on the lips. "You guys really didn't need to do anything for me."

"Come on, dude. This day is special because *you're* special. Of course we had to do something," Gage says.

I look around between my friends—my *family*. Maybe this will be the first birthday of mine that I don't completely despise. Maybe I'll make a new tradition this year.

“Oh, and if a woman named Crystal Methanie comes by the house, this is definitely *not* the correct address.”

CHOCOLATE GOES WITH EVERYTHING

AERIS

It's been thirty minutes. Hayes has already crushed five beers and is now currently shotgunning his sixth. His alcohol tolerance is frightening. Lila, Josie, and I watch from the sidelines.

"This is bad," Lila murmurs, one hand over her eyes, her fingers making the tiniest peephole for her to look out of. "But I can't look away."

Revulsion skips across Josie's face. "I can't either."

Faye joins us to watch the fiasco taking place, a beer in her own hand.

"How did my oaf of a brother end up with someone like you?" she inquires, taking a sophisticated sip of her drink—a polar opposite to the man currently in the middle of a chugging contest.

"He, uh, kinda just stumbled into my life," I tell her, thinking back to the first night we met. To the night I was crying my eyes out because of my brother. To the night I'd sworn off drinking hard liquor. To the night I believed that life wasn't worth living.

"You're good for him, Aeris. I mean that. I haven't seen him this happy since..." Faye trails off.

"Since?"

"Since our mother was alive."

Their mother, of course. I should've put those pieces together.

"I'm so sorry, Faye," I say softly, reaching out to give her shoulder a little squeeze.

She runs her fingernails against the red grooves in her solo cup. "It's okay. I loved my mom, but Hayes was closer to her. It broke him. I don't think he's ever really recovered from it. I wish he didn't have to carry all of this weight on his shoulders. He feels responsible for me, even though I've told him that's not true. I want him to start living his life again," she murmurs.

Sympathy tarries in my chest, causing the airflow circulating through me to leave on a swift set of wings. "I know what you mean. My brother...he passed away. There were so many days I just wanted the pain to go away, but I was too afraid to make it stop because I'd grown so used to it."

There was a time in my life where I couldn't even talk about Roden without crying. With Faye, though, everything seems easy. That must run in the Hollings family.

"Aeris, I'm so sorry. What...what changed?" Her shaky words ride out on a slash of breath.

"I met your brother," I confess, hope sprouting inside of me.

Being with Hayes has made me realize that I'm a lot more than my trauma. The trauma from Roden, the trauma from Wilder, the trauma from my father. While it's good for me to acknowledge and accept what's happened to me, I'm not the sum of my hardships. I'm more than that.

"I hope my brother can try to move on...to accept what's happened," Faye stammers, and before she can say anything else, I hug her, the rapid beat of her heart in close competition with mine.

"He will. I know he will."

I have no doubt in my mind that Hayes will find peace one day. I mean, if I believe I can (and that's saying a lot), then I

know he can. And now he has his father on his side to anchor him if he needs it.

By the time the cake has been devoured and all the alcohol is gone, we're onto presents. Bristol's been chatting with Lila the entire night—no surprise there—and Casen and Josie have been unable to take their eyes off each other.

Gage lugs a large, rectangular-shaped box and places it in front of Hayes. I almost don't want to know what it is.

Hayes wastes no time in unveiling the atrocity in front of him, and I can say for certain that everyone is confused when a fully furnished fish tank is revealed. A fake seaweed plant resides next to a large cave sculpture, and a miniature treasure chest bubbles in the corner, surrounded by bunch of colorful aquarium rocks.

Hayes' eyebrows tug together in confusion. "G, did you get me a fish?"

Gage scoops up a dollop of chocolate frosting from his plate, sticking it in his mouth. "Yep. It's a Peruvian Blue Fin. They're really skittish. He's been hiding in that cave ever since I picked him up from the pet store."

"Okay, let me rephrase: why did you get me a fish?" Hayes is trying to peek into the cave, but he's having trouble finding the right angle.

From where I'm sitting, all I can see is a dark blob.

"You just seemed kind of stressed lately. And animals help with stress," Gage states matter-of-factly.

Casen cackles. "I think they mean more like dogs or cats."

"Not true. According to a lot of scientific articles, observing fish can actually improve mood and anxiety," Bristol interrupts, amassing some bewildered stares from the group.

"What? I read."

Gage's lips twitch into a shit-eating grin. "See? It's a good investment, trust me. They're very low maintenance. You'll barely even know the little dude is there."

“Uh, thanks,” Hayes says, still analyzing the tank with a squint of his eyes.

“Did you really get him a Peruvian Blue Fin?” I whisper to Gage.

Gage’s chest flutters with a chuckle, and he shakes his head. “God, no. Those things don’t exist. Hayes is going to be feeding absolutely nothing for weeks before he catches on.”

Hayes moves on to a box with an *F* scribbled on striped wrapping paper. The handwriting is too legible to be Fulton’s.

“Faye, you didn’t have to get me anything,” he says, his gaze softening in tandem with his voice.

“I mean, it’s nothing too fancy. You’re also impossible to shop for,” she says, shrugging. “It was the least I could do for my favorite brother.”

“Your *only* brother.”

“Uh-huh. That’s what I said.”

He removes the wrapping paper in one fluid motion, revealing a green, velvet box. He cracks it open to find a gold, diamond-encrusted watch perched between two soft cushions.

Hayes brushes his finger over the crystal of the watch. “Faye, I love it. But you didn’t have to get me something so expensive.”

Faye waves him off with a dismissive flap of her hand. “I’ll probably be living off ramen and Capri Suns for the next month, but it was worth it.”

After Hayes gets through the rest of his gifts, ranging from video games to new clothes, I’m the last person to give him his present. I hand him a package wrapped in shiny paper. He told me I didn’t need to get him anything—you know, the usual boyfriend speech—but I was determined to find him something.

He unveils a simple, black frame with a photo of us. It’s a picture of us dancing the night of our first date. When I was scrolling on Instagram, the photo popped up on my feed, and it looked too professional to be taken by some regular ol’

paparazzi. When I clicked on the linked account, it belonged to a photographer. I messaged him and asked if he could send me a copy. Apparently, he's a local who spends his free time hunting out potential once-in-a-lifetime experiences to memorialize. He told me that he's never captured a man so obviously in love before, and I didn't have the heart to correct him.

"I thought you might like it," I say, a blush brewing underneath my skin.

Hayes' smile liquifies my insides. "Aeris, this is incredible. Thank you."

He plants a chaste kiss on my lips before I can respond, but the obnoxious howling of our friends makes us pull apart sooner than I would've liked.

Gage cups one hand around his ear. "So, Hayes, you'd say that this birthday party was a success then?"

Hayes rolls his eyes. "Yes, Gage, the party was a *success*," he says in exasperation.

Gage hums happily as he pats himself on the back.

"Even though a lot of you"—he fixes a narrowed look at Kit and Gage—"get on my nerves, you're family. And I'm so grateful for every one of you."

Family. Not even second family, but *family*. I haven't had a family in the longest time, and never in a million years would I have thought it would consist of a group of hockey players. But sharing in this love, being here with everyone, it closes the empty hole inside of me that my parents left when they abandoned me. And there's a part of me that isn't so scared of the future anymore.



AFTER WE DROP Faye off at the airport, Hayes and I start cleaning up. The guys offered to help, but I wasn't opposed to some alone time with my boyfriend.

I push some of the empty containers into a large trash bag, keeping my eye on Hayes as he reaches up to take down a nest of streamers.

“Did you have fun?” I ask.

Hayes gives me a panty-melting simper. “This was one of the best birthdays I’ve ever had.”

“Really?”

He crosses the space between us, his hands on my waist as he pulls me into him. “Really. And it was all because you were here,” he says.

“I think you’re giving me too much credit.”

“Well, I mean, there is *something* you could do that would make my birthday better.”

I smack my forehead. “Oh, shoot. We never set the chocolate sauce out, did we?”

I strut over to the fridge, deliberately swaying my hips from side to side, and I can feel Hayes’ eyes on my ass the entire time. I dig around to pull out the Saran-wrapped bowl of chocolate sauce that Josie had whipped up from scratch, and I place it on the dining table.

Hayes takes the seat closest to me. Heat thickens across the back of my neck when I glance down at his legs.

“Spoons?”

He doesn’t say anything, so I go ahead and open the drawer, grabbing two spoons.

Instead of sitting beside him, I wrap one arm around his neck and lower myself onto his lap. A low groan makes its way out of him.

Stay cool, Aeris. Stay cool.

I peel back the thin plastic layer on top, dipping my spoon in and gathering a little pool of cocoa. The minute I turn toward Hayes, he wraps his lips around the bowl of the spoon, looking up at me through his thick lashes.

Oh, dear Lord. I'm in trouble.

His mouth detaches from the spoon with a *pop*, and he leans back in his chair, a cocksure grin on his face. Can humans smell pheromones? I hope they can't, otherwise I'd reek of desperation right now.

My thumb instinctively comes up to wipe a dreg of chocolate from the corner of his mouth, but he grabs my wrist before I can fully pull back my arm, lapping at my digit with the snap of his tongue.

Oh, God. How am I already soaked? Does just being in Hayes Hollings' presence make girls instantly wet? It must be some kind of superpower of his.

He slowly unbuttons the first few buttons on my blouse, revealing the red, lacy bra cupping my breasts. My nipples feel especially sensitive, and I wouldn't mind feeling the heat from his mouth engulf them.

"Shit, Aeris. You have no idea how much I want to fuck your tits right now—how good my dick would look sliding between them," he growls.

He removes my shirt a lot more delicately than last time. He probably would've torn my bra off too if those things weren't so expensive. His touch roams every square inch of me, tracing the slope of my waist. There's something both wild and docile about it, and the buzzing sensation that overcomes me is comforting in a way that words will never be. He pulls my lower lip between his teeth, tugging just enough to lightly bruise the delicate skin. When his tongue flicks over the bite, warmth reaches every part of me with an unprecedented determination.

Every nerve inside of me is electrified with an inexplicable feeling—a feeling of two souls being bonded together, a sacred bridge rising between two minds, connecting us by the thinnest thread in the universe.

With heavy eyelids, he pours the remainder of the chocolate sauce down the front of my chest, and as soon as the stickiness hits my skin, my whole body shudders. Dark brown

liquid slathers my flesh, trickling down my stomach and into the waistband of my pants.

I throw my head back, letting him devour my tits, and he rolls my pert nipple between his long fingers. A moan levitates up my throat, my hand jerking roughly in his hair.

He notches his groin against my denim-clad cunt. My underwear is already damp with arousal, restricting my movement. I want them off. I want nothing between us. I want to be skin to skin with him.

He's breathing so heavily that it sounds like a jackhammer in my ears. "Be a good girl. Tell me all the ways you want me to fuck you."

"I want you to fuck me so hard that I forget my own name. I don't want to be able to walk straight for days. I want to have bruises all over my skin from your hands and your teeth, and I want my vagina to be so sore that I can't imagine ever taking another inch of you."

"Fucking *done*."

I'm on autopilot when I lift his shirt over his head, flinging it somewhere to the side. I use my breasts to smear the chocolate around his chest, watching as his skin shines under the canopy of sweet confectionary. I bite my tongue to stop from licking every drop off of him.

I lower myself onto the floor, right between his knees, dipping my lips down to the mountain range of his abs. The aroma from the chocolate is disorienting in the best way, and I tongue his navel, watching his stomach hollow.

"Fuuuck." He lolls his head back, his hand tightening in my hair, pulling at my scalp. The needy whimper sticking in his throat stokes embers of passion inside of me—embers only for him.

I end my expedition at the top of his faint happy trail, and then my fingers move down to unzip his pants and pull down his boxers, letting his cock leap out in all its eight-inch glory. It's angry and red from neglect, and it shines with a pearl of pre-cum over the swollen head.

“I love how hard you are for me,” I breathe, tracing my finger along the dominant vein running up his shaft.

His dick spasms, and his hands dig deeper into my sides. “And I love how hard you make me.”

I shed my jeans and my thong in record time, leaving us both naked and covered in chocolate. He pulls me back onto his lap, and my pussy is sopping when his fingers strum the overstimulated area. His penis nearly covers half my torso with its erect state, and my cunt palpitates from the proximity alone.

Hayes slides his fingers inside me without preamble, stretching out my walls, hunting for that special spot that makes me scream his name and fist his hair. They curve and flit, gaining momentum until a loud moan slips out of me.

My upper body shivers, and I pull myself closer to him, my nails scratching his back harshly as they search for relief. “Wait, we need a—”

He twirls his digits in an expert circle, and the sensation budding inside of me cuts off my train of thought.

“I got tested a while ago. I’m clean. But I can go—”

“No,” I stop him, stilling under his hand. “I have an IUD. We’re good.”

It’s criminal the way he pumps inside of me, now knuckles-deep inside my swollen cunt.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he growls, removing his drenched fingers.

I shuttle my entrance over his dick, which is pulsing with anticipation to shunt inside of me. The first stretch is the most delicious. The moment his tip sidles against my core, I instantly clench around his shaft, and vertigo plays with the edges of my vision. I feel so full, the pressure in my cervix growing with each passing moment.

His breath mutates into a guttural rumble that shakes my frame. “If you’re going to continue milking me like that, you better be ready to watch my cum drip out of you.”

When he goes to silence my mewls, I can taste the bitter tang of chocolate on his tongue. There's a slow crawl of heat that sprawls in my stomach when he bucks against me, every banded muscle in his torso tightening like a rope.

His hands are firmly dug into my sides to keep me in place as I ride him. He pistons his hips against my pelvis, something heady darkening in his eyes. I arch against him to grant him a better angle, and I can feel a burning pain blaze up from where his nails are breaking through my skin.

"Fucking hell, Aeris. I need to feel every inch of you. Please let me feel every inch of you."

The faster I go, the quicker his self-control vanishes, and I'm cherishing every single moment of him begging for mercy. Hayes Hollings. Begging. That's an Eighth Wonder of the World.

A symphony of moans ruptures the sex-fueled atmosphere. We nearly tip over the chair we're both on as Hayes' arm shoots out to grip the edge of the table. The only noise in my ears is the squelching of skin on skin, the slapping of my ass on his solid thighs, and the slurping of my vagina as I slide effortlessly over his erection.

His length twitches inside of me. "Fuck me," he groans, his chest heaving.

"I thought that's what I was doing."

I lick my way up his neck, savoring the sweetness of the chocolate, even loving the tinge of salt from the sweat encasing his flesh. My tongue outlines his pulse point, and even though I can't see it, I can feel it beat steadily.

He chuckles something deep and throaty, arousal composing his words. "That tongue's going to get you in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

He bends forward, his lips on my collarbone, his teeth brushing against the taut skin. When I feel him bite down, I know a hickey will be there.

“How about...”

Hayes’ hands guide my hips as he thrusts into me, alighting a wick of lust, a flickering flame that burns my veins and promises to slacken every one of my muscles. I bite back a whiny moan.

“...a little...”

The next time I bear down on him, his cock probes against the spot that has me seeing stars, and I’m not even fully comprehending what he’s telling me. No, I’m too distracted by the overwhelming ache twisting my insides into balloon animals.

“...edging?” he finishes, and within a second, he’s moved me off him and pulled out.

He moved me like I was weightless. Hell, I didn’t even realize we’d changed positions. That electrifying need I was chasing dims to a tiny spark, and I’m about to grouse my annoyance, but then he bends me over the table.

The collision of my chest against the wood isn’t hard, but it’s definitely powerful enough to make me gasp. From behind me, Hayes wraps his hand around my throat. I’m shivering from the chocolate cooling on my skin and the way he has my bare pussy spread open.

“I can’t. I need to...”

“Come? You will. Just when I say so.”

My legs shake as my vagina throbs, and I swallow harshly under his fingers.

His hand is keeping my head lifted, and he presses his crotch to my ass, the weight of his dick nudging against my thigh. Anarchy breaks out inside me, and I’ve never wanted something so badly in my entire life.

Impatience oozes from my tongue. “Hayes, if you d—”

His fingers tighten around my neck, and then I feel his breath skate down the side of my cheek. “You’ll what?”

Oh my God. I need him to fuck me. I need him to do something. Anything.

I whimper when he starts to swivel his hips, the tip of his cock prodding along my wet entrance.

“I’ll do it myself,” I growl.

“Like hell you will.”

He finally sinks into me, his dick performing knee-weakening and mind-numbing strokes. Each one is purposeful, precise, and they operate at a speed that has my walls fluttering in tandem. Both of his hands have migrated down to my ass, and he slaps one of my cheeks so hard that I wouldn’t be surprised if it shook the walls.

Between the sting in my ass cheek and each slam of his penis, I’m close, panting for that ache between my legs to be satiated. His grip on my hips is starting to waver, and the timing of his breaths is becoming more erratic.

With one last jerk from Hayes, my orgasm hits, stringing me up by my neck and flinging me into the stratosphere. Not far behind me, I can feel him as he releases, his cock spitting warmth into my lower half, and there’s cum dribbling down the inside of my thigh when I collapse onto him.

We’re both a boneless pile of sweat and chocolate sauce, and it takes us a few minutes before we even consider moving in the slightest. With my back to his chest, I can hear the rapid pounding of his heart, feel his hard stomach expand with air.

He uses two fingers to gather the cum that’s on my leg and push it back inside me.

“I don’t know how, but that was better than the first time,” he breathes against my neck, his chest rumbling with delight underneath me.

Is there some weird, universal thing that happens in people to compel them to admit their love for their partner after they just fucked like animals? Because if there is, I’m right there, and I’m so close to telling Hayes that—

I turn around to face him. “Hayes, I—”

“Aeris, I love you,” Hayes professes, stunning me into silence.

My heart plays patty cake with my chest. His voice stands at the edge of my mind’s bluff, echoing throughout my body.

Hayes Hollings *loves* me. I never thought I’d hear those words. I’d accepted that I probably wasn’t destined for love—not after Roden and Wilder. I’d accepted that I’d never have a wedding, I’d never get married, and I’d never have kids. But within weeks, all of my preconceived notions about love have been turned upside down.

I don’t know if I would’ve met Hayes if I wasn’t at the bar that night. I don’t know if I believe in soulmates or love at first sight. I’d like to think that we would’ve found our way to each other eventually, that the universe knew he was out there for me.

“Hayes, I love you too.”

The look on his face is nothing short of complete and utter happiness. A spectrum of emotions spike through me, and I’m starting to worry if I said it weird, but then he kisses me, and everything suddenly makes sense.

A HARD PILL TO SWALLOW

AERIS

It's around four in the morning when I sneak out of Hayes' bedroom. I normally would've stayed for breakfast, but I'm behind on stuff for work, and my boss is going to blow a gasket if I don't get the captions in on time.

Shoes still dangling from my fingers and my hair a bird's nest, I quietly start to head downstairs when a slurry of voices interrupts my departure.

As I peek around the corner, I see Kit's head of dark hair and Bristol's lighter one. A seedling of curiosity plants itself inside of me. What could they be talking about this early in the morning? I don't want to barge into their conversation, and I don't technically mean to eavesdrop, but...

"Has he told Aeris?"

Told me?

"About?"

Yeah, about?

"About the whole fake relationship stuff," Kit clarifies.

"If he has, she must've taken it better than I expected," Bristol says.

"I mean, it worked, you know? He rebranded his image."

Record scratch. Hold on. What the *fuck* did Kit just say?

I freeze, waist-deep in a tsunami of shock. My veins turn into rivers of ice as I stare at them from my spot on the stairs,

trying to make sense of everything.

The truth whips me like a live wire, and the only reason my limbs haven't given out yet is because I'm clinging on to the railing. My breath has fled me, the dizziness is overpowering, and tears boil over onto my skin, creating what feels like third-degree burns.

Fake relationship. Rebrand his image.

Oh my God. My father was telling the truth. How could he have possibly known? I'm so stupid for not heeding his warning.

But I'm not stupid, am I? It was a rumor.

But there's a reason rumors exist. There's a reason they're so widely believed by people. And it's usually because there's an inkling of truth in there.

Hayes has a temper? Check.

Hayes was a womanizer? Check.

I mean, the timing of everything makes sense. Hayes was getting a lot of hate over his reckless behavior, and he was getting involved in scandals left and right. And the moment I entered his life, everyone magically started to like him again.

Has he really kept me around this whole time to look like a decent guy?

The warning signs were right there—they were right in front of me. He lied to me about his occupation, then he kept Sienna a secret from me. I could've stopped all of this from ever happening if I'd guarded my heart better. And as betrayed as I feel by Hayes, the only person I can blame for getting me into this mess is myself.

When the guys exit the kitchen, I run as fast as I can down the stairs, and I don't look back.

I'm sprinting across the driveway barefoot, but I know that if I stop, a part of me will want to march into Hayes' room and demand that we talk. I need space to think. I need to digest all of this. I don't want to see Hayes' face or hear his voice.

He had an ulterior motive this entire time. Did he even mean it when he told me he loved me? Can I trust anything that's come out of his mouth?

I can't believe I've let myself get taken advantage of.
Twice.

Tears run like river rapids down my face as I slam my car door. I wrap my hands around the steering wheel and bang my spine against the back of my seat. In the quiet of the early morning, my sobs drown out the light trilling of birds and the purr of an engine somewhere in the distance.

You know when your life is going too well, and you just feel like something bad is bound to happen? That bad has been waiting on the horizon for me this whole time, in the form of Hayes Hollings. Little did I know that the person who makes my sun rise every morning would also be the same person responsible for darkening my skies.

**SAY GOODBYE TO THE MAN YOU
THOUGHT YOU KNEW**

AERIS

ME: We need to talk.

I've ghosted Hayes for the past four days, and that's the best I could come up with. He opened the thread as soon as I sent the message to him, and he responded with a vague "Okay."

I've paced back and forth outside of Hayes' house for twenty minutes before finally getting the courage to knock on his door. I knew this conversation was coming, but it doesn't make it any less difficult. The minute I see him, I want to reacquaint myself with his lips, even despite the sensible voice in my head telling me to stay far away.

He looks just as bad as I do. There are dark circles under his eyes, his hair is disheveled, and his clothes look slept in. He goes to open his mouth, but I don't let him get a word in.

My stomach roils with nausea, and bile burns a canal up my throat. "Is it true, Hayes? Was this all started because you needed a fake relationship?"

Please don't let it be true. Please.

"Aeris, please. Let me explain." He reaches out to touch me, but my body rejects the thought, and I put a good amount of distance between us. I can't believe I let him in. I can't believe I let him have the most vulnerable parts of me.

Oh my God. I can't even *look* at him right now.

He lied to me. Our whole relationship has been a lie. He's been stringing me along, and I've been stupid enough to fall

for every sweetened sentiment he's told me. And he continued to lie to me, to disrespect me, after I told him I didn't want there to be any secrets between us.

My eyes spurn him, and my lips flare over my teeth. "You've had weeks to explain it to me. I've given you chance after chance to come clean, but you never did. And that speaks volumes about who you truly are."

His expression is barren of the amicability I've grown to love. "I didn't tell you because it didn't matter to me anymore! My feelings for you have been real since the night of our first date."

"How am I supposed to believe you?"

"How can I prove it to you, Aeris? Please don't shut me out."

Indignation wages a war in my mind, forging my voice into a weapon. "I don't need anything from you anymore. In fact, lose my number, and never contact me ever again," I hiss, doing my best to ignore the feeling of my heart breaking in two.

The gray clouds hanging over our heads harshen, marked by the trickle of opal droplets onto the slate ground. Dread shrouds me, as does the hailing rain. My hair is soaked just after a few minutes of standing in the tenebrous storm. The trees begin to sway violently from the ruthless wind, so much so that pendulous branches threaten to break free. Thunder howls in the distance, and the periodic sparks of lightning feel too close for my liking.

"You're not even going to give me a chance to explain?" he exclaims, not caring to wipe away the frigid water buffering down his face.

It feels like my chest has been skewered by a human-sized meat hook, baring all my bleeding parts for the entire universe to see. "No, Hayes. Because if I let you explain, I'll want to forgive you, and what you've done is unforgivable."

I turn to walk away, but he prohibits me from passing.

“I was a fucking idiot. I don’t expect you to forgive me. Hell, I don’t deserve your forgiveness. But I’d kick myself if I didn’t try to fight for you—for us.” There’s no anger in his tone, and a part of me wishes he was flying off the handle right now. It’d make being mad at him a helluva lot easier.

“There shouldn’t have been an *us*, Hayes. This whole ‘relationship’ was built on some stupid ruse to better your reputation.” Red-hot rage cinches my heart like a thermocut wire.

I let my guard down, even after being hurt multiple times in the past. I knew better, yet I was so blinded by the possibility of a life I never thought I could have that it came back to bite me in the ass. And now I’m paying for it—every insufferable second.

And the worst part of it all? I had my doubts. I had my doubts, and I didn’t listen to them.

“Yes, in the beginning, I was looking for a fake relationship. No, I didn’t expect to fall in love with anyone. But I knew after our first date that I wanted to give this thing a chance. A *real* chance,” he yells over the rain, the torrential downpour sticking his hair to his forehead and soaking through his shirt.

“Why didn’t you tell me then? I would’ve understood.”

“I wanted to, but the guys said...”

There’s a lick of animosity in my eyes. “Oh, I know you’re not blaming this on your teammates,” I snarl.

A frown scurries onto his lips, and he shakes his head. “Shit. No. That came out wrong. I should’ve been honest with you. You didn’t deserve any of this. Please know that I’d take everything back in a heartbeat.”

My tears begin to fall steadily now, and it’s the first time Hayes doesn’t reach out to wipe them away. God, as much as I hate him right now, I can’t get the memories to stop charging through me. When we first danced together, when he said those things about my body, when he told me he loved me for

the first time. I want the pain to go away. I want to forget everything.

I wish I'd never met Hayes Hollings that night at the bar. I wish I'd never fallen for him.

This is the moment that breaks me. It reduces me to a wailing mess, tears down the walls that have been standing guard over my emotions for twenty-three years, and takes my heart and flattens it to a barely beating organ.

“Aeris...”

“No, no, no. I can't do this again. I can't. You knew how Wilder treated me, how my father treated me. I'm not going to let someone *ever* treat me like that again. And that includes you.”

The bulging veins in his forearms arrow down toward clenched fists, and I can tell he wants to move toward me.

My voice is strangled with emotion. “My dad was right about you.”

Even though it came out barely above a whisper, it might have well been as loud as the thunder overhead.

“What did you just say?” he snaps, seconds away from unleashing the temper I know he's been suppressing this entire time.

“My dad warned me about you. He told me about your relationship with Sienna and how you were only interested in saving your image. I didn't listen to him, though, because I couldn't *possibly* believe that you would be capable of something like that.”

“Wow. So I haven't been the only one keeping secrets, yet I'm the one being punished?”

“Would you have wanted me to believe my dad? Would you have wanted me to bring it up to you?” I spit, a sick part of me knowing deep down that Hayes is right.

“You're a hypocrite, Aeris. And being a hypocrite is worse than being a liar.”

The needle-sharp sting of his tone makes me rubber-kneed and teary-eyed, more so than I was before. He's not arguing for the sake of winning—he's stating a hard, cold fact. I'd hate myself if I wasn't so mad at him.

"We're done, Hayes," I determine, nearly tripping over a curb as I back away from him.

I don't know what I expected him to say, but he doesn't say anything. He doesn't fight for me. He just...watches as I walk away, and that somehow hurts even more.

EIGHT HUNDRED MILES AND COUNTING

AERIS

I can't believe I'm doing this. I have to be the stupidest person on the entire planet. I just spent all my money on a ticket to Oregon—a ticket that cost me at least a month's worth of groceries and utilities.

Yesterday, I would've rather slathered myself in honey and let my body be consumed by carnivorous bugs than ever consider being in a ten-foot radius of the person I'm going to visit.

My dad.

But I needed an excuse to get away. I needed to find out what my father knows.

I didn't even tell Lila I was leaving the state. I couldn't bring myself to tell her about the breakup. She would've spent the entire day consoling me, pampering me, unintentionally reminding me just how miserable I am. I don't want to be pitied, and I know my father would chew his own arm off before showing me any kind of solace.

Now, as I step onto the porch, my stomach squirms with nerves, and this feeling of trepidation chokes me like a thick fog. I can't turn back. I mean, I could, but that would require me sleeping in an airport and waiting twelve hours for the next flight out.

The door opens without me even having to knock, and my mother flings her arms around me, enveloping me in that signature vanilla scent of hers—the one that hasn't changed

since my childhood. She always smelt like safety and comfort, even when she didn't offer it.

I don't hug her all the way back, but I don't recoil either. She's lost a lot of weight since I last saw her, and I can feel her ribs poke me through the thin sweater hanging off her emaciated frame. Her face is sallow and wrinkled, her skin flaxen, and her beautiful head of brown hair has turned a fiery silver. The realization of how long I've been away from my parents hits me like a semitruck.

"Oh, Aeris," she croons, her rheumy eyes whisking over me, a smile line dotting the corner of her mouth.

I paste on a saccharine grimace. "Hi, Mom."

I don't...hate...my mother. I did. I really did, and it took me a while to understand that she was just as much a victim as I was when it came to my father's reign of power. I know my mother should have stood up for me and Roden. I know, but I also know that she needed help—that she wasn't strong enough to leave my dad. There's a part of me that regrets not being by her side, not helping her find the courage.

I'm one to talk. I had lower self-esteem than a girl in seventh grade before meeting Hayes. He helped me when I needed it, and I couldn't even do the same for the woman who raised me. Or, I guess, she *kinda* raised me.

"Let me take your bag." Elaine reaches for my small carry-on, even though it looks like it could break her back if she tried lifting it above her head.

I follow her into the house, and immediately, I yearn for the familiarity of my childhood home. My parents sold the house when Roden died, and with it went all my childhood memories. Believe it or not, there were some good ones in there. The memory of me falling down the stairs and breaking my tooth; the memory of me and my mom baking sugar cookies every Sunday; the memory of our family adopting our first dog, Curly Lu, from the shelter. All of it...gone.

The memory of finding Roden's bo—

My mother's voice cleaves through my thoughts. "We made up the guest room for you."

The room is about the size of my living room, which isn't bad at all considering my mother hasn't been employed since my brother's death. It's spacious and a little neglected, judging by the layers of dust on every flat surface. The bed is upheld by spruce reinforcements, and there's a checkered quilt draped over the foot of the mattress. A small nightstand sits to the side, adjacent to a lounge chair in the corner of the room. The ceiling is exposed, with spindle-wide beams, as a vintage fan with rust-stained blades sweeps through milky pastures of cobwebs. The floral-stamped curtains billow out from the decrepit window grill, matching the area rug over the hardwood floors.

"Uh, thanks, Mom." I take my suitcase from her hands and set it on the bed.

My mother bumps her hip out, watching me carefully as I start to unpack some of my toiletries.

"I made casserole for dinner. It's still hot. Do you want some?"

Food sounds great right now, especially since all I ate for lunch was a meager bag of airplane peanuts, but if I fall back into a sense of normalcy with them, I'm not going to be able to keep this trip objective. I'm not here to rebuild relationships or take happy trips down memory lane. I'm here because I have to know the logistics behind Hayes' whole operation.

"I'm okay. Thanks, though," I say, despite my empty stomach protesting.

Elaine, still as oblivious as ever, graces me with a smile that looks so much like my own. "Okay. We'll save you a piece for tomorrow."

And just like that, she's gone from the doorway, as if she was never here to begin with—an apparition that only ever existed in my imagination.

I set aside my pajamas for the night, and then an inexplicable cold falls over the room, submerging me in an Ice

Age's worth of snow. The metronomic tick of my heart is the only constant reassuring me that I haven't entered some kind of catatonic state.

"Aeris."

My father's powerful voice sounds from the doorway, grabbing my attention instantly, and I really hope he didn't notice the way my shoulders jumped.

A gulp clicks its way down my throat. "Sperm donor."

"Never thought you'd come to visit us," he chuckles, though that forked tongue of his couldn't be more incapable of humor.

I slough off the fear that's no doubt etched into my features. "You know why I'm here," I snap icily. "I'm not back for you. I'm only here for answers."

"Of course you are. You're my daughter. As much as you hate to admit it, we're more alike than you think."

My glare has enough venom in it to paralyze a full-grown man, and it's a look reserved just for my father. "We are *nothing* alike."

When my fists clench, I want to cringe from the sting of broken skin on my hands. Oh, God. I wish I could punch him right in the face. I probably would if I was strong enough or had any idea how to throw one.

"How did you know?"

Michael leans against the doorway, blocking the exit. If I had to make a quick getaway, I'd have to crawl out the window and into the gardenias. His size has always intimidated me, and that's why I've been so afraid of what would happen if he were ever to get physically abusive with me.

"About Hayes?" With the way his face is shadowed, all I can see are the whites of his eyes and the glint of his teeth.

"About Hayes."

“Ethan Blythe, Hayes’ agent, is a member of my country club. I overheard him talking about Hayes’ efforts to rebrand his image. He mentioned something about a sponsor’s daughter and a fake relationship. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but then those pictures of you and him surfaced, and I put the pieces together,” he explains.

“And how do you know who Hayes’ agent is? How do you even know who Hayes is?”

“My buddy I was with at the time, Joshua, is a huge NHL fan, and he follows the sport closely. That bastard even drove all the way down to California for some sponsored event.” There’s a smugness buried in my father’s tone.

Oh my God. Joshua. From the sponsor party. The puzzle pieces were right in front of me, waiting for me to put them together.

“I can’t fucking believe this.”

“I told you so.”

Rage crawls up my spine, the tension in my shoulders deadlocking with each step I take toward him. “God, you’re a fucking piece of work, you know that? Instead of comforting your daughter, you need to rub it in my face. You always need to be right. I shouldn’t have come all this way. The relief of knowing wasn’t worth being ridiculed by you.”

His lips curl back from his teeth in a snarl. “You won’t speak to me in my own house like that. I’m doing you and your mother a favor by letting you stay here.”

A flat laugh drags out of my mouth. “What? Feeling a little emasculated, Michael?”

That sets him off. My father steps into me, forcing me back against the wall, and his arms flings out to cage me on either side. His potent cologne is making me lightheaded, and when his beef jerky breath gusts over my face, I swallow down the panic making my heart rebel against my ribs.

The fire in his voice is just above a flame. “You’ve been nothing but a pain in my ass for twenty-three years. It

should've been you. You should've killed yourself that night. At least Roden wouldn't have talked back to me."

It should've been you.

Shock is the first thing that hits me. Then grief. And then anger.

The same anger that's always belonged to my dad is now mine, and no part of me wants to smother that fire-breathing dragon. I push him back with enough force to steal his balance, then I'm the one staring him down.

"You don't think I wish it would've been me? You don't think I would've done anything to go back in time and change what happened that night? You didn't even cry when he died, or during his funeral. I had to carry all that pain. By myself."

I don't recognize the sound of my voice. I don't recognize myself.

"I'm done taking this shit from you. I'm done letting you have any part in my life. I tried to keep communication open, for the sake of Mom, but I can't do it anymore. You're a pathetic excuse for a man, and an even more laughable excuse for a father. I'm done hating myself because *you* hate me. I'm done blaming myself for *your* mistakes. You were the one who drove Roden to kill himself," I growl, and I would be freaking out by now if I wasn't so ramped up on adrenaline. I've never talked to my dad like this. I've never had the courage to.

I expect him to lash back, but he doesn't. I force him into the doorway, sharpening my glare on his retreating figure. He visibly moves back when I grip the side of the door.

"You'll always have blood on your hands. And I hope that when you're on your last breath, alone, wishing for that sweet release of death, you'll realize that you've driven everyone away. You're fucking lucky I'm nothing like you, otherwise *your* blood would be on *my* hands."

I shut the partition as soon as he allows me the space, and the combination of my pulse and heartbeat pop roughly in my ear canals.

Once I hear his footsteps diminish down the hallway and see his shadow move from under the door, I drag myself to the bed, letting the dam behind my eyes break. And then I cry the hardest I've cried since Roden's death.



MY MOTHER'S been shoving her baked goods in my face the entire morning. I think they're mainly guilty pastries, but they taste delicious, nonetheless.

My father went out to run errands, and I'm planning on leaving before he comes back. I needed to speak with my mom without him monitoring our conversation.

Elaine's gray eyes laser in on me, as if she can see through to the depth of my pain. "This man you were seeing...he broke your heart, didn't he?"

"He broke more than my heart. He broke my trust. He lied to me about our entire relationship. I gave him the benefit of the doubt. But in the end, I should've listened to my gut. I could've avoided all of this," I confess.

She reaches across the table to hold my hand. Her hand is cold, despite the house being fairly warm, and her fingers are bony. They grasp me like she's afraid to let go—like she knows I'll leave once I'm given the chance.

"I'm so sorry, Aeris," she consoles, her free hand tightening the sweater around her shoulders. "Did you love him?"

Moisture wells in my eyes, and I stare hollowly at the lemon square I'd been nibbling on. "I did. I loved him more than I thought was humanly possible, Mom."

"Do you want to mend things? Do you want to give him a second chance?"

"If I give him a second chance, I'm just giving him another opportunity to break my heart." I need a padlock on my heart with the way it's close to beating out of my chest.

“I’ll support whatever you choose to do. But you can’t be afraid to love. Real love—true love—is worth fighting for, no matter the wounds you get in the process,” she says, using her sleeve to paw at my sodden cheeks.

My mother’s desserts are rotting into sludge in my belly. “I can’t fight. I don’t...I don’t have it in me,” I whisper brokenly.

“Oh, sweetheart.” She comes over to my side and kneels down next to me. “I know you’re tired. Your heart’s been through so much.”

The breath I had spools out of me, only to be replaced by a string of painful hiccups.

“You probably won’t want to hear this, but if you truly love this man, you need to fight for what you had. Think about your brother. Your brother didn’t fight for love, and he lost his fight. I don’t want you to go down the same path. You’re a fighter, Aeris. I know you are. You have been your whole life.”

She’s wrong. I haven’t been fighting. I haven’t been living. I’ve been letting myself drown, wave after excruciating wave. Everything I do, every relationship I have—it’s all dictated by the trauma from my past. It’s like I don’t know how to function without pain.

“I’m not a fighter.”

“You are. You’re the strongest person I know. I haven’t done a lot with my time on this Earth, but the one thing I’ll always take pride in is having you. I’m so proud of how you turned out,” she cries, the turbulent movement of her chest actively working against her words.

A sleet of tears sluices down my cheeks, and my nostrils sting. “I love you, Mom.”

Water floods my mother’s face, hope flickering behind her sad eyes. She embraces me, and even though it’s been a lifetime since we hugged, I still remember her touch vividly.

“I love you, Aeris. When you leave, I want you to fight for the life you had with him. If he’s there, laying his heart out for

you, offering you the love I know you deserve, then consider taking it.”

I mop the rest of my tears up, only having the physical energy to nod.

“I heard you and your father talking last night. I...I’m sorry it’s taken me this long to come to terms with how horrible he’s treated you,” she says, and for the first time in forever, anger snags on her words.

I’ve never seen my mother angry before. I didn’t think she had a mean bone in her body.

“I should’ve left him a long time ago. And after seeing you again, I realize now that I can’t put it off any longer. I want to be able to see you all the time. I want to be able to have a relationship with my daughter. Michael, he never—”

“It’s okay, Mom. I don’t blame you for what Dad made you do. I’m just glad you’re going to get out. And if you ever need a place to stay, you’re welcome to come live with me,” I tell her.

She cups my face in her hands and knocks her forehead against mine. “I’m going to move in with an old friend from high school. But I’m going to come see you as soon as I get settled, okay?”

In that moment, something in my mother switches. Her hands don’t feel so cold anymore, and there’s a tint of color in her cheeks.

My lips sling into a smile. “Okay.”

Amidst everything that’s happened—from my fallout with Hayes to confronting my father—I didn’t think I’d be capable of feeling happiness again until weeks or months of mental recovery. But here, with my mother, making up for lost time, I feel it.

I feel the tiniest spark of happiness that reminds me I’ll be okay.

A LAST CHANCE AT REDEMPTION

HAYES

It's been two days since Aeris broke up with me. And I've deserved every miserable second of it.

The cold bite from the bench has my ass half-frozen, and I've been watching my teammates practice for the upcoming game. I feel useless not being able to help them—even though I'm pretty sure I'd do more harm than good in my current mental state.

I fucked up. I lied. I had so many chances to come clean, and I didn't. I protected my ego when I should've been protecting her. I'm a coward.

But I knew how this story was going to end, didn't I? I knew it from the moment I agreed to this “fake relationship” plan. I played the part of the villain, and I can't act surprised when I don't get the girl.

Aeris is my whole world, and she always will be. She's the salve to my hockey-inflicted wound. There will always be a part of me that belongs to her, no matter where we go, or who we end up with.

I've had an epiphany for the first time in my twenty-four years of life. I've always been surrounded by girls, by options, and I've never had to go looking very far for them. It's like I've been following a broken compass this whole time, pointing me east, west, and south, but never north. Never true north. Never home. Aeris is home.

I can't imagine spending the rest of my life without her. I can't imagine not seeing her face next to me in the morning. I

should've fought harder.

"You look like shit," Bristol notes, taking his first break of the hour.

"Gee, thanks." I scratch my fingernails against the peeling tape on my stick, fixating my gaze on a spot of ice that doesn't look particularly fascinating.

I haven't told anyone about the breakup yet. I didn't want their pitiful looks. I didn't want to breathe it into existence. I didn't want it to be *real*.

His body lists closer to mine. "What's going on, H? Is this about the suspension? You'll be able to play again in a month."

I wish it was about the suspension. I wish I could blame the suspension for being the reason I haven't slept, eaten, or showered in days.

"It's not about the suspension," I say, a long-winded sigh filtering out of my lips.

I know Bristol's trying to console me, but it's only making me feel worse. He's staring at me so intently that it feels like he's trying to dig through my memories and pinpoint the exact moment everything went downhill.

"This is about Aeris," he says.

"She broke up with me."

The tone in his voice is raw with pity. "Hayes..."

I place my head in my gloved hands. "She found out, Bri. About everything. I should've told her. I should've been honest with her from the beginning."

Her words echo in my mind. *There shouldn't have been an us, Hayes. This whole 'relationship' was built on some stupid ruse to better your reputation.*

I'm not going to let someone ever treat me like that again. And that includes you.

Water streams from my eyes in steady rivulets, pooling in the canyon of my mouth, where saliva and phlegm suction my

lips together. My rapid pulse is an urgent melody bombarding my ears. There's perspiration on my skin, and the frozen fire charring my insides rivals the cold chill worming up my spine.

I feel like I can't breathe.

I take my helmet off, and then I begin to rip off my gloves.

My hands claw desperately at my throat to relieve my constricted airways. A thick film of blurriness falls over my eyes, distorting everything in my line of sight. It's like everything's moving around me in slow motion, and I can't keep up, no matter how fast I move. Bristol is reduced to an abstract blob in my peripheral, and the faint, warbled tone emanating from his direction suggests that he's talking to me.

His voice comes out in muffled interludes, but his concern is as clear as day. "H, what's going on?"

"I...don't...know," I gasp.

"Fuck, okay." Bristol slings one arm over my shoulder and helps me to my feet, shouldering his way past the exit of the rink, leading me down a secluded hallway.

Dizziness expands like an atomic blast in my head.

He steadies me with his hands, inhaling and exhaling deeply, trying to get me to follow his instruction. "Take a breath."

I silence the thoughts whizzing through my mind long enough for my breath to fall back into a regular cadence. Then I paste my back against the wall and slide down, bringing my knees into my chest. I let the sound of my own heart tranquilize me, and I count each beat until I can focus my gaze on the ground in front of me.

The body-gripping panic has successfully washed the sting out from my eyes. "What just happened?"

"I think you had a panic attack," Bristol answers.

I've never had a panic attack before. Not even after my mother died.

"How did you know what to do?"

He rubs the back of his neck. “I, uh, I used to get them when I was younger. Usually before hockey games or tests—high-stress situations.”

How did I not know? Bristol and I have been friends since third grade. I’m such a shitty friend. I didn’t take his advice when he gave it to me, and now, everything’s blown up in my face. If I’d only just listened to him.

“Look, I know things seem hopeless right now, but you two can come back from this. It can be fixed. It can always be fixed,” Bristol insists, though his efforts fail to abate the pain rioting inside me.

When Aeris walked away from me, she unknowingly put a crack in me. A crack that’ll continue to grow with time. A crack that, left untreated, will make me break because I’ll be unable to withstand the weight of the world bearing down on my shoulders.

“Maybe it’s not supposed to be fixed,” I admit, visceral guilt jamming the lining of my throat.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

Grief flourishes through my body. “Think about it, Bri. We didn’t get together under the right terms. She was never mine to lose to begin with.”

I feel like I’m watching my whole world crumble before my very eyes. I’m on the other side of the looking glass, unable to speak or move, standing by as the best thing that’s ever happened to me slowly evaporates out of my life.

“You have the chance to do the right thing, H.”

I struggle to find my voice. “What are you talking about?”

Aeris doesn’t want to see me, and I want to respect her wishes. She made it clear that we were done. But I didn’t even try to fight for her...for *us*. I just let her walk away.

“If you really regret everything—which I know you do—you need to show her. You can’t just tell her. You need to show her how much she means to you, and you need to make her believe it. You need to win her back.”

THE WAKEUP CALL OF THE CENTURY

AERIS

It's been two days. And they've been the worst forty-eight hours of my life.

No contact with the outside world, no contact with the guys, no contact with Hayes. I lied to my boss about getting the flu so I wouldn't have to focus on work—and she thankfully believed me. I don't remember the last time I saw the sun or breathed fresh air. I also don't remember the last time I didn't smell like two skunks fornicated in a sewer drain.

I've been sleeping fourteen hours because it's easier for me to be unconscious than to have to think about everything Hayes put me through. But this is the day that sleeping cycle apparently ends.

Lila yanks back the curtains on my window, showering me in harsh sunlight.

I groan, pulling the covers up over my head, wishing she would just leave me to rot in my bed.

“Aer-Bear, you need to get up. And eat. And shower,” she says, gently pulling back my comforter. The pity in her voice extends to burdened eyes, and she sits down next to me, brushing my hair out of my face.

“Leave me alone, Lila.”

A frown catches the corner of her lips. “As your designated best friend, I can't leave you alone. Not when you're this miserable.”

A slew of tears begins to mutilate my vision, and I'm too late to stop the water from dancing down my cheeks. "I can't do this. It hurts so much. Everything hurts. I—I feel like I can't breathe. I can't think about anything other than him. And the worst part of it all is that I still love him. I love him so much."

"Oh, love," Lila murmurs, making me look up at her. "That kind of love doesn't just disappear overnight. It's okay that you still feel that way about him. Your love is your strength."

I want to pull away from her, but I don't. "But it's not. It's what got me into this mess in the first place."

"Do you know how lucky Hayes is to have someone like you who loves him?"

"I—" My heart splinters as my retort dies in my mouth.

Arguing with Lila is an inevitable loss, and I don't have the strength to argue right now. The damage has already been done.

I don't know how Hayes is doing. Does a twisted part of me hope that he's just as miserable? Yes. But does the part of me that still loves him hope he's moving on with his life? Yes.

"Come on," Lila coos, taking my hand in hers and helping me to my feet.

I have a wicked cramp from lying down all day, and I move so slowly that it feels like my legs are stuck in molasses. My mind's reached the summit of the anxiety rollercoaster, and now the fifty-foot drop is making my head ache and my eyes strain.

I let Lila drag me into the kitchen as she heats up some leftover Chinese takeout. The mouthwatering smell awakens the beast in my stomach, reminding me just how long it's been since I've eaten.

She's watching me with those eagle eyes of hers, her arms pinned over her chest.

“Do you think I’m being too harsh on him?” I ask, swallowing a cumbersome noodle lump.

“Frankly, I don’t think you were harsh enough. I mean, if you weren’t still madly in love with him, I’d pop all the segments of his spine out like pieces of Pez.”

“That’s...disturbingly specific.”

Lila laughs, and it’s the first great sound I’ve heard in a while. “You know how protective I am over you,” she replies, bending over to give me a much-needed hug. She smells like fresh jasmine, and her hands are soft as they rove my back. But as much as I love Lila’s hugs, I can’t stop thinking about being in Hayes’ arms instead.

Come on, Aeris. Have some respect for yourself. He lied to you. He played you.

But he also loved you when you couldn’t love yourself.

I push my food away. “Do you think I should forgive him?”

His phantom presence continues to be a thorn in my side, one that I don’t want to remove despite the pain.

“I think you need to worry about your own heart for once. I think you’ll know when you’ve had some time to heal. You’ve always ever worried about others. Now it’s time to put yourself first.”

Lila’s right. I’ve never put myself first. I’ve never shown myself the kindness that I know I deserve. As much as it hurts, I made the right decision—the decision that’ll protect me from further heartache in the future.

DEAR AERIS...

HAYES

I didn't think I'd be giving the *Knights of the Sound Booth* another hot headline, but here I am. Deacon and Oliver were kind enough to squeeze me in on short notice, and I gave them box seat tickets for the rest of the season.

After my talk with Bristol, I spent hours and hours trying to come up with some way to show Aeris how real my feelings are for her, and then it hit me.

It might be predictable. It might be over the top. But the message will get to her, and that's all I need. I don't care about my reputation. I don't care about getting traded. The only thing I care about is getting my girl back.

I quell the nervousness bubbling in my gut as the red light in the recording studio blinks to life.

Deacon adjusts his headphones. "Hayes! It's great to have you back on the podcast, buddy."

I thread my fingers through my hair and give them what I hope is a friendly enough laugh. "Of course. Thank you for letting me, uh, come on such short notice."

Oliver nods. "And what's on the agenda for today?" he asks.

Fear crashes into me like an eighteen-wheeler, and my lower lip is close to bleeding from all the gnawing I've accomplished in an alarmingly short time frame.

It's now or never.

“I’m here to talk about my girlfriend...or *ex*-girlfriend.”

“I sense a grand gesture coming on,” Deacon says.

“I don’t think it comes to anyone’s surprise that I’m a fuckup. And I fucked up. Really badly. The girl I was seeing—Aeris—I broke her trust. I lied to her, and I ruined the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

I don’t know how many people are watching this live right now, but I’m glad there aren’t any flashing lights or noisy reporters trying to get a word in. The entire room is tranquil, and it’s so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Before Aeris, I never would’ve acknowledged my emotions, let alone admit to the whole world that I messed up. I mean, I lied to the only person I’ve ever loved because I was afraid people would find out how bad of a person I really am.

Newsflash, Hayes. People make mistakes. I make a lot more mistakes than the average person, but what I do after the fact is more important than whatever dumb shit I did in the moment.

My pulse speeds away like a rogue bullet, the thump of my heart loud enough to drown out the second thoughts creeping through my head.

My next set of words find no resistance as they flow out of me surprisingly smoothly. “Not only did I lie to her, but I lied to all of you. I rushed into a relationship to save my image. I was getting into so many stupid fights, partying until I blacked out, sleeping with a revolving door of girls. And the icing on the cake was when I slept with a sponsor’s daughter. I genuinely thought my NHL career was going to be over before it started. I had no intention of falling in love. Everything was supposed to be fake, but then things became real, and I didn’t want to give up the girl of my dreams. I convinced myself that it would be best for everyone if I kept the secret to myself, and I shouldn’t have made that decision, because I wasn’t the one affected by it.

“Aeris, if you’re watching this, there are no words to express how sorry I am. If you choose to believe me, just

know that I've meant every word I've ever said to you. From the moment I saw you sitting alone at that bar, I was magnetized by your beauty, and then you pulled me in with that smart mouth of yours, and I was hooked from the get-go. There is not a single thing I regret from our time together. You taught me about patience and understanding and what it means to love wholly—what it means to put another person before yourself.”

I'd convinced myself that I was never going to settle down with anyone. Not just because domestic life wasn't for me, but because the only girls who have been interested in me thus far were using me for fame. You never really know what a person's true intentions are. And yeah, I get it, that's hypocritical coming from me.

The future is uncertain, and I'm pretty sure there was a point in my life where you'd have to pull my teeth to get me to talk about it. Yes, it's cheesy (and probably unrealistic) to say that you've met someone who's changed your whole outlook on life, but Aeris was that person for me.

Aeris couldn't escape her past, and I couldn't escape my future, so we agreed to meet somewhere in the middle and live in the present. And it was one of the best decisions I've ever made. For constantly messing up, the one thing I did right was choose her.

I can't imagine any other woman taking my last name. Or she can keep hers, or hyphenate, or fuck it, I'll take her last name. Hayes Relera has a nice ring to it, don't you think?

I'd never want to put her on the spot, especially not over the internet, but I'd propose to her right now if I could. I want to be the only one to promise her forever. And I'd promise her the world if it meant she'd give me the privilege of loving her.

The minute I close my mouth, the whole room grows silent, and I can feel every eye on me—even the ones on the other side of the soundproof window.

I can't believe I just did that. I'm probably gonna get a barrage of angry calls from both Ethan and Coach within the next few minutes, but it was worth it. When you find that

person who gives you everything, you stop searching for external fulfillment. My heart will always lie with hockey, but now there's an Aeris-sized space in it. A space that I could never get rid of, no matter the distance or time that passes between us.



ONCE I MAKE my way out of the studio, Coach is blowing up my phone. There's a fifty-fifty chance that this will be the call about me getting traded, and I let it ring a few times to try and calm my racing pulse.

My hand shakes as I press my phone to my ear. "Coach?"

"Hollings, you're lucky you're one of the best players on the team."

Shit. What does that mean? Is that his way of softening the blow? I don't regret going live or airing my dirty laundry, but I definitely didn't think about the consequences in the moment.

My jaw pops open to apologize, but I think twice about interrupting him.

"I just got off the phone with Raymond Talavera. He wasn't happy, as you can guess," Coach grumbles, and the lack of blatant anger in his tone is new. However, it's been replaced with his usual disappointment, which I'm beginning to think is a constant state for him—at least where I'm concerned.

The bowling ball of guilt that's decided to sit in my stomach rolls slightly.

There's a pause in his sentence, lending to the all-encompassing silence. The only sound in the parking lot is the tumultuous smacking of my heart against my ribs.

"But whatever you said to Sienna must have worked, because he didn't pull his sponsorship."

Relief is the first thing my ears pick up on. Relief so strong that it overpowers the precursory disappointment, and it's the

best-sounding thing I've heard in a long time.

"That's great, Coach," I reply, keeping my words at a minimum to save myself from any further humiliation. The nerves from before are back with a vengeance.

"I have no idea how the world is going to receive your interview, Hayes. But I am proud of you for coming clean. For admitting everything. That takes guts," he says with pride. "But I do wish you would've come to me first before yapping your mouth."

"I'm sorry. I should've. I just—I couldn't wait."

"I understand. I've been in love before, believe it or not. I've messed up like you have, but I wasn't anywhere near as brave as you to admit when I was wrong. And I paid for my cowardice. I'm glad to see that you didn't go down the same road I did."

I'm glad I didn't either.

"Uh, so just to clarify, I'm not being traded?" I ask, bearing a brutal gust of wind before unlocking my car door and hunkering down to safety.

"No, you're not."

I pump my fist into the air before recomposing myself. "Thank you, Coach."

And in classic Coach fashion, that impenetrable mask of professionalism has sprung back up. "Don't make me regret it, okay?"

I turn my key in the ignition, knowing exactly where my next destination is. With the adrenaline from the interview still thrumming through me, there's no way in hell I'm going back to the house.

"I won't," I promise.

I've got my life back, but there's still a piece missing—the most important piece of all.

IT'S A FOREVER KIND OF THING

AERIS

“Did he just—”
“Yeah,” Lila says.

“In front of—”

“Yeah.”

Should I be happy? Mad? Hayes Hollings just told the whole world the truth live on the internet.

Lila tuts. “He really just did that. I didn’t think he had the balls,” she exclaims, impressed.

I swallow to wet my throat, unable to stop staring at the TV screen. Bristol had texted Lila to turn on YouTube and go to the *Knights of the Sound Booth*’s homepage. Initially, when she sat me down for some casual watching, I was expecting some cat videos at best, but nothing like this.

My stomach recoils as full-blown terror runs up the length of my spine.

“Li, am I dreaming? Slap me.”

Lila shakes her perfectly preened mane. “Aeris, I’m not going to slap you.”

Okay, maybe it’s a good thing she didn’t actually slap me, because that girl has a killer arm on her. I settle for an indoor-appropriate scream and a faceplant into my couch’s throw pillow.

“What do I do?” I mumble against the cushion.

“Do you forgive him?” Lila asks, rubbing my back with a supportive hand.

Do I forgive him? That’s a loaded question. I...think I do. I didn’t ask him to take responsibility for his mistakes, or to embarrass himself in front of the entire world. But he did. He did, and it’s shown me how serious he feels about me. And watching that interview has only reinforced what I’ve known to be true all along—that I’m undeniably in love with Hayes Hollings.

I lift my head up, days’ worth of anger wilting inside of me. “Do you think I’m stupid if I say I do?”

I feel like I’m about to get a smack to the head to knock some sense into me, but a smile only broadens across Lila’s face.

“You’re not. If this is what you want, I fully support you, okay?”

It is what I want. In fact, I’ve never wanted anything more in my entire life.



I’M ALMOST HEADED out the door to Hayes’ place when I find Lila peeking out the blinds.

“Uh, Aeris, I think someone is here to see you,” she mumbles from her stakeout spot next to the window.

Anxiety fills my body up like lighter fluid. “What?”

I go over to join her, mirroring her eyeline, and that’s when Hayes’ six-foot-three body comes into view. He has a five o’clock shadow, which is new, but I don’t hate it. His hair isn’t as messy as the last time I saw him, and the purple circles under his eyes have lightened.

Even after all this time, he still looks as handsome as ever. Distance makes the heart grow fonder and all that shit, I guess.

“Oh my God!” I scream, ducking down from sight. “What do I do?”

I haven't seen Hayes in a while, and all those B.H.—Before Hayes—nerves are coming up and are halfway to clawing themselves free.

“Maybe you should talk to him?”

You're good at talking to people, Aeris. Kind of. Sometimes. Not under pressure, which you are. This is going to be like that time I accidentally called my Chili's waitress Mommy. Granted, I was thinking about my mom, but the girl was really freaked out and had someone change sections with her.

What would I even say to him? I mean, I know I was going to go over and talk to him, but I thought I'd at least have some more time to prepare.

Hey, Hayes.

No, that's too casual.

Hello, Mr. Hayes.

Okay, maybe don't say hi at all.

I watched that interview you did for the whole internet to see and I'm freaking out because that's the nicest and dumbest thing anyone's ever done for me and I also really miss you but I'm mad at you but—

THAT'S TOO MUCH.

I should just let him do all the talking. Yeah. That's a solid plan.

Lila gives me the room, and I wait a few seconds to open the door. When I do, the afternoon breeze laces through my hair and pesters my exposed arms. It's colder than usual today, and I'm not sure if that's a bad omen.

We both stare at each other like we're two strangers who have the wrong house. There is no jumping into arms or a life-changing kiss. There's just awkward silence, and I wish we could skip to the part where we're okay again—where all of this is so far back in our rearview that it was like it never happened. But that's not reality. Reality is messy, and it makes exceptions for no one.

I don't want to play hard to get. I don't want to pretend like these days apart haven't been the worst days of my life. It's taking every morsel of self-control not to wrap my arms around him—not to give myself over to him, not to inhale that sandalwood scent of his into my bloodstream, not to commit the minty taste of his tongue to memory.

I've always felt so safe in his arms, like nothing can hurt me. I want to feel that way again. I want to feel the feather's edge of love in the way he strokes the back of my head or presses his lips to my forehead.

Those radiant, blue eyes of his send a direct line of heart-stopping fear to my chest.

He tips his weight onto one foot. "Aeris, I'm here to grovel for your forgiveness."

That's...straightforward.

"I—"

"No, I'm serious," he says. "I don't expect you to forgive me. I'm not here to clear my conscience. I'm here to tell you that I haven't stopped thinking about you. I don't know if you saw...well, if you saw the interview. I really, really fucked up. I never wanted to hurt you. But I did, and I'll be paying for that mistake for the rest of my life. I should've fought for you. You deserve the entire world, and I want to be the one to give it to you."

"Hayes—"

"I'll get on my knees right now. I'll stand outside of your house with a boombox every night if I have to. I'll send you flowers and chocolate and love letters and—"

Emotion garbles my words. "I forgive you."

And just like that, the war is over.

Hayes stares at me with a fraction of shock wedged in his eyes. "You do?"

"I do."

I sniffle, the love inside of me amping up to a threshold I didn't even know was possible. Then sobs ensue, and some timely wailing, and I'm immediately met by Hayes' arms, which wrap so tightly around me that I think he's never planning on letting go.

The rubbing on my back intensifies, and I can hear his heart bash as quickly and profusely as mine. "Shh, Aeris. You're okay."

By the time I look up at him, I've left a sizable puddle on his shirt. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about what my dad said."

He wipes his thumb over the small smattering of tears on my cheek. "It's okay. I should've never kept this 'fake relationship' bullshit from you. You deserved to know. It wasn't fair to you, and I hate that I hurt you. I'm so, so sorry. I hope you know there'll never be a part of me that forgives myself for what I put you through."

I can see in his eyes that he means every word of it. Hell, he's squeezing my hand so hard that my bones feel like they're made of glass.

"If I can forgive you, I hope you forgive yourself one day too."

Hayes whispers into the curve of my neck, his lips a treasure I plan on hoarding. "I've never done anything in my twenty-four years of life that made me deserving of a blessing. But you, Aeris Relera, were a blessing in disguise. You make me a better person. You make days worth living again. Living, okay? Before you, I was merely surviving. You saved me."

"No, Hayes. *You're* the one who saved *me*. You took that broken girl from the bar and slowly put her back together. You taught me what it feels like to be loved—and that's a lesson I'll carry with me for the rest of my life."

"Loving you was the easiest thing I've ever done," he says.

The easiest thing.

I've always seen myself as impossible to love. I always believed no one would want to be with a girl who's too loud or

too emotional or too damaged. But Hayes didn't care about any of my flaws—he didn't even see them.

“How did you know we were even going to make it?” I murmur.

There's a lightness to his tone, but it doesn't give leeway for laughter. “Because I saw you. That night at the bar. I saw the real you—someone who's understanding, compassionate, loyal. Someone who loves so fiercely that it makes me forget about all the love I lost in the past.”

“Oh, Hayes.”

I stand on my tiptoes and dip my tongue into his mouth. This kiss...it feels different than the ones we've shared in the past. There's a certainty that was never there before, and it's sweeter than both the tequila and the chocolate that have glazed Hayes' lips. His arms squeeze around me, and I allow myself to enjoy every second in his embrace, for once not thinking about the next thing. I'm not running anymore—not from Wilder, not from Roden, not from my dad.

When we eventually pull away for air, his pupils are blown wide, and the smile that he hit me with the first time we met glimmers in my love-drunk haze.

“Aeris, will you—”

“If you get down on one knee right now, I'll knee you in the balls,” I bumble, a shot of panic entering my voice.

I can't be a wife. I've just gotten used to being a girlfriend. Marrying someone is a huge decision—like, fifty percent of first marriages end in divorce. And what if a surprise child comes along before then? That child will have to balance a life between two households, probably develop a ton of mental health issues, and then grow up to become maladjusted and have a deep hatred for their parents.

Hayes chuckles. “I'm not proposing to you.”

I blink about twenty times in the span of three seconds. “You're not?”

“No, Stacks. I was just asking if you’d let me stay,” he finishes, his tone lifting with amusement, that dimple of his popping out.

Stay. A single word has never sounded so good before.

“Of course you can stay,” I answer. I have no idea for how long, but maybe there’s a reason he didn’t add a time commitment.

The way he holds me, the way we talk, the way we kiss—it all feels so natural. I can’t believe I was depriving myself of this for so long. I guess I do believe in soulmates and love at first sight. Two things that were about as imaginary as a unicorn at one point.

He hugs me to his side, and his lips press the top of my head. His voice is soft, nearly a whisper, but I still hear what he says.

“When I propose to you, I hope you’ll say yes.”

TWO YEARS LATER

AERIS

My heart's palpitating in my chest.

If Hayes was planning to propose tonight, he's been disturbingly calm throughout dinner. No sweat on his brow, no excessive water drinking, no darting eyes. He took me to Pasta La Vista, the place we had our first date. If that's not some hidden clue, then I don't know what is.

We just celebrated our third-year anniversary. Lila and Josie are convinced he's going to pop the question soon. I want him to, I do, but I'm also scared that a lot will change once we get married.

Ever since Casen and Josie's wedding, I haven't been able to stop thinking about spending forever with him. I've daydreamed about our kids, and if they'll grow up to play hockey like their father. If you think shopping for baby clothes is adorable, just imagine a big, burly hockey player teaching a tiny child how to skate.

"Do you want some champagne?" Hayes asks, roping my attention with those blue topaz eyes of his.

"I'm okay," I say, an easy smile tipping up the corners of my mouth.

"Are you sure?"

Am I? I mean, I guess a few sips wouldn't hurt. I did just get a promotion at work, so there's a reason to celebrate. I've been promoted from caption writer to social media manager of Your Ass is Grass. And with my relationship with Hayes being

so public, we've gotten a lot of traffic from hockey fans. A lot of athletes want to go vegan, I guess.

"You know what? I could go for a glass. Just one, though."

Without so much as another word, Hayes flags down one of the waiters, requesting that they bring a flute of their finest champagne.

Heat collars my neck. It feels hot in here. Is it hot in here? I feel like everybody in the nearby vicinity is watching me, even though that couldn't be further from the truth.

The minute the glass is set in front of me, expectancy makes Hayes' eyebrows inch toward his hairline.

The pink bubbles pop dauntingly in the liquid. Hayes hasn't ordered a glass for himself, which I find a bit odd, but I don't pay much mind to it.

With his eyes boring a hole in my skull, I take a healthy gulp from my glass, but I only get a few sips in before a sudden pain crowds my throat. At first, I assumed it was just from the burn of the alcohol, but then my windpipe constricts on itself, and I can't breathe.

My gasps for air quickly turn into a fit of coughs, and now I'm more than positive that I've disrupted the ambience of the entire restaurant. If I wasn't so busy choking, I would be humiliated.

Unadulterated fear floods Hayes' expression, and he's up and out of his seat before I can stop him. He comes up behind me, wrapping his strong arms around my ribs and thrusting upwards.

Oh my God. Hayes is giving me the Heimlich maneuver. In front of hundreds of eyes. Will this end up on some Reapers fanpage? Will this haunt me for the rest of my life?

A group of waiters stand by the phone in case an ambulance is needed, and hushed whispers fall over the restaurant.

With one final pull, whatever was in my airway ejects out of my mouth, and I sag against Hayes' chest, wheezing for

oxygen. Saliva runs down my chin, and I'm pretty sure my eyes are bloodshot from bulging out of my head.

Something shiny gleams in my peripheral, but I'm too distracted to take much notice. You know when people say they saw their life flash before their eyes? They're telling the truth. For a second, I truly thought I was going to die. Of course a post-dinner choking fiasco would only happen to someone as unfortunate as me.

Once the tears have subsided and my vision has cleared, I see Hayes bend down to grab something, and then my brain registers what I saw sparkling out of the corner of my eye.

A ring.

And not just any ring, but a ring with a stupendous diamond attached to it.

Is this really happening?

Hayes lowers to one knee, taking my shaking hand in his steady one, love sewn into his chiseled features. He doesn't seem apprehensive—in fact, he's never looked more certain of anything before.

I sink my teeth into my lower lip, hoping that the pressure will stop my body's quaking. His touch is featherlight, and affection bleeds into my heart like watercolors seeping onto a blank canvas.

"Aeris, when I first met you, I never thought I'd end up on one knee for you. I never thought I'd settle down with anyone, actually. Every moment we've spent together has been the best kind of ride. I never believed that I was going to find love, much less find the person I'd want to spend the rest of my life with. And it just so happened that I got lucky enough to find both in you," he says, his voice laced with a tenderness warm enough to unfreeze an icy lake.

Tears rage behind my eyes, but I'm not sure if it's because of his speech or an aftereffect of nearly choking to death.

"You're the most incredible person I know. You have the biggest heart in the world, and I'd give anything to occupy just the tiniest part of it. I can't imagine not spending my forever

with you. I can't go another day without letting everyone know you're mine...without putting this ring on your finger and promising to love you until I take my last breath."

Okay, the tears are *definitely* from his speech.

Words feel heavy on my tongue, and they're also obscured by the water gushing down my face and over my lips. *Awws* spread through the audience we've attracted, and cameras flash on the outskirts of my vision.

"Aeris, will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

I can't believe this is really happening.

Remember when I said that Hayes was my life jacket? He's more than that. He's the very person who makes me want to swim, not just float. And I refuse to spend another second without taking his last name.

"Yes, Hayes. I would love to marry you."

The minute that band slides over my finger, my future is sealed. Forever doesn't seem so scary anymore, and I think Hayes Hollings is the best kind of forever.

KEEP IN TOUCH

If you'd like to stay in contact for updates on new releases or just to talk, look down below! Subscribe to my newsletter for more details regarding the Reapers series! ♥

Instagram: [@celestebriarsauthor](#)

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Keep reading for a sneak peek of *The Worst Kind of Promise* (*Reapers* #2), Faye and Kit's story! Stay tuned for the release date! ♡

THE WORST KIND OF PROMISE

THE NIGHT OF NO RETURN

FAYE

I look up at the ominous storm clouds as they inch across the desolate sky, draping the night in everlasting darkness, the promise of rain poised on the horizon, waiting to fall in tandem with my tears. The streetlamp beside me flickers precariously, a large beacon that shines down on me like I'm a moth caught in a filth-covered flame. Cold air spills over my naked arms and legs, raising goose bumps on flesh, and the cement patch I've claimed as home for the time being has only made my core temperature drop.

My dress—once a thing of happy memories—has been forever tainted. I can't feel my body. It feels like it doesn't belong to me.

See, that already broken part of me has lost another crucial piece tonight, and I don't know if I'll ever get it back.

I look at my phone and check the time. Ten minutes have passed since I called the only person I could trust—the one I know wouldn't ask questions and who just so happened to be in Pennsylvania visiting a friend.

I called Kit Langley.

Star left defenseman for the NHL's Riverside Reapers. One of my brother's best friends. The guy I'm secretly in love with. And the guy who looks at me like I'm his kid sister.

I'm sitting on the cold, hard gas station curb, wondering why I can't feel the rain penetrate my clothes when a Jeep Wrangler pulls haphazardly into one of the parking spaces, parking diagonally across two white-painted lines. The door

swings open with enough force to jar me from my thoughts, and Kit's behemoth frame lumbers out of the vehicle. The minute I meet his dark eyes, I feel mine surge with water, and despite my efforts to keep my emotions at bay, all of them flood out of me like a fast-rising tsunami.

Kit races over to me and yanks me up by the arms, pulling me into his large chest. His grip suffocates me, but I don't try to pull away. He's mumbling something into my hair, his hand cradling the back of my head, the rapid thundering of his heart a steady medium in my ears.

When his embrace loosens and he backpedals to look at me, his naturally dark eyes are alight with worry, a muscle in his jaw flickering. "What happened?" he asks.

I'm not alert enough to form a coherent sentence, but my voice box is vibrating before I have the chance to clamp my lips shut.

"I..." My chest feels tight, like there's a thorn twisting in my sternum. Pair that with the tears wanting to make a quick getaway, and I'm pretty much as useful as a push sign on a pull door.

"Faye, breathe. You're okay. I've got you," Kit says, the softness in his tone wrapping around me like a gentle caress. His hands are still on my arms, and he's craning his neck down to look at me.

A few sobs slip unbidden from my mouth as I inhale shakily, forcing my bloodshot gaze to focus. My vision is peppered with all sorts of ink blots, and my tongue feels like it's swollen to twice its size.

Anger tears across his expression. "Faye, who hurt you?"

"He's...I..."

Come on, Faye. You're safe. You're with Kit. You're not in danger anymore.

The minute I stop trembling from nerves, I break down into a gigantic, blubbing mess, clinging to the back of Kit's shirt. He hugs me with the same bone-crushing desperation,

absorbing the weight of my pain, wringing every tear from me until I'm nothing but a hollow shell.

He uses his thumb to brush away the moisture glistening on my cheek.

My stomach rolls with nausea. "My date. H-he—I said no..." I choke, the sweat on my brow now covering every bare inch of skin.

Kit's eyes heat with understanding, and every muscle in his upper body ripples with iron-hot rage. The cords in his neck are taut, the veins in his forearms like individual rivers of power snaking up to bulging biceps.

"Did he—"

"No," I whisper. "It wasn't his fault. I sent mixed signals."

I'd gone back to his place, we'd started kissing, and then he'd rolled on top of me, and that long ago night came rushing back with such ferocity that I froze. I couldn't speak, I couldn't move, and he took that as a sign to start undoing my dress. It felt like he was peeling off the tattered walls that protected my soul.

"There's no such thing as mixed signals. Either you're into it or you're not. And it's pretty fucking clear when a chick isn't."

"But I was," I whisper. "Until I wasn't."

Kit reaches out to, I don't know, maybe cup my cheek, and I flinch. He stops and lets out a litany of swears so harsh they feel like sandpaper grating against my skin.

"Where. Is. He."

It's not a question.

I trap the plumpness of my bottom lip between my teeth. "Kit, stop."

A guttural rumble stirs deep within his chest. "I'm going to kill that son of a bitch."

"Kit..." I reach out to lightly touch his arm, and he seems to melt a little, but not much.

With a bracing breath, he rakes his hand through the front of his hair, looking about a second away from hitting whatever poor, helpless object is in the vicinity.

“I’m not doing this with you right now, do you understand?” he snaps, gritting his teeth. “You’re going to get in the car and go to the police station.”

I flinch at the bite in his tone, wrapping my arms around my midsection. “Nothing happened.”

“Well, clearly something happened.”

Unable to maintain eye contact, I drop my watery gaze to stare at the middle of his chest. “Not tonight.”

“A long time ago.”

“Does Hayes know?”

At the idea of telling my brother the truth, panic whirls through me like a Category 5 hurricane, determined to bring me to my knees. “No. And he can’t know.”

Okay. In hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have said that, because the lid that Kit’s already struggling to keep on his anger has completely blown off into the stratosphere.

“You’re calling him.” He firmly grabs my wrist, urging me toward his car.

I plant my heels into the ground and pull back, managing to break free from his steel vise. Granted, it takes all my strength and a good amount of my breath.

“If I go with you, we can’t tell Hayes.”

“Faye...”

I’m thrown by his gentle protectiveness, the uncharacteristic softness I didn’t think Kit was capable of, much less willing to show me. Kit’s callous. He isn’t compassionate or particularly thoughtful, and it’s not because he actively chooses to be an asshole. He just isn’t perceptive when it comes to others’ emotions. But I’ve never seen him so distraught before.

“Please, Kit. I can’t bring Hayes into this. You know how reckless he can be. If he finds out, he’ll lose it.”

Humorless laughter dances out of him. “Oh, and you think I’m super calm, cool, and collected right now?”

Even with my skittering pulse, there’s enough fire inside of me to light a match. It scalds my insides, wanting to burn every weak part of me, wanting to turn that meek little girl still crying out for her mother into flakes of ash. “I don’t need you to play hero! I just need you to be here for me. I called you because...”

His eyebrows jerk together expectantly. “Because?”

“Because I trust you,” I finish.

Ever since Hayes joined the Riverside Reapers—a National Hockey League team born and bred in Riverside, California—I’ve had a crush on Kit. He and my brother have only been friends for two years, and even though they don’t always see eye to eye, they’re always there for each other.

As much as I *trust* Kit, I don’t think I could trust him with my *heart*.

Kit doesn’t believe in strings, whether they’re attached or not.

I know liking an unreformable womanizer is a disaster waiting to happen. Kit doesn’t date. He never has. He’s almost always pictured with a new girl, and their relationship lasts as long as a hockey game. If I wanted to get my heart broken, I’d let Kit manhandle it all he wants. As much as I wish things could work out between us, I’m smart enough to know that Kit can’t give me what I need—he can’t give me stability or reassurance or unconditional love.

Like any well-adjusted young woman with a burning hatred for romance, my endless search for love is in part thanks to my absent father. When my mother died of cancer, my father abandoned his parental duties, leaving me and my brother to fend for ourselves. The only thing he was good for was the money he sent us.

He's made a promise to be in our lives from now on, but I'm hesitant to trust him. I think Hayes forgave him so easily because he was exhausted from carrying such a humongous responsibility. I just...I can't forget all the pain he put us through—the pain of us blaming ourselves for his absence, the pain from losing our mother, the pain of having to grow up without a support system.

I knew Kit was going to be in town this week. And a part of me wanted to reach out, to grab lunch with him, to just *see* him. But I knew better. So I was going to let him coast through Pennsylvania without so much as a text.

Not only would keeping my distance benefit me, but it would probably save Hayes from going into cardiac arrest. Hayes is a...protective...older brother. He's never approved of my previous boyfriends. He never thought they were good enough for me. If he found out I liked one of his best friends, his whole world would implode. He'd probably ship me off to a nunnery overseas. After he castrates Kit.

Kit's lips wrench into a frown, and I wish we were meeting under different circumstances. I wish he was disarming me with that million-dollar grin of his, the one that makes paper-thin wings flutter in the pit of my belly.

"I'm sorry for losing my cool." He sighs, letting the knots of his muscles slacken, his voice returning to a lukewarm drawl. "You're scared. Flying off the handle isn't going to help either of us."

Upon seeing me shiver, he glides his hands gingerly over my arms, generating a spark of heat within me.

"Come on. Let's at least sit in the car while we talk things over."

I nod through the debilitating lump in my throat, letting him guide me to the passenger door.

The minute I get into the safety of his Jeep, the roar of the outside world comes to an anticlimactic stop. All I can hear is the mingling of our breaths and the jittery whirring of the heater coming to life.

“What happened?” he asks, his hands white-knuckling the steering wheel.

I shift uncomfortably against the leather seat, a yawning hole of dread opening inside of me, threatening to drag me under and fill my lungs until they forget what crisp air feels like.

“I was on a date with a guy. Everything was going well. We went out to eat, then he invited me back to his place. It—it all happened so fast. We were in the living room, laughing about something stupid, indulging in glass after glass of wine...and then he was on top of me. He was on top of me, and I couldn’t scream, no matter how hard I tried. I tried saying no. I was frozen.” A string of words, almost all obstructed by the thickening saliva and errant tears in my mouth.

My head sloshes with the insuppressible memories, and my gut does a nosedive all the way to my toes.

“When I finally got the courage to move, I pushed him off me. He had no idea what was happening. I just freaked out. I was so embarrassed. I grabbed my things and ran like hell,” I supply, my hands shaking despite being planted safely in my lap.

This night has brought up a past trauma I’ve tried so hard to bury. Trauma that’s haunted me for three years now. It’s teleported me back to the night of my senior prom—when I was raped by a man who claimed to be my friend. Ever since then, I’ve been wary to go on dates, to trust men. And yet, I went on this date voluntarily, thinking that I could gain control over my trauma.

I was wrong.

Kit doesn’t say anything for at least two minutes.

And then he loses it.

He curses so loudly that it echoes in my ears, and he punches the steering wheel, rocking the entire car in the process. I’m surprised he doesn’t break anything. His ivory-colored fists are strained, and his arms twitch with an ungodly

amount of tension. I think he's going to lash out again, but all he does is inhale deeply.

Kit rests his hands on the steering wheel, the surface of his knuckles throbbing with a crimson hue. "What do you want to do?"

The last thing I want to do is go home. Or be by myself. But I don't really have another option.

I want to stay with you.

"Take me home," I finally decide, the weight of my solitude bearing down on my shoulders.

Kit's leg bounces against the underside of the steering wheel. He's so large that he takes up the whole space, even with his seat pushed all the way back. His head is flush with the ceiling, his elbow eating up the entirety of the console between us.

He ponders me for a moment, swishing my weak words around in his mouth, then grimacing like he hates the taste of them.

He sticks the key in the ignition. "I'm not taking you home."

I buckle my seat belt even as uncertainty courses through my veins. "Then where are you taking me?"

"To my hotel room," he says, looking over his shoulder as he backs out of his makeshift parking space.

With his arm right by my head, I get an intoxicating whiff of the bergamot cologne he always wears, which only lightly masks the heady musk of him. I covertly breathe him in, losing myself in his scent, the proximity, the safety of it all.

When I open my eyes, we're barreling down an empty ribbon of road, vegetation flashing past my periphery.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," I tell him, worrying at the hem of my dress.

Kit slams down hard on the brakes, nearly making me face-plant into the glove compartment. My seat belt strains

against my chest, squishing my boobs, and I recoil from the momentum.

He fully twists toward me, glaring. “What are you talking about?”

“Us. Being alone. In a hotel room together.”

The truth is, the only place I’d feel comfortable right now is in that goddamn hotel room.

“Are you afraid of me?” Kit asks, pained.

“No. I know you’d never do anything to hurt me. It’s just —”

I’ve never been in a room alone with you.

Seeing that this is apparently argument-worthy, Kit pulls to the side of the road, puts the car in park, and flips his hazards on. “You’re out of school, right?”

“My finals ended a month ago,” I admit, turtling in on myself.

“I just want to get you somewhere safe, okay? If you’re worried about missing work, tell them something came up—which it did—and that you need time off to be with family.”

I’m not worried about my job as a teaching assistant. I’m worried about having to confront my very real, very terrifying feelings for Kit. The good thing about Kit living all the way on the other side of the country is that I don’t feel inclined to give in to my temptations. But right here, right now, I want to give in so badly.

The look on Kit’s distractingly chiseled face would be butterfly-inducing if it weren’t for the hard lines marring his features. “I promised your brother I’d look after you.”

I cross my arms over my chest, doing my best to look sure of myself. “I can look after myself.”

“Clearly, you can’t.”

I wince like he’d just physically burned me. Honestly, that would probably be less painful than whatever heart-squeezing sensation is erupting behind the cage of my ribs.

Kit registers what he said a second too late, regret immediately shadowing his eyes. “Fuck, Faye. I didn’t mean that.”

Tears sear the backs of my eyes, and I swallow down the vomit threatening to spray the floor of Kit’s car. “No, you did. You’re right. I need to handle this. I’m not your problem.” I unbuckle my seat belt and reach for the door handle, but the little lock above it clicks down.

Kit knocks his head back against the headrest. “I didn’t... there’s...this is all a lot to process,” he confesses. “I can’t imagine how hard this is for you.”

All I do is nod, because now my mind is channel-surfing back to three hours ago when I thought I’d end the night with a kiss goodbye. The buzz from both the alcohol and adrenaline are starting to wear off, meaning I’ll have to consciously try to weather this torrential storm.

I don’t know what to say. I’m paralyzed again.

I suddenly feel Kit’s hand squeeze my palm, and it jolts me back to the present. The warmth of the gesture brings a comfort I haven’t known until now, not even when I’ve searched for it in other people.

“Look, Faye, when you called me...I’ve never been so afraid in my entire life. I was worried something bad had happened to you, and I was right. I need to know I’m keeping you safe, otherwise I’m going to lose my mind.” There’s a brokenness to his words that impales that failing organ in my chest.

Lose his mind? Does he really feel that way?

His fingers tighten around mine, almost painful enough for me to acknowledge it.

“If I go with you, you have to promise not to tell Hayes,” I murmur ashamedly, and I know I’m in no position to negotiate, but I refuse to burden my brother with all this drama.

“You’re seriously asking me to keep this big of a secret from your brother, who’s one of my best friends, and who I

also happen to live with?” His barb, sharp and stinging, clings to my side and burrows into flesh and muscle.

He’s right: keeping a secret this catastrophic from my hotheaded brother isn’t going to end well. But the alternative is possibly seeing my brother in handcuffs as he’s being whisked away for aggravated battery.

I will get on my knees and beg this man if I have to. “Please, Kit. He never has to find out about this. He’ll kill that guy on some crazy vengeance trip.”

“You’re lucky *I’m* not going to kill that guy,” Kit growls.

Oh, I am. Hayes might have enough rage to fuel a small village, but Kit beats his already impressive strength with a six-foot-five body of pure muscle.

“I appreciate it, I do. And now I’m just asking you to keep a teensy, tiny secret.”

Kit sucks his teeth. “I’ll contemplate it if you at least let me get you under a roof. You’re half-soaked. The hotel is only ten minutes away.”

I have a feeling that’s the closest to an agreement I’m going to get from Kit, and considering he has the resolve and patience of a grizzly bear, I’m not looking to argue with him for the rest of the night.

“Okay,” I acquiesce. “But you have to *promise* to think about it.”

Kit brushes his pinky against his nose, then holds it out to me. “I promise.”

I hesitantly hook my pinky with his, letting myself get lost in the wilderness of his umber eyes. There’s warmth nestled in the inner rings, but with it comes a dash of concern.

Fuck, Faye! This could’ve all been avoided if you just focused on yourself, your career. If you stopped chasing after some guy to fill that hole in your heart.

I pull back, severing our arrangement. “I should’ve *done* something.”

“Stop,” Kit snarls, the intensity behind the command alone shaking me to the core. “This is *not* your fault. You need to understand that.”

Kit leans over the center console and hooks his forefinger under my chin, his thumb tracing the edge of my jawline. “This is *his* fault, okay? This is all on *him*. *He* took advantage of you. This small-dicked asshole took your freedom from you, your choice, and he’ll be paying for every second of it for the rest of his miserable life.”

“Why do you care so much?” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

The first smile of the night surfaces over his extremely kissable lips. Extremely kissable, and extremely dangerous.

“Because we’re friends.”

Friends? I’ve never hated one word so much in my entire life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Celeste Briars is an indie author who specializes in spicy hockey romances. She's a UC Davis alumnus with a bachelor's in psychology. She loves creating memorable meet-cutes and happily ever afters. When she's not writing, you can find her binge-watching horror movies, playing with her cats, or dancing the night away with her friends. If you're looking for books with spice hot enough to question your religious values and feel-good moments that make your heart sing, please cuddle up with a Reapers novel and stay a while!