



He's a hockey god,
and she's the one
he can't have

SECRET OBSESSION

S. MASSERY

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OceanofPDF.com

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CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Miles](#)

[ONE MONTH LATER](#)

1. [Willow](#)
2. [Miles](#)
3. [Willow](#)
4. [Willow](#)
5. [Miles](#)
6. [Willow](#)
7. [Miles](#)
8. [Willow](#)
9. [Miles](#)
10. [Willow](#)
11. [Miles](#)
12. [Willow](#)
13. [Willow](#)
14. [Miles](#)
15. [Willow](#)
16. [Miles](#)
17. [Willow](#)
18. [Miles](#)
19. [Willow](#)
20. [Willow](#)
21. [Miles](#)
22. [Willow](#)
23. [Miles](#)
24. [Willow](#)
25. [Miles](#)
26. [Willow](#)
27. [Miles](#)
28. [Willow](#)
29. [Miles](#)
30. [Willow](#)
31. [Miles](#)
32. [Willow](#)
33. [Miles](#)
34. [Willow](#)
35. [Miles](#)

36. [Willow](#)
 37. [Miles](#)
 38. [Willow](#)
 39. [Greyson](#)
 40. [Miles](#)
 41. [Willow](#)
 42. [Miles](#)
 43. [Violet](#)
 44. [Willow](#)
 45. [Willow](#)
 46. [Miles](#)
 47. [Willow](#)
 48. [Miles](#)
 49. [Jacob](#)
 50. [Miles](#)
 51. [Willow](#)
 52. [Miles](#)
 53. [Willow](#)
 54. [Miles](#)
 55. [Willow](#)
 56. [Miles](#)
 57. [Willow](#)
 58. [Miles](#)
 59. [Willow](#)
 60. [Willow](#)
 61. [Miles](#)
 62. [Willow](#)
 63. [Miles](#)
 64. [Willow](#)
 65. [Miles](#)
- [Willow](#)
[Miles](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by S. Massery](#)

[About the Author](#)

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INTRODUCTION

Dear reader,

This is a dark hockey romance that contains content which may be triggering or hard to read, including: non-consent, attempted sexual assault, somnophilia, blood and knife play, dubious consent, emotional and physical bullying, and manipulation by the hero.

And a note from Miles:

I am in control.

Do not doubt that for a moment.

xoxo,

Sara

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MILES

Tonight's party is dull. Knox wanted to throw it because we're going home for winter break tomorrow. Our parents have summoned us home, which really just means we'll have to be on our best behavior for a month. But more than half of the students have already left Crown Point, and thus...

Dull.

Greyson and Violet sit in the corner, their heads bent together. Music plays loud enough that their voices don't travel.

I sip my beer and tip my head back on the couch, exhaling.

Steele and Aspen are outside, smoking a blunt. Part of me wants to join them, to get high and forget about my fucking troubles.

And then the front door opens, and one of my troubles strolls inside.

Her long blonde hair is coiled up on top of her head, her high cheekbones tinted red from the cold. I frown at the way her gaze travels around the room. She seems unsettled until she finds my brother, and I fucking hate that. The frigid blast of winter wind comes in behind her, until she slams the door shut and shucks her coat.

Still, that cold has buried itself under my skin. My bones have caught the chill, and I can't seem to do anything but watch her from my spot on the couch. She's the light that captivates my attention anywhere we go, and I loathe her for it.

Myself, too.

My heart thumps erratically. It's chased on by the slight buzz I have, by the beer that I drain with a few quick swallows.

Her expression is set, decision made.

I push myself up and lean forward, tracking her across the room. To my brother, who waits like a hyena about to devour its prey. His smile seems more evil than anything else. Only because I know what he has planned, what's going to happen the second she admits her feelings for him.

Feelings she should never have had in the first place.

She stops in front of Knox and tucks an invisible hair behind her ear. She does that when she's nervous. My gaze drops down the rest of her, down the tight black shirt that hugs her figure, over her perfect ass in the dark jeans. She's a dancer, and every inch of her is muscle.

When she opens her mouth, I know she's going to blurt it out. Because my girl's been working up the courage to tell my brother she loves him for the past six months—maybe longer. Six months ago was when I first heard the words leave her lips, in some sleepy mumble.

The fact that she hasn't makes me wonder about who else hurt her.

There will be time for that later.

If you asked me last year how this would go, how the bet between our best friend, Greyson, and Knox would evolve... the foolish, naive part of me assumed it would be over in a flash. Knox would get Willow to fall for him in no time.

And maybe he did.

But she didn't say it.

Then he got stubborn.

Almost a year later, and we're here. At this moment.

"I just wanted to say..." I imagine she's telling him. "I love you."

It's in my head, because I certainly can't hear her. But the way my brother's expression lights up, it must be true. He yells for one of the guys to cut the music, and everything falls silent. Willow's tense, her shoulders inching higher. The turtle defense—except it's not her neck she has to protect. It's her heart that needs the armor, and now it's too late. She just handed it over to the worst fucking person in the room.

"Say again, baby?" Knox says, his voice now audible. He takes her hand and runs his thumb over her knuckles.

He oozes charm. He's all honey and sugar. And while we look alike, I've always strayed in the opposite direction. Bitterness and spice. I want to leap from the couch and snatch her away, but this must play out.

She's in love with him—it's only fair that he break her heart once and for all.

I'm okay with getting cut up by her jagged little pieces.

"I just, ah," she clears her throat. "I'm in love with you."

He smiles. That smile turns into a sneer too fast, and he keeps hold of Willow's hand. Yanks her closer, into his arms. "Fucking *finally*," he crows.

He finds Greyson in the crowd that's slowly building. More people are drawn by the spectacle, by the attention that Knox Whiteshaw always needs on him.

"Did you hear that, Devereux?"

Greyson ignores Violet's confused scowl and raises his eyebrow. "I did."

"I won the bet."

Willow jerks, but Knox grips her hand tighter.

"I won," he repeats, looking back at her. "You fell for me. And what a fucking *relief* it is to be done with this nonsense."

"What?" she finally voices.

I grit my teeth. My folded knife is in my palm, and I have the urge to throw it at my brother's face. Because this is worse than anything I could've imagined.

"It was a fucking bet, Reed," he says slowly, like she won't understand him any other way. He releases her hand. "Greyson and I made a bet to see who would fall in love first—you or Violet. Obviously, he's an idiot and fell in love first, making his end of it void." *Insert eye roll.* "But me? I was determined."

Her mouth opens and closes.

Everyone is staring in shocked silence.

It's not like they *all* thought they were endgame... right? My brother has been a man whore for ages. The fact that he dedicated a year to one pussy is proof that he really is a competitive bastard.

That's how I wound up playing goalie anyway. Our coaches figured out that if we were on opposing teams, there was no way we'd leave each other alone. Even on the same team, he needed to shine. So they tried to separate us further, to put us in positions where we had to work together—or not interact at all.

But there's only one goalie, and he didn't have the fucking reflexes for it.

And then someone laughs, and that silence is broken wide open. They're all laughing at her. At the way Knox fooled her. Everyone except

me. And Violet.

But Willow's best friend is caught up in Greyson's arms, and there's no one else to stop Willow from fleeing. Her eyes fill with tears, and she meets my gaze briefly on her way past me.

She rushes out into the night, the door slamming behind her.

Knox is still chuckling, and he shakes his head. "Finally free," he says on a sigh. "Who wants to help me celebrate?"

The music restarts, and my muscles unlock. I shove myself off the couch and through the crowd, grabbing Knox by his shirt. He doesn't object when I tow him outside and shove him against the deck railing. Steele and Aspen are nowhere to be found, which is good. I don't need an audience for this conversation.

He slides on the ice, his fingers digging into the snow on the handrail.

When he turns to look at me, I *know* he knows.

He lifts one shoulder. "Hit me and get it over with, then."

"That easy?"

"You gonna go get the girl, have a little cry, and then make her fall in love with you?" Knox shakes his head. "You always did want to play with my hand-me-downs—"

My fist slams into his face. Pain blooms across my knuckles, and a song of revenge whispers in my ears. If he wasn't already against the rail, he would've fallen. As it is, it catches his weight as his head whips to the side.

He groans through his teeth. "When did you learn to throw a decent punch?"

"Fuck off."

Knox laughs.

I shake my head and eye him. "You're done with her?"

"Yes, baby brother. Go have your fun." He grins, then leans to the side and spits blood into the snow. "Enjoy putting her back together."

A scoff escapes me before I can stop it, and I straighten to my full height. "Who said anything about doing that?"

ONE MONTH LATER

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WILLOW

I lean closer to the mirror, touching up my dark-red lipstick with the tip of my fingernail. My eye makeup is slightly smudged. It creates a rather Gothic appearance, all black eyeliner and smoked-out shadows, but it gives me a break from the sweetheart vibe.

You know, when you walk down the street and guys catcall you with: *Looking good, sweetheart, you wanna come sit on Daddy's lap?*

Okay, so maybe that hasn't happened in a hot minute. Not in Crown Point anyway. Here, the only devils to watch out for are on the hockey team. And I've been on the do-not-flirt-with list for a while.

My best friend, Violet, is with her boyfriend. Aspen and Thalia are at the hockey house. And I...

I'm alone.

Which is preferable nowadays.

"I'm not heartbroken," I tell my reflection.

I shimmy my glittery black crop top into a better position. Music thumps through the bathroom walls, reminding me that even if I *am* heartbroken, I'm still about to go dance my shoes off.

Seems like I've been spending more nights here than not.

My new mission has been to see how many drinks guys will buy me before they realize I'm not going to fuck them. Not unless they know how to dance.

I have high standards.

My eyes burn, and I swallow sharply. It's been a *month* since Knox completely humiliated me at his party. I went home and saw my family. I cried for the first... well, the first week after. But then I really got laughing

again. I wasn't hung up on what some jerk was or wasn't doing to hurt my feelings. It's kind of funny how little I've cried since we broke up, compared to any single month in our relationship.

Then, of course, the other stuff became apparent. That because he really didn't give a fuck about me, he flirted with other girls. I don't think he went so far as cheating on me, but I let that happen. Saw it, cried about it, and still fell in love with him. Or, I thought I did.

I wanted to be sure, you know? I hadn't fallen in love with anyone before, I don't know what it's supposed to feel like. I just knew I felt *something*, and I thought that something was love. Maybe I was wrong?

And then there's his brother.

For some reason, I thought Miles and I were friends. But the look on his face at the party said: *You should've known better*. And all I wanted to do was scream back: *Why didn't you warn me?*

Why did no one warn me?

So I fell for the jerk, and it blew up in my face.

Lesson learned: love is off the table for me.

I run my fingers through my hair, messing it up, and pout my lips at the mirror. I'm fucking hot tonight, I won't lie. The self-tanner keeps my legs bronzed even in the dead of winter. My boots—cute *and* practical, since there's nearly a foot of snow on the ground—stop at my ankles, leaving a smooth, glowing expanse of skin up to the hem of my white shorts.

Clearly the boots are where my common sense begins and ends.

"Hey, baby," a guy says when I leave the restroom.

Don't call me baby, I think at him. I don't say it, though. I just give him a practiced smile.

He pushes off the wall, following me back toward the dance floor. "You okay?"

I eye him. He bought me a drink an hour or so ago and has been lurking ever since. Not really in a good way. Maybe he bought me more than one, I can't really remember. He's older, though. Definitely not college-age. He seems like the kind of guy who has enough swagger to know what he's doing in bed... but I don't like his vibe.

He kind of makes my skin crawl, especially when he steps up and grabs my hip.

"Yeah, fine." I jerk my chin toward the mass of writhing bodies ahead of me. The music is loud, so we're more lip-reading than hearing each

other. The bass thrums in my chest, vibrating in a pleasant way, but I don't want him—or anyone—to kill the feeling. "I'm going to dance."

"I'll join you."

The hulking guy behind me trails in my wake to the center of the dancing bodies and immediately paws at my waist. His hands are too high, just under my breasts, and I'm flooded with discomfort. He pulls me into him, my ass against his groin. Against his erection.

Nope.

I force a laugh and twist in his arms, using my hand to leverage some distance between us. My fingers are positively tiny on his chest. "Not the kind of dancing I was talking about, big guy."

He really is large. Packed with muscles and fat, and he's got the height of a linebacker. He rolls his eyes and reaches for me again. "You don't mean that."

A tendril of fear winds through me, but I refuse to let it show. I only half-heartedly fight as he drags me back into his chest, and then his hand is moving down my front. He gropes me between my legs, and my vision goes white.

What the *fuck*?

I shove away and stumble backward, looking around. I don't know if anyone saw it. No one's even paying attention to me. I'm so focused on putting distance between me and him that I back right into someone else.

New hands brush my sides, and lips press to my ear. "You like trouble, hmm?"

For a second, my heart stops.

Knox wouldn't be here—and he wouldn't approach me. I glance over my shoulder, and it's only because he withdraws an inch that I don't end up accidentally kissing him. That's happened before. Not the accidental part, but the making out while dancing.

Except it's not Knox. It's Miles.

I think, in this moment, that I'm more pissed because it's him. The one who knew about the bet and did nothing to warn me. The one who let me fall on my ass in front of *everyone*.

The one who watches me like he's the only one who pays attention.

"Don't touch me," I hiss.

His hands do the opposite, his fingers inching up to the open skin between my shorts and crop top. I slap at him, but he just whirls me around

and into his chest. His knee slips between my legs, and suddenly, we're *dancing*.

Against my will, but... whatever. It's like my body knows that dancing relaxes me, and I just automatically fall into his movements.

Because damn.

The guy can move.

"I'm rescuing you."

His hands press into the small of my back, keeping me locked against him. Everywhere he touches is electric, and I loathe my reaction to him. His voice curls in my ear like smoke, and I inhale sharply when his lips touch my skin.

"That guy looked like he was two seconds away from ravaging you on the dance floor."

"Who says I don't want to be ravaged on the dance floor?" I force out, even though it makes me sick. Because he *was* touching me against my will, and that was why I was in the process of getting away from him.

But I especially don't want to be handled by Miles. Or anyone with the last name *Whiteshaw*.

I step back. My body doesn't really want to go, but I need the distance to think clearly. And breathe. A glance over my shoulder tells me that the older guy has drifted away, and he's with some other dark-haired girl at the bar.

"I'm going to get another drink," I yell. "If you don't want that guy dancing with me, run interference. That's probably a new one for you, since you're usually all by yourself at the goal..."

He watches me with dark eyes. Well, his eyes are anything but dark—they're brilliant blue, unfortunately. But with the dim lighting in the nightclub, and the way he's glaring at me, it sure seems like he's dark.

I shiver and slip away. I squeeze between two bodies, not at all ashamed by the way I duck and run to the bar.

Miles Whiteshaw isn't going to chase me out of the club.

I claim a stool at the bar and smile brilliantly at the man beside me. A working professional, maybe, judging from the little bits of silver at his temples. His gaze swings around my face and then dips to my body.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he asks.

I grin and nod.

Two hours later, I'm *drunk*. I thought I was on the verge before, but now I'm at a whole new level. The floor keeps tilting under me, but I don't really give a shit. The amount of people on the dance floor with me keeps me upright. And I seem to have a never-ending line of guys who want to dance.

I'm toxic, you're going under...

That song played an hour ago, but it's stuck in my head. Even when the DJ's music should distract me, those words keep playing.

A guy reels me into his chest. I glance up at him, vaguely concerned when the face looking back at me is blurry. But I push it away and shimmy against him. My smile widens as his grip tightens on my hips, steadying me.

"You want to get out of here?" he asks in my ear. His voice is familiar.

Same guy as before. The one who waited for me outside the bathroom, who groped me. Except now, I don't really give a shit that he's hulking and full of bad vibes.

I twist around, giving him my back. My hands go up in the air like they're floating on their own, and my body moves to the beat.

"No, I don't want to get out of here," I call over my shoulder. "I want another drink."

"Sure thing, baby."

My nose wrinkles. I don't like being called baby. Or babe. Or sweetheart.

Knox called me babe or baby for a whole year, luring me in with false promises and *lies*. Utter horseshit. But the alcohol already in my system dulls the bite of it, and the guy's hands leave my hips.

I dance by myself. I swing my hips, run my hands through my hair and down my neck. I'm putting on a fucking show for anyone watching, but I'm not really alone. The club is full of gyrating bodies and pulsing music, and while no one else touches me for a time, the air smells like perfume and sweat. Or maybe that's just me. I can barely keep my eyes open.

"A drink for the lady," the guy says, appearing at my side.

It's not so much a drink as a double pour of straight alcohol. It's clear, or maybe golden. I can't tell in the flashing swoops of colored lights. No ice in the glass either.

Good choice.

I take the glass and toss the liquid back. It's tequila. *I think*. It's the slow burn through my stomach that gives it away. Grimacing, I grip the guy's hand. He lets me through the crowd, all the way to the bar. Where his hand then becomes an assistance for me to climb up on the stool.

Then the bar top itself. I wobble, and someone grabs my ankle. Cold hand against hot skin. No amount of alcohol can hide *his* identity.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" Miles growls.

I giggle and look down at the hand, which has moved up to the back of my calf.

"Dancing," I say. "Obviously."

"You're too drunk to even balance."

The hand becomes two, and then I'm dragged from the bar. I screech and flail, and I land across a set of wide shoulders. My fingers dig into his shirt, but I barely jostle when he turns and strides through the nightclub.

I'm toxic, you're goin' under...

I should get those words tattooed across my forehead. Although I'm not sure those are the actual lyrics—does it really matter? I *am* the toxic one. I'm terrible.

Certainly not worthy of love.

My stomach twists, and I tap his arm.

"I'm gonna puke," I inform him.

And that's the last thing I remember.

MILES

Willow's projectile vomit somehow misses me, and she passes out two seconds later. The smell of the new club, Prime, still clings to both of us. I'm tired and irritated, and the fact that she looks like a sleeping devil doesn't really help matters.

And with her limp in my arms, I can't resist heading to her apartment instead of my house. There are too many memories of her there, waking up in Knox's bed.

When I fuck her in *my* bed, in *my* house, she's not going to be thinking of my brother.

Besides, I've been curious about her living space. It's not the same one her and Violet lived in together last year. She subleased a room from one of the dance team girls over the summer. Now, she's on her own in a tiny little apartment only a block from campus. It's close to the stadium, close to Haven. Close to everything, actually.

Minus the "small" factor—the bedroom is only large enough to hold her bed in the corner, a nightstand, a dresser, and an armchair that's covered in clothes—it's actually not bad.

After I set her on top of her comforter, I explore the rest of her space. The counter in the bathroom is covered in makeup. I pick up the lipstick and touch my thumb to it, inspecting the dark-red color that matches what she wore tonight. I rub it between my fingers and set the tube back down.

What would be a common area, the kitchen, dining, and living room all one space, is tidy. The gray linen couch with a fuzzy blanket thrown over the back, the plants. It all screams... *nice*. Except there's a chill in here that has nothing to do with the winter.

It's set up like it's from a magazine. It's not *her*. No trace of personality exists here.

Satisfied with my initial search, which includes fiddling with the locks on her windows and making sure they're secure, I return to her room. She's on the second floor, so burglars looking for easy theft wouldn't likely pick her apartment. The one smart thing she did when she chose this place.

She cut her hair and lost some weight that she couldn't afford to lose. Her hair used to be long, and now it barely brushes the tops of her shoulders. It's a brutally blunt cut, and yet, it works on her. Her makeup has turned her into a seductress—on the outside anyway. No use arguing that she ensnared me from the moment I stepped foot on CPU's campus, and that was long before she indulged in edgier aesthetics.

Right now, her dark-red lipstick is smeared across her mouth and cheek and is definitely getting on her pillow. I don't even know why I wish it's *my* pillow she's drooling on. My feelings are too confusing around her. All-consuming. Which is why it's better that I take her in now, get my leering over with, so the true work can begin tomorrow.

I shove clothes off the chair and drop into it, toeing off my shoes and socks. What I should do is go home, shower, and prepare for the start of the spring semester on Monday—but instead, I find myself just fixating on the passed-out girl.

It's been a month since my brother wrecked her. Her social media accounts were dormant. Even Violet, via Greyson, had nothing to report. Willow went radio silent over winter break. But in the past few days, Crown Point University students have flocked back to town. Including her.

And damn it if I can't stop thinking about what I'm going to do to her.

I shouldn't have gone to the club, that's for sure.

I pull her phone out of my pocket and set it on the arm of the chair. I've got a remote spyware app downloaded to my phone already, and it only takes a few minutes to connect it to hers.

It's hilarious how companies can package these apps in the form of parental controls. Like any normal parent would want to monitor notifications, social media, texts. Plus, location tracking and creating a geofence. That was of particular interest to me.

And the bonus: it'll give me access to her cell's camera and microphone.

I test it out and find that it works perfectly. The glowing blue dot on my phone with her location, right down to the room she's in.

She rolls over and makes a noise in the back of her throat, but I resist the urge to go to her. We've done this before, her and I. I've watched her sleep after my brother slipped out of the room. I've seen her cry when she thought she was alone.

Always watching, never able to cross that barrier.

That ends tomorrow.

My phone buzzes, and I scan the text.

KNOX

Team meeting. Stadium.

I bite back my sigh. It's not a real team meeting—it's fucking past midnight. These things used to be a source of excitement—but not when it's tearing me away from Willow. Not when I finally have a chance to do something about her.

KNOX

idc what you're doing, but I'll fucking lump you in with the freshmen if I have to come find you

I'm on my way. Fuck off.

I can only lock the knob of her door, not the deadbolt, on my way out. I curse myself that lack of foresight, then push it out of my head. There's another door at the bottom of the stairs that also requires a key or a passcode—and this one is automatic. So I don't feel *as* bad, hurrying away from the defenseless girl.

It's not like a big, bad boogiemani is out to get her.

The only one she has to worry about is me.

Except, as I'm coming out of the building, someone detaches from the shadows and steps toward me.

"Hey, asshole," they call.

I glance over my shoulder at them, ignoring the prickle of apprehension that sweeps down my spine.

"I wasn't finished with her."

My feet stop moving, and I face the guy striding my way. "Oh?"

The closer he gets, the more I realize I recognize him from the club. Prime draws a lot of bad seeds, the small percentage that makes up the underbelly of Crown Point's population, and clearly this guy is one of them. He was all over Willow until I hauled her out of there. I mean, he helped her up onto the top of the bar, for fuck's sake. Fed her drinks until she couldn't even walk in a straight line. Pawed at her incessantly, even after I got her away from him the first time.

Not *my* fault.

Not hers either.

I was happy to help her maneuver out of that dance, too. The guy was too much in her space. And by coming to her rescue, I've discovered his loose screw.

"So you're pissed that she rejected you?" I tilt my head back, looking down my nose at him. Although it's kind of hard, because he's a fucking giant. Like he might have some ogre blood in him, if ogres actually exist. This guy makes me think they do.

"We were—"

"Or maybe your plan was to get her so blindingly drunk, she'd go home with you." I narrow my eyes at him.

He's inching closer. My arms are at my sides, loose, but my fingers curl into fists. Or maybe he did something worse. Something to ensure he'd get her the way he wanted. That makes more sense than her passing out from drinking too much.

"Did you spike her drinks?"

He leers at me. "None of your fucking business."

"What's your name?" I ask him.

He's got buzzed hair, a brutish brow. Cold eyes that bore into mine. I recognize his touch of crazy and fully reject it.

"Doesn't really matter," I mutter to myself.

"What?"

I lunge for him, disregarding that we're on a public street. Who gives a flying shit about that? My fist lands a direct hit on his throat. Sparring with Knox, and then dealing with opponents on the ice, taught me to always go for the weak spots. Especially when the guy coming for me has fifty pounds on me.

He chokes and falls backward, eyes going wide for a second. He makes a gurgling noise and swings at me. He's faster than I anticipate, and the hit

lands on my cheekbone and nose. My head whips to the side. He grabs the front of my shirt and hauls me in. His free hand wraps around my throat and squeezes.

My breath is cut off.

“I’m gonna go up and find her,” he says in my ear. “And I’m going to take what the slut owes me. I bought her four drinks, only for you to swoop in?”

My hand is in my pocket before I can register. I stare into his eyes as I wrap my fingers around the folding knife I always carry around with me. With burning-hot fury, I pull it out. Open it one-handed.

I slide the cold metal blade into his side without thinking.

He goes still as the foreign object enters his body. I yank it out and stab into him again, and hot liquid rushes over my knuckles. His grip on my throat tightens, almost crushingly strong, then loosens. He tries to draw back, but suddenly, I’m the one holding on to *him*.

“No, no you don’t,” I grunt. *Shit*. I just stabbed a guy.

He stumbles with me, both hands pressing to the open wounds in his side. He doesn’t even seem to notice where I guide him, his eyes are so fucking wide. I can see the whites on all sides, his brows lifted.

I haul him deeper into the shadows and contemplate leaving him, then change my mind. This is a shitty situation, but I can make the most of it. And I will. With sudden clarity, I know exactly what I have to do.

Back toward Willow’s apartment. I type in the code, and the door swings open under my hand. The guy comes with me, although I’m half dragging him. Up the stairs, leaving a trail of blood, to Willow’s apartment door.

Thank fuck she lives in a duplex and not something more populated.

I break the lock on her door and shove him through. He sprawls on his face in the middle of her living room, and I close the door behind me. It doesn’t latch, though, and I have to grab one of her chairs to prop against it.

My heart is pounding out of my chest.

I’ve never been so fucking exhilarated.

The guy crawls across the floor, seeming to realize that we’re now even more secluded. Maybe he senses that the end is near for him. I take a moment to look around, then nod to myself. The plan solidifies, until I’ve got a roadmap in my head.

Then I get to work.

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WILLOW

I wake up with a dry mouth and a headache. My eyes crack open, and I immediately groan at the light coming in through my windows. My blinds are mostly closed slats, but I must not have remembered to pull the blackout shades down. Which means, as my windows point east, I get a face full of the morning sun.

It's awful.

Anyway, the dry mouth is fixed by the bottle of water on my nightstand. The blinding headache, however...

Oh. *Aspirin*. I sit up a bit more, wincing, and swallow the pills.

Who put me to bed?

Hell, who got me *home*?

I scrunch up my nose and close my eyes, going back through my night. The last memory I have is of dancing on the bar and being dragged off it. I look beside me, my pulse skyrocketing, but I'm alone.

Didn't bring anyone home, then.

Maybe Violet came and got me. Judging by the brightness, it's still relatively early. The sun hasn't risen high enough to stop being a nuisance—it's right at eye level, I think. Beaming in with enough strength to kill me. I lean over and eye the trash bin from my bathroom placed on the floor by my nightstand.

"You're awake."

I scream and fall off the bed.

Not sure how that happens. One minute I'm leaning over, the next I'm on the floor.

Miles Whiteshaw, one of two guys I'd love to never see ever again, stands in the doorway. He... he was there last night. At Prime. We danced for two seconds.

Goddamn it, drunk Willow.

Why do I have the insane urge to whore myself out to the Whiteshaw brothers?

Wait, no. I definitely told him to get lost.

I scowl up at him. "What the fuck are you doing in my apartment?"

I need to get my bearings—and fast.

He lifts one shoulder. "Why don't you come on out and see?" With that, he just turns on his heel and disappears from my doorway. Leaving me alone and totally confused.

I run my hands through my hair. The shortness of it reminds me of everything I went through for the past year, and I steel myself. I climb to my feet and hurry straight into the bathroom. My reflection almost makes me scream again. *Almost*. But holy shit, I'm terrifying.

Makeup smeared everywhere, my hair a mess, my eyes bloodshot.

The headache is still there, pounding against my temples. It kind of feels like my brain is going to explode. I ignore it in favor of scrubbing at my face with a makeup remover wipe, peeling off my false eyelashes and dropping them on the counter.

When I rinse away the last traces of last night, I meet my gaze and flinch again.

There are dark circles under my eyes, which are still red.

Teeth brushed, tongue scrubbed, clothes changed, and I finally feel human enough to venture into the living room.

Miles stands at my kitchen counter, pressing buttons on my coffee maker. I barely glance at him, because there's a man sitting on the floor, in the middle of the open space. Not that there's much open space, but it seems like Miles had no problem redecorating while I slept. My couch is pushed to the far wall, the plants shoved in the corner. The man sits on my area rug, his arms behind his back, and his legs... his legs are duct taped from his ankles all the way up to mid-thigh, extended out in front of him.

The most concerning part is the blood.

His shirt is covered in it, plastered to his skin and seeping from a hole in the fabric at his side.

“Wh—what is this?” I glance from the man, whose mouth is also taped, to Miles.

Miles sips his coffee and levels me with a single look. A look that has my stomach plummeting to the floor.

“How’s your head?” he asks instead of answering me.

I can’t seem to move. “I’m... it’s...”

“Hurts? A bit more than a usual hangover?” He lifts one shoulder. “Or maybe it feels the same as a hangover. I don’t fucking know how date rape drugs work.”

Date rape drugs?

Miles glowers at me. “This is why we don’t take drinks from strange men who want to fucking *rape you!*” he shouts.

“Don’t yell at me.” I cringe. “In what sort of world do we live in that I have to go out and mind all my drinks, and then—and then I get blamed for some douchebag’s decision to put something in my drink?”

“The rest of us are living in reality,” he snaps.

He sets the mug down—my favorite mug, I note with disdain—and comes stomping toward me. I backpedal, not necessarily afraid of him, but I really would rather not deal with any of this.

And being drugged doesn’t...

I scan my body. Miles is close enough to hear me whisper, “But he didn’t, right?”

Images of the man holding me against him, his hand between my legs, flash in front of my eyes. And I went back and danced with him again? Accepted more drinks from him?

I swear, Miles’ expression softens for a split second. “No, he didn’t.” Then it’s right back to loathing. “And if you thank God before you thank me, I swear, Willow...”

A few realizations hit at once.

One: Miles was looking out for me.

Two: he has a black eye, a bruised cheekbone and throat. I’m pretty sure he didn’t have those the night before. Pair that with the blood on the guy, the wound that’s clearly from a weapon of some sort, and...

Three: something really bad could’ve happened last night.

And four: something bad is *about* to happen.

“Thank you, Miles, for not letting him do anything else.”

He stiffens. “What does that mean?”

Oh. “Um, beyond groping me on the dance floor... It was why I was in a hurry to get away from him and backed into you.”

He reaches out and touches my cheek, the rough pads of his index and middle finger burning a path on my skin. It tingles, and I tense to stop from leaning into it. Wouldn’t that be madness?

Too soon—or right on time, depending on who you ask—he steps back. He clears his throat and focuses back on the bleeding guy.

Right.

He’s been watching our interaction with fury in his eyes—and it makes me want to steer very, very clear of him. What the hell made me accept drinks from him last night? Except now he’s paler, and the blood is more obvious. It’s dripping onto the rug under him, adding to the pool of it. He’s pale, with sweat dotting his brow. A stiff wind could blow him over.

“Willow.”

I tear my attention back to Miles, who has picked up a folding knife from the kitchen counter. I hadn’t even noticed it sitting next to his mug, which he takes a sip from next.

“Your little game with my brother is over, got it? Your game with *me* is only just beginning. Starting with this.” He lets the tip of the blade point toward the man. “Starting with secrets that will tie us together forever.”

A shiver racks up my spine. I wrap my arms around my stomach, not sure I like what he’s insinuating. “What do you mean by that?”

“I’m not like Greyson or Steele. I’m not going to go behind your back and scare away the guys who think they have a right to touch you. And this is even more poetic because this fucker should’ve never laid a hand on you. But especially somewhere private. Somewhere that belongs to *me*.”

He sneers and kneels behind the guy, wrenching his head back and exposing his throat. The guy squirms. He tries to speak, but his voice is muffled behind the tape. His movements get jerkier. More frantic.

“No,” Miles continues. “I’m going to show you.”

“You don’t own me.” I step back, but the wall stops me from getting farther away from this madness. I can’t escape—the man and Miles are between me and the door. All I could do is sprint back into my room and lock the door, but something tells me that it would be a lost cause.

“I will,” he vows. He meets my eyes.

And then he stabs the man in the throat.

I scream.

Miles is on me in an instant, shoving me against the wall and covering my mouth with his blood-covered hand. I can feel the blood on my face, my neck. It burns like holy fire, making me complicit in this murder.

Murder.

I shudder when Miles leans down and runs his nose up the side of my face. His lips brush my temple.

“Look at him.” He grips my jaw, moving aside so I have no choice but to stare at the man dying on my carpet. Miles left the knife in his throat, and blood slips out around the blade.

“Pull it out and give him a painless death,” he whispers in my ear. “Or we can watch him die right here. However long it takes.”

“H-how long?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

He releases me completely, and I sag against the wall. The gurgling sound the man’s making—does he deserve to *die*? Or is Miles Whiteshaw just a complete psychopath?

He never struck me as the type. For a while, he was all smiles. A younger version of his charming brother. They look similar, sound similar...

Fuck.

I can’t escape them.

Your game with me, he said. Like this is just another way to toy with me. And of course it is. He and I... we’ve been glancing off of each other for years. It’s only fair that I picked his brother, got screwed over, and have to pay that price twice.

So the question is, do I play along?

Or do I fight it with every fiber of my being?

“Let him suffer,” I whisper. “But I’m not playing your game, Miles. I never will.”

I stuff my feet into my winter boots by the door. My jacket is slung over a kitchen chair, and I snatch that up, too. I don’t know where I’m going to go, but anywhere is better than here.

Miles doesn’t move. The guy has fallen on his side, and blood soaks the rug so much that it pools above the fibers. I take a good, hard look. It seems like I need to engrain this in my memory to remember, then I take my keys from the hook. I pause at the broken lock on my door, the chair holding the

whole thing closed, and shove it aside. The door swings inward on its own, revealing the empty hallway.

“Willow,” Miles calls.

I glance back at him, gripping the doorframe. He’s moved closer to the man, closer to me.

He crouches beside him, seeming fascinated with the way he’s bleeding out. But then he looks back up at me. “No good deed goes unpunished.”

He pulls the knife out.

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WILLOW

I should be scared. But all I feel is *numb*.
Does that make me a bad person?

After leaving my apartment, I climbed in my car and just started driving. I end up at the Point that Crown Point is named after. The restaurant just up the hill a little way, the one that offers spectacular views on a clear day, is closed. The clock on my dash informs me that it's eight fifty-two, which is entirely too early after being out last night. And... drugged. But the breakfast places will be packed at this hour. Classes start tomorrow, and Sunday brunch is a popular thing for college students.

If only I was hungry.

What I *should* do is call the police. It's probably bad that I haven't already done it.

My phone rings. I glance down at it, my brow furrowing when I spot Amanda's name. She graduated last year, but she's been assisting our coach for the dance team. She kind of had a personality transplant when Aspen came on the scene... probably because she thought she and Steele were endgame.

She was proven wrong pretty fast.

It seems weird to have to talk to her after witnessing what Miles just did. But maybe it would be better to ground myself in something normal, so I accept the call.

"Morning!" My voice is fake chipper.

"Willow, hi!" There's the same fakeness in Amanda's voice.

Which banishes the numbness and instead puts snakes in my gut.

"What's up?"

She sighs. “I’m sorry for calling so early. I just wanted to catch you before the beginning of the semester...”

My brow furrows, but I don’t respond. I don’t know what the correct response is.

“Listen, we’ve decided that the dance team needs to condense. It’s nothing personal, but—”

“Wait.” I lean forward and grip the steering wheel. “What are you saying?”

“You’re out.” Her voice is flat now, with no sign of fake cheer. “I’m sorry, Willow, but there’s a lot riding on us this year. And you’re just not keeping up.”

I scoff. “You’re kidding.”

But she doesn’t respond, and it sinks in that she’s not. I shift, my mouth opening and closing.

I banish the anxiety winding through me at the thought of having to face all my friends, who are all *on the dance team*. Well, except Violet. She got out at the right time, I guess.

“You’re fucking serious?” I ask, just... I don’t know, to dig the knife in deeper?

Too soon, Willow.

“I’m so sorry,” Amanda says. “This was a really tough decision—”

“And my breakup with Knox had nothing to do with it.”

Silence.

My jaw drops at her inability to even deny it. The fucking audacity of them. Except, I have no idea if that’s a Knox thing, a Miles thing, or a... a... I don’t know who. A dance team thing? Did they rally together to kick me out? Did they think I’d be depressed? Or an embarrassment? We’ve already confirmed that I’ve been made out to be a fool.

Bitches.

I hang up on her and throw my phone into the passenger seat. I open my door and step out into the parking lot. The snow crunches under my boots, but it doesn’t deter me from taking the narrow path to the Point.

Violet and I jumped off it last summer with Greyson and Knox and Miles. Of course Miles was there, his stare on me so fucking heavy all the time. It’s not like I didn’t notice him. And it’s not like he didn’t make himself... noticed. But what was I supposed to do?

Who wants to date in college?

Who wants to settle down *in* school? To have to be accountable to someone other than myself? I know that sounds fucking selfish, it *feels* selfish. But I was nineteen, then twenty. I turned twenty-one over the summer, and it's only added to the untethered feeling.

I just want to feel something.

So, I stand on the Point's ledge, with the freezing wind whipping powdery snow up around me, and spread my arms out wide.

I just want to be free.

Far below, the surface of the lake is frozen solid. A fall—or jump—at this height would probably break my legs. Or worse. I lean forward and peer down, but it's all just a haze of white.

A car pulls into the parking lot, but I don't lower my arms. Not until footsteps draw closer, and my best friend comes up beside me. Not quite as close to the edge, but close enough to reach me.

As predicted, she grabs my arm and tows me backward.

I tear my gaze from the endless abyss and face her, stumbling with her until we're not in danger of tumbling off the Point.

"What happened?" Violet pulls a tissue from her pocket and swipes at my face.

Bile rises in my throat.

The blood from Miles' hand...

Oh God, I didn't wash it off.

"Miles," I manage, and then I stagger sideways. I fall to my knees and throw up in the snow. In a weird way, the purge feels good. Like I'm getting rid of everything from last night and this morning.

But puking doesn't eradicate the images that flash behind my eyelids.

"What did Miles do?" Violet asks, gathering my hair back.

It barely fits in a little ponytail at the nape of my neck, so I usually have to get creative. Nothing I had time for this morning.

"He—" I press my lips together. "I can't go back to my apartment."

She takes in my expression and nods once. Her hand under my elbow helps me rise, and we go to her car. Fuck my car and my phone, they feel as complicit in my guilt as me. Which makes no sense, but I also don't object to leaving both there. Violet snatches the keys from my ignition and locks it, then shepherds me to her passenger door.

Greyson bought her a car, a light-gray—ha, get it?—SUV with all-tinted windows. Good in the snow, so she says. Not that we've had much

opportunity to test that out. Seems like Crown Point was holding its breath on getting snow until January, and now it's dumping on us.

Anyway. Better than my little sucker that likes to fishtail at any opportunity.

I buckle up and pull down the visor, sucking in a breath at the sheer amount of drying blood on my face. It's across my mouth, my cheekbone. My throat. The handprint where Miles clapped his palm across my lips is impossible to miss.

"Whatever happened..." Violet eyes me and restarts her car. "It'll be okay."

"Yeah," I mumble, settling in. "I doubt it."

She clicks on my heated seat, and we head back toward town. The house she's renting with Greyson isn't terribly far from my apartment. I point for her to take my street, and we slow roll by my house. It's a duplex. The landlord, a hard-of-hearing old lady, is in the first-floor apartment, and the second is all mine.

I expected police cars at the very least. Yellow crime scene tape.

But there's nothing.

"Are you okay?" Violet asks.

I laugh. "Not even slightly."

Greyson's truck is gone when we get to her house. She leads me inside and straight upstairs to the bathroom, where she sets a clean towel on the counter and peels my coat off my body.

"Take your time. I'll make coffee."

There's something about a cleansing, boiling-hot shower to set a girl's mind right. I scrub my face extra-hard, and my skin stings by the time I'm satisfied. Violet must've come back in at some point, because there's a stack of clothes waiting for me.

Downstairs, Violet is tucked on the couch with a show playing on low volume. She sets down her phone and eyes me.

"Is CPU going to be a problem?"

I roll my eyes. "It'll only be a problem if Miles makes it one."

Violet sighs. "I really just don't understand why they all kept the bet a secret—"

"I can't do this," I interrupt. "Sorry, I just..."

It *hurts*. Like, actually. A knife in *my* throat. I don't tell people I love them. Maybe jokingly, but not for real. Not in an *I'm in love with you* sort

of way. It took me six months to fall for Knox, and another six to work up the nerve to actually tell him. And look what happened! It blew up in my face.

I grab the mug of coffee she poured me and take it into her kitchen. After a minute of scouring their liquor cabinet, I find the whiskey. I add it to my coffee and take a sip, then add some more. What the hell, right?

When the warmth has climbed through my chest, I return to Violet. There's no use telling her exactly what happened. Miles just killed someone in my apartment, and I left him there. I let it happen. But eventually, it'll be discovered. No, it *needs* to be discovered. I just need to call the police and have Miles arrested.

Picturing Miles in a jail cell sends me into a weird spiral all its own. Because I feel guilty even considering turning him in. What would I do if I sent him away for life?

The less Violet knows, the better.

"You okay?"

A repeat of her previous question. I think she's hopeful that my answer will have changed. But the truth of the matter is, I don't know how I could possibly ever be okay again.

I reach over and grip her hand. No matter what I do, I lose. "Promise me you'll still be my friend when the whole world blows up in my face."

She squeezes my fingers. "Babe, you stuck with me when Greyson did his worst. I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay, good," I mumble, taking another big gulp of my coffee. "Because I have a feeling Miles is just getting started."

MILES

We stare down at the dead man.

People are so fascinating as they die. Kind of horrific, too. The blood spurting out of his neck, the artery flowing to his brain severed, eventually slowed to a gurgle when his heart stopped. It took minutes. Not seconds, like in the movies.

I didn't mind.

Now he's lifeless on the area rug, his eyes still open, his body at a weird angle, and I have to force myself to tune in to the conversation around me.

"...no one will know he was here. So why does some blood matter?"

"Because blood always fucking matters. Haven't you ever seen a single episode of *CSI*?"

"If they trace him back here—"

"Oh, look, five *hundred* witnesses who all say they saw him dancing with Willow, then leave the club shortly after? Not suspicious at all."

"She wasn't buying her own drinks, they probably don't have her name —"

"Prime scans IDs at the door, dipshit. Bet they keep video footage, too, just in case."

"Which means Miles would be seen carrying her out, cementing her alibi. If he even wants to be dragged into this, which I'd highly doubt."

I tear my gaze away from the would-be rapist. "Of course I'm her alibi." My friends go silent.

Jacob was the first to arrive. He stepped in with plastic booties on over his shoes and a ball cap tugged low over his face. And then he made me put on the plastic booties, too. Said if we accidentally stepped in blood...

And then he looked at me and grimaced at what he saw. The blood coating me. It sprayed rather violently, and I didn't flinch away when I pulled the knife. I was too busy focusing on Willow's reaction.

Greyson got here next. He's been rather silent thus far, like me. Plastic fucking booties on his feet, his hands tucked into his pockets. Unlike me, he doesn't want so much as a fingerprint linking him here. I understand that. If there was evidence of him here, he'd have to loop in Violet. Make her complicit, too—something he would never do.

My brother and Steele came together. Knox's brows were pinched, and he's talked the most. Unsurprisingly. Really, the majority of the argument has been between Steele and Knox, who seem to be in the same boat as the rest of us.

Totally fucking clueless about dead bodies.

Why would they know anything? It's not like we go around murdering people. Usually, it's more of a beat up, seriously injure, or maim energy.

"We need to get the body out of here," Jacob says. "Unless you want to call the cops right now and tell them you found it. But that would mean a mess for Willow."

I grunt. *I* want to do the torturing. Not some whiny detective in a windowless room.

"Why the fuck would you kill him?" Knox snaps at me.

Again.

He's been periodically asking me that. Well, I think the question just flies out of his mouth. He seems more concerned than angry. Because at the end of the day, I'm the one who did it. I'm the one with blood on my hands. Literally and metaphorically. I just can't seem to give a shit.

I've bitten my tongue until this moment, but they all deserve answers.

"He drugged her," I finally answer. "At the club, he put something in her drink. Or more than one drink, I don't know. I carried her here, he followed. Confronted me outside. Came at me—"

"Self-defense," Jacob inserts.

"I stabbed him in the gut. I could've left him on the sidewalk or just punched him instead of pulling my knife. I could've called nine-one-one as soon as it happened. But look at him. He's huge."

"And instead of leaving him on the sidewalk..."

"I wanted to turn it into a lesson." My mood plummets because I don't think Willow learned her lesson in the slightest. "So I brought him up here

and kept him alive until she woke up this morning.”

Greyson checks his phone, then tucks it away. “Vi picked Willow up from the Point. Said she had blood on her...”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Before they arrived, I watched her dot move toward the Point. But then Jacob walked in, and I shut it down. A little embarrassed to be caught watching her movements so closely? I should get used to it. They’re all just as fucked up as me.

I open the tracking app now and frown. It’s blinking in the restaurant parking lot close to the jump spot. “Where is she?”

“Dude’s obsessed,” Knox snorts.

I glower at him.

“My house,” Greyson says. “She’s fine. Focus.”

Great.

She left her freaking *phone*. What am I supposed to do when she does that? Put a tracker under her skin?

I glance at Steele. He did that to Aspen. And, to my knowledge, she still doesn’t know about it. Maybe that’s just one of those things that he’ll take to his grave, or it’ll blow up in his face four years from now.

“I want to be able to use this,” I say suddenly. “To control her. Which means I need access to the body.”

Jacob’s nodding along. Greyson and Steele, too. Knox is the only one staring at me like I’ve lost my damn mind. He just doesn’t get it—he played with Willow for a fucking year for a bet and didn’t catch feelings for her. I know, because I threatened him over winter break with a knife to his throat after a rogue comment.

All the fucker did was grin at me.

And since he’s been freed, he’s had at least three girls in his bed each week. Without even trying. Like the puck bunnies of CPU were all waiting for him to drop Willow for their shot at him.

“We photograph the place, then move the body. We need to roll him up in the area rug.” Jacob squats and lifts a corner of it, then grins at me. “You put... is that plastic wrap?”

I shrug. “Yeah, well. She had a shit ton of those rolls for some reason.”

“Okay, great. That makes this slightly easier.” He points at Greyson. “We need more plastic. Preferably something a little heftier than this grocery store shit. And get a camera. One with a digital memory card.”

“On it,” Greyson answers. “Be back soon.”

He moves past us to the door, shoving the chair out of the way to open it. They all stared at me like I was nuts when they discovered the broken latch, and I didn't have it in me to tell the full story.

Knox secures it behind him, then rubs his eyes. "This is fifty shades of wrong."

"You owe me," I growl.

My brother whirls around, fire filling his expression. "I'm sorry, I owe you? If you had manned up sooner, I wouldn't have had any chance to hit on Willow. You just needed some encouragement. And now you've gone and killed someone in her apartment."

I cross my arms.

Steele eyes us. "I would've done the same," he admits. "Come close to it anyway. Both of you know that."

"See?"

"And now you want to... control her with this?"

"I want the body somewhere accessible. If she gets out of hand." I shrug and look down at it. Not a *him*, not anymore. Just an empty vessel.

"Okay, so we need to store the body. It's not like we can bury it..." Jacob's brows furrow. "Meat freezer seems cliché, but I kind of like it."

"My dad has one of those," Steele says. "They're in New York City for the next few months for work, but he took the whole family. So we can store it there 'til the ground thaws, then, fuck, bury it? Does that give you enough time to manipulate the situation?"

"Probably. Thanks, man."

It would turn into a nightmare if Steele's dad returned and discovered it—or worse, one of the girls. Aspen would probably murder *me* if I traumatized her sisters like that. So it's a temporary solution, but a good one. Getting it out of Crown Point seems smart, too.

"Okay, so we load it up into the truck and drive it down to Steele's pop's house, secure it, and head back like nothing's happened." Jacob circles the area rug, careful not to step in any blood. "But first, we need to make sure that this place is spotless."

Steele heads for the door, his keys dangling from his fingertips. "I'll get supplies."

We wait for Greyson and Steele to return. There's not much else we can do—Willow has some organic cleaning stuff that definitely won't get rid of blood the way we need.

When they get back, we jump into work: taking photos of Willow's entire apartment, rolling up the body in the carpet and plastic wrapping, then taping the whole thing. It feels vaguely ridiculous, like at any moment the police are going to burst in the door and arrest us.

But nothing happens.

The street is quiet, the whole house eerily silent. Knox goes searching and finds that the first-floor apartment lady's car isn't in the driveway, giving us a modicum of relief that we won't be immediately discovered.

Then the frenzy of cleaning. The smell of bleach embeds itself in my nostrils, and we go through countless paper towels scrubbing and erasing every speck of blood.

Willow's apartment probably hasn't been this thoroughly sanitized since before she moved in.

"If police come looking, they won't find anything obvious here." Jacob ties off another stuffed trash bag.

I loathe the idea of police scouring Willow's apartment. And truthfully, I'd do everything in my power to stop that from happening. But the *fear* that Willow might have of them doing that to her... that's worth it.

When we finish, we're all crabby. It takes three of us to lift the man-rug and walk him down the flight of stairs, sliding him onto the waiting tarp in the bed of Greyson's truck. The other two haul out our trash and toss it in alongside the body. We secure the cover over the bed, slam the tailgate closed, and pile in.

Steele gets the front seat for once, since he has to navigate. Knox, Jacob, and I are stuck squashed together in the back, Jacob between Knox and me. Which is good because prolonged contact with my brother never ends well.

Our parents used to build a wall of pillows between us on longer road trips. They thought that if we couldn't see each other, we wouldn't fight. Of course, all it really meant was that we couldn't see what we were hitting when we struck blindly through the barrier.

An hour passes, and we pull up to Steele's driveway. There's a fucking gate and everything.

I forgot that his dad was *rich-rich*. And Steele, too, I guess. Our parents are upper middle class. Not fancy, but well enough off. But they worked hard for their money, and they made Knox and I learn that same lesson. We had jobs from the age of fifteen onward, every summer between school. We

squirreled away money and bought the hockey house my freshman year, sparing me from living in the dorms like Knox.

The rent from the other guys is mostly passive income, but it also pays the mortgage. Dad keeps saying he wants us to buy another property—but he doesn't hear us when we say the hockey house would be *considerably* worse off if neither of us lived there. At least we half give a shit, and we're renovating this summer. Upgrading some stuff, like the kitchen and bathrooms, electrical. We've got this year and next with the house, and then it's going on the market. After that, hopefully we'll both be playing professional hockey and far away from Crown Point.

That's the dream anyway.

The gate swings open, allowing Greyson to pull his truck through, and we drive another two minutes before the house even comes into view.

I lean forward, frowning. "How come you've never taken us here?"

Steele grimaces. "Because I avoid this place as much as possible."

That's fair enough.

But it doesn't stop us from springing out of the truck in the garage and immediately going to explore the house. It's *huge*. And so wildly un-Steele-like, I can see why he wouldn't be comfortable here. Or maybe it's the wife. All traces of his mom are gone, replaced with photos of Aspen's mother and sisters.

A big, happy family. Shiny and new.

Gross.

"Okay, okay," Steele finally sighs. "Are you guys done?"

Knox hooks his arm around my neck, dragging me through the kitchen and back to where Steele waits. "Ready."

"Ready," Greyson echoes, Jacob close behind him.

We heave the body out and carry it out of the car garage, which is apparently one of two garages. It's connected by a short hallway to a second one, which seems to be a man-cave toolshed sort of place. Steele empties out the few remaining pieces of meat from the freezer while the rest of us cut open the rug.

The body looks even worse than it did before. But we shove him into the long, low freezer, forcing his limbs to fold, and slam it shut. It closes. The guy *fits*. Miracle upon miracle, because he was huge and heavy. Sure, his legs are at a weird angle, and I think we broke something to get him jammed in there, but it works.

Steele has a padlock in his hand, which he loops through a hook at the front. It secures the lid to the base. Once it's clicked shut, he hands the key to me.

I pocket it with a small nod.

"We burn the rug, then we're done," Jacob says quietly.

The rest of them turn away, hurrying to get this job finished.

I pull out my phone and take a picture of the sealed freezer, smiling to myself.

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WILLOW

A huge man staggers toward me, a knife protruding from his neck. His eyes are wild, and he reaches out. Like he needs my help. I rush toward him, but as soon as I get close, he wraps his hand around my throat and slams me to the floor.

My breath is forced out of my lungs. I choke, trying and failing to suck in air. His fingers tighten, cutting off any chance of inhaling. His other hand fumbles at my jeans, but he can't seem to get them open. The terror that rips through me, that he's going to rape me, is too strong. My nails scratch the wood floor, my heels slide without purchase.

White spots flicker around my vision.

And then my gaze locks on the knife in his throat, the one he seems unbothered by. He's grunting, his head too close to my chest. He's trying harder to get my pants open, and all the squirming in the world isn't going to knock him off me. His hand loosens on my throat, sliding down and covering my breast.

Revulsion and desperation sweep up my spine.

With a cry, I grab the knife and yank it out of him.

Blood spurts across my face, drenching my skin. It gets in my mouth, in my eyes. Until it feels like I'm drowning in it.

Hands grip my shoulders.

I scream.

And then I'm awake, on my stomach, my cheek pressed to one of the couch's scratchy linen pillows.

It takes me a minute to realize that Violet is shaking my shoulders.

I lift myself and roll onto my side, batting her hands away. My mouth is dry, and my heart is going a thousand miles a minute. I lick my lips and glance around the room, but it's just the two of us.

"You okay?" Violet has the good sense to look worried.

I didn't tell her anything. Not even that I was kicked off the dance team. We watched movies, and I dozed off, my arms crossed over my middle. I jumped at every little noise until I finally drank enough spiked coffee to shut my eyes.

And now it's dark, and I have no idea what time it is. Or how long I've been out.

"I need you to stop asking me that," I say in a low voice. "Please."

She nods and reaches behind her, flicking on the lamp on the side table. I wince at the brightness of it, although it only takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. She's in her sleep clothes, which must mean I slept most of the day away.

"Greyson got your car," she says. "Here."

She holds out my phone.

I take it and put it facedown on the cushion beside me. "Thanks."

"School starts tomorrow," she points out.

"Obviously."

"Are we playing hooky?"

We. My eyes burn.

How can there be a we when the world is falling down around me? I don't want it to take out my best friend, too.

"I might," I say carefully. "But... I don't think you should."

"Okay." Her brows furrow. "I'll see you in the morning, you can decide then."

"Okay."

She rises and goes back toward the stairs. Her footsteps are light going up. I check my phone for the time and wince. It's three o'clock in the morning. I can only imagine the sort of noises I was making while asleep to drive my best friend out of bed and down here.

There's a bed pillow on the floor. I pick it up and fluff it, then roll onto my back. Violet left the lamp on, which is fine by me. It gives me something to focus on instead of the lingering feel of blood on my skin.

My phone vibrates. I grab it without thinking, swiping open the text message.

MILES

[IMAGE]

My brain seems to lag for a second, because I don't understand what I'm looking at. It's one of those large white freezers that people use when their family hunts—my family never participated in that, but I had a friend in elementary school whose family was big into game hunting. They had this exact thing in their garage to store the extra meat.

MILES

Don't worry, I'm keeping our secret safe.

I cover my mouth.

He doesn't mean that the guy—the body—the *person he murdered*—is in there. Does he?

Miles doesn't send anything else, and I'm too shocked to reply. In what world would we both be awake at three a.m. anyway? I delete the image and set my phone back down. I feel marginally better once the picture is gone, and I blow out a breath.

That means there *isn't* a body in my apartment. And Miles probably didn't call the police, since no one showed up looking for me. Or to arrest me.

I'm too jittery for this.

I hop up and tiptoe into the kitchen. I find a bag of chips and the bottle of whiskey I was pouring into my coffee this morning and head back to the couch. It only takes a little bit of scrolling to watch a nice, lighthearted show...

About zombies.

Yeah, I'm losing it.

I drink from the bottle, wincing at the burn, then open the chips. I wrap the blanket around myself and take another swig.

And another.

Finally, some of the edge starts to fade. I relax into the couch and eye my phone. On the screen, someone's being eaten alive by a zombie. I reach for my phone without thinking. My head falls back on the cushion, and my eyes lower into slits.

"Willow?" Miles answers.

Fuck, I like his voice.

“Why are you calling me in the middle of the night?”

I can’t answer that because I don’t know. His voice sounds raspy, like maybe he was asleep. Impossible, since he just texted me.

“Oh, did you get my text?” Something rustles, like he’s rolling over in bed.

Maybe I did wake him up.

“That’s how it’s going to be,” he continues. “You can’t ignore me, babe.”

That has my eyes opening. “Don’t call me that,” I snap.

We’ve done this before.

He’s chuckling in my ear. How can he laugh after he killed someone? How can he—how can he be *normal*?

“Okay,” he agrees. “Are you at Greyson and Violet’s house?”

“Yeah,” I whisper. Seems like he’s unlocked my voice, after all.

“Sleeping on the couch?”

“Maybe.”

“Drinking whiskey...”

I frown down at the bottle. My head whips to the side, to the window at the front of the house. Where I can just barely make out the headlights in the driveway. Headlights that don’t belong to Violet’s car or Greyson’s truck, or my car parked behind my best friend’s.

“Why are you outside?” I blurt out.

“How about you come find out?”

I don’t want to do that.

Or... maybe I do. Because I’m already mostly dressed, and all it takes is me slipping on my coat and shoes. Curiosity has me drifting to the front door. I unlock it and step outside, my phone still connected to his. Goosebumps rise on my arms, and I shiver. I don’t move off the porch, and my eyes burn from staring down his car.

“Come on,” he goads. “Unless you’re scared?”

I square my shoulders. I don’t like challenges. It’s the competitive part of me that just won’t let it rest. Which is why I don’t think as I say, “I’m not.”

“Then get in the damn car.”

His words unfreeze my limbs. I trot down the porch steps and down the walkway. I yank open the passenger door and slip in without peeking at

him. Until I'm closed in, and he locks it. Then I turn my head and take him in.

He's wearing a black beanie, his dark-blond hair peeking out and curling around the edges of it. His quarter-zip sweater is done up to his chin, and his brown leather jacket over it is open. Jeans. Boots. A different outfit from this morning.

How many times have I climbed into this car before?

Always in the backseat, because we've never been alone. Especially not like this.

"How drunk are you?"

I lift one shoulder. "Probably not enough for whatever you plan on doing."

"I don't plan on *doing* anything." He pulls away from the curb.

I twist to face him. "Then why am I in your car? In the middle of the night?"

He's silent. His fingers flex on the wheel, but he doesn't seem particularly inspired to answer me. Which is... fine, I guess. Some things, I'm better off not knowing. We pass campus, pass the road to the point, pass the hockey arena. Until he's turning onto my street and slowing in front of my house.

"Go inside," he says.

I stare up at the dark house, and that familiar fear bites at my skin.

"I don't want to."

"Too fucking bad." He shuts off his car and climbs out. He leaves me there, striding ahead of me and stopping in front of the main door. There's that one that lets us into the little entryway, then the stairs up to my apartment, and then another door.

It only takes him a moment to get it open, and I suck my lower lip between my teeth.

You can't be afraid of the boogiemán forever, my dad used to say when I'd sneak into the room. You have to realize the boogiemán is just a made-up story to keep young children in their beds at night. Look under the bed.

I hated that particular lesson. Creeping toward my shadow-drenched bed, kneeling beside it. Taking a terrified breath and lowering my head to see under it... And being met with hazel eyes staring back at me.

My sister was punished for that prank—a week without dessert. And I was left to my nightmares.

Now I need to face them again.

I rise out of Miles' car slower than he did. My limbs are coated in ice, each step cracking and aching, until I'm through the front door and up the stairs. My apartment door stands open, waiting for me, but it's so dark. I fumble for the flashlight feature on my phone, stepping in as quietly as possible. My footsteps are light, but it doesn't really matter.

Someone wraps around me from behind.

Miles, I know. *Logically*.

His hand claps over my mouth a second before I scream, and his other bands around my body under my breasts.

I get the flashlight on just as he kicks my door shut. It clicks, and I vaguely register that he must've fixed it.

But also—there's no body.

No blood.

Not a speck of evidence that anything out of the ordinary happened here. Just the slightest smell of bleach, but even that's fading.

When did they do this? If I had called the police, they would've thought I was *insane*.

Miles shuffles us toward my bedroom. I dig my heels in, shaking my head. He just huffs and picks me up, my feet leaving the floor. He marches me inside and drops me on the bed.

I roll quickly and jump to my feet on the other side.

He sneers. "Your lock is fixed. Your apartment is clean. Get some sleep, baby. You're going to need it for what I have planned for you. And you don't deserve to sleep on somebody's couch."

With that, he turns on his heel and disappears out my door.

What does he have planned for me?

I stare after him, shocked—until I realize he's left me here. And the whiskey I drank seems to reaffirm its grip on me.

I sink slowly back to my bed. As much as I hate it, I realize he's right—I need sleep. I just have to hope that nightmares don't plague it too much.

MILES

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TWO YEARS AGO

I skate out onto the ice after Knox. The dance team has come down to watch us practice, and now that practice is over, it seems like an open invitation to take the girls out with us. My brother has a girl on each arm, and he's helping them shuffle across the rink in their street shoes.

"Not into it?"

I glance at the opposing team's benches. A girl stands there, her fingers drumming the boards. She's got long blonde hair. Blue eyes that seem to stab right through me. She's devastatingly cute in a dark-blue vest over a thick white sweater that conceals her curves, and light-washed jeans.

"Am I not into what?" I manage, gliding closer.

She waves her hand around at the giggling girls, the flirting hockey players. "This pomp and circumstance."

I laugh. "If you think this is pomp and circumstance, you haven't seen anything yet."

She hums, then sits on top of the boards and swings her legs over. Like a player preparing to join the game, except she just stops. Her heels hit the wall, and she stares at me.

"Are you on the dance team?"

She nods once.

"Do you like it?"

Her smile is quick. "You ask a lot of questions, Whiteshaw."

"How—"

"It's on the back of your jersey." She holds out her hand for me. "But maybe I know it because everyone knows who the goalies are."

"I'm famous already?" I joke. I'm a freshman. Hardly deserving of any fame. Or infamy.

"Not as famous as you will be, I bet."

I admire her confidence in me, even if it's false. She doesn't really know me, after all. No more than I know her.

I take her hands, but her feet slip out from under her as soon as she touches the ice. She drags me down with her, her yelp loud—but strangely, endearing. Still, my balance only goes so far, and I land on top of her. My chest pressed to her chest, my forearms keeping some of my weight off her, braced on either side of her head.

She stares up at me, and I freeze.

Like an idiot.

“Willow,” she finally whispers.

“What?”

“My name. Willow.”

“Jesus, Miles,” my brother barks, skating to a stop beside us.

He hauls me up, then reaches for Willow’s hand. He helps her to her feet. He gives me an admonishing look, then focuses on her again. Because girls always get his attention—and the two he had on his arms a moment ago are mysteriously gone.

He’s positioned her back to me. I climb to my feet slower, and I catch the shit-eating grin that flashes across his face. The challenge is just for me. My jaw sets. Game fucking on.

And then he’s focusing on Willow again—the girl I barely had a chance to talk to. He’s got her arm looped around his in no time at all, and he helps her move across the ice toward the doors at the far end of the rink.

She doesn’t look back.

WILLOW

Admittedly, I made a *little* mistake with my schedule.

I thought it would be better to front-load my week, and thus, my Monday starts bright and early at eight a.m., with two back-to-back classes and a third after lunch. Wednesday will be the same, and Friday will only have the third. Two classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

But after I get through the first two, I have to stop and get a second coffee from the cart that parks near the library. It wakes me up enough to enjoy my third class, one of two *fun* electives I was able to choose. Crime Fiction requires reading—but the syllabus contains books that are actually pleasurable.

So that one should be a mental break from the math and engineering classes.

When I picked my major, I really should've thought more about how many freaking math classes computer science degrees require. The answer is too many. Luckily, I'm good at math. Numbers come easily.

Doesn't help when I'm dragging after what felt like an all-nighter, and the professor acts like we've already been studying this shit for weeks.

And it's on my way to Crime Fiction that I spot a dance team girl. A freshman in her second semester. She doesn't look at me until she's right on top of me, and she slams her shoulder into mine. Her arm jerks, catching my wrist.

Coffee goes everywhere.

I gasp, sparing a split second to be thankful that I ordered it iced, but then it registers that my coat is soaked. Brown spots hit my boots.

She doesn't even stop—she's gone before I can call out her name.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

No problem. No problem at all.

Once I’m in the admin building, where my Crime Fiction class is located, I shed my coat and duck into the closest bathroom to pat it dry. I’m at the sink, my head down, when someone knocks into me from behind. I barely manage not to fall over.

“Oops,” a sugary voice says.

I meet the eyes of a girl I’ve never seen before.

“What’s your problem?” I try not to snap.

She goes to the far sink and holds her hand under the automatic dispenser. The foaming soap squirts into her hand. She waits a second, then does it again.

“If you’re the reason we don’t make the playoffs, we’ll be coming for you.”

She strides toward me.

I should see it coming, but I don’t. I guess I just didn’t think that girls would be *that* bitchy. But she takes her handful of soap and smears it into my hair.

Her lips curl in a smirk, while all I can do is stare at her in shock. Did she really just do that? The foamy suds run down my short hair, dripping onto my shirt. I feel like I’m having an out-of-body experience, watching from the ceiling.

“That’s for hurting Knox,” she says, leaning toward me.

“What?” It doesn’t really sound like my voice.

“You toyed with him. Used him. How could you do that, when there were plenty of girls who would’ve loved to actually date him?” She wipes the remaining soap in her hand on my shirt and passes me, knocking her shoulder against mine. “You break up with a hockey player, break *his* heart, and there are consequences.”

The door swings shut behind her, and I choke on a disbelieving laugh.

She thinks I broke up with him?

Is that why I’ve been getting weird glares all day?

After doing some damage control that leaves me with a wet shirt and hair, I leave the bathroom. Halfway down the hall, I realize I forgot my coat. My cheeks burn as I backtrack and snatch it from the counter. I’m not going to miss a class because some girls are being assholes.

Now I’ve got a point to prove.

I make it to class on time and slip into a seat toward the back, trying to discreetly rub at the wet spots on my clothes. People give me a wide berth. Even the professor casts an odd look in my direction. But they begin class without delay, and I let out a slow breath.

An hour later, I've decided what I need to do.

Knox was messing with me while he dated me—but surely he's not going to carry a grudge this long, right? He won't feed into the madness...

Oh, wait. He's Knox Whiteshaw.

Of course he'll fucking feed into it. Especially since, this way, he gets some sympathy sex out of it.

I grind my teeth together, refusing to let my brain wander toward him in the bedroom with puck bunnies. One, two, multiple. Should I even put it past him to invite a few girls into his bedroom?

"Willow!"

I flinch automatically.

Violet stops in front of me, frowning at my shirt. "What on earth happened to you?"

"Oh, just your run-of-the-mill psycho bitches." I'm trying to be cheerful. In reality, I'm ready to go home and bury my head in my pillow. Although even my apartment is tainted by what Miles did there. "They got my coat with coffee, too."

"Jeez." She shrugs out of hers and pushes it at me. "Put that on. Give me yours."

She takes mine and loops it over her arm while I zip hers up to my throat. I let out a slow breath.

"Better?"

"Somewhat," I grumble. At least no one can leer at my chest anymore.

"Okay, let's get an early dinner, then I'll go back with you to your apartment." She eyes me. "What?"

"I'd just..." I shrug. "I think I'd rather just go straight home."

"Uh-huh. Since when does Willow Reed hide from a fight?"

Oh, great. Suddenly all my pep talks when Greyson was harassing Violet come back to bite me in the ass. I suck my lip between my teeth, even as she grips my wrist and drags me toward the dining hall. I should've advised her to run away and hide, which is precisely what I'm wanting to do right now.

"One day and you're ready to call it quits?"

“Easy for you to say,” I mutter. “I’ve been getting weird vibes from pretty much everyone on campus. And it’s not like the dance team is supportive—seems like the lower classmen on the team have been the ones following Amanda’s orders to be shitty to me.”

“Is this Knox?” Violet squeezes my wrist. “Or... Miles?”

“Hell if I know. Both, maybe. They think I broke up with *him*. Broke his heart or something.” I sigh. “Ridiculous.”

We swipe into the dining hall and claim a small table in the back. Not our usual seats with the hockey and dance teams, front and center, and I’m grateful for that. Their table is empty anyway. No one eats dinner at four o’clock.

Except us and a few other smaller tables, everyone minding their own business. Just the way I like it. I get food and make it back in relative peace to our table.

But my bag is gone.

Violet’s is still across from mine.

I hunt around, brows furrowed, but there’s no sign of it.

When she returns, I tell her that someone took my backpack.

“No fucking way. Was your phone in your bag?”

I pat my back pocket, feeling the lump of my phone, and blow out an exhale.

“Nope. But my keys and laptop are in it.” I sink into the chair and cover my face. “Who’s doing this shit? I didn’t see any of the hockey guys in here, did you? I mean, would Greyson even play that game?”

You’d think he would be a neutral party, since Violet’s my best friend. She could withhold sex if he misbehaved... Wait, never mind, I don’t want to think about them having sex.

Violet shakes her head. “No idea.”

I toss my phone onto the table beside my food, and the screen lights up with a just-missed text.

MILES

[IMAGE]

I’m starting to hate texts from him. Especially pictures.

It’s a photo of my bag, and it’s being held out over the edge of a rooftop...

“Which building is this?” I ask, sliding my phone to Violet.

Her eyes go wide. “Looks like Admin is in the background, so I’d guess... this one.”

I grit my teeth. “Be right back.”

“Be careful,” she says.

Careful, my ass. I tell the dining attendant that I’ll be back in a minute and take the stairs to the third floor, where they abruptly end with no roof access. I go down the hall, to another set of stairs. Up and up, until I’m shoving open the roof door.

Miles sits on the ledge, my bag beside him.

He smiles when he sees me, then flashes his phone. There’s a countdown, the seconds running out. Less than a minute left. “Just in time.”

“What is that? You were timing how fast I got here?”

He rises. “I want you to learn how I operate. That I have certain expectations that must be met. And yes, Willow, one of them is timeliness.”

Wow. “That’s ridiculous.” I stomp toward my bag—and him. “I don’t want to play your games, Miles. In fact, I’m quite done with Whiteshaws altogether. Thought I made that clear.”

But the closer I get, the wider his smirk. Until I’m close enough to reach him, and he snatches my bag and holds it out over the ledge again.

I skid to a halt. “Why are you doing this?”

He lifts one shoulder. “Because you had your chance to choose, and you’ve proven to make stupid decisions. So now... that option doesn’t exist anymore.”

My stomach flips, and I look at him in a new light. I should’ve already seen him this way, but for the first time I’m noticing how his hair curls down over his forehead, how his light-blue eyes seem to dig right through my chest and into my soul. He’s taller than me by a good bit. Not more so than Knox, who I can’t help but compare him to, but I think he just carries himself differently.

“Done staring, baby?”

I snap out of it and glower at him. “You like calling me the same pet name your brother did? He called me *babe* and *baby* all the time, but especially when I was riding his—”

He drops my bag, luckily just to the floor, and moves toward me with speed I don’t anticipate. But suddenly he’s got one hand around my throat and the other sliding through the short hair at the nape of my neck. He drags me against him, tipping my head back until we’re nose-to-nose.

“If you ever mention my brother’s cock again,” he says, his breath fanning against my lips, “I’ll bring you back up here and dangle *you* off this rooftop.”

“Don’t call me baby and I won’t bring it up.” It comes out a little more hoarse than I’d like, but my glare makes up for it.

His eyebrows raise. And then a smirk takes over, some part of him enjoying my fight. I’m all tapped out on fighting spirit, though—this is just me standing up for myself.

“Why does the school suddenly think I broke up with him anyway?”

I swallow, and I know he feels it. Because his fingers flex against my throat, his palm absorbing the motion. Damn if it doesn’t do something to me. I inhale slightly, my nostrils flaring. Being this close to him in general is a little rush. I have the insane urge to run my fingers through his hair, to push it off his forehead. Like he does before he puts on his helmet for games, throwing his head back to get it out of his face.

I shouldn’t know he does that.

I shouldn’t like the way he’s pulling me in.

My body is just... I’m just...

He releases me and steps back, so suddenly that my knees almost give out.

“This is just the first day,” he says. “And I’m just getting started.”

He grabs my bag and throws it at me. It hits my chest, and I barely manage to catch it before it drops. Too late, he’s strolling past me and out the door. His footsteps echo back to me before the door has a chance to slam shut.

I sink to my knees and scour through my backpack. If he didn’t take anything, it would be a miracle.

And low and behold...

My keys are missing.

MILES

“It’s done.” The girl drops into the seat next to me. She sets the envelope on the table in front of me. “I’m not sure why—”

“Please shut up,” I mutter, sliding her the cash. I check the contents of the envelope, then tuck it into my bag at my feet. “That seat’s taken.”

She looks around the room, no doubt confused—there’s a whole bunch of empty seats around us. “It is?”

“Yep. Move.”

She pockets the cash and rises slowly, her puffy lips turning down into a frown. Or a pout. I can’t fucking tell—and I don’t want to either. Something in me has fundamentally shifted. I used to be happy. At the very least, happy adjacent. But now all I feel is this pressing darkness that drives me toward my prey.

Willow strides into the library and stops short. She finds me automatically, and I smirk at her. I lift my hand, showing her the keys that dangle from my fingers. After our little rooftop conversation, I went to class. Minded my business. But I’m sure Willow tried other alternatives to get back into her apartment.

Too bad her landlord’s number was temporarily blocked from her phone.

And so was Violet’s.

So with no one to turn to, she was left to hunt me down.

And hunt me, she has.

I followed the blue dot on the map as she crisscrossed all over campus, no doubt enduring whatever torture the dance team had planned for her. It

isn't often that girls are kicked off the team for misconduct, but somehow, I convinced Amanda to consider her breakup with Knox as such.

And if Amanda wanted to spin it a certain way, I wasn't going to stop her. Girl's crazy.

Neither was Knox, who's now free game. He's basically considering this whole thing advertising. Just what the puck bunnies want, and Amanda's the head bunny. Even graduated, she still hangs around like a thundercloud. Assisting with the dance team and whatever other jobs she'd picked up to stay in Crown Point. Rumor has it, it's either this or go home to the backwaters of Ohio or Indiana. Wherever the fuck she's from.

Willow walks toward me, her lips pressed in a thin line. She eyes the girl who just left my table, then refocuses on me. She stops on the other side of the table and holds her hand out.

It's remarkable, her just being in my vicinity is drawing stares.

I sit up straighter, my eyebrow raising. "Can I help you?"

"My keys, asshole," she demands through her teeth.

"Oh, these?" I hold them up again, then close my fingers around the cool metal. "Sit. Pull out a book."

"You're trying to control my study habits?" Her tone is... disbelieving.

I drop the keys back in my bag, sighing. "Maybe I just wanted to see if you'd actually do it."

"And what have you learned?"

My jaw tics. "That you're stubborn."

She crosses her arms. All it does is press her breasts together and up, and I find my gaze dipping to that sweet swell before I can stop myself. She's got a great body—always has.

"Let's trade," I say suddenly. "I'll give you your keys..."

"For what?"

"For your schedule." I'd have found it out either way, but there's something refreshing about forcing *her* to give it to me.

She drops her arms and grips the back of the chair in front of her. "You want my class sched—"

"No, no." I lean forward, keeping my attention locked on her face. Not on her breasts, or the way she's white-knuckling the chair, or her heaving breath. "I want your whole schedule. Where you plan to be, every second of every day."

It's not on her phone.

What sort of psychopath doesn't keep a calendar on her phone?

And as far as I could tell from clearing her apartment, and then her bag, she doesn't keep a written schedule either. Her laptop was password protected. So maybe there are notes there, but nowadays everything is synced together. What's on her phone should be on her laptop, and vice versa.

I sense the moment she wavers. She doesn't really have another choice, does she? Unless she wants to camp out on her front stoop and wait for her landlord to come home.

"Here." I flip my notebook to an empty page and set a pen on top of it. "Write."

"You're a fucking asshole," she says under her breath. But then she drags out the chair and drops into it, her bag *thunking* to the floor beside her. She picks up the pen and clicks it, then taps the top against her lower lip. "What if I lie?"

"I'll find out," I promise her.

She exhales.

And then she starts writing.

And writing.

And writing.

It's actually a little impressive how she has it all in her head.

When she's done, she shoves it across the table. I catch it and flip it around, scanning her messy handwriting. She probably wrote like this on purpose—it's half print, half cursive, and all the letters are practically on top of the previous one. She's given me her classes, when she studies. She started to write dance practice, but that's crossed out. In its place, she wrote *exercise*. Then there's more studying on the weekends, huge blocks of it.

"I don't think you study enough." My tone is dry.

She sighs. "Well, I've actually got a future besides getting my teeth knocked out to look forward to."

"You were enamored with hockey when you were dating my brother."

She tsks. "Now who's bringing him up?"

I grimace. "I told you not to bring up his—"

"Yeah." She rises and holds out her hand again. "Keys."

I hold them out.

She lifts them from my fingers and pockets them, wasting no time to snatch her bag and hook it around her shoulder. And then she's gone,

moving swiftly away from me. I watch the sway of her ass until she rounds the corner, out of sight.

I smile to myself and open the app on my phone. I watch her cross campus, exiting onto a side street to head for home. She arrives there and puts music on her phone. I put my headphones in and turn on her mic, just so I can hear her sing along to the melody.

To my utter surprise, her voice is *good*. She harmonizes with the singer, a name and sound I don't recognize. I press a button to turn her camera on, but all I get is a shot of her ceiling.

Huffing slightly, I focus back on the song.

And her voice.

Eventually, she stops. I don't know what to make of it. Or her. I turn my attention away from my phone and back to the text at hand. This English class was recommended by Knox. Apparently, it used to be taught by Jacob's professor. But she up and quit, and the job was taken over by an old-timer last spring. He's a journalist who doesn't want to write anymore, so now we just analyze old stories.

Whatever.

Knox said it wasn't too hard, and I'm inclined to agree. It's just a fuckton of reading... which is why Jacob was failing it so spectacularly, if the syllabus was anything similar.

I stay until midnight, then grudgingly head home.

Or, I *should* head home.

But part of me wants to test that the copies of the keys that girl made for me actually work. And a quick phone check tells me that Willow's been off it for the last hour. When I turn her mic on, all it gives me is deep breathing.

She's sleeping.

Anticipation licks through me.

How many times have I wanted to know what she looks like sleeping peacefully? How many times have I wished that she chose *me* to wake up next to, instead of Knox? How many times have I watched her toss and turn in my brother's bed, knowing the consequences of getting caught?

Too many times. Linger on the fringes of my brother's room after he's had his way with her, burning with anger that she was sleeping with his cum between her legs or on her lips. The noises she made while he fucked her, filtering through the wall separating our rooms, torment me even now.

But she's not off-limits anymore.

She's mine for the taking—and I don't want the noises embedded in my head. I want to make her scream, or I want her silent. I want more than my brother ever asked of her.

So I change direction and head to her apartment instead of the hockey house. I unlock the first door and trot up the steps. I stop outside of Willow's apartment and listen, but there's no sounds. Just as I heard on her phone.

The key slides easily into the lock, and the deadbolt turns. I enter slowly, setting my bag just inside the door. It smells fresher in here. One of her windows in the living room is open a crack, letting in the crisp winter wind. The curtains in front of it flutter out, brushing the plants.

She must've hated the scent of bleach. There's a candle on her stove, not lit, but the smell of fresh apples emanates from it. The wax is still warm and soft. She cares about how her apartment looks and feels, even if it's a carbon copy of some interior designer's Pinterest board.

I brush past it, rolling the bit of wax off my finger, and head for her bedroom. The door is open, and I automatically stop at the threshold.

She's asleep, under the covers, with one hand curled under her chin. Her mouth is open slightly, her short hair fanned out on the pillow. There's an empty glass on her nightstand.

This isn't like before, I assure myself.

But it doesn't help that I'm practically sucker-punched with a memory. One sharper than I'd like. And I have no choice but to relive it.

She's crying.

Her mascara is streaked down her face, her eyes closed and her breathing heavy. Too many tears shed over my brother. She cries over him too much, and every time I'm left... watching.

Unable to move toward her or away.

Stuck in some limbo that feels a lot like Hell.

A text lights up my phone screen, on silent, and I cast a quick glance at it. My brother is telling me to meet them at Haven. But my feet don't move, and I stuff my cell back in my pocket.

Going out drinking now would only result in a fight.

Not with my brother. Never with him. But inevitably, someone would say something stupid, and I'd have had one or five too many drinks, and I'd

wake up with bloodied knuckles and a black eye.

Knox just... left her here. Put her to bed like a child and slipped out while she slept.

Willow shifts, rolling onto her back. Her eyes are closed, but the light from the street seems to make the tear tracks on her cheeks glisten. She's on his pillow, between his sheets, and she's crying in her sleep.

Maybe she knows he left her to go to a bar, and that's why she's upset. Even asleep, she's aware of his fuck-ups.

Fuck this.

I grit my teeth and cross my arms, then wait until she eventually stills. Her breathing evens out, and she slips deeper into sleep. It's only then that I move toward the bed. I stop a good five feet away. We're not going to discuss why I'm watching her like a sick pervert—hell, maybe I am sick in the head. Twisted enough to seek her out when I know I shouldn't.

She's gorgeous even when she's tortured. And lately, it seems like she's always in pain.

"Knox?" she murmurs, shifting toward me. She reaches out.

And I hate, I hate that I go toward her. It's like I can't even help myself. Something about her just drags me in, and that unsurety disappears the moment her fingers close around my wrist.

Her eyes don't open, but she pulls me down onto the bed. I sit beside her, her hold on me firm enough that I have an excuse to not pull away. The mattress dips under my weight, and her body shifts toward me.

I want to throw off the covers and touch every inch of her.

I've never been so far and so close to moving. That limbo feeling intensifies.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I love you."

My heart stops.

She doesn't mean that. She hasn't said that to him—not yet.

But she says it in my direction, and for a second, I forget that she thinks I'm him. I don't move to touch her, or get up from the spot where I sit, and everything comes crashing back down around me. I stew in the feeling of coming in second. No, not even that. I'm not even on the fucking playing board.

It's not the first time my brother has beaten me to the punch.

"You don't yet," I whisper to her. "But you will."

I shake my head to clear her words from ringing in my ears—and my promise to her. My parents taught us the worth of a promise. The weight of one.

The closer I get, the headier her scent is. I want to rip off her blankets and cover her with my body. To feel the heat of her.

Impossible wants from a frozen man.

Instead, she does it for me. She rolls onto her back and knocks off the blankets on her own, baring her stomach. Panties. Legs. In the dim light coming in through the window, I don't know what to focus on first.

My cock jumps to attention, and I grit my teeth. I will it to go away, but it's like my dick has other ideas. It wants to be inside her.

Fuck, I could get behind that.

But she's not ready for it, so I turn away and palm my length through my jeans. It doesn't do much to soothe the ache, and before I know it, I'm fucking fumbling the button and zipper of my pants. I expose myself in her room and jack myself off, cursing my willpower in my head.

I face her and slow my movements. It draws out my agony, until each time my hand comes down, my muscles tremble.

Then I stop altogether. Blue-balling myself.

I swipe my finger over my slit, picking up precum.

I inch closer to the bed and touch her throat. Her skin twitches under my fingertips. I held her throat today. Felt her swallow against my palm. Her hummingbird pulse. Then I lift my finger and trail the wetness from my cock across her lips.

Her tongue flicks out, almost licking the pad of my finger. I let out a low growl at the sight, standing stock-still over her. Debating how to play this.

With iron strength, I step away from her bed. I fasten my jeans back up over my raging hard-on.

Next time I come here, I'll do exactly what I want. I'll bury myself so deep inside her, she'll have no choice but to accept it. *Me*.

But until then, I want to be on her mind. When she's awake or asleep or fucking daydreaming, I want it to be my scent she longs for, my smile she craves, my touch she needs.

Until next time.

WILLOW

I'm early to my first class of the day. We went over the syllabus on Tuesday, and now we're going to be working on our first assignment: a still life.

Our easels are positioned in a circle around the room, pointed so we can all see the bowl of fruit positioned on a box draped in dark-blue velvet. It's directly under a skylight. When the sun's out, it creates sharp shadows and interesting lines. When it's cloudy, like today, everything is softer.

"Ms. Reed," the professor greets me, bustling inside. "While I appreciate timeliness, I believe you're not supposed to be in this class anymore."

I stop fiddling with my charcoal. "What do you mean?"

He sets his things down on his desk and pulls a folded envelope from his briefcase. "I request changes to my roster be printed because I'm dreadful with technology. But I received this today with your name on it from your academic advisor."

He hands it to me.

I open it, my brow furrowing. It's a notice of a class change. And sure enough, when I pull up my schedule in the portal, it's registered there, too.

New class?

Drawing 101, right down the hall. And it started ten minutes ago.

"Professor, with all due respect, I had no idea about this. Can I just—"

"Stay?" He tuts. "Unfortunately, this class is pretty competitive. Your spot has already been filled. I'm sorry, Ms. Reed."

My chest tightens. I was looking forward to painting a stupid bowl of fruit. And now I'm late to a class that I'm ill prepared for.

“Gather your stuff, I’ll walk you there,” he says. Still sympathetic—or maybe just plain pitying.

I mean, he kind of blindsided me here.

I nod, trying to ignore the lump in my throat, and collect my charcoal, the paints that I luckily hadn’t opened yet, my untouched palette. I stuff it all into my bag and follow him out the door. The drawing class is literally right around the corner, and he steps in with me right behind him.

This class seems similarly set up, everyone’s easels at an angle so they can see the center.

The professor spots her colleague and approaches. Her steel-gray hair is loose and curling around her face, and her skin is flawless. The gray is either an intentional choice or premature, because she doesn’t look older than forty.

“Willow Reed?” she asks me.

I nod once.

“Ms. Reed seemed to have forgotten about the switch,” my painting professor says. “Perhaps the registrar didn’t confirm the change.”

“No matter. Welcome, Willow. I’m Professor Hixby.”

“Nice to meet you,” I murmur.

She guides me in. “We’re working on capturing motion today. The class was about to pair up and draw their partner. I had planned on working with a student due to the odd number, but you can take my spot.” She stops at an easel. “Here you are. I have an extra syllabus printed, as well as materials you’ll be required to have for class.”

“Great.” I take a seat on the stool, eyeing the work on the paper that Professor Hixby must’ve done to demonstrate, then turn my attention to my partner.

And almost fall off the stool.

Miles tilts his head. “Surprised to see me?”

“You take a drawing class?”

My jaw works, and my mind races to put two and two together. He has an elective—*obviously*. He knew my schedule, since he forced me to give it to him at the beginning of the week. Of course, I crammed it with as much shit that I could in an effort to keep myself looking busy. It was almost too perfect how he managed to switch my classes. But he wouldn’t have been able to do that without someone signing off on it.

“Did you bribe my advisor?” I hiss.

He grins. “Me? Now, why would I do that?”

“This,” I motion between us, “is forcing me to spend time with you.”

“No, if I wanted to force you to spend time with me, I’d tie you up and keep you in my room like a good little pet.” He leans in, his eyes gleaming. “I’d cut off your clothes and make you kneel at my feet as I did my homework, with a gag in your mouth and your wrists bound behind your back. Maybe I’d put a vibrator in your pussy and watch you squirm and see how far I could push you before you begged for just a little more... *pressure*.”

My mouth is hanging open.

Not because I didn’t expect Miles Whiteshaw to be filthy-mouthed.

And *definitely* not because his words elicit a physical response in me.

Holy shit—he’s deranged. And I must be, too.

“The day I kneel at your feet is the day I die,” I manage to respond.

He shrugs, sitting straighter and focusing back on his easel. “We can simulate your death if you want, *baby*. But you’re not leaving this earth one second before me.”

I shiver.

The professor appears at my side with the syllabus and material list. After a quick scan, I pull out my charcoal pencils and show them to her. She nods, grinning, and reiterates what we should be doing. Capturing *movement*, the action of drawing.

And then she’s tearing her work from the pad and leaving it blank for me. It takes way too long for the newfound ache between my legs to fade. Matters are only made worse in that I have to watch Miles.

I sketch his profile, his nose, his chin, the slope of his throat. I’m a shit drawer, I realize. Especially when it comes to people. My figure doesn’t look anything like Miles.

“Looser lines,” the professor advises, halfway through the class. She grips my wrist and shakes my arm gently. “Draw with your whole arm, Willow.”

She says something to Miles, but I miss it. My face is on fire.

Why did I have to take an art class, at all?

Because I thought it would be fun?

Well, it’s not. It’s judgmental and hard and *stupid*, and my eyes are burning for no goddamn reason. I give up on watching Miles because it’s not helping. I instead turn to the clock, drawing the circle and the numbers,

the hour hand, the minute hand, the blurred second hand. Capturing it mid-tick.

But really, just willing it to move faster.

I put more effort into it, trying to get all the little details in the shadows right.

Miles' stool scrapes along the floor, and suddenly he's looming over my shoulder. He snickers.

"Maybe you should stick to singing," he says in my ear.

And then he's moving past me, his bag over his shoulder. Most of the class is filing out along with him. A new blush rises to my cheeks. I was so desperate to get out of here, and now I've missed the end of class.

I hurry to put my things away and shove the syllabus into one of my notebooks. The professor waves goodbye, and out the door I go. I've got a math class after lunch, and homework due for it. It's Quantitative Problem Solving, which is really fancy wording for applying math to real-life situations.

Although we've really only just started, it seems like an interesting subject. And hopefully useful in whatever career path I choose.

Computer science is supposed to open a lot of doors... except right now, it's feeling more like a lot of them are slamming in my face.

My phone buzzes when I'm halfway to the coffee cart. I step off the sidewalk and answer Violet's call with a frown.

"What's up?"

"Are you on the warpath or something?" Violet asks.

I pause. "Um, not at this moment."

"Where are you?"

I tell her.

"Stay right there. Don't move. Seriously."

"Okay, okay." I look around, but the quad is empty. It's a little early for lunch, I guess. And it doesn't help that it's freaking cold out, with another storm blowing in this weekend. Still, I stay where I am until I spot Violet coming from the parking garage.

She grabs my hand and tows me right back in the direction she came. She doesn't stop until we're at her car, both safely inside with the engine running. I put my hands in front of the vents, my teeth chattering.

"I could've waited for you at the student center," I mutter.

"No, you couldn't have," she replies. "You're in deep shit."

“With who?”

“Amanda?” Violet scoffs. “Come on, Will, if you’re going to get revenge, you should tell me about it beforehand so I can try to help minimize the damage.”

“Um...” I shake my head. “Sorry, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

My best friend stares at me. “It came from your phone.”

“*What* came from my phone?”

“The screenshots.”

I’m going to smack her. “Can you be any more cryptic?”

She winces.

Guilt immediately slaps me in the face, and I reach for her hands. “Sorry. Sorry, I don’t mean to take anything out on you. I’m just frustrated because of Miles, and... Can you just show me what you’re talking about?”

She grips my hands back. “Don’t apologize. I didn’t mean to be vague—I thought you were just playing dumb.”

“Well, I’m not dumb and I wouldn’t pretend to be.” I retract my arms, sitting on my hands. The heated seats are warming up, and I will take every ounce of it I can get.

Violet hands me her phone. My social media page. Calling out Amanda for being biased, for only wanting to be involved in the dance team because of its proximity to the hockey players. And the screenshots of her lusting after Steele, Knox, and a few others who have since graduated. Her messages to me about hooking up with them at parties, if I think low-cut shirts will do it or if she needs to be more forward...

“These conversations are from ages ago.” I shake my head. “Why...?”

“People are saying you’re sharing them out of spite,” Violet says. “Because Amanda kicked you off the dance team, you want revenge. But they’re saying you broke girl code or whatever.”

Oh, great.

“How—” I swallow my frustration. “Do you think my phone was hacked?”

“Maybe. Either way, we’ve got to perform some major damage control. You need to delete it and post... I don’t know, an apology or something. Or say they were edited—”

“I’m not going to cave.” I grit my teeth. Whoever did this wanted to cause harm. I’d never do that, no matter how much I wanted to punch

Amanda for kicking me off the team. “I mean, yes, I’ll delete it.”

I pull up the app, but my social media won’t load. It just spins and spins. “I don’t think I have service down here. I’ll delete it later. Promise.” I hop out of her car. “I’ll just keep on the down-low, you know? It’ll be fine.”

She doesn’t believe me, but she gets out of the car and walks into the student center with me. There’s a little shop next to the dining hall that sells to-go sandwiches, and we both automatically head there instead of the dining hall.

I’m collecting dirty looks as we go, but I keep my gaze averted. Part of me wants to snap back at everyone, but it’s clear that whoever got into my socials wanted this to happen. And in a way, I’m in the wrong.

“Try to delete it again,” Violet urges.

I reload it, but nothing. Just a gray screen.

“This is fucking stupid,” I growl. “I’m going to have to do it on my laptop. Which is at home, of course.”

“I’ll give you a ride.”

We pay for our sandwiches and head back to Violet’s car. We get there without any trouble, but I can feel it brewing like a fucking storm in our wake. The way that thunderstorms send electricity into the air before lightning strikes—that’s what this is. My hair at the nape of my neck is standing up, and I’m on red alert all the way back to my apartment.

“Um...” Violet shifts in her seat. “I’d come up, but I promised I’d get drinks with Grey.”

“Not a problem,” I hop out and lean in the opening. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She smiles, but it’s tight. She’s concerned, and she has every right to be. I am, too. I get up to my apartment and lock my door, then go hunting for my laptop. To delete a post I didn’t even make, with screenshots that somehow came from me... but didn’t.

Which would be fine, if my laptop was here.

But it isn’t.

And, with a sick sense of dread, I have a feeling there’s exactly one person who would’ve broken in and taken it.

MILES

“**S**he needs to learn her place,” Amanda hisses to her friends. She’s holding court, or so it would seem, in the seats just above the players’ entrance to the rink.

“Shouldn’t you have left Crown Point by now?” I ask her, raising an eyebrow. “Aren’t you like, thirty?”

Her lip curls. “I’ll have you know—”

“I don’t care,” I say flatly. “In fact, maybe Willow did you a favor. You can now get with more of the hockey team without fear of them misinterpreting your intentions. Except your one true love, Steele O’Brien. He’s faithful to his girl.”

Her friends are stifling their giggles—which is making matters worse in Amanda’s fucked-up little head. Her face is getting redder and redder, and I quickly move past her. If she explodes, I don’t want that sort of cleanup again.

One murder is enough, thanks.

Too soon?

I slip my mouth guard in and tip my head back, shaking my hair out of my face for my helmet. Once it’s in place, I skate onto the ice. I’m one of the last ones out. Even the other goalie is already here, warming up before practice.

My mind is halfway here, but I’m hoping instincts and reflexes will kick in to make up for it. I’ve got all the blockers up on Willow’s phone in preparation for her to try and salvage her Amanda situation. Her laptop is in my hockey bag, which is safe and sound in the locker room.

I skate forward and slap my stick against Knox's. He grins at me, following me toward the goal. Half of our guys are off to the sides, stretching, and I should join them. But first, I mark up the crease, digging my skates in to give me better traction.

Focus, I order myself.

Like I ever listen to orders.

Greyson eyes me, smirking, and skates past in a flash. I grin back. He's a mastermind when it comes to thinking up ways to fuck with people—and Steele, too. Although Steele is now off to the side, stretching, he catches my eye and nods.

They're all with me.

Setting Amanda against Willow is simply business. Because Amanda has a big mouth, and she'll manipulate everyone in her circle. Now that Violet and Willow aren't on the dance team, that's Amanda's domain. And who knows how far she reaches otherwise. Last I heard, she oversaw the fan bus to all the sporting events off campus.

She's got power on campus. No one can deny that.

Coach skates out onto the ice and blows his whistle. I switch places with the other goalie and drift up toward the neutral zone in the center of the rink. I take my time warming up until Coach divides us, each goalie taking our position in the goal. He explains the drills he wants each side to run, which every player will cycle through twice, then we'll switch.

I get into position, flexing my fingers on my stick. Once I'm in the crease, I'm in the zone. I can't explain it—it's like everything else falls away. Just me and the opponent and the puck.

Greyson charges first, with Steele beside him. He passes quick to Steele, who glides forward and slings the puck at the goal. It comes high, and I easily catch it and toss it away. Another two players are already coming forward, this time a freshman and sophomore. Their movements are just a touch more hesitant, slower. Pass, shoot.

This drill is clearly meant to drive the hesitancy *out* of our players. So they don't freeze when they get the puck in a game.

I block their shot with my stick. Another with my pads. I get into it until Greyson comes back around, this time with Knox. Knox passes to Greyson, who fakes a shot—and I fucking fall for it. He slips the puck between my legs and blows a kiss at me.

I flip him off from inside my glove—not that he can tell.

Makes me feel marginally better, though.

I'm sweating by the time Coach blows the whistle.

"Water break," he calls. "And then goalies are switching."

I skate to the bench and grab my water bottle, taking off my helmet and slowly heading back to the goal. The water is cold and refreshing.

"Whiteshaw!"

A voice I should *not* be hearing at practice catches my attention.

I spin around to watch Willow step through the doorway and onto the ice. She's locked on me, and then she stops in her tracks. My brother is suddenly slamming to a halt in front of her. I bite my tongue to quell the sudden desire to rip her away from him.

Why is he talking to her anyway?

My heartbeat rushes in my ears. She's leaning forward slightly, her balance on the balls of her feet. She doesn't do well on ice, not in street shoes. Her cheeks are red, her hair messy. Windswept, a little damp on top. Maybe it's snowing? Her eyes are angry, flashing up at him. Even her mouth is tense.

Knox says something to her, and she rolls her eyes. She points to me, and I can't help but silently rejoice. My brother can fuck himself right to Hell, she's here for *me*. I know exactly why, of course. But he doesn't. For once, I've kept him out of it.

Greyson and Steele both eye me.

The rest of the team falls silent. Well, silent-*ish*. There are some assholes who never shut up, and my brother is one of them. He chuckles and moves backward, sweeping his arm out in invitation for her to continue. Which she does, with surprising confidence, until she's right in front of me.

I set my water bottle and mask on the back of the net. "Willow. What a surprise."

"Where is it?" She's seething mad and sexy as sin. Her black blouse clings to her in all the right places, visible through her open black coat. Her cleavage is there for the taking, the wide V of skin from the center of her chest up to her collarbones smooth and tan.

In the winter. Go figure.

"Where's what?" I ask, trying to control my smile. And my heartbeat.

We have an audience.

"My laptop," she grits out.

“Oh, that old thing?” I lift one shoulder. “Not sure. I recall it was in the bag that I gave back to you—”

“That was *days* ago,” she hisses. “And I need it. Give it back.”

Coach blows his whistle, and Willow cringes.

“What the fuck is this?” He slides to a stop beside us. “Really, Whiteshaw? Entertaining girls on the ice?” His gaze turns to her. “You’re friends with that Reece girl, aren’t you? You ladies have an untimely habit of trying out for the hockey team. Girls on my ice during practice. Never in my years...”

Willow’s already walking backward, apologizing to him with her hands up. She gets all the way to the door that’ll take her back toward the locker rooms, or the exit. Depending on where she wants to go.

If she goes to the locker room, she’ll no doubt search my bag while I’m out here.

And if she does that, of course she’ll find her laptop.

“Sorry, Coach.” I drift after Willow. I just need to see if she turns left toward the locker rooms, or right toward the exit...

Except, well, I don’t really have anything to worry about.

Amanda has made her way down to the players’ entrance level.

I catch sight of her just as Willow reaches the doorway.

“Uh-oh.”

Coach follows my line of sight, but it’s like it happens in slow motion. One minute, Willow is facing off against Amanda.

And the next, Amanda is on her.

“Shit,” Coach yells.

He skates for the door. I go for it, too, and I’m right on his heels getting to the girls. They’re locked in, Amanda’s hand—more like a claw—digging into Willow’s neck. She hits Willow with her other hand, a true punch that lands across Willow’s cheekbone.

My anger spikes.

Willow drags Amanda forward and knees her in the stomach. When Amanda folds, Willow grabs her by her hair and twists. She uses her momentum to send the girl flying forward, and she just barely catches herself on her forearms.

Coach hoists a shrieking Amanda off her feet before she can regain her footing, and I use my size—and padding—to herd Willow against the wall.

Her chest is heaving, and her jacket is off. Her shirt is ripped, and she's got blood trickling down her neck.

"Fuck." I shake my head at her, knowing that this was my fault—but also being unable to deny that this is the hugest fucking turn-on I've ever known.

Willow just got in a fight, and she's still smiling.

Well, okay, she's scowling. But she's standing. Bloody and bruised, and she would've kept fighting even longer. In fact, she was owning Amanda. Another minute, and she would've had the older girl running for the hills.

"Look at me," I command, wanting to ride the exhilaration with her.

Willow's gaze tips up to mine.

I drink in her anger, which seems to rise like a tide in her. Until she's pushing at me, shoving with all her strength. For all the good it does, I barely rock back a step. And I'm harder than I've ever been, although it fucking sucks to have the cup blocking it. It's a motherfucker when you're turned on... not that it happens very often.

Anyway, it does the job of hiding my emotions, at the very least.

"Good thing your first opponent was more your size," I say.

"Get out of my way."

I glance over my shoulder. Coach has disappeared with Amanda, and half the team seems to be crowding in the doorway—but the front two, Greyson and Steele, seem unbothered about letting anyone through.

"If I let you go, she's just going to jump you with her friends," I reason.

I lean down, my decision made. She doesn't seem to understand what I'm doing until my hands are on her thighs and my shoulder catches her stomach. She squeals when I stand with her over my shoulder, and I turn back to the ice.

"Get an ice pack from first aid, would you?" I ask Steele.

He nods in affirmation and slips past me.

My teammates make a hole for me. I skate directly to the penalty box, where I set her on her feet and push her backward. She looks around slowly.

"Stay," I order.

She glowers at me.

I roll my eyes. "Unless you want to get jumped?"

"Shut up." She sits on the bench, leaning back and crossing her arms. She's going to freeze in two seconds flat with her arms bare.

But I don't quite have it in me to do anything else nice for her.

Luckily, Steele arrives with both her jacket and an ice pack. And bandages. He hands the lot to me, although I don't miss that Willow knows I forgot about her jacket.

Fucker.

And now I want her to be warm? What kind of sap am I?

"Here," I grunt, tossing the supplies at her. Her jacket falls to the floor. I slam the door shut again and point down. "Latch this."

I stare her down until she moves forward and locks the penalty box door. It'll save her if someone slams into it, at the very least.

But she just makes me so crazy. All I can do is skate away—otherwise I might completely lose it.

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WILLOW

My head throbs. I've got strands of long hair caught in my fingers, and I frown as I drop them to the floor beside me. I didn't think I held Amanda's hair that tightly—it was my initial instinct as she clawed at my neck, probably trying to do the same thing. Except my short hair helped me out and she couldn't get a good grip.

Their coach returned to the ice after dealing with her, spared an ugly glance for me, then continued on with practice as if nothing was wrong. Maybe Amanda pled her case in the parking lot, and he's just gearing up to deal with me after practice.

So here I sit, my jacket newly zipped up to my collarbone, the bandages secured against my neck where her nails broke my skin, and the ice pack held dutifully to my aching cheekbone.

After another forty minutes, if that, it seems like the team is done. Coach Roake knocks on the glass, waiting for me to unlatch the door to the penalty box. It swings inward, and he looms in the doorway. He scours me for a moment, seeming to take stock of my injuries.

"Fighting happens," he finally says. "I understand that. So this is your one warning. Pull a stunt like this in my arena again, and I'll bring you to the dean of students for misconduct myself. Clear?"

"Yes, sir." My voice is hoarse. I don't remember using it with much vitriol. Did I scream?

"I'm closing practices for the rest of the week," he adds. "So if anyone comes crying about it, I'll be pointing them toward your feud with the other girl. Are you going to press charges?"

I blink. "Um... on Amanda?"

“Yes.” He raises his eyebrows. “We have security cameras, I’m sure you’d have evidence. If you’d like her to be arrested for assault...”

“No.” I understand why Amanda was so furious. I would be, too, if I was her. “I don’t want to press charges. I don’t want anything to happen.”

He shrugs. “She’s going to lose her position at this school either way. But this is a discussion for when I’m not in the middle of practice.”

I nod. He leaves me there and skates away, exiting the rink and following the players out. I stay where I am, my body thrumming with energy.

Fuck, I feel—

I don’t know. Somewhere different than the limbo I’ve been floating in since Knox ended things. I’ve done everything I can to avoid thinking about the empty cavity in my chest.

Miles can punish me all he likes—it’s not going to make me feel anything else.

Okay, maybe a little lust.

Don’t go there.

Coming face-to-face with Knox was not how I saw today going. And then Miles. And then Amanda. She really laid into me, but I could tell she was hurt by my post, too. I didn’t have a chance to defend myself or tell her that I was hacked before she was on me.

It was survival after that.

Movement catches my eye. I look up, finding Miles skating toward me. He’s lost his pads and, helmet. The doors at the far end of the rink are open, and a Zamboni rumbles through it. He steps up into the penalty box, and my breath catches.

It’s too tight in here, and with him now filling the space, it’s like all the oxygen was sucked out.

He takes my hand holding the ice pack and pulls it away from my head.

“You might have a shiner in the morning,” he says.

I don’t know what to do with that.

Or him.

“Nothing worse than my sister and I would give each other,” I manage, tugging my hand from his grasp. “I’m going home.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“No—”

He shakes his head. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t say no to you?”

“Exactly.”

The notion is ridiculous. I stand—and immediately regret my decision. Rising puts me chest-to-chest with him, and my face heats against my will. I meet his icy gaze.

How can he be so *cold*?

“No,” I repeat. “No, no, *no*. See, Miles? You can’t just eradicate the word from my vocabulary.”

The corner of his lip lifts. Just a twitch. A smirk that was never supposed to slip past his mask, but I catch it and I find myself holding on to it.

“Move,” I demand.

“No,” he mimics.

He grabs my waist. I yelp when he swings me up into his arms and steps backward onto the ice. He cuts a path across the rink, to the far side where the fight happened. The Zamboni is only half finished, but I didn’t think about the slick path already cut. It’s one thing to walk on ice that’s been properly used, and another to think clean ice would be manageable in street shoes.

He sets me down once we’re through, heading to the locker room.

Too much bad shit happens in the locker room, so I wait outside the door. I can’t stop scanning the area, half convinced that he’s right, and Amanda is going to spring out of the shadows again. Not that I’d be particularly worried about fighting *her*. But by now, she could’ve rallied any number of girls to come help her.

Miles reappears silently and tips his head to the exit.

Maybe the paranoia is getting to me, because I don’t even offer him a snappy reply. I just follow.

“See?” Miles jerks his head.

Amanda leans against the hood of her car, just a few down from his, with a cigarette dangling from her fingers. She blows smoke and rises. She glares at me.

I stick close to Miles, and he opens the passenger door for me.

“Watch yourself, Reed,” Amanda calls.

“Fuck off, Henderson,” I yell. “I could press charges, you know. Good luck finding your next job, psycho—”

“*Willow*.” Miles shoves my head down and into the car.

I hit the seat with a huff and barely get my feet in before he slams the door. He gets in and starts it, blasting the heat.

"I hate winter," he says under his breath.

I twist to face him. "You play a winter sport."

"It's temperature controlled," he responds.

"It would help if you wore a coat. It's like fifteen degrees out and you're only wearing..."

A delicious sweater.

Not that I'd ever call it delicious out loud, but that's exactly what it is. It clings to his arm muscles and his torso, outlining his broad shoulders and tapered waist. The dark-blue color brings out the blue in his eyes.

Freaking hell, I'm a disaster.

I turn my attention to the window, just in time to catch Amanda's glare from the driver's seat of her car. I flip her off for the hell of it.

"You really like to piss people off, hmm?"

I shrug. "Maybe. But she's the one who jumped straight to physical violence without hearing me out."

He grunts.

Nothing to say because I'm fucking right.

"My laptop?" I remind him.

"What makes you think I have it?"

I hate him.

I knew I hated him already, but now I really do. And my stupid freaking phone won't load the apps. I've tried everything—restarting my phone, deleting the apps and redownloading them. I even pulled out my SIM card, just to see if that would do anything.

Nada.

"Can I see your phone?"

He glances at me. "Um, no."

"Why not?"

"Because it's my phone, and I don't want you to steal screenshots of my private conversations and post them." He sneers. "You have a history of doing that, you know."

"I was *hacked*." I focus on where we're going and sit up straighter. "Why are we going to your house?"

"Because I want to go home."

"Take me to my apartment."

He ignores me.

“Miles.” I push at his arm. “Take me home. To *my* home.”

Oh. My. God.

“Can you even hear me, jackass?” I shove his arm harder. Not smart, since he’s driving, but *sue me*.

He reaches for me too fast, his hand going around my throat. He shoves me against the door, his fingers digging into my skin. I go completely still for a split second, then try the sensible thing—you know, to remove his hand.

His grip tightens when I try to yank it away, and suddenly, my vision is speckled black. He’s not blocking my airway—but he *is* pressing on my pulse points. Everything goes weak—and then fades. My hand slides off his wrist, and my eyes roll back.

Out like a light.

I wake up flat on my back. The surface under me is hard, and it takes me a second to try and piece together what the hell happened.

One minute, I was trying to get Miles to take me home.

The next, his fucking hand was around my throat, and I lost consciousness.

I crack my eyes open and glance around, and my heart sinks. Unfortunately, I know exactly where I am.

On the freaking floor in the living room of the hockey house.

And utterly alone.

I pick myself up slowly. It seems like I was just dropped unceremoniously in the space between the coffee table and the television. Not on the couch, which is empty. That would’ve been too easy.

My laptop is open on the coffee table, swiveled to face me with a video playing on mute. I squint at it, trying to make sense of what I’m seeing.

It starts over.

My breath stalls. It’s an overhead view of the players’ entrance. Amanda squaring off against me. She says something, and then she lunges. She strikes me first, an open-handed slap that whips my head to the side.

She gripped my neck after that, trying to haul me closer. She'd been watching too many hockey fights, I think.

I hit her, and then Miles and his coach come into the frame. But not before Amanda punches me, the hatred in her eyes so fucking clear. My cheek pulses, and I brush my fingers against it. My skin feels tight and hot.

But then I get a good hit, slamming my knee into her stomach. I'll never forget the quick groaned exhale and the way it felt to grab her hair and throw her to the floor. And then Miles is there, crowding me backward, while his coach dealt with Amanda.

The video cuts there and starts again.

I shake my head and crawl to the table. I exit out of the video and open my social media tabs, going to my page to delete the post about her.

But it's already gone.

I sit back on my heels and rub my eyes. I'm probably ruining what's left of my makeup. My head hurts, *still*. Passing out definitely didn't help. My whole body is out of sorts. Clammy, cold.

I close my laptop and tuck it under my arm, rising slowly. My head swims, but my legs aren't too unsteady. I head for the kitchen in search of a drink.

Noise from the basement draws my attention. After a second of debating, I follow the sound and descend the steps.

Knox and Steele are on the couch, controllers in their hands. A video game plays on the huge television mounted to the wall.

"You finally wake up, baby?" Knox calls.

My brow furrows.

Am I living in an alternate reality?

He pauses the game and cranes around. "What are you doing just standing there? Come here."

It feels so much like how he acted when we were dating, I almost move forward. My body sways, and then I shake my head. I bite the inside of my cheek.

Blood blooms across my tongue, keeping me grounded.

He broke up with me. Admitting I loved him was his sole goal the entire time we dated.

"Did you cheat on me?" The words come out before I can stop them. I set my laptop down against the wall.

He tosses his controller aside and stands. He circles the couch and stops a foot away from me. Way too close for comfort, and my muscles have locked up now that his attention is on me.

“Why do you ask?”

I shrug.

“Would it make it better or worse?” He reaches out and tugs on a lock of my short hair. “I didn’t kiss or have sex with anyone while we were together, babe. Okay?”

Not really.

Because a million sleepless nights where I found him flirting with other girls come to mind. I was way too confident in us. How many excuses had I used?

“Can I have a drink?”

Knox gives me a look. “Tequila?”

For the wild child?

“I don’t think I need to be dancing on any tabletops tonight,” I joke. But really.

He grins. “Just checking.”

There’s a bar cart set up in the corner. I go to the couch and fall into the space next to Steele. He seems equally confused about me being here, but whatever.

“You fight like a hockey player,” he says. “You ever think of playing women’s hockey?”

I wrinkle my nose. “No.”

“You’d probably be good at it,” Knox says, reappearing at my side with a glass in his hand.

I take it from him and sniff. “This is tequila.”

“It’s a margarita.” He waves his hand, then reclaims his spot on the other side of Steele. “It’s different.”

“It’s really not,” I mutter.

Steele chuckles.

“Where’s Aspen?” I ask suddenly. “There’s not some get-together happening here, right? Because the last thing I need is—”

“Actually, she’s on her way over. So if you could switch seats...” He shrugs. “Sorry.”

Except he’s definitely not sorry.

I heave a sigh and rise. Before I can make it past Knox, he grabs my hips and drags me down on his lap. I cringe and try to spring away, but he holds me tight.

“You jerk,” I grit out.

“Stay here for a minute, and let’s enjoy the repercussions. You can thank me tomorrow.”

Fuck.

And then I hear what they must’ve heard signs of before—someone’s upstairs.

It doesn’t take them long to come down, and I just know it’s Miles. Because my life has been anything but easy in the past month, and he’s been driving me insane for the last few weeks.

So maybe this will work in my favor. If I can get over the snakes writhing in my belly. I loop my arm around Knox’s shoulders, and he gives me a shit-eating grin. He knows exactly what I’m doing, and he’s on board with it.

Some of my nerves settle—like the ones that wanted me to get as far away from Knox as possible initially—while others, the ones preparing for Miles to blow a gasket, are only ramping up.

I sip my drink. Then think better of it and down the whole thing. The tequila does its job, spreading warmth through me. I set the glass aside and wait for the fireworks.

Knox picks up his controller and resumes the game, his arms on either side of me with the controller, and his hands hovering near my hip.

“What the fuck is this?” Miles’ voice comes from behind us, low but deadly.

It does some strange shit to me.

I look over Knox’s shoulder, because Knox hasn’t so much as moved an inch. With his arms locked around me, even if I wanted to spring off him, I couldn’t.

Miles’ expression is devastatingly hot. And I mean, in a molten-lava, going-to-burn-your-face-off kind of way.

Although I guess that’s sexy, too...

“Get up,” he orders me.

I lean on Knox’s arm. “This is a brothers’ issue, not a me issue,” I inform Miles. “I didn’t choose to sit here...”

“And yet, there you sit,” he growls.

Steele pauses the game and faces us just as Miles rounds the couch. He snatches the controller from Knox and throws it across the room. It crashes against the far wall, but Knox just smirks up at him and settles his hands on my thighs.

It's a little too close for comfort, and I wince.

Just a little.

Miles sees it, though, and his fury escalates. He grabs my arm and yanks me up, spinning me around and pushing me face-first into the wall next to the television. He leans into me, guiding my hands up until my palms are pressed to the paint on either side of my head.

"Don't move a fucking muscle."

Or what? I almost ask.

But then the weight of him, his body heat, disappears.

There's a scuffle behind me. The thuds of what I can only imagine is fists hitting flesh. Something crashes, and I flinch when something slams into the wall beside me.

I don't want to know.

I press my forehead to the wall and close my eyes.

What's miraculous is the fact that I'm listening to Miles' order. The snakes in my belly have quit moving, even with the fight. Everything just slips away, and I focus on keeping my muscles still.

"Time to go." His words aren't for me, though.

The silence in the room grows louder. All I can concentrate on is my ragged breathing. And then a finger runs down the back of my neck, catching the edge of the bandage, and goosebumps break out in its wake.

"You're a bad girl," Miles says, his fingers trailing lower. Down the small of my back, then farther down. Until his palm is cupping my ass.

I shudder.

He removes his hand, and I crack my eyes open.

Smack.

His palm strikes my ass, and I jump. My forehead bumps the wall harder, and my fingernails dig into it.

"Fuck," I groan. "What the fuck was that for?"

"Unbutton your jeans."

I glance over my shoulder at him. He's got a bloody nose, for fuck's sake.

"Don't make me repeat it," he threatens.

I shake my head and fumble for the button.

“Zipper,” he says next.

I slide the zipper down, still facing the wall.

“Hands back on the wall.”

He hooks his fingers in the waistband and drags my jeans down. My thong gives him a perfect view of my ass. And then he grips my hips and pulls me out. I end up leaning my upper body over, keeping my arms stretched in front of me. There’s a wicked thrill coursing through me, but confusion, too.

He caresses my bare cheek, rubbing it with light circles. I shift my weight, but then his palm disappears.

I tell myself not to flinch, but I do anyway. This strike is harder. Pain echoes through my ass and straight to my core.

You’re not getting turned on by this.

“Why?” I ask.

He goes back to rubbing it. Squeezing. It stings a bit, a residual of him *spanking* me like a child.

“Every time you sit down, I want you to think of this moment.” He moves behind me, and suddenly his teeth are on my ass cheek. He grips my hips hard, keeping me from escaping. “And if you ever sit on my brother’s lap again, I’ll spank you so hard, you won’t be able to *walk* without thinking about me.”

Fuck.

He inhales, and I go completely still.

“Well, well...” He runs his finger down, slipping under the hem of my thong. The thong that’s doing very little to hide my arousal.

“Don’t touch me,” I hiss.

He hums, but he withdraws. He pulls my jeans back up and reaches around me, doing up the zipper and button easily. His chest is pressed to my back. Can he feel my heart pounding?

“Go home,” he finally says.

Shock flickers through me. I turn around carefully, my ass stinging. He’s right—I doubt I’ll be able to sit down tomorrow without remembering this.

Asshole.

His nose has stopped bleeding, and the blood is smeared across his face like he haphazardly swiped at it. Other than that, he looks like he might

have a bruise on his cheek that'll match mine when it darkens.

My gaze drops, and I suck in a shocked breath.

He's hard. His erection tents his jeans, pointing at me.

I inch past him, but he doesn't make a grab for me, or... anything. I just know that this turned him on as much as it did me, and we both got caught in it. I snatch my laptop, which I set on the floor by the door, and hurry up the stairs.

And all the way home.

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WILLOW

Fridays are for fun, and partying, and *not* hockey.

I only had my Crime Fiction class today, which was *fun*. And now we're getting into the *partying* mode. And by we, I mean me. Because Violet's going to the game. Greyson would freak out if she didn't. Something about being his lucky charm—gag—and also, we all know what happened the last time she missed a game.

Anyway.

I'm putting the finishing touches of my makeup on, blasting the *Moulin Rouge* Broadway soundtrack and sipping the cocktail I made myself, when my phone rings.

Since it never rings, and since it's subsequently stopped my music, I hurry to answer it.

"Let us in," Violet says. "It's cold out here."

I raise my eyebrow, but I'm not about to argue. I agree and slide my feet into slippers, hurrying downstairs to open the main door for them. If I lived in a fancy brownstone apartment, I'd be able to buzz them in. As it is, this door has manual locks only, and a keycode I was supposed to keep to myself. Although I guess Miles doesn't count.

The first-floor apartment door cracks open, and my landlord sticks her head out.

"All good, Willow?"

"Yes, ma'am," I respond, ushering Violet and Aspen past me. "Have a good night."

Once we're in my apartment, I look between them. They're both fully decked out in hockey gear. In fact, both are sporting their guys' jerseys.

At one point, I had asked Knox if I could wear his. He... well, he changed the subject. Or he kissed me, which was essentially the same thing.

How often he did that only became apparent after he broke up with me. Then, it was like all the little bits of failure between us were shaken to the top of my memory.

And man, did it make me feel like an idiot when I realized.

“Fishnets?” Aspen eyes my legs.

I smile. I already put on the fishnet stockings, then slipped baggy exercise shorts over them. Similarly, I’m wearing a front-lacing corset under my t-shirt. Always save the tight dress for the last moment. Especially when dealing with powder makeup.

“What’s up?” I ask them.

“We’re bringing you to the game.” Aspen grins.

I snort. “No, you’re not. I’m going dancing.”

“You can dance after,” Violet argues. “Come on, we’ll go dance with you—”

“You both are going to get laid after the game,” I interrupt. “And once upon a time, I would’ve, too. But that was last semester, and I’m not going to hook up with some random guy.”

I plant my hands on my hips.

“Besides,” I continue, “whose house are you partying at after the game? The hockey house where Knox lives?” *And Miles*, I silently add. “Or Haven, where I think both of you have been cornered in the freaking bathroom? That place is basically cursed.”

Maybe I *should* go to Haven. I can watch the game from afar, get blackout drunk, and be in a lovely mood by the time they arrive. *If* they arrive. And if they don’t, I’ll come home alone.

Violet’s face falls. “I hate that this is so hard on you—”

“I knew what I was getting into with him. It was Knox Whiteshaw, of course I was going to end up getting burned.”

I shouldn’t have hooked up with him. But that was when Violet was out on medical leave, and Greyson was the new guy on campus. There was fresh energy wrapped up in the sport, even more than previous years. And Knox is known for his charm.

Damn it if he didn’t make me a sucker with it.

“Okay,” Aspen says. “If you’re sure...”

“Text me if you guys are gonna go to Haven.” I reach out and take their hands. “And thanks for trying.”

Violet rolls her eyes, but she pulls me into a hug. “Love you.”

“I love you, too,” I mutter in her ear.

Love and I are currently fighting—but for her, of course I’d say it. And mean it.

“Now go on, before you’re late.” I shoo them out and close my apartment door behind them. I deflate a little.

But then I force myself to straighten. To smile. I go back to the bathroom and practice a few different variations of that smile in the mirror. I put the metal straw in my mouth and practice my seductive bedroom eyes, blinking slowly as I finish my drink.

I’m floating, and I’ve actually convinced myself I’ll have a decent time, when I’m ready to walk out the door. And I don’t so much walk as *glide* all the way to Haven. I hang my jacket in the coatroom, keeping my wristlet with me.

The bar is crowded, the lighting dark. The game is being broadcast on the screens around the room, and it seems like everywhere I look, there’s blue and silver and white.

Most people think the silver and white are interchangeable, but they’re not. Blue and *silver* are our school colors. But their away jerseys are white with bands of silver and blue. Maybe that’s where the confusion comes from. Or the fact that silver isn’t that easy to find when you’re buying t-shirts, unless you buy the expensive, branded CPU stuff.

I scout the bar, which seems to have clusters of groups, then stride around it and slip onto a free stool. A bartender, an alumni, swings by and takes my order.

“Put it on my tab,” a guy says over my shoulder. “And I’ll take another.”

I glance up at the football player. Not someone I knew through Jack, Violet’s asshole ex-boyfriend. Actually, I can’t say I know this guy’s name at all. His face is familiar, though.

“Ronan Pierce,” he introduces.

“Willow.” I shake his hand, smiling a bit.

“You’re a senior at CPU, right?”

“I am.”

He inches into my space, leaning his elbow on the bar. He's already got a bottle of beer in his hand, which he takes a long draw from, but his eyes never leave mine. He's got a kind of roguish charm that reminds me of Greyson or Steele. Dark and twisty and alluring. More Venus fly trap than man.

"Me, too. I think you just transferred into my drawing class."

My eyebrows hike. "A creative football player?"

"Ah, so you *do* know who I am."

I flush. "No, no, I just recognized you from..."

From when we went to the football games and danced at halftime. Those words die in my throat. The bartender returns with our drinks, and I take a gulp of mine.

"What's your drink of choice tonight?" he asks.

There's cheering around the bar, and my gaze darts up to the television. On screen, the CPU Hawks are celebrating. Knox is holding his stick up in the air, and the on-ice players swarm him in celebration.

"Vodka." I turn back to Ronan. "I was going to go with tequila, but that was before I decided to come here instead of Prime."

"Tequila makes you dance?"

"And strip, on occasion." I lean into him. "Just don't tell anyone that."

He laughs. "Our dirty little secret. No problem." The stool beside me becomes vacant, and he motions to it. "May I?"

"If you tell me what sort of liquor makes *you* dance."

He grins and takes the seat, setting his beer on the bar. "Well, I think I'd have to agree with you that tequila is the Devil's mistress."

"No, no," I giggle. "It's just the Devil's juice. Whoever drinks it becomes the mistress. Or master."

Another cheer goes up, and my stomach flips. This time, it's Miles filling the screen. He straightens and hands the puck off to a ref, and a replay rolls. We watch the opposing team tear down the ice toward Miles, the Hawks seeming to be caught completely off-guard. Until they shoot, and Miles catches the puck almost lazily.

"Are you not a fan?"

I eye Ronan, wondering if he's joking.

"More vodka, and maybe I'll tell you," I quip.

He nods and gestures to the bartender. "Another one for the lady, please."

“Thank you, good sir.” I take my almost empty drink and clink it against his.

Time blurs. I get a text from Violet, and I have to bring the phone up to my face to read the text. It’s blurry, too. The words keep moving. But I get the gist. We won—*that’s what that cheering was about*—and now the team is on its way to Haven.

I swallow.

I said I’d meet them here, but I’m really in no position to want to see Knox.

Or Miles.

Maybe Miles ranks first on my Avoid list, given the fact that my ass is bruised and tender. Discovering that in the shower this morning was not on my bingo card for this week.

“Wanna get out of here?” I wiggle my eyebrows at Ronan.

He shakes his head. “Word is, the team is on its way—oh, look.” He gestures. “My cousin, Finch, plays. I told him I’d buy him a drink.”

I force a smile and gesture to the bartender. He nods at me. The hockey team is pouring in with their admirers, and soon they’ll claim his attention. Greyson has Violet tucked under his arm. Steele’s hand is locked on Aspen’s hip. Knox and Miles enter after them, and I glance away.

“Should’ve gone with tequila,” I whisper to myself.

The back of my neck prickles.

My cue to leave.

I slip off the stool, putting my hand on Ronan’s arm to steady myself. Not that he notices. Or maybe he does. The bar is getting too loud. I take my new drink—the bartender really has been keeping me topped up tonight—and toss it back. It slips down my throat like liquid fire, although the burn has long since stopped working. I think my mouth is numb, my teeth floating.

The floor shifts, but I make my way to the bathroom anyway. A quick stop to pee, and then I’ll slip out the back door. Although I had hoped to leave with the football player, because wouldn’t that be fun?

The stall is manageable.

So is the sink.

I eye my reflection.

“Fuck them,” I tell myself. “Have fun.”

Famous words to live by, right?

I practice smiling. Pull my eyes open a little wider with my fingers, although my lids go right back to half-mast when I let go. I wipe the lipstick off my teeth and touch it up, then smile again. And again. I bounce on the balls of my feet.

“Be happy,” I repeat. “I’m so happy. I’m the happiest girl around.”

I *am* happy.

My friends are here. CPU won. I don’t give a shit that Knox scored one of the three goals or that Miles was admirable.

He *wasn’t* admirable.

He’s despicable.

“I’m the life of the party,” I tell myself.

And I know that’s true. My mood brightens, until the smile doesn’t feel so forced. Even if I am still practicing.

I toss the idea of running away and make my way back to the bar. I find Violet easily and rush toward her. I throw my arms around her shoulders and kiss her cheek, leaving a dark-red lip print on her skin.

“Hi!” I squeal. “Congrats, Greyson.”

“Thanks,” he replies. “You good, Reed?”

I haven’t released my best friend, and he’s eyeing my arm around her neck. I ignore his trepidation and focus on her. “I’m great,” I tell her.

“You’re drunk.” She laughs.

I wave my free hand. “Tomato, tomato.”

“You just repeated the same word twice,” Greyson says. “It’s tomayto, tomahto—”

“Oh, whatever.” I snort. “We should do shots.” I spin. “Where’s Aspen?”

I think they might be my only friends. Not that it matters.

It doesn’t matter.

“Aspen!” I yell.

A hand covers my mouth, and I’m dragged away from Violet. My eyes bug out, and I thrash for a second. Not that I make any contact whatsoever.

“Do you have to be so fucking destructive?” Miles says in my ear.

I scoff into his palm. Pretty sure I’m going to have to go right back to the bathroom to fix my lipstick. The asshole. But he doesn’t release me and instead pulls me tighter against him. My back to his front.

My fingers curl around his wrist.

Nothing.

No reaction.

Well, that won't do.

I push my ass back, swaying slightly when I brush his groin. And *yep*, there's the reaction I'm craving. I guess it's not enough to have a football player buy me drinks. After all, he didn't want to leave with me.

"You got a tab going?" Miles asks, his lips still pressed right to my ear.

A shiver trickles down my spine.

"No." It's muffled. He hasn't removed his hand.

Still, he reads me loud and clear, because he goes still. "Then who's been buying your drinks?"

I jerk my head, and he releases my mouth. I look up at him, craning back and almost losing my balance all over again. Which I would, if he wasn't holding me upright. His arm across my stomach keeps me against him.

"Who?" he snaps.

"I don't remember," I lie. "Maybe it was a bunch—"

"Ricky." Miles pulls me closer to the bar. He maneuvers me onto a suddenly free stool and steps up behind me, his arm never leaving me. We're banded together like this. When the bartender looks his way, Miles gestures to me. "Whose tab have her drinks been going on?"

"Pierce," he replies.

I narrow my eyes and mouth, "Traitor."

Miles chuckles. "See, wasn't that easy?"

"I was going to be easy. For him to take me home," I reply sweetly, hopping off the stool. I spot Aspen and hurry toward her, feeling Hurricane Miles in my wake.

I latch on to her arm. "Dance with me?"

Her eyes go wide, and I think she's trying to take in all of me at once. The puffy cheek, the bruises covered in concealer and foundation, the messy lipstick, and however else I might appear. Crazy? Happy? The life of the party?

Steele smirks at her. "Put on a show, sweetheart."

Her cheeks pinken, but then she's nodding. I drag her around Steele, using him as a blocker for Miles, who I feel behind us. We go where there's already a group of people swaying to the overhead music. It's not really a dancing bar, but the atmosphere after a game is always more playful. Exuberant, even.

I inhale their energy and mimic it. I swing around to face her and shimmy my hips. Aspen frowns, but I move her hands to the beat until she laughs and gives in. She dances with me for a song, then two. Violet joins us, looping my arm around her neck and helping keep me upright.

It's not *my* fault the floor keeps tilting.

"Miles looks like he's going to murder someone," Violet says in my ear.

The memory of the murder he *did* commit bursts to the forefront of my mind.

Suddenly, the urge to party drains out of me, and I go still.

Violet and Aspen stop, too.

"I'm going to be sick," I announce.

An excuse, maybe, but neither of them stop me from rushing out the side door by the bathrooms. The same one I was plotting on using to escape anyway. But now I'm dry heaving at the side of the building, my stomach churning and revolting.

It's only when the muscle spasms subside, and nothing comes up, that I finally straighten.

Something cold pricks my skin.

It's snowing. Of course.

My jacket is inside, but I can't be bothered to go back for it. In fact, it's best if I just... don't. I make it to the corner of the building and step onto the main sidewalk.

"Here."

Warmth in the form of a coat is draped over my shoulders.

I'm not *super* surprised to see Knox.

Because he may be an asshole, but he doesn't have a bad heart.

You thought.

"Why are you being nice right now?"

He laughs. "I'm not being nice. I'm torturing my brother."

Oh.

"Will you fall asleep if I put you in a cab?"

Maybe.

"Okay, walking, it is."

And that's what we do. He doesn't touch me again, but he does stay next to me. And when I fumble with my keys, which were in the pocket of the jacket around my shoulders, he plucks them from my hand and unlocks it. Then unlocks my apartment door.

“Get in bed,” he says. “I’m going to take a picture and send it to Miles.”

I laugh. I highly doubt he’d do that—which is why I strip out of my dress on the way into my bedroom. The fishnets are under my shorts, so those will just have to stay. And the corset laces are making my eyes cross.

“Willow,” Knox calls.

I face him and flop backward on the bed. A giggle bursts out of me. Something flashes in my eyes, blinding for a second until I blink away the stars.

“Sleep it off,” he advises.

“*No problemo*,” I reply.

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MILES

First problem?

Ronan fucking Pierce.

I guess it was bound to happen eventually—Willow would think I was fucking kidding around about her avoiding guys. And I arrive at Haven on a high, knowing she's there, only to find her drunk out of her mind and practically falling over the football jerk.

Mood ruined.

Second problem?

My brother.

I catch him watching Willow's abrupt exit out of the bar, and then he goes to the front entrance. Ducks into the coat-check room and finds her jacket, because of course he knows exactly which one is hers, and leaves without a word.

It takes everything in me not to chase after them. But even my patience isn't that good, and I last only a minute. I can't hold myself back anymore. I stalk out of the bar and quicken my pace until I spot them, although it's easy enough. They're moving at a glacial pace, so I adjust mine, too. I don't want to catch them—not yet.

Willow and him don't really touch as they walk. She sways, and he steadies her every so often, but that's it.

We make it all the way to her apartment, and it strikes me that Knox really should be more aware of his surroundings. I've been following half a block behind them since the bar, and—

He glances over at me and gives a half-wave behind Willow's back.

I glower at him and step farther into the shadows. Last thing I need is for Willow to spot me, although that seems doubly unlikely with her drunk goggles on.

He has to unlock the door for her, then helps her upstairs.

I wait outside, until I get too cold—then I step into the first door and shut it behind me softly. I cross my arms and wait for my brother to reappear. He trots down the steps so fucking smug, I have to ball my hands into fists.

He stops beside me and pulls out his phone. Mine goes off a second later, and then he's slipping past me into the snowy night.

KNOX

[IMAGE]

My blood boils.

Willow, smiling like she's never smiled at me before, in a corset that's pushed her boobs up and together. Her lipstick is smeared, and it takes me a long moment to remember that it was my hand that did that, not from kissing my brother. Messy hair. Tight black shorts, the kind that she used to wear to dance practice, over those fishnet tights that make her legs look killer.

Fuck.

She let him see that?

Ronan was bad enough—but my brother is *off-limits*.

I pocket my phone. Once I'm in her apartment, I shed items. My phone on her dining table, my shoes by her door. My jacket on the back of a chair.

I find her in nearly the same position as the photo, except dead asleep. Her bedside lamp is still on—the only things that managed to come off so far are her dress and shoes.

Part of me doesn't give a shit that she's drunk.

The other part... well, *does*. Because I want her to remember our first time.

Although the sight of her like this is doing things to me, and my control has been fraying for weeks. It's already cracked a few times, like yesterday in the basement.

My brother just wants to shove me over the edge, and I think Willow does, too.

I sit beside her on the bed. It dips and her weight shifts in my direction, but she doesn't so much as stir. Her mouth is open, her breathing deep. I pull her shorts and fishnet tights off and push her onto her side.

Her ass cheek is purple and red, the handprint almost perfect. Right down to my fingers.

I put my hand over it, digging the pads of my fingers into her flesh.

She doesn't react.

Makes me wonder if it hurts.

But then I register her thong. Another one, black this time. I drag it down and off her legs, and it joins the pile on the floor. I roll her to her back again. Her arm grazes my leg, and my throat tightens.

How can I want her so much, and hate her so much at the same time?

Once I undo the bow at the top of the corset, the rest is easy to loosen. Easier than my skates after a hard game. The ties are soft ribbons, and I change my mind about just loosening it—I keep tugging until the ribbon is pooled in my palm, and the corset gapes open.

Her breasts short-circuit my brain.

Holy shit.

I'm glad the light is on and that she's not hiding herself from me. Because they're perfect. Her nipples harden now that they're in the open. I reach out and drag my finger down the center of her chest, resisting the urge to touch her more. Although, for the first time, she's completely naked in front of me.

My gaze goes from her body to the ribbon, and I nod to myself.

A plan forms in my mind.

First, a way to claim her.

Then, a way to save her.

And when I'm done with her, I'll turn my attention on the football player who thought he could get in her pants—and everyone will learn that she's not available any longer.

WILLOW

Sunlight blinds me, as it always does when I forget to put down the blackout shades. I raise my arm to block it, and my other arm is dragged along.

Confusion doesn't help wake me up.

If anything, I sink deeper.

I roll over, into a warm body. My arms are lifted over my head, and I groan to myself.

It's too early—although clearly not early at all—and I'm in no mood to deal with the guy I brought home from the bar. Although, as I try to figure out without opening my eyes who exactly that is, I become aware of something else.

A separate sensation between my legs.

Wicked heat curls through my abdomen, and I let my knees fall open. I don't know what sort of guy I brought home, but it's not often that they're into giving. Most are takers, at least in the one-night-stand department.

I guess in the boyfriend department, too.

My heart skips as it automatically latches on to Knox. I don't *want* to be messed up over him, but why is he who I think about when there's someone beside me in bed?

There were countless times that I woke up in the middle of the night and found him gone. Drinking downstairs with his friends after fucking me, or whatever, until he finally came back to bed. That hurt—but what hurts worse is that I let it happen.

The body beside me shifts, climbing over me.

I finally open my eyes, and my breath stalls.

Miles is directly over me. One arm is stretched up, his fingers wrapped around my wrist and pressing it down to the pillow.

Am I dreaming?

Have I had this dream before?

No—because in the dream, Miles always comes to me in the middle of the night, in the absence of Knox. Because my heart seems to like forbidden things, and maybe Miles has always been my temptation in the dark.

But just because he's been at the back of my mind doesn't mean I want, or *need*, him. I don't want him. I should've gone home with the football guy who was buying me drinks. He seemed into me.

Miles hurts too much. Hits too close to the pain I'm desperate to bury.

"What are you doing?" My voice is thick with sleep—and maybe lingering alcohol still in my system. Everything feels a little hazy anyway.

Maybe I am dreaming.

"I've decided that this will prove to you that I'm serious," he says.

"Serious about...?"

"You. Me."

A buzzing sound fills my ears.

My gaze falls down his body. He's shirtless—*holy shit, abs*—and not wearing pants. His cock rests just above my pubic bone. There's a piece of metal, a piercing, in the tip. And another on the underside, horizontally. No condom. He shifts, and it slips down between my spread legs.

Legs that I opened when I thought it was some random guy.

Not Miles.

"I don't want to have sex with you." My breathing is harsh, more like panting. Because I know, I *know* that he wants to bury himself in more than just my pussy. He wants to be in my mind and my heart and my soul.

I can't do that.

I *won't* do that.

"Stop." I try to inch away, any direction I can go, but he drops his hips and pins them to mine. "Miles, don't."

He ignores me, lowering his mouth to my neck. I squeeze my eyes shut when he kisses just below my jaw. Then his lips are on the shell of my ear, and his other hand is moving between my legs. His thighs, hips, prevent me from closing my legs. Even when I draw them up, my knees even with his ribs.

"This is how it has to be," he whispers. "It'll be okay. Promise."

“None of this is—”

He runs the tip of his dick down my center. The piercing has a different sensation from skin. It’s cool, smooth. I could see how girls would be into that. But it makes no difference when he notches at my entrance.

And it makes no difference especially when it belongs to Miles.

I shudder. I yank at my wrists, but his grip, now on my forearm, just tightens. I look up and realize he’s tied my wrists with some sort of ribbon. It holds fast when I try to jerk my hands apart, and he does the rest.

“Please don’t,” I whisper.

He pulls back to meet my eyes at the same time that he inches into me. He moves painstakingly slow, but it hurts nonetheless. Like he’s ripping me in half. I’ve seen his gaze a thousand different ways over the last three years. Flashes of anger when I started dating his brother, then annoyance. Then disgust.

Is he disgusted with me now?

He’s out to prove something. To himself, or me. Or maybe he just wants the pain that comes with this moment—when we’re joined but so fucking far apart. My mind is a million miles away.

It doesn’t matter. He seems determined to drag me back into the present.

His fingers brush my clit. He rubs small little circles, and I squeeze my eyes shut. He brings my arms down and loops them around his neck, his lips inching along my throat. I dig my nails into my palms, and my skin crawls at this total invasion.

Tears burn behind my eyelids. A few leak out, slipping down my temples and into my hair. My hips shift. The attention he’s paying to my clit is causing a physical reaction, one I can’t stop.

One I desperately want to stop.

And then his hand is wrapping around my throat and jaw, tilting my head up.

“Open your eyes,” he orders.

I don’t want to, I don’t want to—

“Open,” he bites out.

I do. I’m having an out-of-body experience, and my gaze locks in on his face. His fingers tighten on my jaw, digging into my cheek and forcing my lips apart.

What I’m not prepared for is his spit.

In.

My.

Mouth.

He covers my mouth again and jerks his hips forward, and I cry out against his palm. My tongue blocks my throat. I'm unwilling to swallow his spit, although I feel it in my mouth like a second invasion.

We stay like that for a moment. My arms around his neck, his palm on my mouth. His dick spearing me.

I shake my head as more tears spill from my eyes.

Fuck him, fuck this. It doesn't change anything between us. Or how I felt about his brother. Or how fucking broken I am that all I want is to hide my head in the sand.

Knox made a fool out of me—won't Miles do the same?

Hasn't he already begun?

I pull my arms up off his neck, using my forearms to try and put some distance between us. My fingers press against his face, brushing his lips.

It feels like he's kissing them.

"Shh," he whispers. "It's me. Got it? You know me."

I don't want to know you.

He pulls out suddenly and rolls me over, dragging my hips up. I catch myself on my elbows, my lips parting. In one motion, he slides back into me. His piercings hit just the right spot, and it feels better than before—but I can't keep him out. I clench my muscles, grinding my teeth together. His one hand returns to my jaw, creeping across my cheek and covering my mouth. He doesn't let me bury my face in the pillow, as if I could hide and just get this over with.

I'm kept in the present.

His other wraps under me, palming my breast.

"You've got me everywhere," he says, and I think he means it to be reassuring. Or soothing. His voice is soft. "It had to happen. We need this, okay? Just take my cock like a good girl."

"Miles—"

"My cock is the only one you're ever going to feel," he continues, drawing out and slamming back in. Hard enough that my whole bed moves and my headboard slams against the wall. "This is our initiation. If I didn't do this, you'd never let me in. But it's my promise to you."

I don't understand. "You're doing it without my consent—"

He nips my earlobe. “I own you, wild one.” He groans. “Oh, see? You just clenched around me. Your body knows it’s true. We’ll just have to wait for your mind to catch up.”

“I—”

His fingers push into my mouth. Past my teeth, pressing down on my tongue. My jaw opens wider at the pressure. Panic flares through me, but he’s got me trapped.

“I’ve dreamt about what you feel like,” he says in my ear. “But goddamn, woman, nothing in my imagination could compare to the real thing.”

He rolls my nipple between his fingers. I shift my hips as he draws back and slowly inches back in. He makes noises in my ear that has me tensing against him again. My body feels strung out. I can’t make sense of what’s happening to me.

The room spins.

He pinches my nipple harder, eliciting my squeak of shock. His fingers slip out of my mouth and return to my throat. “Make those sweet noises for me. You sound so fucking perfect when you’re helpless like this. Just the way I want you.”

I shudder.

“That’s it, wild one, give in to me.” He rolls his hips and drives deeper.

Still so fucking slow. Drawing out every sensation.

Something breaks inside me.

Maybe it’s been cracking every day since Knox ended things, but this is just a sledgehammer to my defenses. My muscles relax, and I fall into his hold. It’s not just my body that’s falling—my mind is, too. Spiraling. I don’t know where I’m going to land.

Knox played me like a fucking fiddle and laughed when I fell for him.

Now I’m falling again, but it’s not into love. Or even lust. It’s just misery.

He’s picking up speed. I’m barely aware of it. The thumping noise of the bed hitting the wall echoes in my ears.

And then everything stops. He stills inside me.

His weight drops on top of me, and his hand slips from my breast, instead wrapping under both and cinching me to him.

“Get off,” I whisper. My voice cracks.

Maybe I've been in misery for a while, because when I reach for the feeling, it's as familiar as breathing.

"No."

He rolls onto his side, taking me with him. I don't know how he stays inside me, his hips glued to my ass, but he manages to put us in a freaking spooning position. He shifts, adjusting. Maneuvering to get more comfortable. But every move is a stroke of his cock. He doesn't even soften all the way—not that he seems to mind.

I wipe my face the best I can. My tears have dried up, and my heart beats uncomfortably loud in my ears. He didn't just do this for the hell of it—he's clearly not done. It wasn't enough for me to say no and mean it.

He wants something else.

But I already gave in. I don't know what else there is. He brings my pillow down so my head is resting on it. Although comfort is the least of my concern right now. He's still wreaking havoc on me, just in a different way. My chest is too tight—all of this is uncomfortable.

How much longer until he leaves?

The longer we lie in silence, the more nervous I get.

"You didn't wear a condom," I point out.

"I didn't."

I grit my teeth. I want to get away from him. To bathe in acid.

"Does that bother you?" His hand, the arm that's slung over me, traces a path across my stomach.

And that... that doesn't feel so bad.

"Are you trying to get me pregnant?"

"Not right now. I heard you have an IUD."

"You heard it from—"

"Don't," he warns.

I press my lips together and squirm. It just causes further awareness that he's still inside me. He moves, too, sliding in and out just a fraction. Enough that when I shudder, it's not from revulsion.

And that's terrible, too.

"Bad girls don't get to come," he says, kissing my neck.

"Good, I don't want you touching me anyway." And something in me snaps. Or reignites.

My desperation to not give in, maybe?

Or the fact that I *almost* brought up his brother? I can still feel those jagged pieces in my chest, cutting me with every breath. It makes me want to escape it—and escape Miles.

I rear my head back.

A satisfying *crunch* precedes pain where I made contact. Miles grunts, and I throw myself forward. I manage to squirm out of his hold and fall to the floor. I bite at the knot on the ribbons, loosening it enough that I can get my hands free.

My adrenaline is suddenly blasting.

I'm up and casting a glance over my shoulder at Miles, but he's right behind me. He chases me out of my room and into the kitchen. My fingers brush the knob of my apartment door, but too late. He slams into me. My front hits the door, my breath leaving me in a harsh exhale.

His laughter curls in my ears.

"So you are still alive in there," he says.

I scoff. "Of course I am."

He flips me around to face him. I tip my head back, my emotions suddenly tumbling. Anxiety, curiosity. His nose is bleeding, a little crooked. He reaches up and does something to it, and blood pours out of his nose again. But when he pulls his hand away, it's not crooked anymore.

Just swollen and already bruising. He'll have two black eyes by tomorrow.

He's got his blood on his hand. I fixate on it.

"This is fucked up," I breathe. "You need to leave."

"Willow."

"I just broke your nose. Why won't you leave?" Those damn tears fill my eyes again.

That hand I can't tear my gaze off goes down to my hip, his other one mirroring it. Then lower, over my ass, to the backs of my thighs. He lifts me easily, keeping my back to the door, and spreads my legs.

He slides back into me like he never left. Like he doesn't belong anywhere else.

"Feel that?" he asks.

He thrusts in and out, barely moving, but the friction sends shivers up my spine.

I grip his biceps. "No," I lie.

"Mmm." He leans in and kisses my jaw. "You're addicting."

“You’re an asshole,” I counter. “This whole thing is violating.”

Although the way he’s licking and sucking at my neck...

I don’t know which way is up anymore.

Do I want this? *No*.

Do I want to stop it? *No again*.

That thought breaks me.

“There,” he urges. He’s wrapped my leg around his hip, and his now free hand dips between us. He runs his fingers through my center, lazily circling my clit. Like the way he’s fucking me and teasing me are just... normal morning things.

Like he’s not in a hurry.

If there’s one thing I know, it’s that Whiteshaw boys always fuck and leave.

I grasp on to that.

Miles just wants me for sex. He wants to, I don’t know, claim to his brother that he was able to fuck me. And now that he’s done this, everything will go back to the way it was.

I’ll go back to avoiding the hockey team.

He’ll go back to dominating it.

“Fine,” I whisper. “Fuck me.”

He rears back to meet my gaze. I can’t keep my mouth open with his fingers on my clit. But I don’t really care that he’s getting a front-row seat to my sex face. His eyes shutter at whatever he sees in my expression. And whatever he was thinking, whatever was written plainly across his face, is slammed behind a brick wall.

I didn’t realize he had let a guard down... didn’t realize there was anything about him that needed guarding...

Until it was put back up.

MILES

She's infuriating.

Being inside her is the most wicked thrill. Like I'm doing something wrong—well, *I am*—and right at the same time. My blood sings with harmony.

Until she tells me to fuck her.

And then I see the awful, cold truth of it.

Sex, to her, means leaving.

Or maybe, in a more complicated manner, sex leads to sleep, which is when my brother would always slip out of the room. That's how I found her, more often than not. Sleeping in his bed while he drank downstairs.

I don't want to psychoanalyze it, but I *do* think it broke something in her.

Something deep and dark that she doesn't even realize.

Okay, maybe I do want to psychoanalyze her.

Maybe I've been doing it for a long fucking time.

But it's mid-morning. We're not going to sleep—but there is a chance that I'd leave after I come inside her again. That's what she's thinking.

"Miles." Her hand slips higher, up my arm, to my neck. Then my jaw. Her fingers are featherlight on my face.

Loathing rips through me.

I can't stop it—and I don't even try.

I pull out of her and drop her feet to the floor. Her knees give a little, and only my hands on her forearms keep her upright. I turn away from her and shove a chair. It topples over with a crash.

"Fuck!" I yell.

I stalk back to the bedroom. To my pants, neatly folded on top of her chair of forgotten clothes, and yank them on. At the last second, I find her panties and clean my dick with them. A mix of her arousal and my cum soaks through the thin, sheer fabric.

A present for her to find later.

Jeans buttoned. I grab my shirt and almost, *almost* put it on. Instead, I grip it harder and stride back to where I left her.

She seems frozen and unsure, and *fuck*, naked and timid Willow is just as big of a turn-on as the fearless wildling that parties too hard and puts on an excellent bravado.

The thing is, neither of them are the real her.

I guide her arms through my shirt, then her head. While I have her limp, I undo the remaining ribbon from her wrist and slip it in my pocket. Fuck that corset—she'll wear it in my bedroom and nowhere else.

What I should've done was find her panties, or sweats, or something... but my shirt hangs down to mid-thigh on her, and my dick twitches at the sight.

Again.

I mean, I kind of blue-balled myself *and* her just now...

"What are you doing?"

I don't know.

I ignore her question and go back to her room. This time, she follows. I rifle through her drawers and hold up a mess of hot-pink lace.

"What is this?"

She chokes.

I face her, my brows furrowing. "Why is it all... what is it?"

Her face turns red. "Um... crotchless panties?"

"What?"

"They were a gag gift. You know..." She shrugs. "For easy access."

I'm intrigued. I stuff them back in the drawer, resolved to revisit that idea later. She has a shit ton of thongs, which would display the bruise on her ass nicely. See, thinking about *that* has my mind slipping back toward fucking her senseless.

But then I register the *gift* part of her statement.

"Who the fuck is giving you panties?"

She laughs.

Laughs.

“Pretty sure it was Thalia.”

My brows furrow automatically.

Her smile drops. “Aspen’s roommate? You’ve met her on more than one occasion...”

Right. “Sure.” I snag a black pair that look like normal underwear and toss them at her. No bruised ass on display or piece of string wedged up her ass.

“These are my period undies,” she mutters. “Can I—” She steps up next to me and hooks her finger around a neon-green string thong. Like, there’s a minuscule triangle of fabric, but—that’s it.

“Why would you wear that?”

“To make you uncomfortable,” she replies. “Is it working?”

I clench my jaw. “No.”

“You deserve to be a little uncomfortable. I’m going to shower.” She disappears out the door, and the bathroom door slams a second later.

I ball my fists, then force myself to exhale. My hand automatically finds the folded knife in my pocket, and I pull it out. I flip it open and run my thumb over the blade, trying to gain control over my emotions again.

She’s infuriating.

You already thought that, a voice in my head reminds me.

Well, she is.

I don’t know how much time passes as I just stand there, contemplating what I am going to do with her. She’s like a wild animal right now, half-feral, and my instincts are screaming at me to tame her.

To lock her down, bit by bit.

“You kept it?”

My gaze lifts. Her hair is wrapped up in a towel, my t-shirt back on her body, and the neon-green panties out of sight. On her, I’d imagine. Although I shouldn’t imagine it, because it just makes me want to fuck her again.

And then I register what she’s talking about, and nod. “I took it apart and gave every piece of it a bleach bath. Don’t worry.”

“That’s not...” She takes a breath. “That’s not what I was worried about.”

“I’m not going to stab *you*,” I offer.

Not really the best thing to give her assurances, but whatever.

We stare at each other for a beat, and my mind goes to someone I *would* stab.

“Get dressed.” My voice snaps out of me. It’s colder than a moment ago, and Willow’s spine straightens.

For once, she doesn’t argue. I watch her pluck leggings from a drawer and then slide a CPU hoodie over my shirt. The fact that she doesn’t change out of it soothes a broken part of me. The part that had to endure her wearing Knox’s number on her cheeks, or his jacket, or his shirts when she would sleep over—

“Where are we going?” Her cheeks are rosy, her eyes wide. No makeup on her face anymore. It gives her a surprisingly youthful appearance. She could pass for a college freshman.

I don’t answer her question, but I do offer my hand.

For a split second, I think she’s going to take it. She certainly looks at it long enough. But she strides past me instead, and my gut churns. I follow her out the door, sliding on my shoes and shrugging my jacket on over my bare chest.

Am I an idiot for giving up my shirt in the middle of winter...? Maybe. But the thought of Willow wearing it instead will keep me warm.

I zip my jacket up most of the way. On the street, I take her hand and lace her fingers with mine, not giving her a choice in the matter. My knife is back in my pocket, my keys now in my free hand. She doesn’t say a word when I open her door for her and close her in, then round to the driver’s side.

My car is cold. Willow turns the heat up all the way, shivering into her hoodie.

“Where are we going?” she asks again.

“Patience,” I grunt.

She sighs.

I check my phone, then we’re off. The closer we get to the other apartment, the faster my heart beats. My brother pulled some strings, got me some information—but he doesn’t know what I’m going to do with it.

And neither does Willow.

My nose fucking hurts.

I guess I didn’t think about it until now, but the vibrations of the car are making my eyes water. How pathetic is that?

She probably broke it. I felt the bones click back into place when I aligned it. I can't remember how many scuffles I'd gotten into in hockey that resulted in *someone* breaking their nose. And our coach in high school was usually the one to set it before they went to the ER.

"Better to do it fast," he always advised, forcing the kid to stand still as he gripped their nose.

At least it's not bleeding anymore.

But I'm going to have two black eyes—and that's going to be a great story that neither of us will be able to share. Willow's eye is darkened, too, from Amanda's shitty punches. We fucking match.

When I find the correct street, and then the brownstone building, Willow frowns. She doesn't ask any more questions, though. I park. And then we're at the front door of a brownstone, which has a list of names and corresponding buzzers.

Then the door swings open before I can hit one, or any, of the call buttons. It forces Willow back as a woman in a long coat sweeps past us. I lunge for the door and catch it before it closes, then hold it open for Willow.

She scowls at me.

So far, so good.

"I don't know what we're doing," she whispers. "Where are we?"

"We're just going up a level," I say. I run my hand along her shoulder, brushing her hair to the side for access to her neck. There's a hickey just under her ear from where I was sucking and nipping at it earlier... One day, I'll cover her in them.

"I don't understand." Willow glances at me.

"You think I'm going to fuck you and run away." I spit out the words.

She stiffens.

I grip the back of her neck, my fingers curling around and digging in. She shakes her head to deny it.

"You think so because my brother trained you to believe it's what people in love do," I argue. We climb the steps, and my hand doesn't leave her neck. "I'm not faulting you for that. I'm just stating a fact."

"It's—"

"So, this is how it's going to go." We get to the right door, and I rap my knuckles on the wood. "I'm going to fuck you, and then I'm going to make sure you know I'm not leaving. No matter how much you might want me to do so."

Willow grimaces.

“And I’m going to make sure you know that no other man is allowed to touch you.”

The door swings open.

“Willow?”

My hand slides free from her neck. Lost cause, anyway, as she stumbles backward. I launch forward, though. No time to waste.

I punch Ronan Pierce in the face as hard as I can.

Willow screams behind me, but the fucker in front of me has most of my attention. Not all of it. I think there’s a part of me that’ll always be focused on the girl at my back. He rocks back into his apartment, and for a moment, I lean forward like I’m going to follow.

Nah.

Instead, I manage to snatch the front of his shirt and haul him into the hall with us. I shove him against the wall beside his door and point at Willow. Her mouth is covered by her hand, her eyes wide and pupils dilated.

Fuck, she’s sexy.

“Do you see her?” I ask him in a low voice.

He eyes Willow, then jerks his head in a nod.

“No,” I correct. “You don’t. You don’t see her, and none of your friends will see her. If she’s sitting alone at the bar, you don’t fucking buy her a drink. If she’s sitting alone at lunch, you leave her be.”

Ronan licks his lips. “Didn’t realize she was your girl, Whiteshaw.”

I scowl. “Well, now you do.”

“Miles—”

I step back from him and turn to Willow. My knuckles ache, but I ignore it in favor of wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

“Now look at him, wild one,” I say in her ear.

She shivers. But she does it. She stares right at him.

“You accept a drink from someone other than me, and I’ll do a lot worse than this. And I’ll make sure you’re right there with me.” I kiss her temple and relax my grip.

She pulls away automatically, her brows furrowed. She doesn’t know what to make of it. But really, it’s not that hard to figure out.

I want her alone.

I want her isolated.

But I need her to learn that, of all the people in the world, and of all the fucked-up shit people will do to each other, *I* will never leave her.

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WILLOW

We park outside my apartment, and Miles joins me on the curb. It seems he's intent on not letting me out of his sight. He's my shadow up the walkway, but when I pause on the doorstep outside the house, he doesn't miss a beat. His hands catch my hips, but he doesn't so much as bump into me.

Because he's seeing the same thing I am.

The lock is broken. The whole door is slightly off, not quite closed. The cold wind whistles past us, but my muscles are already frozen.

"Stay here." Miles slips past me.

I open my mouth to call him back, then glance around.

There's no fucking way I'm waiting out here. I follow him in. There are shards of wood from the jamb on the floor. I'm on Miles' heels going up the stairs, and he casts a warning look back at me.

I meet his glare with one of my own.

He sighs and shakes his head, but that seems to be the end of it. We get upstairs, and I grab the back of his jacket. My door is ajar. Similarly kicked in, with wood splinters on the floor just inside.

Miles switches tactics, suddenly pulling me closer behind him. We enter the apartment silently, creeping forward. My breath catches in my throat at the damage. My place has been torn apart—the couch upended, the coffee table cracked. Things yanked out of my kitchen cabinets and strewn across the floor and counters. The kitchen table's shoved against the far wall, chairs knocked over. Even my plants have been damaged, torn from their pots. There's dirt all over the living room, glass and ceramic in the kitchen. Silence surrounds us. It feels like the apartment itself is holding its breath.

Miles glances at me, then moves forward. Toward my bedroom.

I stop moving.

He goes on ahead, the gleam of his blade in his hand. But he checks my room and reappears a moment later, his brows furrowed.

“You need to call the police,” he says.

There’s a ringing in my ears.

I’m standing right where Miles killed the man.

“You want me to call the police,” I repeat, my voice hoarse. “So they can come snoop around my destroyed apartment where you *murdered* someone?”

Miles rolls his eyes. “They won’t be looking for anything like that. Besides, no body, no crime. Call them, Willow.”

With shaking hands, I call 9-1-1. I’ve had to call them before, but never for myself. There’s a click as it connects to an operator, and I explain as clearly as I can that there’s been a break-in. I don’t know if anything is missing. *Probably*. There’re damages— isn’t that enough?

“They’ll be here soon,” I tell him.

He nods and rights one of the kitchen chairs. I fidget by the doorway, unsure of what to do or where to stand. After a moment of silence, that seems to just be stretching longer, I head to my refrigerator. I pull the vodka from the freezer and soda water from the fridge. There’s stuff all over the floor. Broken ceramic and coffee from a mug leftover from the morning before. Glass in the sink.

Miles’ gaze is hot on me as I mix the drink in an ice-filled glass, adding a splash of cranberry juice on top. I take a sip and close my eyes. I set it down and grip the counter, but none of this feels real.

In a way, I’m not connected to any of it.

“Come sit down,” Miles says. “You’re going to step on glass.”

I grimace. I already feel the bite of something in the arch of my right foot. A piece of glass slicing through the sole of my boot makes sense, I guess. If I have the shittiest luck in the world. And judging from the state of my apartment...

I ignore it and walk to him. Each step on my right foot hurts worse, but I make it to the table and my own chair. I sink into it and lean back, taking another gulp of the vodka soda.

Vodka gives me more of a fuzzy feeling. Unlike whiskey, which sits like smoke in my chest, or tequila, that burns. I like that vodka shaves down my

edges.

His gaze remains steady on me.

“Why are you still here?” I ask him.

His lips quirk. “Did you think I was going to leave?”

“Yes.” It’s honest. I did expect him to leave, multiple times.

“I’m not going to.”

It’s not my fault I don’t believe him. It’s just been proven, time and again, that people leave.

We lapse into silence until the police arrive. Miles hears them open the door downstairs, their voices carrying up to us, and he steps into the hall to meet them.

I take that opportunity to lift my foot and inspect the bottom. There’s a sliver of glass between the treads of my boot, and I tug it out in one quick motion.

The pain is almost blinding. White spots flicker at my vision as agony lances up my leg.

“Oh my God, Willow,” Miles says, but it sounds really far away. “We’ll go to the hospital when we’re done.”

I’m too busy staring at the amount of blood on the shard of glass. The shard that’s way bigger than I anticipated.

“Ma’am—” The police officer stops. “Is this your apartment?”

I drop the piece of glass on the table. “Yes.”

My head is woozy. I blink slowly and reach for my drink. In the background, Miles is spinning some tale. Or maybe it’s the truth that he’s giving them. Some of it anyway. That we were here this morning and then left to meet a friend.

I hear Steele’s name.

A lie, then.

“Willow.”

I run my finger along the edge of the bloodstained glass. It still has a bite to it. Sharp little fucker.

“Willow.” Miles grabs my hand and yanks it off the table. His palm connects with mine, his fingers pressing into my wrist. “We’re going to urgent care. They’ll look at your foot.”

Right.

He picks me up. Not over the shoulder, which seems to be his favorite way to transport me. But nicely. Arm under the back of my knees, one

around my back. The police follow us down, and I vaguely catch that they want to know if there's anything missing.

Miles doesn't know. I don't either.

And I never saw my room.

"I need to call Violet," I mumble. I pat myself down for my phone. "I'll sleep on her couch."

"No, you won't."

My gaze lifts. "What?"

"You'll stay with me." He glances at me, his jaw tight. "Don't fight me on this."

I sag back into the seat. I *want* to fight him, but I don't have any more energy left. Just a hum of something numb running under my skin.

The scary part is—I don't think I quite mind the numbness.

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MILES

Her room was the target of the burglar's ire—and I'm glad she didn't go into it.

The police agreed with me that it was more concerning than the main space, and they took photos. Dusted for fingerprints, collected whatever evidence they thought necessary. But there wasn't much that they could do, otherwise. They'd check with neighbors, see if anyone has doorbell cameras.

They asked me about our matching bruises—the circle of purple and blue on the side of Willow's face, a crescent shape that rings the outside of her eye and down to her cheekbone, and my double black eyes. At least they didn't swell.

When I sheepishly explained about Willow's fight, and that I was the goalie for the Crown Point Hawks, they backed off. It's surprising how fast their attitudes shifted, actually, once they realized who they were dealing with.

One of them even congratulated me on our last home game.

I took photos of my own, just in case, and I packed clothes into a bag for her, plus her backpack and books. Everything I thought she'd need for school. She sure as fuck isn't going back there until they catch whoever did it.

I also told them that Willow was my girlfriend. In the moment, it just came out. Friends seemed weak, and the way one of the officers kept glancing over at Willow... It set my teeth on edge. But now that I think about it, the more I think this could work in my favor.

They're going to want to talk to Willow again, and she won't be able to backtrack about our relationship. If she does, they'll only look into it harder.

I glance over at her, but she's closed her eyes. We're on our way to my house from the urgent care, where they flushed out the deep wound in the bottom of her foot. There weren't any more pieces of glass in it, and the doc eyed the shard that Willow apparently slipped into her pocket to take with her. They wouldn't close the puncture, something about it needing to drain. They gave her something for the pain and a prescription that she immediately tucked into her purse without reading.

Tomorrow, I decide. *Tomorrow*, I'll tell her the news: she's my girlfriend. And the whole school will know by the end of the day. But this doesn't mean I'm not the worst sort of asshole.

It's another way to glue her to me. Another rope that cinches tighter around her.

We park, and she steps out gingerly onto the sidewalk. I grab her bags from the trunk and sling it over my shoulder. Part of me wants to play the knight in shining armor and scoop her off her feet. But maybe she's better off yearning for my help.

I can't just *give* it to her.

She's far too stubborn for that.

And true to expectation, she limps in behind me without a word.

Knox is sprawled on the couch. At our entrance, his eyebrow raises—and then the corner of his lip pulls up.

"Hey, baby," Knox calls to her. "Back so soon?"

I glare at him. "Don't call her that."

"Sure, sure," he agrees. "I could always go with our other pet name, but she liked to save that for the bed—"

"Shut up," Willow snaps. She rounds on me. "Are you really going to try and keep me here?"

I shrug. "Yeah."

Her mouth opens. To argue, of course.

I step into her space and cup the side of her face, pushing my thumb against her lips. "Trust me, this is the easier of the options I have for you."

"I'd love to hear the harder options," she says.

Her lips moving against the pad of my thumb does something to me. My cock twitches, rising in my jeans. It reminds me that we were cut off earlier.

“I’ve got a *harder* option,” Knox pipes up.

I slide my hand from her face to the back of her neck. I guide her with me, ignoring my brother entirely. Fuck him, really. She moves with me, her brow furrowed, all the way up the stairs and into my room.

“I’ll just stay in one of the empty rooms,” she finally tries.

“There are no empty rooms.”

We filled Steele’s and Greyson’s. Hudson Finch, one of the defensemen on the team, is taking Steele’s. And Tony Rodrigues, another new starter, has decided to take Greyson’s. They moved in early last week, although neither seem to be here at the moment.

Knox and I agreed that we didn’t need anyone in the basement room. After Steele’s stunt with Aspen, we took out the bed and converted it into a home gym. Just to discourage other... activities.

I close my bedroom door behind us, leaning on it. She steps into my space and rotates in a slow circle. I wonder what she sees. Some clutter on top of my dresser, a stack of textbooks and notebooks on the floor beside it because I usually do my homework downstairs, a calendar hanging on a nail with my practices and games, classes... and Willow’s schedule, added in orange marker.

She doesn’t notice that right away, though. She pulls back the burnt-orange-and-white duvet and looks down at my white sheets.

“What?” I finally ask.

“You’re just...” She shrugs. “Knox had black silky sheets. Do you know how much that screams *twenty-something bachelor*? This makes me believe you actually change and wash your bedding on a regular basis.”

“I’m clean.” My voice comes out defensive.

“I didn’t say you weren’t. In fact, I’m agreeing—”

“But you were surprised. Which is fine. I like to be surprising.”

She eyes me carefully, then nods. I set her bag on the end of the bed, then go to my dresser and take things out of the second drawer. I drop it in the bottom drawer, which was mostly empty, and leave the upper one open.

“Put your stuff in there.” I pause. “There was some damage to your clothes, so... you might need to go shopping.”

She winces. “Did my toiletries make it? Makeup?”

“All ruined.” I keep my tone even, but the flash of anger that crosses her face makes me angry, too. Someone broke into her place and took their time

destroying shit. They were thorough about it—they even stuffed underwear and socks down her toilet.

That won't stand.

They worked fast, too. We were only gone for an hour, at *most*.

Ronan Pierce is the only one who isn't guilty, because we were at his apartment when it happened. Other than him, and my friends, there's a wide-open range of suspects.

"I..." Willow trails off.

She seems lost.

"I need my car," she finally decides. "I have some errands to run, obviously, and then I need to go to campus."

Right. Her *study time*, clearly marked on my calendar, and on my phone, and in my brain. Except her car is back at her place, and I'm not really thrilled at the idea of her walking back to get it.

Or going anywhere in a vehicle that someone could've put a tracker on...

"Take mine. The keys are downstairs. I've got to get to practice anyway." And take my brother with me.

Her gaze lingers on me until I'm out of sight, jogging downstairs. Knox waits by the door, his hockey bag slung over his shoulder. Mine is already in my car, which I can retrieve easily enough.

"You good?" he asks me.

I scowl at him. "We need to ride together."

"That's fine."

He's still staring at me, even on our way out the door. Then as I grab my bag out of my car and walk to his. Until he's forced to look away to fucking drive normally.

"What?" I growl.

"You want her to move in?"

Oh, for fuck's sake. "It's not a big deal. I just want her closer."

"But... *why*?"

"Besides some psycho breaking into her apartment probably minutes after we left? To repair what you broke, you asshole." I scowl. "Why'd you have to drag it out for a whole year?"

I wouldn't put it past him to ignore me. It's been an untouched subject since they started hooking up last year. I wasn't about to rain on his fucking

parade when he finally stopped acting like a complete man whore and solely focused on one girl.

I just wish she hadn't already been *my* girl in my head.

My parents were ecstatic about it. Their oldest child found a girlfriend. And not just *a* girlfriend. A pretty, smart, athletic, witty...

He makes a noise in the back of his throat. Clearing it. "To prove something to myself."

I eye him.

He shakes his head slightly, his jaw clenched. "I just wanted to see if I could stay with one person. You know. Like..."

"Oh, monogamy." I snap my fingers. "Right. Congrats, you picked the one girl that *I* was interested in to stick with for a year."

"Fuck off," he grumbles. "You have her now."

"I don't have her now." I ball my fists. "God, you're so fucking blind. I *will* have her. I will have her battered and broken, and I'll have her when she's healed, but in this moment? She's alone and she's numb and she doesn't know what she wants because she thinks the minute she wants something, it's going to cut her loose."

Knox blinks a few times. Maybe he's processing because he's doing a great job of buffering like a computer system. He flicks his directional on and pulls into the arena parking lot. We park next to Greyson's truck, but he doesn't get out immediately.

He just holds out his hand. "I'll let you check me into the wall a few times if that'll make you feel better."

I groan and smack his hand away. "You ass."

He grins. "Guilty."

Well, I *could* use the distraction...

WILLOW

Violet waits for me outside the Crown Point Arts building. She's got her bag slung over her shoulder, bursting with ballet stuff. She's wrapped up in a huge puffy jacket, sweatpants that probably hide another layer of tights under it, and a baby-pink winter hat, complete with a pom-pom, on her head.

Her sleek blonde hair is pulled forward over her shoulders, reminding me how long *my* hair used to be. There's a light dusting of snow on her jacket, and when I tip my head back, I'm greeted with softly falling flakes.

If it would only stop snowing...

"How was it?" Violet asks.

I sigh. "Fine. I love those brats, but they're still—"

"Brats," she finishes.

After she moved out, money got a little tighter than was comfortable. My parents make a decent living, but they were hesitant to fund an apartment for me, myself, and I. They seemed to think I would get in trouble if I didn't have a responsible roommate.

They're not wrong.

But we settled on an agreement. Everything in life can be negotiated. They pay for half of my rent and all the utilities, and I would get a job to cover the other half and my extra expenses. Food, et cetera. The only thing they didn't want me doing was working at a bar or restaurant. The late hours don't mix with computer science, I guess.

I acquiesced and instead got a job here, at the slightly run-down Arts building. Now my Sunday afternoons and Tuesday evenings are spent giving voice lessons to children. Tuesdays used to be our rest day for the

dance team. But now that I've been unceremoniously dumped from that, I suppose I could take on more hours.

If I felt like dealing with shrieking children trying to sing for hours on end.

"Are you honing the next Kelly Clarkson?" Violet grins.

"I wish." I roll my eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm kidnapping you for a girls' night out."

I brighten for a moment—then remember who I'm talking to. Violet doesn't like to go out. If push came to shove, she'd much rather stay in and watch a movie or play games... So the suspicion that hits a second later is barely masked.

My best friend bursts out laughing. "I'm being serious. Aspen and I want to take you dancing. Thalia, too."

Well.

"Okay," I allow.

"Great. Follow me to my place. Aspen and Thal are already on their way."

"You could've just texted," I point out, sidestepping her to unlock Miles' car. I'm going to need to get mine back eventually—except, I can't help but acknowledge that his is a lot nicer. It has a backup camera, even. And the fancy radio stations. I've already hooked up my phone to its Bluetooth, making it the primary. Just to be a pain in the ass.

I've also completely adjusted everything to my liking. Mirrors, seat, steering wheel, the brightness of the display. The preset stations. Hell, his car even let me change the theme colors of the display.

It's the little things.

He violates me, I violate his car.

Or... something.

I park behind Violet at her house. Thalia's car is on the street, and she and Aspen climb out at our arrival. Thalia comes right to me and throws her arms around my shoulders, dragging me into her.

We got close in our semester on the dance team, but...

I pat her back awkwardly. I am *the* touchy-feely person. Always have been. I love hugs, and physical touch, and being around people. I love kissing cheeks and pressing close, and arms wrapped around me. But lately, it seems like that's been tainted. It doesn't really make my skin crawl, nothing so dramatic as that. I just... I don't know.

It doesn't bring comfort.

And I can't pinpoint when that shifted.

When Knox broke up with me in the most humiliating way possible?

When I went home for winter break and my parents barely touched me?

Or was it even more recent? When I woke up to Miles in my bed, forcing himself into me...?

"Let's get inside," Violet says. "It's freaking cold out here."

We nod our agreement. Aspen catches my hand and squeezes, and I force a smile. I squeeze her fingers back, then find some excuse to pull free. We kick the snow off our shoes and then toe them off. Violet's house is so warm and cozy, it's enviable.

Mine never feels warm—and now, with the break-in, it definitely doesn't feel safe. Not that Miles is going to let me back there anytime soon.

"You've been going through it," Aspen says, nudging me. "We're here for you."

I take a deep breath. "Yeah. Thanks."

We move into Violet's room. I didn't even notice that Thalia brought a whole bag of makeup and clothes with her, which she spreads out on the bed. Violet drags me into the closet and starts flipping through clothes.

"What's wrong?" She glances back at me.

I shake my head. "No, nothing."

She pulls out a dark-blue dress. "This goes well with your eyes."

I snort. "Okay."

I strip right there and tug it on. It's high in the back, needing to be zipped up, but the front plunges into a low V. My bra is showing. I unhook it and slide my arms out, dropping it on top of my clothes. Violet moves behind me and does up the zipper, shifting my hair over my shoulder.

"What are you wearing?"

She shows me a lavender skirt and crop top. It also matches her name, which is kind of cute. And I'm glad she's not ashamed of the scar on her leg. There was a time when she wouldn't wear anything but pants.

I step out of the closet, and Aspen pushes me to sit on the bed. Her and Thalia spend the next thirty minutes doing my hair and makeup unprompted. They take turns getting each other ready, too, but I'm done first.

My phone buzzes in my bag. I go for it, and my heart squeezes.

"I'll be right back," I tell them.

Not that anyone pays attention. Violet is doing her makeup in the bathroom, and Aspen and Thalia are giggling about something.

I slip from the room and answer the call.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Reed?”

“Speaking,” I answer, my voice cracking slightly. I hurry downstairs and into the kitchen, leaning my hip against the counter.

“This is Detective Barrister,” a woman says. “Our officers went over to your apartment for the break-in, and I was calling to follow up.”

I blink in surprise.

“You’re calling on a Sunday evening?”

She chuckles. “Yes, well, crime never sleeps, right?”

Right.

“I was hoping that you could provide me with a little more information. Your boyfriend said that you don’t have any enemies, and that you keep to yourself and your friends at school. Is that true?”

“Boyfriend...?”

“Miles Whiteshaw?”

Fucking hell, Miles.

“Yeah.” I swallow, fumbling to recover. “I know who he is, obviously. Um, when did he say that? I mean—I agree, I don’t have any enemies.”

Well, I didn’t. But then Amanda kicked me off the team, and Miles murdered someone in my apartment, and Knox made me Public Enemy Number One with his breakup stunt. Not to mention the fact that the whole school seems to think it was my fault.

“Mr. Whiteshaw mentioned that you’d be getting us a list of items that are missing. Have you noticed any unusual activity in your neighborhood?”

“Not really, Detective. I always thought it was a safe area.”

She hums her agreement, then pauses. The line is filled with static for a moment, until she continues, “This type of aggression pointed toward the bedroom can be a sign of—”

“Wait.” I stand straighter, my grip on my phone tightening. My palms are sweating. “What do you mean?”

Silence.

“Did you see your bedroom? In the... aftermath?”

“No,” I whisper. “Miles told me not to look.”

“I see. All right, Ms. Reed. Please let me know if anything unusual in the week or two leading up to the break-in comes to mind. I’ll let you go and touch base with you in a few days.”

“Okay.” My heart is beating too fast. I hang up and leave my phone on the counter, going for the whiskey. I take a swig right from the bottle, grimacing at the taste.

What was in my bedroom that Miles didn’t want me to see?

Now I want to see it. No, I *need* to see it.

Fuck.

“Violet.” I replace the bottle and hurrying toward the stairs. “I’ll meet you guys at Prime, okay?”

I don’t wait for her answer—because I need some answers of my own.

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WILLOW

The front entrance to the house has been fixed—but not locked. My landlord's door is closed, and I move past it silently. Someone's cleaned up the bits of framing that littered the floor with the break-in. The stairs look recently swept, too.

I can only imagine the mess the police made. And us, too.

My foot hurts. The pain meds I popped a few hours ago are wearing off, and I'm probably due for a bandage change. It's a good lesson to watch where I step, I guess.

On the second floor, my apartment door has been closed to the best of its ability. It's very obviously not locked, and I only push on the door with a few fingers to get it to swing inward.

Part of me was expecting yellow crime scene tape or something, but there's nothing. I just... stroll right in.

That feels wrong.

I shake off my foreboding and crunch over more glass and ceramic. I wince, my gaze dropping to the floor. From then on out, I'm more careful. I avoid the big chunks and make my way toward the back of my tiny apartment.

Really, for such a small space, it's astounding how much stuff this burglar seemed to break. My plants are lost beyond repair, the soil still strewn about. The stuffing of my couch cushions has been pulled out through giant slits in the fabric.

The sun has set, and darkness is quickly taking over the room.

I make it to my bedroom and flick on the light.

Horror washes over me, and I cover my mouth with my hand. The words of the detective come back to me. About particular aggression in the bedroom. This *feels* aggressive. The room has been completely violated.

I'm surprised Miles was able to salvage any of my clothes.

My dresser is in pieces. Someone didn't just tear out my clothes and the drawers—it looks like they took a hammer to the actual furniture, smashing it to bits. Same with the armchair that used to hold worn-once clothes. They didn't just cut it up, the back and arms are separated, ripped apart.

And my bed...

Feathers from my pillows, the quality ones Mom insisted I'd sleep better on, are everywhere. On the floor, smashed into the carpet, coating the comforter. I step inside, and my nose wrinkles. The foul, bitter stench of gasoline hits me, and I almost choke.

It's everywhere. Soaked into the carpet, the clothes still hanging in my closet, the bed. This place is a tinderbox waiting to go up in flames.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

I need to get out of here.

This—they were going to set the place on fire? Did Miles and I interrupt the burglar? Is the person responsible even a burglar if they meant to harm me?

I shudder and back up.

A hand wraps around my mouth a split second before I bump into someone.

I scream.

The sound is muffled, but it rings in my ears nonetheless. I'm lifted off my feet and bodily carried out of my apartment. Downstairs. All the way to the car, where my assailant drops me and shoves me against the hood.

I barely catch myself in time, and I whirl around.

Miles stands in front of me, madder than I've ever seen him.

"Are you fucking crazy?" he yells.

I stare at him.

"You could've—you cannot come back here alone. Do you understand me?" He's still yelling. His eyes are wild, his damp hair messier than usual.

Usual.

He grabs my hand and pulls me into him, and he catches the back of my neck. It's not really a hug, but maybe it's an embrace. His hands on me *do*

something to me, and I hate it as much as I want it. Like his touch is something to crave.

It's not. But still, his fingers digging into my neck, over the bandage hiding Amanda's claw marks, sends tingles down my spine. It's not entirely unpleasant, all things considered. *All things* being that I thought I was going to die just a moment ago. Or be kidnapped. Or—

“Well?”

I raise my eyebrow and try to dispel the butterflies suddenly running rampant in my chest. I tip my head back. Catching my breath is out of the question, especially looking up at Miles like this. “Well, what?”

“Are you sorry?”

I squeeze his wrist with my free hand and slowly shake my head. “No.”

He releases me just as fast as he grabbed me. He yanks open the passenger door and leaves it, circling to the driver's seat. He has the keys to his car. I don't know how—they were in my pocket. But as I pat my jacket down, it becomes obvious that he stole them back while I was distracted.

I shiver.

The light in my bedroom is still on. Sometime between then and now, the sun has set completely, and it's dark enough that the streetlights are beginning to flicker on. We're in the shadows between two posts, which is exactly where I don't want to linger. The light can stay on. Maybe it'll act as a *fuck you* to the person who destroyed it.

I slip into the car and slam the door behind me. Then, after a moment of consideration, flip the lock.

Miles drives us back to his house without saying anything. He doesn't even look in my direction. And that's fair enough, I suppose, but the longer I sit, the more I fidget.

I should've stayed with my friends and gone dancing. I put on the dress and everything. Let them do my makeup, my hair.

Tears fill my eyes, and I turn my gaze to the ceiling. The car stops, but the burning behind my eyes doesn't lessen. The cracks in my mask are pushing through, my guard failing me completely. Miles gets out of the car. It's only insanity keeping me frozen in place while I try to pull myself together.

“Come on.” He's got my door unlocked and open, and he takes my hand.

I hadn't even buckled my seat belt. Was the alarm dinging the whole way over?

He leads me out onto the street, and music catches my attention. It's only then that I register where we are. Certainly not on the quiet residential street his home is on. We're downtown. Parked near Prime, which seems to be busy even for a Sunday.

"Dancing," Miles says with a frown. "Greyson said I had to bring you."

I smile. No doubt Violet led that charge. I stride forward, and Miles catches up to me fast. His hand grips my hip, then slides down and cups my ass. I jump, but he just chuckles.

"Bet that's still bruised," he muses. "And it's going to be worse tomorrow morning."

My gaze cuts toward him.

He leaves his hand on my ass and smirks. I... let him. Fuck it. We head into the nightclub without even pausing to show our IDs to the bouncer. He and Miles do this weird head nod exchange. And then we're going to the VIP section, past another bouncer.

Violet and Greyson are at a booth. Violet shoots up when she sees me and rushes forward. She's tipsy, I think, because her smile is wider and looser than I would've expected. Since I basically ditched them for an hour...

"You're here!" She pushes at my jacket, sliding it off my shoulders.

Miles peels the rest of it away. I look at him over my shoulder, and his gaze crashes into mine. I don't know what he's thinking or why he agreed to bring me here. Or what he has planned for later. But I do know that his eyes are captivating, and with another few drinks I could be convinced to do something stupid.

With him.

The enemy of my heart.

"Dancing," Violet interrupts. "It's just what the doctor ordered." She practically drags me back downstairs, into the throng of people.

It's a Sunday night—it shouldn't be busy. But this is Crown Point, and half of the population when school is in session is college students. Kids who don't give a fuck what day of the week it is. Sure, it isn't as full as a Friday or Saturday night. But it seems like there's a new DJ who's playing different stuff than usual.

Whatever. It has a beat.

“I need a drink,” I say in her ear.

She nods and shoots off a text. “Aspen will grab you one. They went to the bar.”

We dance until Aspen and Thalia re-emerge. I hug both of them, the guilt of abandoning them when they tried to cheer me up hitting hard. But they all wave me off, and Aspen pushes a drink in my hand and a shot into my other one.

We cheers and do the shots. Tequila, unsurprisingly. People gravitate toward that for shots for some reason. The guys join us—Miles and Steele and Greyson. I eye Miles, although he doesn’t immediately latch on to me like the other two do with their girls. I grab Thalia’s hand and spin her until we’re both giggling. We’ve each got drinks in our hands, not that it really matters. I don’t even care when it sloshes over the rim and drips down my hand.

Miles keeps eyeing me from across our circle of friends.

The back of my neck is hot, and I lift my hair up with my free hand. It doesn’t have far to go, with it being so fucking short nowadays. My throat is dry, and I fight to hold Miles’ gaze. It’s like a challenge.

Another sip—but only ice touches my lips.

Damn.

“Next round’s on me,” Thalia calls, her drink also done. “I already said.”

I nod. With my dance partner gone, I find myself drifting across our little circle toward Miles. I should want to stay as far away from him as possible. After all, he’s hurt me more than once. This morning, forcing himself into me. *Onto* me. I can’t forget the violation.

And I won’t.

But there’s something else.

The way he pays attention. The way his eyes feel like lasers burning into me.

The way he danced with me a few nights ago...

My arms loop around his shoulders. His hands find my waist, then drift lower. And suddenly the song changes, and I falter. It’s probably wishful thinking that he’s just as clueless about this as I am. About what to do. Or what the point even is.

But he doesn’t stop, doesn’t so much as hesitate.

The next song is slower. Miles pulls me close and spins me around, grinding my ass against his groin. It reminds me of the last time we were at the club together. Not *together*-together. But... dancing. Like this.

"Relax," he says in my ear.

Hard to, when the last time ended in murder.

Fuck.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to focus on the music. But his hands are getting to me. They haven't so much as moved from my sides, but his hot palms are burning my skin.

"Drinks," Thalia calls. She's managed to hold on to four of them. "Next round is on you, if you wanted to partake."

I nod and take a glass from her fingers. Whatever she got, it seems to be an orange or pink color. The lighting makes it hard to know a hundred percent. But there's no ice in it.

Drink it slow. I didn't think to bring my wallet on this crusade. It's still in my bag, which is most likely in Violet's bedroom. The bartender might still have one of my credit cards, actually. I don't remember getting it the last time... although I don't remember if I had even started a tab.

The drink is inches from my lips when Miles plucks it from my hand. I follow it, craning around in time to watch him swallow the whole thing like a freaking shot.

He makes a face. "It was fruity."

My mouth drops open. "It was *mine*."

"I'll buy you another one."

He shifts me into the circle, closer to Thalia, and disappears. I watch him go, and my stomach swoops. Thalia grabs my hand. And then Aspen takes my other one. Violet is suddenly in front of me, and I tear my attention away from the path Miles cut through the dancing people.

Fuck him anyway.

We dance and dance until my hair is stuck to my face with sweat and my throat is dry again. Miles reappears just in time, and he hands me a shot glass. He has one, too. I sniff it, pleasantly surprised at the sharp vodka scent.

We cheers, and I down it. He smirks at me, then disappears again.

Whatever.

More dancing. More spinning. The room is wobbling a bit, not that it matters. I like this floating feeling, because for once, nothing seems sad.

I'm not sad.

"Here." Miles steps up behind me and winding his arm around me.

He holds a larger glass, and I freaking sniff it again. Vodka. Easy. I take a sip and grimace. Then another, and another. It gets easier to drink it down.

"Are you drugging me?" I ask, leaning back on him.

"No." His voice curls in my ear, followed a split second later by his lips. "No, Willow, I wouldn't resort to drugging you to fuck you. Haven't I proved that already?"

I shiver.

He lifts the now-empty glass from my hand and shoves it into a passerby's chest. He spins me away from my friends. Toward the bathrooms, and the shadows.

I dig my heels in. "Where are we going?"

"Easy, wild one."

He still propels me forward, ignoring the way my shoes slide across the floor. Until we're in an alcove all of our own, hidden nearly out of sight. His hands run up my legs, dragging my dress higher, and suddenly there's air on my ass.

I suck in a breath and glance over my shoulder.

Miles meets my gaze, then goes to his knees.

Slowly.

"Wh—"

"Just checking." He pulls at the neon-green thong and snaps it against my hip.

"Checking—"

"Shh." His fingers brush my ass.

That shuts me up.

It kind of tickles, the way he runs his nails lightly over my ass cheek. He's level with it, his face *right there*, and I resist the urge to jump away from him. There's only a wall in front of me. A wall which seems okay to brace against, so I do.

"Are you turned on?" he asks me.

My mind isn't working.

And it certainly isn't connected to my body.

He hums.

And then there's a sharp pain on my ass cheek—but not a hand. And not the side he spanked before.

A low groan slips out of my mouth when I realize what he's doing. When it registers that he just bit me. And now his tongue is soothing it, only a second before he bites again.

I shudder. Goosebumps rise everywhere.

"Stop," I tell him.

He snaps my thong again, and the sting of it makes me stand up straighter.

I turn around in his hold and push at his face. My fingers slide into his hair automatically, fisting, and I drag his head back. His eyes burn into mine at the same time that his finger thrusts into me.

Inside me.

"Miles." Fuck, why does that feel good? "Don't."

My dress is hiked around my hips, and my thong is little more than string. It's no protectant from him. And he's still on his knees in front of me. His head and shoulders shield my lower body from the dancing crowd beyond our alcove.

But that doesn't mean I want him touching me.

Or do I?

My head is so screwed up, I don't know *what* I want. But I don't think it's to be finger-fucked by a Whiteshaw in public.

"Dancing," I murmur, stepping away from him. I pull my dress back down and clear my throat, ignoring the burning in my cheeks. "They're probably wondering where we are..."

He rises slowly, and I do what I do best: I run away.

MILES

I flag down the bartender. “Same thing,” I tell him. “No ice.”

He nods. I watch him grab a clean glass and fill it with water. He finishes with a squeeze of lime and a splash of vodka floated on top. Not enough to really matter, but the drink will smell like it.

Willow’s drunk enough to not be able to tell the difference. She *was* drunk enough. Now she’s coming down off it, as I intercepted her beverages. And I’ve been running interference ever since.

Now, her eyes are closed and she’s swaying on the dance floor by herself. I wrap my arms around her and put the lip of the glass to her mouth.

“Drink, and then let’s go,” I say in her ear.

Like a little bird, she parts her lips and lets me tip the drink in. I cup her throat, and she swallows against my palm. My dick’s been hard for what feels like hours, even though we haven’t been here very long at all.

With a full day of classes, studying, and then practice—none of us can really afford to stay ’til midnight. Greyson and Steele look ready to quit, and I am, too.

Maybe I’m just eager to get her back in my bedroom.

Drink gone, I take her hand and lead her away from the dance floor. My friends follow us out, herding the girls. We fetch coats and bags and make our way to the exit.

Willow’s got her arm looped around mine now, and she leans on me as we walk to the car. “You can dance.”

I smile. “I know.”

“I didn’t.” She sighs. “Maybe I would’ve danced with you more if I had known.”

I don't reply to that. That could be true—or it's just wishful thinking after what happened with my brother. Even thinking about him and her drives a big wedge between us. I don't want to think about *them*. Just us.

Just her.

I put her in the passenger seat and drive us home quietly.

Home is a weird concept all its own. Although we've had some fluctuations—most recently Erik, who graduated last year, then Greyson, then Steele—this house has always been filled with friends. And laughter. And in the past year and a half, *women*. Violet, then Aspen, and now I'm bringing Willow into it. Although I guess she had already been here.

Now, Finch and Rodrigues are filling the empty rooms. It feels a little more like how Knox and I intended it. Not quite the same without Steele and Greyson, but fine all the same.

Having a full house is nice. It reminds me of when all our relatives would come and stay with us for the holidays. Not to mention the fact that Knox and I always had friends over. My childhood home was never empty.

So naturally, I wanted to replicate it.

Jacob, another friend who graduated the year prior, is at the house. His truck is parked out front, and there are sounds of video games and laughing shit-talk coming from the basement. I move past the stairs without comment, and Willow follows on silent feet. She's my shadow upstairs, although she passes me and goes into the bathroom.

We had decided, Knox and I, that he would get the primary bedroom with its own bathroom. At least until he graduates. Then I'm taking it over. But three years of sharing the hallway bathroom with various roommates had made me regret that decision ever since.

The door slams, the lock flicking audibly. I consider waiting for her in the hall, then shake my head and get ready for bed.

I'm dead tired.

And she'll be grumpy in the morning, I have no doubt.

But not hungover.

I smile at that. My good deed for the year. Then I pull down my blankets. I washed everything in preparation for her coming to stay here. Changed them, then straightened up my room like a nervous teenager. It was probably due, but I like to keep things tidy even when I'm not hosting a girl in my bed.

Her bag is still on top of my dresser, the second drawer left open and empty. She didn't unpack... and now I'm tempted to do it for her. Just to settle her in faster, right?

Or to make it harder for her to leave.

I unzip it and shove the clothes inside, leaving out the few bits of makeup that were salvaged. She's got some bags from shopping that I found in the trunk of my car. Underwear—a six-pack of thongs, of course—and socks, some leggings and sports bras, plain t-shirts.

Nothing fancy.

“What are you doing?”

“Unpacking.” I'm unbothered, but my heart squeezes. I turn to face her and frown. “Shut the door.”

She does. Slowly.

That dress is toxic. It looks fucking amazing, hugging her curves and highlighting her *assets*. But it's trouble because it almost makes me forget my anger. And the plan I came up with.

“Rules,” I announce.

Her arms fold over her chest, and her mouth opens.

“No.” I hold up my hand. “You don't get a say. These are my rules.”

My gaze drops to her bare thighs. She toes off her shoes, leaving them just inside the door.

“Well?” Her voice is soft.

“No panties. Including thongs.”

Her eyes narrow.

“Or pants,” I add. “While you're in this room.”

She exhales. “And why is that?”

“To make you uncomfortable.” Words she said to me just this morning.

Was it really only this morning?

She nods once, and her blonde hair swings in her face. She tucks it behind her ear and bends down, hooking her thumbs under her dress and dragging the neon-green thong down her legs. 'Til it gets to her knees and falls on its own. Then she steps out of it, slinging it with one foot to land on top of her shoes.

“Is that it?”

“No.” I move closer and hold out a shirt. “Put this on.”

She eyes the ball of fabric in my grip, then slowly steps forward. Her toenails are painted black. Not the cute color I would've envisioned for her.

But she shakes out my t-shirt and holds it up, then lowers it.

“Is that a rule? Wear this shirt?”

“The rule is, you wear what I tell you to wear.”

“So you’re going to dress me,” she responds.

Yes. The word comes up and stops behind my teeth. I barely manage to contain it. But I nod anyway, and her gaze drops to her feet. She reaches behind her and drags the zipper of her dress down and lets the whole thing slide off her body.

My brain stops working.

My dick, however, has fully woken up. It stiffens immediately, standing at attention against the zipper of my pants.

Her tits are bare, no bra to speak of. Her nipples pebble.

There’s so much space between us, it’s laughable.

Once the shirt is on, she resumes her cross-armed stance. The bottom hem hits her mid-thigh, and I once again admire the smooth tanned skin peeking out from under it.

“Repeat the rules,” I order.

She rolls her eyes. “No pants or underwear in the room. You’re going to tell me what to wear. Although I’m not really sure on what you mean by *in* the room. Is there a grace period? Like, I’ve got five minutes to take off my clothes? Or am I expected to strip in the hallway?” She glances over her shoulder. “Tony wouldn’t give a shit, but Finch might be interested in our arrangement. And Kno—”

“Third rule,” I interrupt. “No mentioning my brother.”

She presses her lips together. “In here, or ever?”

“Ever,” I snap. “And you come in here, you close the door, and you strip. Simple as that.”

“What if I just need to come get a book or something?” She tilts her head. “It’s a little convoluted—”

“For fuck’s sake, Willow,” I growl.

I stalk forward. She quickly backs up, bumping into the door. My hands land on the wood on either side of her head.

“When you come here to sleep, take off your fucking panties.”

“Fine,” she replies, breathless. “What else?”

I raise my eyebrow. “What makes you think there’s more?”

“Because you’re Miles Whiteshaw,” she murmurs. “There’s always more.”

My lip curls up, and I take my time looking in her pretty blue eyes. She's a disaster, there's no denying it. And the only reason she's not sloppy drunk right now is because of me.

"No more drinking."

Her nostrils flare. "When, here?"

"Anywhere," I decide.

"Bullshit." She shifts, like she's going to try to escape.

There is no escape.

"Let's talk consequences," I say instead.

She stills. "Okay. What happens when I break one of your rules?"

Her hand lands on my chest, using it to leverage some distance between us. I'm tempted to lean into it—and I do, testing her resistance. Her nails dig into my sternum.

"Wait, let me guess. You're going to punish me. A little corporal punishment, yeah?" Her laugh escapes her, and she sucks her lower lip between her teeth. "What makes you think I won't enjoy that sort of thing?"

Well, fuck.

I remove my hand from the door and wrap it around her throat. Slow. Because I want her to see my moves coming from a mile away. And true to form, her eyes go wide, but she doesn't try to stop me.

"Trust me, wild girl. You'll enjoy and hate my punishments in equal measure."

I release her and step back. Her chest rises and falls, and her tongue darts across her lower lip. I almost groan at that, but instead, my spine straightens. My gaze travels across her body, too hidden by the shirt. I should've picked something in a smaller size.

"Are you ready for bed?" I ask. "Brushed your teeth?"

She bristles but inclines her chin. "Thank goodness *someone* stocks that bathroom with extra toothbrushes."

My shoulders tense. "Get in bed," I order.

We stare at each other. And then the most beautiful thing happens. Her delicate neck bends, her gaze falling to the floor. She breaks for *me*. She listens to *me*. Her body seems to release some tension and gain more, and she inches toward the bed. I let her go, giving her the space to move.

She fluffs one of my pillows and lies on her side, facing the windows. She drags the blankets up to her neck.

I watch her for a moment, then flick the light off. I leave the room and take care of business in the bathroom, then return. I shed my clothes in the dark and slip into bed. I wait for a moment, listening to her breathing.

She's barely taking any breaths at all. Her short inhales and exhales are too shallow.

I reach for her and drag her into the middle of the bed. Her ass finds my groin, and my hard dick waiting for her. She gasps, her hands turning into claws on my arm.

"Relax," I demand.

It takes her a second, but she does. She melts against me, and I don't know why.

Is she just done fighting for the day?

I trace a pattern on her thigh, then push her top leg forward. Her hips angle down, and my weight covers her.

"Don't," she warns. "Miles—"

My fingers find her hot cunt. I spread her for myself and notch my dick at her entrance. My heart is hammering, but there's nothing we can do about that. I want this more than she does.

She doesn't at all, but she will.

I push inside her. Her muscles grip me, and I let out a low groan of appreciation. *Fuck*, I could come just from this. Just from entering her once. I pull out and slide back in, relishing the feel of her. But then I hook my arms around her and pin her back flush to my chest.

Willow fights me for a second. She tries to buck and claw at me, and the prick of pain on my forearms just brings forth a rush of adrenaline. My nose is aching—I can only imagine what it'd feel like if she bashes her head into it a second time.

I lift my chin, tucking her head under it. She's short enough that it works. She can be impaled on my cock and still fit snugly against me.

The silence stretches forward. We're spooning, with the added agony of my cock buried inside her. I don't move, and neither does she. Eventually, her nails loosen. She sniffs.

"What are you doing?" she whispers.

"Trying to sleep."

"With your..."

I growl. I've got my girl in my arms. *Finally*. But the kicker? She doesn't want to be here. She's been ground down into dust by my brother.

She thinks I'm going to leave her here after I take what I want from her.

But I want everything.

I want her tears and her anger and her heartbreak. I want her smile and laughter and joy. And *fuck*, I just want her to walk around not looking so dazed. Or drunk. Or pained.

She's in pieces now, and I'm not going to glue her back together. I'm not going to paint a pretty picture for her to live in instead of reality.

I'm going to forge her into something new. Something stronger.

"Sleep," I say again, just to see if she will. In this new position, with this new invasion.

How far can I push her?

Maybe I'll find out tomorrow, because right now, she *does* sleep. And that's enough.

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WILLOW

Something wakes me in the middle of the night. One minute, I'm sleeping. And the next, my heart is racing and my eyes are open.

The scent wrapped around me is familiar and distant all at once. Sandalwood, maybe, or cedar. Like Knox... but not.

For a second, my brain tricks me into thinking I'm back in Knox's bed. That I'll roll over and find his side of the bed cold and empty, and I'll have to grapple with the feeling of not being good enough. Of not keeping his attention *in my sleep*.

I roll, but my shoulder bumps a chest. I tense up all over, and then I'm aware of the *other* sensation. Between my legs.

Not Knox.

Miles.

And while his breathing is even and deep, and a glance up at his face tells me he's most definitely asleep, the way he's fucking me is most definitely not in my dreams. His hips jack against mine so slowly, driving his cock in and out of me with an excruciatingly slow pace. For a moment, I'm just dumbfounded.

But then his hand moves lower, across my stomach, and presses against my clit.

I gasp.

The sound is out before I can stop it, and Miles' eyes flutter open.

He seems to take a second to focus on me, and then a smile curls his lips.

A smile.

His hips pull back, drawing more of his cock out of me. Those piercings hit my G-spot with his new thrust, and I almost groan. I bite my tongue to keep it in check, and the coppery taste of blood fills my mouth.

Better that, than give him an ounce of satisfaction.

His fingers drag against my clit harder, rubbing little circles until my mouth opens again. My breathing is ragged and loud in my ears. More like panting. And he keeps fucking me. Playing me like an instrument made just for him.

Speaking would ruin it.

It would remind me that I don't want him—that I can't have him. That my heart is this fragile little thing, and if I trust him with it, he could destroy me for good.

But sex?

It seems inevitable.

Worse, still, are the memories of lingering looks that come floating back to me. Those near-miss moments with Miles that I'd do anything to banish. I don't want to remember how he and I *almost...* almost what? Existed together? Kissed? Fell in love?

That's not happening.

I'm not falling in love ever again.

Pain spikes through my chest. It's usually a dull ache, but right now it sears like a stab. A lump forms in my throat, and my eyes burn. A tear slips free, running out of the corner of my eye and into my hair.

But that's not what I should've been paying attention to.

Miles takes my hand with his free one and drags it down between my legs. My fingers tangle with his as he leads me right to where his cock is thrusting into me.

I groan. Or sigh.

Or some mix of the two.

"Mine," Miles growls in my ear.

His lips are right there, his huge body curving around me. He's everywhere. His breath in my hair, the slight stubble on his chin raking across my jaw. His arms wrapped around me, his hand on my wrist and the other cupping my breast. His dick inside me—not just in me but slamming home with more fervor than before.

I've never felt *less* alone.

My skin tingles with some unknown force.

Like anxiety, but worse. Like fear, but more intoxicating.

“You’re mine, wild girl. And I will tame you as I set you free.”

He stills, filling me up, and the pulse between my legs only seems to worsen. He jerks again and comes hard, his teeth scraping my earlobe. I shudder with him and try to retract. To move. But his grip only tightens. On my breast, on my wrist. He keeps me exactly where I am.

Until the foreign pulse between my legs fades and his cock slips out. He immediately pushes his fingers inside me, trapping my hand against my core. Every shift of his hand moves mine.

My clit is on fire.

“Feel my cum inside you?” He pulls his hand out and lifts it in front of us.

I smell the sex on us, and in the low light, barely see the glisten on his fingers. Doesn’t matter—he smears it across my lips anyway. And my nose. His fingers make a wet path down my jaw, to my throat. Where he captures my pulse, and then he just... stops.

“Go back to sleep,” he says gruffly.

I don’t want to sleep.

“If I leave you, you can punch me in the nose as hard as you can,” he says in my ear.

Oh.

It’s a strange sensation, wanting to hate him and hug him at the same time. Maybe that’s why I roll over to face him and bury my face against his chest.

I belatedly realize that he’s not wearing a shirt. My cheek presses to his hot skin.

His hand slides down my side, over the curve of my hip and down my thigh. He grips just below my knee and hitches my leg up over his. And then his arms wrap around me again, and he sighs.

I close my eyes and ignore the dampness on my inner thighs. His cum and my arousal. He didn’t get me off—I can’t help but acknowledge that. But in our position, he’d know... And then, of course, there’s the lingering thought of cleaning up. Of protecting myself against infections. I should pee.

But instead, I fall asleep, just as he ordered.

Morning is just as weird. Miles is right there when I wake up, in the same exact position. He tips my head back and meets my eyes, and for a moment, I think he might kiss me.

He doesn't, though. He just rises more, giving me a full look at his naked body.

His naked, stunning, gorgeous body.

Holy fuck.

I thought Knox was hot?

He has nothing on his younger brother.

His abs stand out in sweet relief against the rest of his torso. He's got no tattoos, no scars. He does, however, have two black eyes. He doesn't seem to notice or even mind. There's a little swelling around the socket, but it's mostly localized to the inner corners of his eyes. The bruises were there yesterday, but now it's worse.

It makes his irises even bluer, if that's possible.

My gaze drops lower, to the V that points to, well... his cock is at attention and pointing at *me*. The two piercings draw my eye, and his length twitches under my attention. There's one that goes through the tip of his dick, and then another horizontal bar that sits just below the head, on the underside.

"Why...?"

He shakes his head. "You're going to be late for class."

I sit up suddenly. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty."

My first class is at eight.

Fuck.

I throw back the covers and practically dive out of bed. I go for my bag, then belatedly remember that he unpacked everything in one of the drawers.

"Leave it," he barks. "Go shower."

I jump again, then glance over my shoulder. My fingers are *on* my clothes. It would be easy enough to disregard him and pick my own things.

But... I'm curious.

And desperate to wash off.

So I retract my hand and hurry down the hall to the bathroom, which is blessedly empty. The other bedroom doors are all closed up tight, giving me no indication of whether their occupants are home.

At least I don't have to worry about Knox barging in. He has his own bathroom to use. In the shower, there's the good kind of shampoo and conditioner, left over from Aspen staying here with Steele. I say a quick mental thank you to her for leaving them here, and I wash in record time.

Wrapped in a towel, I step back into Miles' room. He's laid out clothes on the now-made bed, and he's nowhere to be found.

Huh.

He picked a band t-shirt and light-wash jeans. There's no bra... and no underwear either.

I frown. My gaze bounces from the clothes to the closed drawer.

Is it a test?

Well, if it is, it's a stupid one.

I march over and open the drawer, only to stop dead at the sight of the closet. It's full of shirts and stuff that I bought, sure, but... my underwear is gone. I open the top drawer and note his neatly folded briefs and the paired socks on the other side of it. I go through the rest of the dresser, then finally stop.

The clock is ticking, my time to get to class dwindling fast.

Too much happened yesterday. I'm having trouble getting my mind around it.

"Morning," a voice chimes.

I whirl around.

Knox leans on the doorframe, his one arm braced above his head. My gaze rakes over him. The stylish way he always dressed no longer holds the same appeal. In fact, it makes me question how I fell for him so thoroughly.

"Sleep well?" he asks.

Did I? I *slept*, which is more than I thought was going to happen. He seems to do his own sweep over my body, hidden only by a towel. He's seen it before—it isn't anything new. My grip on the corners of my towel tightens.

I swallow thickly. "Um..."

He chuckles. "I'm sure you did. See you around, Willow."

He shoves off and leaves me gaping at the open door. I hurry to it and slam it closed, then go back to the dresser. I snatch out a rolled pair of briefs and drop my towel. I tug them up my legs. They're not a super-snug fit—but at least it's better than nothing between my pussy and jeans. That

solved, I dress quickly and put a new bandage on my foot, followed by socks and shoes. I snatch my jacket and shrug it on.

Downstairs, Miles waits for me by the door. His hungry gaze drinks me in, so much so that I stop dead.

“What?” I question.

He shakes his head, his focus snapping. “Your hair is wet.”

I run my fingers through the strands. “Drying it was going to make me late.”

“You might be late, yet,” he murmurs.

I frown. “We don’t have time.”

“Thus the definition of *late*.”

Ugh. I spot my backpack leaning against the wall next to his, and I go straight for it. I fall to my knees and unzip it, hurrying to pull out the books for my Tuesday/Thursday classes. No use lugging those around, too. All that’s left is my laptop and the books for my three classes today.

Hooking the strap over my shoulder, I rise.

Miles hasn’t moved.

“Do you have class or...?”

He lifts one shoulder. “Not ’til nine-fifteen.”

“Okay. See you...”

“I’ll drive you,” he says suddenly, ripping open the front door.

An icy blast sweeps into the house, ruffling my wet hair. I was *going* to walk, since I’m pretty sure my car is still at my apartment. I actually should’ve just grabbed it yesterday, but I didn’t think about it. I didn’t think about much of anything except murder and break-ins and the pain in my foot, which suddenly jumps to the forefront of my mind.

He leaves me standing there.

I hurry after him, biting my tongue against snapping at him.

Is it his fault I’m late?

Maybe.

I pat down my pockets, belatedly realizing I don’t even have my phone.

So maybe it *is* my fault for being late, since I didn’t give a shit about my phone or an alarm or anything like that. I just let Miles do whatever he wanted to me, without any resistance...

Shame hits me square in the gut. It streams through me, but I refuse to linger on it. I slide into the passenger seat and hunch forward. It’s *cold*. So

much more fucking cold than any day so far this winter. It makes me wish I had my hat and gloves, and a scarf, and a hot coffee.

Coffee is only for those who wake up on time, though.

Miles speeds to campus, and I'm out and jogging away before he's even put it in park.

I make it to the classroom at 7:58. The professor is already at the front of the class, and I stride to my seat quickly. I smile at the professor, who smiles back.

The girl beside me, however, gives me a dirty look.

I sigh as my mood plummets.

Funny how fast that can happen.

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MILES

I lied. I only have one class on Monday. My Tuesday and Thursday schedule is a bit busier—three classes—but I’d also be lying if I said my schedule was difficult by any stretch of the imagination.

I follow the path Willow took, albeit at a much slower pace. I pass the classroom she’s in, making sure to spot her. I love that she’s wearing the shirt and jeans I picked out, and she didn’t even comment on them. I should’ve checked about her panties—but since I hid them, I’m pretty confident she’s not wearing anything else. And her nipples made their appearance through her shirt, visible through her gaping-open jacket, verifying that she didn’t try to sneak on a bra. Which, again, would’ve been possible if I hadn’t hidden them.

Now, she’s got her jacket zipped up and protecting those perky breasts from view. There’s a little berth around her, which satisfies me somewhat. It’s not like I set out to start rumors about her.

My brother made it easy, however. He didn’t deny when I told Erik and Amanda over winter break that Willow broke up with him. I may have fed them some line about how devastated Knox was over it and that I hoped his game didn’t worsen due to his heartache.

Knox eats that shit up. He’s the definition of an attention-whore.

Not Willow.

I still can’t really fathom how she developed feelings for the asshole.

Downstairs is one of the other, lesser-used dining options. It’s quieter and more of a grab-and-pay type of place. As opposed to the dining hall, where you just swipe to enter, then eat as much as your stomach can handle.

“Hi, Miles!” a girl calls.

I ignore it.

The amount of people who want to get all up in my business sometimes verges on uncomfortable. When I'm alone, I pretend I can't hear them. It's rare that anyone forces their attention on me—like jumping in front of me or whatever. Only desperate girls try it, and while they're harder to merely brush off, they're also easier to trick.

Hey, baby, I'd love to chat—but I'm late to meet my brother.

*Oh, Knox? *bats eyelashes like a fucking fan* Good luck in the game next...*

Total bullshit, most of the time.

I grab two breakfast sandwiches, two coffees, and add in a protein bar on top of my pile. I pay and settle at a table to wait, slowly eating one of the sandwiches. I open my phone and scroll through it.

"Hey." Greyson slides into the seat across from me.

I set my phone down. "What's up?"

He drops Willow's phone on the table between us. "Figured you might want that."

I smile. "Yeah. I've never met a girl who gives less of a shit about her phone."

Greyson glares at something over my shoulder. "Is there a reason you've got a group of angry football assholes staring at you?"

I crane around.

Sure enough, Ronan Pierce—the prick who was giving Willow drinks the other night—is glowering at me. He has a matching black eye, and already I can imagine the rumors that'll start up. Who will connect Willow between us?

A lot of people, knowing this fucking school. The *three* of us with bruises? Suspicious.

I sigh. "May as well face this head-on."

Greyson shakes his head, but he follows me across the room to the football table. There are four of them, and they all look like they want to hit me.

They should just get in line.

"Pierce," I greet him. I keep my voice even.

"Whiteshaw," he replies. His eyes are full of anger.

I mean, I *did* sucker punch him in front of his own apartment. I'd be pissed, too.

“Willow’s my girlfriend,” I inform him. “So back the fuck off.”

Pierce sneers. “Yeah? Does she know that?”

“Oh, fuck you,” Greyson mutters.

“He’s funny,” I comment to my friend. “So fucking funny with that black eye. Do you want to know what he looked like right *after* I punched him in the face?”

“I’d love to,” Greyson deadpans.

So I do what I definitely shouldn’t.

I wind up and punch that fucker in the face. *Again*.

Really. He should expect this by now. But instead, the force knocks him off his chair and to the floor. He jumps to his feet and dives at me, and I relish the bite of his knuckles against my jaw. He tackles me with the force of a linebacker. I hit the floor hard, the wind knocked from my lungs.

I manage to block his punch to my face, but I get another to my ribs. He’s on top of me and raining down hits, and the pain wakes me the fuck up. With a roar, I throw him off me and into the table next to us. He crashes into it, tipping it over.

A quick glance in Greyson’s direction shows that he’s somehow keeping the rest of Pierce’s friends away from our fight.

“What is the meaning of this?” someone roars.

Pierce staggers to his feet. He’s got blood dripping from a split lip, and his eyes are wild. Greyson shoves someone back, then grabs my arm and hauls me to my feet.

My ribs hurt, my face kind of hurts. I think my nose is bleeding again.

We face the football coach. He’s one of those small-but-mighty assholes who will hold their own against guys twice his size. He’s got his players pinned with a look, and Greyson and I both inch backward.

“Stay,” he barks at us.

Great.

He strides right up and gets in our faces. Coach Roake would freak the fuck out if we did anything to jeopardize our spots, so Greyson and I remain still. And calm, although I’m seething on the inside.

“Get your shit and come with me. All of you.” He points to the football players and us, then heads to the exit.

I grab my shit, tossing my coffee and holding on to the second one. The second sandwich goes in my bag, along with the protein bar. Greyson and I follow him toward the student center. He must have an office near the

gymnasium, like the rest of the athletic department—with the exception of our coach. His office is at the stadium, far away from the rest of the bullshit.

That's how he describes it anyway.

Maybe the football coach gives ours a heads-up, because Roake is waiting in the hall when we arrive.

When he sees Greyson and me, his eyebrows shoot up. He doesn't say a damn word until the eight of us are in the office.

"Explain," the football coach barks. He points to Pierce. "Starting with you."

Ronan's jaw tics. "Just a friendly little tussle, sir."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sir," one of his friends pipes up. "Devereux and Whiteshaw were just helping us settle a debate."

I exchange a glance with Greyson.

Their coach points again, this time down at his desk. "You are all on fucking thin ice after the *last* time—" He cuts himself off abruptly and looks at Roake. "Unfortunately, I can't say this sort of stunt is out of the ordinary for my boys."

Roake turns his glare on us. "Do you two have anything to add?"

Just that we're damn lucky sports are worshipped at this fucking school.

I shake my head, and so does Greyson. Quick, silent.

"Get out of our sight," the football coach yells.

Ronan is the first to move. He yanks the door open and slips out, followed by his three friends. Greyson and I hurry after them, and I take a sip of the coffee before I forget it's exactly how I don't like it. I wrinkle my nose.

"Thanks," Greyson says to one of the guys.

He shrugs. "Maybe pick a spot off campus next time you hockey assholes want to start a brawl."

"Oh, fuck off," I growl.

Ronan laughs and elbows one of his friends. "Chase is gonna get a kick out of this."

Greyson rolls his eyes. But once we're around the corner and away from the athletic offices, he draws to a halt and holds out his hand.

Ronan eyes him, then shakes it.

Ugh.

We slap hands next, our fingers wrapping around each other and squeezing hard. He drags me a step closer. “So, Willow’s off-limits, hmm?”

I squeeze until I feel the bones of his hand grind together, then jerk out of his grasp. He just smirks at me, his eyebrow raised. Waiting for a reply? He’s not going to get one.

Greyson hooks his arm around my shoulders and steers me in the opposite direction of them. We take a different staircase down, and he follows me back across campus.

“Do you have nothing better to do than babysit me?” I snap.

He shrugs. “You seem like a bomb about to detonate, so... nope, I’ve got nothing better to do at the moment.”

I grunt and take another sip of the coffee. It’s actually not so bad. Just a weird flavor. Coffee should taste like coffee, not sugar. But it isn’t hot anymore. At best, it’s lukewarm.

Fucking hell.

I drop it into the trash and go back to get another one. Greyson follows silently, and I’m glad he’s not making me talk. Because what would we even say? That I have an insane obsession? That I’m driving myself crazy over it?

Coffee paid for, I take the stairs up just as the classroom doors start opening. Greyson’s my shadow as I spot Willow and walk faster to reach her. I bump her shoulder, and she almost jumps a foot.

“Miles,” she exhales. “I don’t have time for whatever you want. I need caffeine—”

“In the form of coffee?” I hand her the cup.

She stops walking. Her fingers curl around the cup automatically, so at least she’s not going to drop it. But *fuck*, she’s staring at it like she would never expect someone to do something halfway nice to her. Or for her.

For her. Yeah.

She takes a sip, and her eyes close. Her shoulders sag.

The satisfaction in my chest makes the extra trip, the fight, all of it worth it. I grab the breakfast sandwich from my bag and push that into her free hand. Fuck it, right? That’s why I bought it.

And then we’re moving again.

I glance back, but Greyson is gone.

“Why is your nose bleeding?”

I touch it, not surprised to find wet blood still there. I didn't really even wipe it, but now I do. My whole body aches as the adrenaline ebbs from my system.

"Don't worry about it." I pull out her phone and hand it to her. "Missing this?"

She smiles slightly and plucks it from my grasp, checking the locked screen. "Aw, Violet charged it for me."

"How sweet." My tone is dry. "Keep it on you, would you?"

She makes a face and stops again. At this rate, she'll be late for her next class. "I know I'm a computer science major, and my whole life is going to be about technology. I mean, I guess my whole world already *is* about technology. But it's exhausting. I don't want to be chained to a phone and a slave to notifications. I don't want to be available whenever anyone comes calling."

I digest that.

In a strange way, it makes sense.

There's so much information coming at us from our phones all the damn time. I can see why she'd want to disconnect—and sometimes the only way to do that is by force.

"This is me," she says, stopping outside another classroom.

"What class is it?"

"You don't have my schedule memorized?"

I hide my smile. "Of course I do. I know when you need to be places... but forgive me if your class names get a little jumbled."

"Well, for your information, this is Computational Linguistics 101. It's an elective. See you... later, I guess." She steps into the room, leaving me alone in the hall.

Not *alone*-alone. The hallway is full of students moving between classes.

But... alone enough that I want to follow her.

WILLOW

My reprieve comes in the form of Aspen Monroe.

She finds me in the library, where I've been hiding out instead of going back to the hockey house. Miles and the rest of them have practice right now, so in *theory*, I could have the place to myself.

But then I imagine someone following me, and I haven't been able to work up the nerve to leave campus.

Funny how a little fear can totally paralyze you.

I frown. Violet was stalked. I could go to my best friend about this feeling that keeps rattling around in my chest. Aspen knows how to deal with fear, too. We were there to help her through her trauma, and now she's... well, maybe *fine* would be the wrong word.

But she's better.

She flips her dark hair off her shoulder and braces her forearms on the table across from me. "You look sad."

I'm not sad. I'm miffed, since my sister hasn't been answering any of my texts. Neither has Violet. Not that I've sent either of them that many. Something about pushing my *maybe-sadness* on them has me backing off more than I should.

"We're going to the pizza place on the corner," Aspen says when I don't respond. "And you've been weird lately."

It's the second week of the semester. I watched someone die. My place was broken into and ripped apart.

Of course I've been weird.

"When I feel weird, I go watch the hockey practice," she confides in me. "I'd say we could do that, but their coach closed practices for the time

being.”

Well, I’m not about to tell her that was my fault.

“No, thanks.” I open my laptop, switching assignments. My second week of classes, and I’m already swamped. “I’ve got some coding to do…”

“Is it about Knox? Or Miles?”

I close my laptop again. “I don’t know,” I answer truthfully. “I don’t want to give either of them a bigger ego than they already have.”

She snorts and taps the table. “So, no on the pizza?”

“Rain check,” I reply.

She nods and wanders off.

I scan my phone again, but there’s nothing from Violet or Indie.

My sister is seventeen. She’s *always* on her phone—and yet, she never responds to anything except that obscure app that deletes your messages and pictures after you send them. I don’t know why anyone likes that. It’s so ephemeral. I want to keep the photos she sends me. The ones of her in school with her friends, or at cheer practice, or doing whatever it is that seventeen-year-olds do.

I’ve lost touch with that in the past few years. Being away has only heightened the divide between us. So much that not even summers together could rectify it. We used to be close. Best friends and sisters. Now we’re just… blood relatives.

She looks like me, a bit. Her hair is a lighter shade of blonde. More white than gold. She pulls more of our father’s features. His height—so she’s already a couple of inches taller than me—and her eye color. Hazel. Her lankiness, although that might be attributed to the growth spurt.

I wouldn’t say I have curves. But while I at least have a hint of a figure, Indie is a string bean. She says she hates it, but she does gymnastics. It gives her an edge, and I think she tries to hone that. She does workouts that focus on lean muscles. She runs a lot.

She’s got a billion friends, while mine seem to have dwindled down to a handful.

I miss her.

My phone buzzes against my hand, and I jump. I snatch it and scan the caller ID, my hope peaking. It crashes down the instant I register that it isn’t my sister.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Ms. Reed. This is Detective Barrister.”

Oh, shoot. “Hi, Detective. If you’ll just give me a moment, I’ll move somewhere quieter...” I gather my stuff, keeping my phone pinched between my ear and shoulder. In a matter of moments, I’m heading out of the library and toward the campus quad. “Sorry about that. I was in the library, they frown on phone calls.”

“Not a problem,” she replies. Her tone is brisk. “I was hoping to see you stop by the station with that list of items.”

My steps falter. “Oh. I’m sorry, today’s been a little crazy with classes. I probably won’t get a chance until Friday. I haven’t actually been back to the apartment to look for missing things.”

She’s quiet for a moment, then says, “Willow, this is very important. We received a report of another break-in with very similar attributes.”

“What does that mean?”

“The destruction done to the bedroom, shredding things for the sake of anger. It’s aggressive. And the new break-in was to an apartment of a college-aged girl who lived alone, on an upper floor.”

Like me. A chill skitters up my back, and I grip my phone harder.

But at least this means it wasn’t targeted at *me*. Right? It was just a random attack by some asshole who needed to break something.

And maybe steal something.

“I’m not staying there,” I reply. “So, um, I’ll have to go this weekend.”

“How about this,” the detective says. “I’ll send an officer out tomorrow, and he’ll go with you through the apartment to catalog anything that might’ve been taken.”

Worry niggles at me, but I find myself agreeing. I tell her when I can get over there, and she says she’ll have someone meet me.

She wishes me well.

Hangs up.

I slowly stow my phone in my pocket, although truthfully? All I’m thinking about right now is the desire to chuck my phone about as far away as I can manage.

Instead, I call my mother.

“Willow!” she answers on the second ring. “I was just thinking about you, darling.”

My chest tightens. “Oh, yeah?”

“We were thinking of coming up to Crown Point the weekend before spring break, and then whisk you away for a trip somewhere. We’re due for

a vacation, and our bosses informed us today that there would be a project over the summer that would require us to dedicate a solid amount of time to... In essence, springtime is better for travel plans. Although busier all around, of course.”

“Oh.” I smile. It’s easy to force it. “That sounds great.”

“Indie can stay with you, and your father and I will get a hotel nearby. She’s been talking about colleges—now’s an excellent time to show her the true life around CPU, don’t you think?”

Mom just sounds so... chipper.

Happy.

And for some reason, I can’t fathom why. Maybe because Crown Point isn’t feeling quite so safe these days. And even school has been turning into a mental game. Who hates me? Who doesn’t give a shit? Who’s still on my side?

I don’t even *have* a side.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I lie. A lump forms in my throat as I think about all the things I haven’t told her. I should just blurt it out, but then she’d go into crisis management mode.

It’s cold and efficient, and how she tackled all of my teenage drama.

“Perfect! We’ll solidify the dates, since it’s coming up in just about a month. What else is going on with you?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I look around. It takes me a moment to realize that I’ve left campus. Just wandered right out the gates, headed toward Haven.

Well, it’s about to be *my* haven. I hurry along the sidewalk and tell Mom about my classes. Classes are safe to discuss with her, because they’re safe in general. They’re normal to stress over.

“Okay, honey,” Mom says after I’ve pushed in through the doors to Haven.

Clearly, she can hear the shift of background noise.

“I’ll let you go. Thanks for calling, honey.”

“Of course. Talk to you soon.” I hit the *end* button and slip my phone back in my pocket. My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven’t eaten anything since the breakfast sandwich Miles handed me. It was surprisingly delicious, actually. Not that I’d admit it out loud.

But now, I wave to one of the waitresses. She gestures to any of the open tables along the windows. I take one a good way down and set my bag

on the chair beside me.

Never-ending homework—but now at least I'll be able to eat while doing it.

I order a drink and burger, then crack open my laptop. I slip earbuds in and turn up the white-noise music. It's supposed to focus your brain, and I've always believed in that shit. Like, yes, this random assortment of noises will keep me concentrating much better than All Time Low or Harry Styles.

Four drinks and another order of fries later, and I'm *toast*. Also, toasted. That's a thing, right? It sounds like something people would say. A *euphemism* for drunk. Pissed. Blasted.

I slouch in my chair and zip closed my backpack. I quit homework a while ago, and now I'm just enjoying the afterburn of a certain salt-rimmed drink.

You know what I'm talking about.

"Water?" the waitress asks, setting one down in front of me.

"Thanks." My smile feels so much less forced right now. My lips just tip up like I was born to smile. Or grin. Am I grinning? Showing too much teeth can be a detriment. It can scare people away, because sometimes it can be misconstrued as a teeth-bared expression.

Or so I've heard.

I touch my cheeks. They're warm, and I'm sure my face is on fire.

The chair opposite me is dragged out. I look up, my lips parting.

Miles drops into the seat. His gaze is impassive, but I'm sure he's pissed about something. He's always mad, isn't he?

Belatedly, his last rule comes drifting back to me.

The no-drinking rule.

I sit up straighter and drop my probing fingers from my cheeks, lacing them in my lap. I'm glad, at the *very* least, that the waitress already cleared most of my table. All that's left is the water in front of me.

"Willow."

I eye him.

Can I get away with pretending to be sober?

His hair is wet again. He must shower at the arena, in the locker rooms. How rough was his practice? He looks like shit. Dark circles—*wait, no, those are bruises*—under his eyes, his split lip scabbed over. They were there earlier. I didn't split his lip. Or hit him in the nose again. But someone did.

Those eyes burn into me.

His nose is a little swollen, too.

“How much?” His voice is so quiet.

My gaze drops to the table. That’s a no to getting away with it, then.

“Look at me,” he growls.

I do. My eyes snap to his without a thought.

Why do I do that?

And a better question—why does it release some of the stiffness in my shoulders? They sag, without warning, as I lean forward and just *watch* him. As if that would be enough. As if anything I ever do will be enough.

It won’t, remember?

“How much did you drink?”

I tilt my head. “All day? Or just here?”

He blinks. “All day?”

“Four here,” I breathe. “Maybe five.”

“There’s five on your bill.”

Fuck.

“Okay, five,” I agree.

He presses his lips together for a moment, then leans back. A second later, his foot is running up the inside of my calf. “Here’s what you’re going to do, wild girl. Are you listening?”

I nod. My skin prickles. I don’t like the sensation, little bees buzzing under my skin. But I want to know what he wants. To set things right?

No, that’s not it.

“You’re going to buy a round of shots for everyone in the bar.”

My brows furrow. I cast a glance around, relieved to find that there are only a dozen people in Haven. I wave the waitress over and tell her.

“Your best whiskey,” Miles adds.

Oh, my wallet is going to hurt after this.

Her eyes widen, but she nods quickly and heads back to the bar. She passes out the drinks slowly, seeming to need to explain to everyone that I’ve bought them a shot. Their gazes swing toward me one by one, and heat licks across my face.

Finally, she brings back two shots for us.

I lick my lips.

“Go on,” he says.

I shiver and lift the shot glass. I shouldn't mix liquors, but it goes down easy enough. I set it down and lean back, groaning at the feel of it. It adds to my floating feeling. I'm untethered, except for Miles' foot running up and down the inside of my leg.

He slides his glass toward me.

"Be a good girl and take that," he says. "I'm driving you home, after all."

I lift it and stare at the amber liquid.

"Maybe after that shot, you'll decide that you want another round for the bar," he continues. "Or maybe you'll get up and go to the bathroom, where you'll pull your pants down and put your hands on the wall in the handicap stall. And you'll wait for me there, with your head bent and your heart pounding out of your chest."

His words hang between us.

My heart *is* pounding out of my chest.

I take the shot and stand suddenly. My chair scrapes back.

Miles watches me. I know he does, even when I walk away from him. He watches the sway of my hips and my light-as-air footsteps across the bar, into the darker hallway that hides the bathrooms. Women first, then men. I push into the women's restroom and duck down, scanning the stalls.

Empty.

For now.

My breathing is uneven, and I catch a glimpse of myself in the row of mirrors. My hair is in place, but it doesn't do much to hide my burning cheeks or the half-lidded eyes. The way my lips quirk up at myself.

I don't try to smile, because my nerves are all tangled together with my sensibilities.

Handicap stall. I drag it shut, although I don't latch it. I undo the button of my jeans and drag them, and the briefs I stole from Miles' drawer this morning, down my hips. My thighs. All the way to my ankles.

I crane around and eye my bare ass. At the handprint still visible as a wicked version of a bruise. And then I face forward again, exhaling carefully. I don't know what he's going to do, and I can barely suppress my moan when my hands touch the cold tile.

My body bends forward automatically, and my head hangs down.

And then I wait.

And wait.

The door bangs open, and my whole body tenses. I practically hold my breath when another stall door shuts, and then the sound of another woman pulling her pants down and peeing fills the restroom.

I stay still until she flushes. There's a quick rush of water, and the grind of the paper towel dispenser. And then she's gone.

While I wait, I drift. My stomach cramps, and my feet ache. My one foot, in particular, is throbbing. The urgent care doctor said it would be healed soon—but soon can't come fast enough.

The door opens again.

Then the stall door opens, and fingers trail down the side of my hip.

"Good," he breathes. He locks the stall behind him. The latch scrapes across the metal, the noise unmistakable. "What a good little slut you are."

His fingers are back, this time parting my ass cheeks. I bite my lip to hold back my groan.

"Oh, my slut is dripping." His breath hits my skin. And then his finger is pushing through my wetness, straight into me.

My knees nearly give out.

"Ah, ah," he admonishes. He continues to pump his finger in and out, pressing on my G-spot with every stroke.

Before I can come—before I can get close—he withdraws. His wet finger trails higher, over my asshole. He pushes in slightly, and I squeal.

The sound echoes around me.

SMACK!

My body lurches forward, my weight shifting to my toes. Toes that curl in my shoes as fire spreads through my body, emanating from my ass.

"Your reactions drive me insane," Miles groans behind me.

He slips his finger into my ass. In and out, like he's fucking it. My brain stutters to a halt. I don't know what I'm doing, or what he's doing. All I can focus on is the sensation he's giving me.

SMACK!

I keep my mouth shut this time, swallowing the noise before it can escape. He struck a different spot. Lower on my ass, on the other cheek. My muscles tense, and he pulls his finger from my asshole. He grips my cheeks with both hands, massaging. Rubbing. Kneading.

And then he strikes again.

Hit, massage. Repeat.

My mouth is hanging open by the time he's done—and the butterflies in my chest are fanning their wings. I want to fall into his arms, because if this was punishment, I'll break every fucking one of his rules.

All I need is an orgasm and a bed.

His hands drift along the outside of my legs, coasting down to where my jeans are pooled around my ankles. My eyes crack open, and I see him through my legs. His crouched position, the way his long fingers pluck at his black briefs that sit, in plain sight, on top of my jeans.

"Clever girl," he murmurs.

He pulls that fabric up first, securing it around my hips, then dips back down for my jeans. He rises and presses his groin into my ass, and I nearly groan again. He's hard as a rock. Layers of clothing separate us, but I swear I can feel his piercing.

Wishful thinking.

"When will she wake up?" he asks.

My brow furrows again.

When will who wake up?

He reaches around me and does up the button of my jeans, then the fly. He pulls me upright, and it takes a minute for my brain to connect to my muscles. I wobble.

And in the next instant, I'm in his arms.

Good, a little piece of my mind whispers.

The louder part doesn't think that's good at all—but the alcohol has silenced that voice.

And I don't think I miss it.

MILES

I sit outside the bathroom door, frowning down at my phone. I should be *in* the bathroom, but she managed to get it locked before heaving her guts out. If I was nice, I'd be in there with her, locked door or not. You know, to hold her hair and rub her back.

As it is, I'm *not* nice. And the sound of her throwing up vaguely makes me nauseous, too.

My current screen is information on the pill that makes your body unable to process alcohol. It's prescription only, but this is Crown Point. There are dealers for everything if you know where to look. Find me a college campus that doesn't have a guy with connections to the local pharmacy, I dare you.

It's got too many side effects for my comfort.

And getting Willow dry needs to be painful but not dangerous.

I eye the door again. She's gone silent.

Maybe that's my solution. Every time she has a drink, I get her drunk enough to throw up? Or...

Fuck, I don't know.

Movement on the stairs draws my gaze. Finch has a pretty girl hooked under his arm, and a smirk firmly in place.

I wasn't too sure about him, but I think my brother and our friends are rubbing off on him. Hudson Finch used to be nice. That niceness has flaked to the floor like peeling paint, leaving behind a rough shell.

Good for him, though. Hockey isn't for the nice.

It's for the angry.

It's for those of us who need to rage against *something*—or, more often than not, *someone*.

They pass me without comment, disappearing into Finch's room. The door closes softly behind them, and the high-pitched moans start up almost immediately.

Funny, that.

Ah, well. He'll learn that puck bunnies like to put on a show. Brush your finger over their tit, and they'll pretend they're coming. Learned that one from watching my brother pick up a girl my freshman year. He basically blew her mind, then shoved her toward me.

And then she blew *me*.

The girl in question turned out to be a bitch named Paris, a grade-A puck bunny with a golden tongue. Too bad she was a raging bitch when her mouth wasn't full of cock. She's graduated now, thank God.

I hop to my feet and try the bathroom doorknob. It's still locked, but we keep a long, slim nail on top of the frame for situations just like these. I run my finger along the top until I find it, then insert it into the little hole in the knob.

It unlocks with a *click*, and I replace the nail. Then I enter.

Willow's arm is stretched out along the edge of the toilet, and her head is resting on it. Her eyes are closed, her breathing even.

Well, shit.

I pick her up, shifting her until her head rolls onto my shoulder. And then I bring her to bed, because... well. Worst pretend boyfriend of the year award goes to me?

She doesn't wake up, and I don't try any funky business. She's already in just my briefs and the band t-shirt she wore today. She didn't make any attempt to do anything when we got back here. She just crawled into bed, and that lasted about an hour.

And now we're here.

I continue researching tough-love ways to get her to stop drinking.

She uses it as an escape for the hard shit. Like getting over my brother, or dealing with his betrayal, or anything that requires emotions. Hell, she might even be drinking to conceal how she feels about me.

Not to *me*, obviously. I'm not stupid. But to herself.

I get a text, drawing my attention from the webpages.

JACOB

You up? I have it.

Yep. Meet you outside?

I loathe leaving her in her sleep—a particular sore point for her—but this is more important. And with the way she’s snoring, I don’t think she’s going to wake up for a few hours.

Be there in 5.

I smile to myself and hop out of bed. I pull shoes on and make my way downstairs, flipping on our porch light. In less than five, Jacob’s truck coasts down the street. I jog down the walkway to meet him.

He rolls down his window. “Do you need help?”

I shake my head. I mean, in theory, probably. But also, I’d rather not risk Willow waking up to Jacob leaning over her. “I heard your explanation last time.”

He frowns. “Okay.”

“Where do you even get this shit?”

“I know a guy.”

Well.

“You know you’re welcome here if you ever want to... hang out.” I cross my arms over my chest, silently cursing my lack of a jacket. We’re supposed to be indestructible hockey players, impervious to cold—or whatever people say about us. But *damn it*, my nipples are going to fall off.

“My little vacation has run out of time,” he says, holding his hand out through the window. “I appreciate that, though, man.”

I shake it. “Next time you pass through here.”

“Definitely.”

I take the paper bag with me, and Jacob rolls up his window. At the kitchen table, I empty it and spread everything out. I get the instrument ready, then make sure it’s connected to my phone. There’s a little chip number and everything.

A chill races through me.

I want to do this, but I also know that Willow will freak out when she discovers it. Aspen and Steele still haven’t had this conversation yet—and I’m crazy enough to want to be around for that show.

Back upstairs.

I gently roll Willow onto her stomach, parting her hair to expose the back of her neck. It just... goes in, I guess. I mean, could I have paid slightly better attention to Jacob's instructions? Yeah. Too late now. I hold the back of her neck, lest she starts squirming or suddenly becomes conscious, and push the inserter into her skin. She lets out a whimper but doesn't otherwise stir. Not even when I press down on the trigger and the chip finds its new home.

Satisfaction rages through me. I pull it out gently, then replace the bandage that's been hiding Amanda's nail marks. They're healing well, though. Another one might escape Willow's notice, and in a few days, they'll all be healed enough that she won't give them another thought.

I check my phone again, and her blue dot shows up on the app.

I'm hard in an instant. I toss the inserter thing into the drawer in my nightstand and my phone on top of it. She's not wearing panties, and I slouch out of my sweatpants. I part her legs, guiding her so she's more on her stomach than her side, and run the tip of my cock through her center. She's wet. Even asleep.

I push into her, groaning at the tightness of her. Her muscles clench around me automatically, and I thrust in deeper. Until I'm buried inside her to the hilt.

My self-control isn't all here.

I fuck her fast, every jerk of my hips on her ass slamming the headboard against the wall. She's not waking up because the alcohol still has her firmly in its grip. And this is the last time this will happen.

I run my hands over her body, cupping her perfect breasts, and bury my face in her back when I come.

My erection doesn't fully disappear. It stays hard enough that I remain inside her, keeping my cum trapped. And she doesn't make a noise when I adjust our positions to sleep. Her floral scent, and that of sex, wraps around me.

Before I fall asleep, I'm fully hard again. I relish the thought of fucking her when I'm asleep, too. Like our bodies just can't help but move together on a subconscious level. It should be subconscious. As easy as breathing.

Like love.

Well, I knew I was obsessed with her. It should be fucking obvious that I'm in love with her, too.

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WILLOW

Our week progresses as follows:

Wake up. Shower (alone and in peace, thank you very much).

Get dressed in whatever outfit Miles picks, with some slight tweaks that either set his expression on edge or pass by undetected until later. Get driven to campus. Go to classes (including that drawing class that I now share with Miles and meeting him between my morning Monday and Wednesday classes, where he brings me a coffee just the way I like it. Every. Single. Time.).

Try to avoid the staring and whispering of everyone else in the freaking school. Slip away to go teach singing in the Crown Point Arts building, then hurry back to the library like I was there all along.

Eat dinner. Don't drink. Avoid Miles, until he's inside me in bed and it's impossible to ignore him. Avoid Violet, because if I told her what I'm letting Miles do to me, she'd be pissed. Then Greyson would get involved, and he'd either pick her side or his friend's. And I don't really want to test that when they've just figured their shit out.

I don't want to think about Miles' dick.

I really, really don't.

But... *fuck*, I am. All the time. I think about what it would taste like, what it would feel like in my hand. He hasn't done anything to make me do *anything* to it, except slide it inside me from behind when I'm on the cusp of sleep.

I'd tried to take a nap the other day, and I'd lain in bed and flopped around, my insides aching.

He's messing with my head. And at the same time, I crave it. I want to know what he wants me to do, or else I don't know what to do.

Isn't that fucked up?

I should know what I want.

And yet, sifting through desire and want and need is overwhelming.

So I don't, and he does.

The stares are getting worse. All around campus, people whisper about me as the brother-hopper. Never mind that *plenty* of girls have probably fucked or blown both of them. I'm the whore because I jumped into a relationship with one and got played like a fool, and now I'm with the other.

But because of Miles, no one says anything *to* me. Just around me. About me. And it's getting harder to ignore them.

I blew off the detective on Tuesday. I called her up and left a message right after my Crime Fiction class, lamenting that we were assigned a paper due the next class, and I couldn't make it. That was before I hustled across Crown Point to teach the brats how to sing.

"You're coming to the game," Miles announces, dropping down into the seat beside me.

Dining hall. Lunch, Friday afternoon. My Crime Fiction class is in an hour, and I think Miles has a class at that time, too.

He reaches for my hand and runs his thumb across my palm. "Willow, say yes."

"Yes," I reply automatically.

And then I wince, and I jerk out of his hold.

"I mean, *no*," I glare at him. "I'm not going to a game with you."

He shrugs. "You wouldn't go *with* me. I'm playing. You'd go with Violet and Aspen and her other friend, whatever her name is."

"Thalia."

He snaps and points at me. "That's it. You'll go with Violet and Aspen and *Thalia*, and you'll sit right behind the players' benches, so I don't have to worry about you."

"And if I decide..." I cast my gaze around, then back to him. "If I decide, 'Hey, you know what? I think I like this other team better. Maybe I'll wear their jersey and—'"

"You'll wear what I say you're going to wear," Miles replies. "Coach wants to give our second goalie some ice time tonight, so I'll be able to keep an eye on you, too."

"I don't like it."

"No one asked you to like it."

"I don't want to go. Hockey is my least favorite thing about you."

Miles laughs. He *laughs*. Tips back in his chair, throws his head back, and belly laughs.

"I'm serious," I snap.

"Oh, I know," he says once he's calmed down enough to breathe normally. "And that means there are pieces of me that you *do* like."

I cross my arms. "You're a piece of work, you know that? How much ego—"

"A lot of fucking ego." He smirks. "But I think it works out for us."

I sigh. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Meet me at the house before the game. Five o'clock." He eyes me and rises. "Don't be late."

I'm never late.

But... I definitely *want* to be late. To push his buttons or whatever. Because it seems to be the only interesting thing happening to me lately.

He comes around and presses his lips to my temple. "Wake up, wild girl."

My brows furrow. "I'm not sleeping."

He straightens, and I swear, his expression is almost wistful. Or... regretful?

Either way, I'm treated to a nice view of his ass as he walks away.

It's 5:12 p.m.

I walk in through the front door of the hockey house, my nerves racing. The game starts at seven. He's due to be at the arena at 5:30 or something like that. So my bold lateness is going to be an issue, I can already tell.

It's dark in the house and unusually silent. I haven't once thought of it as mine.

Mine is a crime scene.

I sense him a split second before he grabs me, and I whirl around. Except it isn't Miles' face staring down at me—it's a mask. The same *Scream* one that Steele tormented Aspen with months ago. I know, because

she took a little pride in showing us after the fact. In hushed tones, she told us about their little game of chase.

And I swore that I'd never be chased like that. No fucking way.

But that doesn't mean my knees aren't trembling at the sight of it in front of me.

Miles isn't wearing a shirt. He's got low-slung sweatpants on and sneakers. That's it. I lick my lips at the sight.

"You're late." It's his voice behind the mask, at least.

I shiver.

"I was going to go easy on you." He pulls something from his pocket and tosses it to me. "But now..."

I look down at the odd-shaped thing in my hand.

"What is this?"

"Turn around," he murmurs.

"Take the mask off," I demand.

He chuckles and ignores that. Instead, he grabs my hand and yanks me around, dragging me to the couch. He bends me over the back of it, my arms trapped behind me. Cold cuffs are locked around my wrists, keeping them at the small of my back. He lifts the object from my fingers.

A moment later, he's unbuttoning my jeans and dragging them down.

"What is this?" I ask, shifting my weight.

He kicks my legs wider, and something cool hits my ass. It drips down my crack, and I close my eyes. I squeeze them tighter when something touches my ass.

The object?

"Handy little toy, this plug," Miles says in my ear.

The plastic mask touches my jaw. He works the toy deeper, and I try to relax my muscles. Otherwise it'll just fucking hurt more than it already does. He pushes it in another inch, then draws it out. He fucks me with it, his body pressing down on mine.

I turn my head and look him in the eye. Through the shadows of the creepy fucking mask. Just blue on blue, me to him.

"Tonight, Willow. Tonight we wake you up for good."

He pushes the plug all the way in, and my lips part as my muscles tense and close around it. When I straighten, it shifts inside me. It's foreign and sets me off-balance, but Miles ignores it. He pulls up my underwear and

jeans—again with his fucking briefs instead of anything I own—and reaches around me to do up my zipper and button.

I curl my fingers into the front of his sweatpants, flexing against his hard-on. My knees go a little weak, but he's right there. Keeping me up. He undoes the cuffs and releases me. The mask keeps my heart beating faster. I reach up and pull it off his face, revealing his scruff and his intense glower and his ticking jaw.

I reach for that jaw.

And then the plug comes to life.

It buzzes, and I jump out of my skin.

He grasps my forearms, keeping me upright. I arch away from the vibrations and inadvertently press myself to his body. Where his hard cock strains to greet me through his sweatpants.

“What the fuck is this?”

“Something to remember me by.”

He shows me the remote in his hand, clicking a button. The vibrations die, leaving me panting. I don't know if I like it or hate it, but I glare at him all the same.

He pats my ass. “We gotta go. You can do your makeup or whatever at the arena, but I need to keep my eye on you.”

Great.

MILES

Our second goalie, who isn't the *greatest* goalie to ever exist, is Jeremy Blue. Nicknames include: Blue Jay—when he's demonstrating that he can stop a puck, and because sometimes he resembles a blue bird flapping his wings in the crease—and Blue Balls. You know, when he's holding out on us.

I sit off to the side, because Coach made it clear that I wasn't playing today at all. I've got my pads on in case something goes wrong, and Blue Balls fucks it up and gets injured. But until then, I'm benched. All because of a little fight with Pierce.

Greyson, on the other hand, is out there skating for his life.

We're playing the Shadow Valley Knights, and they're out for blood tonight. They're ranking a bit better than us at this point in the season, and they seem to remember the last time we played each other. The fight that Steele started with one of their best players, Josh Maverick.

I spot him now, gliding around the ice like a pompous peacock. Steele's got his gaze on a swivel, seeming determined to check Maverick into the glass every time he gets the puck... and a few times when he doesn't.

The whistle blows, and my attention drifts from Blue Balls to the stands next to me. True to my order, with some help from my teammates, Willow and her friends are seated behind the bench. She's actually adjacent to me, which works out just fine.

I hit the button on the plug's remote stashed in my pocket.

She was mid-conversation with Violet, but all of a sudden she goes rigid.

"Are you okay?" Violet says, maybe.

There's a lot of noise in the stadium, and I'm mostly lip reading and anticipating. I up it a level, and Willow squeezes her legs together.

Do I want her to orgasm in front of her friends?

Not particularly.

But...

Nah, don't do that.

She hasn't come since she moved in with me. It's only been a week, but she hasn't said a word about it. I don't even think she's noticed.

My teeth grind together.

The play has resumed, drawing Violet's focus back to the ice. Willow, however, turns and glares at me. Her hips are moving ever so slightly, and her eyes lose focus the longer I let it continue.

Her pupils are dilated.

I shut the toy off again, and she sags in her seat.

There's a shout, and I jump forward to see what's happening better. Our goalie caught the puck, but one of the Knights slammed into him. The net is askew, and Steele and Finch are on the asshole opponent in a split second. They shove him away, but it seems like the Knight doesn't really give a shit. Because he's got Finch in his grip, and they're exchanging heated words.

The whole arena is yelling for a fight. Steele glides around Finch and the Knight, his gaze granite. And then Finch tosses his gloves to the ice, and so does the other guy. The crowd loses their minds. Even I find myself yelling for Finch to beat his stupid ass.

Blue Jay skates toward me, stepping off the ice. He grabs a towel and tears his mask off, holding it to his bloody lip. Not sure how he managed that with a full helmet on, but whatever. We both watch Finch and the Knight exchange blows, until Finch somehow manages to get the Knight down.

"That's our boy," I yell, banging my fist on the glass.

Good for him.

He'll definitely get fucking laid tonight.

Coach glares at me. "Whiteshaw," he barks. "Get on the damn ice."

I smirk at Blue Jay—he's got the good nickname for stopping them from scoring on that last shot—and slide my mouth guard in, then shake my hair back and put on my helmet.

Grab the stick and go. No time to waste.

There's going to be a penalty for us, no doubt. Maybe both sides. But being down a defenseman isn't something Coach wants to leave for the second-best goalie on our team.

Even if he promised I wouldn't play tonight.

I take the ice. My muscles are warm, my skates sharp. I'm ready.

Part of being a goalie is keeping yourself limber while waiting for the play to get into your section of the rink. Another part is keeping a line of sight on the fucking puck.

Like now, when the ref is ready to drop the puck to my left. A Knight is right in front of me, trying to block my view. I crouch and look between his legs and watch Knox get control over the puck and send it across toward Rodrigues. Who passes it to Greyson, and the play shifts toward the other end of the rink.

And just like that, it comes flying back.

"Come on, fucker," I mutter.

A Knight skates through my crease, and I spare a moment to shove him out of the way. They've got the puck, and they're coming in aggressive. My gaze follows it, my body loose. It's more instinct than anything.

They shoot, and my arm snaps up, blocking it off the pad on my arm. My heart jumps, and adrenaline crashes through me. I grin around my mouth guard. The puck is reclaimed by Greyson, who skates behind the goal and is slammed into the wall. They both fall, and I guard the corner of the net.

The puck comes wheeling toward me, almost like it's going to go right past me parallel to the goal, and I dive on it. I pull it into my body.

A Knight skids to a stop in front of me, and suddenly my face is showered in ice shavings.

A whistle blows—but fuck that. I jump up, but Knox beats me to it. He shoves the guy backward, shit-talking and punching him at the same time. More Knights and Hawks players flood in, trying to get in on the action.

I tear off my helmet and gloves, sending them scattering across the ice, and jump into the fray. Never mind that my pads make my body bulky and slow my normal body movements. It's meant to help me guard the goal, not get in fucking fights. I get off a few hits on random players, not really caring where I'm swinging.

A lineman—one of the refs—grabs me by the back of my jersey and drags me backward. My knuckles ache. There are fights everywhere.

Rodrigues is mouthing off, but he's being hauled backward by Finch. Knox and the asshole that shot ice in my face are still yelling and trading blows around the ref who's trying to separate them.

Steele and Maverick are fighting.

Big surprise.

I hide my smile.

"Off the ice, Whiteshaw," the lineman snaps, pushing me.

I realize we're at the door, and I step off the ice.

"What the fuck?" Coach roars. "Jesus Christ, Whiteshaw. *Sit*. Don't fucking move."

I shake my head and wipe at my mouth. Someone got in a free hit. Don't ask me who. But when I glance up at the stands, Willow's seat is empty.

The fuck?

I bang on the glass separating me from them. Violet looks over, her brows furrowing.

"Where is she?" I yell.

Violet rolls her eyes. "She's getting a drink. She'll be right back."

A drink, my fucking ass.

On the ice, Blue Jay has returned to his spot in the crease. And you know what? Fuck, it's *fine*. But Willow's not fucking drinking. I spot her coming down the stairs with a cup in her hand. She takes a sip, and my blood boils.

She was doing fine this whole time. The week was *fine*. She didn't seem to struggle with not drinking—not that I gave her a fucking choice. Or put her in situations where I thought she might fail.

Like this.

She sits and doesn't so much as look at me.

I just... I stare at her. Fuck the game and everything else, I can't take my eyes off her. And the way her body loosens up the more she sips whatever's in her cup, and her eyes lose their wild edge. Thalia gets her another one.

She's sinking into oblivion right in front of me, and no one's fucking saying a goddamn word about it.

She lifts the cup to her lips, and I hit the button on the remote. Her plug vibrates to life, and I click it through the levels until it must be wiggling in

her ass. She jerks and spills the drink. It drips down her chest, soaking her shirt.

The buzzer sounds.

End of the first period.

I end the vibrations again, my thumb coasting over the smooth buttons. I follow my team into the locker room and listen to Coach berate all of us for playing like heathens. He's smiling, though. I think he likes the aggression, but he'd never admit it.

Out we go. The second period passes faster than the first. Willow tries to drink, and every time, I punish her with the toy. Over and over again, until it seems like her stubbornness might win out against the battery.

But she doesn't take it out, and she avoids my gaze.

Third period, and I'm dying to drag her out of here.

Finally, the fucking game is over. We won by the skin of our teeth. Four to three. Higher points than we usually allow in a game, but whatever. We got it done. I skate out to congratulate Blue Jay, fist bumping him before taking a lap of the ice. We trade handshakes with the other team, then we're released.

We head back into the locker room and strip out of our gear. I take a sip of water and catch Steele's eye. He wanders over. Coach is talking, so I tell him in a low voice what I need.

He nods.

Player of the night goes to Knox, unsurprisingly.

Finally, *finally*, Coach lets us go. We finish packing our equipment, and Steele stands.

"Party at my house tonight after Haven. We're mixing it up."

There are cheers around the room, and Knox flashes me a confused look. I shrug him off and continue with my laces, making sure everything is perfect for the next time I open my hockey bag. Not everyone is as anal—I know for a fact that my brother just throws his shit in his and hopes for the best—but I prefer to know exactly where things are.

Which is why I pull up Willow's tracking data before I text her.

Where are you?

I already know she's still in the stands. Maybe she's talking to her friends or waiting for us to leave or... whatever.

WILLOW

Waiting for you

Okay. Maybe I believe it, maybe I don't.

Meet me by the locker doors

I grab my bag, my keys, and nudge Knox. "You'll distract Finch and Rodrigues tonight?"

He snickers. "You mean keep them at Steele's? Yeah, dude, I can do that."

My phone goes off again, and I glance down.

ASPEN

Steele said I should tell you...

W's drunk. I think it's kind of bad this time.

Fuck.

I crush my phone in my grip. At least, it feels like it. I go out of the locker room doors and find it empty, and I drop my sticks and bag on the floor. I follow the little blue dot up to the next level, the long wraparound hallway that has openings to each section, up and down.

I find Willow standing on one of the folding chairs, arguing with Violet. Violet seems... stressed.

Greyson appears a moment later, his hand landing on my shoulder. "How do you want to play this? I've dealt with drunk Willow before, but..."

"Nah." I shake him off. "I got it."

"Ooh," Willow jeers when she spots me, swaying on the spot. Only Violet and Aspen manage to keep her from pitching headfirst into the row lower. "Big bad goalie."

I grit my teeth. I get to the row above her and stalk down, but she dances across the seats and skips down one.

I'm chasing a fucking five-year-old.

"Nice try, you asshole," she calls over her shoulder.

Steele appears in the next aisle over, quickly jogging down. She's too busy paying attention to me, trying to get away, and fails to notice the hulking defenseman blocking her route. O'Brien snatches her up and lifts her off her feet.

Willow screeches like a banshee.

The sound bounces around the nearly empty arena, garnering us a look from the Zamboni driver. I meet Steele in the aisle, and he hands her off to me. I adjust my grip on her, tossing her over my shoulder, and strike her ass once. *Hard*.

She falls silent.

Thank fucking God.

“Miles—”

“Save it,” I snap at Violet, who appears ready to take Willow from me. No one’s taking her from me. Not when she’s clearly determined to self-destruct.

Violet’s had a month to steer Willow onto a better path. Or provide any support at all—and she’s gotten worse.

At least I’ve noticed.

At least I’m trying to do something about it.

Willow’s gone limp over my shoulder, but I’m not fool enough to think she’s passed out. No, she’s probably biding her time. I feel her fingers tracing the edge of my sweatpants, pushing the hem of my shirt up to touch my skin.

It sends goosebumps through me, but I ignore it.

“Go have fun,” I tell them but focusing more on my friends.

With Steele and Greyson here to herd the girls away, I know there won’t be too much of an issue. Even Thalia doesn’t seem like she wants to put up much of a fight. So I stay where I am as they all shuffle up the stairs and out into the hall. I count in my head to a hundred, then I finally move.

I’ve been thinking about this for a while, but I kind of figured it would be a last resort. Something I wouldn’t have to use unless she forced me... and yeah, this kind of feels like I’m being backed into a corner.

But really, it’s about to be her backed into... well, far be it from me to ruin the surprise.

WILLOW

I'm upside down. I touch skin, tracing the smooth warmth. It's almost funny, being this close to it, I don't know what I'm looking at—but I know it belongs to Miles. Know it from the scent of him and the way he hit my ass.

It still stings.

Oh, yeah, my *ass*.

I wiggle. He's been torturing me the whole fucking game, turning that stupid plug on and off, repeatedly, until I could barely keep a straight face. And just when I was on the cusp of coming, he shut it off and never turned it back on.

Asshole.

I paid him back by drinking double what I'd normally have, chugging a drink up in the hallway outside of the concessions and then going to bring another one down to my seat. Over and over. Even more in the lulls between periods.

The world shifts again, and my feet touch concrete. I barely get a chance to balance—well, *balance* is probably the wrong word—before he's pushing me face-first into a wall. He yanks down my pants, and his fingers grip the plug.

"Oh, fuck," I mumble.

He snarls and yanks it out without warning. My ass hurts, and I don't know what I want. I certainly don't want him to fuck me. Not wherever we are. But then he's guiding my jeans back up, closing them for me. I stay against the wall, breathing hard.

There's a rushing sound, and then I'm dragged sideways.

I see the full sink a split second before Miles' hand grips the back of my head and forces me down.

My face submerges in the cold water, and I choke. There should be some sort of instinct to hold my breath, but all I get is a nose full of water. He pulls me up, and I sputter and cough. He waits a moment, then dunks me again. My whole head is doused—but I don't inhale water.

And it helps clear a little bit of the fog from my mind.

Not a lot. Cold water isn't a miracle worker.

He manhandles me again, forcing me away from the sink and crowding into me. I stumble away from him, although that's fucking pointless. Finally, my feet stop moving, and I just hold on to the front of his shirt. With my other hand, I swipe my hair away from my face.

"I'm sorry, okay?" I yell in his face. "You don't have to be such a dick about it."

"I'm trying to save you," he yells back. He picks me up the nice way, an arm under my knees and the other behind my back, and he carries me through what I can only guess is a commercial food storage area. There are boxes on metal wire shelves lining the walls.

He stops when we reach the back, and he sets me down.

He yanks open the giant metal door and uses a hand on my back to propel me inside.

I whirl around as a dim light flickers on overhead.

Miles watches me with pity. "You're killing yourself, Willow. Whether you realize it or not. And your friends aren't just going to stand by and let it happen. So, you wanna die? Go ahead."

He steps back, and the door swings inward.

I jump to stop it, but I've gone in too far. It slams in my face, and I grasp the lever to release myself.

It doesn't work.

There's a bone-grinding *click* of a lock engaging, and then... nothing.

I stand there for a second, staring at the door. Waiting for Miles to open it up again, to say: *Just kidding!*

He doesn't.

I try the handle again, but it doesn't budge.

I shiver.

Wait.

I look around, and my stomach knots. It isn't just a room that he's locked me in. I go to the shelving and tip the closest box toward me. Frozen balls of pizza dough roll around the bottom of it. I move along, wincing at the bite in the air.

It's only going to get worse.

Does he just want to play hero?

I laugh at that, then kick a box. It's full of something hard and heavy, and it barely moves. My foot, however, feels the effects. I howl and hop away, cursing the box and Miles. Like, what the fuck is his problem?

I exhale a visible cloud.

Fuck.

My drunkenness is wearing off faster as I pace. I'm not in dance condition anymore. I haven't been working out since before Amanda booted me off the team. Where I used to run and take enjoyment in the weight room, it just felt too hard to go there by myself. Especially sad.

Sometimes it's easier to do nothing than one tough thing.

No, it's *always* easier to do nothing.

I watch my breath puffing in front of my face, the cloud rising and dissipating. I had a jacket when I arrived, but I lost that somewhere between my seat and here. Beer usually makes me hot, which means I definitely shed it on purpose.

Stupid.

I lean against one of the shelves and slide down it, wrapping my arms around my legs. My fingers are cramping from the cold, but the worst part is my hair. My head is like an ice block. When I touch a lock of hair, it's crisp. Freezing already.

Do I have my phone?

No. It's in my jacket pocket.

I close my eyes and bury my face in the crook of my arm. My mind spins, trying to figure a way out, but all I can think of is the burning cold.

And Miles' last words.

That I'm self-destructing? That I want to die?

Maybe I do.

Would that be the worst thing in the world?

"Yeah, it would," I say out loud. Surprising myself.

Is this how I want to go? Because he could just leave me here and then I really would be toast. I'd be a frozen corpse by the time anyone came by,

which probably wouldn't be until next week. For the next game. Or I'd traumatize the delivery or stock person. Poor unfortunate soul.

Dying hasn't been my plan.

But I can see why he thinks that's my path. I've been... *self-destructing*, as he said. Refusing to connect with my emotions.

I hate that he's right.

I hate that the cold has snapped some clarity into me.

The more pressing issue is how long Miles is going to leave me here.

I unlock my arms, but my fingers are numb. And my legs won't seem to work. I stand and fall right back to my knees.

Now you want to fight? a long-lost voice in the back of my head whispers. The voice that I used to listen to all the time. The voice that Knox slowly shut off. The voice that told me when I deserved better than what I had. The voice that *I* muted because I didn't want it to be right.

I need to fight. It's not a question anymore.

And not just to survive.

I want to feel things again, dammit.

I cough and claw my way forward. My nail breaks, but I don't feel it. I just hear and see it, register that there *should* be pain, and keep moving.

Although moving is a stretch. I'm inching across the icy, metal floor. The little bumps, meant to make it not slippery, dig into my palms.

I'm shivering like I've never shivered before. My teeth are chattering. The cold has seeped through me and into my bones, and I have no idea how long I've been in here.

A minute?

Five?

An hour?

The room spins around me, and I rest my cheek on the floor. It's easier to just stop moving. In fact, it's kind of warmer like this. I pull at my shirt, dragging it up my stomach. It doesn't help the sudden prick of heat through my body.

I groan and close my eyes.

The shivering stops, and everything goes quiet.

MILES

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THREE YEARS AGO

“Hey, goalie.”

I skate in a quick circle, finding the girl I’ve been dreaming about coming across the row behind the goal. Sure, there’s glass between us. And I can’t really hear the crowd usually—a blessing when they’re assholes—but I somehow hear her.

Her smile lights up her whole face.

She’s decked out in her dance gear. The tight cropped shirt and black shorts, the high socks and white sneakers. Her makeup is extra.

“Competition day?” I call, casting a quick glance behind me.

They’re at the other end of the rink. It’s a scrimmage, and my offense is hammering down on the other team. It gives me a little reprieve to chat with my favorite girl.

Willow nods. “Wish me luck?”

I leave the crease and press my hand to the glass. “Good luck,” I mouth.

She smiles and puts her hand against mine.

God, I’d do anything for that smile.

“Whiteshaw!” Coach barks.

I snatch my hand away and skate back to the crease just as the puck soars past me.

Into the net.

Fuck.

The searing sound of his whistle rips through the rink.

“Everyone on the line,” he orders. “We’re doing sprints until Whiteshaw can tell me why he wasn’t in the fucking net!”

There’s mass grumbling and glares in my direction, but Knox is the one to jostle me.

“Don’t worry about it, dude,” he says. He lines up beside me. “Everyone gets on Coach’s bad side at some point or another.”

The whistle blows, and off we go.

It fucking sucks to skate fast in my pads. I come in last, weighed down by my gear and restricted in my movements.

We go again.

And again.

And again. Until sweat drips down my back and my lungs sear. Everyone else seems in various shades of exhaustion, too. My brother is leaned over, his forearms braced on his thighs.

Until Coach skates to a stop in front of me and points back toward the net.

We spend the next forty minutes with everyone taking shots at me, until I can stop ten in a row. And thankfully, that comes sooner rather than later.

If there's one thing I'm good at, it's stopping a fucking puck. When I'm paying attention anyway.

"There might be hope for you yet, Whiteshaw," Coach comments. "Now everyone get out of my sight."

Tonight, I'm on a mission. I hurry through stripping down and showering, changing into new clothes. My bag is packed, and I'll take care of my sticks later. Right now, I've got somewhere to be.

Ten minutes later, I'm walking into the Crown Point Arts building. They're holding the dance competition this week, and it's not too difficult to find my way upstairs to the large, open space. It's used as a gymnastics gym and converted for their competitions. But the dance competitions also use it when the gym at CPU is otherwise occupied.

I find a seat and tap the girl on the row below me on the shoulder. She might go to CPU, I don't know, but her face blanches when she sees me.

"Has CPU gone on yet?" I ask her.

"Are you Miles Whiteshaw?" she asks instead. "Knox's brother?"

I grind my teeth. "Yeah."

"Wow," she breathes.

"Our team," I reiterate.

Her awed expression shutters slightly. "Oh, yeah. They're coming on next, I think."

Perfect. I settle back, hoping my face conveys that I'm done talking. It doesn't stop her from glancing back at me, and then she leans over toward her friend. They burst into a fit of giggles. I don't know why.

A few minutes later, the familiar CPU blue and silver colors bounce out onto the stage. They set up, and I scan the area. I see Willow and her best friend. They're both blonde, and they exchange a glance with each other right before the music starts.

But my gaze is glued to Willow.

She's toward the back, maybe because she's only a sophomore, but she dazzles. Her smile sparkles. She shifts into position, rolling and twirling and moving with the music. Not even like she's moving *with* it, but she has fully become the music. Not everyone does that. My gaze turns more analytical as I study the girls around her.

Her friend keeps up with her. She might even have a magic of her own, some sort of ethereal grace that, as a hockey player, I wish I could emulate on the ice. Her feet barely touch the floor.

No—it's still all Willow. She demonstrates her strength, joining together with another girl to perform a lift of a third. And then they end in a pose that has her bending backward, reaching toward the floor.

I rise along with the rest of the bleachers, giving them the standing ovation they deserve.

It's only after the competition ends, and CPU is crowned the winner, that I realize I should've brought her flowers.

Or something.

Either way, I wade through the crowd toward the black curtain that separates spectators from dancers. Well, most of the crowd seems to part before me, so I don't even have to use my weight to force my way through.

Interesting new thing, this borderline fame of being on the hockey team. It's my first semester at college. I'm still figuring shit out.

But I like it, in a heady, power-drunk sort of way.

My legs are still sore from practice, and that grounds me a bit. I push through the black curtain, finding the gap, and step into the other side.

Chaos. Teams seem grouped together, but they're busy packing their bags and chatting, sitting on the floor stretching, whatever. I follow the loud laughter around to the back of the stage, and my gaze latches on Willow.

She's with her friend, her long, golden hair curled and down. It was just up in a high ponytail for the dance, but I spot the fabric tie around her wrist a second later.

Her hair down, where it reaches the bottom of her shoulder blades, makes my dick twitch. I want to stalk up to her, wrap my fingers around those silky golden locks, and wrench her head back. And kiss her like she's my only oxygen.

Jesus, Miles, get a hold of yourself.

I shake it off and continue forward, until Willow spots me.

Red rises to her cheeks, apparent even through her thick makeup. Her fake lashes make her eyes look huge but half-lidded, adding to her sultry expression.

She captivates me without even trying.

“You were great,” I tell her.

“You saw?” Her lips part, and her gaze darts to her friend. Back to me. “You were just getting yelled at—”

I shrug. “Worth it.”

Her smile makes it worth it.

“We’re headed to Haven,” her friend says.

“You’ve met Violet, right, Miles?” Willow loops her arm through her friend’s. “She’s dating the football quarterback.”

I probably have, but this is the first time I’ve heard her name. I offer my hand, which she shakes.

“Do you want to join us?” Willow asks.

I find myself nodding. Although what I really want is to ask if she’ll go somewhere else with me. But on the high of winning a dance competition, I doubt she’d agree.

So we go to Haven, a bar close to campus that notoriously never cards college students. I get a drink and sit next to Willow, across from Violet and her boyfriend, as they discuss the other teams’ dance routines. And theirs. Jack seems bored, but he’s tracing some pattern on Violet’s shoulder that makes her lean into him.

“What do we have here?”

I bite my groan as my brother appears at the head of the table. “Hey, baby brother. Do you ladies mind if we join?”

Violet eyes Knox, then Willow. She’s the first to nod, and Knox grins.

Soon enough, there are more of us squashed around the table. Knox and Steele, thick as thieves, along with Erik and Jacob—two juniors who play crazy good. They act like magnets for the rest of the bar. We’re visited by more than a few of the other dance team girls, who touch the guys’ shoulders and bat their eyelashes.

“That’ll never be me,” Willow whispers across the table to Violet. “The day I fawn over a hockey player, you can commit me to a psych ward.”

Knox hears that.

I see the expression that crosses his face, and he leans toward Willow.

“You shouldn’t have said that, baby,” he says to her.

She smirks. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Because that’s a challenge in my eyes. I’ll win you over, eventually.”

I scoff.

Willow nudges me. “You got something to say to that, Miles?”

I look at my brother, then at her. I believe *her*. That she’d never fawn over someone who didn’t deserve it. So I don’t fight it, and I don’t rebuke my brother. I don’t stake a claim on Willow, even though she makes my heart hammer and draws my focus like no other.

My mistake.

One I’ll be paying for, for quite a while.

PRESENT

I stand outside the freezer door, my stomach in knots.

I didn't want to lock her in there—but the damn girl needs a wake-up call. *Something* to snap her out of the dazed look she's always wearing. She doesn't care that she's in my bed. She doesn't want it, but she doesn't fight. She doesn't care that Knox gets a reaction out of me every fucking time they're in the same room together.

She hasn't noticed that I haven't fucking left her.

She should be okay for a little while. It's why I left her there and went back to retrieve my bag, throwing it in my car. It's why I took my time walking back, although every instinct wanted me to *run* to her.

There's also the possibility that she isn't panicking. That she's okay being cold. It's been fifteen minutes. My watch vibrates with an alert.

My heart is racing. *Are you working out?* the watch asks.

No, I'm just stressed.

She hasn't banged on the door and demanded her release.

Ice slides down my spine. Those doors are thick. Maybe she was, but I didn't hear her? Or she only worked up the nerve when I had already left her?

I unlock the door and swing it open.

Horror greets me.

Willow is facedown on the floor, her arms outstretched like she was reaching for the door. Her eyes are closed, and there's frost on her hair. Her *wet* hair.

I'm a fucking idiot.

I race in and scoop her up. Her shirt is up to her ribs, exposing her stomach. I tug it down and hurry out of the freezer, letting it slam behind us. Is she breathing?

Shit, I don't think she's breathing.

I drop down, resting her ass on my knee, and use one hand to feel under her nose. Shallow exhales warm my fingers.

"You're okay, wild girl," I say to her, folding her arms in. I shuck off my coat and wrap it around her, then pull her close again.

Her nails are bloody. I stare at them for a second, then shake it off and snap into survival mode.

Not my survival—hers.

“Stay with me,” I say to her.

There’s frost on her eyelashes, for fuck’s sake. Shoving away the nausea, I get her into my car and blast the heat. Her head lolls, even when I lean over and buckle her seat belt. I take her hands and cup mine around them, blowing warm air on her frozen fingers. They’re white and ice cold.

If she gets frostbite because of me...

I’m glad Knox is keeping everyone away from the hockey house. That way, we can exist in my shame without a fucking audience.

I speed home, the car sweltering hot by the time we get back. She stirs a little, drawing her arms into her stomach.

“Miles?” Her teeth are chattering. “What—”

“I’ve got you.”

“So c-cold,” she whispers.

I know. I know, and it’s my fault.

I slam the car in park and hop out. I lift her and carry her inside, upstairs, into the bathroom. I turn the water on cool, so it’s barely better than how her fingers feel, and I step into it with her.

She gasps. Her head falls against my chest, and she lets out a groan. “It hurts.”

“I know. It’s going to warm you up.”

It’s cold as shit. But it doesn’t dampen the relief that she’s awake and talking.

We stay in the tub, with the water pounding down on her chest, until she reaches out and turns up the heat on her own. Her teeth continue to chatter, and she cradles her hands in her lap.

“You can p-p-put me d-down,” she forces out. “You don’t have t-to stay.”

“I will be staying,” I say firmly. My grip on her tightens. But I do lower us into a sitting position, until my legs are splayed out in front of me.

We’re drenched. The water pools in her lap and runs between her legs, over her stomach. It’s soaked through my shirt and even my hair. Speaking of hair. I run my fingers through hers, meeting ice-cold chunks.

I dunked her head in water and threw her in a freezer.

That might be a new low.

Well, at least I didn’t drug her.

No, no, Miles, focus.

“Let’s get these off,” I murmur, tearing her shirt over her head.

She tries and fails to undo the button of her jeans, so I do it for her. It takes some shifting to get the wet denim down her legs, and then her shoes and socks. I tear my shirt off, too, dropping it on the pile. Her hands are still shaking, but she seems to relax farther into my body now that the barriers between us are gone. I undo her bra and pull that off, too. Not that I have exact scientific reasoning for that.

“I f-feel warmer,” she says.

Pretty sure she’s lying.

Her fingers splay across my abdomen, which automatically tenses under her touch. My dick also gets the message, and I grit my teeth as it stiffens under my jeans.

Fucking worst timing possible.

I shift us forward and turn up the temperature of the water, then recline again. My arms lock around her.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper into her hair.

She hums. It vibrates through her, and I squeeze her all the tighter.

WILLOW

H ours later, Miles and I lie in bed in what I've come to think of as our 'usual' positions. He's wrapped around me. His scent, his weight. It's all-encompassing. We haven't been talking, or moving, or sleeping. Each of us is lost in our own world.

I've stopped shivering. The sensation returned to my limbs, my fingers and toes, after a while in the shower. Miles then picked us up out of it, stripping off the rest of his clothes, and wrapped me in two towels. He caught my hair up in another one, keeping it off my neck and preventing the water from dripping down my back.

Once out, he cranked the water to its full heat, and we were encased in steam in no time. The mirror fogged over, and it was almost hard to see straight through to the other wall.

But the one constant was *him*.

Did he leave me in the freezer?

Yeah. Technically.

Do I blame him?

Strangely... no.

As traumatic as it was, I was also mostly out of my mind. And I can't find it in me to hate him for it.

So I've come to the conclusion that I *do* want to live. And what I've been doing for the past few weeks hasn't even come close to how I want my life to go. I've been numb. As numb as my limbs in that stupid freezer.

In a way, this is like a rebirth.

A second chance.

It's why I roll toward Miles and reach up, running my fingers down his scruff. He hasn't shaved in a few days, and I don't know if I love or hate it. Maybe a little bit of both.

His eyes open, and he watches me with a guarded look.

I move my hand up, into his hair. It's mostly dry now, the curls falling over his forehead. I push them back, running my nails along his scalp.

He apologized to me.

And I feel an apology of my own welling up inside me, ready to burst free.

But instead, different words come out.

"I can't fall in love with you," I whisper.

He catches my wrist and turns his head, pressing his lips to my palm. When he releases me, I retract it. I keep my kissed palm safe against my chest, like he's going to try something else.

"I won't," I clarify. "Because—"

"You will," he replies. "You don't have a choice. There's never been a choice with us, wild girl. You'll fall in love with me, and it's going to be a hundred times better than any love you held for Knox. Because I deserve you and you deserve me." His gaze intensifies. "And when you do realize that you're madly in love with me, you're going to know in your bones that I won't leave you. I haven't left you, and I won't ever. It's you and me until the end of time."

My heart skips, then picks up a beat that is quickly careening out of control.

He's hurt me.

He almost killed me.

And he's killed *for* me.

"Miles—"

"Don't," he interrupts. "Don't say anything right now. Just sleep, and we'll start again in the morning."

Okay.

I roll away. His arm is there, hooking around me.

The strangest thing happens.

He doesn't force himself into me, like every night prior. I should be happy about that, right? He almost killed me, and now he's not making me have sex with him.

It was never just sex, Willow.

I lie there with my eyes closed, trying to even out my breathing. His groin isn't even near my ass. Our only point of contact is his arm and the top of his chest.

The loss gives me a hollow feeling behind my ribs, but I don't know how to articulate it or force my mind away from it.

I shift my legs together and roll onto my stomach. I grip my pillow, fluffing it. His hand is on my back now, his fingers lightly moving across my spine. It tickles. Desire winds through me, straight to my core.

It's confusing.

Am I still drunk?

Has he hypnotized me into enjoying what he does to me?

I whimper. It just happens.

His hand slides higher, digging into the muscles on either side of my spine. A one-handed back massage, loosening the tension that's coiled there. It's not enough.

God.

I hate that I crave it.

I loathe myself for even giving in and letting another Whiteshaw ensnare me like this.

My eyes burn, and I whimper again.

"If you need something, take it," his voice floats out of the dark. Seductive, daring.

Fucking enchanting.

I hold out for another few minutes, at least. Shifting and trying to pretend that he's not driving me crazy just by being beside me and not *in* me.

Fuck him. Fuck this.

But also... fuck every notion that I *can't* take what I need. Not when he's offering it to me so plainly. And that thought snaps my self-control. I roll toward him, my gaze feasting on his face. His eyes are open, and he's watching me.

He watches me even as I shove the covers down, exposing both of our naked bodies. Naked except for the briefs he pulled on...

My brows furrow, and I shift to my knees. Hovering over him. I push him on his back and drag the briefs down. His cock is hardening, straightening up to give me its full attention. I get his briefs all the way off and throw them off the side of the bed.

He doesn't move when I swing my leg over him, straddling him and hovering above his erection. I touch myself, and my back arches. I lose that eye contact for a second.

Miles grips the side of my face suddenly. He sits up, bringing us that much closer together, and his lips hover over mine.

I've never kissed him before.

Even... *before*-before. We never kissed. Not once.

Not when he said we'd end up together, or when we flirted mercilessly for a year, or when we danced at house parties and bars and, more recently, at the nightclubs when he intercepted me. Or after hockey games. Or—

"Take what you need," Miles repeats, and I swear his breath leaves his lips and travels right into me.

I lean forward and kiss him.

Simple as that.

Well, it would be. And it *is*, for a second. Our lips touch, holding perfectly still, before he seems to register that what I need is *him*.

It's not love.

It's suffering and healing and everything that goes along with it.

His hand fists in the back of my hair, angling my head to the side. He takes over the kiss like he takes over everything. With reckless abandon and total control. I am melting putty in his grip, relaxing into his arm that winds behind my back and keeps me pressed to him. The way he tugs my hair sends little zips of pleasure straight down to my toes.

When his tongue sweeps the seam of my lips, slanting them open and invading my mouth, I moan. My hands find his shoulders, sliding up his neck and over his jaw. I dig my fingers into his hair, gripping it as tightly as he holds mine.

My hips rock slightly. His length rubs my pussy, causing delicious friction to radiate through me. I need *more*. And I'm starving for it.

His piercing hits my clit with every forward rock. While his tongue tastes me, I take my pleasure from the little metal rod on the underside of his shaft. His cock keeps twitching, and I keep moving. Grinding against him shamelessly until an orgasm crashes over me.

I tear my mouth away, my muscles trembling and legs weak.

"Oh, wild girl," Miles whispers in my ear.

His lips trail down my throat, kissing and sucking. His teeth scrape my skin, pinching and pulling before easing up. I'm helpless. I want *more*. And

he knows it, because he releases my hair and moves his hand between us, adjusting his cock. Lining it up when I lift slightly.

It notches at my entrance, the other piercing leaving an echo of sparks in its wake.

I lower onto it. He's reached the crook of my shoulder and neck, and he gives me a rasping groan when my thighs finally meet his hips.

All the way in.

And fuck if it doesn't feel different. *Better.*

His hand is still between my legs, and he runs his fingers from where we're joined up to my clit. "You're dripping wet for me. Fuck, you feel so good like this."

He flexes his hips, and my lips part.

His mouth connects with mine again. Just for a moment. Then he's staring into my eyes and he orders, "Ride me."

I do.

I brace my hands on his shoulders and move up and down, relishing the feel. The way he stretches me and how his piercings rub just the right places. His fingers drift across my clit, stroking me softly, while he bends me backward and leans down. He kisses my collarbone, then lower. Straight down my sternum between my breasts.

"Miles."

"You've been driving me nuts, clenching me in your sleep," he murmurs.

He bites my breast, just above my nipple.

I yelp and jerk, but he's got me too wrapped up in him to go very far. He licks and soothes the skin, then down to my nipple. When he sucks it into his mouth, I see fireworks.

I cry out again. He releases my nipple and grips my hips with both hands. He takes over the pace, propelling me up and down. My gaze finds his again.

"Touch yourself, Willow."

My fingers move on their own, coasting down my stomach, making his eyes track my hand over my abdomen and finally resting on the sensitive bud. My breasts sway with every thrust, and my eyes want to roll back.

It just feels too good.

After a week of nothing but tension, I'm ready.

"Fuck," he grunts, lifting me off him.

My back hits the mattress, legs in the air, and my breath leaves me in a sharp exhale.

He's on me in a second—but it isn't his cock that's sliding back into me. It's his fingers, two of them pumping and stroking, while he kisses down my body. He bats my hand away.

"Miles—"

His lips close over my clit.

I let out a hiss. He sucks and bites and licks until I'm shuddering against him, clenching at his fingers.

"Two," he says, barely raising his head. "I want another."

"Another... what?" I push up on my elbows.

He's already dipping back down, running his nose along my center. Inhaling. *Smelling* me. And his eyes roll back like it's the best fucking thing he's smelled, while I try not to cringe. His free hand moves up my side, palming my breast. He pinches my nipple and tweaks it between his fingers, while his mouth works magic on my cunt.

Oh God.

I don't know if I say that out loud.

I think I might, but fuck it.

I say it again, louder.

He thrusts his tongue inside me, his fingers taking over rubbing my clit. He tongue-fucks me over the edge, and I almost black out from the force of it. I sag back on the pillow.

"Holy shit."

And then I'm being flipped. I let out an *oof* as I hit the mattress face-first and suck in a quick breath. But then he's dragging my hips back, my knees bending, and he slides back into me.

"Oh, fuck." I bury my head in the pillow, extending my arms forward to brace myself against the headboard.

He pounds into me with an unmatched fervor. My whole body moves with the force of it, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it. I push my hips back, meeting every fucking thrust. His hands on my hips are squeezing hard enough to bruise.

The insane part of me hopes he marks me in more ways than one.

"Harder," I grind out.

He replies by slapping my ass. The pain just sends another flood of wetness between my thighs, and his dark chuckle hits me. And then his

palm, striking me again.

Holy fucking fire.

“What do you want, wild girl?” he calls.

His fingers are massaging my ass, even as he fucks me hard enough to bruise my cunt. And he’s hitting some deep, dark spot inside me. A spot I should be ashamed about.

Not physical.

Mental.

“What do you need?” he rephrases.

“You,” I choke out. “Directions.”

“Orders,” he corrects.

I’m silent. I taste the word on my lips. Feel it take shape in my body.

He pulls out and picks me up. I’m on my feet, back to his chest, before my mind registers the shift. His wet cock is caught between us, rubbing my ass cheek that already burns from his earlier ministrations.

His hand wraps around my throat, guiding my head back. His fingers tip my face to the side, where his lips are waiting.

I kiss him because I can. Because I’m afraid of what might come out of my mouth if I don’t. So I kiss him and let his tongue stroke me, and then my tongue is in *his* mouth. Tasting the mint flavor of his toothpaste and his saliva. Running along the ridges of his molars.

His cock presses to my asshole, and I don’t object when he pushes in an inch. I stay where I am, exactly as he has me. Caught up in his arms with nothing to brace myself except *him*. And he slowly penetrates my asshole, stretching and inching in, until we’re connected. Ass to groin.

It hurts, and it’s full, and my mind is a fractured mess. It’s been a mess for a while, but this is different. I stare at the window, at the blinds that are open a sliver, then the dresser that holds his clothes *and* mine. The rows of books stacked across the top, a mix from both of our classes.

He shifts, thrusting a little, and the pain has my eyes opening wide. I dig my nails into his arm. His hand is still around my throat, rubbing softly just under my jaw.

“I want to fill your ass with a toy,” he says in my ear. “I want to watch you fight an orgasm in the most inappropriate fucking places. And I want to edge you until you lose control and beg me to fuck you.”

My heart flutters.

“But right now, I’m going to do the honors myself. I’m going to fill your ass with my cum. And it’s going to hurt. But the best things in life all hurt a little, don’t they?” He growls. And then he’s shifting us to the floor.

My knees hit, then my chest. He lowers my head, and his hand slips from my chest. He leans up, adjusting himself, and something warm hits my ass.

Spit.

He’s spit on me again.

Only this time, it adds some slipperiness to his cock. And he spits again before he thrusts back in. New pleasure surges through me. I dig my fingers into his carpet. Bits of pain in my nails force me to loosen my grip, but it doesn’t matter.

Miles stretches out over me, and his hand lands on top of mine. His fingers lace with mine, curling around and pressing to my palm. His other hand is right next to my head.

“Ready?”

Three orgasms in, and my mind is mush in a whole new way. Talking is off the table.

I make some noise of assent.

And then he begins.

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MILES

“Detective Barrister needs me to go to the apartment and tell her what’s missing,” Willow says to me. “And I have an appointment after, so...”

Sunday. Way too fucking early to even consider getting out of bed.

We spent almost the whole day in bed yesterday.

Which is why I’m blinking at her blearily, still naked.

Is there a way to entice her back?

“So I’ll see you later,” she says.

I watch the sway of her ass, clad in black jeans and looking smoking hot, as she walks right out my door.

Bummer.

Less than two minutes later, the front door slams and my car starts up. I rub my hand over my face and fight my smile. But after a second, it wins out.

She’s still driving my car. And while she says she doesn’t love me, we’re making progress. She kissed *me*, and I thought my heart was going to explode. Just replaying it, it might still happen.

I’m practically giddy on my way to the bathroom, where I shower, brush my teeth, and try to ignore the memory of us fucking. I need to get to the stadium. Blue Jay and I have a long-standing workout time blocked off in our schedule, and I’m running late.

Knox and Erik are downstairs on the couch. The sight of Erik is so jarring, I stop mid-step.

“What are you doing here?” I blurt out.

Erik looks over his shoulder at me, grinning. “Hey, little Whiteshaw. Your brother and I are taking a drive down to Boston soon. Want to come with us?”

I shake my head slowly. “What’s in Boston?”

Knox shifts in his seat. He shoots Erik a look, then hops up. “An open recruitment.”

“For...?”

“Don’t be obtuse,” he snaps. “This is my shot for the NHL.”

“You have recruiters at almost every game,” I point out. “Coach is always showing off the golden trio. And you think you won’t make it?”

The golden trio being Coach’s personal favorites—Knox, Greyson, and Steele. The ones he thinks have the best chance of going pro.

“I don’t know, dude, but I’ve got to try.” Knox’s expression turns imploring. “You’re going to want to take those same opportunities next year. Trust me.”

I grunt. I’ve always known that my career *might* be coming to an end after college. Do I want to face that? No, especially not right now. But being realistic means seeing the big picture. And *that* is that for every five players on the ice, there’s only one goalie. And just as many candidates for those spots.

They take the best of the best.

I’m good. I won’t lie about that. But sometimes I worry that I’ll get passed over.

Hockey is in my blood, and I know it’s in my brother’s. So I slap his hand and hug him, patting his back hard enough to jar him.

“You’ll kill it,” I say in his ear.

He laughs, then shoves me away. The cocky smile is back, his ego roaring. “Yeah, I know.”

Since Willow has my car, I lace up my sneakers and jog to meet Blue Jay. We should consider just shortening his nickname to BJ. Kind of goes hand in hand with Blue Balls anyway. My lungs expand, and I quicken my pace. I slip buds in my ears and tap to activate Willow’s phone’s microphone, because I want to know what she’s saying to that detective.

There’s nothing for a few minutes. A scratching that must be the phone moving in Willow’s pocket or purse. Footsteps, mumbled words I can’t make out.

“Are you Detective Barrister?” Willow’s voice comes through loud and suddenly clear.

Did she take out her phone?

“Yes. Willow?”

“Nice to meet you,” my girl says.

My gut tightens. I should’ve gone with her.

“Let’s go up,” the detective says.

I get to the stadium and slip in through a side door, heading straight to the gym on the lower level. It’s worse reception down here, but whatever. I spot Greyson and Violet working out together in the corner, both running on the treadmill. My cheeks are frozen from the wind, and it reminds me of what I did to Willow.

Guilt laces through me.

“Hey, man,” BJ calls.

I nod my greeting and follow him to the mats in the far corner. We do a range of calisthenics and cardio, stretching... He’s got earbuds in, too, so I don’t feel too bad keeping mine in and eavesdropping on Willow’s conversation.

There’s a tinkling, like scraping of glass across the floor.

“You said there was another break-in?” Willow asks.

I suck in a sharp breath.

“Yes,” the detective answers. Her voice is softer, perhaps farther away.

“Unfortunately, the woman was home at the time.”

Willow doesn’t reply.

“She’s in the hospital.”

“Oh, gosh. Is she... will she be okay?”

“You okay, dude?” BJ waves his hand in front of my face.

I jerk, then slap his fucking hand away. “Fine,” I grit out.

“You were just standing there, staring at the wall like you were zoning out—”

“Just thinking,” I mutter.

“...brain damage,” the detective is saying.

I grab some weights and put them beside a mat. We go through our warm-up, and soon I’m breathing as hard as I imagine Willow is. The same asshole who broke into her apartment broke into someone else’s—and that woman wasn’t spared any pain.

“Wow,” Willow murmurs. “That’s so scary.”

“As you can imagine, it’s hard for us to tell if there was an actual robbery. Since our second victim isn’t able to give us any information, and her apartment was badly vandalized. Did you recover your electronics, expensive items? Things of that nature?”

“I have my laptop. It was in my bag, I think Miles grabbed it and some clothes when the officers were here.” Silence, then, “I don’t think anything else was taken. Is that a bad sign?”

“It could indicate that the perpetrator broke in for a different reason. And it was only luck that you weren’t home...”

I’m going to be sick.

The detective clears her throat. I think it’s her, anyway, because she has a nasally voice. And she continues speaking like she didn’t just traumatize Willow.

“Have you noticed anything unusual? Did you have any altercations with anyone leading up to the break-in?”

“Don’t say it,” I mutter.

“What’s that?” BJ calls.

I wave him off.

“Well...” Willow makes a noise. “There was a guy who was messing with me at Prime, but nothing came of it. We left, and that was that.”

“Hmm,” the detective says.

I don’t like her fucking tone.

But also—Willow better not fucking say another word. She and I both know it isn’t him—he’s packed in Steele’s family’s meat freezer, for fuck’s sake. If the detective goes down that road, she won’t find any trace of him.

“I’m sorry, Detective, I’ve got to get to an appointment. I can come another time? Nothing is jumping out at me.”

“Of course, Ms. Reed. Thank you for your time. Do you mind if I look around further?”

Willow pauses. “Um, actually, I’d like to lock up. Give my landlord some peace of mind.”

“Naturally.”

I grit my teeth until I hear the start of the engine that indicates Willow’s in her car. A second later, she’s calling me. I exit the spyware app and answer her call.

“Hey.” My voice comes out strained—but fuck it, I guess we can blame it on my workout. Even though I’ve barely done much to work up a sweat

besides my run and the stretching, the lunges... nothing major.

“I’m leaving my apartment,” Willow says. Her voice is a *lot* more shaken than it was when she spoke to the detective. “Some other girl’s apartment got broken into, and it’s bad. She’s going to be in the hospital for a while. They had to take off part of her skull to relieve the brain swelling...”

“Holy shit.” I missed the extent of that, thanks to BJ. “Are you okay?”

“I’m just glad you were there,” she whispers. “I told her that there was some guy bothering me at the nightclub, but he’s... he’s gone, right?”

“He is,” I confirm. “You’re safe at my house, okay? Do you want to meet me at the arena—”

“I’ve got somewhere to be. But I’ll catch you later, okay?”

Curiosity burns bright in me, even after she hangs up. Maybe I wouldn’t if she wasn’t being secretive about it, but... fuck it, I want to know where she’s going and who she’s meeting.

I hop up from my spot and pull out my earbud. I stop in front of BJ. “Sorry, man, I’ve got to run. See you tomorrow at practice?”

“Yeah.” His eyebrows rise, but he quickly schools his expression into something more chill.

Which is good, because I would hate to rearrange his face for ratting me out to Coach.

He knows it, and I know it.

That’s enough.

I snap my fingers and turn back around. “Oh, and I need your car.”

WILLOW

“Don’t forget to practice,” I call after my last girl.

There were four today, each a half-hour, and I’m *exhausted*. It’s probably more of a combination of what I learned with Detective Barrister, being back in my wrecked apartment, and the reminder of the death that happened there more than dealing with sour brats who don’t really give a shit about singing.

Don’t get me wrong—some of them actually like it.

But others are only there because their parents are determined to find hobbies and hidden talents.

“Knock, knock,” one of the other voice coaches calls, tapping on my door. “Ready?”

Yeah, may as well.

I like singing. And I’m teaching kids the theory behind it, the proper techniques, the least I could do is help myself and do the same. So, for the last few weeks, Nora has been giving me lessons. Every Sunday and Tuesday after my last kid, without fail.

We go into her room, and I stop in front of the music stand. It’s still weird to have her sit behind the piano and facing me. Normally that’s me. Although I can’t play the piano to save my life—I know just enough to read the keys and the melodies, and that’s about it. For young kids, that’s fine. I get the beginners, anyway, and then they move up to Nora.

“Let’s pick up where we left off on Tuesday,” Nora says now.

She’s in her fifties, with only a few streaks of gray in her otherwise light-brown hair. I scan the music and nod to myself, and she gives me my starting note.

Singing and I have an interesting relationship. I've always liked to sing in the car, and along to the pop songs, but sometimes my parents got annoyed with it. *She has a lovely voice*, I overheard my mom tell one of her friends, *but she doesn't ever stop*.

That was a silent hit to my ego.

Because if I really was good, then they wouldn't want me to stop. Right?

Never mind that I've written a handful of songs on my own. They're in a notebook that I kept stashed under my mattress.

My heart squeezes.

With all the craziness, and my sincere lack of caring about *anything* for the past month, that notebook has sat forgotten. But my mattress was overturned, shredded... surely I would've seen it?

I'll go back after and get it. It would be nice to flip through it, maybe add to it. Now that I'm starting to process the ugly emotions that come with Knox and Miles.

Like how I can loathe one brother and feel intensely satisfied with the other.

The lesson passes in a blur, and Nora teaches me so much about my own voice. I'm singing louder, with more confidence, at the end of our thirty minutes.

"Thank you," I tell her.

"It was my pleasure," she says. "We'll do this again on Tuesday, yeah?"

"Absolutely." I grin.

I return to my lesson room, and the door swings shut behind me. My skin prickles a second before I'm grabbed from behind.

I scream into a hand that grips my face.

"Shh, wild girl," Miles breathes in my ear. He shifts, digging his erection into my ass cheek. "These walls aren't as soundproof as you might think. We wouldn't want anyone coming to see you squirming, would we?"

I exhale sharply, sagging against him.

His chuckle follows, and he releases me.

"On your knees, Willow."

I face him. His expression is a dark mask that brooks no argument.

Not that I want to argue.

I drop down easily, my body just folding. I lick my lips and stare at his crotch, now even with my face. My fingers twitch on my thighs, but I keep

my hands still.

“Take it out.”

Now I move. Pulling the elastic of his sweatpants down, catching his briefs in the hook of my fingers, too. I drag it down in the front and release it when his cock and balls are free. The material slides back up an inch, lifting his balls toward me.

I groan through my teeth.

He rakes his fingers through my hair, tipping my head back. My gaze flickers up, crashing into his stormy eyes.

“You should’ve told me about your job,” he bites out.

I start to shake my head, but his grip on my hair tightens.

“No, Willow. You should’ve told me this is where you come. That this is where you *sing*.”

Oh God. My cheeks flame, and it spreads to my whole face.

Am I ashamed of singing?

Maybe. It’s one of those quiet hobbies that I don’t like to talk about. My attention flicks back to his cock. There’s precum oozing out of the tip, dripping past the piercing.

That’s going to ravage my throat.

“Worried about your voice?” he murmurs, leaning over me. “I’ll steal your voice, wild girl. And then I’ll give it back to you.”

I open my mouth to protest, and he forces me forward. I automatically open wider for him, letting him in my mouth. His second piercing rubs my tongue, the metallic flavor sharp and foreign. All of him is foreign, and my chest tightens at that.

I don’t want him to be foreign.

My eyes close as he pushes farther in, until my throat closes around him and my whole body seems to rebel with the force of my gag reflex. He pulls out and jacks his hips forward again, pressing deeper.

“Relax,” he whispers. His grip turns into a caress of fingers against my scalp, but his palm on the back of my head doesn’t let me escape. He pushes in far enough to block my breathing.

I squeeze his thighs. My eyes open, and I stare up at him.

He controls the pace, my movements, my breath.

It’s okay that way.

When he withdraws, I suck in a noisy breath through my nose. My nostrils flare with the effort of being quick. And then he’s moving again,

fucking my face with wild abandon. I might just topple over backward if he wasn't holding on to me, and me to him.

But something shifts halfway through. I wrap my tongue around his tip when he withdraws, and suck at his shaft when he plunges forward. The piercings rub on my tongue, giving me a taste of metal with the taste of *him*. My mind goes all floaty, and it's like I'm drunk again.

Not in a bad way, though. More like... in a way that I don't need to control my every move, because he's doing it for me. He's got me.

"Good," he growls. "Submission looks so sweet on your face, wild girl. Stay in it. That's it. *Fuck*, I love when your throat squeezes me like that."

My eyes roll back, and my jaw relaxes farther. He stills, the tip of his dick on my tongue, and he pulls my head back slightly. I close my lips around him and run my tongue along the underside of the head, and his cock jumps.

"God," he groans.

He comes, flooding my mouth. I swallow around him, almost choking on the amount of it. His grip on my hair eases, and he pulls me off his dick. He drops to his knees in front of me, his finger lifting my chin.

"Show me your mouth," he orders.

My lips part. He catches some of his cum on his fingers. Scooping it from my tongue. His other hand undoes my jeans enough for him to guide his cum-covered fingers down to my cunt. He thrusts inside me. The heel of his palm grinds on my clit. I rise, making a noise in the back of my throat.

"Swallow," he whispers.

I just do it without thinking.

Does that make me a bad person?

His fingers are still inside me, pumping slowly. He manages to work me right up to the edge, when my orgasm seems like an apparition in the distance, and then withdraws.

He licks his fingers clean right in front of me, the corner of his lips tilting up.

"You've tasted me, I've tasted you." He holds out his hands.

I put my palms against his, and he helps me rise. We stand together while my mind comes back to me.

"How...?" I shake my head.

How did he do that to me?

How did he know where to find me?

How has he *always* known where to find me?

"I like control," he says simply. "And sometimes, I need it."

Sometimes I need to not have it.

"Yes," he agrees.

I didn't mean to speak aloud. But now that it's in the open, my shoulders relax. The tension seems to fade away. It doesn't mean I won't keep secrets, or rebel in my own way, or try to steal the control when I think he doesn't have it.

But maybe that's just because I want him to prove me wrong.

Like... like about him leaving me.

I stop and close my eyes, pulling free of Miles. I don't want my thoughts to go in that direction, but it seems we're careening down that path regardless.

As much as Miles might tell me not to go there, or not think about it—I have to. I have to deal with the fact that Knox was an asshole who didn't give a shit about me.

There.

He didn't give a *shit*.

And Miles...

Miles always has.

MILES

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TEN MONTHS AGO

She's upset. I hate that I can tell from here, with the shadows swarming around us. There are so many other things to focus on tonight, but I seem to be drawn to her. My gaze keeps flicking to the curve of her spine, ignoring everything else. The air around us is buzzing, alive with music and laughter, but she's turned to stone.

Like me.

Her shoulders are hunched, a faint tremor shivering her skin in the cool night air. I saw her arrive and go straight inside, then come right back out. She went to the far end of the porch and sat, and she's been there ever since.

My first impulse is the one I go with, no hesitation. I strip off my jacket and stride forward, draping it over her shoulders.

It's May. We're at the end of our playoff season, which means bigger parties. Classes are almost over. Girls around here have no concept of wearing warm clothing to parties. Too often, the ones who start off smart end up leaving their coats and sweatshirts behind.

There's a closet in the basement where we put them all. There's a growing collection of girls' clothes. And maybe I could've gone to get one of them, hoping for the perfect fit, but I think I rather like my jacket around her.

She stiffens, straightening.

I've surprised her.

And then I lower myself to the porch floor beside her, letting my legs dangle off the edge, and she relaxes. Just a little bit. She trusts me, and a dark part of me relishes that. I haven't done anything to break her trust... or earn it. So the fact that I have it makes me glow on the inside.

"What did my asshole brother do now?" I ask her, leaning close and pitching my voice low.

She's got tears in her eyes, although she sniffs and wipes them away at my closer inspection.

Knox has run the gamut of idiocy. Thinking he's done something to make his girlfriend cry isn't a leap. It's just connecting the fucking dots.

She runs the back of her hand under her nose. "He was flirting with another girl. I walked in, and their heads were bent together..."

My heart bangs around my chest. I want to kill him for putting us through this stupid bet. “That’s not right.”

Willow glances at me, then pulls my jacket tighter around her. She appears to have just come from a dance competition—maybe the last of the year. Her curled blonde hair is in a high ponytail, tied up with blue and silver curled ribbons. The makeup that was probably on thick for the performance is now running down her cheeks in blue and black streaks, belying how long she’s actually been crying. Even her red lipstick is smudged.

Sure enough, when my gaze drops lower than her face, I see her dance uniform. The tight white-and-blue crop top, the blue skirt and the black shorts peeking out from under it. Her white sneakers and tall socks.

Fuck.

Flirting with another girl *and* he missed her competition?

“He forgot?”

She shrugs and looks away. “I didn’t stick around to ask.”

Cheer her up. Another impulse, another thought I shouldn’t indulge.

But I do.

I hold my hand out between us, palm up, and wiggle my fingers. “Give me your hand.”

“Why?”

I give her a look, and she meets my eyes for the first time. She really examines me. And then she notices my black eye and the cut across my eyebrow, and her teeth dig into her lower lip. I know what she’s thinking—it isn’t a normal hockey fight injury. We’ve sustained plenty of those this year.

This is different. *This* one happened in the locker room after the game, when I finally blew up at my brother. It’s been months since this bet started, and it was void the moment Greyson backed out of it. But Knox doesn’t fucking care. He fought back, amped up on adrenaline.

We’ve gotten into plenty of scraps before, and I’m sure we’ll get into more. So this time, I don’t tell her where my injuries came from, and she doesn’t ask.

But she does put her hand in mine.

I pull it closer and turn her hand palm-up.

“What are you doing?” she finally asks.

I grin. “Reading your palm.”

“You know how to do that?”

No, but I’m not about to ruin it. Now that I’ve got her hand in mine, I don’t ever want to let it go. But I can’t really say *that* without bursting this bubble we’ve found ourselves in either. So, I let my body stay hyper-aware of hers, and I run my finger down one of the creases in her palm.

She shivers.

I suppress my smile. “Have you had your palm read before?”

“No.” Her voice is quiet. She leans forward a little, her shoulder bumping mine.

“Well, this one...” I trace it again, just to see if she’ll shiver again. If it tickles her, or if it’s *me*. I pray it’s the latter. “This is your head line. It says you’re smart and brave.” I glance at her out of the corner of my eye.

Her attention is fixed on her palm, but I can tell that she’s skeptical.

Onto the next one. “Your life line is supposed to tell you if you’re going to live a long and happy life.”

“Am I?”

“Of course. Well, it breaks apart there at the end, so you might be in for some suffering when you get older. I think you’ll be okay, though.” I hunch over her hand, then move to the top crease. “This is your heart line.”

“Does it say my great love will end in heartbreak?” Willow huffs. “Because that’s how it feels right now.”

Knox is *not* her great love.

“No.” I run my nail down the line, eliciting a beautiful shiver from her. “It says you’re destined to fall in love with me.”

She jerks back like I burned her, clutching her hand to her stomach. “That’s not funny, Miles.”

I keep my gaze steady on her face, although my heart is hammering against my ribcage.

“I don’t make the rules,” I say.

“Willow?”

She hurriedly wipes at her face, removing the evidence of her tears and messed-up makeup. In seconds, she’s presentable, and I don’t know how she flipped that switch so fast. When she twists around, her face is a mask.

Knox comes out onto the porch, his gaze going from her to me, then back again. “Hey, baby. One of the guys said he saw you come in.”

“Yeah, I just got here.” She clears her throat and rises, letting my jacket slip off her shoulders. “Miles was just looking out for me.”

I stare at my brother, trying to convey how fucked up he is, but as usual, he ignores it. Willow takes his hand, and he reels her in. His gaze sweeps her, up and down. He kisses her on the lips and then cinches her to his side.

“Let’s get you a drink.” He guides her toward the door, only glancing back once to make sure I’m watching. Then he raises his hand behind her back and flips me off.

Fucker.

One day, Willow will come to her senses and see him for who he is. And she’ll see me, too. Then it’ll be game on.

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WILLOW

I follow Aspen and Violet into the Crown Point Theater. The orchestra plays here, and Aspen's been working with them for the past two months. She says it'll be fine, so... I guess it's okay. Even if we're *technically* sneaking in.

We enter the large theater, and my breath catches. There's red velvet and gilded columns and rows and rows of seats that immediately inspires awe. The painting on the domed ceiling is angelic. Literally, *angels* and clouds and naked people.

"Wow," I say on an exhale.

"That's not the most impressive part," Aspen laughs.

She takes my hand and pulls me along. Down the sloped aisle and up a staircase tucked into the side. Onto the stage, which is lit up with the house lights.

"I can't believe you didn't tell us you sang," Aspen murmurs.

Violet hums her agreement. She's known for a while that I decided to start teaching little heathens, but it isn't like I ever told her I wanted to sing in front of other people.

No, Miles discovered that. Although he didn't throw it in my face, he did make me *sing* for him in his bed. Quite often.

And it seems that's where we've been for the last week, bouncing between campus for classes, the arena for his practices—which are once again open for students to watch—and his bed. I've been dodging calls from the detective, and Miles hasn't said anything about her either. Although I have the sneaking suspicion that she calls him, too.

He keeps threatening to tell everyone he knows about my voice—but apparently, he already has. Because when Aspen and Violet showed up this afternoon and demanded to know about my dark singing secrets, there was only one culprit.

And now we're here.

"What do you know?" Aspen asks me. "Pop?"

"Wait." I hold up my hands. "What?"

She's moving across the stage toward the grand piano. It's not quite in the center, and the lid is down. It's all closed up, not that Aspen seems to give a shit. She runs her hand over the gleaming black polish and drags the bench out.

"We're having a concert next week," she says. "They moved the piano up here, when it's normally off in the wings. When I play for the theater, I use the upright piano downstairs."

"Oh," I murmur.

"So...?"

So I name a song off the top of my head. "Glory" by Dermot Kennedy. And I'm half hoping that she won't know it.

But to my surprise, Aspen launches into a rendition.

"Holy shit." Violet laughs. She grips my shoulders and propels me toward the piano. "*Sing, Willow.*"

I do. My voice is soft at first, but neither of them judge me. Warmth blooms through my chest, and I find myself getting bolder as it goes on. Aspen looks up and grins at me, urging me to continue.

When the song comes to an end, I trail off into silence.

My heart aches, but in a delicious, adrenaline-fueled way.

Violet and Aspen both clap, and I allow my grin to take over my expression.

"I think the lessons are helping," I say, clearing my throat. "Nora's been teaching me how to be more confident with my own voice."

Two lessons a week has done wonders—but I can't help but think that singing is just a hobby. I'm going into the tech industry, and maybe I'll follow in my parents' path and work for the government.

I don't know.

Everything is up in the air, and with only a few months left of college, it's high time I figure it out.

My parents are the driving force behind my career choice. Not because they pressured me, but because I've always idolized them. They're where I learned *everything*. How to do mental math in elementary school, and coding websites by the time I was in middle school. There was a brief stint in hacking, although that really isn't my forte. And it's not legal, so. There's that. I only managed to break into the school's grading system once, to change a grade for another classmate, and my parents caught me. They nearly skinned me alive, and I learned my lesson. Don't hack unless you can't be caught.

But because they're such badasses in the sector where tech and government collide, it's easy to want to emulate that.

Even if I'm not really feeling it.

But *feeling* something and being skilled are two completely different things. I like it well enough to get straight A's in my classes, even the difficult ones. I'm good enough to not have to spend every waking hour studying this shit, like some of the other students in my major.

So if I'm a little lost right now in all aspects, at least I have career options that will pay well. Even if it gets to be tedious and monotonous and

—

"Willow?" Violet squeezes my arm. "Where'd you go?"

I suppress my sigh. I should be excited to be here, to have just sung in front of an empty theater and felt alive for about a full minute.

I smother the emotion instead and smile at my best friend. "Sorry. Just a little..." I wave my hand.

My phone buzzes.

UNKNOWN

Just wanted to say sorry to you. It's Ronan Pierce.

Well... that's weird.

How did you get my number?

RONAN

Bought it off one of the dance girls

Ummmm...

Too creepy?

Plus, you were just buying me drinks. How could you know I had a psychotic goalie stalker? Unless you're apologizing for something else?

Can we talk?

My frown deepens.

"What is it?" Aspen asks.

I shake my head, ignoring the niggling feeling in my stomach. I stuff my phone in my pocket and force another smile. "Nothing, just some odd message. I'm hungry."

"Haven?"

My smile wobbles. I've been on a good track recently. Like, for a week. I haven't touched alcohol. Going to a bar just seems like tempting fate—or me—to fuck things up.

"You'll be okay," Violet says. "But we can go to that diner, the one that just opened. What's it called?"

"The Market," Aspen supplies. "They do breakfast all day, I heard."

"Yeah, okay. Let's go there."

My phone buzzes again in my pocket, but I ignore it. I take Violet's hand, loop my arm through Aspen's, and return to Violet's car.

The Market is closed.

"Oh," Aspen pouts. "Damn."

"Maybe just the dining hall, then," Violet murmurs.

I let out a breath. "Sure."

Except there, I come face-to-face with Ronan Pierce. His bruises have faded, and he casts a wary glance around, like he's searching for Miles. Then he focuses on me.

He's handsome. I didn't notice it before, or maybe just didn't take exceptional note of it. He could make some girl pretty happy if he set his mind to it. Or maybe he already does?

"Willow." He holds up his hands as if to stop me from moving.

I've already stopped.

Violet and Aspen stop, too, but I wave them on. I exchange a glance with Violet, and she rolls her eyes.

"What's up, Ronan?" I keep my voice light.

"I—"

"Pierce!"

He flinches ever so slightly and rotates. I'm left staring at his back—and that won't do. I head for the lines of food. It's dinner time, and the place is mobbed. It wasn't Miles' voice anyway, so he's probably not in danger of being punched again.

I spot Miles entering the dining hall. His gaze sweeps around and lands on me, just as Ronan catches back up.

"Hey." Ronan grabs my arm. "We need to talk—"

Miles is suddenly between us.

Ronan yells, going down to his knees. I peer around Miles, and my jaw drops. He's got Ronan's wrist in his hand, twisting it so the latter has no choice but to fold with the pressure.

"What did I tell you about touching my girl?" Miles asks, leaning over him.

"Miles." I grab the back of his shirt and tug. It's not enough, though. It doesn't seem to be snapping him out of the rage that's burning through him. My palms flatten against his back, skin-to-skin, and I slide them around so I'm hugging him from behind. "Miles, let him go."

"He put his hands on you."

We're drawing a commotion. People whispering and pointing.

"Please," I whisper. My nails rake his abdomen. I slip around his body, inserting myself between Ronan and him. But my focus is entirely on Miles. "It's not worth it. You're going to get in trouble."

He blinks.

Chase King, another football player, suddenly shoves through the crowd.

"Whiteshaw," he barks. "For fuck's sake, let him go."

Miles flings Ronan's arm, sending him crashing backward. But then he lasers in on me, and my throat closes. Excitement and anxiety wrap through me, and I take a small step back. Miles' gaze drops to my feet, the way I slide them backward in an attempt to be sly. But his gaze always draws me in, especially when his blue eyes rise and burn into mine.

He holds out his hand.

I stop and look at it.

I know what awaits me if I take it—and I *want* it.

So I take it.

He pulls me out of the dining hall, telling the attendant there that we'll be back. We go upstairs, silent the whole time we march up through the

stairwell, and down the hall lined with offices.

Athletic department.

We get to an office, and I miss whose it is. We're inside in a flash, and he closes and locks the door behind us.

I step into the dark space, feeling my way forward. I bump into a chair. I grip the back of it automatically. It's impossibly dark here, and my skin prickles with apprehension.

"Strip," comes Miles' order.

I let out a breath. My fingers are already moving, undoing my jeans and shoving them down. I kick them off, along with my shoes, and tear my shirt off. It makes it easier knowing that Miles can't see me either.

The office has no windows. It's pitch-black with the door shut.

Actually, no. There's a sliver of light that comes from under the closed door. It's blocked by two spokes that I can imagine are his legs. Meaning he hasn't come farther into the room.

I feel around the chair, to the desk. My other hand finds the wall. I get to the back corner and turn back around, shedding my bra. I toss it at where I think Miles is, and his surprised huff is enough to bring a smile to my lips.

"Mmm," he murmurs, inhaling. "Where are your panties, wild girl?"

I *snap* the elastic still on my hip.

"Give," he orders.

I practically tear them off and toss them the same way I tossed my bra.

"I can smell your arousal from here." His voice is deep and rasping.

Yes, I'm turned on. Impossibly so. Although I can't pinpoint if it's the excitement or my guess that he wants to punish me for speaking with Ronan.

A light turns on—his camera's flashlight. I raise my hand against it, trying to see past the searing brightness, and he comes forward. The light bathes my naked body in a cool bluish-white color, seeming to make me seem paler than I am. I look down, then back up to him. I'm in the corner of the room, with the desk to my right, and the wheeled office chair tucked behind it. If I leaned over, I might be able to reach it from here.

Miles jerks the light, directing me wordlessly to the chair. I go to it and pull it out, only hesitating for a moment before sitting.

"Spread those legs for me," he says. "Hook them over the armrests."

I hum and do as directed. He moves around the desk and stands so he can see all of me. With my legs splayed like this, he has a prime view of my

pussy. And damn if that doesn't excite me more. Adding to the fact that I can't see his face, or much of anything besides the light aimed on me.

"Touch yourself. Sink your fingers into your greedy cunt."

Something in my chest tightens. I run my finger through my center, collecting the wetness there. My thighs tremble. I pay attention to my clit for a moment, rubbing tiny little circles, until Miles tsks at me. My cheeks flame, and I move my hand lower. A single finger inside my cunt. I thrust it in and out until Miles makes another noise, and I add a digit.

"Keep going."

Okay, I mouth. I don't have words. I finger-fuck myself, legs spread like a whore.

"Good girl," he murmurs. "You look so pretty on camera."

I freeze, orgasm forgotten. My cunt clenches around my fingers, but I pull them out and grip the armrest.

He chuckles, and suddenly he tosses the phone on the desk. It's facedown, so the light—and if he's still recording—illuminates more of the room while only capturing the ceiling.

I see him better now.

He's got his shirt off, his glorious abs on display and his pants undone and shoved down. My panties are in his grip, and he's sliding it along his length. Stroking himself off with the silk.

My lips part.

He gets closer, still jacking himself off with my panties.

I narrow my eyes at it. The little glimpse of the metal piercings flash through the blue silk that he picked out this morning. Yeah, we're still doing that. I've given up on trying to change it and secretly kind of like it.

Except when he's being a dick, like right now.

He's close enough that his fist is jerking himself off even with my breasts. I sit up straighter, reaching for him, but he catches my fingers and intertwines them with his. Keeping my hand away.

And then he's groaning, and he covers the head of his dick with the fabric in his grip. His balls tighten, lifting closer to his body, and his cock twitches. I bet it's throbbing in his grasp.

He finishes and helps me off the chair. I stand, my body pressing to his. He doesn't give me room to breathe. He barely ever gives me room to think. But then he's turning me around and putting my hands on the wall, and he's kneeling behind me.

“Miles—”

His nose is in my cunt. Inhaling. His teeth nip at me, his fingers separate me. He devours me like this, like he’s never tasted anything so good, and my head hangs down. Every inch of me is tensing up. He keeps me on the edge for seconds, minutes. Time drags out, and his movements stay slow and methodical.

“God,” he groans. He shifts. His breath coasts along my ass cheek.

I should expect his teeth—but I don’t.

He bites me, and I jump forward. Without anywhere to go, really, he easily drags me back. He bites again, harder, and I whimper. His fingers massage it. His other hand is still between my legs, working magic on my clit.

Until he rises and lines up behind me.

Then I understand that this was just him warming up.

“Hold the wall,” he grits out.

I barely have time to readjust my palms and brace myself. He slams into me with the force of a hurricane, and I scream. It just comes out. A wordless, breathless torrent. He fucks me with unmatched vigor. Every time his hips slap into my ass, it feels like a spank. Pain and pleasure have me captivated, and the noises that come out of my mouth—I don’t even know what I’m saying.

Some sort of plea. To release me, to fuck me harder. Nonsensical begging.

He cups my breasts, curving around me to lift my upper body and pin it against him. His hips continue to pound into me, but now we’re moving forward. I’m smashed between the wall and him. Only his hands on my breasts, rolling my nipples, act as a buffer. My cheek is on the cool paint, no doubt leaving behind makeup and sweat and tears.

“Do bad girls come?” He nips my earlobe.

“No,” I groan.

He slams to a halt, fully inside me. His forehead touches my shoulder, and his fingers tighten on me to the point of bruising, and he comes hard.

My body is on fire.

Pulsing and tense.

I swallow and take a deep breath, *knowing* that everything leading up to this moment was just foreplay. And this is the punishment.

He steps back and turns me around. I stare at him, but his face is completely in shadow. He retrieves my panties from where he must've tossed them on the chair, and he kneels. He maneuvers one leg through its hole, then the other.

I forget that he came in them until he's got them back around my hips, and the cool wetness greets me.

"Ah, ah," Miles admonishes, putting his finger to my lips. "It's this or no panties at all. And then my fresh cum will seep out of you and wet the crotch of your jeans. Would you like everyone to know what we did?"

Pretty sure they already know.

He smirks and grabs his phone.

He stops recording, the light extinguishing.

We stay still in the darkness for a moment, and then his flashlight comes back on. He finds our clothes, tossing mine to me. Bra, shirt, jeans. Shoes. Jacket.

I put it all back on silently, fighting off the urge to run away and finish the job Miles started.

"Does it burn?" he asks me, his eyes hungry. "Tell me what it feels like."

"It feels like I'm going to explode."

"But you're not," he confirms. "You're my dirty little whore when I want you to be, but when we're with our friends, you're just a good girl with a secret. Isn't that right?"

I frown.

He reaches out and strokes my cheek with the back of his hand. Those knuckles that can do so much damage are calming on my hot skin. And I *am* hot. Burning up, as he said.

He opens his arms, and I step into them.

Automatic response.

What's *wrong* with me?

But my arms wrap around him, and his around me, and I can't help but feel like his words are true. Good girl with a secret. His dirty little whore. Both exist, both are true, and he frees both of those sides of me.

There's something darker at work here, though. Another bet I haven't spotted, a game in which the rules are in a foreign language. The other shoe about to drop and crush my heart before I can even give it away.

The longer I stay in his embrace, the more I want to run away.

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MILES

“Two truths and a lie,” Knox announces.
I groan.

We’re in the living room of the hockey house. Friday night. We’re supposed to be taking it easy, according to Coach, because we face one of our biggest rivals tomorrow. It’s an away game, so we’ll be going by bus, per usual. This trip, however, is going to be a torturous six hours.

Plus, waking up and reporting to the arena for our pickup time at the crack of dawn is going to suck.

And because it’s so far away, there’s no fan bus. No extra bus, at all. If CPU students want to come, then they have to find their own way there.

It’s for that reason that Violet, Willow, and Aspen are staying here. They’re going to have a sleepover at Violet’s house, I guess. I can’t lie and say it doesn’t make me a little apprehensive.

Greyson and Steele must feel the same way, because they’re both holding their girls close tonight. Greyson and Violet are on the couch beside Willow and me. Steele has Aspen on his lap on one of the chairs.

Finch is flying solo tonight on another chair, and Tony and his boyfriend of the week are sitting on the floor near Finch. Knox stands in front of the television and fireplace, his eyes bright and a beer in his hand. No girl for him tonight.

In the wake of his suggestion, it seems like everyone has a different response. Violet and Greyson exchange a glance. Steele nods and smirks, pulling Aspen tighter against him. The other guys are shrugging.

Maybe I’m the only one who doesn’t want to play.

“Or we can play truth or dare,” Knox offers.

“That’s better,” Aspen declares. “More exciting.”

“What’s the punishment if you don’t do it?” Greyson asks.

Knox taps his finger against his lips, but I’d bet anything that the fucker already has an idea. In fact, with his scheming, this is probably *why* he picked the game. Give people impossible dares so they face whatever punishments he can come up with.

It’s sick and twisted and it could be interesting.

Willow’s sitting beside me, her hand on my thigh, but she’s not really here. She hasn’t been here since I caught her talking to Ronan earlier this week and she had a punishment of her own.

Punishment that’s been ongoing, since I haven’t let her come in four days.

I’ve come quite a bit. In fact, she’s got the plug in her ass right now, holding my cum there. As if I just remembered it, I slip my free hand in my pocket and thumb the button. She twitches under my arm.

It takes her a moment to get her expression under control. We’re covered by a blanket, thank fuck, because my dick is hard in an instant. And her hips shift, her body squirming under the siege of vibrations.

“Stop,” she breathes. “Miles.”

I keep it going for another minute, until her eyes are rolling back.

Then I turn it off.

She sags against me.

“Punishment is losing a piece of clothing,” Knox suggests.

Willow shifts. I don’t think she loves that idea—and neither do I.

I lower my lips to her ear. “Guess that means we’re all in, hmm?”

She makes a face at me, then sits up. “I’ll go first,” she volunteers. “Aspen, truth or dare?”

Aspen grins. “Dare.”

“I dare you to show us your sex face.”

Steele’s eyebrows lift, but both of them are fucking smiling. Of course, because they have a bit of exhibitionism in them. Aspen sits up straighter, moving Steele’s hands to her thighs, and does an imitation of how she probably looks when she’s having sex. She bounces on Steele’s lap, and then throws her head back in a form of ecstasy.

“Damn, sweetheart,” Steele murmurs, tipping her head to the side to catch her lips. “You’re so fucking sexy.”

I smirk.

Aspen drags her fingers through her dark hair, and her gaze flickers around before landing on Finch. "Truth or Dare, Hudson?"

Shit, I always forget that's his first name.

"Truth," he says.

"Did you fuck Thalia? And if you did, did you enjoy it?"

He blanches. Poor guy. It's kind of funny, though.

"I didn't. Um, your uncle scared me away."

Aspen's lips turn down. "Uncle Cillian? When did you meet him?"

"This goes outside the scope of truth or dare," Knox interrupts. He's still lording over the party in front of the TV. "Finch, you're up."

"Um, Knox, truth or dare?"

"Truth."

Finch glances from me to Willow, then back to him. My chest tightens automatically.

I fucking know what's coming.

"Did you have feelings for Willow when you dated her?" Finch asks him.

Willow goes still.

Knox's expression stays light, but he focuses on Willow instead of Finch. "I liked you just fine, babe. Does that make you feel better?"

"Not really," she grits out.

He shrugs. "My turn, then. Truth or dare, Willow?"

"Dare."

He grins.

My brother is fucking up to something. *Always.*

"I dare you to give me a lap dance for a full song."

My grip on Willow tightens, keeping her next to me. "Are you kidding me?"

Knox shrugs. "Do you have a problem with that? It's not like she's taking off her clothes... which she will have to do if she doesn't do the dare."

Willow pats my leg. "It's fine. I'm over him."

I bite my tongue. She slips out from under me and rises, shaking out her limbs. Knox returns with a chair from the dining room, and he sits in it with his legs spread like an asshole. He pats his thighs.

"Lay it on me," he tells her.

She circles him, running her fingers through her hair. It swings right back to where it was, making a curtain around her face. Someone puts a song on their phone, setting it on the coffee table.

“No touching,” she warns him. “Keep your hands to yourself.”

And then she begins.

I forgot, for a moment, that Willow was on the dance team. And while it may have been a few months since she danced with them, she still has that innate talent of moving her body exactly how she wants.

She steps in front of him, facing away, and bends forward. Her gaze is on me—but her ass is in my brother’s face. I grit my teeth as she moves, hooking her legs over his and lowering herself on his lap. She grabs the back of his neck and brings his face toward her cleavage, although she releases him and slips away before he can make contact.

It seems like she’s set on teasing him to death.

My dick twitches, and emotions roar within me.

I’m angry and turned on and so fucking pissed, I can’t see straight. Is it possible for blood to boil?

The song ends, and Willow immediately stops. She straightens and comes back to the couch—but she doesn’t sit next to me. She climbs up on my lap, straddling me. My furious gaze rakes over her eyes, her mouth, her flared nostrils, a second before she cups my face and slams her lips to mine.

She grinds down on me at the same time, feeling how fucking hard I am for her.

I want to kill her for agreeing to it—but then her tongue is in my mouth, and I groan. I grab the back of her head and wind my other arm around her back, keeping her locked against me. We kiss until my head spins and some of my anger recedes. Until I know I won’t commit murder.

Then my grip loosens, and she sits back slightly.

Although she’s not getting out of my lap, that’s for fucking sure.

“Well, that was fun,” Finch murmurs. “Willow, I think it’s your turn.”

“Miles, truth or dare.”

I sense that she wants me to pick a dare. Or maybe she wants a truth from me, I don’t know. Either way. “Dare.”

“I dare you to give your brother a lap dance for a full song.”

The room erupts into laughter.

I sit up straighter, nose to nose with her. “You’d like that, hmm?”

“No, but I think it would be funny,” she murmurs.

I shift her back on my lap and tear off my shirt. “Nice try.”

Our friends boo, but I wave them off. “There’s no fucking way. Greyson, truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

I lift my chin and fight my smirk. “Do you regret making Violet give Steele a blow job?”

Willow chokes, but it’s Aspen who has the weirdest reaction. She looks from Violet to Greyson to Steele, and she shoves herself off her boyfriend’s lap. Is she going to hit him? I could use some violence right about now—a different sort of outlet to the lingering fury under my skin.

But instead, she starts laughing.

Full, huge, belly laughs.

We stare at Aspen for a moment, and Steele runs his hand over his face.

“Fuck you, Whiteshaw,” Greyson murmurs. His grip on Violet tightens. “No, I don’t regret it. Because it made me realize that I couldn’t handle it if anyone else wanted to have her. Before that, I was just...” He shrugs and meets her eyes. “I love you, Vi.”

“I know.” She kisses him.

It’s sweet.

But Aspen is on the floor, still laughing hard enough that tears are tracking down her cheeks.

“Jesus, woman,” Steele mutters. He grabs her up and puts her back on his lap. “You aren’t mad that I didn’t tell you?”

She lifts one shoulder, her giggles trailing off. “I mean... no, I’m pretty pissed *you* didn’t tell me. But as far as it actually happening? I can only imagine how feral Greyson was after.” She pats Steele’s cheek. “You were the pawn in that scenario, *sweetheart*.”

We lapse into silence. I mean, she’s got a point.

“Moving on,” Greyson says after a minute. He opens his mouth to continue, but a huge crash outside stops him short.

I crane around, trying to see out the front windows. A second later, there’s a squealing of tires.

We’re up in an instant. I barely set Willow on her feet before me, Knox, Greyson, and Steele are rushing out the front door. Barefoot, bare-chested, in the middle of winter—doesn’t fucking matter.

My car is destroyed.

Hit-and-run, judging from the lack of a second vehicle. It took a direct hit to the front, which is crunched inward so far, it barely resembles a car. The back is crunched in, too, having met the back of Greyson's truck. He must have a hitch attached or some shit, because his doesn't appear damaged in the slightest.

Mine's just an unfortunate pancake.

Willow appears at my side, her hand slipping into mine. "Holy shit."

I sigh. But then her grip tightens, and she points down the street.

"Are they...?"

A huge truck with a brush guard on the front is idling in the middle of the street. Its headlights are off, but it doesn't hide the fact that it's running. Steam comes out of the exhaust, visible in the cold night air.

Our collective attention swings to it.

The headlights come on, so bright they're fucking blinding, and the truck squeals in reverse. Straight down the street to the intersection, where its tail end swings to the left. It maneuvers a perfect turn and shoots off into the night.

"What the fuck was that?" Greyson demands.

I bite the inside of my cheek.

I don't have any idea.

"Game's over," I say, sighing. "We're going to get some sleep. Deal with this shit in the morning."

Willow follows me upstairs. She doesn't say anything until we're in the room, and she automatically strips off the rest of her clothes. I want to fucking flog her for giving my brother a lap dance. But she's not wearing a bra... or panties. What would she have taken off that would make that situation any better?

Still.

I groan when she faces away from me and bends over, revealing the base of the plug sticking out from between her ass cheeks. She pulls at the laces of her shoes quickly, removing them, then straightens up and glances back at me.

The remote is in my hand before I really register it.

My cock is rock-hard.

I shed my sweatpants, sit on the end of the bed, and motion for her to come closer. She does, her hair swinging around and brushing the tops of

her shoulders. Her tits are perky, her pink nipples staring at me. Before I bend her over my knee, I lean forward and suck one into my mouth.

“Oh, fuck,” she whimpers.

I catch her hips and drag her closer, flicking her nipple with my tongue and sucking it between my teeth. I pay it special attention, then switch to her other one. Her back arches, pushing her breast into my face. I maul the other, wet with my spit, in my hand. Kneading and squeezing it, until she’s trembling against me.

Then I pull her down across my legs, pinning her facedown.

She lets out a shocked noise.

“Hold my leg. And don’t let go.” I wait until she does, then turn on the plug.

She gasps.

I touch her ass cheek lightly, enjoying the way she trembles. The buzz of the plug is louder now. So when I lift my hand and bring it down on her cheek, she almost jumps out of her skin.

“Oooh, why does that feel good?” she cries.

I smile. She’s leaking on my thigh. I push a finger into her cunt. It catches her off guard, and she squirms at the new sensation. I withdraw and spank her again. The other cheek. Hard enough to leave a red imprint in its wake.

My hand is immediately there again, soothing the spot. Then finger-fucking her. All while I use my other arm to keep her down, splayed out.

“Why am I doing this to you?” I ask her, keeping my voice calm.

“B-because I gave Knox—”

SMACK.

She yelps.

I thrust two fingers inside her. She’s getting wetter, the devious girl.

“You know you did wrong,” I murmur. “And you know not to say his name.”

“I know,” she pants. “Would you rather I bare my tits for everyone—”

SMACK.

Her moan is louder. Lust and pain in a heady combination.

“I’d rather you let me decide,” I say. “Three more. And I want you to count with me.”

I aim lower this time. Her upper thigh.

She's not expecting it, and her breath is shaky when she whispers, "One."

"That's my girl," I reply.

I turn up the plug, and she squirms again.

"Stay still now."

Again.

"Two," she moans.

Again.

"Three."

I pull her up and plant her on the bed. She slides forward, her chest hitting the mattress as I drag her legs back and get her knees under her. When I thrust into her hot cunt, her muscles grip at me.

But it's the vibration of the plug that I need to grit my teeth against.

I'm not going to last long like this.

"Do you want to come?" I ask her.

She makes an indecipherable noise.

"Willow." I stroke her bare back, running my fingers along the bumps of her spine. "Do you want to come, wild girl?"

"Yes," she practically sobs. Her hands are fisting in the blanket, her body shuddering. "Please make me come, Miles."

"I will, sweet girl," I murmur.

I draw out and push back in, taking another moment to control myself. Every time I bury my cock to the hilt inside her, my groin meeting her ass, her tender skin seems to shiver. I reach around her and brush her clit. I fuck her slowly and work her up while trying not to explode myself, but it's damn hard.

She's so fucking alluring, and needy, and gorgeous.

"Come for me." It's a command that breaks her.

When she unravels, she clenches at me and drags me over the edge with her. I thrust quickly, twice more, and my balls tighten. Then empty. And fuck if it doesn't feel perfect to climax at the same time as her.

I shut off the plug and remove it. Then my cock. I drop to my knees and hold her thighs, keeping her lifted on her knees, and take in her leaking pussy. My cum is already seeping out, strings of it dropping to the blanket.

On a whim, I thrust my fingers inside her. Searching... Ah.

"Your IUD strings are right here," I tell her. "I could pull them out, get you pregnant..."

“No.” Her voice snaps through, crystal clear.

I raise my eyebrow. “No?”

She’s suddenly rolling away from me, drawing her legs together. She keeps going right off the other side of the bed, and she hops up. “No. Do you want to hurt me? Is that it? It’s painful enough in a doctor’s office. And there’s a myriad of things that could be off with it. I don’t know if it’s buried itself in my uterus wall—”

“Okay.” I raise my hands in surrender. “I won’t.”

“And I don’t want babies,” she adds. “Ever.”

“Okay,” I reply.

Her expression is... distrustful. I don’t blame her. How many relationships fall apart on the *baby* aspect?

“I don’t need a screaming child,” I tell her. “I don’t even need a well-behaved child. I just need you.”

She stalls out. Her hands plant on her hips, and her head tilts. “What?”

I shrug. “I don’t give a shit about babies. I want *you*. I need you. Haven’t I said that enough? That it’s you and me, forever? If you don’t want to get pregnant, that’s fine. If the IUD hurts, you should get it out. And because it freaks you out that much, I’ll take responsibility for it and get snipped.”

I mean, that doesn’t sound like the most pleasant thing on earth, but for her?

Anything.

“Especially if it means we can have fear-free, raw sex,” I add.

She huffs. And a second later, a smile cracks her expression. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I pick a t-shirt and toss it at her, then find my sweatpants.

She trails me to the bathroom. It’s not even that fucking weird to pee in front of her, and her in front of me. We take turns brushing our teeth, and she braids her hair back and ties it off with a mini elastic. My shirt conceals her naked pussy, which is probably for the best. Tony and his boyfriend almost crash into us as we’re coming out of the bathroom.

I wink at him and herd her to safety.

She climbs into bed and watches me pull clothes for her for tomorrow from her drawer—although really, her drawer has expanded into two, and she also has prime real estate in my closet—because our long fucking drive requires us to be up at an ungodly hour.

“What am I wearing?”

“My jersey for luck,” I tell her. “Obviously.”

She snickers, but it’s tinged with exhaustion. “I’ll take care of the report with the police. Your car.”

Clothes done, I crawl into bed behind her. She faces me, still for a moment, then tugs at my sweatpants.

I grin. “You want more?”

Her lower lip sticks out. “Miles.”

“I got you, wild girl.” I kick them off and grip her leg, hitching it up over my hip. She makes no objection, no sound, when I slide back into her. She’s still wet and tight, and my cock is a fucking trooper.

But she just snuggles into me, her head on my chest, and falls still.

And that’s how we sleep.

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WILLOW

Detective Barrister frowns at the damage to Miles' car. There's a tow truck here, the worker bustling around with straps and preparing to load it onto the flatbed, but she pays him no mind.

I'm bundled in my thickest jacket, hat, scarf, and I *still* can't seem to get warm. It could be a lingering chill from the freezer, or it could be the words the detective is saying. And repeating, judging from her pinched expression.

"Sorry," I say, shaking my head. "One more time."

She sighs. "I know this is difficult, Willow. But we believe you're being targeted."

Yeah, there goes the white noise again. It fills my ears, and I work my jaw. Bite my tongue. The metallic taste in my mouth grounds me.

"And you think this because..."

"By your own admission, you've been driving Mr. Whiteshaw's car around town." She eyes the damage, then faces me fully. "The girl who was involved in the other break-in woke up."

Relief sweeps through me. "That's great."

"It is," the detective agrees. "She was able to give us a statement."

"Good."

"She said that the man who broke in and attacked her kept asking her one question." Detective Barrister pauses. "He wanted to know where his brother is."

My brows furrow. "What?"

She shrugs. "We're looking into it. We have a basic description." She taps on her phone and pulls up a drawing.

Dark eyes stare up at me, and I have to fight a visceral reaction. That face—I know him. Or some semblance of him.

Before Miles killed him.

“Are you okay, Willow?”

Don’t be an idiot, a voice in my head whispers. Because he committed murder in my apartment *for me*. Or, well. Was it for me? Or was it to get me in line? To be used as a threat later?

My skin prickles, and doubt creeps in.

What if Miles planned all of this? Right down to the police turning their investigation toward this guy he killed? In *my apartment*. In front of me.

I didn’t call the police then, and I still haven’t. That makes me an accomplice, doesn’t it? If he doesn’t go ahead and blame everything on me. And then I’d go to prison for his—what? His murder, his mistake, his decision?

It was no mistake.

“Willow. Breathe.” She’s got my shoulders, and she rocks me back and forth slightly.

I jerk out of her hold. “I’m okay. Sorry. Just... seeing his face makes it even more real that it could’ve been me, you know?”

Jesus. I’m a liar. A filthy, horrible liar.

“He can’t hurt you,” she assures me.

“You don’t even know that these two things are correlated. What makes you think the one who broke into my apartment and hurt the other girl is the same person who hit Miles’ car?”

She inclines her chin. “There’s one more thing. The other victim confirmed that she was at Prime the same night you were.”

My stomach swoops.

Did he bother her, too? A hazy memory comes back of seeing him at the bar with another dark-haired girl while I danced with Miles. Was that her? Is his brother stalking everyone he had contact with before he went missing? And if he’s circled back to me...

She smiles. There’s a loud series of beeps, and Miles’ crunched-up car is slowly dragged onto the flatbed. The detective steps away from me to talk to the worker, and I’m left casting uneasy glances up and down the street.

I should tell her about the truck. Seeing it, staring it down. As far as the detective knows, the hit-and-run happened so fast, we didn’t see anything or

anyone.

It's on the tip of my tongue, but the words are sticking.

Because if it leads back to the guy Miles killed...

My brain is going on overload, and I think I'm about two seconds away from a panic attack. I focus on my breathing, inhaling and exhaling. And *not* how much I wish I could drink half a bottle of whiskey to dull my nerves.

We're talking about murder. He was tied up in my living room, and an intention to rape doesn't justify homicide.

I've been sleeping with a killer—and I haven't cared one damn bit.

"Willow?"

Focus. "Detective."

"You look a little ill."

"Well, you just told me you think I'm being targeted by... a psychopath," I splutter. "Of course I seem ill—I feel like I'm about to throw up on your polished shoes."

She inches backward. "Of course."

"When will the officers to watch me be here?"

"Within the hour."

I fold my arms over my stomach. "Okay. Well... if there's anything else?"

The car is fully up on the flatbed now, and the worker has hopped back up into the driver's seat.

The detective watches him pull away, rumbling down the street, and finally shakes her head. "No. I'll be in touch."

Great.

I leave her standing on the curb and hurry back inside. The guys left almost two hours ago, just as the sun was rising. I'm left with a choice: I can ruin Miles' concentration at his game and tell him what the detective told me, or I can keep it to myself for a little while. At least until they're back.

I lock the door and go straight upstairs, into the bathroom. I need a hot shower to wash away my horror... and to figure out what the hell I'm going to do.

He was asking about his brother. Somehow, he found out where his brother went and thinks that we're the suitable lead. Maybe he's exhausted all his other options. But instead of questions, he went for intimidation.

The dead guy's brother is hunting us.
Not just *us*. Me.

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MILES

“**Y**ou look worried,” Greyson calls. He passes me the puck.
I stop it with my stick and pass it over to Steele.

We arrived an hour ago. Most of the team is off doing whatever, since we have most of the afternoon to ourselves, but we decided to stretch our legs on the ice. The hotel we’re staying at is attached to the arena. It’s not like sneaking over and lacing up was *hard*.

I don’t often get to skate without the pads. And I’ve borrowed one of Knox’s sticks, which is taped weird as shit.

Whatever.

Knox has his other stick, and he intercepts Steele’s pass to Greyson. He takes the puck down and around the goal, coming zooming back toward us.

The urge to thrust my stick out and trip him is building, but I refrain. Barely.

“What’s up, baby brother?” Knox skids to a halt in front of me, the puck already sailing toward Greyson. Well, *past* Greyson. He skates after it in a hurry.

“You’re pouting,” Knox adds.

“I’m not fucking pouting.”

He shrugs. “Okay.”

“I’m *not*,” I snap. “I just...”

“He’s upset about his car,” Steele interjects. “Which means we’re absolutely going out tonight.”

Not exactly true. More like, I’m worried about what my wrecked car means. Clearly, the break-in at Willow’s place wasn’t an accident. Not if the hit-and-run is related. And let’s be honest. It’s fucking related.

Going out will be about a quarter as fun as it usually would be, since Willow is back home with the other girls. Before her, I had fun enough at our outings. Usually dealing with my brother's antics and getting drunk, getting hit on by girls...

That never ended well, because there was exactly one girl I wanted to make out with, pretty much from the moment I first set foot on campus.

But anyway, now I just want to go home and keep her safe.

"Hey," Greyson calls, holding up his phone. "Rhodes is in town. He wants to meet up for lunch and said he'd pay." He snorts. "He texted us an address."

I follow my friends off the ice. We didn't bother putting anything in the locker room, so we just squat and unlace our skates in the hall, wiping the ice and water off our blades and tucking them back in our bags.

We dump them off in our rooms and meet downstairs.

Twenty minutes later, we're walking through the doors of a fancy-as-fuck restaurant. Greyson takes over, that whole money and privilege thing coming through loud and clear. He's used to places like this, and the cocky smile he offers the hostess says that he gets exactly what he wants.

"Hey." Jacob strolls in behind us. "We've got a reservation already."

The hostess's eyes go wide. While Greyson may have charm, I suppose Jacob has... fame?

Weird concept.

"Mr. Rhodes." She clears her throat. "Yes, we have your table ready." She glances at us with new eyes, and I can practically see her thought process. She's wondering if we're teammates she simply didn't recognize or other people of importance.

We get a private table in the back, away from the other customers. It's quiet, and a little dark, and *definitely* moody. For a lunch, it might even be a little over the top.

"You guys are going back to CPU tomorrow?" Jacob asks.

Knox nods. "Yeah, bus is leaving by eleven."

Jacob smirks. "Or... you could skip it and come to *my* game tomorrow night."

I sit up straighter. With our schedule, it's difficult to get to the NHL games. They tend to coincide—plus the fact that Crown Point doesn't have an NHL team in general. The closest one is Boston.

Greyson and Steele exchange a look, then over to us. Part of me wants to go—but the other part just wants to get back to Willow. Which is insane. But sue me, I love the girl.

“Sure,” Knox agrees, without fucking consulting any of us.

I bite my tongue.

“Yeah, man, we’d love to. We can fly back,” Greyson agrees. “Or rent a car.”

“Guys—”

Steele kicks me under the table. “What’s been going on with you?” he asks Jacob. “You seem...”

More fit? Tanner? *Broader* than the last time I saw him, not including when he was giving me the tracker to inject into Willow. That was in the dark, and he didn’t get out of his car. I’d guess taller, but I don’t think that shit’s possible. He does seem like he’s taking better care of himself. Spring semester last year was rough—he played fine, but he was definitely self-destructing on the inside. All because the professor he became infatuated with fled Crown Point.

He still signed with a team.

“I’ve been good,” he confirms. “Playing at this level is insane. It requires all of my focus, so I haven’t had time to think about anyone—anything else.”

Somehow, I think that’s a lie. But I’m not about to be the dick and call him out on it.

“You’re coming tonight, right?” Greyson asks.

“Yep.” Jacob grins. “And so is my coach. And half the team.”

Steele and Knox mirror his expression. Greyson looks... disinterested? But that’s probably just a mask to hide any sort of nerves. He’s an iceman in skates. And off.

I clear my throat. “We need to discuss something. About our... cold friend.”

Jacob snorts.

Steele’s expression tightens. “I was going to bring that up, as well. I was informed on the way here that my father is coming back early. Beginning of next week.”

We all trade glances.

“I’ve been watching the missing person reports,” Jacob murmurs. “Nothing matching his description has come up. So if that’s—”

“The break-in and Willow driving my car around Crown Point, and then it getting totaled, isn’t a coincidence.” I sigh. “Someone knows.”

Greyson swears, and we all nod our agreement.

“Let’s focus on the game,” Knox advises. “This isn’t the time to choke. We’ll deal with our friend later, and we’ll figure out who found out.”

I rub my eyes, wanting to protest. But he’s right—we’re six hours away from Crown Point. Five away from Steele’s dad’s house. There’s no way we can get there and back before the game tonight.

Our conversation turns to our opponents. We’re playing the Bexley University Wolves. They’re known in the region for being absolutely fucking ruthless, and it’s the first time we’re playing them this season.

We talk strategy until the food comes. Jacob pays, much to our protests, but he waves us off. I find myself slowly dropping into the zone as we walk back to the hotel. All of us get quieter—except Knox and Jacob. They seem content to continue to jabber about meaningless shit.

I tune them out.

My phone rings in the elevator up to my room. Willow’s contact picture—of her frowning up at me, like an adorable heathen—fills my screen. I swipe to answer it, unable to stop my own smile.

“Hey, wild girl,” I greet her.

“Hey, yourself,” she replies. “What are you wearing?”

I cough. “Ms. Reed, are you trying to sexy talk?”

“I’m succeeding.” Her smile is apparent in her tone. “I’ll tell you what I am... or rather, *not* wearing.”

My cock wakes up. The elevator opens on my floor, but I have a long fucking walk back to my room. My pace quickens, and I try to video call her. She quickly rejects it, though, and laughs under her breath.

“Don’t ruin the game,” she admonishes lightly. “Now, do you want to guess?”

“Are you wearing panties?” My dick is stiff already, just from the idea of her teasing me. To say I’m wrapped around her finger would be putting it fucking mildly. I palm my cock through my jeans, trying to relieve some of the pressure.

“Hmmm, nope. Not wearing panties.”

“Socks?” I tease.

She groans. “Miles, *no*. I’m not wearing socks.”

“Interesting. What could you be wearing, wild girl? A skirt that barely hides your sweet cunt?”

“Now that’s an idea.”

I get to my room and fumble for the key card in my wallet. I shove the door open, more than ready to take care of this erection and hopefully hear her come, too. I step inside, heading past the bathroom, and slam to a halt.

She’s there.

Here.

Fuck.

And she’s totally naked, reclining against the headboard. Her legs are crossed, but her breasts are on full display, with—*holy shit*. She’s got ties around her wrists and ankles, not connected to anything. Just waiting, loose, for me.

“What are you doing here?”

She stares at me. “Are you happy?”

I almost shake my head in disbelief—but I don’t want her thinking I *don’t* want her here. I do. But I also want to know how she got here, and who drove, and if she wore her seat belt. And if they drove the speed limit. And—

“Miles,” she whispers.

I toss my phone. I’ve got maybe an hour, tops, before I need to get to the arena. That’s enough time to make my girl orgasm at least three times, I think.

“I’m ecstatic,” I reply. I undo my jeans and shove them down, letting my cock spring free. It’s already got precum at the tip, and I fist my length.

Not as good as her cunt, but I need *something* to take the edge off. I kick off the rest of my clothes and stalk toward her. I tug on one of the ribbons attached to her ankle. She uncrosses her legs and lets me pull it toward the corner of the bed.

I curl my fingers around her ankle. Her skin is smooth and soft and warm, and she shivers slightly at my touch. I yank, and she squeaks as she slides down the bed. Until she’s flat. There’s enough length to secure her to the legs of the bed, so I do first the one leg, then the other.

When I get up to her head, she eyes me carefully.

I lean down and press my lips to hers.

She gives in immediately, arching up like she can dive into me. My tongue sweeps the seam of her lips, and then I pull away. I pluck her phone

from her hand and set it aside, then tie her wrists together. I drag them up over her head, looping the ribbon around part of the headboard. Bless whoever decided to make it not a solid block of wood.

“Is this from your corset?” I ask, pausing to touch the material.

She bites her lip. “I found them in your closet.”

My heart is picking up speed, and any meditation calmness I gained on the walk back here is gone.

Her gaze drops to my dick.

“When did you get the piercings?” she asks.

I run my hand across her chest, pausing to thumb her nipple.

“The first one, I got just over a year ago,” I admit.

When she hooked up with my brother for the first time.

Because I wanted something just as painful to be physical, too. I couldn’t make sense of the betrayal and anger I felt toward both of them.

“And then the second...”

Well, that came when she said she loved him. In her sleep.

I shouldn’t have been watching her that night, shouldn’t have stepped into his room when I knew he was downstairs. But she was upset, crying even unconscious, and then she just fucking said it.

It killed me—she’d fallen in love with someone else.

Someone who wasn’t me.

I pinch her nipple, and she gasps. Arches again, pushing into my touch instead of shirking away from it.

“I love you,” I say.

She stops.

There’s something holding her back from saying it. No matter how she feels, she’s going to have difficulty saying it back to me.

“Do you trust me?”

Her blue eyes stay locked on my face, and she slowly nods.

I go into my bag and retrieve the tie I’ll need to wear in just under an hour. I lift her head and wrap it around her, covering her eyes. She doesn’t say a word of protest, and my dick twitches even more.

And then I’m reaching in my pocket, drawing out my folding knife. It opens noiselessly.

I climb on the bed, ignoring the way it dips and pulls her body toward mine. I straddle her hips and touch the tip of the blade to her sternum. Just between her breasts.

Her skin twitches and shivers.

“What is that?”

“Pleasure and pain,” I reply. “You get off on this, Willow. But if you’re not sure, I’m happy to check...”

I scoot back, positioning myself better between her legs. I drag her body down more, so her restrained legs can bend and her ass rests on my thighs. She’s spread open, on my lap, and completely helpless. Her arms are caught over her head, but there’s still some give. She tests that now, tugging on them, and her hands come down an inch. If that.

Good.

I lean down and trace the path of the knife’s point with my tongue.

“Miles,” she pants.

“Your pussy is practically dripping,” I tell her. “How long were you waiting for me, wild girl?”

“O-only an hour.”

Her breath catches when I resume tracing an invisible pattern across her stomach, down to her pubic bone, then back up. Around her breasts, to her throat. She swallows so daintily.

I line up the tip of my dick with her entrance, inching inside her. I suppress my groan, because she immediately clenches around the head. I lean over her and claim her lips for a moment, staying perfectly still otherwise.

The first slice of my blade across her breast is quick. I pair it with my thrust into her, and I don’t know if she actually registers the bite of pain. Or the way my lips close over the cut right after, lapping at and irritating it.

Her blood is warm on my tongue.

“What did you do to me?” she whispers.

“Cut you open.” I pull out and push back into her. *Slow*. Enough to drive both of us crazy. She squeezes around my shaft, and sheer willpower keeps me from fucking her like an animal.

“What?” Her voice is panicked.

Drops of blood well up on the cut on her breast, spilling over.

I put the blade to her skin again and continue to fuck her. Every thrust in has her shuddering, an involuntary response. It cuts into her again, and this time she makes a noise. She’s caught somewhere between pain and lust, which is right where I want her.

“X marks the spot, wild girl.” I slash my own chest, relishing the pain, then toss the knife onto my pile of clothes. I lean down over her. My forearms bracket her head.

Her lips meet mine in a frenzy. My blood drips down and hits her chest. Making a mess of both of us. We’re just two canvases that don’t know any better.

My hand slips between us, and I bring her with me toward an orgasm. One of however many she’ll give me, if she forgives me for this.

“Come with me,” I order.

My teeth graze her earlobe, and she groans.

She tenses and shudders around me, her cry wordless. I pump twice more and meet her in the haze of climax.

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WILLOW

“I love you,” Miles repeats.

He’s undone my restraints and lifted me into his lap, but he bats away my hand whenever I go for the blindfold.

“I’m not going to leave you. I’m not going to hurt you in any way you don’t want to be hurt. I love you, and I’ll always love you.” It seems to be some sort of mantra. If he repeats it, it’ll stick.

I try to believe him.

I really do.

But there’s a little voice in my head that reminds me what happens when people love me—and when *I* love.

My heart is aching—but there’s a physical pain on top of that. A tenderness. And by the way Miles probes it with his fingers, eliciting a hiss from me, I know it’s intentional. He smears something into my skin, and then he’s got my hand in his.

He brings it to his chest, flattening my palm over his heart.

His thundering pulse flutters against my palm—and then the matching wetness.

“Miles—”

“Shh.” It sounds like an order.

I close my mouth.

He sets me back on the mattress, and his weight disappears. I stay still, listening for him.

His hands return to my ankles, and I suck in a breath. A second later, something is running up my center. His finger, maybe, or—

“You smell like us,” he says from between my legs. His lips kiss my inner thigh.

He pushes a finger into me slowly. I grip the blankets under me, trying desperately to ground myself when he seems desperate to knock me off course.

His lips close over my clit.

“No, no,” I murmur, shifting. Trying to roll away from him. “Miles, I already—”

“You’ll come again,” he says.

And then he’s right back on me, licking and nipping at the sore bud. He continues like he’s got all the time in the world, and *fuck*, heat spreads through me like wildfire. He grips my ass, keeping my core pressed right to his face. There’s no escape from it, and he builds me up like he’s done it a thousand times before.

How does someone know my body better than me?

“I can’t.”

“You can,” he growls.

He sucks my clit into his mouth, and I scream. My orgasm hits hard, bowling into me. I twist on the sheets, my body lighting up from the inside.

“Beautiful girl.” His fingers are working inside me. “One more, hmm?”

“I can’t.”

I’m glad for the blindfold, because it obscures the tears forming. I don’t even know why I’m crying. Maybe it’s his tone, which is rasping and low and *gentle*. A new piece of the puzzle of Miles Whiteshaw flipped over. But where does it fit?

“Do you love me?”

I stop. Every part of me rebels against that notion.

If I want him to walk out the door right now, I’d say it. I’d say it, even though it’s a fucking lie, and I’d lose him.

“Willow, do you love me?”

I lick my lips. “You can’t torture me into saying it. Or feeling it.”

He sighs. His breath hits my pussy, and I almost jump. For a stupid second, I forgot how close he was. His fingers have stopped thrusting into me, but they’re still rubbing my G-spot lightly, coaxing out sensations that I battle against.

“Do you remember that night on the porch?” His voice is husky now. “You were crying. He missed a competition, and you saw him flirting with

someone else.”

I work my jaw. But yes, I do remember that night. I remember being so devastated that Knox chose to stay home, that he forgot. And later, he slipped platitudes in my ear. *I’m sorry, baby, time just got away from me. I’ll see the next one...* But there wasn’t a next one. Summer was right around the corner.

But Miles...

He came to one of our dance competitions.

I saw him sitting in the bleachers my sophomore year. I don’t know what made me peek out from the black curtains that framed the stage, but something in me wanted to see the crowd, to try and convince myself they weren’t all evil.

Someone had said to picture them all naked—so maybe I was trying that out.

Either way, my attention snagged on him.

And the butterflies that erupted in my chest were unprecedented.

For the first time, someone had showed up. I had just been at the arena with the other girls prior to our competition, because some of them were hooking up with guys on the team, and I was the sucker who went along with them.

But I saw him, and he talked to me through the glass.

And then he showed up.

I tear the blindfold off my face, blinking at the ceiling. It takes me another moment of courage to sit up and meet his gaze.

“I don’t love you.” The words are out before I can stop them. But now that they hang between us, I can’t go back. Can’t snatch them out of the air like they don’t exist. “I won’t love you. Ever.”

His face shatters. He pulls out and stands, seeming to contemplate what to do with me. He seems to go through the stages of grief right in front of me—denial, anger, whatever else. His jaw tenses, like he’s going to argue with it.

I glare back, begging him to believe me.

“I don’t love you, Miles Whiteshaw,” I repeat. “After everything you’ve done to me? I’m smarter than that. I’m stronger than that.”

But the worst part?

I’m pretty sure I’m lying.

Miles checks his watch, and he swears. He leaves me on the bed and disappears into the bathroom. A second later, the shower starts. I sit up carefully, waiting for a moment. My heart is hammering, so loud it's a match for the rush of the shower.

I yank on my clothes and braid my hair away from my face. Slip my feet into shoes and leave his hotel room with my purse slung over my shoulder. My bag can stay in his room. Fuck it, everything can stay. I'll rent a car and drive home if I must.

Or...

We're close to my childhood home. An hour drive, at most.

So why would I drive back to Crown Point when I can go *home*?

My vision blurs.

Fuck, you're still crying.

I dash my hands under my eyes and hurry downstairs. The concierge at the front desk is helpful—he finds me a taxi company that'll take me all the way to my parents' house. It's pulling out front in no time at all, and I climb into the backseat with my chest tight.

I can't seem to take a breath.

But then the taxi rounds the corner away from the hotel, and everything in me releases. The tightness, the guilt. It *snaps*, and all I'm left with is fucking relief.

GREYSON

“Y ou okay?”

Vi’s frozen in the middle of the room, staring at her phone. She looks over at me and shakes her head slowly. “Um... Willow’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

Her gaze goes from still to panicked in a second, and she lifts her phone to her ear. Calling her best friend, then.

The girls showing up was certainly a surprise, but one I definitely didn’t mind. We have to be at the rink in fifteen minutes, and Vi’s only half dressed. Not that I’m any better.

I finish the buttons on my shirt and loop my tie around my neck.

“I think she shut her phone off,” she whispers, worry cracking her voice. She turns to face me. “I don’t—”

“Hey, hey.” I wrap my arms around her, my lips automatically finding her neck. Just under her ear. “I’ll go check with Miles. Maybe he knows something.”

She exhales, relaxing into me. “Okay. I’m going to grab Aspen, see if Willow texted her anything.”

“Good idea.” I release her, then duck back in and steal a kiss. Because I can, and because an hour with her before the game just wasn’t enough.

“Tell Steele to meet me at Miles’ room.”

She nods. She quickly pulls her dress back on, shifting so I can zip up the back, and we head out together. She goes in one direction, and I move in the other.

Immediately, my attention snaps to clear focus. Willow running away after driving for-fucking-ever to get here? It seems like too big of a deal. And weird timing.

I draw closer to Miles' room, and the sound of crashing greets me. It continues, followed by swearing.

Uh-oh.

"Hey," Steele says, jogging toward me. "What's going on?"

I hook my thumb at Miles' door, letting him experience the cacophony of noise for himself. Steele's brows shoot up.

"Do you have a key to his room? Or should we take our chances knocking?"

"I do," Knox calls. He's coming from the opposite direction, although he's fucking strolling. And he doesn't look very put out, until he comes to a stop in front of the door. "Jesus, what the fuck is he doing?"

He produces a key card and swipes it. The little light turns green, and Knox shoves the door open.

Inside is total destruction, but we file inside anyway. Knox stares at his brother, who seems like he doesn't even realize we're here.

Fuck that.

The bed is off its frame, the desk cracked with the chair on top of it. The lamps that they keep bolted to the nightstands—for good reason—are broken. It's only then that I spot his hockey stick, in pieces, on the floor at his feet.

Seems he swung it like a bat. Hard, too, because goalie sticks don't break very easily.

"Miles," Knox calls.

"Fuck off," Miles snarls.

I shake my head. Miles has a blade in his hand, and he stabs at the sheets. There's already drops of blood on it, vibrant against the white linens.

Enough is fucking enough.

I march forward and grab him from behind. Knox leaps with me, prying the folding knife from his brother's hand. And Steele is on his other side, pinning his other arm back. Together, we slam him against the wall.

"Just stop." I lean into his spine. "Relax. Talk to us."

"She fucking *left*."

Well, that much I knew.

"Okay..." Knox's brows furrow. "Why? Where'd she go?"

“I don’t fucking know where she went, she took my phone—”

“So that tracker is useless?” I guess.

He struggles against us, and Knox nods to me and Steele. We release him and hop back just as his fists go flying.

I duck and shove him back again.

Tough love time.

I wrap my hand around his throat and force him to look at me. “Dude. Suck it up. Your girl left you? You can get her back. There’s always a fucking way, and I don’t really want to hear your griping or self-pity that it isn’t. This reaction? This anger?” I gesture to the room. “Use that in our game.”

Miles shoves me away. “Asshole.”

“Whatever you say, buttercup,” I snap back. “This is our future on the line. You want to run off after her without any clue where she went? Know that you’ll never play on our team again.”

He goes still.

Knox and Steele glance over, too.

But whatever, I fucking mean it. “She left of her own free will?” I confirm.

He hesitates, then nods.

“She wasn’t kidnapped by her psycho stalker. She’s not in danger. Wherever she went, it probably wasn’t far because Violet and Aspen drove with her. And they’re still here.”

That sinks into his thick skull.

He nods slowly, sagging back against the wall. I straighten his shirt, which he had managed to put on before completely destroying his room, and tie his tie. I snatch his one remaining stick and put it in his hands.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s go play some fucking hockey.”

MILES

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TWO YEARS AGO

“**T**ruth or dare,” Amanda prompts, directing her words at Willow.

Willow, who has giggled and leaned on her best friend for the better part of an hour, trying to get her to agree to sing a song with her on the table. Willow, who has drawn my eye all night in a stunning, shimmery black halter top and leather skirt.

It’s the end of my freshman year at CPU. The dance team won their competition, and we came *so close* to the Cup, we could taste it. And then we lost in the last game of the round. Six to fucking four.

There’s nothing quite like the guilt of knowing I should’ve been able to stop those two extra fucking shots and failed to do so.

I let my whole team down, although that’s not how they saw it. They see it in ways that blame themselves. They should’ve shot more and passed less. They should’ve seen the other team’s plays and stopped them or not folded to the high-velocity pressure they exerted on our defense.

“Truth,” Willow answers.

She drags me back into the present, and I swallow a mouthful of beer. It’s gone a bit warm—a sure sign that I’m not drinking fast enough.

“What’s your red flag?” Amanda asks her.

Willow frowns and glances at her best friend. Violet. They share some sort of communication, and then Willow seems to decide something.

“I’ve never been in love,” she declares. “And I’m not going to fall in love.”

“Why not?” someone else asks.

She lifts one shoulder and sips her drink. When she lowers her cup, her gaze flits around the circle and lands on me.

“My parents are great. But they’re not really the ‘I love you’ type. Or affectionate. They’re mathematicians.” She laughs.

“So your parents don’t tell you they love you?” Amanda asks, her brows furrowing. “I can’t get off the phone until I say it to my mom, or she’d kill me.”

“Well, no... I guess not.” Willow shifts in her seat. “That’s enough truth for one day, don’t you think? Steele, truth or dare?”

I keep watching her as she dares Steele to do something stupid. Her smile doesn’t reach her eyes for once, and I have to wonder if it’s because

of that question. Her *red flag*. And maybe it makes me an idiot for thinking that maybe there's some other reason she's never been in love, or that it's just a barrier she needs to break in her mind. Or... maybe she has been in love, but she doesn't know how to recognize it.

The game stretches on. I get up and refresh my beer, and when I turn around, Willow is right behind me.

She tucks her golden hair behind her ear. "Are you judging me?"

"Nah." I take her cup and fill it, then hand it back. "Unless you're into that sort of thing."

She scoffs.

"Honesty is hard. Especially around a bunch of drunk dumbasses."

"Yeah, well. That's the game, isn't it?" She nudges me. "Maybe you should just go ahead and tell me your red flag. It'll make me feel better for exposing myself like that."

I have to think about that one.

What's my red flag?

My gaze drops to hers. I'm addicted to the weight of her stare on me, and I'm pretty sure it'll never be enough. So I open my mouth and, without even thinking, I say, "We're the opposite, you and me. You've never been in love. But I fell in love at first sight. And I'm pretty sure it's the forever sort of thing."

My chest tightens with the admission.

Her expression shutters. "Oh, you're in love with someone? I..."

An arm lands on my shoulder, and I jerk my arm to the side a second before my asshole brother reaches for my beer. In my head, I curse his god-awful timing. Because there are so many things I want to say to change the look on her face right now, but I can't fucking do it with an audience of one.

How do I tell her it's *her*, without ruining everything?

For the girl who, by all accounts, seems afraid of love?

"Hey, Reed," Knox croons at her. "You getting any better on the ice?"

Her cheeks flame, and her gaze shifts. Like she's seeing him in a new light. "I haven't been on the ice since we crashed your practice." A new smile lifts her features. "Maybe you should give me some more lessons."

"Absolutely," Knox agrees. "Anything for a beautiful girl like you."

He drops his arm from my shoulders and holds out his hand to her.

She doesn't even glance at me—she just fucking goes.

And that's when I realize I've lost her.

For the first time anyway. But not the last.

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WILLOW

My parents aren't home. I know that as soon as the taxi pulls up to the curb in front of their house. There are no lights on, no cars in the driveway, and the place seems sealed up tight. There's even a layer of snow dusting the pavement, with no tracks to be seen.

I pay the man and climb out, ignoring the stiffness in my limbs and my numb ass. The backseat was the opposite of comfortable for the hour car ride. He speeds away before I've made it halfway up the walkway, but that's okay. He tried to make conversation for some of it. I couldn't come up with answers fast enough.

So we lapsed into silence.

I have a key to the house in my purse, and I stand on the porch and frantically search for them for a minute. It's dark out, and my phone died about fifteen minutes into the drive. But then my fingers graze the collection of keys, and I lift it out with triumph.

Once I'm inside, I kick off my shoes and flip the lights on.

"Hello? Anyone home?" I wander farther into the house. Wishful thinking that I'll get an answer. "Surprise! I'm back..."

Nothing.

Even upstairs, everything is cool and dark and still.

Where did they go? Out to dinner, maybe? It's Saturday night, after all. They can't be working.

My bones ache. I step into my room and inhale. I'm wrapped in nostalgia and homesickness, but I'm reminded painfully of the last time I was here, when I spent most of my time crying myself to sleep over one Whiteshaw brother. Now my instinct is to do the same for the other?

Fuck that.

I grind my teeth together. I plug my phone in and sit on my bed, pulling my legs up. What I would love to do is have a drink and drown myself in it, until I forget that today even fucking happened.

Instead, I dig through my bag for a pack of gum. Because it's that or grind my teeth to nubs, and I happen to like my molars.

And what I find instead is Miles' phone.

But even more surprising, is that the thing unlocks with my face.

First of all. When did Miles set up his phone to recognize my face? And second, *why*? But then it's open, and I quickly set it down.

Snooping is wrong. Especially after I just...

I shudder.

Stare at the wall, which has a corkboard of memories front and center. I rise and drift toward it, my attention snagging on one photo in particular. It's from the dance competition my sophomore year. One of the first that I had a solo, and I was so fucking nervous... until I peeked out from behind the black curtains and spotted Miles in the crowd.

The photo is of Violet, me, Amanda, Michelle, Jess... and Miles. He's on the end, his smile big and bright.

My stomach rolls.

All the times he found me in the quiet come flashing back to me. At the competition. On the ice, when the dance team decided to go to one of the hockey practices, and then Paris led us down to the benches. And from there, onto the ice.

The feel of his hands on mine, the weight of his body as I dragged him down. I didn't like not being able to stand on my own. It left me off-kilter.

Now *he's* the one making me wobble and not trust my legs.

His phone rings.

I automatically swipe to answer the call from Violet's number. He doesn't have it saved, but I recognize it anyway. I've been calling her since we both got cell phones in high school, after all.

"Hey," I whisper.

"Oh, thank God." Violet's voice comes through loud and clear. "Miles said—"

"I don't want to talk about him," I interrupt. "Please."

"Okay. No problem. Where are you?"

I sink onto the bed. Then off it, until I'm in a ball on the floor. My eyes fill with tears, and I have to wonder why the hell I'm so damn broken. "I'm home. But no one is here."

"I'm coming," Violet says. "Do you hear me? I'm coming for you, Willow. Just stay there."

"Okay."

"It'll be—*hey*—"

"Willow." Miles' voice fills my ear. He sounds as fucking broken as I feel. "You just left?"

"That's what I do." I hate the lump in my throat and the agony ripping through my chest. "I leave people, Miles. It's better that you learn it before you get too invested—"

"Oh, fuck off," he growls.

I rear back.

"Too invested? I'll show you too invested."

The line goes dead with a beep. I rub my sternum, trying to get the knot there to loosen. It's like I can't take a deep enough breath, and I hate the way it hurts. I toss the phone away from me and reach up, fumbling for the blanket that's folded at the end of my bed.

When my phone is charged enough, I'll call my parents. Or my sister.

I'll figure out where they are, and if they're coming home, and I'll pick myself up. Shower. Pull myself together. Pretend everything is fine.

But when it does turn back on, vibrating on my nightstand with notification after notification, it takes me a long moment to unfold myself from the floor. I glance at the incoming texts from Violet and Aspen. Even Thalia, who didn't come with us, sent a message just to check in.

Setting it back down, I strip and head for the bathroom I share with my sister. My skin still carries traces of Miles, from his cum to his teeth marks, and I pause suddenly at the cuts in my breast.

I touch the X carefully. It's scabbed over a bit, but at the scratching from my nail, it opens up again. There's more blood on my chest, but it's not all mine. Some on my other breast that my heart tells me is Miles'.

He cut both of us open.

For *what*?

In the shower, I scrub at the cuts and the dried blood. And between my legs. It's hard to even tell if I'm crying or if it's just too hot. The water is

scorching, turning my skin red and a little too painful. But I don't stop until I'm clean. Whatever that means.

I find sweatpants that didn't make it back to my apartment, old underwear with holes in it. A sports bra. It's weird to dress myself. Isn't that funny? After so much time letting Miles decide, I'm suddenly forced to choose for myself. A piece of independence stolen back.

There are no good t-shirts, nothing warm enough, until I raid my sister's closet. She has a CPU sweatshirt and also some other colleges' paraphernalia. She wants to go somewhere else, I can feel it. But I grit my teeth at the sight of the Shadow Valley crew neck. They're one of CPU's biggest rivals. Of course she'd want to go there. I pass it by for my own school's sweatshirt. The memory of being beat by their dance team last year still rankles.

Digging deeper, I gasp and retrieve a tank top from the depths of the closet. The hanger comes loose, falling to the floor. "That sneaky bitch." I laugh. I was fully convinced I'd lost this tank, which I tie-dyed for senior day in high school. And she had it all along.

Needless to say, I'm stealing this sucker back.

After the shirt situation is sorted, I shoot a text to her and ask what they're up to. If Violet's on her way, chances are good we could just... go back to Crown Point. Or have a sleepover here.

INDIE

NYC for the weekend.

With Mom and Dad?

Ya.

I scowl at her lack of information. But they probably won't be back until tomorrow, so... I've got a full night of being away from Miles and everyone else. Better that than going back to the hockey house. Or worse, sleeping on Violet's couch and pretending like I'm not intruding. Which I totally fucking would be.

My next stop is covering this horrible cross on my chest. Every time I catch the angry red skin out of the corner of my eye, it makes *me* angry. My parents have an assortment of bandages in the linen closet, so I grab the largest one and plaster it over the cuts.

There.

Slightly better.

Except it still stings a little, and I probably should've added an antiseptic ointment. With my luck, it'll get infected and scar.

I close myself in my room and crawl into bed. If Violet's on her way, she can let herself in. And if she's not... well, I'm exhausted. Mentally and physically.

In no time at all, my heart rate is slowing and my eyelids get heavier. Worries about Miles and love and loneliness flutter away, and I drift to sleep.

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MILES

“**Y**ou can’t.”

“Like fuck I *can*’t, what is this bullshit?”

I shove Jacob, who seems to be the only one left not in the locker room. He was standing right outside the door to the parking lot, waiting for me like a freak. And now he’s blocking my fucking way.

“You’re going to throw your whole career down the toilet because of a little fight with your girl?” Jacob snaps, shoving me back. “She said she’s okay. You heard her, we all did. Now you need to get your head in the game. *Literally.*”

My whole body is vibrating, restless with the need to just—*go*. To get it through her thick skull that I’m not leaving her. And she’s not leaving me.

This is what I do, she said. When has she ever left anyone?

Knox broke up with her.

I’m still fucking here.

Who else?

“Whiteshaw,” Jacob barks. He grabs my shoulders and slams me against the wall. “Think about this. If she does leave you, if she flees the fucking country and never comes back, what do you have left?”

I work my jaw and spit out one word. “Hockey.”

“And if you chase her now, Coach Roake will ban you from ever setting foot in his rink again. You’ll be known as the flake.” He scowls. “And then you’ll have no girl and no hockey, and *then* what will you have?”

Understanding dawns. This is what he’s going through.

This is what he’s had to grapple with for the last miserable year of his life, because the professor he became addicted to up and left him without a

trace. So he picked hockey, because there was no other choice.

Willow isn't going to do the same to me.

I know that in my bones—I just need to break through her fear of relationships and commitment and love. And she needs to know what love actually is.

A big ol' cocktail of adrenaline, fear, and wanting to be so close to someone it hurts.

"So?" Jacob questions. "What will you do?"

Willow isn't leaving me. She's not fleeing the country—she's run home like a scared little girl. Which means she'll hide there until I can come find her, and an hour, two, or four isn't going to make a difference.

"I'll play," I decide, shoving his hand away. "Now get the fuck out of my face."

"Get your ass back in the locker room, and I won't need to be in your face." He inclines his chin. "I'll give you a ride to her house after, if Violet and Aspen don't bring her back first."

My chest tightens, but I force myself to nod and turn around. I head back to the locker room and try to focus, but my nerves are shot. In the half-circle-shaped room, I find Knox and Greyson framing my bag. They both look up when I come over and drop onto the bench beside them.

Coach strides in and blows his whistle. He gives his cursory speech about how we're going to work as a team, execute what we've been working on, and whatever else he decides to include this time around. Me and some of the other guys are still getting dressed, putting on our pads and skates. I've got all my equipment laid out in front of me, ready to go.

"Ten minutes," Coach ends. "Then we're hitting the ice for warm-up."

"You good?" Knox asks me, his voice low. "We need you for this one."

"I know." Jesus, my voice sounds like shit. "I'm here, aren't I?"

He slaps my back and moves away. The seriousness from a moment ago fades away as he dances up to Steele and fake punches him. I watch their antics, the way Knox makes all the guys smile and laugh, and I've got to admit—he's a good fucking captain.

"Violet will get her," Greyson adds.

I shake my head and rise. I need to tighten my skates before I put on the thick pads that cover the front of my legs—once those go on, it's a little more difficult to do much of anything. My helmet is on my bag in front of me, my sticks taped to perfection.

Everything is ready, except for my mindset.

I drop into a lunge, and the burn of my hamstrings helps narrow my focus. I stretch until Greyson calls a two-minute warning, and I put on the rest of my gear. Just the finishing touches. But I do feel more centered, which is... *something*.

BJ—definitely more of a Blue Jay kind of day, I think—holds out his knuckles for me. I knock them and grin.

Fake it 'til you make it, right?

“Ready?” Knox calls. “We’re going to go fuck up some Wolves’ assholes!”

I groan—and I’m not the only one.

“Hey, hey, I didn’t mean it like that,” Knox yells. “Jesus fuck, you perverted dicks. Those Wolves won’t know what hit ’em.”

“Because we’re taking them from behind!” Rodrigues calls.

“You’d know all about that,” someone else says.

“Yeah, it makes me an expert on fucking—unlike your virgin—”

“Boys,” Coach hollers. “Cut the shit. Let’s get to work.”

I elbow Steele, who catches my eye with a grin. We march as a huge unit down the hallway. There’s thunderous applause in the arena as the BU Wolves are announced. And then we’re bursting out and onto the ice. I lift my hand and touch peoples’ hands, then step onto the ice. Around me, my teammates are zooming around and warming up their muscles. I join them in the race, pushing off and forcing myself faster. They grab pucks spread out across the ice and drop into shooting drills, while others find space on the ice to stretch. I drift up toward the center line and go through my movements.

Muscle memory takes over, and it helps turn my thoughts toward the upcoming game.

The Wolves’ goalie is across from me. We trade a look, and I don’t like the flash of annoyance in his gaze. I hold the eye contact until someone skates between us, and I head back to the crease.

The center of my universe—for the next sixty minutes of game play anyway.

BJ comes skating toward me after a few minutes, and I move aside to let him take over the net. He’s not playing, but he warms up all the same. I glance around the arena, only vaguely frowning at the masses of black and

silver. The Wolves are in mostly black jerseys, with pops of silver, and white lettering.

Since we're the visitors, our jerseys are white, with blue and silver outlines. My helmet matches. It comes to a V, pointing toward my chest, to protect my neck. I drop to the ice and stretch my legs out to either side, basically the fucking splits.

It's funny—I always thought that would come in handy with sex. But I guess I'm just not doing nearly enough creative shit.

Greyson skates over and kneels beside me. "They're hungry."

I shrug. "Hungry for a dick up the ass, according to my brother."

He snorts. "Yeah."

We both glance up at the clock counting down our remaining minutes. BJ has moved out of the net, and there's a flurry of movement as our team arcs in two circles, shooting continuously at the goal.

Most make it. Some fly high or wide, crashing into the glass beyond.

When there's less than a minute remaining, I follow Steele and Finch back to our locker room. The rest of the guys are close behind. They'll clean the ice with the Zamboni, then play some hype music for the home team, and then we'll come out with little to no fanfare.

Which is fine.

I don't talk to anyone while we wait, stretching in the corner to keep myself warm. I put in my brother's earbuds and crank the music on his phone, tuning out the sounds of laughter and chatter behind me. If I had my phone, I'd have my own playlist. As it is, his is similar enough.

"Where's my phone?" Knox calls. "I want to play my pump-it-up playlist. Anyone see it?"

"I've got a playlist," Rodrigues calls. He hits a button, and hip-hop blasts out of his phone. Loud enough that even I can hear it.

Ugh.

I move my brother's phone so he can't quite see it on the other side of my leg.

"Miles."

I pull an earbud out and jump to my feet at Greyson's tone. He raises his phone, flashing a text from Violet.

VI

At Willow's house. She's ok. We're staying here tonight, will be back tomorrow for Jacob's game. Don't worry. X

Okay.

Okay, I can work with that, I think.

The game starts, and everything is normal. And it stays normal, until the third period. Some jackass comes tearing in with the puck, and his own teammate gets in the way. He fumbles, and suddenly he's barreling into *me*.

He's a huge motherfucker, and I don't stand a chance. We collide, and something heavy hits my helmet. It sounds like a percussion inside my skull, and I'm flattened to the ice. I slide into the net, and I barely manage to lift my arms up to protect my head, operating on instinct. There's a ringing in my ears that drowns out everything for a split second, and it feels like I went five rounds with a Mac truck.

I force myself up. I toss my gloves off and crawl out of the net.

How embarrassing.

But my attention is drawn to the mass of players to my left. Knox has the big guy's helmet off and is punching him repeatedly in the face, while the guy tries to shove him away. The refs are actively trying to separate them.

Greyson's got another one, and so does Steele. Everyone's in a fucking dog pile, their mouths moving, tempers high. I can't even fucking hear them.

I kneel in the crease and try to catch my breath.

Jesus Christ.

One of the refs skates closer and asks if I'm okay. I look up, and the players have separated. One of the linemen has the big guy by the back of the jersey, steering him toward the penalty box.

"You okay, baby bro?" Knox asks, spitting blood on the ice. When he grins at me, his mouth guard is stained pink.

"Peachy." I open my mouth and try to pop my ears, or *something*, but the ringing is persistent. Although better than it was two minutes ago.

Once I've caught my breath, I shake my hair out of my face and slide my helmet on. Then gloves. Checking my gear, my straps, my pads. Everything is okay, so I stand. I retrieve my stick, which somehow got knocked clear away.

Focus.

Head back in the game.

And for once, I'm glad that Willow didn't have to see that.

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VIOLET

The front door of Willow's family house is unlocked. Aspen and I let ourselves in, and we find Willow in her room, buried under a mountain of blankets. There's just a bit of her wet hair peeking out and the corner of her temple. One eye, that's open and staring at us.

"Hey," I call, stepping into the dark room.

I know it by heart—almost as well as my childhood home. I spent probably more time here than my house. Which is why I don't fumble on my way to the lamp on her nightstand, and I find the little dial on the first try.

Warm light illuminates the room. She winces.

My heart hurts for her.

I pull the covers up and crawl into bed, wrapping my arms around her.

"I've been a bad friend," I whisper. "I've been distracted, and not sympathetic enough—"

She buries her face in my chest and bursts into tears.

"I'm going to see if there's stuff to make dinner," Aspen says quietly, still in the doorway. She retreats, leaving us alone.

I let her cry for a while, then say, "I'm sorry, Willow."

"It's not your fault." She sniffs and withdraws. Her cheeks are streaked with tears that she hastily swipes away. "I came back here and sulked for three weeks, and then I spent a week learning how to pretend to be okay."

"Still."

I missed the red flags flashing in my face and told myself that she was just being some louder version of herself. Acting out because of her

devastating breakup with Knox. Drinking more, sure, or partying harder. Nothing wrong with that... until it becomes a problem.

And I didn't see it.

I almost killed Grey that night. He knew about the freaking bet and said absolutely nothing to me. I could've warned my best friend, and instead, we got a front-row seat to her humiliation.

"Why did you run away?"

She reaches behind her and grabs a pack of tissues, dabbing at her eyes and blowing her nose. She stares at the ceiling and lets out a huff. "He said he loved me."

"Loved? Past tense?"

Her head turns, her gaze landing on mine. "I told him I'd never love him. So... yeah, pretty sure it's past tense."

I snort. "Willow."

"What?"

"You say you haven't experienced love but grew up surrounded by it. Your parents just didn't *tell* you."

She frowns.

I sit up and pull her up, too. "Okay. So, your parents liked to enroll you in summer camp. The math one. And that one year, you had a panic attack and they picked you up and took you home for the weekend."

"Yeah..."

I smile. "So the next year, they wanted you to go back, didn't they?"

"They made me go back, yeah. Said something about facing my fears —"

"And I was there." I squeeze her fingers. I never told her that her parents were the ones who approached my mom when we were fifteen, asking if they could send me to this rich person overnight camp. In reality, I should've been dancing—but my mom saw fucking dollar signs in the Reeds, so she'd said yes.

Understanding dawns over my best friend's expression.

"You couldn't have afforded that," she whispers. "Hell, you *hate* math."

"I do," I agree. "But they knew you needed some backup, but they wanted you to figure out how to do things you were scared of doing."

I have a hundred examples. Her parents are showers, not tellers. Traveling all day to dance competitions when their schedules allowed—and sometimes even taking my mother along, back when she was part of my

life. If we were putting a label on things, I'd tell Willow that her parents showers her with acts of service but never words of affirmation. Because maybe they didn't know she needed it.

Or she didn't.

"You can love," I tell her.

She sniffs and wipes her nose again. "I lied to him."

"Miles?"

"I told him that I leave people." She lifts her teary blue eyes to mine. "But that's not true. He's the first person I've ever left. He's the only one who's scared me enough to actually run away and say nasty things—"

"It'll take more than a few words to dissuade him," I say.

"But that's why I said what I said," she whispers. "I wanted to push him away. But instead, I made true on my word and *I* left."

In the back of my mind, a new plan forms. One that puts both of them together, without all the pressure of school and people judging, the bullies and gossips and glares.

"Food's ready," Aspen calls up the stairs. "Anyone want my infamous mac 'n' cheese?"

I take Willow's hands and pull her out of bed. We head downstairs and sit around the table, where Aspen serves us bowls of creamy, cheesy, delicious-smelling macaroni.

"I used to make this for my sisters when Mom had to work late," she tells us. "One staple that was always in supply was boxed pasta, and blocks of cheese usually lasted us a while. Milk, if it was the beginning of the week." She shrugs. "Easy to throw together."

"Comfort food," I agree. "And we'll watch Disney movies with ice cream after."

Willow picks at her bowl and forces a smile. It's easier to see now that I'm watching for it. The way her eyes take a second to catch up with her mouth.

I hold up my phone. "Grey's calling. I'll be right back."

Once I'm around the corner, I dial his number.

"Hey," he greets me almost immediately.

Warmth floods through my chest. "Hey, yourself. How's the game?"

"About to start the third period. It's been a fun fight, but we're ahead by two."

I smile.

“What’s up? Do I need to get Miles?”

“No, no, I think it’d be best if we don’t involve him. At least, not directly...” I take a breath and explain my plan.

“Brilliant,” Grey says. “I gotta run, Coach is coming in. Love you.”

“Love you,” I echo.

It still feels a *little* weird to be saying that. In a, *holy shit, this is my life* kind of way. He’s twisted and dark and brutal, and he hasn’t lost any of his edge—but I love him all the same. And he loves me.

There’s a weird sort of safety in that, and my heart aches that Willow hasn’t experienced it in full. Not where she’s actively accepting it anyway.

“Violet?” Willow calls.

I return to find them polishing off the pan, and relief lifts weight off my shoulders that she’s eating.

“Sorry. He just wanted to make sure we made it safely. They’re winning by two going into the third period.” I take my seat and slide my bowl closer.

Willow’s cheeks pinken. “No, it’s fine, we just wanted to know if we should leave another little serving for you?”

I wave my hand for her to take it and smile.

Now we just need to talk her into going along with my plan. Or trick her into it.

WILLOW

Violet, Aspen, and I had a sleepover on the couch. Which is good, because I'm pretty sure I would've just started crying again if I had to go back to my bedroom.

In the morning, we take turns showering and doing our makeup, blow drying our hair. The temperature has dropped again, and wet hair would freeze in minutes if we left it. I've had enough freezing hair for one lifetime. Once we're ready, we pile back in Violet's car.

Aspen and I sit with the heat blasting while Violet dusts off the new layer of snow. It seems like they've both decided to do everything possible to not let silences build up. Sure, they did when we were on the cusp of sleep. But I'm almost positive they both kept talking so I wouldn't sink back into my stupid thoughts.

It didn't really work, but whatever.

I spent a lot of the night on my back, staring at the almost-dark ceiling. Part of me wondered if Miles was going to come here after the game and steal me away. Or yell at me for leaving. You know, prove a point or something.

But I haven't heard from him.

It doesn't help that I have both of our phones and he doesn't have a vehicle.

I let Aspen take the front seat, and I've got a blanket wrapped around me in the back. I'm not in the idle chitchat mood and don't really feel like depriving Aspen and Violet of conversation with each other. Which they do, their voices low and blurred under the blast of the heat.

When Violet gets in and turns toward the highway, I sit up straighter.

“Wait,” I call as she goes by the sign for the northbound side. “You’re going the wrong way.”

“I’m going the right way,” Violet says lightly, brushing me off. “We’re just taking a detour. We saw construction on the highway going the other way, don’t you remember?”

No, I definitely don’t remember that. But the detour part of her explanation jumps out, and I lean forward even farther. “Detour for coffee?”

“Sure,” Violet agrees.

I narrow my eyes at her and open my mouth to reply, but Aspen cranks the music.

Oh, great.

They’re up to something. And since there’s nothing I can do about it right this moment, I sit back and... well, *try* to enjoy the ride.

That is, until we *detour* so hard, we’re turning onto the street with the very familiar arena and hotel that I had hoped to never see again.

I shove between the seats and pause the music. “Tell me what’s going on.” The team left already, I’m sure of it. The bus would’ve been gone by eleven, like every other away game.

Violet and Aspen trade glances, but neither answer me.

“Seriously?” I snap.

“Willow.” Aspen glances back. “Do you trust your best friend in the whole wide world?”

I cross my arms and huff. “I mean, at this present moment? Not in the slightest.”

Violet rolls her eyes. I catch it in the rearview mirror and stick my tongue out at her in response. Childish, maybe, but come on. What are we doing here?

She parks and cranes around. “You don’t want to be here, then? Is that it?”

I stare at her. “Um... yeah, that’s it. I want to go back to Crown Point and—”

“And stay at my house, pretending Miles doesn’t exist?” Violet interrupts. “Okay, fine. If you don’t want to see what we’re doing here, get out of the car.”

“Fine, I will.” I yank on the door handle, but it doesn’t budge. I glare at her. “Unlock it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she replies, hitting the button.

I see it unlock, and yet, the door still doesn't fucking open.

"Oh, you do want to find out?" Violet turns back around in her seat. "Great."

"You've got to be kidding me. Did you put the child lock on it or something?" I shove at the door, then try for the window. It doesn't freaking go down either.

Violet drives around the arena and flicks her blinker on at a random time. There aren't any side streets here.

I finally stop jerking on the handle and face forward, watching her turn toward a huge garage door. She honks twice, and it slowly rolls up. We wait in silence, and I let my confusion show on my face.

I mean, who the hell does she know who will let her drive into the arena?

She parks in what seems to be a garage with an interior loading dock and a few Zambonis along the wall, facing another opening that is slanted upward.

"Violet," I murmur.

"Hush. Do me a favor, Willow, and just... don't think too much." She shuts off the car and climbs out, slamming her door.

Aspen follows suit.

I wait for them to open my door, but neither do. Instead, they meet at the back of the car and walk away. Keys in hand.

She's got to be kidding me.

The garage door closes around them, and I'm left in the dark.

"What the fuck, guys?" I yell.

I fall back against the seat and stare out the front windshield. Part of me is in shock. Another part is intrigued. Because my best friend isn't inherently mean, not to me. She wouldn't just abandon me here for the sake of a laugh.

She's definitely getting the biggest surprise party of her life—her least favorite thing—in retaliation, though.

"Just breathe," I murmur to myself.

I'm not going anywhere.

The very rational side of me insists I could climb into the front seat and go out that way, but the curious side just wants to wait it out.

And sure enough, moments later, someone holding a swinging flashlight comes down the ramp and directly toward the car. I raise my hand and

squint when the light is shined at my window, hitting my face.

The door opens, allowing a rush of cool air into the warm car, and my ‘savior’ leans down into the open space.

My breath catches.

Miles holds his hand out. His hair is combed and neat, although a curl still falls down his forehead. His eyes are guarded and unsure—like I’m feral. And trapped.

Both things may be true.

“Wild girl.” He reads my mind. “Will you come with me?”

I resist the urge to snap at him, and instead, I say nothing at all. All the emotions I don’t want to feel come bubbling up in my chest, and it takes a mountain of effort to shove them back down. My seemingly infinite distrust of him, and probably men in general. My desire to just throw myself into his arms because another part of me thinks he’d catch me. My terror at feeling the pain and humiliation his brother put me through again.

It’s all overwhelming, but I don’t have a hint of a coping mechanism besides pretending none of those feelings exist.

So, will I go with him? My choices are limited.

I have a sneaking suspicion Violet and Aspen won’t come back until whatever allotted time with Miles expires. Which means, if I refuse, he could just slam the door and leave me in here.

Then you’d go through the front, you dummy.

My other choice is to go with it.

To stop thinking about my choices, and where they could lead, and just do it for once.

Violet told me not to think—so that’s what I do. I shove away the dark thoughts that tell me Miles will leave me high and dry just like his brother, that I should protect my heart ten times harder from him, and take his hand.

And I swear, the relief on his face makes my eyes burn.

His fingers curl around mine, and he shifts out of the way. He helps me from the car. Once standing, I straighten slowly. I clear my throat before I can talk. My words jam in my throat.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Asking you on a date.”

I tilt my head. “A date?”

“I should’ve done it sooner, but there was too much in the way.” He shakes his head. He’s still holding my hand. “That’s a bullshit excuse. The

real reason is, I don't think I could've stomached it if you refused."

"You don't think I'm going to refuse now?"

He lifts his shoulder. His gaze, though, sears into mine. With it, he's pulling me apart to examine my soul, and I shudder at the rawness of it.

I find myself wanting to give him what he wants.

I agree without prompting, "No, I'm not going to refuse you now."

His smile is earth-shattering.

"Good. Let's go." He tugs me back the way he came.

"Wait." I duck back into the car and rummage through my purse, finding his phone. "You probably want this back."

He grins and pockets it. "Okay. Let's go for real."

"Wait," I repeat, trying to slow him down. "Go *where*?"

"On our date."

"You mean right now?"

He grins. "Yeah, I didn't mean three weeks from now, wild girl. Right now, before you lose your nerve."

I frown at that but let him guide me along more easily. Up the ramp, into the main hallway that goes to the locker rooms and wraps under the public hallways above. This one is for players and staff, and it immediately feels a bit like we're not supposed to be here.

But when have I let that stop me?

I throw my shoulders back. We go to the locker room, where I balk. *Again*. He ignores it and pulls harder, practically dragging me through the door. He doesn't stop until he reaches the horseshoe-shaped arrangement of lockers and benches. They're all empty except for one.

"Miles...?"

"Sit," he urges, releasing me and pointing to the bench beside the bag.

He drops to his knees in front of me, and my damn heart skips.

"You say you don't love me." His tone is conversational as he tugs at the laces of my boots. "But do you *like* me?"

My brows furrow.

He removes one boot, his hand sliding around my ankle and cupping it. His palm is warm through my sock, and it moves up to my calf for a moment. Then he pulls a skate out of the bag and slides it on my foot. The laces are almost all the way undone, making it easy. He sets it down and repeats the steps with my other foot, taking care on each step.

I'm biting my lip hard by the time he's done.

“Ice skating?” I try to laugh off. “Do you remember the last time we went—”

“I refuse to believe that counts,” he interrupts. “You weren’t wearing skates. And you were jumping down, which is hard to do in street shoes, let alone for someone who has never been on ice before.”

I don’t tell him I *have* been on the ice—in skates—before. Indie went through a phase where she wanted to be a professional figure skater, and my parents made me take her to the local rink on the public skate nights. Most of the time, they had run out of figure skates in my size, so I was stuck with the hockey skates. No toe picks, which always seemed to scare Indie. Not me, though. I got used to it pretty fast.

But why ruin that surprise?

He laces me up fast and tight, and it’s actually kind of hot how quick he does it. Way better than any time I had to do my own.

He pats the side of the skate. “Good?”

“Yep.”

He sits beside me and pulls out his own skates, quickly lacing them up and hopping to his feet. “Ready?”

“Yeah.”

I let him help me to my feet, and he doesn’t release one of my hands on the way out of the locker room and down the rubber-matted hall to the rink. The door is already open and waiting for us, the lights illuminating it.

“How is this allowed?”

“I bribed someone to give us an hour alone.” He steps out and skates in a wide circle, coming back to me. “Don’t be afraid to fall. That’s the hardest lesson to learn.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “I’m not.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“Oh, someone’s going around and talking about my so-called fear of falling?”

He glides closer. I’m on the lip above the ice, holding on to the half wall on either side, and it puts us eye to eye.

His eye contact is unnerving. “Never said you didn’t want to, Willow. Just that you’re chicken shit.”

My jaw drops. “I’m not.”

“Prove it, then.” There’s a new glimmer of challenge in his eyes.

One I can’t resist.

Maybe that's why I was drawn to Knox. I relished the competitive spirit—although it did get exhausting after a while. This little flash is the first sign I've seen of it in Miles. Although, to be fair, I've been focusing on other things.

Or maybe it's more correct to say I haven't been focusing at all.

I put my hands on his shoulders, and he leans in—as if to help me, maybe? Or he could just want to get closer.

Either way, when I push him back, away he goes.

I step out after him, my muscles tensing. My skating knowledge could've gone out the window, and I wobble for the briefest second. But then my blade steadies in the ice, and I push off. Muscle memory takes over, and I skate in a wide arc around Miles.

He watches me with the weirdest look on his face. I pick up speed, enjoying the rush of wind against my face. And then laughter booms behind me, and a grin splits me open.

"Better run," he calls.

I squeak and pour on the speed. The sound of him behind me douses me in adrenaline. I lean into my turn, following the curve of the wall and round the goal. But Miles is there waiting for me, and I skid to a halt. My blades create a shower of ice that hits his skates, his legs.

Whoops.

His gaze is hot. "You aren't one of those girls who totter around and can't figure out how to pick their feet up off the ice."

"No."

He smiles—then stops. "Did my brother teach you?"

I make a face. "He never took me out on the ice."

"His loss."

He glides toward me and captures my waist before I can skate away. I'm still at the same height disadvantage as when we're in regular shoes, and I watch his expression.

"Did you want to teach me how to skate, Whiteshaw?" I tease. I loop my fingers in his belt and tug him even closer. Until his body is pressed to mine. "Or do you like knowing that there's some things you don't have to teach me?"

"I can think of a few things you still haven't learned," he muses.

I shiver, my brow rising. "Like what?"

“I don’t think you’re ready for your final lesson, Ms. Reed.” He guides me backward. “But you do need to be punished.”

My jaw drops, and my hands fall to his wrists. “For what?”

“Sassing.”

He reaches behind me and pushes open a door. I glance over my shoulder, and my cheeks heat when he lifts me into the penalty box.

I fight my smile. “How long is your power play?”

Miles closes us in, crowding me back against the glass. “Hmmm... until you scream my name so loud, it echoes around the arena.”

My breath catches. “And why would I do that?”

“Because I’m going to take my time eating your magic cunt, and you’ll be crying to your god—*me*.”

“Oh.”

He smirks. “Yeah. *Oh*.”

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WILLOW

He drops to his knees in front of me. My breath catches when he grips the waistband of my leggings and drags it down. I reach out and touch his shoulder, because I know he just said exactly what he's going to do to me, but I'm not sure I believe it.

He gets my leggings down to my ankles and pushes me backward. I sit on the bench hard, my back hitting the wall again.

"Ready, wild girl?"

I'm not quite sure I am.

But he's still on his knees, and he parts mine with gentle pressure. And then he's scooting closer, running his nose up my inner thigh.

"Miles," I murmur. "I don't think—"

"Don't think," he agrees. "Just feel."

I take a deep breath and try to do just that. It's not a crime to feel pleasure, is it? To steal it like moments of time that don't belong to either of us. The way his bright eyes are boring into me, for once waiting for a modicum of agreement, makes my decision that much easier.

"Okay," I reply.

He smiles.

Brilliant. Blinding.

And totally not like his brother's.

This one makes me feel something. That's the whole point.

But then he's leaning down, and his tongue is tracing a path that makes me *feel* something else entirely. I tip my head back and widen my legs, my knees falling open, and his shoulders brush my bare skin as he gets closer.

His tongue flattens over my clit, and his hands grip my ass, pulling me to the edge of the bench.

Everything he does is designed for him to get closer to me.

His teeth graze my inner thigh, and I shudder.

“Fuck,” I groan.

He takes my wrist, guiding my hand to the back of his head. “Show me where you like it,” he orders. “Because you’re so fucking wet, I’m going to lose my mind.”

I slide my fingers through his curls, ruining how neat he had it. It’s hard to think straight, let alone concentrate on what I like. But he moves away from my clit, inching lower, and I tug his hair. His voice hums through his lips, his amusement clear. He licks and sucks everywhere but my clit.

“Stop messing around,” I snap.

He pushes a finger inside me, and I arch backward. My nails dig into his scalp, hard enough for it to bleed. He adds a second finger, thrusting and twisting slowly, hitting the spot inside me that makes me shudder over and over again.

“*Miles.*” It’s a plea and a demand, and fuck it, maybe I’m begging, I don’t know.

I’m unraveling.

“Louder.” He lifts his head, eyes snapping to mine. “*Louder.*”

Oh, fuck.

I push his face back down. I’m not the shameful sort when it comes to sex. Not that I ever put on a show with Knox, but with Miles...

Well, I don’t think he’d mind. Even though he’s still fucking messing with me, avoiding my clit until I’m trembling and squeezing his shoulders with my knees like my life depends on it. So when he traces the tip of his tongue over my clit, so fucking slow, I do scream his name.

Without shame.

I scream his name, and whatever else comes out of my mouth isn’t my fault—it’s his. Especially when his lips close around my clit and he sucks, shoving me over the edge into oblivion.

My ears are ringing by the time I come back to my body, and I only realize that he’s shifted us when my eyes crack open. My legs are closed, my underwear and leggings back in place. And he’s watching my face with an odd expression.

“What?”

“Don’t ruin it by putting your guard up.” He cups my jaw. “Because for a second there, I think you forgot about all the shit you’ve been through, and you actually felt something.”

I shake my head, my throat closing up. “Just an orgasm. Nothing to freak out about.”

He scoffs. “One day, you’ll admit the truth to yourself.”

“And what’s that?”

“That you do know how to love and you’ve fallen head over heels for me.”

“That’s not the truth.”

“It’s the only piece of truth that matters, Willow.” His thumb coasts under the edge of my jaw, forcing my head up. So I can’t hide from him. “And I’m catching you. Every time you feel unsure or afraid or like you want to climb out of your skin with terror and doubt.”

I don’t want this conversation.

Maybe he realizes it, because he drops his hand and turns around, opening the door onto the ice. Without a word, he steps out of the penalty box and skates toward the players’ benches. I follow more slowly, still half-dazed by the orgasm and conversation.

Like, damn. Why does he have to go and insinuate what I feel? No—he doesn’t fucking insinuate. He goes out of his way to tell me exactly where I am with my emotions.

He can’t know more than I do about *myself*.

“Willow.”

I jerk to attention, refocusing on Miles. He’s got gloves and pads on, a goalie stick in one hand and a regular stick in the other. I belatedly register the pucks sliding across the ice around him, like they’ve got little minds of their own and want to follow.

You’re being stupid.

“What’s this?”

“The next part of our date.” He holds out the regular stick. “You’ve got the skating part down. But can you get the puck past me?”

I perk up. “What do I get if I do?”

His eyes darken. “What do you want?”

Something that’ll knock him off his high horse.

Wait. “What do you want if I can’t?”

He grins. “Ah, I was wondering if you’d ask. I want a second date.”

“This one isn’t even over.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, but I’d prefer to guarantee a continuation.”

I take the stick from him and glide backward, out of reach. “I don’t know,” I hedge. “I’m already sleeping in your bed. Isn’t that enough?”

“You could give me everything in the world except your heart, and it wouldn’t be enough.”

I snag a puck and fling it toward the far net. It slings far and wide, hitting the boards with a resounding *crack*. Well, okay, no shooting from the center line.

“Is that what you’re asking for? According to you, you already have it.”

He laughs. “You’re fickle, you know that?”

“My parents tell me I’m hard to love all the time,” I comment.

Violet says my parents do love me. That their love is in their acts of service, or whatever bullshit that is. And yeah, maybe they do care enough to do those things for me. But it doesn’t mean anything when I don’t hear the words or feel their touch. When I grew up without knowing in my heart that that’s what they were giving me. My house has always been cold.

I mean, it could be a fantasy that Violet cooked up all on her own. A way to heal me.

Newsflash: I’m unhealable. I’ve got ugly scars all over my insides from a weird, draining childhood. Nothing particularly bad happened, but it left me traumatized all the same.

How fucked up is that?

Maybe it has nothing to do with my parents, and it’s just a personality defect. Or a chemical imbalance in my brain, like depression or anxiety.

Here, have a totally fucking normal childhood, and we’ll watch as your insides get scrambled up anyway.

“You’re not hard to love,” Miles interrupts. “I don’t know how you could think that.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Do you know how reinforced that is? Your brother did everything he could to make me fall for him, and I fucking *did*. Past all the fucked-up mind-bending, I actually did think I loved him. And he laughed. He told the whole room what I said and made me the punchline of a joke.”

“I hit him in the face for that,” he admits. “You’re not a prickly cactus, Willow. You’re not any harder to love than I am.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs. He passes me another puck and heads toward the goal crease. “I’ll prove it to you.”

I tighten my grip on the stick. “If I get a goal, I want you to get my name tattooed on your dick.”

He spins to face me, continuing to skate backward, and smirks. “That won’t convince me to try very hard.”

My jaw drops.

“Matching tattoos,” he declares. “If I stop your shots, you get a tattoo with me.”

I’m already shaking my head before he finishes.

“Come on, Willow,” he goads. “Are you scared?”

“I’m not getting your name on my face or neck or anywhere visible—”

His smile is positively wicked. “I was thinking about a spot I was licking earlier...”

Oh, fuck.

Well... that would be interesting. And I find that I’m not entirely against that idea. I mean, I don’t *want* his name tattooed on my pussy. Right?

No, Willow, you don’t. And the renewed pulse between your legs is just a coincidence.

I retrieve a few pucks, angling them toward the center of the rink. I practice taking one around in a circle, experimenting with how the fuck I’m going to get it past Miles. He’s got the pads on his arms and legs, plus the stick—but none of the padding protecting his chest.

How badly do I want a groin shot?

And then something else occurs to me. “How many chances do I get?”

He scans the ice, then shrugs. “You can use all the pucks I set out once. Fair?”

“Enough,” I mumble, counting how many that gives me. Twelve. Not *terrible*. Maybe I’ll get lucky... A girl can dream, right?

MILES

Didn't think I'd ever have to goaltend with a stiff dick, but here we are. I dig the edges of my blades into the ice, readying myself for Willow's first shot. She's absolutely fucking hot in the baby-pink sweater and leggings. I almost stripped her completely bare in the penalty box—which was a complete improvisation as it was.

Not that I regret it. The taste of her is still on my lips, on my tongue, and I savor it while focusing on my girl.

She wasn't going to come back. She's so twisted in the head, she doesn't see what's right in front of her. Those wild emotions of hers are tangled up inside, and all I want to do is show her how to smooth it out.

Except my emotions are fickle, too. And sometimes anger is the only thing I feel—especially on the ice.

Until I see her.

And I *know* she feels the same.

“Ready to lose?” she calls, smiling.

I almost say yes. But I catch myself at the last second and focus on the way she pulls the stick back. The slapshot sends the puck way left. I don't even bother going for it because it's going clear of the net. And sure enough, it hits the wall.

Her pout makes me want to kiss her.

“You can do better than that,” I call.

She scowls and retrieves another puck. Her skating abilities were a surprise—and damn, her ass looks good when she moves across the ice.

Her head darts to the side. She eyes me, barely moving. It's just a twitch of her wrist, and the puck sails at me. Better aim this time.

I catch it low and toss it aside, prepared for the next one that comes immediately after. High. Her aim improves, and she drifts closer.

The next one comes at center mass, and I stop it with my arm guard, deflecting it off to the side. That would've sucked if she nailed me in the chest.

"Do you give up?" I ask.

"Never," she replies.

Well, she will when she runs out of things to hit.

"I want to fuck you on this ice," I say, right as she shoots. I laugh when it goes wide, and her pretty face turns a deeper red. "And map out exactly where your tattoo will go..."

"Anyone could walk in. We're not—"

"Where's your sense of adventure, wild girl?" I straighten. "New rule. For every shot you miss, you take off a piece of clothing."

Her lips part. "Are you kidding? I'm barely wearing anything—"

I grin. "Do you still want to play?"

She finds another puck, her expression determined. Oh, I love her competitive streak.

But I'm one of the best goalies in college hockey—does she think she has a chance?

I catch the next one and toss it, grinning at her. It's unfair, really, how easy it is to block them. But I feel a bit of pride, too. Like I'm showing off.

I motion to her, and she scowls. After a moment, she pulls off that pink sweater and throws it onto the ice behind her. Her blonde hair swings around her face. Her tits are contained in a matching pink bra that has some extra straps to it across the top. It doesn't hide the bandage she's put over her heart, concealing the X I carved into her skin yesterday.

Her chest heaves, and her toned stomach flexes.

My dick gets even fucking harder. Any chance of losing my erection disappears entirely.

"You're so fucking sexy," I tell her.

She shifts her weight. "Maybe you should strip, too."

"After I win."

Willow snorts. She shoots again, this one sliding across the ice toward the corner of the goal. I bat it away with the blade of my stick and readjust my grip.

“Hmmm, what’s going to come next? I don’t know if you can get your leggings off over your skates...”

“Oh, I hate you.”

“You love me,” I reply, still grinning. Although it stings a little to watch her eyes darken, a silent guard going back up for a split second.

She’s rejecting my words before she thinks about it.

That won’t do.

“Bra,” I order. “Because I have a feeling you won’t want to ruin your only pair of pants by dragging them over your skates.”

She drops her stick to the ice, her stance widening. The skates make her legs look longer. And when she reaches up behind her with both hands, her chest pushes out. My self-control is wavering on a thread, and that thread is fraying. *Fast.*

Even more so when she unclips it and yanks it off, tossing it in the same direction as the sweater.

Her nipples immediately pebble in the cold air, her skin puckering. A shiver runs up her spine.

She flips her hair back—although all it does is swing right back into place—and retrieves the stick. The way she grips it forces her breasts together, and I groan.

“Maybe this is more distracting for you than it is embarrassing for me,” she murmurs.

“Maybe,” I agree. “And you’ve only got one puck left.”

She spins around, her eyebrows rising. “No!”

“Sorry, wild girl. You’re about out of chances.”

“I’m going to aim for your dick,” she says under her breath.

Luckily, I have good hearing. Because I *am* too distracted by her breasts to even notice her aim and shoot, and it comes soaring at my groin. I bring my arm down at the last second, and it flies off the pad.

“Matching tattoos,” I crow, my heart thumping harder.

I toss off the gloves and undo the pad on my arm, then lean down and detach the ones strapped to my legs. In moments, I’m back to jeans and the long-sleeved t-shirt. I skate toward her, *into* her, grabbing her hips and propelling her backward.

“*Miles,*” she squeals, gripping my shoulders.

I pick her up and set her on her ass on her sweater. It’s going to be fucking cold in a second, but *fuck*, I just want all of her. I kneel between her

legs and hover over her, leaning down to suck her nipple into my mouth.

Her skin is cool, and she immediately lets out a breathy sigh. Her fingernails dig into my shoulders.

I cup her other breast, rolling and pinching her other nipple. I tug on it at the same time that I nip at the one in my mouth. Her knees come up on either side of me, her legs crossing behind my ass and pressing me into her.

I give her what she wants, grinding my erection into the apex of her thighs. The feeling isn't strong enough between all our layers of fabric.

Seems she's of the same mind, because her hands slip under my shirt. She touches my abs, then hooks her fingers in the waistband and finds the button. She shoves my jeans down, freeing my erection.

And she grips it a moment later.

It twitches in her hand, and I groan. I drag my mouth off her nipple and up her chest, leaving a trail of kisses. I get to the edge of the bandage and bite it, pulling it off with a quick yank.

She gasps. I spit it away and look down at the angry red X. It makes my heart sing a little, because I have the matching one. I kiss her red skin, licking at it, then move upward. I suck on her neck, my hips moving and thrusting my dick in her hand.

She jacks me off, her hold on me nearly strangling. In a twisted way, it's just what I need. A bit of pain to stave off the pleasure.

I get to the edge of her jaw, and she directs my lips to hers with a hold on my chin.

Gladly.

Our lips slide against each other. I run my tongue across the seam of her lips, and they part for me so nicely. I taste her mouth. Her tongue tangles with mine.

I drag her leggings down again, and her hand guides my cock to her entrance. Her thumb passes over my piercing, and I moan into her mouth. She's slick and hot, and I notch at her opening. Her hand falls away, finding my hip and shoving my shirt up. My abdomen presses against hers for a moment, pinning her to the ice.

"Fuck me," she begs, her lips moving against mine. "Miles, please."

I thrust into her, my body tensing at the wicked heat of her. It's a perfect contrast to the ice under my forearms and knees. The sweater protects her back from the worst of the cold and potential frostbite, but not all of it.

She shoves my shirt up higher, and she finds the cut on my chest by feel alone. Her nails dig into it, opening up the wound again. I cut myself deeper than her, secretly wanting the scar. Relishing the idea of it.

“Why’d you do this?” she asks, her voice hitching when I push back into her.

Fuck me, she feels good. I draw back to look into her eyes.

“Why’d I cut us open?”

She nods, and a pang echoes through my chest. She loops her arms around my neck, pulling me down. Until we’re nose to nose.

“We need it,” I reply. “And I need control...”

“Why?”

“It’s ingrained in me. It’s why we work so well together.” My feral girl and me. “Plus, we had a connection way before my brother tried to sweep you off your feet.”

Do I like bringing up my brother while I’m inside her? Not particularly. But I’m making a point, aren’t I?

Her eyes flash.

“Think about it,” I whisper in her ear. “And forget the rest of the noise.”

She whimpers in response. I pick up my pace, and I grit my teeth to stop myself from exploding inside her too soon. The piercings do something to her, sure, but they add some sensitivity to me, too.

My chest stings, and blood drips down onto her skin.

The urge to declare my love for her is overwhelming, but I quell it. Instead, I make sure she *feels* it. In the way I lift her body and hug her to me, her breasts crushed to my chest, in the way I fuck her sweetly and completely at odds with our earlier banter.

I just can’t fucking help it.

I smear my blood on my fingers and bring it to her lips. They automatically part for me, and I slip them into her mouth. Coating her tongue in my blood. And then I remove them and kiss her. *Hard*. So I can taste the metallic zing of blood mixing with her sweet saliva. Our teeth clash, and our tongues collide.

Her cunt clenches around me.

“Fuck.” I barely move away from her lips. “I’m not going to last long, wild girl. You feel too fucking good.”

I lean to the side and brush my fingers over her clit. The little nub is slick with her arousal, and she moans under me. I hit the right spot, both

inside her and with the pad of my index finger.

“How about we come together? Hmm? I want to feel you tremble around me when I explode inside you.” I nip her earlobe.

“Okay,” she breathes. Her nails dig into my shoulders again.

“Good girl,” I whisper.

I work her up until she’s writhing beneath me, and her orgasm tears through her. She screams my name again.

Music to my ears.

I roll my hips and pound into her harder, chasing my own high. I focus on the feel of her, the silky slide of skin-on-skin contact, the way she clenches around my cock. My balls tighten, and I groan when I come. I still inside her, and *fuck it*, I need to see my handiwork.

Because babies aren’t in our future, but a lifetime of my cum in her pussy is.

I pull out and slide down, keeping her legs parted. It’s already oozing out, mixing with her wetness, and I use two fingers to keep it inside her.

“Miles.” She drops back to the ice. “You’re killing me.”

“I can’t help it. You’re so perfect. I wish you could see this.” I tilt my head, considering, then reach for my phone. It’s still in my back pocket, balanced precariously in the fabric that’s been shoved down past my ass. I take a picture before she can say a damn word, cementing it in my digital spank bank.

I show her the photo, and her eyes bug out.

“Are you kidding?” She scoots backward, closing her legs and drawing her knees up. “You can’t just—”

“I’m not going to show anyone,” I assure her, my voice dark. “I’d rather cut off my dick than let anyone see your pussy.”

I’ve got a nice collection going. The video from the football coach’s office, this picture...

She huffs, but she drops it. And she climbs to her feet, wobbling on the skates. She pulls up her leggings and grimaces at the wet spot left on the edge of her sweater. I guess it’s a casualty in our fucking adventure, but... oh well. I pick it up and lift it to my nose, inhaling.

Smells like sex.

“Put it on,” I say, skating closer. My erection isn’t going away, which isn’t too surprising. I’m addicted to her. I grasp it and tug, running my

thumb over the piercing. “Bra, sweater. Get dressed, then get on your knees.”

Willow eyes me. Her cheeks are flushed, her hair wild. Her doe-eyed expression is almost too much for me, and precum oozes out. It coats my hand on my next pass.

Watching her get dressed almost does it for me as much as watching her get undressed. She skates to her bra and bends over, giving me a view of her leggings-clad ass, then straightens and slips her arms through. She reaches behind her and clasps it, then adjusts the bra. Her gaze falls to the sweater in my free hand, and she ventures closer.

“You’re just going to jack yourself off while I watch?” Her voice is husky.

“No,” I reply. “I’m going to let you taste us on my cock before I fuck your throat.”

“Oh.” She bats her eyelashes. “Good.”

Good? She’s going to be the death of me.

Knowing that she wants it as much as I do, I point to the ice. She kneels gracefully, first one knee, then the next, and flicks my piercing with her tongue. Ignoring that I’m still stroking myself.

“How are you still hard?” Her gaze lifts to mine.

“How can I stay inside you all night while we sleep?” I shrug. “I’m just built different, wild girl.”

She hums and takes over, grasping my length and sliding her hand down to the base. Then back up. Her lips part, and her mouth covers the tip. She takes me in slowly, like she’s savoring it, and I allow it for a moment or two... but then, I don’t know, I guess I’m just impatient.

I grip the back of her head, my fingers tangling in her silky hair, and thrust farther into her mouth.

But then I remember what else I have planned for tonight, and I swear.

I withdraw and skate backward, leaving her kneeling alone.

“What—”

“Sorry, wild girl,” I murmur. I stroke myself off in front of her, widening my stance to help my balance.

She shakes her head and crawls across the ice toward me.

My heart lurches.

Fuck.

She stops in front of me and bats my hand away. “Screw whatever made you stop,” she whispers. “You’re mine, aren’t you? You made a big speech about that. Which means *I* make you come.”

She takes me back into her mouth. Not as deep as fucking her throat would do, but—

Shit. She does something magic with her tongue. And when my cock twitches in her mouth, and I twist her hair in my hand, she does it again.

And again.

Her teeth touch my shaft briefly, clicking against the piercing on the underside, and I suck in a breath. Her gaze finds mine. She hums around me, sucking harder. This girl knows exactly how to unravel me.

“I’m not going to last—” My hips jerk forward of their own accord. I stay shallow, but I fuck her mouth until she’s red in the face. And when I come, spilling my seed across her tongue, she swallows it all.

“Perfect,” I breathe. “Fucking unbelievable.”

And that’s only the first part of our date.

WILLOW

I need to tell Miles about his car. And what the detective said about the dead guy's brother, how he was asking questions of the other girl. Searching for him. Although the brother doesn't know he's dead... I think. I have that photo of a case freezer ingrained in my head, but I'm not sure where the body is.

Still in Crown Point?

Easily findable?

The brother is going to raise too many questions. If he keeps coming after us, he'll bring every police detective down on our heads, too.

I shudder. I can't let that fate fall on us. Miles murdered him—but somehow, I don't actually care about that. I've forgiven it. Forgotten about it.

How fucked up is that?

How can I sleep with him every night, knowing he plunged that blade he's always carrying, the one he carved an X into *my* skin with, into that guy's neck for drugging me?

Because he makes me feel safe.

Because he's in my head, scrambling my insides.

Because I'm starting to believe the crazy shit he says to me. About me. For me.

The sex scent follows us to a restaurant, the spot on my sweater drying enough to go unnoticed. A shrewd-eyed hostess leads us to a table by the windows. We're caught in the awkward time between lunch and dinner, and the place is mostly empty.

"Do you have an agenda?" I ask him. "For today."

“Yes, of course.” He sits beside me.

Not across from me, like a normal person. I chose the seat closer to the window, and he slid right in next to me. His hand landed on my thigh a moment later, burning through the thin material.

We order lemonades and burgers.

“You saw your family last night?” His thumb is moving slowly across my inner thigh. Not traveling, just marking a crescent path. Sending little tingles all over me.

“No.” I shift. “They weren’t home.”

He pauses and looks at me closer. “Did you know you were going to an empty house?”

“No.”

“Willow.”

I shake my head and clear my throat. “Violet and Aspen were good company. It’s okay.”

He hums. “They left for a weekend and just... didn’t tell you? That’s not okay.”

“Families can be weird,” I mutter. “Do your parents tell you where they go all the time?”

Miles snorts. He unlocks his phone, going to a conversation thread. A group chat between him, Knox, and his parents. He scrolls up for what feels like way too long and hands me the phone.

I scan it.

His mom sending a picture of them out to dinner. Knox telling them about his most recent paper grade. A question about their home games. Conversation.

Love.

I lose track of how many *I love yous* they send each other. Over the course of weeks, it seems like they talk at least once a day.

And for some reason, that realization makes a lump form in my throat.

I’ve never met their parents. Never even came close.

Why would I? Knox wasn’t in our relationship for the long haul, as much as he wanted me to think otherwise. And he balked at any indication that he should meet my family, too. I thought that was normal.

“Oh,” I manage. “I see.”

“You don’t.” Miles frowns and takes the phone back, pressing another button. He holds the phone out and puts his face next to mine, and the next

thing I know, the video call is connecting.

His mother's face fills the screen. She looks like him. Bright-blue eyes, dirty-blond hair, a heart-shaped face and wide smile. She's got sunglasses perched on top of her head.

"Hey, honey," she greets him. "I was just gardening."

"Mom, I wanted you to meet Willow."

Her smile gets even bigger. "Oh, Willow! Miles has told me a lot about you."

I swallow around that lump. "He has?"

"He said you're a singer with a beautiful voice."

"Well..."

Her eyes glitter. "There's more, but he'd probably hang up on me if I went into detail."

"Mom." Miles laughs. "Willow's going to come home with me next weekend for dinner, okay? We've got a game on Friday, so we can come down on Saturday."

"Great! Your father and I were just complaining about how quiet the house has been lately. Is there anything particular you'd like to eat, Willow?"

This is a normal and weird conversation. My head swims. How would my parents react to meeting Miles? I haven't told them anything about him, and he's told her practically everything about me.

Well, maybe. That's probably just an exaggeration.

But he told her I sing.

When did he do that? *Why* did he do that?

Miles' lips touch my temple, and I try to fight my shiver. I stare at the little box on his screen that's all *us*. Our faces are close enough to touch. That's what she's seeing, and she's not admonishing him for it. For calling her without warning. I mean, he just randomly called, and she *answered*.

"Anything but sushi," he advises his mother when I don't respond. "And maybe nothing too spicy. She likes mild spice, but anything more than that, and she'll drink a gallon of milk."

I shift. "That was one time."

"I know."

My sophomore, his freshman year. *Three years ago*. We were out in a group—I don't even remember what he ordered, and he remembers my reaction to my meal?

Have I been completely oblivious?

“How cute. Okay, no sushi and no spice. How about Italian? It’s been a while since I’ve made a lasagna. Willow, you’re okay with ground beef?”

I clear my throat. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Call me Lucy, dear. I’ll see you both on Saturday, then.”

“Love you, Mom,” Miles says.

“Love you, too, baby.”

The call disconnects from her end, and he tosses the phone on the table. The waitress appears with our drinks and relays that our food will be out soon.

“Why’d you do that?” I ask.

“Because not all families look the same. You don’t just get me in this deal, wild girl. You can have more love than you know what to do with.”

“What if they meet me in person and hate me?” I shake my head and open my phone, going to the group conversation between my parents, Indie, and me. I secretly think all families must have that, but unlike Miles’, ours has been all but abandoned.

The last text was from me, over a month ago.

I hand him my phone, and he scans the messages. They’re all... well, not *cold*, but they’re not really brimming with emotion either.

“Efficient,” he decides, closing out of that and going to my text thread with Mom.

That one is even worse. The last text is from when I was home for Christmas. They were invited to some work party, and she asked if I would be okay home on my own. The day after the holiday.

I didn’t respond to the text.

Miles grunts.

“So... how did you get Violet and Aspen to help you with this date idea?” Better to change the subject, right? Than deal with hard things?

He shifts to face me fully and lifts his hand to cup my cheek. “They know I’m what’s best for you.”

Oh, super.

The waitress returns, saving me from forming a decent response, and places our burgers in front of us. Suddenly ravenous, I ignore Miles and dig in.

An hour later, he’s got my hand in his and we’re walking back toward the arena. Except now, there are a hell of a lot more people around.

I frown, glancing from them to Miles, but he only winks at me and pulls me onward. Into the line of people entering the arena. We go through a metal detector, and someone scans a barcode on his phone. Then another.

We're through, and I poke him.

"What is this?"

"Willow!"

I jerk toward the sound of Aspen's voice. She and Steele are followed by Violet and Greyson, and they're all wearing Colorado Titans jerseys, with the same number on the sleeves. Aspen holds out a bag for us, and Miles takes it. He reveals two more matching jerseys, flipping them around so I can see the back.

Rhodes.

"Jacob's playing?"

They nod, smiling.

Truthfully, I had lost track of where he went after he graduated. I knew he was recruited by the NHL—Knox frequently mentioned it, and especially how he wanted to end up on the same team as him. While Knox plays center, Jacob plays defense. On the defensive, he and Steele were a force to be reckoned with.

I duck into a bathroom stall and change into the jersey, grateful to be out of the stained pink sweater. Once my hair is fixed—goodbye, sex hair—and makeup touched up, I rejoin them outside. Miles takes my sweater and shoves it into the bag with his shirt. His fingers lace with mine.

"We're going to our seats," Violet says. "We'll see you... after."

"After?" I question.

Violet doesn't meet my gaze. In fact, all of them look a little shifty. Except Miles. He's just watching me.

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, let's go see Rhodes. Wish him luck."

He squeezes my hand and leads me away from our friends. He pulls a pass on a lanyard from God-knows-where, showing it to a man in a suit by an elevator. The man nods once, hitting the button to call up the elevator. When the doors slide open, Miles and I step in alone.

We go down a floor. My stomach is flip-flopping for some reason, and I try not to think about how sweaty my palms are getting. I don't know why I'm nervous. Maybe just because I realize *something* is off, especially in the way Violet acted.

She's a shit actor.

We're back on the lower level, opposite where we entered earlier. We're at the corner of the rink, with a view of the visiting team—the Titans—warming up. I catch Jacob's number on his back, *Rhodes* printed above it, as he skates past.

"Whiteshaw?" someone calls.

A woman in a cherry-red pantsuit. She's got a badge on a lanyard around her neck, although I can't quite make out what it says.

"Yes. And this is Willow."

She shakes his hand, then mine. "Pleasure. This way, please."

I glance at Miles, then the woman, but she's already striding away. Miles ushers me along.

"We expected you an hour ago for sound check," she says over her shoulder. "But we're all set up. Here's your room. I'll have my assistant come in and wire you up."

Door.

Taped to it is a piece of paper with my name on it.

Small room. Couch, table and chairs, a mini fridge with waters. A vanity with a mirror surrounded by lights, an array of makeup. Flowers.

Sound check?

My mouth is dry.

The door closes. Then opens again, seemingly before I can take a breath. Another woman, all in black with a headset on, comes in. She clips a battery pack to the waistband of my leggings, threads it up under my jersey, and fits a piece in my ear.

"We'll come get you in a few minutes. The arrangement was sent over by Ms. Masen yesterday, and it'll play in your in-ear monitors." The woman smiles, and it's probably meant to be reassuring.

But I can't fucking breathe.

The door closes again, and I yank my hand out of Miles' grip.

"What is this?" I croak.

"Breathe," he advises.

"Just fucking tell me why they strapped me up like I'm about to—" I shake my head, my voice failing.

Like I'm about to *what*? Ms. Masen sent an arrangement. That's Nora, the sweet woman who has been helping me with singing for *months*. The

one I was with when Miles discovered where I was working. And that I sing.

“What did you do?” I ask in a calmer voice.

“You’re going to sing the national anthem,” he says. “And you’re going to kill it.”

I stare at him. “I’m going to kill *you*.”

This sort of thing takes prep. Practice. Rehearsal. *Sound check*. And while they were preparing for this, I was—I was eating a burger. Drinking lemonade.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” My mind is going in endless circles, thinking of a way I can get out of this. “There’s an arena full of people out there.”

“I know.”

“Oh, great, maybe you should go out there and—”

“You’re going to be great.” He leans against the wall. “But I suggest you do your warm-ups before that lady comes back.”

I glower at him and turn away sharply. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and down half of it, although I already have the urge to piss my pants.

That’s nerves.

But if I can’t get out of this, then I need to do my best.

Right?

I face the wall and run through my vocal warm-ups quietly. Trills and octave runs and whatever else I can think of, although my brain is static. I can barely remember my last lesson with Nora. If I knew I was going to be singing in front of more people, I would’ve remembered it better. Or done my homework more seriously.

“Ms. Reed?” The door swings open, and the assistant is back. “We’re ready for you now.”

I swallow.

Miles grabs my shoulder and pushes me ahead of him. He has to, otherwise I wouldn’t fucking move. I don’t know how I’m supposed to go out and sing one of the hardest songs, without practice....

“This is why you didn’t fuck my throat,” I groan, smacking my palm to my forehead. “You’re such an asshole.”

He chuckles.

The woman’s mouth quirks, and I press my lips together.

And then I get my first look at the rink.

It's all dark, and music blasts out across the arena. Colored lights swing around the ice, the stands, and finally, a spotlight comes on the door beside the home team's bench.

An announcer booms, "Please welcome..."

I block it out and focus on the woman in front of me. She's saying shit that I don't know, don't understand, and a carpet is being rolled out on the ice. Someone brings out a set of microphone stands. Children file past me, and I watch them with confusion. They line up, and their teacher, or some adult, kneels in front of them.

They sing *God Bless America*. It's cute, but my palms sweat more. The crowd seems to enjoy it. They give their wild support, which makes sense. They're children in need of encouragement, not... me.

And then they're done. Filing off the ice.

Someone says my name, and it's echoing over the arena.

Miles propels me forward.

I lick my lips and step out onto the carpet. The spotlight is blinding, and I fight the urge to squint. There are people behind me, and the starting players are on the ice. They're lined up. Six visitors on the far line, down by their goal. Five on the one closer to me. And the goalie, even with where I stand.

I meet his eyes, then shift my attention to the microphone on the stand. I wet my lips again and step up closer, until my lips are almost touching the mic.

This is a do-or-die situation—and I am *not* about to mortify myself on live television. I touch the in-ear monitor again, checking that it's still there. It's blocking out the sound of the crowd, if there is any. Maybe they're all silent, waiting for me to begin.

There's a clicking in my ears. A metronome. And a voice that says, "National anthem in three... two... one."

MILES

Willow's fucking killing it.

She looked terrified until she stepped up to the mic, and it was as if all that fear just dissipated. My girl rose to the challenge.

Her voice is sweet like honey, but there's power behind it. Her eyes are half-lidded, and I think she's on autopilot as she sings her fucking heart out. She's so fucking sexy, her face on the big screen. My hand is pressed over my heart, and I should have my eyes on the flag. But all I can focus on is her.

The last huge notes swell, and my chest loosens at the harmonic melody.

Holy shit.

I thought she was going to stab me for a minute there, but this is totally worth it.

The crowd goes absolutely fucking nuts for her. She pulls out her in-ear monitors and lets them drape down around her neck, and she stares in awe at the packed arena.

Yeah, they're cheering for *her*.

She turns and comes back, and I take both her hands. She's staring at me with a mixture of giddiness and guardedness.

I reel her in and kiss her. Her lips move against mine, so she's not mad enough that she's going to become a statue. A little stiff, sure. But when I nip her lower lip, she sags into me.

"You were perfect," I tell her.

The assistant is at her back, removing the battery pack and wires. And then she's gone, and I lead Willow back to the elevator. Well, almost.

There's a storage closet that I spotted on our walk from her dressing room, and I drag her into it.

She lets out a squeak, and I slap the light switch. The single bulb over our heads flickers on, casting us in odd shadows.

"You're so impressive," I tell her. I back her into the door and duck down, kissing the corner of her lips. Her cheek, along her jaw.

She tilts her head, and her hand slips up the side of my neck. Her fingers dip into my hair, nails catching my scalp. I groan and nip her sweet skin, flicking my tongue out and tasting the slightly salty tang of sweat.

"Leggings off," I order. I undo my jeans. "Turn around, put your forearms on the door."

Her lips part, but she does exactly what I say. She spreads her legs and braces, sticking her ass out at me.

I slap it, the *smack* resounding in the small space, and she gasps. I soothe the area, then spank her again. I resist the urge to lean down and bite her ass cheek, although a bite mark there would help erase the sight of her in my friend's jersey.

You're wearing his jersey, too, I remind myself.

I part her ass cheeks and stare down at her pink asshole, and my dick twitches. I should've brought the plug with me. Fucking her with it in, with it vibrating... shit. Precum leaks out without even touching myself. I press my thumb to the puckered hole, and I slide the head of my cock down her center.

She groans, shifting and arching her back. I do it again, watching for her shudder.

"The game is about to start," she pants. "Just fuck me already."

I snicker, teasing her for another long moment before pushing slowly inside her pussy. Her head bows forward, and she moans. I don't know how one girl can feel so fantastic, over and over again.

I'm never going to get tired of her.

I pull almost all the way out, leaving her clenching at the tip of my cock.

"Say thank you," I tell her.

She makes a noise in the back of her throat, then glances over her shoulder at me. "For what?"

"For making you sing."

I inch forward, then draw back.

Torture—for both of us.

She scowls at me. “If I show you gratitude, you’ll do something like this again.”

My eyebrows lift. “Will I?”

“Yes. Oh, fuck—”

I fully seat myself inside her. But I don’t stay still. I pull all the way out and drag my wet cock higher. I spit on her asshole, and she lurches. Well, she tries to get away from me.

I tsk at her, not giving her time to think before I’m pushing past her barriers. Her muscles grip me harder than her cunt, and I let out a hiss. I spit again, and I slide in deeper.

“Holy fuck, Miles,” she cries.

“Just relax, wild girl,” I murmur, stroking her side. I lean over her and reach around her leg, my fingers finding her slippery clit. I rub it and fuck her ass, ignoring her groans that seem borderline pain. The pleasure is there, waiting for her.

When she comes, I wrap my other arm around her abdomen and keep her upright. It’s the only thing that stops her from falling face-first into the door, her whole body trembling. I wait for it to stop, my fingers light on her clit, and then pull back slightly. My grip on her hip tightens.

“Hold on.” That’s the only warning I give before I begin to move. *Hard*. I chase my own high and take out a little of my annoyance that I agreed to put her in my friend’s jersey, by fucking her so hard, she’ll feel me in her ass for a week.

But fuck if she doesn’t push back at me, meeting my thrusts head-on.

I wrap my fingers around her short hair, tugging her head back.

“Fuck, baby,” I groan.

She stiffens—and I fucking realize my mistake.

The one where my brother calls her baby.

You know what? We’re eradicating that.

“Whose dick is fucking your asshole?” I bark, yanking her head back farther.

“Yours.”

“Who am I?”

“M-Miles.”

I growl.

“Stop it,” she whimpers.

“Who do you think of when I call you baby?” I breathe in her ear. I slide my hand from her hair around to her throat. My fingers catch her hummingbird pulse, and I relish how fast her heart is beating. “Tell me as I’m taking your sweet ass, *who’s on your mind, baby?*”

“*You.*”

“Good girl.” I kiss her jaw.

I resume fucking her—but I don’t last long. Not with the noises she’s making. I explode inside her, and I stay there until my dick loses some of its hardness. I slowly draw the back of her jersey down and her leggings up over her hips. She straightens and spins around, immediately grabbing my face.

Her lips land on mine, and my heart lurches.

I could get used to her initiating contact like this. I waited—painstakingly—for her to kiss me first. Although that feels like months ago at this point. Her tongue touches my lip, and I open my mouth for her.

Her kiss is hungry, insistent.

“If you’re not careful, I’m going to be ready for another round,” I warn.

“Maybe I just want you all messed up inside like me,” she replies.

Is she messed up inside?

Well, *yeah*. But I mean, from this?

Before my mind can catch up, she’s stepped away and tamed her wild hair. I adjust my jeans and chuckle to myself, then follow her back to the hallway. Down to the elevator, and up a floor. I take her hand, unwilling to be parted from her again, and we walk the path ’til I spot the right section.

Our friends left the two aisle seats open for us, and we quickly slip into them. We’re at the glass, directly across from the Titans’ bench. Perfect seats for when one of those fuckers gets thrown in the penalty box.

“You missed most of the first period,” Aspen says, then immediately hugs Willow. “You sounded amazing.”

My girl laughs nervously, leaning into me. “Thanks. It was nerve-racking.”

“We knew you could do it,” Violet says. “Sorry for tricking you to get to the arena, I just couldn’t bear the thought of you unhappy. We came up with that scheme for a date afternoon. But then Miles told us his plan for you to sing, and you crushed it.”

“I never heard you sing.”

My gaze lifts to my brother, all the way at the other end. He hadn't come to find us when we arrived, and I kind of forgot that he didn't return on the bus with the rest of the team.

Of course he wouldn't. He'd do anything for me... except give up a bet, of course.

Willow gives him a brittle smile. "Some things aren't meant for flings."

Knox narrows his eyes at her. My smile widens.

"How's the game?" Willow asks.

Greyson points. "Rhodes is pissed about something."

We turn our attention to our friend. He's on the ice, and the set of his jaw is a familiar one. His laser focus is directed at the puck, and he races toward the player skating toward him. He checks him into the glass in front of us, the whole wall bouncing and reverberating with the force of it.

He steals the puck and passes to a teammate, then throws his shoulder into the other player's gut when he tries to stand.

Then he's off.

"Wow," Aspen murmurs. "Um... is he okay?"

Steele shrugs. "Never seen him quite so angry, but maybe he's just blowing off steam."

I glance up at the clock. Six minutes left of the first period.

At the five-minute mark, he starts a fight. Gloves off, helmet tossed, it's more of a brawl than anything else. I have no idea what he says to the other guy to bait him, but suddenly they're both swinging and bleeding.

Jacob gets his opponent down on the ice, but he doesn't stop punching. The refs and linemen swarm him, and it takes three of them to drag him up and away.

Well, shit.

JACOB

No one knows agony like I do.

I feel it every day. Constantly. It's become an undercurrent to other emotions, tainting even precious, happy memories. Few and far between as they are. It's a black stain on my soul, and some days, I fear the stain is only getting darker. Going deeper.

Eventually, there will be no coming back from this.

Every time we stand and wait for the national anthem, I think of *her*.

My songbird wasn't a singer, but she did make lovely noises in other circumstances.

Melody Cameron was a painter. Her easels were always covered in canvases, with mixed paint on wrapped palettes waiting nearby for her to restart her work.

English professor by day, artist by night.

Tonight feels more visceral. Maybe it was Willow singing. I tried not to stare at her, standing on the line on the ice. But seeing her, with Miles just beyond the door, was like a punch to the gut.

Him, Greyson, Steele—they got their girls. They hold on to them so fucking tight.

I should've done that. I should've caged my songbird when I had the chance, because she flew away without a fucking word. There was no trace of her *anywhere*.

And then that asshole made a comment under his breath, how it's no fucking wonder I'm single because of my goddamn playing. It wasn't even that big of a deal.

But I was already rubbed raw, and I snapped.

His fists against my face, his knuckles snapping into my cheek and jaw, wasn't enough. The victory wasn't enough either.

His blood coats my skin as I'm ejected from the game for misconduct. Coach follows me out, screaming at me all the way into the locker room, but I've got no reply. I get out of my skates and pads and leave the locker room in silence, heading down one of the hallways toward the exit.

I won't leave—then I'd truly be fucked—but I need something.

Fresh air or whatever. But I find myself heading up to the next level, then up again. The doors to the suites are all mostly closed, the spectators enjoying their private rooms without being bothered by attendants or stray sports fans.

Art lines the walls. A sign catches my attention, something about all the proceeds from purchasing the paintings going to charity. I glance at the plaques under each painting, noting the name and title, the medium. Oil, watercolor, mixed media. On and on.

Then I see it.

A bird shouldn't be conspicuous. It's bright teal, almost fictional in its coloring, but the feathers look soft and real and alive. I draw closer, taking it in. The bird's feet are covered in a black substance. Oil or tar, maybe, that also got on the tips of its wings. Probably rendering it unable to fly.

I shouldn't be drawn to it.

But I try to take in all of it, right down to the shimmer in the bird's eye, before my attention falls to the name.

M. Cameron

My heart stops, and I spin in a slow circle. Almost like I'm going to catch her watching me, laughing.

"Joke's on you, Rhodes," she'd say.

My skin is fucking burning.

I note the little number taped next to it and stride down the hall to the table, where an attendant sits.

"I need number seven," I tell her.

She blinks up at me. "Um, it's an auction. We're taking bids until the end of the second period."

"Great. Number seven, what's it up to?"

She clicks on her computer. "Eight hundred dollars."

"What can you tell me about the artist?"

The woman slides a brochure toward me. “There’s a blurb about each artist featured tonight. Did you want to place a bid?”

I nod once, my jaw set. It’s going to charity, right? Fuck it. “Ten thousand dollars.”

Her eyes round. “Oh. Wow, okay.”

I slide a hundred-dollar bill toward her. “And you’ll notify me if I’m outbid.”

“I can’t take that,” she mumbles.

Her name tag reads *Elaine*.

“Elaine.” I lean down on the table, putting my face level with hers. “This painting is speaking to me. And it’s for charity. You would want to get as much as you could for it, wouldn’t you?”

“O-of course,” she stammers.

Her fingers curl around the bill, and satisfaction rumbles through me. She gives me a form to fill out, which I do. My handwriting feels messier than usual, my block print at a slant and the letters crammed together. Once I’m done, I straighten and check my phone.

A few messages from Knox, asking if I’m okay. And what the fuck happened.

The horn blows, ending the first period. There wasn’t much time left when I was kicked off the ice, so there must’ve been more penalties. More clock stopping, dragging out the time. I tuck the brochure in my back pocket and hurry to the locker room to get yelled at more.

An excruciating amount of time later, when the team returns to the benches for the second period, I sit alone in the locker room and pull out the brochure.

Where there are photos of other artists, posing next to their art displayed on walls, *M. Cameron* has nothing. Just a short blurb listing her other accomplishments. A few awards, a gallery in New York City that has more of her paintings.

Fuck.

I look up the gallery.

I feel insane, and maybe a little out of control.

“Thank you for calling Wild Oak Art, this is Shelby,” a warm voice says. “Can I help you?”

“Yes.” I clear my throat. “I’m wondering if you still have artwork by M. Cameron?”

“Melody?”

My heart slams to a halt. “That’s her,” I manage. “Is she local?”

“I’m afraid not. Her brother-in-law owns the gallery, though.”

Brother-in-law?

She’s married?

No, maybe she has a sister who’s married. A sister she’s never mentioned. Not that she mentioned much of her life...

I close my eyes and remind myself to breathe. “How many paintings?”

The woman is quiet for a moment. I’ve already forgotten her fucking name, not that it matters. My face hurts, but it’s nothing compared to the storm picking up intensity in my chest. It’s lightning and thunder and ice-cold rain, whipping into a hurricane that’s going to take me out.

“We have two portraits in mixed media. Oil and acrylic, sixty by forty inches. One oil painting, forty by sixty. Two charcoal drawings, twenty by twenty. So five total at the moment.”

“I’ll take them,” I blurt out.

Shocked silence. “Mr...”

“Rhodes,” I supply. “I’m a fan of Ms. Cameron’s work. I don’t care the cost, but I will need them shipped to my home in Colorado.”

“Of course.” Pause. Then, “Denver, by chance?”

“Yes.” I give her my information.

“Between us, Mr. Rhodes... her brother-in-law mentioned a show she’s doing in Denver in a few months. I’m not sure if anything has been announced... But since you live in the area, I figured I would mention it.”

I stand. I just can’t sit anymore, not with the idea of Melody Cameron being in the same fucking city as me. Again.

Finally.

“Thank you,” I reply. “Anything else?”

“No. I’ll charge once we have shipping.”

“You’ve been most helpful.”

I hang up and shove my phone back in my pocket, then head up to the third floor. I find Melody’s painting and stop in front of it, my arms crossed over my chest. Staring at the brush strokes, knowing she put them there, knowing that she touched and handled and *created* this piece, is almost too much.

“Mr. Rhodes?”

I turn toward the attendant.

She points to her computer. “You’ve been outbid.”

Fuck.

“By who?” I demand.

Her expression turns pinched. “Placed online by... Mr. Cameron.”

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MILES

The Colorado Titans win in overtime. It's getting dark by the time we head out of the arena, and while we'd love to be able to stay another night, we have class tomorrow.

Missing class could very well equal grades low enough to kick us off the hockey team. And with everyone else being seniors, on the verge of making it to the playoffs, there's no fucking way we're risking our grades.

Willow leans into me. I wrap my arm around her shoulders, enjoying the willing affection. I have no problem taking it from her—but it is nice to see her *want* the contact.

Greyson takes the keys to Violet's car. Aspen and Steele follow them, leaving us with my brother.

Maybe not the *best* decision, but... if there's ever a time for a test, I suppose it's now.

Knox rented a car for us to get home. He slips into the driver's seat, and Willow automatically goes to the back.

Well, fuck that, I'm not going to choose him over her. I slide in next to her, pulling her across the middle seat to cinch her to my side once again. Her expression seems caught between lust and guilt.

Knox drives behind Greyson, getting on the highway and picking up speed. He puts on the radio, loud enough to drown us all out, and I smile to myself.

This is my brother on his best behavior.

Night falls. We've got another few hours of driving, but it seems Willow is wide awake. She's scrolling through her phone, head bent. Her blonde hair swings in her face.

I reach around her and unbuckle her seat belt, then pull her onto my lap. She tosses her phone down on the seat next to us and loops her arms around my neck.

“What’s your plan?” she asks in my ear. Her voice is breathy and perfect.

“Hmm.” I palm the apex of her legs through her leggings. “Maybe you should demonstrate how a real man makes you come?”

Her eyes narrow.

But therein lies the challenge.

Knox won’t care. He’s already brought home puck bunnies, and I know he screwed a girl from Bexley University last night. It’s not in his nature to stick with one girl, and that’s going to be his MO for a while. Fuck and pretend he doesn’t have emotions.

Okay, maybe he’ll care a little, in the territorial sort of way, but I can promise that he’s never made Willow scream the way I can.

Because I know her, inside and out. All the ugly, fucked-up shards of her. The pieces she’s convinced will slice us to shreds.

She forgets that I like pain. That I want to bleed with her.

“Straddle me,” I order in her ear, adjusting my position.

Her lower lip is caught between her teeth, but she swings her leg over. She settles on my thighs, the heat between her legs so close—and so far. I kiss her and only vaguely hear Knox’s groan in the front seat.

She might not hear it at all, because she doesn’t react to him. She does react to the way my tongue takes possession of her mouth, though. Her hips roll forward, grinding against my tented jeans.

I cup her face with both hands. My fingers ease into her hair, dragging her closer. Until we’re flush from chest to groin.

The music gets louder. A loud bass thumping in my ears, matching my rapid heartbeat.

Willow tears her lips from mine, kissing my jaw. She dips down, her lips trailing across my throat. I hiss when she bites me, and my dick gets even fucking harder. It strains against my jeans, but neither of us go to free it.

My hands leave her face, her neck, and go to her waistband. She sucks in a breath when I slide my hand in, cupping her pussy. My middle and ring finger push inside her, thrusting with shallow little pushes. The heel of my palm rubs her clit.

“Ride my hand,” I whisper.

She lifts her head and meets my gaze. She’s so fucking sexy like this, eyes wild and hair messed from my hands. I slip my other hand under the jersey, and I squeeze her breast. I tug her nipple, then skate my thumb over it.

Willow’s lips part, and she moves her hips again. Pressing harder on my hand, absorbing the friction. She’ll be marked there soon enough. Thinking about that makes me want to sink into her—but I don’t want my brother to catch an eyeful of her ass.

Hearing her come is gift enough.

I look over her shoulder and meet his gaze in the mirror.

“You asshole,” he mouths.

I grin and turn my attention back to the squirming girl on my lap. My balls are tight, my cock so fucking swollen I might come in my pants from the sight of her. Like a teenager.

Wouldn’t that be embarrassing?

Willow glances over her shoulder at Knox, and anger surges inside me. It’s white-hot.

“His fingers feel better than your dick ever did,” she tells him on a gasp. “I hope you find a girl who gives you the best sex of your life—and then she never lets you inside her again.”

Knox laughs. “If you think that’s you—”

“Get off your high horse,” she interrupts. “I don’t.”

I shake my head and release her breast. I tug her face back around by her chin. “Eyes on me.”

“Okay,” she moans.

I curl the fingers inside her, rubbing the spot that I know will make her explode. Her eyes roll back, and she moves faster. Riding my hand like it’s my cock, her bouncing swaying her breasts right in my face.

I shove her shirt up and lean forward, biting her breast through the thin fabric of her bra. Her back bows, pushing them into my face, and I yank the cup down. I suck and bite her nipple and palm the other one.

She comes with a cry, burying her face in my shoulder. I keep moving my fingers, milking her orgasm, until she goes lax on top of me.

“What about you?”

My cock is so hard, I’m two seconds away from exploding. She looks down.

“If you suck him off, I’m going to throw you both out of this car,” Knox swears.

“And leave us on the side of the road?” I laugh, although it’s strained.

Because she’s tracing a path over my jeans.

“Okay,” Willow says instead. “We’ll let you handle the cleaning fee when you drop the car off.”

She unbuttons my jeans and reaches in, past my briefs, and wraps her slim fingers around my shaft. My head falls back.

Do I think of my grandmother?

Or do I let this happen?

But then she’s bending over, practically folding herself in half, and her lips wrap around my pierced head.

“Fuck,” I groan.

She strokes me, sliding her hand up and down. Squeezing and twisting like she’s given a million guys hand jobs before.

I don’t love *that* thought, but I do love whatever she’s doing to me right now.

Her tongue laps at my slit, her lips only closed around the tip of my dick. She’s not sucking, but damn it, her tongue is doing magical things.

Magic cunt, magic tongue. What part of this girl isn’t special?

“You two are the worst,” Knox grumbles.

I jack my hips up, but the movement is almost involuntary. I slide farther into her mouth, hitting the back of her throat. This is the throat fuck I promised her earlier.

I grip the back of her head and push her down. She cups my balls, kneading and tugging, and my hips move again on their own. It’s like I’ve lost control, and I lean back as I fuck her mouth. She’s off my lap completely, only her knees on the edge of the seat and her ass pressed against the seat in front of us keeping her steady.

“Swallow, baby,” I order, my attention locked on her body.

I wait for the flinch, or the reaction, but there is none. If anything, she opens her throat wider, and I shoot deeper inside her.

My balls retract, and my orgasm rushes forward. My cum spurts down her throat, which automatically works and contracts around me. She swallows, and swallows, and swallows.

Until I pull out of her mouth and drag her face up, kissing her hard.

I taste myself and her saliva on my tongue, and she slides back onto my lap. She loops her arms around my neck, holding me as tight as she can.

“I love you,” I say in her ear. Words just for her. Because anyone who convinced this girl she doesn’t know love can fuck off right to Hell.

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WILLOW

I break the silence that lingers in the aftermath of Miles and I getting each other off with Knox in a front-row seat... by telling them about the dead guy's brother.

And that really doesn't *break* the silence so much as elongate it.

"I'm sorry," Knox says, glancing back at me. "But you're telling me that the guy Miles killed, the guy who put something in your drink and tried to rape you, has a brother? And that brother is searching for him?"

"And going the intimidation route," I add. "I don't know if the car is connected, but the detective seemed pretty convinced that it wasn't a coincidence."

"So we know he drives a truck," Miles concludes. "And he's looking for his brother, clearly, so he doesn't know he's dead."

Never thought I'd say it, but I'm glad they didn't put the body somewhere easily found. Like planting it elsewhere for the police to find.

"Where is he?" I ask, my stomach swooping.

I don't want to know. I've never wanted to know. Minus the meat freezer photo Miles showed me, which I've got to assume has now been deleted for our own sake, I didn't ask any questions.

That would only make me an accomplice.

"This guy's been trying to find his brother for weeks," Miles muses. He's got his hand on my thigh, drawing a nonsense pattern with his finger. "How did he get to your apartment? So close after..."

I think back. "He was dancing with me at Prime. Is there security footage?"

Knox frowns and pulls out his phone. He dials, the phone connected to Bluetooth in the car, and it rings twice before Greyson answers.

“What’s up?”

“What do you know about Prime’s owner?” Knox asks. He fills their car in on what we’ve been discussing.

“Nothing,” Greyson answers. “Vi?”

“No,” she echoes. “Just that it opened somewhat recently.”

“Did you see any cameras in there? Security apart from the bouncer out front?”

“They scan IDs,” Aspen says. “Not everyone, but some nights. Do they keep a record?”

“Probably,” I reply. “I think they were scanning IDs the night I was there.”

Miles shifts forward, two lines forming between his brows. “O’Brien. When does your family return?”

“In a few days,” Steele replies. “So whatever you want to do, we need to do it soon.”

I meet Miles’ gaze in the dark. He’s worried. Maybe not outright, but enough to worry *me*, too. A shiver goes up my spine.

All of this is my fault.

When I close my eyes, I see Miles yanking the knife out of the guy’s neck.

But it wasn’t just me—they all had a part to play. Only Violet and Aspen are innocent, and I want to keep it that way.

“We should go now,” I mouth to him.

He nods once. “Let’s stop at the next rest stop. Switch cars.”

That’s exactly what we do—except when I think I’m going with Miles, he pushes me back toward the rental. “Go with the girls, baby. We’ll take care of this.”

I plant my hands on my hips. “Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No, you asshole. You got me into this—”

“Me?” Miles laughs. “You got yourself into this, wild girl. I got you *out* of it—”

“You didn’t have to murder him,” I whisper-yell. “You didn’t have to use him as an intimidation tactic.”

His eyes darken. “I may have twisted it that way, Willow, but he was dead either way. But at least you learned something.”

I throw my hands up. “At least I *learned* something? What, that my boyfriend is a psychopath?” I freeze. “You’re not my boyfriend.”

Oh, fuck. He’s grinning.

Argument forgotten, he looks like he just won everything.

“Boyfriend, huh? Not a fake one. For real.”

“Nope.” I step backward.

“Okay, fine, you can come.”

He lunges forward, and I let out a sharp squeal. We’re in the middle of the parking lot of a rest stop, but no one gives a shit. He grabs my hips and tosses me over his shoulder, then breaks into a *run*.

“She’s my real girlfriend!” Miles yells.

I shake my head and laugh.

What the fuck is wrong with us?

“Fake,” I cry out. “Fake girlfriend!”

He slaps my ass.

I yelp again and dig my nails into his back, hoping they cause some real damage. Like blood and scars or whatever.

He runs in a wide circle, drawing the attention of everyone else in our group. He slows down beside Violet’s car and leans forward, setting me down.

I grip his forearm, steadying myself, and glare at him.

“Was that necessary?”

“Celebrations? Yes, always.” He winks at me, then focuses on his friends. “Willow’s coming with us.”

“Fine by me,” Greyson says. “As long as you don’t fuck her in the backseat again...”

Miles smirks.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumble, elbowing Miles. “He’ll behave.”

“It’s you we need to worry about,” he says in my ear.

My face flames.

Was that me? Did I instigate that? I mean... *maybe*. But also, definitely not. Miles is just a conniving jerk. That’s why I like him. Not love, no, no, no. But *like*? Yeah. Sure.

I hug Aspen and Violet. They get in the rental car and head out, and the guys and I pile into Violet's car. I'm squashed between Steele and Miles, which Miles has no trouble fixing by plucking me up and putting me on his lap sideways. I lean against him and the door, and he wraps his arms around me like a seat belt.

Soon enough, we're pulling off the highway and navigating through a small, dark town. It's silent, with no sign of night life, and eventually we come to the top of a long driveway.

Steele tells Greyson the code, and the gate—*it has a gate!*—swings inward. I stare at Steele, then at the upcoming house. It's *huge*. Like, mansion big. I have no idea if the Whiteshaws or Devereuxes are this kind of rich, but it's clear that Steele's dad has a fuck ton of money.

Greyson parks in front of the garage, and we all pile out. Steele types in the code to the garage, and it rumbles upward, the lights flickering on.

The garage is empty, luckily. We hurry inside, and the garage door slides down behind us. I follow the guys down a short hallway, into another garage-like room. It feels like a guy's version of a wet dream, which is weird. Like, games and an oversized television and couch, and a workbench along the far wall. The freezer is on the far wall, padlocked shut.

All at once, my body goes cold.

I remember the feeling of freezing.

"He was already dead when we put him in," Miles says to me.

I blink hard, then look up at him. "Yeah."

He nods and moves past me. He's got the key to the padlock, and he wastes no time unlocking it and shoving the door up.

I inch closer, then peer down at the body.

He's bent at weird angles, jammed in with folded limbs and a bent neck to fit. He's wrapped in plastic, obscuring his face. It's just his outlines that I can see. An elbow there, a hand there. His nose protruding through the opaque covering, the roundness of the top of his head.

"Still safe," Steele comments. "I talked to Rhodes about this a few weeks ago. He suggested digging a hole, burning the body in it, then burying it. But the ground is still frozen."

There isn't as much snow here. And there was hardly any where their game was yesterday. The farther north we go, the more snow and colder it is. Even though we're probably an hour south of Crown Point, it feels like a big temperature difference.

We have the lake effect, too. It compounds our weather, especially the snow.

“What’s his name?”

They don’t reply.

I glance over my shoulder at them, frowning. “Didn’t you check for a wallet or something? To know who you were... freezing?”

Miles shrugs. “It didn’t really matter at the time.”

I scoff. “If we know his name, we can find his brother’s name.” Taking a deep breath, I reach in and uncover the plastic wrap. It comes away easily, just having been tucked around him. I ignore his frost-bitten skin, the gaping cut on his neck, and pat down his pockets.

I pull a slim wallet from his pocket and open it, scanning his driver’s license. “Daniel Freeman. Crown Point resident, just a few streets over from me. Not so free anymore...” I try to laugh, but it doesn’t work out very well.

Seeing a photo of him alive, even though it’s a shitty DMV photo, sets me on edge. Nausea rolls through me, and I fold it back up and toss it on his lap. I shove the plastic down and take a few big steps back. He lived a few blocks over—and that, more than anything, makes me want to puke.

He was practically my neighbor.

“So what do we do?” I ask.

Miles and Knox trade a look.

“We could burn it without burying it,” Knox says slowly. “Out here, it wouldn’t raise much suspicion.”

“A fire in the middle of the woods would raise suspicion,” Steele counters. “At least if it was six feet down, the flames would be concealed.”

The room spins.

“Your family won’t get into it if we lock it again?”

Steele frowns. “He might find it suspicious to have a lock on his freezer.”

“We should move it,” Knox mutters. “Find somewhere else to stash it at the very least.”

“I don’t want to risk Aspen in this,” Steele finally says. “It was fine with them gone, but her sisters live here. And Dad will ask questions—”

Miles’ jaw tics. “What did you tell him?”

“Nothing, yet. But if he asks, I’ll come up with something.”

Not the best plan—but it's all we've got. Miles closes the lid and relocks it, and I can't decide if I feel better or worse for knowing exactly where the body is.

I do know, I won't be turning any of them in for this.

That much has shifted inside me.

I go to the couch and practically fall into it, burying my face in my hands. Our lives, or livelihoods, rest on how well Steele's dad will believe his story?

If Aspen hadn't already spilled how his dad trusted him so much, he orchestrated her to spy on him, I would believe in Steele's confidence.

"Next week is supposed to be in the fifties here," Miles says. "The ground will thaw, and we'll come back and do it then. Okay?"

"Okay," the guys all agree.

"Okay," I echo.

But something really doesn't feel right.

MILES

I pull away from the curb in my new rental, fuming in my head. In the rearview mirror, the police precinct gets smaller and smaller.

Detective Barrister spent the better part of an hour grilling me about enemies of Willow's, where she spends her evenings, who might be out to get her. If she's had any run-ins with a man who Willow might be too embarrassed to talk to the police about.

She showed me a sketch, a loose rendition of the man I killed. Although I suppose it could be his brother, the one searching for us.

In a way, I feel like we're being hunted.

Steele and Greyson went to Prime last night to scope the place out. They did spot security cameras, but they didn't have cash on them to bribe anyone to see it. The bartender seemed like the type to sway when faced with cash, though, so they're going to return tonight.

I can only imagine the fiasco that would erupt if the investigating detective discovered we've been snooping. And worse, that we knew exactly who we were looking for.

This asshole is targeting her, but he's been elusive. I keep scanning the streets in front of me for the dark truck with the brush guard, the one that totaled my car, but I've been coming up empty.

Willow: See you at the arena?

Me: On my way.

I drop my phone in the cup holder. My hockey bag is in the trunk. It'll be nice to have Willow within sight—and hopefully not too much of a distraction—and focus on what I can control. Stopping the puck from getting past me.

In just a few days, we play Leighton University at home. And then I'll take Willow back to meet my parents.

Spring break is next month. She mentioned in passing that her family is coming to visit, and I'm going to meet them. Okay, well, she didn't add that last part. But I will get an introduction, and perhaps buy them lunch or something. You know, make a good impression.

Since they've no doubt already got an earful about my brother's reputation—and how skilled he is at breaking hearts.

I sigh.

Something catches my eye in the rearview mirror, and my spine prickles.

A truck.

Keep cool, I order myself, taking a breath. Just because a truck is behind me doesn't mean it's *that* truck. Even if it has a brush guard on the front. And just because it suddenly flicks on its high beams, nearly blinding me, doesn't mean anything either.

I reach for my phone.

An engine roars behind me, and I'm reminded of the *crunch* sound my car made when it was rammed into a few nights ago. Then, I wasn't in it. Then, I wasn't going to be flattened like a pancake along with it.

I wrap my fingers around the phone, and I tell it to call my brother.

It rings.

Rings.

The roar gets louder, and I step on the gas out of pure instinct. My car shoots forward, running a stop sign and speeding through an empty intersection.

"Yo," Knox answers.

"I'm being followed by that asshole."

"Where are you?" he demands.

I crank the wheel, turning onto another road. One that will lead past campus and the arena. But the last thing I need is to lead him straight to Willow. "Passing the rink in two minutes."

The headlights fill my rearview mirror, and I have a split second to brace.

His truck slams into me from behind.

The rental car goes squirrely, the back end swinging around, and I drop my phone. I manage to keep myself on the road and press the pedal down

farther. Our speed picks up, the car whining.

“I dropped my phone,” I call. “If you can still hear me, I’m fine. I’m sure he just wants to scare Willow by getting to me—”

Slam.

This time, his hit spins my car. I lose control completely, my speed now a detriment. One of my wheels catches on a curb, and the whole vehicle lurches sideways. My head bounces off something, and my vision goes white for a second. My stomach goes with the car as it flips over on its side, sliding with a sharp squeal across someone’s lawn. My seat belt is the only thing keeping me from eating shit.

“Miles,” Knox is yelling. His voice is tinny. “Jesus fuck—”

Slam.

Metal bends, and the car shudders. It’s flipped onto the roof. I hang upside down. I’ve still got stars blooming in front of my eyes, and I can’t seem to focus. There’s another shudder, and glass tinkers around me.

My door is wrenched open, letting in cold air.

Hands reach in, and my seat belt is cut. I fall, my body smashing on the steering wheel, and I’m dragged out of the car and across the lawn. My heels leave twin, grooved paths in the snow-covered grass.

I’m guided up into the bed of the truck, and it only occurs to me belatedly to fucking fight. I struggle, swiping at him, but he swings something down. I see it coming, but my reactions are too fucking slow.

Pain explodes across my temple, and I’m out like a light.

WILLOW

I t's been three days since we checked on the body. Daniel Freeman.

I'd rather not have his name attached. That's where Miles got it right. As he said: *It doesn't really matter*. A dead body is a dead body.

Jacob, via phone, warned us not to search this guy's name. If the police do end up doing a deep dive into us, then our search histories could be evidence.

Nothing like terrifying a girl when all she wants is to find out who this guy is. What made him tick, what made him evil. What made him decide to put something in *my* drink that night.

He could've gotten away with it if Miles wasn't watching out for me. Actually, he absolutely would've. If I didn't have a murderous guardian angel. If he didn't carry me out of the bar before the drug took hold, I would've been helpless.

My breath catches, and I wrap my jacket tighter around me. Violet, Aspen, and Thalia are spread out across the row beside and below me, textbooks or laptops out. We're at the arena waiting for practice to start. I have a notebook on my lap, with the pretense of copying my notes to study for an upcoming exam, but I've only written two lines.

I just can't concentrate.

Something is rubbing me wrong on the inside. Like... a precursor to something bad happening.

And then I see waving arms across the rink, and I narrow my eyes at Knox.

I'd ignore him—in fact, I do. But a moment later, I hear him shouting my name, and I raise my head again.

“Meet me at the exit,” he yells. “Right now.”

I scowl at him, but whatever. I toss my notebook on top of my bag and shove my phone in my pocket, murmuring an, “I’ll be right back,” to the girls.

Five minutes later, I’m outside.

Knox is pacing. He grabs my upper arm and drags me toward his car, so fast I stumble.

“What the fuck?” I shove at him. “What are you doing?”

“You got Miles into this mess,” he seethes. “If anything happens to my baby brother—”

“Knox.” I dig my heels in. “Where are we going?”

“Get in the car, Reed.” He gets up in my face, his hand wrapping around the back of my neck. Holding me nose to nose with him. “My brother would sacrifice everything to save you. We’re going to do the exact same fucking thing.”

I search his frantic gaze.

Something happened. That wild, out-of-control feeling doubles in my chest, and I nod. He’s right: Miles would do anything for me, and it’s about time I learned to do the same.

He releases me when he sees my acceptance, and I get into the passenger seat of his car. He pulls out of the lot with a squeal of tires, turning toward their house. It isn’t long before we come up on the rental Miles’ insurance gave him. At least, it seems like it...

It’s upside down, the driver’s door open and blocking our view into the car. Smoke pours from the hood—and a second later, the whole car goes up in flames.

I gasp and slam my palm over my mouth. I scramble for the door handle, getting halfway to the burning car before Knox catches up with me. He yanks me back, ignoring the keening noise coming out of me. I can’t stop it any more than I can stop trying to get to the car.

“Look,” he orders, directing my face to the marks in the snow. Drag marks, not unlike the ones we’re leaving in the snow now. “Someone pulled him out.”

“Someone?”

Daniel Freeman’s brother, I’d bet.

Sirens scream in the distance. Knox shoves me into the car and hurries around to the driver’s side, hopping in and throwing it in reverse. We speed

backward fast enough to make me sick. I hold on to the door handle, my stomach all but in my throat, until he swings the back end around and smoothly tucks us into a driveway.

A second later, police cruisers pass us at high speed, their lights bouncing through the interior of the car. A firetruck follows. And then an ambulance.

He wasn't in it, I tell myself.

"This is a situation for the police," I tell Knox. "He took your brother. They can help—"

"No." He glares at me. "No, they can't help. We're going to fix this."

I swallow past the lump in my throat. Gone is any trace of the man I dated for a whole fucking year. Who I convinced myself I loved. The months apart, the eye-opening experience given to me by Miles, has proven that Knox never actually gave a shit. He was pretending, and so was I. It just took my heart a little time to be convinced of that.

Oh my God.

Do I love Miles?

Stop it. I sink into the seat as Knox speeds away from the car crash.

But Jesus, I thought I was going to lose it when I saw his car upside down.

"Willow."

"Yeah."

"Get out of the car."

I look up. We're at the hockey house, idling at the curb.

The front door is open.

My stomach is doing funny things. Why did Knox bring me here?

"What's going on?"

He grits his teeth. "You for him. That's what he said."

"You talked to him? The brother—"

He reaches out and grabs my wrist. Like I might try to bolt or something. Utterly ridiculous, seeing as we've come this far. But I let him drag me across the center console, and I try to reconcile the guy I knew with the one sitting in front of me.

He already said he'd do anything to save his baby brother—he knew that this was part of it.

"I was on the phone with Miles when he crashed," Knox says quietly. "I listened as that fucker hit his car repeatedly until he crashed, and then he

dragged my brother out of it. And he took his phone, too. I heard his voice. He just wants answers, Willow, and he thinks you can give them to him.”

My shoulders sag. I should’ve known Knox had an ulterior motive. If it was just a matter of getting to his baby brother, he would’ve gone without me.

“Okay,” I whisper. “But he won’t forgive you.”

“But at least he’ll be alive.”

He releases my wrist, and I climb out of the car. My legs feel wooden, a bit shaky, as I walk toward the house. The open door isn’t unusual in parties. How many times have I stood on the darkened porch after a game or dance competition, with the sounds of a party going on inside, and contemplated just running away?

I glance at the corner of the porch.

I cried there once. Because Knox was flirting with someone else, and because he missed my competition. That’s when Miles sat down and told me that I was going to fall in love with him. That our love lines were destined for it, or whatever nonsense he spouted. I trace the line in my palm with my fingernail.

This is it.

Lie convincingly or die.

I take a deep breath and step into the house.

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MILES

I come to with a jolt.

There's a steady, fast beeping noise. White walls, white bed, white ceiling. A blue curtain cuts off my view of anything else.

Hospital, my mind supplies.

I touch my temple and wince. There's a bandage covering it, and the aching pain spreads out from there across my head. I've taken my fair share of hits, but none of them have felt quite like this.

Like I got run over by a truck.

Truck. Daniel Freeman's brother.

Willow.

My mind is working overtime to catch up with what the fuck is going on. He was there, dragging me out of the car. Only to bring me to the hospital?

"Hey, there." A nurse pulls back the curtain. "Good to see you're awake."

I lick my lips. "What happened?"

He hit me in the temple with something. It shouldn't have knocked me out for longer than... I don't know. An hour? Less?

"The EMTs brought you in. You were found bleeding on the benches out front." She frowns. "Someone dropped you off. Do you remember what happened?"

I start to shake my head, and the room tilts.

Gah, don't do that. My stomach twists, the nausea making everything worse.

"No," I manage.

She grabs a Styrofoam cup with a lid and straw, handing it to me.
“Water?”

“Thanks. How long have I been here? Has anyone called... anyone?”

“You actually came to once we started to move you, but you lost consciousness again when we were running tests. You’ve been here for about two hours. The doctor will be in soon to discuss your results. And your parents are on their way.”

Great.

“My phone?”

She retrieves a small, clear bag of my belongings from the closet.
“Everything you came in with is in here.”

“Thanks.”

She leaves me alone, and I suck down the water. Setting it aside, I rummage through the bag for my phone. It’s all the way at the bottom, and there’s a crack in the screen. Still works, though, so I call Knox back.

“Miles?”

“Hey,” I answer. “I’m, um, in the hospital. Where are you?”

“Holy shit, dude. I—*hey*—”

“Miles.” Violet’s voice now, with way more panic than my brother’s.
“Where is she? He won’t tell us.”

“Because I don’t know,” Knox mutters in the background.

My heart lurches. The beeping on the monitor is picking up speed.
“Who?”

“*Willow*,” Violet cries.

“Hey, it’s Greyson. Knox took Willow somewhere after your phone call. Said the brother wanted to exchange her for you...”

“I’ve been here for two fucking hours,” I tell him. I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, pinching the phone between my ear and shoulder. Although that really makes my vision go fuzzy. I’m connected to wires, and I start pulling them off. The monitor gives an alarmed shriek.

Fuck.

I jam my finger into buttons along the bottom of the machine until it goes quiet.

“He had me,” I say. “He had me unconscious, and he...”

He twisted my brother to suit his needs. He’s been after Willow this whole fucking time, but I was the easier target tonight. So he struck, and now he has *her* instead of me.

“Come pick me up.”

“We’re already on our way,” he assures me.

I hang up and shed the loose hospital gown, pulling on my clothes. My jeans are damp with blood and water, but I ignore the cold sensation against my skin. My shirt didn’t fare much better. Socks, shoes. My knife. I flip it open and press the pad of my thumb into the blade, then close it. I pocket it, plus my wallet and phone, and slip out of the room.

I’ll pay for not discharging myself appropriately later.

Right now, I’m going to kill my brother.

And then the dead guy’s brother.

I manage to make it all the way past the security desk, out the front door, before someone calls out behind me. I ignore it and hop into Greyson’s truck idling at the curb. I slam the door and twist around, looking first at Greyson, then Violet and Steele in the backseat.

“She’s my best friend,” Violet says steadily. “I’m going with you.”

“Fine. Where’s my brother?”

“At the hockey house,” Steele answers. “Aspen’s watching him.”

I grunt.

Not quite good enough.

“That’s where we’re going,” he adds. “Because that’s where he brought Willow.”

We get there in record time. I stride into the house and make a beeline for my brother, who stands from the kitchen table when he sees me.

I slam my fist into his face. There’s a crunch, but it doesn’t do shit to dull the ache in my chest.

And then my phone rings.

It’s Willow.

WILLOW

Daniel Freeman's brother stands in the middle of the room, my phone in his hand. He's got a mask on, but it doesn't hide the eyes. He has the same eyes as his brother.

He asked if I knew him.

He asked if I knew where he was.

He asked if I would tell him anything to save my life.

No, no, no.

Lie after lie, sitting sourly on my tongue, while he paced in front of me.

We're not in the hockey house anymore. I walked in, registered the quiet, and the way Knox sped off, and then felt the prick of the needle in my neck and a presence behind me, catching me when my legs gave out.

He took me out the back, my body slung over his shoulder, through a yard. Then another. He cut up along the side of a house and onto another street, where his truck waited.

He put me in the passenger seat and bound my hands together in front of me. It was the weirdest thing, not being able to move but being aware of all of it. My eyes were half-lidded. Almost able to blink, but not quite enough to shut out the world.

We drove and drove. He typed in a code. And then another.

I eye the freezer in the corner of the room that holds his brother's body. The man cave-ness to the room that is so fucking familiar. Because we were just here a day ago, or two?

Steele's family home.

So close, and so fucking far away.

He hasn't looked twice at it, and it makes me wonder if he really knows how close we are to his truths.

But the more I examine it, the more wrong it feels.

There's something missing, and I can't put my finger on it.

My phone makes a noise as the call connects, and the brother holds out the phone away from his face.

Video call.

"Greetings, Miles Whiteshaw," he says.

His voice sets me on edge every time he opens his mouth. It's slimy and *wrong*.

"Where is she?" Miles demands.

The brother twists the phone around, and I lift my head enough to catch sight of Miles' face. He's okay. There's a bandage on his temple, and his eyes are wild, but he's *okay*. I almost didn't believe it when he assured me of such a thing, and I let out a slow breath.

Whatever happens to me from here on out will be okay if Miles is okay.

"You love her, don't you, Miles?" He kneels beside my chair.

My hands and ankles are bound. I can't do a fucking thing except squirm away from him and try not to fall over.

He grabs my hair, bringing my face in close to his masked one.

"Look how pretty she is, and so terrified."

"I'm going to kill you," Miles spits. His face is his own version of a mask, his cold eyes only softening a little when he sees me.

"Like you killed my brother?"

I suck in a breath.

"Ah, the love of your life is frightened for you." He faces me, those brown eyes searing into mine. "All your pathetic lies were worthless. They assured me that I couldn't trust you, even if I wanted to... even if I was inclined to do so. I have a weak spot for blondes."

I shudder.

"You took my brother," he continues, his words directed at Miles. "So I'm going to do you one better."

He hauls me up and drags me toward the freezer. He's got his other hand out, angled down with the camera to show our progression.

"You'll never trust *your* brother again," he says. "Because you'll always blame him for killing your girlfriend."

Belatedly, I realize what's wrong with the freezer.

The padlock is gone.

He hauls the lid open and reveals an empty freezer. It's not cold, though. At some point, he must've unplugged it. It doesn't burn my fingers when I grip the edge, pushing back and trying to keep away from it.

"Aw, she's afraid." He's suddenly in my face, running his covered nose up my temple and into my hair. He's focused on the camera, though. "I hope you dream about her screams, Miles Whiteshaw."

No, no, no.

The fear is there, so fucking real it chokes me. I can't get any words out beyond a moaning noise, and I struggle against him. He's got a hundred pounds on me and is at least a foot taller.

He pushes me into it, forcing me down. He grabs my ankles and twists my body, so I fall into the case freezer on my side.

"Scream," he commands.

I don't want to, but I can't help it. It just bursts out of me, all the terror and fear unable to be contained. It echoes around me as he shows the camera what he did. He reveals the padlock in his hand, and then he closes the lid.

Silence.

I stare at the inside of the lid, although it's pitch-black. I can't even see my hands in front of my face. But I reach out and probe, pushing at the lid. Then shoving harder, until my muscles ache and my breathing is sharp pants in my ear.

Stay still, some small voice in my head whispers.

Calm breathing will help me survive.

There's no air in here.

Well, there is—but there won't be for long.

Miles must know I'm at Steele's parents' house. He must've recognized it. I touch the lid, the sides. There's water in the bottom, just a little, that soaks through my jeans. I shiver and curl into a ball, letting my head touch the bottom of the case.

My heartbeat is erratic, and breathing is hard. My mind keeps playing tricks on me, thinking I've suddenly run out of options.

And then the whole case jostles, and I let out another squeal.

I'm moving.

The sliding, scraping noise fills the interior, although it's muffled.

One side rises sharply, and I crash into one of the walls. Then the other side is lifted. My body sways with new movement, and the fear almost takes over again. I pound my fists against the side.

“Let me out!” I call. “You don’t want murder on your hands.”

Nothing.

Maybe he does want murder.

Maybe his brother meant everything to him.

I close my eyes—for all the good it does. It’s the same darkness as with my eyes wide open. I don’t know how long this goes on. I try counting, but my numbers are off. Too fast, too slow. There’s no drastic shift in speed. I think he’s got the freezer on wheels, or maybe loaded in his truck. Minutes melt together.

He could take me anywhere, and Miles would never find me.

Eventually, it stops. I bang on the sides again, calling out, and get no reply.

Suddenly, the case is tipped over. It tumbles, and I scream again. I hit all sides of it like it’s being launched down a slope, and it finally stops moving.

My body hurts. Worse than after the fight with Amanda, or when Miles locked me in the walk-in freezer.

An exasperated huff escapes me. Of course this is the *second* freezer I’ve been locked in, and damn well convinced I’m going to die in.

I lie there panting, waiting for the punch line. Or maybe for the case to open and the guy to tell me that this was all a pathetic joke. A prank set up by Miles to teach me some sort of lesson.

Wishful thinking, Willow.

There’s nothing left to do but wait.

And pray he finds me before my air runs out.

MILES

I can't look at my brother.
Or anyone.

I just focus on directing Greyson to drive fucking *faster*.

When we realized where the brother had taken Willow, Greyson leapt up. He returned before the call even ended, holding a tracker that came from the front grill of Violet's car. Just slipped in behind the license plate. The fucking brother knew as soon as we took a detour from our route home. He may have even been following us there.

Greyson's pushing his speed, flying down back roads to get to Steele's house. We opted against the highway in case it's a trap. They monitor the highways, there's video surveillance everywhere. Jacob advised Greyson on avoiding any major roads if we were going to do anything illegal.

When we get to the house, the garage door has been left open. I hop out of the car and fly inside, only to skid to a halt.

The freezer is gone.

The cut lock is on the floor, a pair of bolt cutters beside it. He showed me a padlock in the video call. A new one he'd brought with him. He meant to do this. He *planned* this all.

"Where the fuck did he take her?" I roar.

I go for the app on my phone, pulling it up. Her tracker is gone, same as when I checked it an hour ago. Last known location: *here*. The freezer must be blocking it or something.

Steele's on the phone. He comes back with a frown and slight shake of his head. "Finch went back to Prime and talked to the bartender, who said a

big guy came in the day after Willow was there, demanding to see footage. Gave the bartender a thousand bucks.”

“And?” I demand. “Did Finch see it?”

“Yeah. It’s got a good shot of them dancing, then you slipping in and stealing her away. It also shows him following you out of the nightclub—all in all, it doesn’t look too conspicuous to the plain observer. Just two guys vying for a girl’s attention.”

I grunt.

Obviously, that’s not how it happened.

He put something in her drink, and he was waiting for her to lose consciousness. And then he was going to fucking rape her.

But instead, I carried her out of the bar and brought her home.

Hell—I led him there.

I pull at my hair. There’s no way to find her, or him—she’s going to die in that freezer, wherever that is. Maybe buried in the woods or...

“Wait.” I jerk around. “He doesn’t just want to take her from me. He wants me to go down for his brother’s murder.”

Steele and Greyson nod slowly.

“The app,” Greyson reminds me. “You can access her camera and mic, can’t you?”

Fuck.

I open the spyware. It gives me her phone’s location.

Middle of nowhere. Like, a back road between Crown Point and here. But then that, too, blinks out of existence.

Phone offline, it says. SIM card unavailable.

I throw my phone.

It smashes off the wall and to the floor, the already cracked glass shattering on the concrete. I go over and stomp on it, over and over, until Steele and Greyson drag me off it.

“Okay,” one of them says. “Breathe.”

I don’t want to breathe.

I jerk out of their holds and round on my brother. “This is your fault.”

He’s in the corner, his expression absolutely fucking miserable. His hands are tucked into his pockets. There’s blood in one of his nostrils from my earlier hit, although I don’t think I broke his nose.

Pity.

I stop in front of him and grip the front of his shirt. I shake him, and he doesn't even fight it.

"What makes you think she's not worth ten of me?" I yell in his face. "What gives you the right to play God and trade our lives like that?"

He drags his eyes up to mine. "Miles, I—"

"It's going to be a damn long time before I accept that you did this with any amount of kindness," I spit. I shove him backward.

He should've kept her safe.

But why? He played with her heart—and fuck it, he played with mine—for a *year*. Of course he would push her into the arms of the guy who wanted to hurt both of us.

Knox's phone rings.

I hold out my hand for it automatically, but he ignores me and answers it. His expression pinches, his mouth flattening. And then he offers the phone to me. A blocked number is calling him.

I snatch it. "Where is she?"

"What were you planning on doing with my brother? Cutting him up and tossing him in the lake? Burying him? Burning him?"

I stay silent, fear rattling through my chest that he's going to do the same thing to Willow.

"Come on, Miles," he croons. "Play the game with me. I'm going to drive the knife into you either way. See? I'll kill you when I'm done. I promise. You just need to suffer a little first."

"We were going to bury him," I choke out. "And then burn his body—"

"I'm going to enjoy watching your blood run cold," he promises. "Return to Crown Point and keep this phone on you. Poor Willow is running out of air, and I need you close."

The line goes dead.

Knox comes for me, but I turn away sharply.

"We need to go back to Crown Point," I tell my friends. I pick up the bolt cutters and take them with me, heading back to the truck.

"What else did he say?" Greyson asks, catching up to me.

Steele closes up the garage, and Knox follows slower. Dragging his feet.

"He said he wants to torture me before he kills me."

The sad part is that I'd accept it, if it means Willow lives.

WILLOW

I'm dying.

Maybe it's panic, maybe it's reality.

There's a weight on my chest, and a tightness in my lungs. It's harder to take a deep breath, so I settle for shallow pants. I'm using up my oxygen too fast, but holding back the terror from rushing through me is difficult. It's a tide that surges forward and recedes, over and over.

I press against the lid again, but it doesn't budge.

I'm starting to hallucinate. Shapes and faces in the darkness, watching over me.

Things I'll never see again: meeting Miles' parents, watching my sister graduate high school, falling in love.

You're already in love, idiot.

Miles' face looms in front of me. Smirking, secretive, caring. The blue eyes fill my vision, and for the first time since I was closed in here, I cry.

MILES

UNKNOWN

Meet me where you killed him.

If anyone accompanies you, she dies.

Greyson drops me off around the corner from Willow's house. I walk the rest of the way, my hands empty. I have the knife that killed his brother in my pocket and Knox's phone in my other.

Besides those two things, I've got nothing.

No bargaining chip, nothing to offer. No platitudes.

I'm going to die, or she is, or he will.

I ball my fists.

The door to Willow's house is open. I step into the foyer, glancing at the door on the first floor. The landlord's apartment door is shut tight. I continue up the stairs, a sinking feeling in my chest.

He wouldn't have lugged the case freezer up here.

So either she's not in it, or...

They're not here.

Except for the light on in the apartment, I would think I'm right. The light spills out into the hallway. I step inside the apartment and push the door shut behind me. Nothing moves. Not a whisper of sound reaches my ears.

My brother's phone chimes in my hand.

UNKNOWN

You're getting warmer.

Fuck this guy.

I do a sweep through the rest of the apartment. It's still destroyed, and my shoes pick up bits of soil as I go. I leave tracks as I check her bedroom and bathroom. Both empty.

Basement?

I pick up a knife from the counter and adjust my grip on it, the blade extending from the bottom of my hand and facing out. I make my way back downstairs silently and go around the stairwell, to the closed door that leads down.

I take the steps slowly, the light from Knox's phone illuminating the stairwell. It goes down five steps to a landing, then makes a right turn and descends farther.

When I get to the bottom, the lights flicker on over my head. They buzz as they come to life. I spin around and stop in my tracks when I find the masked brother. He's sitting on the case freezer, a gun in his hand. He's got it resting on his thigh, pointed at my feet.

"Did you lure me here to kill me?" I ask.

My gaze keeps going to the case.

Willow is in there.

Can she hear me? Does she know I'm here?

The man chuckles. "I haven't decided whether this ends with your death or just hers. Toss the knife, Miles."

I glare at him, my fingers tightening on the handle.

"Don't make me shoot you so soon."

Fuck it. I toss the kitchen knife away. It clatters to the concrete floor, and I kick it backward. Away from both of us.

He pats the lid that he's sitting on. "Willow Reed. What a peculiar name for an ordinary girl."

I grit my teeth. "She's not ordinary."

"No? Neither was my brother. He competed in the two thousand and four Olympics. He had a family—"

"He tried to rape her," I growl. "So clearly he didn't think she was so ordinary either."

“Interesting.” He tilts his head, staring at me through the holes in the mask. “So you’re saying it was in defense?”

“Yes.”

“Defense of a girl you weren’t with at the time. Of a girl who you bodily carried out of that club.”

“Yes.” My heart is hammering. “What do I have to do for you to let her out?”

He shifts. The gun’s muzzle shifts in my direction, and he raises it when I take a single step forward. “Stay where you are, Miles Whiteshaw.”

I raise my hands. “Okay, okay.”

“Your brother.” He leans forward. “Knox. Will you forgive him for delivering Willow to me? No, no, think before you answer. Mull it over. If the girl dies, it’s his fault, isn’t it? He put her into his car and drove her exactly where I said. He told her to go inside the house. He told her to come to *me*.”

My mouth opens and closes.

And I do think about it.

I think about him and only see a selfish bastard who put his love of me over my love of her.

“I don’t know,” I finally say. “Maybe I’d eventually be able to look him in the face again.”

He nods slowly. “A broken relationship. A wound that splits your family in two.”

“Yes.”

“And the love of your life, gone. Would you visit her grave? Would you go to her parents and her sister and tell them how it happened? How, when you finally get the padlock smashed and off, you were too late? Her skin will be mottled and blue from lack of oxygen. She won’t be pretty.” He raises the gun higher, his finger moving to the trigger. “Ah, ah. Careful.”

I step back. I truthfully hadn’t even noticed my jolt forward.

But I am envisioning everything he’s saying. He’s painting a bleak future for me.

“Should I tell you about the awful scream my mother let out when I told her that her baby was dead?” He sighs. It’s ragged, scarred. “Or should I let you wait to experience a mother’s cry of grief on your own?”

“Please don’t hurt her. Kill me if you must. Okay? Just shoot me in the fucking face and get it over with.”

He laughs and rises. “On your knees.”

A chill goes through me—and with it, my emotions. I drop to the floor. The impact rattles my bones, but I keep my chin up, and my eyes on him. He’s got everything, hasn’t he? Willow, his brother, me.

“She has to live.” I never thought I’d plead or beg anyone for anything—but for her life? Of course. I’d give everything. “Shoot me and open the freezer, let her out—”

“You’re bargaining? You’re on the floor, with nothing left to give.” He strides toward me, pushing the muzzle of the gun into my forehead. “You stupid boy. I’ve followed you for *weeks*. I know the perverted little games you play. I know that you thrive on chaos. You like to temper storms—but this is one you cannot quell.”

“You can’t kill me and leave her in there,” I growl. “What do you think my brother will do when he discovers me dead and Willow still locked in there?”

“Beg.” He shifts back a step, his weight transferring.

“Please just let me say goodbye.” I rise on my knees. My hand is so close to my pocket, to the knife that killed his brother, that my hand almost twitches. But somehow, it stays steady. “Please. She deserves a goodbye. Wouldn’t you have wanted—”

“Shut up,” he hisses. He takes a few steps back and jerks the gun toward the case—it’s clear permission to move. And from his pocket, he withdraws a key. He throws it on the floor in front of the case freezer.

I lunge for the key and pick it up. I unlock it and yank the padlock off, stuffing it into my pocket and palming the folded knife in one movement. And then I’m shoving the lid open, and light and air rushes into it.

For a moment, I think I’ve been tricked.

But then I lean over farther and find Willow curled at the bottom of the case. She’s bleeding from a cut on her temple, and her wrists and ankles are duct taped. Her eyes are closed. She’s in the fetal position, for fuck’s sake, looking half-dead. I reach inside and quickly slip the knife into her hand.

Then I feel her throat. For the pulse that I *need* to be there. It takes an agonizing few seconds to feel it. But then it’s there, bumping against the pads of my fingers, and relief whooshes through me. I cup her jaw, which is still warm, and move her head.

“Wake up, wild girl,” I whisper, shaking her shoulder. “You’re okay. Wake up.”

The edge of the freezer digs into my stomach. I keep reaching for her, but I don't try to haul her up and out. I just want her—no, I *need* her—to open her eyes.

When they do, when she comes back to consciousness, they're the prettiest, most dazed jewels I've ever seen.

"Am I dead?" she whispers.

"No, baby." My voice catches. "I'm so sorry. I love you. Please remember that."

I squeeze her hand, folding her fingers harder around the knife.

The masked man looms over us. He kicks out, his heel connecting with my ribs and sending me crashing sideways to the floor. I sprawl, then crawl backward. I glare at him, my heart skipping.

"Are you going to shoot me in the face?" I ask.

He scoffs. "And make you unrecognizable? Maybe I should."

"What did you do with your brother?"

He continues to follow me. "He's in a safe place. After you're dead, I'm going to frame your girl, here. It happened in her apartment, didn't it? By the faint smell of bleach, you tried to be thorough with your cleaning. Except the odds are in my favor. All it would take is a speck of blood... and the body."

I grit my teeth.

"Cheer up," he adds. "At least she's not dying. She'll live a long, miserable life in prison... well, I guess unless she gets the death penalty."

"Fuck off," I snap.

His eyes harden. He pulls off the mask and stares down at me. His face is a lot like his brother's. Not handsome. Not particularly masculine. He's got a weak jawline that slopes into his neck and a hooked, crooked nose. His brow bone is the most prominent thing on his face, and thick eyebrows.

He looks like an asshole.

"On your knees." He widens his stance and bringing the gun up. "I'm going to enjoy watching your girl scream as she watches you die."

I grimace.

He presses the gun to my forehead again, looming over me. His finger twitches on the trigger, and my whole body goes tight.

Bracing to die.

At least I got to tell Willow I love her—and the knife will give her a fighting chance of escaping this madman. Maybe she's already cutting

herself free and getting ready to run.

I keep my gaze locked on his face.

My murderer.

I taste it in my mouth, roll the words around.

They feel wrong. Like accepting this fate is something only an idiot would do. But what can I say? He's threatening the only girl I care about. The only one I'd give up everything for.

And he's asking—no, *demanding*—that I give up my life to save her.

Done.

Easy.

"Are you sorry for killing my brother?" he asks. "Your final words, Whiteshaw. Better make it count."

His thumb pulls back the safety. I don't know shit about guns, but clearly everything up until now wasn't a real threat.

Now, it's ready to go.

I lift my chin and stare him down. "If I knew this was how it would end, I would've tortured him a bit more first."

WILLOW

My lungs ache. The last thing I remember was taking gasping breaths, then nothing. More darkness, but it seemed worse than the pitch-black I was locked in. This was endless, and I was falling through it without a parachute.

But then cool, stale air rushed into me, and the familiar scent of Miles curled in my nostrils. His voice in my ears.

Another hallucination.

But when I asked if I was dead, his voice was a sweet melody. Sweet and sad, and he denied death. The pain in my muscles and joints came back next. My head was pulsing, a migraine of epic proportions brewing behind my eyes.

Miles loves me.

He told me. *Again*. And it sounded more like a plea, or an apology.

Except Miles Whiteshaw doesn't apologize.

He put his folding knife in my hands. I blink at it and try to get my numb fingers to work, to flip open the blade and slice through the tape. It takes me too many tries to get the blade pointed the right way, and then the right leverage. Force.

The blade slips through the tape as soon as I get it started. I sit up and glance over at Miles. He's on his knees, glaring up at the brother of the guy he killed without a shred of fear.

Me? I have plenty of fear.

"Are you sorry for killing my brother?" he asks Miles. "Your final words, Whiteshaw. Better make it count."

My heart kicks it into high gear. I cut the tape away from my ankles and move to a crouch. When neither notice me, I swing my leg out. Then the other. I land silently and step forward.

The gun is in Miles' face. He's going to fucking obliterate him.

But Miles says, "If I knew this was how it would end, I would've tortured him a bit more first."

I'm not losing him.

I lunge forward and swing with the knife. It buries in the back of the guy's knee, and he lets out a yell. A split second later, the gun goes off.

I scream, the noise tearing from my throat as I rip the blade out.

He comes to his knees. I leap onto his back and wrap my arm around his throat, and I finally get a good look at Miles.

His face hasn't been ruined by a bullet. He's on his side, staring up at us.

But then the man seems to get it together, and he grabs at my wrist.

I let out a scream and bring my other hand around, squeezing my eyes shut. I drag the blade across his throat. It hurts. My grip is all wrong, and the blade bumps in my hand as it catches on something.

His windpipe?

Hot blood coats my hand and the arm still around him. He lets out a gurgle noise.

Oh my god.

I release him and shove off his back, falling to my ass behind him. All I can do is stare at the blood pouring onto the concrete in front of him.

I just killed him.

Or—well—he's *dying*.

Miles staggers up and takes my hands, helping me to my feet.

"You okay?" he yells.

I touch his jaw. "I'm fine."

"What?"

There's blood in his ear. Shit. Did the gun go off right next to his head?

"We need to go." I yank on his hand.

He follows right behind me, only pausing to lift the knife from my trembling hand. He folds the bloodied blade and sticks it back in his pocket, and we race out of the basement. He slams the door shut behind us, as if to keep the horrors from following us.

Fat lot of good that will do.

He pulls out a phone—not his own—and dials. He hits the speaker button. “I can’t hear shit,” he says in a too-loud voice.

“Miles?” Knox’s voice.

My gut sours, and bile rushes up my throat.

“It’s Willow. And you better give the phone to someone else before I hang up.”

“I’m here,” Violet interrupts. “Are you okay?”

“Miles got me out.” I reach over and take his hand. “We’re okay.”

He comes closer automatically, wrapping his arms around me. My head fits perfectly tucked under his chin, and he surrounds me better than a security blanket. Because he’s alive, and his hands coast over my skin like he’s making sure I’m really here, too.

“Where are you guys?”

“Grey and Steele are on their way,” Violet says softly. “He told me and Aspen to stay with Knox, just in case he tried to do something else...”

I press my lips together.

“They’ll be there soon. Hang tight, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper.

Miles takes the phone back and hangs up, stuffing it back in his pocket.

“I love you,” he says.

“You’re still yelling,” I whisper.

“I can’t hear you.”

I smile. It makes it easier to say, “I love you, too.”

He grins. Oh, so he heard that?

“Asshole,” I add. But my smile widens, too.

Greyson and Steele arrive to help survey the damage. In this case, another freaking body in my house. Although I guess this area is technically not even mine, so... that’s better, right?

I stay on the staircase with Miles while they do something downstairs. I keep casting furtive glances, then outright staring, at my landlord’s apartment door. With all the hustle and bustle of activity, it seems strange that she hasn’t come out.

Finally, Miles rises and knocks on her door. He listens hard for a moment, then shrugs and tries the knob.

The door swings open easily.

We exchange a look, and I hop up. We walk into the apartment slowly. I automatically reach for the back of Miles' shirt, fisting it and keeping myself close to him. Her apartment is stuffed to the brim, bordering on hoarding tendencies. The pathway into the kitchen and living space is narrow, hemmed in by stacks of books and boxes, side tables loaded with bits and bobs. Even two trash bags, tied off, lean against the wall by the door.

"I didn't realize it was so bad." I frown.

We step into the kitchen, and my heart sinks.

There's blood on the floor.

"Don't touch anything," Miles calls back to me.

I nod once. We skirt the blood and continue on. Past the island, there's a kitchen table with four chairs. It's covered in mail and newspapers. Beyond that is a sliding glass door that leads to a small, unimpressive backyard. It's always been overgrown, since I moved in, but seeing it in tandem with the apartment makes me nauseous.

Should I have seen the signs?

Offered to help? Mow the lawn or whatever?

"There," Miles whispers, pointing to the living room. "She's in there."

We round the corner and both stop.

She's dead.

There's blood on her shirt. Her head is leaned back, her mouth open wide.

"He shot her," Miles growls.

I tug him backward.

"This is a crime scene."

"I don't know how to explain this," Miles says, his voice tinged with desperation. He whirls around and grabs my shoulders. "I don't know how they won't spin this into something it's not."

I meet his wild eyes. "It'll be okay."

I take his hand and lead him back outside. All the way, this time, to the front steps. I sit him down and go to the top of the basement stairs, calling for Greyson and Steele. When they don't respond, I go down. And I find

that nothing at all has changed. Not the position of the body, not the tape I left on the floor, not the blood pooling under him.

“The landlord is dead,” I tell them.

They both look at me.

I smile, but it’s desperate. “You both need to get Miles out of here. And... do either of you know a good lawyer?”

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WILLOW

I sit in an interrogation—excuse me, *interview*—room, with my lawyer beside me. He's young. Not quite just-out-of-law-school young, but young enough for me to question his experience. To which he gave me a baleful glance and continued like I hadn't even spoken.

He arrived at the house two minutes before the police. He gave me a once-over, noting the blood on my hands, soaked through my sleeve, and the only blood that was mine: on my temple.

My head still aches.

"Caleb Asher," he introduced, not bothering to extend a hand. "Can you tell me what happened? Quickly."

I did. The truth. It all fell out, minus the murder in my apartment. I didn't know where he had put his brother's body, or if any evidence remained in my apartment. But police probably wouldn't have reason to search it with the intent of finding blood... it was just involved in the break-in. Nothing more, nothing less.

But the rest: that this man had been stalking me, that he put another girl in the hospital, that he hit Miles' car in a threat of aggression. Then later hitting Miles' rental car and taking him from the crash, kidnapping me—

And then I lie.

Well, I omit.

I think Mr. Asher knows when my tale veers off course, because my words come slower. He brought me down here in the freezer, intent on torturing me. I cut myself free. Attacked him when he was distracted. The gun went off, yes, but I got the better of him. I saved myself, but I didn't save my landlord.

He accepted it all with a nod, and then the police came screaming in. Detective Barrister was right behind them. An officer stayed with us while they searched the house, finding the two bodies.

Everything was a flurry of motion after that.

He advised me not to speak, so I didn't. I kept my mouth shut, my eyes down. I didn't cower, I barely trembled.

Okay, that's a lie. I trembled the entire time.

Just fifteen minutes prior, I made two calls: one to Mr. Asher, and the next to 9-1-1. And I watched Greyson and Steele bodily drag Miles away from me.

The officer put me in the back of the cruiser and drove me to the station. My lawyer met me there.

Now, the door opens, and Detective Barrister comes in.

Having rehearsed my story once, I feel better about selling it.

Mr. Asher doesn't look at me, but he launches into some speech about self-defense. How this man has clearly been stalking me, with the police failing to come *close* to stopping him or protecting me.

The detective seems inclined to agree, although she swabs my hands and clothes for gunshot residue. She gives me a shirt to put on as she bags mine, noting the tape's sticky remnants on my wrists.

She swabs that, too.

"She'll give a written statement," Mr. Asher says as I tune back in. "And then Ms. Reed needs to go to the hospital. It should've been her first stop."

"Her injuries aren't life threatening," the detective counters.

"Hmm," the lawyer replies. "And if she has internal bleeding? Did Mr. Freeman kick you, Willow? Strike you in any way?"

I motion to my temple and lick my lips. "He injected me with something. I think."

"Drugs that are working their way out of her system as we speak," Mr. Asher spits. "I expected better from you, Detective. And seeing as how you haven't brought charges against my client, I am electing to get her immediate medical attention."

He stands and helps me rise, too. His hand on my forearm is cool and firm. He guides me out ahead of him, past the detective, down the hallway. We don't stop until we're at his car, a matte black thing that probably costs more than the hockey house.

When we're closed inside, the seat belt tight across my chest and hips, he glances at me. "I don't need to know the full truth, Willow. But if there's anything in your story that they could poke holes into..."

I bite my lip.

"Miles," I whisper. "He was communicating with... Freeman... on his brother's phone. Taunting him about me."

"He was in the basement?"

I nod. My eyes burn.

He pulls out of the station and turns toward the hospital. "We'll keep him out of it unless necessary," he mutters. He hands me his phone. "Call him. Have him meet us at the hospital."

"The gunshot went off next to his head." I glance down at the screen. His lock screen is a gorgeous dark-haired woman, holding a toddler in her arms. They're both dressed in black puffy jackets and hats with pom-poms, standing outside with snow all around them. "He's probably already there for a burst eardrum or something. He couldn't hear very well when they left."

He sighs.

I call Miles anyway and confirm.

"We'll see you soon," I tell him.

"Self-defense is your best bet," Asher continues. "If Miles was there, he could corroborate..."

"Miles can't be dragged into this," I interrupt. I grip the handle over my head and fight nausea. He's driving *fast*, whipping around corners like he owns them. "It'll open up a whole other avenue of investigating—please, just trust that having him involved would do more harm than good."

We get to the hospital in record time, and I leap out of the sports car. The lawyer follows close behind. At the ER desk, he takes over, explaining what happened and why I'm here. I pretend not to notice that he slides the nurse a wad of cash, which she tucks into her pocket with a furious blush.

And then we're being led back to a curtained-off bed, and the nurse runs through what I can only imagine is standard procedure for someone who was attacked. When she asks what happened, I tell her that I was drugged, locked in a case freezer—which then seemed to be rolled, which I now can assume was when Freeman shoved it down the basement stairs, and then I fought him, albeit briefly.

"Can you find Miles?" I ask the lawyer.

He nods, sliding his phone back in the pocket of his slacks and striding out.

“You brought in the big guns,” the nurse whispers to me. “Caleb Asher is the best defense attorney on the East Coast. Most handsome, too.”

“He’s married.” I spotted the ring on his finger earlier. Not that it really matters.

“They were on the cover of a magazine a few years ago.” She glances over her shoulder in the direction he went. “Maybe I should ask for his autograph.”

I manage not to roll my eyes.

“I need to draw blood to run tests,” she says, wheeling over a tray.

“Okay.”

The curtain whips back just as she pushes the needle into my arm. I wince, and suddenly Miles is on my other side. He drags me into his chest, and only the nurse’s grip on my arm keeps me from launching at him.

“You okay?” he whispers in my ear.

“Don’t answer that,” Mr. Asher says from the foot of the bed.

Miles shoots him a look.

I take his hand, trying not to wince again when the needle moves, the nurse switching out a vial for another one. We both look at it, the way my blood fills it, and bile rushes up my throat.

“I’m going to be sick.”

The lawyer passes me a plastic tub, and I lean over it just as my stomach contents rush up and out.

Gross.

Miles strokes my hair away from my face. When the heaving subsides, the nurse passes me a cup of water and takes the tub away. She’s already bandaged my arm, a wad of gauze taped to my skin.

“Our doctor will be in to check your head wound,” she says. “It looks deep. It may need stitches.”

The curtain closes, leaving Miles, me, and the lawyer with the illusion of privacy.

“Don’t talk to anyone,” Asher orders. His tone is brisk, no-nonsense. “Don’t answer any questions. Not here, not at the station, not in front of your goddamn house. If the police bring you down for another statement, or under the guise of follow-up questions, make sure I’m there before you say or write a word.”

“Okay.”

He pats my foot. “We’ll get you through this. If they even decide to press charges. And don’t confuse these flimsy curtains for walls.” He flicks one, and it sways against his finger.

I take a breath and force a smile. He ducks out, and then it’s just Miles and me.

We don’t say anything. I stare at him, he stares at me.

There’s a lot I want to ask. How his ear is, if his hearing is impaired, what the fuck he’s going to do with Knox. But I can’t say that now. It’ll be saved for later, when I get the clean bill of health, and we’re safe at home.

Home.

Weird to think about the hockey house that way. But the longer I think on it, the more I realize it’s true. It’s home—but more than that, Miles is.

And I want nothing more than to go home to him.

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MILES

My family's a lot to take in. If you take the charm and charisma that oozes out of Knox and multiply it by four, that's my mother. She's a natural beauty, the most popular woman I know, and the kindest, too. Knox got the asshole gene from my father.

Me, too, I guess.

They're classic childhood sweethearts, their relationship beginning their sophomore year of high school and still going strong almost thirty years later.

I don't know a lot about Willow's family, but judging by her bewildered expression, it's not like *this*. Oh, because my parents are currently dancing around the kitchen, Dad singing some off-key rendition of Frank Sinatra.

We've been here for an hour, in which my mother has tried—and failed—to get Willow out of her shell.

But my girl has been even more withdrawn lately. Freeman fucked with her head. I think she was fully convinced she was dying, and in some small way, made peace with it. Now, to find herself alive and well, has left her with a misstep.

Sometimes she wakes up crying, grasping my shirt and shaking uncontrollably. But only when we don't sleep with the lights on.

Darkness scares her. And it doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon. This fear has a chokehold on her, and I can only imagine what her brain processes when she's waking up from a nightmare, only to be unable to see. *Again*. Like being tossed right back into the nightmare she lived.

Trauma runs deep. That's clear to see. But she's getting better. Inching past what happened to her. To us.

Because of our involvement with the investigation, and the lawyer's strict instructions for us to stay in Crown Point until things resolved somewhat, we pushed off the trip to see my family until Caleb's okay.

Apparently, a trip to see family is an acceptable reason to leave town.

So here we are.

It's Thursday. We're staying here tonight, in my old bedroom, and tomorrow we take the short drive to the away game. There are only a few games left of the regular season, which slips from winter into spring.

Another week, and spring break will be here.

Willow mentioned that her parents and sister are coming.

With everything that's happened, I don't think she's even told them. Her phone remains dark and silent, except for the texts from Violet, Aspen, and Thalia. Those girls are lifelines Willow needs, but sometimes it's not enough.

The front door opens, the familiar squeal of the hinges setting my teeth on edge, and my parents fall still. They exchange a glance, then look at me.

Guilty.

"You didn't," I accuse.

I rise from my seat beside Willow, where we had been talking—well, my parents and I carried most of the conversation—and stride for the foyer.

Mom chases me. "Miles—"

Knox is stripping off his coat and shoes, and his expression goes weird. Like he's sorry for crashing? Doesn't matter. His nose is still swollen from the last time I punched him, but my fist is clenched again, ready to break his face open.

"*Miles*," Mom yells.

The loudness stops me.

Yes, she's yelled before. But she hasn't had to since we were kids. Okay, teenagers. Usually she lets us sort out our fighting or pushes us into the backyard with our hockey gear and tells us to work it out a different way.

But this is preemptive.

"Violence isn't the answer," she says in a low voice. "You will have to forgive your brother—"

"No," I interrupt. "No, Mom, he's done so many fucking shitty things to me and Willow. He knows I'm done with him."

Hurt flashes across Mom's face. But then resolve hardens it. "Well, he's staying. He's my son, too, and this is my house. You may not forgive, and you may hold a grudge forever, but you *will* coexist under my roof."

I gaze at the ceiling and pray to whoever can hear me for strength.

Knox shakes his head and moves past me, kissing Mom on the cheek. She pats his arm and allows him to continue farther into the house.

But then he'd be alone with Willow and my father—

"Stop," Mom says, catching my arm. "What is going on with you?"

"He gave her to a madman, Mom," I whisper. "He knew I love her, and he still put her in danger."

"For you. Because he loves *you*." She searches my gaze. "You've told me about her before, haven't you? Never by name. Over the years... I've been blind, I should've known it was the girl your brother was dating."

I flinch.

"There's something dark in both of you, and it happened outside of my control." She presses her hand to my chest, right over my heart. "He's your brother. He's your blood. We all make mistakes, honey, don't we?"

Yeah, we do.

"Has he apologized?"

I swallow. "Too many times."

She smiles. "Well, that boy never apologized for a damn thing when you were kids. So I think he really means it."

I grunt.

Finally, she lets me pass her and hurry back into the kitchen.

Knox has stolen my seat, and he's pivoted toward Willow.

White-hot fury flashes through me. I stride forward and grab the back of his shirt, yanking him off the chair. He's not expecting it, wasn't braced, and slides off too easily. He stumbles, somehow remaining upright, as I drag him around the counter and shove him toward Dad.

"You keep six feet away from her at all times, and we won't have problems," I seethe. "I can't leave you alone for a fucking minute, can I? You just—"

"He was apologizing," Willow says from behind me.

I spin toward her.

Her blue eyes are bright with unshed tears. "He was just apologizing, Miles, it's okay."

"It's not." I glower at him.

Knox looks... maybe not dejected, but certainly not happy. He mutters something, rubbing the back of his neck, and leaves the kitchen without a word.

Dad watches me passively, but he returns to cooking dinner without a comment.

The lightheartedness from just a few moments ago seems broken.

Willow rises, taking my hand and pulling me into her. To my astonishment, she tips her head back and starts singing the Frank Sinatra song my dad was howling. She's got a much, *much* lovelier voice, and I don't resist the urge to sweep her into a dance.

A smile cracks her lips, even while she sings, for the first time in over a week.

Anything to distract her.

Or to make it better.

"I took care of the body."

I face my brother.

After dinner, Mom tasked me with starting the fire. S'mores are on the menu, apparently, and the weather is just tolerable enough to be outside around the fire pit.

Willow is inside, shoulder to shoulder with my mom cleaning dishes.

"How'd you find it?" I finally ask, stuffing my hands in my pockets.

Daniel Freeman. He was the last missing piece, which Caleb Asher—Willow's lawyer—recommended we take care of *fast*. I don't know who told him the full story. Willow or Steele, who recommended him, or maybe Knox.

All I know is that it wasn't me, but I did get a phone call from him late one night, saying that my best bet for not getting roped into any of this was to make it disappear.

Yeah, some lawyer.

Knox shrugs. "I went back through the conversations with the brother."

Conversations, plural. Because the asshole called him after I was dragged out of the rental car, and then again once he had Willow.

“He wanted to make you pay,” he says quietly. “The grief had driven him mad. All I could think about this past week was where he might put his dead brother. Where I might put you, if someone had killed you.”

Gruesome. I wrinkle my nose and wave my hand for him to continue.

“Willow told Greyson and Steele that he mentioned framing her after the fact. After you were...” He swallows.

Guess he can’t say *dead*. Of course, that reminds me that I had a gun pointed at my forehead, and my ear is still ringing as my eardrum repairs itself. I came out of that basement with bruised ribs, a ruptured eardrum, and some scrapes and scratches. Oh, and a concussion from the car crash.

I fared better than Willow, whose toxicology results showed lingering drugs in her system. They set her up with an IV to help her body flush it. A doctor stitched the cut on her forehead, too, so cleanly the scar will be nearly invisible.

“He had him in Willow’s car,” he finally says.

My eyes almost bug out.

He shrugs. “You guys left it in front of her apartment after the break-in, and she was using yours for most of the time after. I doubt it was much trouble for him to get into it, and he stashed his brother’s body in the trunk.”

“Well, fuck.”

Knox raises his chin. “Yep. But as I said, it’s all taken care of. I grabbed her stuff out of it and dumped bleach in the back. It might be better off in a junkyard, honestly, the smell is eye-watering. And before you ask, I’m not going to fucking tell you anything else and incriminate you.”

I grunt. The urge to shove him into the fire is lessening, although it’s not the worst idea I’ve had...

“The detective has been documenting the harassment since the beginning,” he adds. “And she admitted to telling Willow about the other girl’s testimony. Caleb said it’s reasonable to assume that even if Freeman hadn’t drugged her and tried to kill her, simply being alone in a room with him would give Willow reason to fear for her life. I just wanted you to know that this case is going to close. It won’t be hanging over your heads forever.”

I blow out a breath. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Knox repeats.

“Yeah.” I extend my hand. “Thanks.”

After a beat, he shakes it. It's weird, and not at all how I'd normally interact with Knox. But there's something broken between us. This is just the first step to healing.

Setting the bone, no matter how painful.

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WILLOW

Free and clear. Somehow. Miraculously.

I rush back to the hockey house, my heart soaring. I feel lighter than I have in the past few weeks. Like once the police agreed that his death wasn't my fault, exactly, my mind and body caught up, too.

My parents and sister are coming tonight. They're staying at a local hotel, and then they're going to meet me at the arena.

It's the first night of the playoffs. Go figure.

Spring break passed in a blur. My parents did *not* come out to Crown Point, something to do with work or whatever. But Indie came to visit me for a weekend. That was fun, and she flirted with Finch whenever she saw him.

Did it leave the poor guy stammering and blushing?

Yeah.

It was fucking funny.

"Miles?" I call, stepping inside. I bypass the living room and head for the stairs, trotting up to our room. I push the door open and step inside, looking around.

Nothing.

Back in the hall, I spot the closed bathroom door.

I grin. I open it silently, spotting familiar gray sweatpants on the floor outside the shower. The water is running, the curtain closed, and I creep toward it.

Miles is either going to not be surprised at all, or he's going to jump a foot.

Hopefully he won't deck me.

I slowly grasp the edge of the curtains.

“Gotcha!” I whip it open.

Finch screams.

He’s naked. Wet. Fuck.

I scream back, louder, and cover my eyes, then spin around for good measure.

Not what I wanted to see.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” I rush out of the bathroom and smack right into Miles. “Oh my God. I didn’t see anything. Promise.”

He grasps my upper arms and peers around me. Finch has yanked the shower curtain closed, although the door is still open. Miles slams it, his gaze dropping from my eyes to my lips.

“Do you like seeing my teammates naked?”

My jaw drops. “What? NO!”

His brow rises. And then his lips curl into a smirk, and I smack his chest.

“Oh, that’s a punishable offense.” He grips the back of my neck and reels me in. His kiss takes my breath away.

“They’re closing the case,” I blurt out when he withdraws.

Although he doesn’t go far, instead moving to pepper kisses down the side of my neck.

He straightens at my words.

And then I’m in his arms, and he carries me into his room. He kicks the door shut and tosses me on the bed.

“My, my,” he whispers, shucking his shirt and dropping his pants in record time. “Why are you still wearing clothes, wild girl?”

I let out an exhale and practically tear my shirt off, too. I undo my bra clasp and pull the straps off my arms. But too slow, because he’s suddenly on me. He yanks my leggings down, removing my shoes and socks, and then his mouth is between my legs.

“Oh,” I moan at the first touch. “Fuck.”

He swipes his finger through my center. “You’re so wet, baby. Is this for me or because you saw Finch naked?”

I swat at him again. He catches my hand and pins it to the bed next to my leg, his fingers intertwining with mine. He winks and lowers again, licking me. He ends up keeping my other hand hostage, too, just under my

ass. Where his thumb can reach my ass cheek and swipe it lightly, causing tingles to shoot under my skin.

And then he's pulling back and flipping me onto my stomach, yanking my hips up.

He bites my ass cheek.

I let out a screech, but he just chuckles and captures my wrists again, this time holding them both in one hand at the small of my back.

Holy fuck.

I squeeze my eyes shut, ignoring my thundering heart. He's got me in a position to do whatever he wants—and *damn* if I don't want him to do exactly that.

Control and me have never been friends.

So when he palms my other cheek, kneading it, I know the strike is coming.

"Tell me why I'm punishing you," he says softly. "And look at me when you speak, baby. I like to see the torture in those gorgeous blue eyes."

I blink them open and turn my head, staring over my shoulder at him. He's between my legs, his cock hard and pointing at me, but it's his mouth that hovers close to my ass that has me tensing. Teeth, palm. Options, options.

"Because I walked in on Finch."

"Yes."

Smack.

"One," I say without thinking, my face heating.

He slides a finger into my cunt, and I groan. I roll my head down, my forehead and nose pressing into the mattress. My muscles automatically clench at him.

He's not even holding my wrists anymore.

He doesn't have to.

Smack.

"Two." I make an unholy noise when one finger inside me becomes two, thrusting and curling, pressing on my G-spot.

Smack.

"Three."

Three fingers.

I shudder. And then his other hand is spreading my cheeks, and my body goes hot. He licks my asshole. Just a little flick, but I clench around

his fingers. And he snickers. *Snickers.*

Then he continues.

My mind blips out. He's eating my ass and finger-fucking me, and I can't think straight. I draw my hands up, gripping the blankets, until I can't take it anymore. The orgasm comes out of nowhere, blowing me over. Every muscle tenses; my vision goes white.

When I come back to planet Earth, he's spread my legs farther apart and is already inside me. His weight on my back presses me to the mattress, and he trails kisses across my shoulder. To the curve of my neck. His gentle kisses are at odds with the way his hips piston forward, slamming his dick into me.

I lift my hips back to meet him, groaning again. I push up, wanting to face him, but he bites my earlobe and forces me into stillness.

His hands slide under me and palm my breasts. There's no part of me that he isn't touching, and my body sings for it.

He really has officially fucked with my head.

"I need your lips," I plead. "I want to face you."

Miles pulls out, rising off me. "Your wish is my command."

I bite my lip as he flops to the bed beside me, then picks me up and drapes me over him. I swing my leg over, and his hand guides his cock back inside me. I lower myself, taking him inch by inch. His piercings really do just make the sex eighteen times better, and my eyes roll back.

His hands explore my body, from my thighs and hips up my sides to my breasts, my back. Even higher, until he tangles my hair in his fingers. I sink fully onto him and go still, my mouth gaping. This angle is different. Deeper. I grind down on him, and the pressure sends sparks exploding in front of my eyes.

He sits up suddenly, catching me and forcing us chest to chest.

"Ride my cock like a good little slut," he says with a smirk. "But tell me you love me while you do it."

I frown. "You can't have both."

"Yes, I can. I have you, don't I? You do both quite well."

I lift myself and slide back down, and we both exhale. I loop my arms around his neck and lean in, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

"Miles Whiteshaw," I start. "I think I may love you more than anyone I've ever known."

"You think?"

I put my mouth to his ear, my movements so fucking slow, it's going to drive both of us crazy. "I do," I whisper.

"Good."

I pull back. As far as he lets me. "That's all you're going to say?"

"No. I've been saying a whole hell of a lot to my future wife since we first met."

I narrow my eyes. "Like what?"

"Like the fact that I fell in love with you ages ago." He rolls his eyes. "We talked about this. I told you I fell in love—"

Shock flickers through me.

"You didn't say with *me*." I gape at him. I should've known this. I should've realized, right? I stop and focus on his expression. "I thought you were unavailable. *Unattainable*. Already in love with another girl—"

"You," he interrupts.

I scoff. And then I'm hurt.

And then... mortified.

"It's okay," he says, his arms cinching tighter around me. "I've got you now, and I'm never letting go. All right?"

I nod.

He flips us suddenly, my back hitting the mattress, all without him losing his throbbing erection inside me. He leans up and hooks one of my legs by the back of my knee, slinging it over his shoulder.

"Now I'm going to fuck the love of my life," he murmurs. "And I'm going to come inside you. Maybe twice. Just because. And you're going to match me, orgasm for orgasm."

"Don't wear yourself out before the game," I reply, trying not to squirm.

His expression turns cocky.

And damn, that's hot.

His fingers land on my clit, and he makes good on his promise.

Once.

Twice.

Gone.

MILES

During warm-ups, I spot Willow sitting in the seats I had reserved for her and her family. She's right in the corner by my goal, so I'll be able to see her for two periods. It may or may not be a mistake to have her in my line of sight, but I'd like to think it's less of a worry than not being able to see her.

Greyson and Steele both had bad things happen when their girls didn't show up for games. Away games, nonetheless. I'm just glad we've avoided any such drama, and we're well on our way to recovery.

Willow's forehead is still healing, although the stitches came out just fine. It's fading into a pink, slightly puckered scar that the doctors say will smooth out in no time. Not that I give a shit, but I catch her examining it in the mirror sometimes.

My gaze ticks over from her to the younger girl, a carbon copy of Willow, sitting beside her. She grins and waves at me, although Willow grabs her hands and pushes them down almost immediately.

Next over are who I can only assume are Willow's parents. They look... stiff. Maybe uncomfortable? Willow's mom's hair is obscured by a navy CPU cap, matching her husband's. He slides his glasses farther up his nose and frowns at something his wife says.

On Willow's other side is Violet, but her attention is on the sister. Following whatever she's saying.

"Whiteshaw," Steele barks. "Focus." He taps my leg with his stick as he skates past.

I grimace and head toward the benches and the top of our zone, where I can drop to the ice and stretch. My padding feels heavier today, with more

eyes on me than ever.

Willow is graduating this year.

I've been staving off signing with a team, against my better judgment, because my parents wanted me to graduate with a degree.

But if I can just jumpstart my career, I can sweep her away. We can do anything we want. I don't know if she has a preference where we live, but I'm sure she can get a job wherever we end up. Or she can build her own empire.

Or she can just take up hobbies, like singing. Forever and ever.

After I warm up, I head back to the crease. BJ trades places with me, sweat already lining his brow. Good fucking thing he's not playing tonight—I have a feeling he'd choke on our big playoffs' night.

I have to be perfect.

Not just for the Crown Point Hawks, but for Willow. Some little part of me wants to impress her family, so they know that I'm going to take care of her forever.

I laser in on Knox, who skates forward with a puck. He's the easiest and the hardest to read, because his micro-movements are sometimes misleading. A fake there, a true slice here. He's been known to get some past me—but most of the time, he's got nothing on me.

He shoots, and I catch it in my glove.

Easy-peasy.

I drop it and focus on the next. Then again. After a few minutes of that, I straighten and get out of the way. It opens the floodgates for shooting, our whole team moving in rows to take shots at the goal.

"You good?" I ask BJ, stopping beside him.

He's getting greener. "I'm glad you're playing," he mumbles.

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, me, too, with that fucking attitude."

I step off the ice and head back to the locker room. He follows, and I pull off my helmet. Greyson and Finch are already in the locker room, and Tony Rodrigues is close behind. There's a new energy tonight, one that's been lacking in the last few games. It doesn't matter that my doctors warned me about continuing to play and further concussions.

An excitement buzzes through us.

I take a seat in front of my cubby and watch Greyson and Finch fake spar. I know by now that Greyson's just trying to keep Finch's mind off shit.

He, like BJ, is an occasional worrier. He'll make a great forward on a professional team one day, if he even goes that route.

Hell, maybe he'll decide that it isn't for him, and we'll see him coaching the future stars.

Or not.

Knox emerges, and I avoid his gaze. He always looks at me first now, testing the waters. Waiting for me to break.

Mom wants me to forgive him so fucking badly, and of course they're here tonight. I just don't have it in me. Maybe eventually, but definitely not right now. He took care of Freeman's body for us as an apology. And he's actually said the words *I'm sorry* on numerous occasions.

It's just not enough when my trust in him is so broken.

And then it's game time. I glance at Willow when the girl singing the national anthem hits a relatively dour note, and she gives me a tiny smile in return.

Did she tell her parents about that? How exhilarating it was to sing in front of thousands of people and have them all cheer and scream for her once she finished?

If she didn't, I will. I'll brag about her all fucking day.

The game begins, and I push Willow out of my mind as much as I can. Let's be real, she's always there, floating in the back. But I put the weight of my attention on the players in front of me. And they come crashing down into our zone first, my defensemen circling the coal and blocking players. A rogue opponent parks himself right in front of me.

I shove him away. Fucker.

I slam to the side and block a low shot. The puck slams into my left leg's pad and ricochets off, collected by Steele and shot up the left side of the rink. The player is still in my space, seeming to linger.

"Get the fuck away from me," I snap, using my stick to propel him backward. "You think we're dating or something? Stage five clinger?"

He shakes his head.

We have the puck, and he's got to follow, or the whistle will be blown. Would hate to be caught offside.

Asshole.

I bend forward, elbows on my thighs, and wait. I scan each player from across the ice. How they move.

One catches the puck and comes charging toward me. The Hawks on the ice won't be able to catch him in time, and suddenly it becomes a one-on-one play. I ready myself, everything in me dropping into the zone.

The way he shifts his weight. The angle of his blade against the puck, guiding it out ahead of him. I drift forward the slightest bit in the crease, ready for the shot. And when he takes it, it whips high and to the right. I push off and catch the puck in my shoulder. The padding saves me from a world of hurt—I've been hit there without padding, and my whole arm has gone numb.

The puck falls, and I dive on it at the same time that the player tries to take another swing. I land over the puck, still mostly in the crease, and cover it with my catcher.

I also catch his stick with my fucking face.

The impact rattles my bones. My head snaps back, and pain zings down my back. The hit pulls my helmet clean off my head. My body has no choice but to follow the momentum.

I vaguely hear a whistle blow, but my vision goes white and then black.

WILLOW

All hell breaks loose after Miles gets hit. Knox charges the player who hit his brother, colliding with him and knocking him into the boards. The other player doesn't have any qualms about swinging back, and now they're locked in an exchange. Knox seems to be only fueled by the fact that Miles isn't getting up.

On the other side of the net, Greyson is beating the shit out of another player. Steele, Finch, and three others from the visiting team are locked in some mass huddle, too, all of them yelling. Crown Point players are leaping off the bench, and suddenly it's chaos. Whistles are blown, the crowd is yelling.

The refs have their hands full trying to tear everyone apart, but my attention is on Miles. My heart is in my damn throat.

I reach for Violet's hand, and she squeezes hard.

He's not getting up.

"He's moving," Violet whispers.

"He already was healing from a concussion and the ear thing." I shake my head and stand. I drop Violet's hand to press both to the glass. "What the fuck are they doing?"

Medics have reached him. They kneel on either side, slowly turning him onto his back. There are too many people in the way, and my heart is going to explode with not knowing.

Finally, one gets up and hurries back to the door. He returns a moment later with a stretcher.

The fighting breaks up suddenly, as fast as it began.

You can hear a pin drop in the arena.

Knox drops to his knees beside his brother. He leans over him, dripping blood everywhere—from his nose, his mouth—and only swipes an errant hand through it to stem the flow.

They load Miles onto the stretcher.

“Come on,” Violet says, taking my arm and pulling me toward the aisle. “Willow.”

I cast a glance back at my sister. She seems horrified, her hand over her mouth. This isn’t exactly how I envisioned the whole *meet the boyfriend* thing going.

I leave them sitting there without a word and race up the stairs with Violet. We burst outside and circle the arena to the players’ entrance, just in time to see Miles being loaded into an ambulance.

My stomach twists.

“Wait!” I rush forward.

They either don’t hear me or don’t want to wait, because only a moment later, the ambulance pulls away.

I’m tempted to chase it.

Strong arms catch me around the middle before I have a chance to take a step off the sidewalk. They put me on my feet with my back to the building.

Knox.

“Don’t,” I hiss.

He looks stricken, still in his skates and standing on the concrete.

“We’re going to the hospital,” Violet says. “Knox, are you coming?”

The door opens, and Coach emerges with Knox’s bag and street shoes. Knox quickly bends down and unlaces the skates, handing them to his coach.

“Go,” Coach Roake tells us. “Keep me updated, and we’ll see you after the game.”

Knox nods. He shoves his feet into his sneakers and shoulders his bag, turning his gaze to Violet.

“Okay,” Violet says.

I nod my own agreement.

Getting in the car with him is another issue entirely. The ride over is silent, and the tension between us just keeps climbing. Violet drops both of us off out front and goes to park, and Knox takes over at the front desk. Says we’re there for his brother, who was just brought in.

“Six-foot something hockey player, probably griping about needing to be here.” Knox leans on the counter and smiles at the girl. “You probably couldn’t have missed him.”

“They’ve got him up for testing,” she says. “Rush order for CPU’s finest goalie.”

She smiles at him.

Ugh, is he flirting?

I step up beside him and elbow him in the gut, but I only connect with the hard plastic under his jersey. Ow.

He snorts at my effort.

“You can take a seat in the waiting room,” she says. “When he’s back down, you can see him.”

I glance at Knox, then move away. I take a seat in the far corner of the ER waiting room, folding my arms over my chest. Worry has taken ahold of me, but I don’t know how to manage it. There’s some part of me that still wants to go to alcohol. It numbed me for months, it was my fallback, it was a safe haven I could sink into.

Not anymore, though. I can’t do that to myself—or Miles.

Knox fiddles around with the cups at the water cooler, pouring a cup, then comes over and takes the seat right next to me. His freaking shoulder brushes mine.

“Willow.”

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye, refusing to turn my head.

“Willow,” he says again.

“Knox,” I sigh. “What do you want?”

He’s silent.

I direct my attention to my nails, which are suddenly way more fascinating than anything else. Including my ex, who seems determined to annoy the life out of me.

“Do you think you could forgive me?” he finally asks.

I scoff. He’s already apologized, and I didn’t have an answer for him then. I’m not sure I do now either.

“What? Is that a no?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I stand and pace away from him. “What do you want forgiveness for? Which part?”

“All of it?”

“I’d love a list.” I face him and plant my hands on my hips. “Go on.”

He runs his hand down his face. He's still bleeding, the asshole. It comes away on his hand from his nose and a split lip. Defending his fallen brother, the goalie.

No one touches the goalie.

"First, I should've just left you to my brother."

I wave him off, old guilt rising and forming a lump in my throat. "He told me he was in love with someone, so I pounced on you. That's more on me than anything else."

He grunts. "Well, it shouldn't have continued on as long as it did."

"Agreed," I mutter.

"And I'm sorry for... putting you in danger. With the guy's brother. And also for causing your downward spiral. And for breaking up with you so publicly—"

"Okay, okay." I grimace. "Jesus. You really are an asshole, you know?"

"Yeah. It's what makes me a good hockey player."

"But not a good person," I reply.

He shrugs.

Do I want to forgive him? Even two months ago, I would've said absolutely not. The wound seemed to be rotting inside me. Thus, alcohol. But then Miles came in and cleared out the dead stuff, replacing it with... *himself*. And he made me better.

There's no more room for hatred.

"Fine," I reply. "I forgive you."

He jumps up, cup of water forgotten. It goes everywhere as he grabs me, and I'm crushed into his chest. His arms wrap around me, and his chin rests on top of my head.

"You're the best, babe."

My nose wrinkles. He smells like sweat and blood. I shove him away.

"Don't mention it."

"No, I will mention it to everyone. Willow Reed is the best. She's forgiven me for my deepest sins. She's going to tell my brother to forgive me—"

"Ah, no." I frown. "While I get what you did on some twisted level, I don't think he'll understand it."

Knox scowls. He takes a seat again, dropping down like I freaking popped his balloon. "Well, one day, Miles will pay me back in revenge, and we'll be even."

Hmm.

“You’d have to fall in love first,” I point out.

He offers me a quick smile. But it’s to hide something else. A flash of pain, maybe? Or just discomfort? “Who says I’m ever going to fall in love?”

I slowly sit back down beside him. “Well, that’s true. You could be impervious.”

“I could be,” he agrees.

Somehow, though, I fucking doubt it. Someone’s going to slip under his guard one day—and when she does, I hope she ruins him.

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MILES

I walk out of the hospital with my pads in a fucking garbage bag. It was all they had to offer me, since my hockey bag didn't make the trip with me. I'm just wearing the compression shorts and t-shirt that go under my gear, although they did offer me scrubs. *Pass*. I did take them up on the slides that go so well with my black socks, but only because going barefoot seemed offensive.

The whole situation is embarrassing.

One of the nurses informed me that Willow and Knox were in the waiting room. But since I was being discharged, they would let them know and I could see them afterward. The emergency department seemed particularly busy—maybe it's a full moon—and they weren't allowing any extra visitors in.

Fine by me. Although the thought of Willow suffering Knox's company set my teeth on edge, and I drummed my fingers on my thighs until the doctor released me.

My head feels marginally better. Although I lost consciousness briefly—which makes sense, because I barely remember being transported off the ice—the tests came back clear. Just a little ol' concussion.

Well, another one.

The doctor warned that it could have prolonged effects until it healed fully, and that I needed to take a break from hockey. Headaches, dizziness, nausea. I have a pamphlet of things to watch out for, as well as medications to avoid. Stuff that can make my traumatic brain injury bleed more.

I promised to read the pamphlet, but I'm not quitting hockey. Fuck that.

Willow and Knox are standing together in the parking lot. I cast a glance back at the nurse who insisted on wheeling me to the exit, but she's already turning around and leaving me behind.

Upon further examination, they're not really *together*. They're next to each other, with a foot of space between them, but it's clear they're not talking.

I wave.

Willow pushes off the car and rushes across the remaining distance. I drop the bag and catch her, lifting her off her feet. Her arms go around my neck, her chest presses to mine. Her momentum spins us around, and the world tilts. I just squeeze her tighter and close my eyes, ignoring the nauseating sensation.

"I'm okay," I assure her.

"That was a big hit," she whispers, cupping my face when I finally set her back on her feet. "And then you didn't get up..."

"I'm okay," I repeat. I duck down and kiss her.

She melts into me.

My brother clears his throat behind me.

Willow pulls away slightly, frowning. Her eyes search mine.

I smile, then face Knox. The smile falls away. I don't know that I like what I see when I look at him, but I know that he was probably terrified. We've had our fair share of solid hits that have landed us on our asses, or being checked out by medics in the locker room, but I can't say either of us have ever been sent to the hospital.

"What did they say?" he asks.

"Concussion."

Knox's brows furrow. "Did you tell them you just had one of those?"

I wave him off. "Yeah, I mentioned it. It was in my medical history, too."

"Okay, but—"

"No buts," I interrupt. "I'm fine. How did the game go? Did we win?"

Knox checks his phone, then shrugs. "They're only in the third period. We're down by two, and the refs are calling stupid penalties."

Fuck.

"Well, let's go."

Willow takes my hand. "Where? To the game?"

“Yeah. Maybe it’ll help...” I clear my throat. “BJ is letting in too many goals. He needs a pep talk or something.”

She sighs. I lean into her, hooking my arm around her shoulders.

Violet climbs out of the driver’s seat. I blink, surprised that she’s here. That she drove them. But then again, I wouldn’t have wanted Willow behind the wheel in a mad dash to follow the ambulance. That would’ve been a recipe for disaster.

I hug her and thank her quietly, so her best friend can’t hear. Because I know Violet left the game more for her than me, and I appreciate it.

She accepts my gratitude and steps back. “So... we’re going back to the game?”

“Yes.”

Knox takes the front. I cinch Willow into my side in the backseat, trying to silently convince her that I’m not going to die. Or break into a million pieces. She keeps a straight face, but she’s not fooling me. She shudders when I press my lips to her temple, and she can’t look at me now that we’re on the road.

Back at the stadium, Violet and Willow follow Knox and me into the players’ entrance. Then into the locker room, which is empty. I change into my street clothes and unload my gear into my hockey bag, leaving it on the bench.

“Okay.” I take Willow’s hand.

Violet and Knox head out first, and I stop my girl.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“It was scary,” I comment. “We’re allowed to be scared.”

“I know.”

“Okay.”

“If something had happened to you—” She cuts herself off and turns away.

“If something happened to me, what?”

“I’ve never come so close to wanting to drown myself in alcohol,” she admits. “I wanted to *leave* the hospital and go to the closest liquor store then just sit in the dark and make myself numb. That terrifies me. The hold that dropping into that space where I just don’t care—”

“But you didn’t.” I tug her closer, ignoring the rigid set of her shoulders. “You stayed.”

“Because of Knox,” she whispers. She swipes under her eye, catching a rolling tear. “Because I wouldn’t have forgiven myself if I left while he stayed.”

I chuckle. “He’s good for something, then.”

Her expression is stricken. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize, baby.” I kiss her again, stealing the sweetness of her lips, before pulling back. “Now, let’s go whip some Hawks into shape.”

“And meet my parents,” she adds.

Oh, fuck. I forgot about that.

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WILLOW

Meeting the parents—check.
Moving in together—check.
Falling in love—check.

Weird, right? The idea of me in love?

I mean, I guess that's where my story with Miles started. Falling in love with the wrong brother. Being broken up with in a spectacularly embarrassing fashion.

Lucky for me, Miles knew what he wanted the whole time. And so did Knox.

It just took me some time to catch up.

Two months after Miles met my parents at the playoffs game, and only a month before I graduate, he surprised me with a letter. He'd been drafted to an NHL team. Seems they wanted him all along, but he was more focused on leveling up his skills at the collegiate level. That's what he tells me anyway.

So. No more college for Miles. He's happy to leave with three years under his belt.

But he is there for my graduation from CPU with Violet, Greyson, Knox, and Steele. He cheers and claps alongside my family and his. He even got some pretty good photos of me crossing the stage, flipping my tassel from one side of my cap to the other and hugging Violet.

My parents take pictures of all my friends and us. My sister, Indie, shows me an acceptance letter to CPU—and she tells me she's committed to coming here next year. *Surprise!*

Crown Point isn't ready for her.

But maybe that's the way it should be. Maybe this town needs her craziness to shake things up a bit.

I received a recording of my performance at the NHL game. And on an impulse, I sent it to a producer in Atlanta. They got back to me, and they want to meet me.

Do I even want to be a singer?

Maybe. Dare to dream, right?

Hey. If it works out, cool. If it doesn't, I know that singing around the house will be enough. Or maybe Miles will take things into his own hands, and I'll wind up singing on the ice again.

A year after graduation, Miles and I find ourselves in the same city as Greyson and Violet *and* Jacob. Steele and Aspen. We've all drifted out to sea, unbound by Crown Point University. And while the physical distance sometimes makes me sad, our friend group remains as strong as always.

My personal enjoyment comes when Miles' team faces off against his friends.

But tonight, we're watching two of our favorite teams in the first round of the playoffs.

Knox in the gold-and-black jersey. Jacob in the white and blue.

The six of us meet in the lobby of the nearby hotel, and my heart feels full again. I hug Violet, then Aspen. Miles greets Greyson and Steele like they didn't just play each other a few weeks ago. Neither of their teams made it to the playoffs, but that's fine.

There's always next year.

We take our seats in the front row, and I glance over at Miles. He's grinning, looking around the arena like he'll never get sick of it.

Neither will I.

While other wives or girlfriends hang out in the suites upstairs, I prefer to be close enough to see the blood hit the ice. I know Violet and Aspen enjoy the same.

The players skate out for warm-up, and we all wave frantically at Knox.

He gives us a cocky smirk and half-wave. That's all the attention he gives us, until he flags down Jacob and points in our direction.

Jacob skates toward us, stopping in front of the ice. He gives us a wide smile.

"You good?" Steele asks him, leaning forward.

Our friend nods. And then his gaze lifts, and the smile slips from his face.

I crane around automatically, scanning the rows of people above us. This section is packed already, filling in with a sea of gold and black fans.

But then I see what Jacob must've seen.

A flash of blonde, a manicured finger pushing dark-framed glasses up her nose. I recognize her, even though it's been over two years since I was in her class.

Professor Melody Cameron.

And she's not alone.

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MILES

“How much farther?” Willow’s huffing and puffing on the trail. Her flashlight swings wildly, coasting across my feet and then up at the surrounding rock.

“Another half mile, maybe,” I call back.

I’m climbing with purpose, but I can tell my lovely girl is exasperated. I can’t really blame her. I dragged her out of the hotel at four a.m., put her in a taxi, and drove... *here*. Well, to the trailhead, which is about two miles back. And at least five hundred vertical feet below.

I came to this particular mountain as a kid. Or teenager. I don’t know. It was one of those bonding moments with my family that I think of when someone asks me to remember something happy.

So naturally, I want to duplicate it for Willow. Give her a happy memory of her own.

We have lots of happy memories already—but this one needs to stand out.

I stop and look back. The sky is getting lighter by the second, which means we need to hurry the fuck up. Willow stops, too, uncapping her water and taking a swig. I aim my flashlight at her, capturing the way her throat moves and sweat dots under her long blonde hair.

It’s grown out since she chopped it almost eighteen months ago. I like that it gives me more to hold on to when I fuck her. I like that the tips rest on the tops of her breasts when she’s naked.

“Do you need a lift?” I ask, but I’m already turning and going down on one knee.

I’ll be doing this again in a moment.

She laughs and climbs on my back without question. I rise, and she wraps her legs around my hips. She holds my shoulders, and her lips touch my neck.

I set off at a faster pace. She aims her flashlight at the trail ahead, although soon enough, we won't need the light.

A little under fifteen minutes later, we crest the hill and come to a stop at the ledge that I remember so fucking clearly. It gives us a bird's eye view of the valley below. And while it's definitely not the tallest mountain we could've climbed—in fact, it's more like a hill—it still manages to take our breath away.

"Wow," Willow whispers. She slips down my back and steps around me.

The sun is starting to peek out over the horizon in the distance.

Just in time.

I slip my hand into my pocket, curling around the ring I've had for almost a year. I bought it after I got my bonus for signing with my team. I'd spend every last penny on her if I could—but I figured she wouldn't want something overly flashy. It's medium flash. Bigger than the one Greyson got Violet, for sure.

Doesn't matter.

We watch the sunrise, the sky turning a beautiful riot of colors, and I go down on my knee again, this time watching her back. She's illuminated in oranges and golds, the deep blues of night being chased away by dawn.

"Willow," I say softly, and she turns to me.

Her gasp is everything. The way her eyes widen and her mouth drops open.

"I love you. I've wanted to marry you since the moment you dragged me down on the ice with you." I smile. "You're the best person in the world. You're the only one I want to be with every moment of the day, for the rest of our lives. Will you make it official and marry me?"

Her chin wobbles, her eyes fill with tears.

I offer the ring to her, like she might need to inspect it before accepting. Although I already know she's going to say yes. She would've said yes without a pretty speech, or a hike, or over a year of waiting. She could've married me right out of school, just after I signed on with my team, or even before that.

But waiting felt special, too.

My girl sometimes moves slowly with her emotions, and I wanted any lingering trauma to heal. Or fade. Marrying her isn't a gut reaction out of fear that we'll lose each other. Marrying her isn't a way to keep her close when our world is ever shifting.

We did that without a piece of paper tying us together—although I do relish the mental image of ropes binding us legally. 'Til death.

But let's be serious.

Even Hades wouldn't dare separate us.

"Yes," she says, those tears overflowing. She holds out her left hand.

I take it and slide the ring on her finger, then kiss those chilled fingers for good measure. I rise and cup her cheek and kiss her lips next. I pour every ounce of happiness and love into the touch, bending her backward. She clutches at my shoulders and laughs into my mouth. But she kisses me back just as eagerly.

Cheers break out across the hillside, and our friends—who made the hike in the dark to get here ahead of us—emerge from their hiding places.

"Oh my God," Willow laughs, still clutching me. She presses her cheek to my chest. "Is this real?"

"Yeah, baby." I'm unable to hold back my grin. "It is."

THE END, but...

Remember how Miles won the bet about matching tattoos? Read what they decide to get in the bonus scene, here: <http://smassery.com/bonus-scenes>

And Twisted Obsession (Jacob's story) is coming October 25, 2023!

Pre-order on Amazon:

mybook.to/twistedobsessionhockey.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much for taking this journey with me. When I started writing Miles and Willow's story, I wasn't exactly sure how it was going to be perceived. I mean, yes, Miles kills someone in the first ten percent of the book. But I also found that he was so *nice*. And I worried about that, given Greyson's and Steele's tendencies toward brutality or deception. My early readers put up with a lot of, "But is Miles too NICE? Or SWEET?" To which they'd remind me of the terrible things he's done.

But here's the thing: everything Miles did was for Willow. He's been obsessed with her (and therefore in some sort of love with her) long before our story began. Is he twisted? Yeah. Is he wrong sometimes? Yep. Does his love come through anyway? I hope so.

Anyway. I hope you enjoyed the ride, because I sure did while I was writing it. Those moments of unsureness aside.

First, a special shout out to SJ Sylvis and CE Ricci who graciously allowed me to include their hockey teams (Bexley University and Leighton University) in this story! And if you check out their stuff, you might see Crown Point University make an appearance... ;)

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S. Massery is a dark romance author who loves injecting a good dose of suspense into her stories. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her dog, Alice.

Before adventuring into the world of writing, she went to college in Boston and held a wide variety of jobs—including working on a dude ranch in Wyoming (a personal highlight). She has a love affair with coffee and chocolate. When S. Massery isn't writing, she can be found devouring books, playing outside with her dog, or trying to make people smile.

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