

WILD ABOUT YOU

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REBECCA JENSHAK

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BLURB

A month ago, I was a rookie with the best stats in the league. I was traveling the world, playing hockey, and making more money than I ever dreamed.

Then my sister showed up on my doorstep with nowhere else to go.

I don't know the first thing about being responsible for a troubled teen, and the team jet isn't exactly kid-friendly.

Enter Piper. My sister's new teacher and nanny.

Smart, nurturing, and just as beautiful as I remember.

Too bad she hates my guts.

We need her.

And this time, I'm not letting her go.

Wild About You is a full-length second chance romance with a grumpy NHL player, his teenage sister, and the ex-girlfriend he never forgot.

The Wildcats are the youngest team in the NHL. On the ice, they're cocky, determined, and ready to take the league by storm. Off the ice? They're always up for a wild time.

1

JUST ONE NIGHT

TYLER

AN HOUR AGO, I WAS A GUY THAT HAD IT ALL—A RISING CAREER PLAYING professional hockey, the best stats of any rookie in the league, great teammates, and a cold beer in my hand on a Sunday afternoon.

Maybe that doesn't sound like a lot, but growing up with nothing, it felt like I'd finally achieved something. I felt on top of the world. At peace. You know the bad thing about peace is that it never holds. If it did, it'd just be called status quo.

Life is a series of ups and downs with mere moments where you look around, take a deep breath, and think this is what it's all about. Then your seventeen-year-old sister arrives and shoots that peace to shit. Maybe I didn't have it all, but what I did have was my sanity and an apartment to myself.

Both of those are fading fast.

"You can take my room," I say as I bring my favorite pillow and a spare blanket with me to the couch.

Everly still lingers in the doorway as if she's just now realized she traveled five hours to squat with her half-brother in his messy, one bedroom apartment. I didn't say my apartment was ritzy, just that it was my own. It'd be easy to blow my salary on a huge house with all the bells and whistles, but this place feels more like home. Plus, it's walking distance to the arena.

"Gross. I'm not sleeping in your bed. There's no telling how many girls you've had in there." She scrunches up her face to show her disgust.

I run my fingers through my hair and tug at the long strands. Needing a haircut is the least of my worries right now. I have an early practice in the morning and a big game on Tuesday. I need one hundred percent of my focus

on hockey.

“I changed the sheets this morning,” I say, which is true. Also, Everly is the only girl that’s stepped foot in this apartment since I moved in five months ago. I’m sure she wouldn’t believe me, and I’m not about to share my sex life, however nonexistent, with my sister.

Having it all requires a lot of time and effort. I didn’t come this far or work this hard to not give hockey everything I have. Besides, I don’t do dating or relationships. Not anymore.

She takes one step farther into the apartment. I can see her, assessing, judging, but she doesn’t say anything else as she lets her backpack drop to the floor next to her scuffed boots. She didn’t bring much with her, so hopefully that means she isn’t serious about staying.

I plop down on the couch. This thing is gonna be a bitch to sleep on. “Want to tell me what made you decide to hop on a bus to see me? Or why you were suspended...again?”

Her posture stiffens. “I’m tired. Can we talk tomorrow?”

You’d think I’d deserve some sort of explanation for her showing up on my doorstep claiming she’s quitting high school and wants to live with me, but Everly always was one that held her thoughts and feelings inside until you wanted to shake them from her. I guess that hasn’t changed.

The last suspension was for punching a classmate. The girl was bullying her, so I hadn’t worried at the time. But two suspensions in a year?

“We need to talk, Everly.”

She groans. “You sound like Mom.”

“Why are you here?”

“I told you. I want to live here.”

“Not going to happen.”

She has the audacity to look surprised. “Why not?”

“Lots of reasons. Let’s start with the obvious. I’m not your parent and you need to finish high school.”

“I’m not going back to that prison. Besides, I turn eighteen next week.”

“What happened, Ev?”

“Can we please do this tomorrow?”

I’d like to press her, but it’s late and I have an early morning so maybe I don’t want to get into it, and hold on to whatever sense of false security and solitude I have left.

“Sure. Get some rest,” I say.

She puts one foot in front of the other. With each step her strides get a little more confident. There's an awkwardness between us that wasn't always there. In my quest to get away from home and make something of myself, I haven't always done the best job of staying in touch.

"Hey, Ev," I say, before she disappears into my room.

She pauses and glances over her shoulder but doesn't speak.

"It's good to see you. I like your hair." The blonde strands are longer, hanging down her back. In the six months since I saw her last, Everly has changed a lot but that feels like the least confrontational thing to point out. She's skinnier—too skinny, her makeup is heavier, and I spotted a rose tattoo along her wrist I've never seen before.

Normal, teenage girl things, I guess, but it's the combination of all those things mixed with the defeated look on her face that's kept me from turning her away or packing her up in my car and driving her back home myself.

That look disintegrates as she rolls her eyes at me and walks into my bedroom. She slams the door for good measure. *Good talk.*

I let out a long breath and groan as I try to get comfortable on the couch. It's just one night. There's no way she's serious about living here. I'm not in any position to take care of her, even if she is almost an adult. My life is routine and structured down to what time I go to sleep each night and when I eat every meal.

And our mom would never go for it. She might not be the world's greatest parent, but she couldn't possibly be okay with her underage daughter dropping out of school and moving out of state. Although when I tried to call to let her know Ev was here, she didn't answer. An uneasy feeling settles on my chest. *What the hell did you do, Everly?*

Whatever happened, everyone just needs a night to cool off. She'll wake up, talk to Mom, have a change of heart, and want to go back home. Then I can have my apartment and sanity back. Just one night.

NOTHING HAS GONE ACCORDING TO PLAN

TYLER

One month later

“Ev! WE GOTTA LEAVE IN FIVE MINUTES!” I YELL AS I STEP INTO THE apartment.

I pull off my sweaty shirt and roll my neck to work out a kink. The extra mile on the treadmill this morning did not loosen up the knots and frustration like I hoped.

Tripping over my travel bag, I curse as I move it out of the way. The team had an away game last night and didn’t get back until late. I really wanted to sleep in this morning, but that couch had other ideas for me. I need a shower, breakfast, and I have five—no, make that four now—minutes to do it in.

“Ev!” I bang on the bedroom door twice. “Ev, you can’t be late again. You have to—”

My sister pulls the door open and shoots me a death glare. “I’m up. Stop yelling. Gosh, you’re such a grumpy old man these days.”

I’m only twenty-two. Not the youngest in the NHL, but the youngest guy on the Wildcats roster. But let me tell you, there is nothing like a teenage girl to make you feel old as shit.

“Homework done?” I ask as I toss my shirt in the hamper.

“Yeah.”

“Even the paper for English class?”

“Yes.” Her tone borders on exasperation. “Declan helped me with it last night.”

“I brought back bagels. Grab something to eat. I’ll just be a minute,” I say before shutting the bathroom door.

I turn on the water and step under the spray, wincing as the cold water blasts me. Awesome, no hot water.

I squeeze my eyes shut and rush to clean my body and hair. I should have taken a shower at the rink after my morning workout, but I was in a hurry to get home and make sure Everly was up and ready to go. It’s her first week at a new high school and it has been an adjustment trying to juggle everything. Especially while on the road. She’s had three tardies already this week. It’s Friday. Thank fuck.

I’m out of the shower thirty seconds later. I wrap a towel around my waist and weave through the mess in my room. Clothes, not mine, are strewn everywhere—the bed, the floor, there’s even something lacy hanging over the

lampshade on my nightstand. I shudder and walk into my closet to get dressed.

More of her shit is in here, but since my wardrobe barely takes up a third of the large walk-in closet, I don't mind...much. For a girl who didn't bring a lot with her, she has managed to really spread it out.

I need to talk to her about keeping things cleaner. It feels hypocritical since I'm not exactly the picture of organization, but with two of us, the apartment is starting to feel like a hovel.

Funny how it'd felt like a palace when I moved in. I'd never had my own place. I shared small, crappy houses or apartments with teammates while I was playing in the juniors. It still seems crazy that this is all mine. Sure, it's only six hundred square feet and I'm just renting for now, but up until Everly showed up, it was the first time I had my own space. Something that was just mine. I miss it.

Everly is in the kitchen when I walk out. I missed her outfit earlier in my rush to get in the shower, but as I take it in now, I grind my molars. "You can't wear that."

"Why not?" She stands taller and gets a defensive glint in her eyes.

"You got the same copy of the dress code that I did. You tell me."

She rolls her eyes. "I didn't read it and I don't care."

"Oh no, you do care. Remember?" It was my only deal breaker when I finally agreed she could stay with me: go to school and stay out of trouble.

She unties the flannel shirt around her waist and puts it on. It doesn't completely cover the three inches of her stomach unless she buttons it, but it's progress.

So, things didn't go as planned. One night turned into four weeks and now it looks like Ev is going to be staying with me for the next five months while she finishes high school. Five months...that's less than half of a year. I probably won't lose my mind.

We've mostly been steering clear of one another, which is difficult in my small apartment.

A knock sounds at the door. I know that can only be one person, so I yell, "It's open."

Declan pokes his head in a second later. "Morning."

"Hey, Dec. Coffee?" I ask as I pour myself some in a to-go mug.

"Nah, thanks. I just came by to wish Ev good luck on her math test."

My stomach drops.

“You have a test already?” I look at Ev. Fuck, I should have known. Parents are supposed to know when their kids have tests, right? Did I miss a paper syllabus or something? Is that even still a thing?

She nods. “Every Friday.”

“You’ve got it, Little Sharpie,” Declan says encouragingly.

Since Everly came to stay with me last month and hasn’t left, like I thought she would after a night or two, I’ve become, for all intents and purposes, her guardian. She turned eighteen over Christmas break so she doesn’t really need a guardian, but what she does need is someone to keep her in line. Actually, she needs a whole team of people. Aka, my teammates. Declan and a few other close teammates have become like surrogate big brothers.

“Thanks, Big Sato,” she mocks, but she smiles at my teammate.

Of all the guys I thought Everly would bond with, Declan was the least likely. He’s quiet and keeps to himself a lot, but he seems to speak teenage girl better than the rest of us. Who knew the broody defenseman was such a softie?

“Coming to the rink today?” I point my gaze toward his wrist.

“Yeah, meeting with doc this morning.” His mouth tightens and he makes a fist with his right hand as if he’s checking to see how it feels.

He had surgery last month and has been rehabbing it. The time away and missing games has been hard on him, but a lifesaver for me. He’s been the one to help keep an eye on Everly while I travel. He lives in the same apartment building as we do, a few floors up. Having him stop in once or twice while I’m gone has been clutch.

“All right. See you there.” I look at the time. Shit, we’re already running late. “Ready, Ev?”

On the ride to school, she’s quiet, earbuds in. I nudge her with an elbow. “Things going okay at school?”

“School is school.”

“Can you translate that for me?”

She rolls her eyes. It’s her very favorite thing to do when I’m around. “It means school sucks, but it’s whatever.”

I start to pull into the parking lot, but Everly unbuckles. “Here is fine.”

“I have time. I thought I could go in with you and—”

“No way. I’d rather die.”

Dramatic much? I pull over and stop the car.

“Thanks for the ride,” she says.

“Hey.” I stop her before she gets out. “Coach Miller and his wife went out on a limb for us. If this doesn’t work out, then it’s back to Iowa.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, but it has less bite in it. She knows I’m right. Not that she’d ever admit it.

“What time do you need me to pick you up?”

“I’ll find my own ride home.” She’s out of the car before I can object.

With a silent prayer to the teenage gods, I turn the car toward the arena.

Coach catches me as I’m stepping onto the ice. “How’s everything going with Everly? Is she settling into her new school?”

“Good. I think so. She wouldn’t let me go in with her this morning. Apparently, I’m embarrassing.”

He chuckles. “I remember those days well. She’ll be okay,” he assures me.

I let his words settle like a balm, and for the duration of our morning practice, I put it all out of my mind. Hockey has always been my sanctuary, but I’ve never needed it as much as I have since Everly came to stay with me.

I thought it might bring us closer like when we were younger but being responsible for her has only added strain to our relationship. She’s sullen and withdrawn, and I’m grumpy. I know it, but I can’t seem to help it.

We have some big games coming up and I need to find a way to focus. I miss the days where hockey was my only concern. I feel selfish admitting that. I love my sister, I do, but I did not plan to spend my rookie season making sure she goes to school and stays out of trouble.

After practice, I linger in the training room with Declan. We’re both quiet as we stretch and roll out our muscles.

Ash and Leo come in and take a seat on the mats with us.

“What are you two still doing here?” Leo asks.

Dec grunts and gives a one-shoulder shrug. Even though he can’t practice, he still spends all day here. I know because I’m usually here with him, avoiding my cramped apartment.

“I was just admiring all the empty space in here,” I say. “Think they’d mind if I move in?”

Ash chuckles. “Baby sis still driving you crazy?”

I don’t say anything. Admitting it feels shitty.

“I get it,” he says. “I have two sisters. You can love them and still want to kill them sometimes. I suggest ear plugs and a sleep mask.” He kicks my

foot. “Better yet, you need a night out. Come over later.”

Man, would I love to say yes. I know that Everly doesn’t need me to hover twenty-four/seven, but I’m not sure how much space to give her. Especially with the things Coach and his wife have done for us. It’s only because of Mrs. Miller’s recommendation that I was able to get Everly into the private high school. She doesn’t work there, but she’s a local teacher and made a few calls to help me. Turns out two suspensions in a year does not make you a highly desirable prospective student.

“I can’t. I’ve barely seen Ev all week with travel. I’m going to take her to dinner and see if I can get some idea of how school is going.”

“Bring her over for dinner at my place. I’ll grab some pizzas.”

He and Leo are good guys, always offering up whatever they think I might need, but I don’t take them up on much. Trusting other people, even my teammates, doesn’t come easy. Everly and I have that in common. Call it a defense mechanism from being let down one too many times if you want. I call it smart.

“Thanks. Maybe another time.” My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out and stare at the number.

“It’s the school,” I say and stand. “I’ll catch you guys later.”

“Hello,” I answer as I walk down the hallway to the back entrance of the arena.

“Hello, Mr. Sharp. It’s Mrs. Best from Park Academy.”

An uneasy feeling washes over me, but I try for cheery in my response. “Hi, Mrs. Best. Everything okay?”

I push out into the freezing temp in my shorts and T-shirt. Without even realizing what I’ve done, I’m in my car and pulling out toward the school before she gets to the heart of why she’s called.

“Everly is fine, but we did have an incident this afternoon. Would you be able to stop in for a quick meeting?”

“On my way,” I clip. Silence hangs between us and I struggle to form the next words. “Should I be worried?”

“I think it would be better to talk in person. I’ll fill you in once you get here.”

We hang up, and I grip the steering wheel harder. I think maybe I was expecting the call all week. Everly isn’t a bad kid, I don’t think. She didn’t used to be anyway. We used to have a lot of fun together in the summers when I wasn’t playing hockey. We’d go to the lake or walk to the skate park

to hang with friends. She was sassy but sweet, athletic and daring. She never cared much for authority, but we have that in common too. When your parents are unreliable, it's easy to resent everyone who holds power over you because you know they might wield it to an unfair advantage or make promises they can't deliver.

But I had a bad feeling about her starting school this week because in the month she's been living with me, nothing has gone according to plan.

I don't know if I'm happy that she's screwed up and I can send her back to Mom, have my apartment and life back, or if I'm disappointed that she proved me right so quickly. Her failure suddenly feels very much like *my* failure.

I'm still mulling it over as I walk through the halls of Park Academy. My tennis shoes squeak on the waxed floors. My gaze lifts to the trophy case lining the walls on either side.

Swimming, cross country, lacrosse, golf, hockey—PA has it all. The banners and signs that hang on the walls and from the ceilings aren't the kind that were made by students in art class, either. It's all custom and a little sterile. As bullet points, this high school sounded like the perfect place for Ev but walking down the hall, I feel...out of place and my stomach sinks.

I lived away from home with a host family so I could play in the junior league my senior year. That place was rich, but Park Academy is on a whole other level. This isn't what Everly is used to.

I wanted her to have every opportunity to turn things around, but I fear I might have sent her to rub elbows with rich kids that eat the poor for lunch.

I've met Coach's wife a handful of times and she's never given me that impression. Sure, the Millers have money, but they don't flaunt it in that way that makes other people feel shitty for having less.

Maybe I'm sensitive to it. Even signing a million-dollar contract to play hockey hasn't made me feel like I'm someone with money. Stupid, I know.

I pull open the heavy door with the words OFFICE printed across the frosted glass. A woman stands behind a desk, the kind that lifts and lowers so you can sit or stand behind it. The door beeps alerting her to my presence, and she smiles.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

I'm suddenly very aware that I'm in shorts and a sweaty tee. I'm sure other parents, not that that's what I am, show up in far more formal attire. "I'm looking for Everly Kent."

“Are you her...boyfriend?” Her dark brows rise above the thick framed glasses she wears.

I nearly choke on my own spit. “No. I’m her brother, Tyler Sharp. Mrs. Best called me.”

“Oh, of course, yes.” She comes around her desk. “Your sister is in the art room. Mrs. Best had to see to another emergency, but she should be right back.”

Another emergency? My pulse spikes.

“She’s with one of our teachers cleaning up the mess. I’ll let them know to come to the office now.”

The mess. Oh boy. *What the hell did you do, Ev?*

ADULTING REALLY SUCKS SOMETIMES

PIPER

I'M ON DAY NUMBER FIVE OF MOLDING YOUNG MINDS AND READY TO THROW in the towel. Okay, not really, but I was not prepared. Every muscle hurts, not because I stood for a large portion of those five days, but because I was so nervous I clenched and tensed all week long.

For three and a half years I've been working toward this. What's that saying about false hopes being more dangerous than fears? I challenge that person to stand in front of a class of high schoolers and say that with a straight face.

So many teenage boys made passes at me today I feel icky. And the girls? Wow, either I've blocked it, or they've gotten meaner since I was in high school a few years ago.

I shake off my pessimism and glance at the lone student left under my supervision. She's why I wanted to do this. Girls just like Everly Kent. It's her first week, too, and it's hard to say whose was more craptastic.

School has been over for almost an hour now, but I'm still here waiting for her parents to pick her up. She stands at the sink rinsing out paintbrushes and palette cups.

My cell phone buzzes on the desk in front of me. ***Dinner tonight?***

Can't. I have tutoring. Call you after. I tap out the quick response to my boyfriend and then put my phone away.

I toss the last stale chip left over from lunch in my mouth and chew as I watch Everly scrub at old paint stains. It's been as clean as it's going to get for five minutes, but I think she's working out her own issues.

She doesn't look like a kid who ruined a semester's worth of theater

backdrops in a single hour. Though she doesn't look all that remorseful either. Still, there's something in the way she holds herself—angry, jaded, with just a dash of insecurity that she hides under thick makeup and a glare at anyone who looks like they might be a threat. If Everly can make it through this week, then I can too.

“I think those are clean enough,” I say.

My stomach growls and I toss the empty chip bag in the trash. I check the clock on the wall for the time. Everyone else is gone for the day. The halls are quiet and the parking lot outside my window is mostly empty. My mentor teacher, Mrs. Aaron, had to run to a doctor's appointment right after school so I volunteered to stay.

Everly takes a seat in front of my desk and stares at her fingernails, picking at the black polish.

She hasn't even apologized, but the pout of her mouth tells me she feels something...even if it's only rage at being stuck here with me. Oh, to be a teenager again. The days of writing off your wrongs so easily and letting your parents sweep in and fix everything. I'm not even joking. I'd love to call up Mom and Dad and have them save me. Adulthood really sucks sometimes.

I tap my foot, anxious to get out of here. I have a tutoring job in thirty minutes, and I really don't want to cancel. The Allens pay well, especially considering their nine-year-old daughter is whip smart, and I need the money. This student teaching gig does not pay, which feels like a crime. I worked my butt off this week.

“Are your parents coming from work?” I ask, trying not to sound like I'm sweating bullets hoping that they'll arrive soon so I can leave.

Before she can answer, the phone on my/Mrs. Aaron's desk rings.

“Hello?” I say as I put it to my ear.

“Hi there. Mrs. Best is ready for Everly in the office.” Kim, the office administrator, talks in a sweet, warm tone that always sounds like she's smiling. And she has been every time I've seen her.

“On our way,” I say too eagerly, standing before I've even put the receiver down.

Everly gets to her feet without question and follows me, slowly putting one foot in front of the other.

Finally, I'm going to be able to get out of here. I might even have time to drive through somewhere and grab something to eat before I go to the Allens. I spent too much time this morning trying to decide what to wear (my closet

needs a serious overhaul) and forgot to pack a lunch. I thought it'd be fine, and I could grab something from the cafeteria, but none of the other teachers eat lunch at the cafeteria so then I felt weird about going and had to eat vending machine food. I'm starving.

As we round the last corner toward the office, Everly speaks. "Are they going to suspend me?"

I pause and turn to face her. "I'm not sure."

She clutches on to her backpack, eyes on her feet. "He's going to send me back."

A pang of sympathy hits me. I don't ask back where. Wherever she means, she isn't happy about it.

"It's going to be okay," I promise, having absolutely no right to say it and regretting it immediately. I have no idea what her home life is like or what situation brought her here the last semester of her senior year.

I wanted to be a teacher for two reasons, and I am going to repeat them to myself every day, probably multiple times a day. Number one, my grandmother was a teacher, and she was the most magnificent person that ever lived. I loved her more than anyone in the world. People adored her everywhere we went. Her students grew up, had kids, and hoped they'd have her as a teacher too. They invited her to weddings and christenings like she was a part of the family. It was incredible to go somewhere with her and run into an old student. What she did mattered to people on a real and personal level.

Number two—and this one is harder to put into words that don't sound lofty and cliché—I want to make a difference. My life has been...easy. Not always, certainly not now, but for enough of my life that I feel like I owe it to the universe or something. I saw how much of a difference my grandmother made and I want to continue that. I don't know how else to describe it other than to say it just feels like what I'm supposed to be doing.

Maybe I won't be the teacher that my grandmother was, but if I make a difference for just one person, then I think it will have all been worth it. And I guess Everly Kent is as good of a place to start as any.

"I will do what I can," I say to her as I place my hand on the doorknob for the school office.

"Thanks." Her hazel eyes lift to mine, and I get the smallest of smiles.

Kim tips her head to the back of the office. "Everly, you can go right in."

The girl next to me mumbles her thanks and heads toward Mrs. Best's

open door.

She walks in and takes the empty seat in front of the desk. I follow, then linger in the doorway unsure if I should be here for the meeting or not, but I can't plead my case for Everly on the other side of the door.

"Miss Vaughn," Principal Best says. One of her dark brows inches higher as if asking, what are you doing here?

"Hi. I was just bringing Everly here from the classroom, but while I'm here I wanted to say that I would be thrilled to work with Everly to fix the damage," I say, then quickly add, "if that's okay with you."

"Sit." She waves her hand to an empty chair. "I was just talking with Mr. Sharp about the damage."

I finally let myself look at Everly's father. His name and hers swirl together in my head like a tornado waiting to swoop down and destroy. And when I meet his green gaze, that's exactly what it does—wreck me.

I'm no longer the capable woman starting a new job, but a brokenhearted teenager crying over the boy sitting across the room. Except he's not a boy anymore.

Tyler Sharp is all grown up. I already knew this. His face is everywhere in this city, but no amount of media exposure prepared me for seeing him in person.

"Piper," he says, my name a jagged whisper from his lips.

Still, it knocks the air from my lungs. I'm still walking forward to my seat, gaze locked on his. I ram into the side of Principal Best's desk and buckle forward on impact.

Tyler stands quickly like he's going to come across the room to help me. I hold up a hand and grimace as pain spreads down my leg, but it's nothing compared to the one in my chest.

I glance up at him from where I hunch over rubbing my knee. My high school love. My only love, if we're being technical.

He's dressed in shorts and a Wildcat T-shirt like he came straight from the arena. I have so many questions, none of them appropriate for my new boss to hear.

I scramble to stand upright, ignoring the sharp pain and slapping a smile on my face. "Tyler. Hi. I didn't realize..." I glance at Everly. *His sister*. He spoke of her often while we were together, but I never met her, and I definitely didn't expect to run into her here. Her gaze ping-pongs between us for answers.

“I’m student teaching here.” I take my seat and a deep breath.

He nods but doesn’t speak. He doesn’t take his eyes off me either and I finally look away first, giving Principal Best my attention.

“Great, well,” she says, clasping her hands on the desk. “I’ve already explained to Mr. Sharp the damage to school property.”

Everly winces. I think she’s finally realizing just how bad it sounds when put in those terms.

Principal Best looks right at Everly. “I know that moving to a new school halfway through your senior year of high school can’t be easy, but it doesn’t excuse what happened today. A lot of people worked really hard on the backdrops that are now ruined.”

I sneak another glance at Tyler. His jaw is tight, mouth in a straight line as he watches his sister like he’s waiting for an explanation.

“Ev?” His voice is quiet but stern.

“I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t know that’s what they were.”

He rakes a hand across his jaw, back and forth, while he looks up at the ceiling. His mouth moves but no words come out. Finally, he speaks where we can hear him. “What does this mean for Everly? Will she be suspended?”

Principal Best sits back in her chair, hands still clasped but now at her waist. She’s quiet, mulling over what to do. Finally, she says, “I believe that you didn’t do it maliciously, but in the future, if it doesn’t belong to you, I think it’s safe to assume you shouldn’t be painting on it in your free time. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“It won’t happen again,” Tyler says.

“Good.”

“Is that it?” Tyler’s voice sounds like he can’t believe she’s getting off this easy.

“Well, the backdrops are still unusable, and we have a much-anticipated theater performance coming up in a couple of months.”

“I will pay for the damage, of course,” he says.

“That won’t be necessary.” Mrs. Best’s gaze slides to me. “Are you sure that you would like to oversee the work required to repaint the backdrops?”

“Yes,” I say with confidence that is entirely for Everly’s benefit. Maybe a little for Tyler. I don’t want him to see me sweating, not over the job and definitely not over him.

I catch his eye and swallow thickly when I find him staring back at me.

“We could work on it after school if that works for your schedule,” I say to him and Everly, keeping my eyes on her.

“Seems fair,” Tyler says. “Everly?”

Her tone doesn’t sound like she thinks it’s fair, but she agrees.

“Okay. It’s settled.” Mrs. Best stands, as does Tyler. She extends a hand to him. “Thank you for your time.”

“Likewise,” he says, drops her hand, and places it at Everly’s elbow.

I wait for them to leave first and then shuffle out behind them into the hallway.

“I’ll meet you outside,” Tyler says to his sister.

She doesn’t need any more encouragement. She takes off out the front of the school without so much as a thank you.

He’s taller. Broader too. His face has less of the boyish softness than it did when I knew him. It feels like a lifetime ago.

“I had no idea she was...” My voice trails off. “I didn’t realize your family had moved here too.”

Too. Meaning, I knew he was here. I did. I’d have to be completely oblivious not to know. Wildcat Hockey is everything in this city, and Tyler has been getting a lot of attention as a rookie with star potential.

“They didn’t. Just Ev. She’s staying with me.”

“Oh.” I have a whole host of questions that I no longer feel close enough to him to ask, but still wonder. I never met his sister while we were dating, but I saw pictures. She was thirteen, then, and I never would have put it together without him showing up here.

“It’s good to see you, Piper,” he says. “I hoped I might run into you someday. I didn’t imagine it like this.”

My heart beats wildly, but anger flashes too. This boy broke my heart in a million pieces. We dated for the most amazing eight months. We lived in different cities, so we were mostly long-distance, but somehow it felt like he was with me every second of the day: texts, all-night phone calls, weekend visits cramming in hours of making out and kissing until my lips hurt. I loved him so much. I thought he was my forever. Maybe that’s dumb at eighteen, but I’ve never met anyone that made me feel like he did. Not before him and not since.

He broke up with me the night of my high school’s big spring dance. He was supposed to be my date, but he got held up because of hockey. That happened quite a bit, honestly. His schedule was intense for a high school

kid. I got it. Like I said, I felt a connection to him without needing to be with him every day and I was fine with being the one who had to make concessions like traveling to visit him on weekends instead of him coming to see me. I loved him so much. None of that mattered.

But when he called that night to tell me he wasn't going to make it, he said he couldn't keep disappointing me. He said, 'I love you, Pipes, but right now this just isn't meant to be.' He left me standing alone at a high school dance, dateless, in the rain. Okay, fine, it wasn't raining, but I cried so much that it looked like I'd walked through a storm.

It took me a really long time to move on. Then five months ago he moved to *my* city where I have had to see his face plastered everywhere I go.

And now he's right in front of me.

"You too," I say, but don't quite meet his gaze.

"Thank you for what you did in there."

"I didn't do it for you."

His mouth lifts on one side but it isn't quite a smile. "I figured, but I'm still grateful."

"She seems like a good kid."

"Does she?" he asks with a bitter laugh as he runs his hand through his dark hair.

Since I don't know how to respond to that, I just nod.

"Is your number still the same?" He pulls his phone from his pocket. When I don't answer, he looks up from the screen at me. "In case I need to get in contact with you about Everly."

"Oh, uh, if you need anything you should contact Mrs. Best or Kim in the office."

He taps out something and my phone buzzes in my pocket. I'm sure he can hear it, but I don't make any move for it.

Tyler wraps his long fingers around his phone and finally smiles at me. Really smiles. With all that teenage Tyler charm I fell in love with four years ago. But there's something else in it too. Regret? Pain?

I've dreamt about this day. How I would look (ahhh-mazing!), what I would say (oh, so many things—all perfect and cutting), and most importantly, the validation I would feel when I realized he no longer makes my body come alive with a single look.

Instead, I'm standing here in a thrift store dress that's a size too big, I can't seem to make anything coherent come out of my mouth, and worst of

all his stare still ripples over my skin like electricity.

It pisses me off. All of it.

“I should go before she takes off with my car. It was really good to see you, Piper. I, uh...” He shifts like he’s trying to figure out how to say whatever is on his mind. Eventually he shakes his head. “I’ll see you.”

Only when he’s out the front door do I release a breath and pull out my phone to read his text.

You look even more beautiful than you did four years ago.

ANGST AND EXCITEMENT

TYLER

“HEADS UP,” ASH CALLS AS HE TOSSES ME A BEER AND THEN ANOTHER TO Leo.

“No thanks.” I set it on the coffee table.

“You’re no fun anymore, Sharpie. You have to learn to release some of that tension.”

He takes a seat on the chair across from me and kicks his feet up. “Your sister is outside talking on the phone telling someone you’re sending her back to Iowa. That true?”

“I should,” I say. That was the bargain. Everly wouldn’t mess up and I wouldn’t send her back to live with Mom.

“At least they didn’t suspend her,” Leo says quietly.

“No, not this time.”

“Tough situation, man.” Ash offers a sympathetic smile. “But first week at a new school has to be tough. Especially if it’s filled with a bunch of pretentious pimple-faced assholes.”

My head snaps up. “You know Park Academy?”

“No, but I overheard Everly saying that verbatim.”

“Eavesdrop much?” Leo asks him with a chuckle.

“What can I say? I love some good, old-fashioned high school drama. Nothing exciting happens around here anymore since this one settled down.” He points a finger wrapped around his beer toward Leo.

Ash sighs and looks at me. “Remember when he was hooking up with Scarlett behind Coach’s back? Those were the days. Angst and excitement.”

Leo rolls his eyes, but his lips twitch with amusement. Since he and

Scarlett got engaged, Leo is all smiles. I'm happy for him. But it drags my thoughts back to Piper.

"I ran into her."

They exchange a look and Ash asks, "Who?"

"Her. Piper. My Scarlett." I wave a hand toward Leo. "Except without the sneaking-around drama."

"She sounds kind of dull." Ash's lips quirk up when I glare at him. "I need more information."

"We dated in high school—long distance."

"Why'd it end?" Leo asks.

"Because I was a stupid teenage boy."

"Ooooh, shit." Ash gets a wicked grin on his face. "This is your girl. The *one* that got away? It's all coming back to me now."

I might have gotten drunk and mentioned her a time or two.

"She's a teacher at Everly's new school."

Piper's face fills my mind. I've missed her every day for four years, but something about seeing her again has the pain of losing her as fresh as the night it happened.

"Oh shit." Ash rubs his palms together. "Drama and angst, lost love. Tell me more."

Leo shoots him a *shut the fuck up* look before he glances at me. "What happened?"

"Nothing, really. Piper was perfect. Beautiful, fun, the best girlfriend. She'd send me these long texts on game days, pumping me up, telling me how great I was going to be and how she was so proud of me."

The guys are hanging on my every word. "You know what it's like. If it wasn't eating, sleeping, hockey, or school, I barely had time for it."

Ash nods thoughtfully. "She got sick of it?"

"No. Well, yeah, I'm sure she did, but she never said as much." I stare at my hands. "I got tired of not being there for her. It ate away at me. She invited me to stuff, and I had to say no, then she'd act like she didn't want to go either. She was missing out on all the parties and dances, normal high school shit because my schedule made it basically impossible to travel to see her most weekends. I could see how it was wearing on her. I was never going to be the boyfriend that she deserved."

"Fuck," Ash says, his voice serious. "Yeah. I get that."

"How'd you two meet in the first place if it was long distance?" Leo asks.

“Tim Vaughn is her uncle. I lived with his family while I was playing with the Gamblers.”

“No shit?” Leo’s brows rise. “That dude was a hell of a hockey player.”

Piper’s uncle, Tim Vaughn, was a pro hockey player, too, and basically my idol. Living with him was the golden ticket. The fact that it led me to Piper was the cherry on top. Hands down, the best thing that ever happened to me was living with the Vaughns.

Even so, I don’t regret breaking up with her, not for a second. I kept tabs on her through Tim and his family. I saw how she flourished without me, went to prom, attended parties, had a life that she was never going to have with me.

“How’d she look?” Ash asks.

“Like the hottest woman alive.” I rub at a knot in my chest. “I forgot. I mean, I didn’t, but fuck.”

“And? What’d she say?” Leo asks.

“Not a lot. She mostly glared at me. I don’t think she remembers our time together quite as fondly as I do.”

Ash gives me a sympathetic nod. “That’ll happen when you break up with a chick. Hell hath no fury and all that.”

Leo clears his throat. “I have to tell you something.”

“What?” Ash and I say at the same time.

“Scarlett knows Piper.”

My heart races.

Ash chuckles. “This gets better and better.”

“They met randomly and have hung out a handful of times. Neither of them knew the connection right away, and I just found out myself last month about the time Everly showed up. I wasn’t sure if I should say anything. I didn’t realize what she meant to you. Now I’m thinking I should have at least given you a heads-up. I’m sorry, man.”

“No, I get it,” I say. “You couldn’t have known.”

I’ve kept details about Piper mostly to myself. Talking about her just made me want her that much more.

The sliding door off the kitchen opens and Everly comes inside clutching her phone in one hand. “Are we going soon? River is supposed to pick me up in an hour.”

“Yeah.” I nod to her, and she buries her nose back in her phone and disappears into the game room.

“I should go.” I sit forward, elbows on my knees. “Thanks for letting us crash for a bit. I can’t think at my place with all the piles of stuff.”

“You need a bigger place,” Ash says.

“All the two-bedroom apartments are rented. They’ve got me on a list.”

“Stay here.” Ash lifts one shoulder in a shrug.

“Thank you for the offer, but we’ll be fine. I don’t know how much longer she’s going to be here anyway.”

“You’d send her back?” Leo asks quietly.

“No. He won’t. No way,” Ash answers for me.

I hate that she did the one thing I asked her not to do—get in trouble at school, but he’s right, I won’t send her back. Not after seeing her there today. It was only a brief moment that I saw the insecurity and remorse at what she’d done, but it was there. And besides, I haven’t given her a fair shake. I’ve been resenting her every second she’s been here when what she needs is me to support her. I don’t know how I’m going to do that yet, but it’s time to stop being selfish and figure it out.

“Something has to change.”

“Well, the offer stands.” Ash waves a hand in the air toward upstairs. “I have the space. The master is down here. I barely even go upstairs.”

“Ty!” Everly whines from the other room.

I stand and suppress a groan. It’s truly amazing how quickly she can make me want to pull my hair out.

“I’ll see you guys in the morning.”

With a salute, I head out. Everly is already sitting in my car waiting for me.

I drive home in silence, and that silence continues as we take the elevator up to my apartment on the fourth floor. I don’t know what to say. My mind is a mess.

River is leaning against the wall next to our door. Ev takes off down the hallway at a jog toward him. He pushes off the wall and catches her, spins her around, then places her on the ground.

I walk past them, unlock the door, and start inside.

“Are you ready?” he asks her. Neither of them come inside.

I turn around and face Ev. “Where are you going?”

“Just out with friends.”

“We need to talk, Ev.”

“I know,” she says, tone annoyed.

“I’m serious. The shit that went down today was not cool.”

“I knooow. Gosh.” She huffs.

My patience obliterates at my feet. “Home by nine.”

“It’s Friday night!”

I cock my head to the side as if to say, *try me*.

“Whatever.” She turns on her heel and slams the door behind her.

I blow out a long breath and head to the kitchen. Pulling open the fridge, I stare inside without finding anything. The silence is nice, but I can’t even appreciate it because I’m hungry, there’s no food, my place is a disaster, and I need to talk to Ev.

Things have to change. The loser boyfriend is at the top of my list. He’s twenty, thinks he’s God’s gift to women, has no ambitions, and is basically going nowhere fast. Not exactly the influence I want on my baby sister.

My thoughts drift back to Piper. I get that same uncomfortable sensation in my chest. I rub at it as I pull out my phone. She didn’t respond to my text. I guess I deserve that. It was obvious she wasn’t thrilled to see me. I don’t blame her, but it feels like the first bit of good luck I’ve had in a while to run into her again. The number of times I’ve looked for her in a crowd are too many to count. I knew she was here, and it was torture not to track her down.

I planned to as soon as the season was over. She’d be done with school, and I’d have, hopefully, proved my worth to the team. I wanted things to be different when I saw her again. I wanted to feel like I wasn’t keeping her from doing all the things she was meant to do. And yeah, I guess it was important to me that I’d reached my goals too.

But now? Ready or not, I’ve found her and there are so many things I want to say. I don’t know where to start.

I really appreciate what you did today. Can I buy you dinner as a thank you?

After I fire off the text, I order takeout and pick up the place. I toss anything that’s Everly’s into the bedroom, reclaiming a small fraction of space back for myself. I fall asleep watching TV and wake up at the creak of the front door.

Everly steps inside and pushes it closed softly behind her, then tiptoes toward her room.

“It’s almost ten,” I croak.

She stills and then stands tall to flash another haughty stare at me. “I was back at nine, but we were talking in the hallway.”

I wince. I'm almost positive that means making out where all my neighbors could see.

She starts for the bedroom again.

"Wait, Ev, sit down. We need to talk." Sitting up, I roll my shoulders back to work out a kink. I've been meaning to buy a new couch, one with a pullout, but there never seems to be time.

She does, but her reluctance is clear with every slow step.

If someone had told me a year ago that I was going to have to think like a parent and have awkward conversations with my little sister, I would have laughed in their face. Yet, here I am.

"What's going on with you? I thought things were going better?"

"They are," she says quickly, then backpedals. "They were. I didn't know the backdrops were for some stupid play or I wouldn't have done it."

"Why were you in the art room by yourself anyway?"

She stares down at her hands. "It was lunch, and I wanted some time alone."

"What about your friends?" Oh shit. "You did make some new friends this week, right?"

Everly's eyes narrow. "The girls at school are stuck up and the boys are worse. Besides, I have River."

"Ev," I start.

She stands. "I'm fine, okay. I don't need you to feel sorry for me. If I wanted to make friends, I would, but I don't. I'm only going to school because you said I had to."

I think back to my high school days. God, how much worse would it have been without guys I could count on. Even now.

"Are you kicking me out?"

"Is that what you want?"

"If it were, I would have already left. River said I could stay with him."

Oh, perfect. That brightens my mood. But even without the threat of her moving in with River, I won't turn her away. Everyone deserves to have someone that will look out for them. Neither of us got that from our parents. I found it in my teammates, and I guess I'm going to be that for Everly. I'm not sure how, but I will figure it out.

"You can stay, but we have to make some changes around here." I wave a hand around the apartment. "This isn't working."

"You can have the bedroom," she says glumly.

“It isn’t the bed, though this couch is awful. We need more space, and you need people around when I can’t be here.”

“Okay.” Her brows tug together. “What are you saying?”

I sigh and say a silent goodbye to my six-hundred-square foot palace. “Pack your shit. We’re moving.”

“Are you positive this is okay?” I ask Ash as Leo and Declan carry Everly’s and my few possessions through his front door.

“Don’t even sweat it. This is going to be fun,” he says, and slaps me on the shoulder. “You want some coffee?”

I check the time on my phone. “I still need to get in a workout this morning.”

“You have time.” He nods his head toward the kitchen, and I follow. Something about this just feels wrong, like I’m overstepping. Asking for help doesn’t come easily, but I know this is better for Everly.

“Mugs and glasses are in here.” He opens a cabinet and sets out two coffee mugs. “Everything else, your guess is as good as mine.”

“You don’t cook?”

“Not if I can help it, but my housekeeper, Lynn, shops for me, so if there’s anything you want, just add it to the list.” He taps a notepad on the fridge, then opens it and pulls out the creamer. He puts it and the sugar in front of me then fills the mugs with coffee. By the time he sets one in front of me, my head is spinning, and I don’t immediately grab for it. I was worried about taking up space and invading his privacy, but I never considered all the other ways we’d be messing with his routine and his housekeeper’s routine. One pebble with a thousand ripples.

Leaning back on the counter as he assesses me, Ash shoots me a playful grin. “Relax, man. It’s no imposition.”

“I don’t believe you, but since I just gave away our apartment, I guess I’ll make my peace with it.”

Everly comes into the kitchen. Declan has one tattooed arm slung around her shoulders.

“All set,” he says.

Leo is behind them. “I have to take off, but I’ll see you guys at practice.”

“Thanks for your help.”

He nods. “Of course. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“I should get going too,” Declan says.

“Are we still hanging out next week?” Everly asks him.

“Absolutely. You can come to my place or I’ll come by here. Text ya later, Little Sharpie.” He tips his head to me and then he and Leo head out together.

Ash looks at Everly and lifts his mug. “Coffee?”

She wrinkles her nose. “I only like iced coffee.”

“I don’t have that, but there’s OJ and Gatorade in the fridge. Help yourself.”

Before Everly can move, a woman wearing only an oversized Wildcat Hockey T-shirt saunters into the room. Her tits bounce with every step, and her long, blue hair hangs down her back in messy bedhead waves. Her eyes are only half open, but she goes right for Ash, throws her arms around his neck, and lifts up on her toes to kiss him. The movement makes her T-shirt ride up, and Ev and I get a generous glimpse of her ass.

“Come back to bed,” she says, voice husky.

Ash tugs her to his side and clears his throat. “Talia, you remember Ty? And that’s his sister Everly. They are moving in upstairs.”

“Morning,” she says to us, then takes Ash’s mug from him and sips it. Her nipples are saluting us, and Everly has this shocked, amused look on her face.

Ash pulls her with him toward his bedroom. “I’ll be right there.”

She saunters out, and Ash turns to look at me with a sheepish grin.

“Is that your girlfriend?” Everly asks.

“Uhh…” Ash rubs at the back of his neck.

I don’t know the whole story with Ash and Talia, but I watch in amusement as our new roommate tries to figure out how to tell my sister that she’s his fuck buddy.

I clear my throat. “Grab your stuff, Ev.”

“For what?”

“You’re coming with me to the arena this morning. I have a couple of meetings after my workout. It won’t take too long.”

“Seriously? Why can’t I stay here?”

“Because I want to hang out with you.”

She rolls her eyes but leaves me in the kitchen alone with Ash.

I cock a brow in the direction Talia went, and he smothers a laugh. “I forgot she was here.”

“Oh, this is going to be interesting,” I say with a chuckle.

Sunday afternoon I’m in the garage working on my car. We have the day off and Ash invited some friends over to hang out. They’re inside, but their laughter filters out every so often.

“You look like you could use a beer?” The voice is attached to a long pair of legs that step into my line of sight.

I glance up from my position, bent over the hood of my car, to meet her smile and shake off the beer in her hand. “I’m good. Thanks.”

“Is this your car?”

Resisting a laugh, I straighten and wipe my hands on a rag. “If it isn’t then I’m a really nice guy.”

“Are you...” She takes a step closer until her hip rests against my thigh. “A really nice guy?”

“No. I’m definitely not.”

A beat of silence hangs between us. Her gaze darts to my mouth and she presses against me just a little bit more. She’s all long legs and big hair, a nice smile. Plenty of women hang around my teammates so this isn’t the first time one has flirted with me, but she’s less aggressive than most and I like that about her. Some guys might be into the easy score, but I like sex the same way I like everything else in my life—earned.

So, I let the moment hang a little longer between us. I enjoy the heat of her body and the feeling of being wanted. And I think about it for a second, what it’d be like to give in and touch this gorgeous girl.

Motion in the driveway catches my attention, breaking the spell. A group of guys and girls are heading across the street. Someone is carrying a cooler and they’re all laughing and talking, not a care in the world.

I step away from the girl next to me. She seems nice enough, she’s definitely hot enough, but I’d be using her, wishing she was someone else.

“Olivia!” a girl calls.

“Coming,” she says from beside me. She sets the beer on the top of my car. “We’re crashing the hot tub at Leo’s house. You should come.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, knowing full well I won’t.

With one more smile, she jogs off to join her friends. Ash appears a second later from the door leading inside, a towel thrown over his shoulder and his swim trunks on, no shirt.

“Dude, it’s like thirty degrees out here.”

“Won’t be cold for long,” he says. His freaking breath is visible as he speaks. “Are you gonna stop working on your prized possession and come hang out or what?”

Declan steps into view behind him. He’s more appropriately dressed in jeans, a heavy coat, gloves, and a hat on his head. One side of his mouth quirks up when he sees me under the hood of my car. “Break down again, Sharpie? When are you going to sell that antique and buy something that won’t strand you on the side of the road every week?”

We have an ongoing thing with our cars. He has a sweet, little Ferrari. It’s a beauty, but I like old, American muscle. I dreamt my whole life of having a ‘67 Shelby Mustang, and now that I own her, there’s no amount of ribbing from the guys that will get to me. She’s perfect.

I close the hood. God, I love the sound of it. “I was just changing the oil. Showing her a little love.”

“Awesome. Now grab your trunks and come show Talia’s friend, Olivia, some love. She has been asking about you for months.”

“I don’t have any trunks.”

My teammate—and always up for a good time buddy—Ash, just shrugs. “Boxers or naked is fine too.”

Declan snorts. “I think that’s my cue to get out of here.”

“What?” Ash cocks his head to the side and stares at him. “You just got here.”

“It doesn’t take long to get sick of you.” He grins wide. Declan and Ash are total opposites, but they respect the hell out of each other, despite the joking around.

“I’m gonna pass, too, but thanks for letting me use your garage,” I say as I pull out my phone to check the time. I tamp down the irritation that bubbles up. Everly was supposed to be back fifteen minutes ago.

“You live here now. You can use it any time you want.” He walks backward. “If you’re not going to rock Olivia’s world, then do the world a favor and call up Piper. You’re not going to be able to move on until you find out for sure whether or not she hates your guts.”

He's not wrong. She's occupied most of my thoughts this weekend, but I flip him the bird anyway. It's easier than admitting I don't need to talk to her to know she hates my guts. Her silence says it all.

YOU WERE THE PERFECT GIRLFRIEND

PIPER

I MET SCARLETT BY ACCIDENT.

For the past year, I've been living with my friend Heather and her fiancé Steve. They booked an engagement shoot, and I went with them because... well, now I can't even remember. But I'm pretty sure it was boredom.

Scarlett was their photographer. I didn't know her link to the Wildcats until later, but I'm glad I didn't immediately put it together because I never would have let myself be friends with her if I'd known she was the head coach's daughter and dating one of the players. It would have been too weird and too close of a connection to Tyler. Once I found out, it was too late. I adored her too much to let it bother me...much.

Tuesday night, I meet Scarlett and her friend Jade for drinks at one of our favorite wine bars. They're waiting for me at their usual table. We're in that new stage of friendship where I still feel a little awkward when I show up, but I always leave feeling like I've known them forever.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I say, sliding into the open high-top chair.

"We were taking bets on how late you'd be," Jade says with a playful smile. I might have a slight reputation for being late to, well, everything. I'm working on it.

"I'm sorry."

"She's only teasing." Scarlett pushes a glass of wine toward me.

My cheeks flush, and I scramble for my purse. I was hoping they wouldn't order for me. I only have enough for the cheapest house wine, and I doubt that's what they got. "Let me give you some cash."

"Nonsense," Scarlett says. "You spent all day with high schoolers. That

one is on me.”

“Thank you.” I take a sip. So much better than the sweet white I was going to buy.

I sit back in my chair. “How’ve you two been? Anything new?”

They exchange a glance. They have lots of little nonverbal communication signals from being friends for so long, but I can’t read whatever passes between them.

“What?”

“We know you ran into Tyler last week,” Scarlett says, then her lips part into a big smile.

My pulse speeds up. “How?”

“He told Leo.”

I take another sip of wine while I try to decide if I want to ask what he said. Tyler is a pretty private guy so I can’t imagine him oversharing anything beyond what Scarlett and Jade already know. Or I should say, he was. I don’t know him anymore. Either way I’m curious what he might have told Leo and his other teammates about us, and more specifically, me. Curious, but also not sure I want to know. Even after all these years I know he has the ability to hurt me deeply.

Isn’t it weird how hearing something secondhand makes it feel real in a way it doesn’t when the person communicates it directly? It’s like somehow whatever he said to his friends feels like a more authentic version than the few things he said to me. And I guess I do want to know because the next words out of my mouth are, “What’d he say?”

“That he ran into you at his sister’s school. That you were the perfect girlfriend.” Scarlett’s smile softens.

“And that you were the hottest woman alive,” Jade pipes in.

Scarlett’s eyes widen. “Yes! He said that too.”

Heat hits my cheeks and butterflies swoop low in my stomach. “I didn’t know that she was his sister. I should have. Now that I do, I can see the resemblance.”

“Confession.” Scarlett raises her hand and bites the corner of her lip. “I knew Everly was at Park Academy. My mom helped him find a school for her.”

“You knew his sister was here?” I ask.

Scarlett nods. “I don’t know the full story, but yeah. She came to stay with him late last year. I wanted to tell you, but...”

I nod, understanding what she doesn't say.

In order to be friends with Scarlett, I've had to keep a very clear line about what she can share about the team. She talks my ear off about Leo and even her family, but Tyler has been off-limits. I never considered that there were things going on in his life that she was holding back from me. I mean, I assumed she was withholding information about his dating life, which I'd still like to remain happily ignorant about, but not things like he'd suddenly become responsible for his sister.

"What was it like seeing him?" Jade asks.

"Like no time had passed. I felt eighteen and heartbroken all over again. And then angry because even after all this time he still gets under my skin."

Scarlett reaches over and squeezes my hand. "Sorry, babe. I should have warned you."

"No, it's fine. It was a shock, but in a way, I'm glad I got it over with. I knew it was only a matter of time before I bumped into him somewhere."

"Especially now that he's basically the guardian of one of your students."

Tyler as a guardian. Weird.

"He texted me over the weekend and asked me to dinner," I confess.

Both girls grin so big at me, like this is the best news ever.

"I'm not going."

"Why not?" Jade asks.

"Well, for starters, I'm still seeing Chris."

"But this is Tyler," Scarlett whines.

"Exactly. Another reason that I shouldn't go. There's too much history, too much heartache. The only way I'm going to survive teaching his sister all year is to keep my distance."

Scarlett doesn't say anything, but I can read her expression loud and clear. She's happily in love with Leo, engaged, planning their forever. I thought I was going to have all of that with Tyler. I can't go back to a time where I see him as anything but the boy that shattered that dream I had for us.

"Okay, I get that, but..." She flashes a hesitant smile before continuing, "Now that you've seen him, will you come to my engagement party next week?"

"He's going to be there, isn't he?"

"Probably." She nods. "My parents already threw us a little family one so this is just friends. Bring Chris if you want. He can be your buffer."

Chris and Tyler in the same room? That sounds positively awful, but I

really want to be friends with Scarlett. Real friends who show up for each other. I take a large drink of the wine and nod. "Of course, I will be there."

Why does it suddenly feel like there's going to be no avoiding Tyler?

The next day after school, I'm working on a lesson plan for my freshman class while Everly paints the backdrop. Over the last two days she gave it all a new base coat and then we worked together with the theater director to sketch the design. Now all that is left is painting the three large screens. I would never admit this out loud, but I think it's going to be even better than what they had before.

I glance up to see her sitting in front of it, unsmiling as she moves the brush back and forth in front of her. Even bored, she's talented.

Since I met her, I've found myself wanting to reach her, be there for her, inspire her somehow. But that feeling has amplified since finding out she's Tyler's sister, and I don't know if it's because I feel like I understand her situation better or because of my ties to him. Starting a new school halfway through your senior year has to be tough. I don't know what happened that caused her to come live with Tyler, but I doubt it's because things were going really great for her.

Since he lived away from home for the entirety of our relationship, I never met Tyler's family. He never said much about them either. He talked the most about Everly. How he wished he saw her more and how much fun they had together when he had a break and was able to go visit. I knew he wasn't super close to his mom, that she was remarried and he didn't care much for his stepfather, Everly's dad, and that his real dad wasn't in the picture, but he kept all the whys and details to himself.

In hindsight, maybe I didn't ask enough questions. I had my own family drama, and I think it blinded me to see how bad things might have been for him.

"You can stop for today," I say to Everly, blinking back to the present.

She glances at the clock. "My ride won't be here for another thirty minutes."

"I know. Clean out the brushes and then I want to get your opinion on something."

“Okay,” she says slowly as she moves to the sink.

I stand and come around the desk when she’s finished. I turn the paper with my rough sketch around so she can see it. “This is for my ninth-grade class. I want to have them create a two-point perspective name drawing for their lockers.”

She steps closer to the desk. “This is kind of cool.”

“I hoped you’d say that. Will you make one for me to show as another example?”

With a nod, she grabs a piece of paper. I bring colored pencils and a ruler with me to a table and sit next to Everly.

While I color in the letters of my name, she sketches hers.

I have a million things I’d like to ask her, but I stay quiet while we work side by side. If I have learned anything in this week of teaching high school students, it’s that you can’t force them to open up.

Eventually, Everly does speak. “You and my brother, huh?”

I hide behind my hair, certain my face is red. “It was a long, long time ago.”

She studies me but doesn’t say any more. The time ticks by as we work in silence.

She finishes just before her hour is up.

“It looks great. Thank you.”

“Can I go now? River is waiting outside.”

“Yeah, of course.” She pushes back from her seat and grabs her backpack.

A familiar form fills the doorway. Everly’s shoulders slump. “What are you doing here?”

“Good to see you too,” Tyler says, brows raised in amusement.

“River is picking me up.”

“No, he isn’t. I told him to go home.”

It looks like she wants to rage on him, but he doesn’t give her the chance. “Wait for me outside. I need to talk to your teacher.”

“You mean your ex-girlfriend?”

“Ev.” His voice is sharp.

“Whatever.”

“Bye, Ms. Vaughn.”

“See you tomorrow,” I say as she huffs out the door.

Tyler takes three steps farther into the room.

“Stopping her from seeing her friends isn’t going to win you any points,” I say as I stand and clean up our supplies.

“No, probably not.” His gaze drops to the table where Everly’s name drawing lies. “She did that?”

“Yeah. In half the time it took me to do mine,” I say as I wave a hand toward my paper.

“Ms. Vaughn.” He reads it, one side of his mouth lifting in a grin.

“Did you need to talk to me about something?” I take Everly’s and my work to my desk, turning my back to Tyler.

I feel his presence move with me.

“How’s she doing?”

“She should be done with the backdrops by the end of next week.” I point to the back of the room where they sit.

“I don’t just mean with that. Is she fitting in? Are her grades okay?”

“That’s probably a conversation you should have with her.”

“You know as well as I do that she’ll either refuse to answer me or give me some bullshit response.”

“If you’re worried about her art grade, then I’d be happy to set up a time with the regular art teacher, Mrs. Aaron. I’m just student teaching.”

He takes another step into my space. “I don’t want to talk to Mrs. Aaron. I want to hear it from you. I trust you, Pipes, and I just want to know that I made the right decision sending her here.”

I can see how much he cares about his sister, how worried he is, but this is not something I can answer for him. I see her for an hour a day, two now that we’re working together after school. It’s a glimpse of her entire day.

“I can’t give you that.” I take a deep breath as I move away.

He nods, but still doesn’t leave. “You didn’t respond to my text.”

I hum, a noncommittal sound like maybe I didn’t get it.

“I’d love to take you to dinner and catch up, talk about Everly.”

“I can’t have dinner with you, Tyler.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m seeing someone. Because I’m your sister’s teacher. Because...” I trail off. You broke my heart. It feels ridiculous to say that out loud. Nobody finds the love of their life at eighteen. So why am I still so affected by him?

His throat works with a swallow and his jaw flexes. “Drinks? Coffee? It’s been a long time.”

“Not long enough.”

Hurt flashes in his eyes. “I deserve that, but I would still like to talk about Everly. I think there are things you should know that might help you understand her better.”

“Mrs. Best or the counselor, Mr.—”

“You, Pipes. I want to tell you. You’re the only one I trust not to treat her differently. You never did me.”

I can’t seem to get enough oxygen in my lungs. I don’t know how he can piss me off and make me want to cry all at the same time.

“I’m busy tonight, but I could meet up with you one night later this week? *Just* to talk about Everly.”

A small smile passes over his lips. “Tomorrow?”

I nod my agreement. “Sure. Why don’t you stop by the school after Everly is done. We can stay here or there is a coffee shop down the street.”

He runs a hand along his chiseled jaw. His face is more angular now, and the short stubble makes him look older. “Can you meet me at the arena at six?”

“The arena?”

“Yeah, I’m not picking Ev up tomorrow. I have a conflict. But if you meet me at the arena, we can walk downtown and get drinks or dinner.”

“This is sounding more and more like a date.”

“Not a date. Promise.” He holds up both hands.

“Fine,” I say, mostly to be done with this conversation. And maybe a little because I want to prove to him and to myself that I’m over him. I can meet up with him downtown, have dinner or a drink, talk about his sister, and it not be weird.

Why? Because I’m OVER him.

“Great. See you tomorrow, Pipes.” He smiles. A smile that hits me right in the gut.

Oh damn. I’m gonna need a much better poker face for tomorrow night.

I WANT TO THROTTLE HIM

PIPER

I GET TO THE ARENA AT FIVE AFTER SIX, WHICH IS BASICALLY EARLY FOR ME. Parking is a nightmare, but I find a spot and walk to meet Tyler. The sidewalk is streaming with people in Wildcat hockey jerseys and hats—couples, groups of friends, families. My steps slow as I approach the front entrance.

I stop a girl walking past me. “Excuse me, is there something going on at the arena tonight?”

She smiles big. “Yeah. The Wildcats are playing Dallas.”

“Thanks,” I mutter and continue walking with the rest of the people heading to the game. I stop before getting into the line and pull out my phone to text him, but then realize he’s not going to see it because he’s playing a freaking hockey game.

“I just want to talk about Everly. I have a small conflict. Not a date,” I mutter all the things he said under my breath in a mocking tone. I want to throttle him.

“Hi.” A guy approaches me tentatively. “Are you Piper Vaughn?”

“Yes.” I study his face but can’t place him.

“I’m supposed to give you this.”

I take the envelope from him, and he takes off without another word. If I was hoping for an explanation or maybe an apology, I don’t get it. Instead, I find a ticket for the game and food vouchers.

Against my better judgment, I go inside. My stomach is a wreck, so I bypass food and find my seat. I freeze when I see Everly. I double-check that I’m in the right seat and then she looks up and waves like she was expecting

me.

With a sigh, I sit beside her. “Your brother is on my shit list.”

“I’m supposed to tell you that he’ll meet you right after the game and he’s sorry, but it’s the only time he has until next week.”

I arch a brow.

“The team is traveling for away games the rest of the week and into the weekend,” she clarifies.

I nod and search the ice for him. He skates around the net and retrieves a puck. His gaze lifts and I hold my breath when he looks right at me. Of course, he knows where to find me, he bought the ticket after all.

“You come to all the games?” I ask.

“The home games.”

“And the away games?”

“I stay by myself.” Then she quickly adds, “Tyler calls to check in like every two hours and he sends people to pop in and make sure I’m fine. It’s really obnoxious.”

I tip my head toward the textbook in her lap. “Homework?”

“Yeah. I have to finish a chemistry assignment.” She scrunches up her nose.

“You don’t like chemistry?”

“Not really.”

I take the book from her and flip through it. “Yeah, it wasn’t really my thing in school either.”

“Are teachers supposed to admit things like that?”

I laugh. “I don’t know, but it’s the truth.”

She takes it and opens it back up. “Did you always want to be an art teacher?”

“Yeah. Always. My grandmother was a teacher. I would go over to her house and dig through her teaching supplies. My stuffed animals suffered through a lot of pretend school.”

She snorts. “I don’t know what I want to be when I grow up yet, but I can’t imagine wanting to relive high school.”

“You don’t like school?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“What about your last school?” I ask tentatively. I let my gaze go back to the ice and pretend like I’m not dying to know what led her to living with her brother.

“High school sucks no matter where you live,” she says so definitively that it makes my chest hurt, and then she goes back to her homework.

Chris texts as the game is starting, ***Are we still on for dinner later?***

“Oh, shi—crap,” I censor myself when Everly’s head pops up. I probably shouldn’t be cursing around a student.

“Everything okay?”

“I was supposed to have dinner with my boyfriend later. I forgot.”

“You forgot about your boyfriend?”

“I was distracted by my rage,” I say as I tap out a response to Chris letting him know something came up.

“How long did you two date?”

“Me and Chris?” I ask as I put away my phone.

“No, you and my brother.”

“Oh. Right. Eight months.”

“Huh.” She looks like she wants to say more but doesn’t.

Everly returns to her homework, and I get lost in the game. Hockey was a big part of my life even before I met Tyler. My uncle Tim was a pro hockey player and at least a few times a year we’d go and watch him play. And on rare occasions, my dad, who had also played as a kid, would lace up his skates and the two of them would play. The memory of my dad makes my smile fall. I miss him.

He had a stroke my senior year of high school that made it hard for him to communicate and to remember certain things. I know he loves me. I feel it when I’m around him, but our relationship is different. He remembers most of my childhood, but he forgets things I told him last year. It’s hard. He’s different. And as much as I don’t want to constantly compare things to before the stroke, we simply aren’t as close; and that ache, missing the man he was, or could be, has woven itself into the very fiber of my being.

I find Tyler on the ice. I watch as he speeds by players and puts himself into position in front of the net. He fights off a defender putting pressure on him, trying to get between him and the goalie, but Tyler holds his ground. Someone passes him the puck, and he turns and shoots it through the five hole, lighting up the goal post.

My breath hitches as everyone around me gets to their feet and cheers on number twenty-one. A couple people near us are wearing his jersey. It’s too weird. Everly even looks happy. She glances back at me still in my seat. “Are you okay?”

“Perfect.” I stand. “I’m going to get some food.”

“You’re not leaving, right?” she asks as I turn to flee. She has to yell over the continued applause and cheers for Tyler.

It’s exactly what I’d planned to do, but looking at Everly and knowing I’ll have to face her and her brother again no matter how this night ends, I change my mind.

“No, I’m not leaving. I’m gonna grab some food though.” I hold up the vouchers Tyler left me. It’s a pretty big stack and I’m going to use every last one on greasy, delicious food that will hopefully distract me from watching my hot ex-boyfriend being cheered on by twenty-thousand people. “Do you want anything?”

She nods, and I get the first real smile I’ve ever seen from Everly Kent.

SOME SET OF BALLS

TYLER

“ARE YOU SURE YOU’RE GOOD TO GIVE EVERLY A RIDE HOME?” I ASK ASH.

“For the third time,” he says, “It’s no problem.”

“Thank you.” I’m sweating bullets and it isn’t from the hockey game I just played. Piper is here. She came. She *stayed*.

I head out of the locker room. Everly and Piper are waiting for me. My sister smiles and lifts her hand. “Nice game, bro.”

“Thank you.” My gaze slides to Piper. “Hey.”

Her dark blue eyes look almost black when she’s angry...and she’s angry.

I turn my attention back to Everly as Ash walks out to meet us. I jut my chin toward him. “Ash is going to give you a ride back to the house. I won’t be long.”

“Okay.” Everly covers a yawn and glances at Piper. “See you tomorrow.”

“Bye.” Piper waves.

When they’re gone, I take a step closer. “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“Me neither.” She gestures around the hallway where photos of the team line the walls. “This was your small conflict?”

“My job requires late hours some nights. Did you enjoy the game?”

Instead of answering, she asks, “What am I doing here?”

“I wanted to see you, talk about Everly.”

“You played me, and you dragged your sister in the middle of it.”

“That’s not...” I trail off and my brows pull together in confusion. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t my intention. I wanted to talk to you before the team heads out on our next road games and I thought you might like to sit next to someone you knew. That’s all.”

Some of the fight leaves her, but I can tell she's still mad.

"Let me take you to dinner. Anywhere you want. It's the least I can do. I don't want to think about you being pissed at me the entire time I'm gone."

She cocks a brow as if to say, *what about the last four years?*

"Please? I really do want to chat about Ev."

"*Just* drinks. I ate half of the concession stand."

One side of my mouth pulls up in a grin. "Drinks are perfect."

We walk a few blocks from the arena to a quieter bar. I order a beer and she gets wine. It's surreal being out with her like this, even if she is keeping a foot of distance between us at all times. We were only kids when we dated so we never went out to bars or restaurants and drank together. Hell, even if we had been old enough, I was stupid broke.

She turns the wineglass by the stem slowly, keeping her gaze forward. Angling my body in her direction, I study her. Her hair is longer, but the same shade of dark brown, and so thick I want to run my fingers through it. She still looks so much like the girl I fell in love with all those years ago, I have to remind myself that this one isn't mine even though my fingers burn to touch her.

She catches me staring at her. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're cataloging all the ways I'm different since the last time you saw me."

"The opposite actually. You look exactly the same. It's like no time has passed."

"Except it has. I'm not the same girl I was then."

"I get that. I'm not the same guy either. I'm really sorry about the way things ended, Piper. I only wanted the best for you. Even if it wasn't me."

Her eyes fall closed and her body trembles. "Why is your sister living with you, Tyler?"

Right to it, I guess. "She showed up on my doorstep a month ago. She was having a hard time in Iowa, got suspended from school a couple of times until they told her not to bother coming back, and she came to me wanting a place to start over. She begged me not to send her back."

Piper's face softens. "Suspended for what?"

"Threatening another student." I wince. "She had an issue with a girl in her class. The girl was bullying Everly, and Ev told her she was going to cut off all her pretty hair with a knife."

A laugh escapes Piper's lips. It starts quiet and builds. She covers her mouth with a hand. "Oh my gosh. Did she?"

"No." I crack a small smile. "And I know Everly, or I'm starting to again. It had to have been bad for her to get to that point. Plus, the knife she had on her was like a million years old. It's this old pocket knife that belonged to our grandfather. I don't think she could have hurt the girl if she'd tried. But the school had a zero-tolerance policy with weapons, and it wasn't like it was the first time she'd gotten in trouble."

"Wow."

I nod.

"What about your mom? What did she say about Everly moving here?"

"Not a lot. She's fed up, basically washed her hands of it all. She thinks Everly needs time away to get a new perspective."

"So, you became her guardian."

"More or less. She's eighteen now, but she still needs someone to look out for her. I'm not much, but I can at least give her a safe place and make sure she graduates high school."

Piper blows out a breath. "I want to hate you."

The admission doesn't surprise me, but still knocks the air from my lungs. "I figured as much."

"I want to hate you," she says again. "But I think what you're doing for your sister is really great."

A rough laugh slips from my lips. "I don't know if she's any better off with me. I have no idea what I'm doing."

"But you're trying. You haven't given up on her."

The praise makes me uncomfortable because it took me too long to realize I was acting like her annoyed big brother instead of the parent-figure she needed. "No. Everly is great. She's smart and tough. She hasn't had the easiest life and I basically abandoned her when I left to play hockey. This is the least I can do."

Piper falls quiet. The tension lingers between us, and I don't know how to dissolve it.

"Thank you for telling me. I like Everly. She reminds me a little of myself at that age after everything happened with you and then my dad."

My jaw tightens. It was shitty timing that Piper's dad had a stroke a few months after we broke up. It gutted me to know she was hurting, and I couldn't be there for her. It was the one time I reached out in all these years.

“I was sorry to hear about your dad.”

“Thank you. I got the flowers you sent. It was kind of you.” She takes a sip of wine before continuing. “I will look out for her the best I can. I only have her in one class, though. Has she been in any other trouble aside from the backdrop debacle?”

“Isn’t that enough?” I shake my head. “No, she’s mostly been staying out of trouble, but she’s constantly pushing boundaries, and I hate her boyfriend.”

“She’s been here a month and already has a boyfriend? I haven’t seen her with anyone at school.”

“He’s older—twenty, has no idea what he wants out of life, but he and his buddies are moving to New York soon because ‘that’s where things are really happening.’” I say the words with all the disdain I feel. “He’s an absolute punk. I can’t wait until he’s gone.”

Piper’s mouth curves into a smile. “You sound like a worried father.”

“I am worried. I’m gone a lot and I have no idea what I’m doing. This is her last chance, I know that. It’s a lot of pressure.”

“She’s lucky to have you.”

“Thank you for saying that.” I let my knee brush against her thigh. “I didn’t ask you to dinner only to talk about Everly or bitch about her boyfriend.”

“No?” she asks, sarcasm dripping from the word. She finishes her wine and pushes the glass away from her. “Why did you ask me?”

“Because I’ve missed you every day for four years and because now that I’ve seen you again, I can’t imagine another day going by where I can’t.”

Her eyes widen in surprise, but she shields her expression almost as quickly. I don’t know when she did it, but I notice the cash on the bar as she moves to stand. “I should go. It’s getting late.”

With every inch she puts between us, I can feel her slipping away from me forever.

“Piper, wait.” I run after her, catching her as she pushes out the front door of the bar.

I wrap my fingers around her upper arm, and she stops suddenly, jerking her arm away.

Tears swirl in her dark eyes. “No. You don’t get to say things like that to me. You and I have been over for a very long time. I moved on. I have a boyfriend. I’m happy.”

I shove my hands in my pockets and swallow the lump in my throat. “I figured you’d want nothing to do with me, but I still had to tell you. I messed up, Pipes.”

“It’s a little late to be figuring that out.”

“I’ve known it for years, but I still wasn’t in a position to be the guy you deserve. I’m still not.”

“Then why tell me now?”

“Because you’re here.” I stop myself from reaching out and touching her again, but God, I want to feel her. “I didn’t think I believed in fate, but then you walked into that principal’s office and my heart stopped.”

She pulls her keys from her purse and a steely determination settles over her. “I will keep an eye on your sister because I like her and I want her to succeed, but you and I will never be more than acquaintances.”

“Got it.” My throat burns on the words.

She hesitates, maybe waiting for me to object but she already stomped on my heart enough for one night, so I keep my mouth shut.

And then she leaves me standing on the sidewalk.

I go back inside to pay for my drink and then head home. Everly is already in bed, but I find Ash in the living room playing video games.

He takes one look at me and hands me the second controller. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Not a lot to say. She still hates me.”

“You got some set of balls on you. I told you she was going to be pissed that you tricked her into watching you play.”

“I didn’t want to trick her,” I say, but I’m not sure that’s one hundred percent true. In my defense, I knew if I told her I had a game and couldn’t meet until late, she would have blown me off. And as brutal as it was, I needed to talk to her, to tell her I miss her, and yeah, fill her in on things with Everly. It gives me a little peace to know that Piper is there at school with her.

“Did you say what you needed to say?” Ash asks.

“I guess.” I sit back and sink into the couch cushion. “I thought I’d feel better.”

“And you don’t?”

“Not even a little bit. She told me we will never be more than acquaintances. She’s seeing someone. All but told me to fuck right the hell off.”

“Sorry, man.”

I close my eyes and picture her face. “That can’t be it for us. I refuse to accept it.”

“Then don’t. The idiot she’s dating won’t last.”

My eyes fly open. “You know him?”

He gives me a sheepish smile. “I, uh, might have scoped her out online.”

I shake my head. “Stop creeping on my girl.”

“I’m not creeping. I just had to see for myself.”

“And?”

“You’re right. She’s hot. Like way too hot for you.”

Laughter builds in my chest and a little of the tension from the night fades.

“You never looked her up in all these years?”

“No, never.” I deleted my account years ago after the first time she posted a smiling picture on her page with another guy. I knew I’d never survive following her and watching her move on. And for the most part it worked, I survived. I just haven’t exactly moved on. Now, I don’t have any accounts that aren’t managed by someone else.

I let out a breath that puffs out my cheeks. “What do I do now?”

“I don’t know,” Ash says. “I guess the same thing you’ve been doing... wait for your moment.”

HOLD ON TO YOUR PANTIES, LADIES.

PIPER

FRIDAY AFTERNOON COMES AND I HAVEN'T LOOKED FORWARD TO A WEEKEND so much in ages.

"Congrats on surviving another week," Ainsley, or Mrs. Aaron as she's known to the students, says as I pack up. Today she stayed after school with me and Everly to finish the theater backdrops. With all three of us, we managed to get it done in a week. A very long week.

"Thanks for all your help."

"That's what I'm here for." She rubs her pregnant belly. "See you next week if you're brave enough to come back."

I smile. I'm exhausted but this week turned out to be pretty amazing. I didn't feel like I wanted to puke once today while I stood in front of the class. "I'll be here."

The wind and bitter cold take my breath away as I walk outside. I pull my coat tighter around me and hurry down the sidewalk. I pause when I see Everly sitting on the bench near the parking lot.

I walk toward her with slow, measured steps. It's been at least fifteen minutes since she left the classroom. Way too long to be outside in this weather.

"Is everything okay?" I ask as I approach her.

"I'm fine." She lifts her chin proudly, but the dots of red on her cheeks and the chatter of her teeth say otherwise. "I'm waiting for my ride. He should be here pretty soon."

"Tyler?" I take a seat next to her. The metal bench is like ice.

"No, River. He had to work late at the record store to cover for his ex."

She tilts the screen of her phone to show me a picture of what I assume is River and a girl with long, jet black hair. “That’s her. His ex, Molly. She works with him at Empire. Should I be worried that they’re still friends?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “But just because she’s his ex, doesn’t mean he still has feelings for her.”

“I’m not sure I believe you can be just friends with an ex after you break up. It seems like it would be weird. I mean, look at you and my brother. You two can barely stand to be in the same room together.” Small snowflakes start to drop from the sky and land on the screen, and she slides her phone into her coat pocket.

“It’s freezing out.” Literally freezing. “Is there anyone else you could call?”

She shakes her blonde head. “No.”

“What about your brother?”

“He’s out of town.”

Right. He did say he was going to be traveling with the team the rest of the week. I’ve tried to block out everything he said that night, but it’s replayed in my head on a loop.

“Who stays with you while he’s gone?”

“Umm...” She looks nervous. “Scarlett checks on me sometimes or Declan, neighbors, whoever Tyler can convince to pop in on me.”

“Scarlett Miller?” I ask.

She smiles. “Yeah. You know her?”

“I do.” I pull out my phone, but Everly stops me.

“She’s traveling with the team this week. Leo likes having her in the stands.”

I smile because I can hear Scarlett in that. *His family hardly ever comes so I love being there for him. He gets the biggest smile on his face when he looks up and sees me in the stands.*

“Okay, so who is watching you this weekend they’re gone?”

She gets a defensive glint in her eyes. “Declan is going to check in on me later. I don’t need a babysitter. I’m eighteen.”

“Who is Declan?”

“One of my brother’s teammates. He’s injured so he isn’t traveling, but he’s at physical therapy until five.”

I’m starting to get a pretty good picture of the chaos of Everly’s life. I know it can’t be easy for Tyler trying to juggle everything, but no wonder

Everly is acting out. She has no certainty in her life.

I stand. "Come on. I'll give you a ride."

"For real?"

"Yeah, but no judgment when I eat a share size Kit Kat on the drive. It's been a long week."

Everly gives me the address and I punch it into my phone before we leave the school. I eat my Kit Kat as promised, and Everly stares down at her phone. The snow has picked up and the sky darkens.

When I get to the gated community, my jaw drops. In the back of my mind, I knew Tyler was a wealthy hockey player now, but it hadn't really hit me until we're passing the large homes of his neighborhood that he isn't the young guy struggling to make something of himself anymore.

A part of me is really proud of him, but I can't linger on that emotion for long without it clouding the anger I feel that I didn't get to be by his side. That was the plan. He'd play junior hockey, I'd go to college, and someday we'd both be living our dreams together.

"It's that one right there." Everly points at the same time her phone rings in her lap.

I pull into the driveway as she answers.

"Hey, Ty. I'm just getting to the house now."

My stomach flips as I hear just the faintest bit of his voice on the other end of her phone.

"No, he isn't here." She glances at me. "Something came up. Piper brought me home."

"Yeah," she says. "Yeah."

I stare straight ahead, but then Everly holds the phone out toward me. "He wants to talk to you."

"Oh, that's okay." I try to wave her off, but she keeps holding it out and eventually I take it.

"Hello?"

"Hey. Thank you for giving her a ride home. I'm sorry you needed to come to our rescue again." His deep voice bats away that anger I was just clinging to.

“It was no problem,” I say.

“Well, I appreciate it anyway.”

I look out the partially snow-covered windshield to the house in front of me. “Your house looks nice.”

“It is, but it isn’t mine. We’re staying with a buddy until I can find us our own place. I had an apartment near the arena, but it wasn’t big enough for both of us.”

I file that information away to think about later.

“Everly said she has someone coming to check in on her later?” I ask as I avoid meeting her gaze. I want her to like me, but I also need to make sure I’m not dropping her off to fend for herself all weekend. She might be eighteen but she should have someone for emergencies.

“Yeah, Declan should be stopping by later. He looks in on her a couple of times a day while I’m gone.”

“The snow is coming down pretty hard.”

He hums. “I’ll text him, but if I know Declan, he won’t let something like a little snow get in the way.”

“It looks like it’s going to be more than a little snow,” I say, noting that the road behind us is now covered. “Do you want me to stay with her until he gets here?”

“I can’t ask you to do that. If he can’t make it, I’ll give the neighbors a call to see if they can drop by.”

“You didn’t ask, and I’m already here.” I smile at Everly. I don’t want to admit that I’m also not thrilled about driving home in this. I needed new tires months ago. My car will be skating home. “It’s no problem. I’ll just hang out until someone else comes.”

He’s quiet for a beat and I have to check the phone to make sure he hasn’t hung up.

“Tyler?”

His voice comes out gruffer. “Thank you, Pipes.”

I shut off the car. The nickname still gets to me more than I’d like to admit. “Okay. Well, good luck or whatever. I’m handing you back to Everly.”

Everly says goodbye to her brother and then looks at me. “You didn’t need to do that. I’m used to taking care of myself, you know?”

“I know.”

She raises a brow like she thinks I’m just telling her what she wants to

hear.

“I think you are way more mature and capable than I was at your age, but it’s still good to have people that will look out for you. And it will make your brother feel better.”

She sighs. “I guess you’re right. Besides, I really don’t want the lady next door to check in on me.”

We get out of the car and Everly lets us in through the front door. She nods her head toward the neighbor’s house. “She treats me like I’m five and she’s always hitting on Ty.”

Everly scrunches up her face in disgust. I bet there’s a long list of women hitting on her brother. And who could blame them? Young, hot, rich professional athlete? Any one of those things would make him a catch. All three? Hold on to your panties, ladies.

Everly kicks off her snowy shoes and I do the same.

Her phone rings and a big smile stretches out over her face. “It’s River.”

Everly disappears up the stairs, tapping away as she goes. I let out a long breath and look around, spotting a living area off to the right of the entryway. Even knowing this isn’t Tyler’s house, I still feel him here. The framed jerseys on the wall, the hockey stick mounted like artwork—it all has a very Tyler-like feel that unexpectedly makes me smile.

I reach out and run my fingers along the wooden stick on the wall and goosebumps climb up my arm. The hall leads to an open kitchen with a giant island. A piece of paper catches my eye. Tyler’s penmanship sucks the air out of my lungs. Why is it the smallest things that hit me the hardest when it comes to him?

Ev,

Here’s my card for food and emergencies, or whatever you need.

Stay out of trouble.

Ty

I hate how even when I want to hold on to every ounce of anger for the things he did in the past, the present version draws me in.

Chris pops into my mind. It’s been a crazy couple of weeks with my student teaching starting and I’ve barely talked to him, let alone seen him.

He isn’t a great love or anything. We’ve kept our relationship casual and

fun, but I like him and he's a nice guy. Still, I find myself comparing him to Tyler. Like I've inevitably done with every other guy that came before him.

Chris has a younger sister, too, Heidi, who is about the same age as Everly. It isn't the same situation—she lives at home with two loving parents—but I can't help but think of the time he wouldn't let her borrow a phone charger, and here Tyler is leaving his credit card on the kitchen table like it's no big thing.

But it isn't just the money, because God knows he probably has more of it than he knows what to do with now. How incredible is it that Tyler was there for Everly when she had no one else all while keeping a crazy schedule and following his own dreams?

Maybe the truth is Tyler is a good guy. But he can be a good guy and still be the jerk that broke my heart.

READY TO CELEBRATE?

TYLER

“DID DECLAN MAKE IT?” I ASK EVERLY, BALANCING THE PHONE BETWEEN MY shoulder and ear as I pack my bag for the arena. Tonight is the second game of our three-game road trip. We’re heading home tomorrow, and I can finally sigh a breath of relief. Being away and making sure Everly is doing what she’s supposed to is even more stressful than being there.

“Yeah. He brought dinner and is trying to help me with my homework.”

“Trying?”

“We couldn’t figure out this stupid accounting assignment, but it’s fine. It isn’t due until next Monday.”

I lift my face away from the phone to the guys. Ash, Leo, Maverick, and Jack are watching TV in my and Mav’s room. “Can anyone help Ev with accounting?”

Without looking up from the screen, Leo calls, “I got this one.”

He stands and walks backward to the phone.

“We’ll be back tomorrow night, probably around eight. Make sure the house isn’t a wreck. We might be staying there but it isn’t ours.”

Ash says something from his spot on the couch, but I ignore him. No matter how welcoming he’s been, I don’t want to take advantage.

“I know. I know. I’m eighteen, not eight.” I’d bet anything that Everly’s rolling her eyes as she says it.

“Did Piper go home?”

“Yeah. She left when Declan got here.”

I want to ask more, but Leo is waiting so instead I say, “Here’s Leo.”

She sends a FaceTime request and I hand the phone over and watch as my

teammate smiles at my sister. “What’s up, Little Sharpie?”

While they work on Ev’s homework, I finish packing and then take Leo’s seat in front of the TV.

Ash eyes me carefully. “You look stressed.”

“I’m never having kids,” I mutter and drop my head back.

They all laugh at me like they think I’m kidding. I’m not sure I am. How do people do this?

I stare ahead at the TV, not really watching, until Leo tosses my phone in my lap.

“Get it worked out?” I ask.

“Piece of cake.”

I let out a long breath. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Any time.”

Jack laughs. “Are you kidding? Lohan lives for this shit.”

“Any chance to show off his big brain,” Ash adds.

Leo flips them both off. “Time to go, boys.”

I’m the last to get to my feet as I hover over Piper’s name on my phone. I don’t have time to come up with anything grand. It’s real possible she’s blocked me anyway.

Thank you for staying with Everly. I appreciate it, Pipes.

I hit send and wait a beat to see if I’ll get something back. While I am thankful, I’m glad for an excuse to reach out to her. Maybe this time she’ll even respond.



We touch down in Minnesota right on time. I never thought much about arrival times until Everly came to stay with me. Now I have to know when and where and schedule things way in advance.

But I made it work again—somehow. We picked up two points with our win against Arizona this afternoon, too. All in all, a great freaking trip and I can breathe easy.

“Are you boys ready to celebrate?” Jack asks as we get off the plane. He rests a hand on Leo’s shoulder and squeezes. “The man of the night.”

“I appreciate you letting us use your house,” Leo says.

Jack shakes his head. “Happy to. Mav? Sharpie? You guys coming?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I say. “I need to swing by the house and check on Everly.”

We disperse. Most of the guys are going to Jack’s for Leo and Scarlett’s engagement party, but I don’t feel great about leaving Everly alone again tonight when I’ve been gone for the last few days, even if it’s just a couple of houses down the street.

Declan calls as I’m driving home.

“Hey,” I answer. “Everything okay?”

His chuckle comes over the speakers. “Yeah. Didn’t mean to worry you, but I wanted you to be the first to know that the doctor cleared me to play in Tuesday’s game.”

“That’s great.” I fall quiet as I let the news sink in, and I realize why he’s telling me first. “You won’t be able to keep an eye on Everly anymore while I’m gone.”

“Yeah,” he says the word slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no. It’s great news for you and for the team. Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

After saying our goodbyes, I hang up and finish the drive. Ash isn’t here yet and the house is dark.

“Ev?” I call as I walk through the downstairs. I head upstairs, but her door is closed, lights out. I shower and change, assuming she’ll come out to say hello by the time I’m done. She doesn’t.

I knock on her bedroom door, but there’s no answer. I open it an inch. “Ev?”

Her room is empty.

“That’s weird,” I say out loud to myself.

I call her as I head back downstairs to recheck the rooms. Panic starts to rise when she doesn’t answer, and I can’t find her anywhere in the house. I check every room, even Ash’s. I come up short when he fills the doorway.

“Hey.” He’s already changed and has a beer in one hand.

“Have you seen Everly?”

“She’s not here.” He takes a drink. “There’s a note on the fridge.”

I backtrack to the kitchen and tear off the top Post-it with her note. *Out with River. Be back by midnight.*

I call her phone, but there’s no answer. I send a text and wait. All while Ash leans against the counter, drinking his beer.

“You look like your head is going to explode.” Fucker smirks at me.

“I can’t stand that dude. I don’t trust him.”

“Ev can handle herself.” Ash hands me a beer. “You just got a night off, man. Enjoy it.”

“Declan’s back. He’s playing next week.”

“No shit?” Ash’s smile pulls higher, then falls. “Oh shit. Ev.”

“Yeah.”

He shrugs. “Maybe she doesn’t need someone checking in on her. She’s mostly stayed out of trouble, and she is eighteen.”

“It’s only been a couple of weeks since she destroyed school property, or have you already forgotten?” I shake my head. “She needs someone looking out for her. Someone she can trust and that will keep her in check.”

“Any ideas?”

“One,” I admit.

Ash bites back laughter. “Piper? She hates you.”

“But she doesn’t hate Everly.”

NOT IN THAT DRESS, YOU'RE NOT

PIPER

“HOW DO I LOOK?” I WALK OUT INTO THE LIVING ROOM WHERE HEATHER AND Steve are curled up together on the couch.

My friend sits up and smiles appreciatively. “Damn, Piper.”

“It isn’t too much?” I smooth a hand down the short skirt of the dress and turn to the side. It hugs my curves in all the right spots. I forgot how decadent expensive fabric felt like against my skin.

“The tag is sticking out the back,” she says, and pulls free from Steve. “Here, let me help.”

“Thank you.”

She comes up behind me and pushes the tag back inside the dress.

I turn my head and look over my shoulder. “Slide it under the back of my bra. That’ll help keep it from slipping out again.”

A small snort-laugh escapes as she does as I request. I’m not proud of wearing and returning a dress, but I needed a little extra boost of confidence going in to tonight.

It’s one thing to see or talk to Tyler about his sister, but it’s another thing entirely to show up to a party with all his friends and teammates.

“Okay. You’re all set,” Heather says. “Nervous?”

“So nervous. The only two people I know are the bride-to-be and Jade.”

“And Tyler,” she adds with a smirk. She goes back to the coach and sits next to Steve. He rests a hand on her thigh as he continues to stare at the TV.

“I don’t *know* Tyler anymore,” I say. “So, he doesn’t count.”

I toss my lipstick and gum in my purse and take a deep breath.

“Okay. I’m off. I’ll see you in the morning.” I point to the couch where I

sleep every night. “Don’t have sex on my bed.”

As I pull away from the apartment in a dress I can’t afford, driving a car that is only slightly more reliable than the ice cream machine at McDonald’s, and heading to a party in one of the nicest neighborhoods in the city, I think about how I got here. Not *here* here, but here—broke.

I would have died of embarrassment if I’d known this was my future five years ago. My dad ran a successful company, I grew up in a huge house, and basically had anything my heart desired. When I met Tyler my dad’s company had just crumbled. It was hard, but my dad was the most resilient man I’ve ever known. I didn’t sweat it.

That was the beginning of a lot of changes, I guess. Tyler and I broke up, then Dad had his stroke and wasn’t able to work, my family moved out of my beloved childhood home, and life was different. Basically, I got hit over the head with a heavy dose of reality.

I’m not sure I’d be the same person today if I hadn’t gone through all of that, but I sure miss my dad from before the stroke and would love to have a little more heat in this old car as I drive toward the party on the other side of the city.

The engagement party is at Jack’s house, just down the street from where Tyler and Everly are staying. I glance at it as I pass, and my nerves kick up a notch.

Even without the address, I’d know exactly where to go by the sheer number of cars parked along the street and in the circle driveway. After I’m parked, I continue to sit in my car. I’m seconds from just turning around and going home when there’s a knock on the window.

I jump and let out a little scream. Jade stares back at me with a smile. Her laughter filters through from outside. “The party is inside.”

“Oh really?” I ask dryly as I open the car door and step out.

“You clean up real nice.” She whistles and links her arm through mine. “Now I’m glad I left Sam at home. You can be my date.”

“Your date is planning on hiding in the corner.”

“Not in that dress, you’re not.”

She has a point. This dress was not made to slink away in the shadows unless it’s so that someone can slide their hands underneath. My body gives an involuntary shudder at the thought.

With every step closer to the party, I seriously consider sending Scarlett an apology text and going back home. I feel like I’m infiltrating something

sacred. This is supposed to be a fun, happy night for my friend, and I reach for some of that steely determination I've acquired to put on my brightest smile and celebrate the same way she would for me.

I can hear the music inside. The bass thumps at a fast rhythm and my heart races to catch up with it.

"Are you ready for this?" Jade asks, seconds before she pulls open the front door.

Even if I weren't, it'd be hard to turn back now. Jade leads me through the entryway where someone takes our coats and purses, and another hands us a glass of champagne.

I sip the chilled drink as we move closer to the music. A large kitchen opens up to a dining area and beyond that is a living area that is bigger than the entirety of Heather and Steve's apartment. The whole thing is open-concept and people fill the space. Lights outside are on and I can see that more people have braved the cold to stand out there.

I'm searching for Tyler. Not because I want to see him, but because I want to see him first so I can avoid making direct eye contact.

"There's Scarlett." Jade pulls me with her before I can spot him in the crowd.

Scarlett looks every bit the blushing bride-to-be in a sexy, white dress standing next to Leo. He's got one arm around her waist as he talks to a guy nearby.

When Scarlett sees us, her lips curve up and she launches herself at us, squeezing us each around the neck in a big, group hug. "You guys finally made it."

"I had to pry this one out of her car, but here we are. Congratulations, babe." Jade gives her long-time friend a bittersweet smile. "I'm so happy for you."

"Me too," I say.

Scarlett's eyes widen. "Oooh. Let me introduce you to Leo finally."

Breaking free, she turns to her fiancé and laces her fingers through his. "Leo, this is Piper."

He and the guy he was talking to both smile at me, and I get the awkward feeling they're looking at me that way because of Tyler and whatever things they've heard about the two of us.

"It's nice to meet you," Leo says, pulling Scarlett tighter against his side.

The other guy continues to give me this friendly, almost shy smile. He's

the broadest of the group, tallest too. “For once the rookie didn’t exaggerate about something.”

“Right?” Another guy steps up and shakes his head. The movement makes the long strands of his dark blond hair fall into his face and he brushes it back with a flip of his head that somehow comes off not at all rehearsed or vain. He taps the other guy on the chest. “This is Declan, and I’m Ash.”

“The roommate,” I say quietly. I could ignore his remark about “the rookie” but if I’m going to survive tonight, I need to squash the idea that I’m in any way uncomfortable or tense about being in the same room with Tyler. Even if it’s a total lie. “Nice to meet both of you. I assume by rookie you mean Tyler?”

Their matching grins are my answer.

“And what did he not exaggerate about?”

“Answer that and I might have to kill you in your sleep.” Tyler places a hand on Ash’s shoulder and cuts in.

I suck in a breath at being caught off guard. I was so busy trying to appear like I didn’t care that I forgot to keep an eye out for him. Now here he is, and ugh, why does he have to be so hot?

“Hey, Piper,” he says. “See you met some of the guys.”

“Hey.” I give him the same greeting as I did his teammates. Only he doesn’t let me off so easily.

He takes a step closer and I pull in another breath, this time inhaling the scent of him. He smells like leather and cologne and hot guy. (Yeah, it has a smell. Or maybe I’ve just associated it with Tyler.)

“You look beautiful.”

The compliment skirts over my skin, caressing it as lovingly as the dress I’m wearing. He didn’t say *great* where I could play it off as a friendly compliment people toss out like mints or even *gorgeous* where it could be construed as flirty and a little over the top, but *beautiful*.

“Thank you.” I sip my champagne and look at Jade for help. I can feel everyone staring at us.

She must have already met Ash because she waves at him and then introduces herself to Tyler. He moves closer to me as he talks to her. Heat pours off of him and I find myself wanting to lean in.

“Bathroom?” I mouth to Scarlett.

“Down the hall, first door on the left.” She tips her head in that direction.

“Excuse me,” I mutter quietly. I no longer care if everyone here knows

that I'm affected by him. Seems like a stupid thing to try to hide anyway. The man has been inside of me; of course, running into him at a mutual friend's party would be tense.

After a few minutes alone, I exit the bathroom to find Tyler waiting for me.

"Hey." He pushes off the wall across from me. In jeans and a basic T-shirt, he shouldn't take my breath away the way he does.

The hallway is right off the living room, but right now we're the only two in the space.

"Hi," I say, stopping in front of him. This is good. A moment alone to ease the weirdness of the situation. I knew I was going to run into him, and if I'm going to show up to things for Scarlett, I have to figure out how to be around him without wanting to kiss him or strangle him.

"I probably should have told you I was going to be here," I say. "Scarlett and I have become friends. It's a long story."

"Leo mentioned you two had met. Scarlett's great."

"Yeah, she is."

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "Whatever the reason, I'm glad you're here, seeing as how you don't respond to my texts. I was hoping to talk to you."

My face heats. While I didn't think his thank you text needed a response, I doubt I would have responded to anything he might have sent. It's just easier not to open that door again.

"It was no problem staying with Everly for a few hours. Honestly. Your thanks wasn't needed. I like her and I don't like the thought of her not having someone she can count on while you're gone." I shake my head as I realize how judgmental that might sound. "I'm not saying you're doing anything wrong. I get how hard it must be. I just mean to say, I'm happy I could fill in."

"I think she likes you too. You're the only teacher she doesn't add some modifier to their name. Evil Mrs. Jones and Asshole Mr. Thomas." His mouth lifts on one side. "And, uh, that's actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

My brows pull together. "What do you mean?"

He slides both hands into his pants pockets. "I've been relying on Declan to keep an eye on her while I'm traveling, but I found out tonight that he's been cleared to play starting next week. She's not a child so she doesn't

exactly need a nanny, but I don't feel right about leaving her alone for days at a time. Look, I know it's a lot to ask, and if I had anywhere else to turn, I would, but I'm hoping you might do what you did Friday. I'd pay you, of course."

"You want me to babysit your sister?"

"Babysit is the wrong word, but I'd feel better if she had someone she can count on if something comes up."

"I meant what I said, I like Everly, truly, but I live across town and I have school, plus I tutor some nights."

"I will pay you double whatever you are making at your other jobs. No, triple." He moves closer and I get another big whiff of him. It's so familiar and intoxicating.

"Tyler, that's ridiculous."

He grins. A smile of four summers ago. "You're worth it. I know you are. And you can still hate me and avoid me if you want. This is actually not about me this time. I want what's best for Ev, and I think that's you."

I want to believe him, but it's all too intertwined. I can't hang with his sister and expect to never talk to or see him. We already have too many strands weaved together as it is. "It isn't a good idea. I'm sorry."

He takes a deep breath that lifts his chest, and he nods. "Yeah, all right. I knew it was a long shot. Thank you again for Friday."

"Welcome." I take a step toward the party. His gaze follows me but he doesn't move. "I'll see you around."

I hang with Jade most of the night. She introduces me to some more of the hockey guys and others she knows through Scarlett, but mostly we have a damn good time hanging out just the two of us dancing and drinking.

After my second glass of champagne, I hold up a hand to stop her from giving me another. "I have to drive home later."

"Sam is picking me up. He can give you a ride home."

I haven't met Jade's fiancé. She almost always goes out without him, saying he prefers to stay in. I get that but wonder if it bothers her more than she lets on. It doesn't really seem like it so maybe I'm projecting.

One of my favorite things to do with Tyler was go out with our friends or his then teammates. There's nothing like being at a party or in a room full of people and sneaking kisses or little touches. It's the best kind of foreplay.

I realize as I'm thinking about me and Tyler that me and Chris don't spend that many nights out together with friends either. We have dinner or

hang out at my place, but rarely do we go out with other couples. I forgot how much I enjoyed that.

I look at my friend, smiling, red hair bouncing around her shoulders as she moves to the beat. She's so happy and free in the moment. I want to be that carefree tonight.

I haven't seen Tyler since the run-in outside of the bathroom, but I haven't completely shaken it off either. I feel for him and everything he's doing trying to look out for his sister, but I can't be the one that saves him.

"Okay." I take the glass and tip it back. I'm not going to think about it. At least not tonight.

AWESOME OR OVERBEARING?

PIPER

FOR HOURS, JADE AND I DON'T LEAVE THE DANCE FLOOR. MY FACE HURTS from smiling and laughing. And this dress? I don't think I'll be returning it. It smells like sweat and champagne.

The party has died down and the few of us left are sitting in the living room at Jack's house. He has this huge sectional. Me and Jade, Declan, Scarlett and Leo, Ash and the girl that's been with him most of the night are all sitting on it. Tyler is sitting in an armchair across from me and Jack is in another. A guy named Johnny Maverick is sitting on the floor between us all, leaned back with his legs kicked out in front of him.

The guys are heckling Leo about getting married, but when I check his reaction, he doesn't look like it bothers him one bit.

"Married life is great," Maverick says. He's the only one here that's already walked down the aisle. "Don't let them scare you off. Nothing better than knowing someone always has your back. Plus, sex. Lots of it. They wish they were getting laid as much as us."

"Speak for yourself," Ash chirps. "Your wife doesn't even live here. How often can you really be getting it on?"

"Does phone sex count?" he asks.

Ash sucks in a breath through his teeth, a playful smile on his lips. "Gray area, but I'll give it to you."

I inadvertently glance at Tyler and find his gaze on me. I managed to dodge him all night long, but this isn't the first time I've caught him looking my way. I break eye contact first, but he speaks for my benefit.

"Dakota, Maverick's wife, is still in college back in Arizona."

My face warms. I was feeling slightly out of the loop, but I didn't want to break the atmosphere with a thousand questions to figure out everyone's backstory.

"Oh, right. I keep forgetting you don't know everyone," Scarlett says.

"It's fine. I'm figuring it out."

"Who am I?" Ash asks.

"Trouble. That's who you are, Ash Kelly."

Everyone laughs.

"Sorry to be the first to cut out, but I should get going." Tyler stands and smiles at Leo and Scarlett. "Congrats, guys. Thrilled for you."

Leo gets up to shake his hand and pull him into a one-arm hug. "Thanks for coming."

Tyler waves to the group, letting his stare hold on me a beat longer than everyone else.

After he's gone, other people start leaving. Declan, then Ash and his girl say their goodbyes, then Scarlett and Leo.

Jade and I follow them out, but linger in Jack's driveway to wait for Sam.

"God, I can't remember the last time I had so much fun," I say, spinning in a circle with my arms out. My coat falls open and the air bites at my skin, but I don't care. I'm not even drunk. A little tipsy, maybe.

Jade, on the other hand, is well past tipsy.

"Sam's here!" She tosses her arms up when headlights turn down the street. "Oh, no. That's not him."

We take off up the street anyway. She links her arm through mine, and we sway and sing. Good thing most of the neighbors know us. Her steps slow suddenly and pull me backward.

"Creep alert," she whispers loudly.

I stop singing and look up the sidewalk where a guy paces ahead of us.

"Not a creeper," I say.

Tyler turns at the sound of my voice. He has his phone up to his ear, but he drops it as I shorten the distance between us.

"What are you doing out here?" I ask, wondering for a second if he's going to try to talk to me again.

"Everly isn't home, and when I call her phone, it's saying it's no longer in service." Panic flashes in his eyes.

"She probably just turned it off. Where was she going?"

"I don't know." His jaw flexes. "She was gone when I got home this

afternoon from the game. She left a note that said she'd be back by midnight. I didn't think anything of it."

I glance at the time on my phone. It's almost two.

A car comes to a stop next to us. This time it is Sam. I look between an expectant Jade and a stressed-out Tyler. He's got his phone back to his ear.

"Go," I tell her. "I'm going to stay and help him track down Everly."

"You want us to wait?" she asks.

"No. I'll call an Uber." I hug her.

She hesitates.

"I'll be fine. Thank you for tonight."

She smiles. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Tyler drops the phone to his side and tips his head up to the sky. He lets out a growl. "Fuck, Everly."

If I had been drunk, I think seeing him like this would sober me right up. "Where would she go?"

He looks at me like he didn't realize I was still here. "With River if I had to guess, but I have no idea where he lives."

"Okay. Do you have his number?"

He gives his head a quick shake.

"Where do they like to go?"

"I don't know." He runs a hand through his hair.

Ash comes out the front door, shrugging into a leather jacket. "I called Declan; he doesn't have River's number either, but he thinks his last name might be Stafford or Stamford, something like that."

"Thanks," Tyler clips.

Ash comes to stand with us and nods to me.

I smile at him, but Tyler steals my focus. He's freaking out and I don't know how to help.

"Her Instagram," I say as I unlock my phone and search her name. Nothing immediately comes up. "Are you following her?"

"I don't have an account," Tyler says.

Right. I knew that. I might have had a moment of weakness and looked him up a few times over the years.

"We'll find her." I place a hand on his arm, ignoring the sparks it sends shooting up my fingertips.

"Found him," Ash says, looking at his phone. "River Stevenson. Declan was way off. Want me to send him a message?"

“Can I see?” I ask.

He hands me the phone and I scroll until I see the photo Everly had shown me of him and his ex. The record store. It’s a long shot, but it’s something. “I might know one place to check.”

Tyler’s eyes light up with something like hope.

“The record store where he works, Empire.”

Tyler takes off toward his car. I follow.

“Do you want me to try somewhere else?” Ash asks. “We could split up.”

Tyler shakes his head as he throws open the driver’s side door. “No, stay here in case she comes back. I’ll call you if we find her.”

Seated in the passenger seat, I buckle up as Tyler peels out of the driveway. He shifts and it draws my attention to the car.

“You bought it.”

He gives me a quick glance as I run my hand along the dash next to the cobra logo. For just a second, he flashes a playful smile. “Second thing I bought when I signed my contract.”

“What was the first?”

His grin falls.

“Well, it’s beautiful.” It’s an unexpected thrill to know he did this for himself. Tyler didn’t come from a family that had a lot of money, and never really wanted for a lot of things, but owning a ‘67 Ford Mustang Shelby GT500 was a dream he talked about like other people talking about going to the moon. Sure, it’d be awesome, but what were the chances of it happening?

“She wasn’t when I bought her. Restored just about every piece.”

“You did it yourself?”

“No. I wish.”

The atmosphere shifts back to tense when he takes a turn, and the record store comes into view.

“There,” I say. The streets are dark and quiet. Most of the businesses are closed this late. Even the bar a block away has closed up for the night.

Tyler lets the car idle in front of the store.

“The sign says it closed at ten,” I say.

“That’s River’s car there.” He points to an old Mazda in a metered spot. “I’m just gonna check the door. If she’s not here, I don’t know where else to look.”

He looks so desperate and hopeless. I rest a hand on his arm. My throat tightens. It’s hard to believe that after all this time a simple touch could still

make me feel so many things. But now is not the time to get caught up in the past. “We’ll find her.”

His dark head nods and then he leaves me alone in the car while he runs to the front door and pulls. It opens and he disappears inside.

Seconds turn into minutes and I’m so close to getting out and going in when he finally comes out with his arm around Everly’s shoulders.

“Oh no,” I say quietly, and get out to help him.

“I can walk,” she says, but then stumbles as she tries to pull away from us.

“I only had two beers. Or maybe it was four. I’m not very good at drunk math.” Her glazed stare lands on me. “I don’t think I can go to school today, Ms. Vaughn.”

“No, I don’t think you can either,” I say. “Good thing it’s the weekend.”

“You’re eighteen, Ev,” Tyler says through clenched teeth.

“Oh, please, you drank when you were my age. I know you did.”

“You were supposed to be home hours ago. And why is your phone off?”

“My dad cut off my service. I was going to text from someone else’s phone, but I don’t have your number memorized.” She looks at her brother and then reaches out and touches his face. “You look so mad, big brother. I was fine. I can take care of myself.”

A muscle flexes in his cheek. “Yeah? How exactly were you going to get home tonight?”

“River would have brought me home as soon as everyone left.” She yawns and her shoulders slump forward. “I’m really tired all of a sudden. Can you lecture me later?”

“Sure, Ev. I’ll lecture you when it’s more convenient for you.”

Tyler’s jaw flexes as she goes limp next to him. I move in to help steady her. She reeks of alcohol and cigarettes. I hold my breath as I take the other side and we guide her into the car. Tyler’s car doesn’t have a back seat, so I have to squeeze in next to her.

It’s quiet as we head back to the house. Everly rests her head against my shoulder, and I wrap my arms around her so she can use me as a pillow. I watch Tyler, feeling like I’m seeing him and all the stress he’s under more clearly. His hands tighten around the steering wheel, and he mutters under his breath, but I can’t make out anything other than the multiple f-bombs he drops.

“She’s safe,” I say softly, and place my hand on his bicep.

He nods, but the leather creaks under his grip.

Walking into Tyler's house the second time is surreal. Three guys wait in the doorway as Tyler helps his sister inside: Jack, Ash, and Declan.

I amble behind him awkwardly unsure if I should wait to talk to him or just go ahead and call an Uber.

Tyler looks over his shoulder while I'm still deciding. "Give me five and I'll drive you home."

Declan steps forward on Everly's other side.

"Declan," she murmurs happily.

"Hey, Little Sharpie." He takes some of her weight from Tyler. "This looks like more than one beer."

"You're lucky your brother found you and not me," Jack calls to her back. His dark stare narrows as he watches Tyler and Declan all but carry her up the stairs.

"You're all hypocrites. You guys drink all the time," she fires back.

They get her upstairs and disappear, then I'm back to not knowing what to do with myself.

"Where was she?" Ash asks.

"The record store with River."

"What was he feeding her? Jell-O shots?"

"I don't know. She said she just had a few beers."

"She's gonna be hungover as shit in the morning." Jack grumbles under his breath as he stalks to the door. "Call me if you guys need anything."

Ash watches everything with amusement. "Little Sharpie is going to have hell to pay tomorrow. I do not envy her that."

"Yeah, this whole 'team of big brothers' thing is intense," I say. It's obvious in the thirty seconds I've been here that she has a group of guys, her brother's teammates, that all care about her and have been helping look out for her. I'm glad for her, but also can't help but wonder what that must be like. Awesome or overbearing? I'm guessing a little of both.

Ash laughs. He has a way about him that makes the moment feel less tense. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Yeah. That would be great."

I follow him into the kitchen.

“I have wine or beer, liquor.”

“Alcohol doesn’t sound that great right now,” I admit, picturing Everly’s ashen face.

“Right. Water it is.” He fills a glass and sets it on the island.

I take a seat on one of the large barstools in front of it and drink slowly.

Declan comes down soon after.

“How is she?” Ash asks.

“Sleeping. Ty tried to get her in the shower, but she passed out cold. Where in the hell was she?”

“The record store where River works,” I answer.

Declan shakes his head. “I told her that guy was no good.”

“We’ve all told her that,” Ash says. “I’m pretty sure she’s dating him just to piss us off.”

“Did Jack already take off?” Declan looks around for him.

“Yep. Stormed out of here all pissed off that Little Sharpie was drunk.” He grins.

“She knows how to worry the shit out of all of us, that’s for sure.” Declan blows out a breath and runs a hand over his jaw. “I guess I should get back too.”

“You’re welcome to crash here,” Ash offers.

“Nah.” Declan grins and it transforms his face into a less serious, more boyish expression. “I finally get to practice tomorrow, and I want to get there early.”

“All right. See you then.” Ash gives him a salute and Declan leaves.

“You guys have a whole team bonding thing going on that I was not prepared for,” I admit.

“You? Tim Vaughn’s niece doesn’t know hockey players?” His brows lift.

“When Uncle Tim talks about his hockey days it’s usually about certain games or achievements. I don’t think he ever mentioned raising teenage girls with his teammates.”

Ash laughs good-naturedly. “Yeah, well, I guess this is a unique situation, but I don’t doubt that he would have done whatever his guys needed.”

I nod, sure he’s right.

Ash’s gaze lifts above my head and I turn to see Tyler. His hair sticks up around his head and he walks like a man that’s run a marathon and is about to

collapse.

“Beer?” Ash asks.

Ty nods and falls onto the stool next to me.

“I’m off to bed.” He slides the beer to Ty and then smiles at me. “Glad I finally got to meet you tonight, P. Vaughn.”

“You too,” I say before he steps out of the room.

Tyler tips back the bottle and takes a long drink. His throat works and I watch the column of his neck, noting how much he’s filled out over the years. He was always muscular but he’s broader now. Everywhere.

He sets the bottle down and looks at me. All the things I’ve despised about him are hard to remember when he looks so broken.

“Thank you. I don’t know how I would have found her without you.”

“You would have. You have a lot of people that have your back,” I note, meaning the teammates that showed up here for him and his sister. “But you’re welcome.”

“What the hell was she thinking?” He looks at me like he expects me to have the answer.

“I’m not sure, but go easy on her, okay?”

His gaze narrows.

“Or don’t. Sorry. It isn’t my business.” I hold up both hands.

“No, I want to know. You’re smart and you know more teenagers than I do. What would you do?”

“She’s been through a lot it seems. I don’t think yelling at her is going to do anything. Talk to her. Hear her out. Set boundaries and rules, but don’t lose sight of the fact that she’s here and she’s safe. That’s what matters.”

His jaw works back and forth, but he nods. “I’m sorry you got pulled into this.”

I find myself reaching out and taking his hand. It jolts me every freaking time, but this time I can feel how it affects him too. I keep contact for a few more seconds as I say, “I’m glad I could help. I keep telling you I like Everly and I mean it.”

“And me?” he asks, gliding his thumb along my palm. “Still hate me?”

I hold his gaze. My heart races and I struggle to put my feelings for him into words. Do I hate him? Of course not. I’m not sure I ever did. But I’m not a masochist either. I almost didn’t survive him the first time, and this grown-up Tyler with the weight of the world on his much broader shoulders could wreck me.

“No,” I finally say. “I don’t hate you.”

“Well, that’s something.” He tips back the bottle again. “I think you’re right. She needs routine and rules, stability that she hasn’t really gotten from me and the half-assed job I’m doing trying to look out for her.”

“I think you’re doing a really great job, all things considered.”

He makes a face that shows his disappointment in himself.

“I should get home.”

“Yeah, of course.” He sets the bottle down. “Let me drive you home.”

“It’s okay. You should stay in case she needs you. I have an Uber on the way.”

“All right then. I guess, thanks, again.”

“Bye, Tyler,” I say as I stare into his dark green eyes. My pulse skips.

“Bye, Pipes.”

I make it all the way to the front door before my resolve crumbles. I walk back into the kitchen. Tyler is tossing the beer into the trash. He looks up when I enter, and a hopeful look crosses his face.

“I’ll do it,” I say. “I will look after Everly, be her nanny, or whatever.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

He rushes me and hugs me, squeezing the air from my lungs. “Thank you.”

Any final hesitation I had leaves when he pulls back, and I see the relief on his face. He just aged backward by about four years.

“She obviously needs a female influence amidst all your teammates,” I say the last part jokingly but I’m serious. Holy overprotective hockey players.

“Thank you. I will pay you whatever you want and there’s a spare bedroom upstairs that Ash said you could have.”

I quirk a brow.

“I ran it by him earlier in case you said yes,” he admits.

Those nerves are back as I imagine waking up in the morning to a sleepy-eyed, shirtless Tyler. That sounds...amazing, and also like torture. “I don’t know. Us sleeping under the same roof feels like...a lot.”

“Okay, whatever you want. I’ll text you my schedule and leave the details up to you, but the offer to stay is open, and name your price.”

I’m probably going to regret this in the light of the morning, but I find myself nodding. “No payment necessary. Consider it a favor. I will chill with her while you’re gone. Let’s just start there.”

LIVING WITH PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES IS THE WORST

TYLER

“RISE AND SHINE.” I STAND OVER EVERLY’S BED WITH A GLASS OF WATER and Advil.

She winces and rolls over. Ash is on the other side. He nudges the mattress with his foot. “Morning, Little Sharpie.”

She glances between us. “What is going on?”

“Little family therapy session,” I say, and put the water and pills on her side table. “Get up. Put on your running shoes and meet us downstairs in five.”

“Living with professional athletes is the worst,” she mumbles, and puts the pillow over her face.

It’s ten minutes before she shows, but Everly comes downstairs dressed in sweats, eyes barely open. “You can’t really expect me to run this morning.”

“Sure, I can. Little sweat, a good breakfast, you’ll be good as new.”

Leo is waiting for us outside. He and Ash take off on our usual route, but I hang back with Everly. She falls into a slow jog next to me. I don’t say a word until we’re about a mile from the house.

“You scared the shit out of me last night.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not going to tell you not to drink because we both know I did when I was your age, but you have to be smart, Ev. You want to have a beer, fine. Do it surrounded by people you trust, not people who are going to let you take it too far and leave you God knows where, or worse, drive you home after they’ve been drinking alongside you.”

She stays quiet, but she doesn't have that look on her face like she's not listening to a word I'm saying, so progress.

"I ordered you a new phone. It's on my plan so you don't have to worry about it getting shut off again."

"Thank you."

"Why'd he shut it off anyway? I thought things were better with your dad?"

"They were for a while when he and Mom were trying to work things out, but since he moved back out, he's flaky again." Everly's dad and our mom have had a roller coaster of a relationship since the beginning. They're madly in love, they hate each other, they're working it out, and on and on. Unfortunately, Ev is often put in the middle of their games.

"Well, this one is yours no matter what."

She glances over at me. "You mean if you send me packing?"

"I'm not going to do that. You should know that by now, but we have to figure out a different way because I'm going to be gray or in cardiac arrest by the time I'm twenty-five."

She snorts and rolls her eyes.

"We leave tonight for Vegas. I'll be back late Tuesday night."

"Okay. Got it. Declan will be checking in on me, I assume?"

"No. Declan is playing Tuesday."

I get a genuine smile out of her. "Really? That's awesome. I can't wait to watch him play. He says he's the best player on the team."

"I bet he does," I say with a chuckle. "It's great news but it means that when I'm traveling, I don't have anyone to look in on you."

"I promise I won't go out drinking again. It was one time." She places a hand on her stomach and winces. "Trust me."

"I appreciate that, but it's not only that. You need people to look after you. You're eighteen and I know you feel like you're an adult, but you should still have someone making you dinner and worrying about you, all that shit. Which is why I asked Piper to be your nanny."

"Nanny?" She stops jogging and stares at me. "What am I, four?"

"Somehow I think a four-year-old would cause less trouble."

She glowers at me.

"I thought you liked Piper."

"I do, but this is humiliating. What do I tell River?"

"I don't give a shit what you tell anyone, least of all that fuck face." I'm

still livid that he got her drunk.

“Am I still allowed to see him?”

If I thought she'd listen if I told her she couldn't see him anymore, I'd do it. But even I know teenagers tend to gravitate toward the exact people you try to keep them from.

“As long as I know where you're going, you come back when you say you will, and you keep your phone on at all times, then yes. But if I find out he's giving you alcohol again or driving you around after drinking, I'll break his ankles.”

Piper's pulling into the driveway as we get back. She grabs a small bag from her back seat and faces us. “I packed enough for the two days you're gone. Is it still okay that I stay?”

“Of course. I just told Ev the news.”

Piper smiles at her. “Hey, Everly.”

“So, you're my new warden, huh?”

“It'll be fun,” Piper says.

“Sure.” Everly huffs. “I'm going to shower.”

I step forward and take Piper's bag from her. “Sorry about that. I made her get up and go run with me this morning. She's grumpy.”

“She's mad you hired someone to look after her like a child,” she says with a laugh.

“How'd you know?”

“Lucky guess.” She follows me inside the house.

“I probably won't have time to come back after practice. Do you want the full tour now?”

“Ummm.” Her gaze lifts and scans the room. “Sure.”

As I show Piper around, she's quiet, nodding along and offering small, hesitant smiles.

“This is, uh, my room,” I say, stepping into the doorway and waving a hand. I didn't make the bed and I spy a pair of dirty boxers that didn't quite make it into the hamper.

Not that Piper notices. She gives my room the briefest glance and then stares at her feet. I clear my throat and keep going. “This is you any time you want to stay over.”

I set her bag on the floor just inside of the room and let her walk fully inside by herself. She does a quick scan and then stares at the attached bath between our rooms.

“It’s a Jack and Jill style,” I say. “You can have that one and I’ll use the one down the hall.”

“What about Everly?”

“She’s the last room at the end of the hallway and she has her own bathroom.”

She sits on the end of the bed. “This all feels like too much, even for a night or two.”

“Ash is fine with it. I promise. I think he likes having a bunch of people around.”

“I meant me staying in your house. Even if you’re not here, it’s a lot. I’ve seen you more in the past week than I did most weeks when we were actually dating.”

Guilt and remorse prick at my skin. She’s right, of course; I may not have seen her every day but I felt her, wanted her, loved her. She was mine, no matter the distance. Until I fucked it all up.

And now that I’m lucky enough to have her this close, I’m not screwing it up again.

“Before I go, I need to come clean on something.”

She stiffens. “What?”

“I said this was about what is best for Everly, and I meant it. I think you are the best person for the job, and I don’t want to screw with that.”

“O-kay.”

I step closer. Her bottom lip trembles as I invade her space. “But it doesn’t change how I feel about you. There’s something still here, Pipes. I know it.”

A LOT OF CHARACTER

PIPER

“HEY, STRANGER.” CHRIS STANDS FROM THE TABLE AT THE COFFEE SHOP.

“Hey.” I lean into him for a quick embrace. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

“Only three past. That’s basically early for you.”

He sits and I slide into the seat across from him. He pushes a coffee cup closer to me.

“Thank you.” I rest both elbows on the table and place my hands around the cup.

Chris hooks one finger around the pinky on my left hand. “It’s good to see you, Piper. How’s school? I feel like I haven’t seen you at all since you started teaching.”

My pulse ticks faster. “School is good. Hard. Harder than I expected, but good. What about you? How are classes and the gym?”

“Good. Good. Busy. The same.” He smiles at me. He’s such an easy guy to be with, but I know this isn’t going anywhere. Maybe I knew it all along, but seeing Tyler again and having all these reminders of how great we were together has me all mixed up. I don’t know what’s what. Am I just romanticizing it? I don’t know, but I know that Chris’s touch doesn’t feel anything like Tyler’s.

“Don’t leave me in suspense. Tell me about this new job.” He leans back, breaking contact. “Nannying for one of the Wildcat players? How did that happen?”

I’ve never told Chris about Tyler and now I’m wishing I had.

“It’s more like helping out a friend. Or not a friend. The truth is we used to date, like way back in high school.” I ramble as I try to explain who Tyler

is to me. I don't even freaking know anymore. "I ran into him because his sister is a student at my school, and he needed someone to help when he's traveling for games."

"That's nice of you." He pauses. "Your ex-boyfriend plays hockey for the Wildcats?"

"Umm. Yes. Tyler Sharp."

His brows lift. "No way? He's awesome. You dated him?"

"It was an eternity ago. He wasn't a Wildcat then. And his sister is going through a rough time, and I felt like I could help. She's eighteen so I can work on school stuff while I'm there."

He nods thoughtfully and finally says, "How come you never mentioned him before?"

I squirm in my chair. "There's nothing to say. Until I ran into him at the school, I hadn't seen him since high school."

"Makes sense, I guess. Now that I think about it, you've never mentioned any of the guys you dated before me. Got an ex on the Vikings too?" He shoots me an easy smile.

"No." I laugh and breathe a sigh of relief to have that conversation out of the way.

"Tell me more about school stuff. Are you teaching or observing?"

For the next fifteen minutes, I give him the rundown of my first few weeks at Park Academy. I tell him everything I've done, the teachers, the students. When I finally take a breath, I add, "I still think I want to teach middle school, but high school has been good practice."

Chris checks his watch. "Oh shit. I need to go soon. I have an eight o'clock today."

"Right. I need to go too."

He stands and comes over to drop a kiss on my cheek. "Are you free this weekend?"

"I'll have to look. Call you later?"

He nods and starts to the door, talking over his shoulder. "Think you can get me an autograph?"

I'm in the kitchen trying to acclimate myself with where everything is located

in this massive space. Ash has every utensil and gadget you can imagine, but the pantry and fridge are pathetic.

“We eat out a lot,” Everly says from where she sits behind the island.

“Okay, well...” I grab a box of pasta. “Looks like we’ll have to get creative.”

While I find everything I need, Everly continues to sit in the room with me, playing on her phone.

She reminds me so much of her brother. They both have this quiet presence that somehow fills the space in this nice, comforting way.

When I finally set a bowl in front of her, Everly drops her phone to the counter.

“What is it?”

“Pasta surprise.” I shrug.

She takes a hesitant bite, but then her mouth curves up. “It’s good.”

“Living on student loans the past few years, I’ve gotten pretty good at finding creative ways to make pasta out of just about anything in the pantry.”

She studies me for a second. “I thought you were from some rich family.”

“Was. It’s a long story.”

She shrugs. “I’ve got time. River is at work for another hour.”

I take the seat next to her with my pasta. “Well, my dad owned a company that got into some financial trouble and eventually had to liquidate. Everything he built was just gone. It was awful, but he was so smart and determined. He threw himself into a new start-up.” My thoughts are wistful as I remember him sitting at the dining room table with his laptop, papers strewn all around, and a dozen empty coffee mugs in front of him.

“I’m guessing it wasn’t successful?”

“It never got off the ground. He had a stroke that severely impacted his speech and memory.”

“I’m so sorry,” Everly says.

“Thanks. My parents sold everything, and he and my mom bought a cute little place on a lake upstate. I think they’re happy, all things considered, and that’s all that really matters.”

She regards me for a moment. “I thought growing up broke was bad, but I think that having money and losing it would be worse. Except...I guess you probably still got to keep some of your nice stuff, huh?”

I think about the Gucci bracelet I loved so much. The one I gave to Tyler every time he left and told him to keep until we saw each other again. It was

silly, but I guess I thought if he held on to it, he'd always have a reason to see me again.

"I'm grateful for the life I had growing up but being broke gives you character."

She snorts. "I guess I have a LOT of character then."

"How'd you meet River?" I ask, eager to turn the conversation off me.

"At the record store. When I first got here, Ty and I were living in his small one-bedroom apartment by the arena. He was always at practice or working out. I guess he still is, but I didn't know anyone then. Anyway, I got bored one day and walked around hitting all the shops and stores. I was frozen solid by the time I got to the record store. I didn't have any money on me to buy anything, but he let me hang out there. He even offered me coffee while I warmed up. Then he played me some of his favorite records, and..." She shrugs again.

I realize in that moment how very little it takes to win over a teenage girl. I'm not knocking it, it was a nice gesture, but knowing more about him and how he let his underage girlfriend drink and miss curfew, I worry that his motives that first day were a one-time occurrence and he isn't really that nice of a guy.

"What about you?" she asks.

"Oh, I met my boyfriend in a business writing class my junior year. We were friends for about a year before we started dating."

Her head tips to the side. I realize then she meant me and Tyler.

"Do you love him?"

I swirl my fork around as I decide how honest to be with an eighteen-year-old. "He's great."

"You didn't answer the question."

"We're keeping it casual. He's busy with classes and he works at his family's gym part-time. I have student teaching and now hanging with you." I lean closer and give her a playful smile.

"How long have you been dating?"

I think for a minute. "About three months. Wow, longer than I thought."

"Didn't you date my brother for like a year?"

"Eight months." My pulse races. I do not like being cross-examined by his sister. I feel like if she keeps prying, I'll spill everything and answer every single question she asks. And she does not need to know how I was head over heels in love with her brother and he broke my heart. "But we were young,

and we only saw each other once a month, sometimes less.”

She nods slowly. “He talked about you.”

“He did?” I’m not sure why I’m surprised.

“Yeah. He came home for a few days over Christmas that year and his screen on his phone was this picture of you two kissing on the beach. I didn’t recognize you that first week of school, but now I can see it. He said you were the most amazing person he’d ever met.”

I remember that photo. Remember taking it. Remember the way his kiss made me feel.

Damn, an hour alone with Everly and I’m already cracking. This is going to be harder than I thought.

River comes over after dinner. He’s a good-looking kid, skinny with tattoos and a lip piercing that he continually glides his tongue over. There’s something about him that rubs me the wrong way, even forgetting that he let Everly drink too much and miss her curfew. He soaks up attention from Everly but he’s almost indifferent in the way he interacts with her.

I stay in the kitchen where I can’t hear them unless I strain, but where I’m close enough that they know I’m around. I have no idea how much privacy to give her. Tyler didn’t give me any rules for Everly, and I hadn’t thought to ask. My parents basically let me do whatever I wanted. Then again, my boyfriend was three hundred miles away.

I’m doing a Google search on parenting teenage girls when Tyler texts, ***Hey. Everything going okay?***

I’m about to reply when my phone rings in my hand.

“Hello?” I answer with amusement. “I was just about to respond. Did you think I called it quits already?”

“No, I was just too nervous to wait.”

“She’s fine. Relax. River came over and they’re watching a movie.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to relax where Everly is concerned. She hasn’t given you a hard time?”

“No, she’s been great. We did run into a food issue, though. Meaning, there is no food in this place. I’ll take her tomorrow morning to pick up some stuff. Any allergies or things I should be aware of for the household?”

“No, but Lynn, Ash’s housekeeper, comes by on Tuesdays. There’s a list on the fridge. Add anything you want there and she’ll grab it.”

I walk over to the fridge and find the list. It’s long and contains everything from eggs to shaving cream.

“I don’t mind. I like grocery shopping.”

“Are you in the kitchen now?” he asks.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Walk over to the end of the counter by the coffee machine.”

“Okay,” I say as I do just that.

“Open the last drawer, next to the wall. I left an envelope of cash for you and keys.”

I take out the envelope first, balking at the amount of cash. It’s the weirdest rush of excitement mixed with panic. “Holy shit, Tyler.”

“We eat a lot,” he says. “Everly has my credit card, too, if you need it.” I count out at least a thousand dollars. Plus a card. Is he for real? They don’t eat that much.

Dropping the envelope back in the drawer, I pick up the keys. “What do I need keys for?”

“I rode to the arena with Ash so you could have my car for whatever you need.”

“My car works just fine.”

“Your tires are basically bald.”

When I don’t respond, he says, “I forgot how stubborn you are.”

“Very.”

He chuckles lightly. “Drive it, don’t, but it’s there for you.”

“Thank you,” I force the words out of my mouth. I am thankful, but this situation is already weird. I don’t want to feel like he’s looking out for me in a boyfriend type of way.

“What are you up to tonight?” he asks.

“You mean besides watching your sister?”

“Mm-hmm,” he says, and it sounds like he’s moving around. I try to picture him at the hotel or maybe out somewhere. Although the latter seems unlikely because it’s too quiet.

“I was Googling how much privacy to give a teenager.”

His laughter comes easier this time.

“My parents pretty much let me do whatever I wanted. Or at least that’s how I remember it.”

“You were a good kid,” he says.

“So is Everly.”

“She is, but she hasn’t had a lot of good role models. Our mom and Ev’s dad are too wrapped up in their own shit to notice unless she’s causing

trouble.”

“That had to have been tough.” I fidget with his keys, spinning them around on my finger. “Was it like that for you, too?”

“They were happier then, I think. I don’t remember a lot. She met Ev’s dad when I was three.”

“And before then, was your dad ever in the picture?”

“Nah. My mom got pregnant with me at sixteen. According to her, his parents didn’t approve of her, and he was too chicken shit to go against them.”

I knew the first part of that, that she’d had Tyler early, but he never mentioned his dad except to say he wasn’t around.

“You never tracked him down to find out for sure?”

“No. One parent that resented my presence was more than enough.”

“She resented you? Why?” My chest tightens. God, why did I never ask him any of this before? Or had I and he just brushed it off with half answers?

“She’s never outright said it, but she would tell me these stories about all the plans she had before she got pregnant. I honestly don’t know if it was the same for Everly. I hope not, but from the second I was able, I spent as much time as I could away from the house, playing hockey or whatever sport I could. Luckily, I was pretty good at all of them because I never would have been able to pay for the fees and equipment. Coaches would lend me shit or cover my costs. I was too desperate to care or feel guilty about it. I think I thought if I became someone, she would finally feel like it wasn’t all for nothing, you know?” He lets out a short, harsh snort. “Sorry, that got dark.”

My throat is thick with emotion. “Why did you never tell me any of this?”

“You were going through your own stuff with your dad losing his company. Plus, I didn’t really like talking about it. I still don’t, but with Everly here it’s all been on my mind.” His tone changes as he moves from the topic. “We’ll be back tomorrow night. And as for privacy, use your best judgment with Everly. River, however, is another story. I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him.”

Tyler hurries off the phone soon after, leaving me reeling with all this new information about his childhood. I knew things hadn’t been exactly like mine with two parents who loved and provided for me, but I had no idea his mother carried so much resentment toward him.

Toward Tyler of all people. God, my heart hurts for him. I see his drive and determination in a new light, and I hate her a little for that. No, I hate her

a lot for it.

And Tyler, well, I'm finding more and more of the same reasons I fell for him in the first place, and that is a dangerous place to be.

CONSIDER IT A FAVOR

PIPER

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, I STAY WITH EVERLY TWICE MORE WHILE TYLER IS traveling. I've also started picking her up and bringing her home from school. Tyler said that wasn't necessary when he's in town, but every time I show up, I can see a little more stress lifting from his shoulders.

I wake up on the couch at Heather and Steve's apartment Monday morning and it takes me a minute to remember where I am and what day it is.

"Morning," Heather chirps, and holds out a Starbucks cup for me.

"Marry me." My voice comes out groggy.

"Sorry." She flashes her engagement ring at me.

I sit up and she takes a seat beside me.

"This schedule has my internal clock all screwed up."

"I figured. You're usually already up by now."

"Tyler didn't get back until after midnight."

Her lips curve up, but she bites back whatever retort she clearly wants to say.

"What?"

"Why do you keep schlepping back here to sleep on this old couch when he has a room for you to crash there?"

I stare at her over my coffee cup as I take a sip, so I don't have to answer.

Heather places a hand on my arm. "Okay, well, I have news. My sister is coming to visit and help with wedding plans."

It takes a minute for me to connect the dots. "She wants to crash here while she's in town. When does she get in?"

"Tonight." She smiles nervously. "It will just be a week. Two, tops. You

know how flighty she is.”

I laugh. “I’m not sure Tyler’s offer to stay included nights he’s there.”

“I’m sorry. Of course. I’ll tell Beatrix to find somewhere else to crash.”

“No,” I say. “Don’t do that. I can ask Chris if I can stay with him while she’s here.”

She arches a brow. “At his parents’ house?”

“He has the entire basement.”

“Uh-huh. Whatever you say.” Her grin gets wide. “Why stay in a mansion with your hottie NHL ex-boyfriend when you can shack up with Chris and his family? Tell me, does his grandpa still wear those really short shorts that let his balls snake down the leg hole?”

I toss the pillow at her. “I hate you.”

As I get ready, I look around the cramped apartment. I was never supposed to be here as long as I have. I pay the utilities so I’m not exactly freeloading, but I know it’s time for me to find my own place. It’s just that everything is so expensive and finding a roommate you trust is scary.

I text Chris as I get ready. **Hey. Any chance I can crash with you while Heather’s sister is in town?**

His response comes as I’m slipping on my shoes. **Sorry! Aunt B just had hip surgery and is staying with us while she gets back on her feet.**

Of course. I understand, I fire back.

Crap. I could reach out to some of my other college friends, but none come to mind that have the space. I pour a cup of coffee and then scroll through my contacts looking for someone that I can stay with. I make it all the way to Tyler’s name and sigh.

On my way to pick up Everly. Can we chat this morning?

He’s waiting in the garage when I pull up.

He has a rag in hand and a spray bottle in the other, cleaning the windows on his car. He sets both on top of the car and walks out to meet me.

“Hey.” A concerned expression mars his face, and I realize he thought my request to talk meant I was quitting, or something had happened with Everly. Oops.

“Hi,” I say more brightly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“How can you tell I’m worried?”

“You get this little line right here.” I run a hand over the spot on myself.

His face relaxes. “What’s up?”

“I was wondering if it’s okay that I stay here temporarily. Like a week or

two. My roommate's sister is visiting and since I'm already going to be sleeping over the nights you're away..." I trail off, staring at everything but him. "I will help out more, cook, clean, whatever you need."

He doesn't say anything until I give in and look up. "Yeah, Pipes. It's more than okay. No extra help required. Stay as long as you want."

"It'll just be until Heather's sister leaves."

"You know, if you let me pay you—"

"Everly!" I cut Tyler off with a dismissive smile when his sister steps outside. She looks between us.

"Am I riding to school with you today?"

I nod. "Yep. Ready?"

Tyler smirks as I get in my car. I hold his gaze through the windshield and mouth "thank you."

I don't see Tyler much that night. He and Ash get home late, eat, and go to bed. Regardless, I have a hard time falling asleep. I feel his presence everywhere. Even the smell of his soap lingering in the bathroom brings back an onslaught of emotions and memories.

The next morning, he's in the kitchen when I drag myself downstairs.

"Morning," he says, holding a mug of coffee in one hand. He's in sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt that clings to his chest and biceps.

"Good morning." My voice comes out all squeaky.

"Coffee?"

"I got it," I say, and come around the island. He scoots down to make room for me, and I pull a mug from the cabinet and pour a cup.

This is so strange, but also not. Tyler and I have a practiced ease around each other. It might have been years since we shared a morning routine, but we slip right back into it.

"Have you already worked out this morning?" I ask, letting my gaze do another sweep of him in fitted athletic clothes.

"Just a quick run." He angles his body toward me. "What about you? I'm assuming your cheerleader days are behind you, but do you still dance?"

"No." I shake my head. "I used to take a class at the university, but I'm on campus so rarely anymore. I should find another place." Strange how I

hadn't even thought about it, but now that Tyler mentioned it, I feel like I abandoned something I really enjoyed. That's probably true of a lot of things. There never seems to be enough time for it all. "Someday."

Everly comes downstairs. She already has her earbuds in and doesn't look at me or Tyler as she grabs a banana from the fruit bowl and then heads for the front door.

"I guess that's my cue."

Tyler follows me outside. It snowed overnight, but my car is cleaned off. I glance back at him with one brow raised. "You did this?"

He lifts a shoulder and lets it fall.

"You didn't need to do that but thank you."

"Consider it a favor." He moves over to the passenger side and stops the door with a big hand before Everly closes it.

She looks up at her brother. "What?"

"I don't know. Good morning. Have a nice day. Try not to get in trouble." An amused smile tugs at the corner of his lips.

"No promises," she says, and pulls the door closed.

The next morning, there's no Tyler in the kitchen but my keys are sitting on the counter. Weird. I thought I put them back in my purse. I don't think anything of it until I get in my car. Something is different. No, a lot of things are different. For starters, it smells like grape soda inside and the dash is missing several layers of dust. I run my hand along it. Who knew it was so shiny underneath?

Everly throws open the door and heaves herself in with the usual disinterest, but when she sees how clean my car is she raises both brows. "What happened to your car?"

"Your brother," I mutter. Your brother happened.

Ev rushes out when we get to the school, but I take my time so I can text Tyler. ***Thank you for cleaning my car, but you didn't need to do that. I would have gotten around to it.***

Maybe. Probably.

You're welcome.

As I'm shutting the door behind me, my gaze snags on the tires. *Oh, you*

have to be kidding me.

WHY DOES MY CAR HAVE NEW TIRES?!

EXCUSE-FUCKING-ME?

TYLER

“NICE JOB, ROOKIE.” JACK TAPS MY HELMET AS I STEP OFF THE ICE. “GLAD to see you’ve got your sparkle back.”

“Me too,” I answer as I hand my stick and gloves to the equipment manager.

I haven’t had a game like that in months. An assist and two points—one of which was the game-winning goal.

I FaceTime Everly as soon as we get on the plane to head home.

“Congratulations,” she says, smiling.

“Thanks. How’s everything there?”

“Boring. River had to work tonight. Piper and I are getting ready to watch some reality TV.” She sets the phone down so she can get the popcorn and start the microwave. While she does all this, I get a view of her outfit that makes me want to grind my molars.

“Ev, did you wear that to school today?”

“Yes.” She tugs on the hem of her T-shirt.

“Do you have a single shirt that fits the dress code?”

She rolls her eyes. “No, actually. Maybe if you let me get a job, I could afford to buy myself some clothes. River said he could get me a job at the record store in the afternoons and weekends.”

“You need to focus on school.”

“School sucks.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. What else is new?”

“Nothing. You’ve been gone for like a day.”

I chuckle softly under my breath. “Good to know you missed me too. Is

Piper around?”

“Yeah.” Everly nods.

“Right here,” Piper says from somewhere off-camera.

Ev picks up the phone and hands it to her, and I’m treated with a close-up view of Piper’s flushed face.

“Hi.” She repositions the phone farther away and tucks a strand of hair behind one ear. “Congrats on the game.”

“Thanks. All good there? Everly giving you any trouble?”

“I can still hear you, you know,” Everly yells.

Piper’s gaze lifts over the phone and she smiles before answering me.

“We’re getting along just fine. You don’t need to worry.”

The thing is, I really haven’t. Not like I used to when I was gone on trips. I trust Piper.

“We’re headed home now, but it’ll be pretty late by the time I’m there.”

“Okay.” Piper nods like I’m giving her official orders.

“My buddy Frank is coming by in the morning to get my car. Can you set my keys on the seat for him? He has the garage code, so you won’t need to let him in or anything.”

“This the same Frank that fixed the mystery rattle on my car? Don’t think I didn’t notice you did more than clean it and change the tires.”

I bite back a smile. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure,” she says dryly.

“If your uncle knew you were driving around in that thing, he’d kick my ass.”

The blush of her cheeks tells me that she has specifically avoided reaching out to him for help. Stubborn Piper wanting to do it all on her own.

She sighs. “Yes, I will set your keys on the front seat for him. Something wrong with your car?”

“Nah, he’s adding the option seat in back. I had it removed because it was so small but seems like it might come in handy now. You and Everly won’t have to share the passenger seat.”

“A real family wagon,” she teases. “Anything else?”

Oh, so many more things, but I just shake my head. “That’s it for now.”

The next afternoon I pick Everly up from school. I got in later than expected last night and she was already asleep. Then, this morning I had a rare opportunity to sleep in and missed her before she went to school.

I texted Piper earlier to let her know I was picking up Ev and taking her to get new clothes and then to dinner. I invited Piper, too, but she told me to have fun with Everly.

They come out of the school together. Everly with her backpack hanging on one shoulder and Piper with a tote, purse, and lunch bag she juggles in one hand while trying to balance a coffee cup in the other.

It's really something seeing her like this, all grown up. I mean, I realize we both grew up but I'm still doing basically the same thing. Piper's got a new wardrobe that matches her professional job, and I just dig it so much that she did the thing. She followed through on her dreams and is making them happen.

"What?" she asks, and I realize I'm still staring at her.

"Nothing. I got this." I move in and take the bags from her.

"Thank you."

She unlocks her car, and I set it all on the passenger seat.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

"She can't." Ev's smile is big as she looks at Piper. "She has a date with her boyfriend."

The words detonate like bombs. Date. *Pow*. Boyfriend. *Pow*.

Excuse-fucking-me?

Piper has her back to me and I blank my expression before she turns. I try for a smile, but it feels more like a grimace.

"I guess we'll see you later," I say, voice tight.

"Yeah." She smiles. "Have fun."

"Okay dokey." I throw myself into my car.

"Okay dokey?" I mutter. I send Piper a text. **Boyfriend?**

As soon as Everly climbs in, I take off for the mall.

I can't remember the last time I went into a mall, but it has not changed, and I still hate it. Being able to afford shit has not made me like shopping, but Everly doesn't ask for a lot of stuff, and it hadn't occurred to me until last night that if she needed things like clothes, she probably wouldn't ask.

My phone vibrates and I pull it out of my pocket to see a reply from Piper. **Yes, I told you about him. Problem?**

Hell, yes there's a problem, but I just shoot back a quick, **See you at the**

house later.

Everly and I reach the food court. I tip my head in that direction. “Do you want me to wait out here?”

She does a not-so-subtle and disapproving once-over of my clothes. “You don’t want to shop for yourself?”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“Too many things,” she says.

Well, fuck me.

I follow Everly around racks of shirts and dresses, keeping my head down and my hands shoved in my pockets. She hums lightly under her breath as she slides hangers around the rack, occasionally pulling something off to get a better look and then shoving it back.

After she’s done that through most of the store, I say, “What was wrong with that one?”

Her brows lift and my gaze slides over to the plain black shirt she just put back on the rack.

“It’s forty dollars.” She moves along, this time to a clearance section.

“So?” I grab the shirt and carry it with us.

“So that’s crazy. It’s a basic T-shirt.”

“Isn’t that mostly what you wear?” I use the hand holding the shirt to wave it in front of her to a plain shirt, this one a dark red.

“This shirt cost me five bucks.”

“Do you like the shirt?” I ask, shaking the hanger to indicate the black one.

“Yeah.” She lifts one shoulder in a small shrug.

“Okay, then. What else?”

“This one is only thirty.” She holds up a cropped sweatshirt with the words Good Vibes Only, in big block letters that are neon colors—orange, pink, yellow. It’s so not Ev’s style, but I grab it and add it to the pile.

Pretty soon both of us have our arms full of clothes. Some of it ridiculous, some stuff she actually likes. I take a seat in a chair outside the fitting room.

A woman with a daughter that looks a few years younger than Everly, smiles at me as her daughter carries a dress. The daughter smiles too, though in a less obvious way. Have I mentioned that shopping is torture?

I smile back and then drop my gaze to my lap.

“Oh my gosh. You have to see this one.” Everly comes out of the room in the white sweatshirt. Ignoring how much of her stomach is showing, I can

admit it somehow isn't awful.

"What do you think?" She makes a pose and then bursts into laughter.

"Sold," I say. "It'll be worth it just to make fun of you every time you wear it."

She shakes her head and disappears back into the dressing room.

"Daughter?" the woman asks me.

"Nah." I shake my head.

"Girlfriend?"

Coughing, I manage to get out. "Sister."

Her head tilts to one side and her eyes soften. "Oh, how nice."

I have no idea what to say to that, so I just smile and wait for Ev to come out again.

She does, a dozen more times until she's tried on every single item. We have more in the get pile than the put back pile, and my sister hasn't stopped smiling.

More women come and go, and it feels like I might die in this chair waiting for Everly to choose what she wants and doesn't. She tries to put back several of the more expensive items, don't think I don't notice, but I add every item except the definite nos to the stack and pay for it while she bites on her thumbnail.

"All right. Please tell me we can go now?" I ask, handing her the bag.

"Thank you," she says quietly.

"Any time. Now, food?"

She shakes her head. "No, now we go to the men's department."

I groan.

"Just let me pick out one outfit for you?" She sticks out her bottom lip. "I'll put one of mine back."

"No, that's not..." I sigh. "Okay, you can pick out one outfit for me. But I'm not trying it on in the store and nothing pink. I can't pull it off."

She squeals with excitement as she rushes off to the men's section. My daily attire is all about function. I wear workout clothes or suits, there really isn't any in-between. I own two pairs of jeans that I rotate for anything that I can't wear my suit or sweats for, but that basically consists of hanging around the house.

I follow behind her, offering up answers to questions like jeans and shirt size, but otherwise she doesn't ask for my input.

"Okay," she says finally. She lifts an off-white sweater in one hand and a

pair of black jeans with holes in the knees in the other.

“I think I’d rather wear your white crop top sweater,” I say.

“You’re funny.” She spins on her heel. “Hurry up. I’m starving.”

After shopping, we grab something to eat from the food court.

“This was fun,” I say as I toss a chip in my mouth. I have to stick at least somewhat to a decent diet during the season so it’s a sub and chips for me. Everly is scarfing down pizza that makes me wish I’d become something else, like a banker or realtor, or anything that doesn’t mean giving up pizza for a large portion of the year.

“Stop staring at my food.” Ev sits back, laughing. “Go get your own.”

“Can’t. I’ve put on like ten pounds of lean muscle since I joined the team.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Talked to Mom lately?”

“A little. She called to make sure I was still in school and that you haven’t left me to fend for myself.”

I clamp my mouth shut. I have a lot of feelings about my mom backing off from Everly when she clearly needs guidance and support more than ever, but I’m trying really hard not to jade Ev with my shit.

“Oh, this is so good.” Everly takes another bite and lets her eyes fall closed.

“You’re mocking me, right?”

“Maybe.” She grins. “Thank God for Piper. We finally have something to eat around the house that isn’t chicken, fish, and protein drinks.”

“How was it while I was gone?”

“I like Piper. She’s great. If I have to have a babysitter, then I’m glad it’s her. I see why you were so crazy in love with her. Plus, she’s really hot. Way too hot for you.”

I choke around my food. I take a drink, and then say, “You’re the second person to say that to me. Thanks a lot, sis.”

A slow smile spreads across her lips. “Seriously, though. I understand now.”

“Understand what?”

“Why you are still so hung up on her and haven’t dated anyone else.”

“Who says I haven’t dated anyone else?”

“Ash,” she says smugly.

“He has such a big mouth.”

“He really does,” she agrees. “So, is asking her to look out for me just a way to get her back?”

“No.” I shake my head adamantly, then concede. “Fine. Yes. I am glad to have a reason to interact with her, but I wouldn’t have hired her if I didn’t think she would be good for you too. I could have pursued her without putting you in the middle.”

“Yeah?” She hits me with that smirk again. “How was that working for you the last four years?”

I wipe my hands on a napkin, ball it up, and toss it at her.

“Eat your pizza. No, you know what?” I grab her wrist and lean forward, taking a bite out of the cheesy slice.

Oh, damn that’s good. I should have been a realtor.

STUPID SCHOOL STUFF

PIPER

CHRIS PULLS INTO THE DRIVEWAY AT ASH'S PLACE. MY PULSE JUMPS AS I look for some indication that Tyler is home, but he usually parks in the garage, and the light on inside could mean anyone is there.

"Thanks for dinner," I say as I unbuckle.

He tangles his hand in my hair and brings his face closer like he's going to kiss me. "It was good to finally spend some real time with you."

"Yeah," I squeak. My nerves ramp up as I glance at the house again.

"I should get inside."

"Wait." He stops me and his eyes widen with excitement. "Before I forget, my buddies are booking spring break tickets. Four nights, Cancun, the beach. What do you say?"

"Oh, um, I don't know."

"I know money is tight. I will cover the hotel."

"That is really generous, but I can't let you do that. Besides, I have work."

"I checked. Park Academy is on break that week too."

"I meant with Everly and Tyler. The Wildcats probably have a game."

"You can't be serious. He's not even paying you."

He would be if I'd let him. "I made a commitment and I'm going to honor that. I'm sorry."

He sits back in his seat and runs a hand through his hair. "All right. I get it, I guess. Maybe we can go sometime this summer. Just the two of us."

I nod but if I'm honest with myself I have no desire to go now or this summer. Not with him anyway. My stomach sinks. "Actually, no. This isn't

working, Chris. I wanted it to. You're a great guy."

"You're breaking up with me?"

"I'm sorry."

"I know we agreed to do casual, but I really like you."

"I like you too, but I have to be honest, and I don't think this is going anywhere. It's not you. It's me, I swear."

"The 'it's not you, it's me' speech. Ouch. Heard that before."

"I'm sorry." I move closer and hug him, then get out of the car.

I walk slowly up to the house, glancing back just once to offer a sympathetic smile. My stomach is in knots, but I know I made the right decision. Being with Chris has never felt anywhere close to what it felt like with Tyler. Then or now.

Downstairs is quiet, but the lights are on. I think I hear music in Ash's room.

I go straight upstairs. Tugging my hair down from my ponytail, I moan my relief and massage my scalp with my fingertips. I toss my purse on my bed, kick off my shoes, and glance toward the bathroom. It's dark, but Tyler's door is open, and his light is on. He walks into the bathroom while I'm still staring in that direction.

Shirtless, jeans unbuttoned, he's got a shirt in one hand and the other is running through his messy hair when he spots me.

I squeak and turn around so fast I get a little dizzy. "Sorry, I didn't realize you were home."

"Same," he says. His voice sounds a lot less affected than mine.

Still facing the other direction, I hear him walk toward me.

"I'm decent."

Slowly, I turn back. He stands inside my room looking too good to be real. Mostly I've seen him in workout clothes, shorts, sweats, T-shirts, that kind of thing, occasionally a pair of jeans that I'm pretty sure he had when we were together four years ago, but tonight he's wearing a cream sweater that stretches over his broad chest and a pair of black jeans that hug his muscular legs.

His bare feet move a step closer. "Do I look ridiculous?"

"No." The word comes out raspy. I find myself reaching out to smooth my hand down his bicep. It's something I did a million times when we were together, but as soon as I do it now, I wish I hadn't.

He feels different and I want to run my fingers up and down his arm until

I know his body as well as I once did.

“Everly picked it out for me. She seems to think my wardrobe needs an update.”

“Still adverse to shopping, huh?”

I pull away, but I swear my fingers tingle as I drop my hand to my side.

“Not completely true. I like shopping for shoes.” His mouth pulls into a playful smile, and he looks down at his feet and wiggles his toes.

When he looks up, he stares at me more intently. “How was your date?”

“It was fine.” I can’t get the words *we broke up* out of my mouth. I haven’t even fully processed it myself.

“What’s he like?”

“Chris?”

His chin dips.

“He’s nice.” My voice wavers. “He’s a fan of yours, actually.” Or was. I might have just earned Tyler one less fan in this city.

“Well, I’m not a fan of his.” His lips press into a firm line. “Sorry. That was out of line. If you’re happy then I’m glad.”

He leaves, walking back through the bathroom between our rooms and then closing his door.

My heart is galloping in my chest, and for a fraction of a second I consider going after him.

Oh, this isn’t good.

The next afternoon, River picks up Everly from school, so I stay a little later and work on grading and lesson plans. When I finally make it back to the house, the kitchen is filled with half the Wildcats’ roster.

“P. Vaughn!” Ash calls. “You’re just in time.”

“Time for what?” I ask with a hesitant smile.

“Family dinner. We’ve got burgers, hot dogs, steak, or chicken.”

I scan the island where plates of food are piled up. In addition to the meat there are several side dishes and even dessert.

“I’m okay. I have some leftovers in the fridge.” I move to get it, and Ash steps in the way.

Tyler appears beside me. He hands me an empty plate. “Resistance is

futile.”

“I tried to get out of it too.” Everly hops down from the chair where she was sitting in front of the island.

“I said River could stay,” Tyler says.

“Yeah, right, like he would want to sit around while you guys glare at him any time he breathes too close.”

The corner of Tyler’s mouth twitches with amusement.

“Ladies first,” Jack says. He extends a plate to Everly, and she starts us off.

Leo gets in line behind me.

“Where’s Scarlett?” I ask.

“Still at work.”

It would be nice to have another girl here to talk to. Not that the guys aren’t all nice, but holy flock of hockey players. This is intense.

Once we all have food, we sit around the dining room table. It sits twelve comfortably, but they’ve pulled more chairs up to accommodate everyone. The guys all fall quiet as they dig in. Tyler takes the seat next to me and catches me staring at this odd yet very homey-vibe family dinner.

“It’s a lot, right?”

“Yeah. The last time I gathered around a table with this many people was...never mind, I don’t think I ever have.”

“I thought the same when I joined the team. Even with extended family at holidays, our gatherings were half this.”

I nod my agreement.

“How’s your family doing?” he asks, and then takes a bite of his chicken sandwich.

“They’re okay. My parents moved upstate. Do you still keep in touch with Uncle Tim?”

“Oh yeah. Luke too.”

I smile at the mention of my cousin Luke. “He’s getting married this summer.”

“I heard.”

We fall quiet after that, and I feel out of place again. The rest of the table has finally started to talk between bites, too, and the noise around us puts me and Tyler in our own little bubble since neither of us are talking to anyone else.

His body is angled toward me slightly, and when I glance over at him for

reassurance, he smiles. “Are you enjoying teaching?”

“Depends on the day.”

He chuckles and my nerves dissipate. This is Tyler. I can do this. We have never had a problem communicating. We used to talk on the phone for hours, but I’m all too aware of how close he is. If I moved my leg a fraction, it’d be flush against his.

We find safe topics to talk about. I tell him about student teaching and then ask him about hockey. Before I know it, the guys are pushing back from the table for seconds or dessert, then they trickle out to the game room.

I set my napkin in the middle of my plate.

“Are you done?” Tyler asks.

“Yeah. I can’t remember the last time I ate so much.”

He takes my plate and his, and I follow him back to the kitchen.

“Sneaking out?” he asks when I step toward the stairs.

“I need to shower and get a few things ready for tomorrow.”

He invades my space and I stop breathing. His right hand lifts and stretches toward me as if he’s going to caress my face. I don’t move. I lock my gaze on his. I can read everything in his expression. He wants me. He’s made no attempt at hiding it, and a large part of me wants him too.

His fingers glide across my cheek, and then he holds out a single finger in front of me with an eyelash. “Make a wish, Pipes.”

My pulse slows as I realize he isn’t going to kiss me. Of course, he isn’t. He thinks I have a boyfriend.

I blow the eyelash off his finger, but I don’t make a wish. Making a wish without knowing exactly what you want is a dangerous thing. And I have no idea if I’m ready to give Tyler another chance.

Everly gets in my car the next morning to go to school. She has a Pop-Tart in one hand and an energy drink in the other.

I cast a sidelong glance at her breakfast of choice.

“I know, I know. Tyler already lectured me. I didn’t sleep well.” She pulls on a pair of sunglasses as I back out of the driveway.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, trying to sound casual about it. If I’ve learned anything about Everly, it’s that the second you make it out to be a big

deal, she shuts down and says nothing.

“Stupid school stuff.”

“I love stupid school stuff.”

She snorts. “Of course, you do.”

She takes a bite of her Pop-Tart and chews it before elaborating. “I think I might want to go to college.”

“Really?” I can’t help my surprise. The only thing she ever says about school is how it sucks.

“I mean, it has to suck less than high school, right?”

I nod. “Yeah. It does. I promise. I think it’s great you want to go to college.”

“No, it isn’t great,” she says. “My grades aren’t that good, and I don’t have any extracurriculars or references. Plus, deadlines for a lot of places have already passed.”

“Plenty of good schools are still taking applications for this fall. I can help you look if you want.”

“What about my grades and lack of interest in...everything else?”

I smile. “I can help you with that too.”

As soon as we get to school, I take her to see Paul, the theater director, or Mr. Hall as the kids know him. He looks hesitant at first. I can’t totally blame him since she destroyed his backdrops, but when I remind him how good the new ones turned out and how talented Everly is with a paintbrush, he agrees to let her join the stage crew.

I knew I could convince him. Plus, I happen to know he lost two kids last week. One moved and I have no idea what happened to the other.

“We meet after school until five. Don’t be late,” he says with a smile that somehow makes his mouth turn down at the corners.

“Thank you,” Everly says as we walk back to my class. She pulls on the sleeve of her shirt in an anxious sort of way. “I will ask Tyler if he can pick me up, so you don’t have to wait.”

“It’s fine. I have plenty of things I can work on while I wait for you.” I reach out and squeeze her arm. “You’re going to be great.”

I have an extra bounce in my step all day. I'm excited that Everly is looking toward her future, and I can't wait to tell Tyler. I almost texted him during my lunch break but decided to wait until tonight.

I get to the gym a few minutes before rehearsal is done. I stand next to the side door that leads out to the parking lot to wait for her. The stage sits at one end of the basketball court and the boys' team is warming up on the other end.

They're doing *The Wizard of Oz* and the lead actress has a voice that gives me goosebumps even with all the extra noise and commotion going on.

Everly has her back to me, off on one corner by herself, but I don't think much of it until Mr. Hall dismisses them. She bolts so fast.

Her eyes are red and watery.

"Oh my gosh. Are you crying?" I ask.

She cuts a glare in my direction and pushes past me out the door. I hear someone snicker, and look up to see a group of kids watching her leave. Rage fills my entire being, but I know making a scene will just make things worse for her.

I hurry to catch up with her and don't say a word until we're a block away from the school.

"Those kids are jerks."

"Most are," she says, sounding tired and numb.

"I'm sure it's just because you're new. In a day or two, they'll move on."

"I'm not giving it a day or two. Thank you for your help and everything, but who was I kidding? I'm not a theater geek, and I'm not going to college. That's not who I am."

"You can be whoever you want."

She raises her chin defiantly. "I'm already good with who I am."

I'D SUCK ON EACH ONE

TYLER

“RIVER IS COMING OVER,” EVERLY SAYS AS I’M HEATING UP DINNER.

I scowl.

“Piper said it was fine.” She sticks out her tongue at me.

“He’s not allowed upstairs.”

“I know, I know. We’re going to watch a movie.”

“What movie?”

“The new Ryan Reynolds, but you’re not invited.”

“We should watch it in the theater room.” Ash has a kick-ass media room with a projector and theater seats that rarely gets used in favor of his living room.

To be fair, the TV in there is almost as big.

“No. Creepy. You can’t third wheel it with us.”

Piper walks in, her hair wet and soaking the white fabric of her T-shirt. She goes to the fridge and grabs a Diet Dr. Pepper. “Third wheel what?”

Everly turns to her. “Please tell him he can’t watch a movie with me and River.”

“You can’t watch a movie with them,” she says so matter-of-factly like her word is the end-all.

“Thank you.” Everly smiles smugly. “But will you still get the movie going in the theater room?”

“What are you watching?” Piper asks as she pops the tab of the can.

“The new Ryan Reynolds one on Netflix.”

“Oh, I haven’t seen that yet,” Piper says, eyes going wide with excitement. She bites at her bottom lip and we both look at Everly.

She groans. “Ugh. Fine, but you two have to sit in the back, far away from us.”

River shows up as I get the movie ready. He and Everly take seats in the front row with a blanket. I grind my molars. I know the blanket trick. I used it myself many times to cop a feel without getting caught.

I go to the thermostat and crank it to eighty-five. His balls will be so sweaty he won't even think about letting her touch him.

Piper sits in the back with a big bowl of popcorn in her lap. The wet spot on her shirt has grown and I can see the outline of her bra.

I settle back into my seat. It's weird if I don't sit next to her but being this close is difficult. She's dating someone and has made it very clear that she is only here to help with Everly.

She props her long legs up on the seat in front of her.

“Were you raised in a barn?” I ask with a playful smirk, without looking directly at her.

“My feet are clean.” She wiggles her bare toes which just draws my attention back to her smooth legs.

The shorts she's wearing ride up high on her thighs. Piper always did have great legs. I remember just what it was like to slide my hand up them, and what it felt like to have them wrapped around my back.

I wipe a hand across my brow. Fuck, it's already hot in here.

Everly hits the lights, and I don't think I've ever been so grateful to not be able to see Piper.

I move around trying to find a comfortable way to sit here, not see her legs, but also see the screen. I was looking forward to seeing this movie but now I can't focus on anything but the smell of Piper's shampoo and her pink toenails.

I don't particularly like feet, but Piper's are sexy as hell. I'd suck on each one... I groan too loudly and try to cover it with a cough.

She leans closer and the tips of her wet hair brush against my bicep. “Do you want some popcorn?”

I make the grave mistake of looking at her. Her face is inches from mine, and those dark blue eyes that always remind me of the deep ocean are big and wide and aimed right at me.

“Sure,” I say, not breaking eye contact even as she hands me the bowl.

It isn't until her lips curve up that I grab a handful of popcorn and look back at the screen.

She doesn't move away and the left side of my body tingles with awareness. I glance up at Everly and River. They're quiet, faces forward, but she has her head resting on his shoulder and his arm is around her shoulders. His fingers stroke up and down her arm.

"Give me this," Piper whispers, taking the bowl back from me. "You look like you might chuck it at his head."

"I don't trust him."

"What's he possibly going to do in here with you fifteen feet away and ready to pounce?"

"If his brain is anything like mine was, the options are endless."

She laughs softly. I look over at her and smile back. I wonder if she's thinking back to all the times we fooled around when we were with other people. Neither of us cared where we were or who was watching—we kissed and held hands, and sometimes even felt each other up while we were at a party or out with friends.

Back then I figured it was because we saw each other so infrequently that we had to make up for it while we were together, but now I wonder if that was just how crazy we were about each other. And if it'd be like that now.

My gaze drops to her lips and holds. Adrenaline and want courses through me. She's right here, the only woman I've ever felt this way about, and I can't have her.

I lean onto the armrest on the opposite side to put some space between us and continue to shoot daggers at River.

When the movie is over, Everly walks out with River, leaving me alone with Piper.

"This was fun," she says.

"Yeah." I kill the projector and hit the lights. Fun, torturous—same thing.

"I should get to bed." I hitch a thumb over my shoulder and then turn to go before I keep staring at her or do something incredibly stupid like ask her to dump her boyfriend and go out with me.

"Wait." She jogs to catch up with me. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Okay." I slow down.

She looks at where Everly and River are hugging in the doorway. His hands are dangerously close to her ass. "Let's go upstairs."

"Yeah, all right." I raise my voice. "Ev, time to wrap it up and get to bed."

I'm pretty sure Piper laughs at me, but I barely hear it over Everly's annoyed grunt.

"Night," I say in a nicer tone, then follow Piper upstairs and into her room.

"It's actually about your sister," she says, shutting us inside and then going to sit on the edge of her bed.

There is absolutely no way I can get on that bed with her, so I cross my arms at my chest and lean against the wall. "Is something wrong? Is she giving you a hard time?"

"No," she says quickly. "I adore Everly. Truly."

I relax a fraction.

Piper lowers her voice. "She confided in me this morning that she was considering going to college this fall."

"Really?" I drop my arms and push off the wall. "That's great."

"Yeah, it is, except..." She bobs her head side to side. "I might have screwed it up."

"Doubt it." I move closer to the bed.

"She was worried about not having extracurriculars, so I got her on stage crew with the theater group. It's after school until five, and I'd pick her up and everything. I probably should have asked first, I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I don't see a problem with that."

"The problem is the kids were giving her a hard time when I picked her up today. I don't know why or what was said, but she said she didn't want to go back." She looks so apologetic and guilty.

"High schoolers are assholes. We both know that. I'll talk to her."

She picks up a piece of paper I hadn't noticed on the comforter next to her. "This is a list of all the colleges within a three-hour radius that are still accepting admissions, as well as the last date she can apply."

I step forward and take it from her. It's a long list and my head spins with the names and dates, some as soon as the end of the month.

"I included a few near your mom, too, at the bottom." Piper shrugs. "I wasn't sure what the situation was there."

"Thank you for doing this, and for looking out for my sister so well."

"That is what I signed up for," she says with a playful laugh. "At this point I owe you for all the car repairs."

"If you'd let me pay you, then I wouldn't have to find other ways to show my thanks."

“It isn’t necessary. I really like Everly. Hanging with her isn’t a job. I want only good things for her.”

I nod and swallow around the lump in my throat. I can see the sincerity on her face, and I feel the impact so deeply.

She stands in front of me. “I want good things for both of you.”

It’s torture not to reach out and touch her.

She links her hands in front of her and looks at them as she speaks. “I was angry and upset when we ran into each other again, but it was so long ago. I shouldn’t have held it over you all these years.”

I thought it was hard to be around her when she hated me, but I was wrong because this is so much worse. Hate kept a line drawn between us.

“Break up with your boyfriend, Piper.”

“Wha-at?” Her voice breaks on the word.

I invade her space. She doesn’t step back. “I want good things for you too.”

“Okay.” A line forms between her brows.

I allow myself only to brush my fingers against hers. It’s the smallest contact. Not enough, but still so fucking good.

“Break up with him because *I’m* what’s good for you.”

SCAMPER OFF NOW

PIPER

MY HEAD IS A MESS AS I SIT IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM OBSERVING MRS. Aaron. She's a great teacher, easily holding the attention of the freshman and sophomore class. It's inspiring, really, and I should be taking more notes, but I'm struggling to hear anything she says.

Instead, it's Tyler's voice from last night that plays on a loop in my head. *"I'm what's good for you."*

After he'd said those words, he'd turned and left me reeling. I stared at his closed bedroom door for a good thirty minutes wishing I was brave enough to go tell him I'd broken up with Chris. I couldn't do it, so instead I stayed put, tossing and turning all night long.

I slept like shit, dreaming about us together. Not in the past, but now. What he said wasn't wrong. He was good for me. He helped me keep perspective when things were hard; he made me feel special in a way that had nothing to do with gifts or nice things. He showed me what it was like to be wholly and completely loved and accepted.

When I was with Tyler, really with him, I felt cherished and adored.

But when he took that away, I struggled to find my footing. It was like he was this missing piece I didn't even know I needed. Eighteen-year-old Tyler broke my heart. I wouldn't survive this twenty-two-year-old version. Even so, I can't help but wonder if he'd still be good for me.

This morning he was already gone to the arena when I came out of my room, and he left a note that he had meetings this afternoon and wouldn't be home until late. I guess that's good. It gives me more time to think before I have to see him again.

The bell rings and I breathe a sigh of relief that this day is over. Tyler must have made good on his word to talk to his sister because this morning, she said she was going to give theater another shot.

I spend the two hours waiting for Everly reading in the gym. I sit on the bottom bleacher as far away from the stage as I can so if she spots me, she won't feel like I'm there to keep an eye on her or something.

About fifteen minutes before five, my phone rings. I slip out into the hallway to answer.

"Hi." I smile as Heather's face fills the screen. She's called and texted a few times since I started staying at Tyler's, but it's the first time I've had a minute to answer.

"She's alive." She looks away from the screen and repeats it. "You owe me five bucks."

"Hey, Piper." Steve moves into the frame.

"Betting on my death?" I ask him.

"Nah. I knew you were alive. I just didn't think you'd answer."

"I'm sorry. I've been busy."

"If I had known you were going to disappear forever, I would have told my sister to find somewhere else to crash." Heather sticks out her bottom lip. "I miss you. You know you can still come by the apartment and hang."

"I miss you too. I was trying to give you time with your sister. How are you?"

"Beatrix is driving me crazy, but otherwise good." Her grin widens and she tells me about all the things they've done this week.

The doors to the school slide open and my gaze snags on the four hulking figures walking through them. Tyler, Ash, Declan, and Jack are so out of place, and yet they walk in like they own the place.

"Heather, I'm sorry, I have to go," I say, cutting her off. "I'll call you right back."

I hang up and walk toward them. Tyler sees me first and slows his gait.

"What are you guys doing here?" I ask.

"Yelling at some teenagers," Declan says quietly.

"Nope. No." Tyler shakes his head and holds out a hand to keep Declan from charging forward. "We are just here for Everly. Do not talk to anyone. You promised."

Declan grumbles.

"Well, I didn't promise shit," Jack says, and goes into the gym.

Ash and Declan follow him. Tyler hangs back, shooting me a nervous glance. “Hope this doesn’t backfire.”

Their strides are confident as they move to the front, stage right. I’m not sure what they think showing up is going to do. Or I wasn’t until every eye in the gym turns to the group of guys in front of me. Even Mr. Hall stops and stares.

I step to Tyler, my shoulder brushing up against him and whisper, “Now what?”

His fingers lightly wrap around mine. He doesn’t face me, but his mouth curves up. “This was the whole plan, Pipes.”

If my body weren’t fighting to hold in the reaction of his touch and the old nickname, I might laugh.

“Maybe you should at least sit down. They aren’t finished and your sister looks horrified.”

“Gentlemen, this is a closed rehearsal. Can I help you?” Mr. Hall addresses them as he takes one tentative step their way.

“Sorry for the interruption,” Jack says in a charismatic voice that I’m confident lets him get away with all sorts of things. “We’re here for Everly Kent. We can wait if you’re not finished.”

Mr. Hall is quiet as he stares at Jack like he’s trying to figure out how to respond. Finally, he nods and turns to the kids on the stage. “We’ll stop here for the day. Good job, everyone.”

Instead of rushing off like they did last time, the kids are slow, moving while keeping their gazes locked on Jack, Declan, Ash, and Tyler.

The only one that does hurry, is Everly. Her face is red as she grabs her backpack and jogs down the stairs.

“Hey, Little Sharpie.” Ash throws an arm over her shoulder.

“I am so embarrassed,” she says in a hushed tone. She tries to run away, but Ash keeps her by his side.

“We wanted to see our favorite high schooler.”

“I tried to come alone,” Tyler tells her.

Everly glares but the corners of her mouth lift a fraction.

A few of the bravest kids come up to the guys.

“Will you sign my backpack?” one asks and holds out a pen to Jack.

Jack takes it and spins it between his fingers. “Are you a friend of Everly’s?”

The kid shoots a nervous glance at her. “Uh, I don’t think we’ve met yet.”

“Allow me to help.” Jack grips his backpack and tugs him around so he’s facing her. “This is Everly.”

“Hey, I’m Jacob.” The tips of his ears go crimson.

Everly waves but doesn’t speak.

“You know the Wildcats?” Jacob asks.

“That one is my brother.” She tilts her head toward Tyler.

A little prick of admiration hits me at the look of adoration Jacob gives Tyler.

“What grade are you, Jake?” Jack asks him, still holding on to his bag.

“Senior.”

“So is our girl.” Jack signs the backpack and then sticks the pen behind his ear.

“Our girl?” Everly asks through gritted teeth.

“Do you play sports or is this your only gig?” Jack asks him, ignoring Everly.

“I’m on the baseball team and the golf team.”

“So, you know lots of people then.”

Jacob looks around. “I guess so.”

“Perfect.” Jack finally lets go of the poor kid’s backpack and gives him a squeeze on the shoulder that I’d bet is a little too hard to be welcoming. “You can pass on a message for me. You mess with her, and I’ll be back. You don’t want me to come back, Jake.”

Ash steps in before Jack can continue. “What my buddy is trying to say is that we’d love it if you could introduce Everly around and make sure she’s finding her way. It’d mean a lot to us.”

“I hate all of you,” Everly hisses. “Ignore them, Jacob.”

Fat chance of that. He looks like he’s going to shit himself. I might too with the daggers Declan and Jack are driving into him.

“Yeah. I can do that.” He clears his throat and looks back to his friends who have taken several steps away. “We all can, right, guys?”

“Yeah.” They all agree at once. A few others brave the guys, shoving things at them to sign, which they do.

“I’m going to wait in the car. Thanks for humiliating me.” Everly takes off.

Tyler stares after her, cursing under his breath.

“What did you expect?” I ask.

“I knew she was going to be pissed,” he admits. “But I had to do

something.”

I put a step of distance between us. “I’m going to check on her. Are you done for the day?”

“No. We have to go back to the arena.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll see you at home later, then?”

“Yeah.” He comes to me. His fingers find mine again, brushing against them for just a second. “Let me walk you out.”

The guys extract themselves from the group and we all head to the parking lot. They’re a spectacle out here, too, except now it’s moms and dads picking up their kids ogling the Wildcat players.

As soon as I hit the unlock button, Everly slides into my passenger seat.

“I hope you have a good apology planned.” I look at the guys.

Tyler opens my door and peers inside. “Sorry, Ev.”

She has her earbuds in and refuses to look at him. Ash goes around to her door and lets himself in. “We’re all really sorry, Little Sharpie.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jack says.

Declan grabs something from his vehicle and comes back, handing it to her through the open door on Ash’s side. She side-eyes the can of Red Bull but finally takes it.

“I’m still horrified,” she says.

“All right, boys.” I step to my car. “Unless you want me to start pimping you out to the single moms staring out their windows, I’d suggest you scamper off now.”

Ash scans the parking lot. “Doesn’t sound so bad.”

“In the car. We gotta get back,” Jack says over his shoulder as he heads to his Lambo.

Tyler is the slowest to leave, watching his sister as he takes one step back.

“She’ll be okay,” I say quietly. “We’ll talk shit about you on the way home and it’ll be as good as forgotten by the time we get there.”

One side of his mouth quirks up. “See you later.”

They tear out of the parking lot, and Everly lets out a long breath. “Secret is out now.”

“They mean well,” I say as I start the car. “Wait. Nobody knew Tyler is your brother?”

“Different last names and it isn’t like he’s posting about me on social media.” She shrugs, then holds up her phone to show me a string of notifications. I lean closer to see she has several new follow requests,

including one from Jacob.

“Well, they know now,” I say.

Later after Tyler and Ash get home, I walk over to Leo and Scarlett’s house across the street. She kicks Leo out so we can chat.

“Back in an hour,” he says, dropping a kiss on her lips.

They’re so cute together. The way he looks at her makes *my* stomach dip.

Scarlett pours me a glass of wine, and we sit in the living room where I tell her about the guys showing up at the school this afternoon.

“Leo opted to come home during their break so we could have sex, but maybe I should have sent him with the guys because that is kind of sexy how they all showed up for her.”

“It was. I mean she was absolutely mortified, but everyone else was swooning. You should have seen the moms in the parking lot. I have a feeling Everly is about to get a lot of attention at school.”

“That could be good or bad,” Scarlett says. “I’m glad she has you there.”

“Same, but she’s tough as nails. I really admire that about her.”

“You’re pretty tough too.” She bumps my knee.

I nod and take a sip.

“How’s it been?” She makes a face like she can’t imagine. I couldn’t have either.

“Surprisingly not as bad as I thought it would be. He’s hardly home and even when he is, there are usually other people around. Except...”

“What?” Her grin lights up her face. “Did something happen?”

“No. Of course not. But I broke up with Chris.” I quickly add, “Tyler doesn’t know so please don’t tell Leo.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I tell him and he makes a move, I’m not sure I have enough willpower to say no.”

Scarlett gives me a wide innocent look. “Why would you want to?”

“Broke my heart. Ruined all other men for me.”

She laughs softly. “I know what that is like.”

I barely see Tyler the rest of the week. Thursday night the guys have a home game. Everly and I decide to watch it at the house instead of the arena because she has a quiz in English class she needs to study for. After we have dinner, Everly lingers in the kitchen.

“Everything okay?” I ask. It isn’t like her to hang around. She usually goes straight to her room once she’s cleared her plate and put it in the dishwasher.

“Yeah.” She cradles her phone. “I got invited to a thing tomorrow night.”

“What kind of thing?”

“My friend Grace is having a few friends over for her birthday. It’s at her house, pizza, ice cream, that sort of thing.”

“That sounds fun.”

“You think?”

“Have you ever stayed over at a friend’s house before?”

“Yeah, of course.” She bobs her head from side to side. “No, not really. Not like this. My friends and I back home would get together and get wasted or high and sometimes we’d crash, but I’ve never had normal friends before. Those girls weren’t even really my friends. I wasn’t into drugs or even alcohol, but they were the only ones that didn’t look at me like I was a weirdo for all the trouble I got into.”

“Do you want to go?”

She hops up onto the counter. “Maybe. You look like you used to get invited to stuff like this all the time. Is it any fun?”

“I’m trying not to see that as an insult,” I say with a small chuckle. “Depends on the people going. It’s either a ton of fun or really catty. Grace doesn’t strike me as catty though. She’s in my fifth hour class.”

“Nah, she’s not like that. I don’t know her friends that well though.”

“How’d you meet her?”

“She’s in stage crew.”

“Ah.” I nod. “Was she swooning over your brother’s teammates?”

“No. She came up to me the next day and told me she would have been horrified if her dad had done something like that. He was a pro baseball player, or maybe football. I don’t know.”

“I think you should go. I’ll tell you what. Take your phone with you. If it sucks, text me and I’ll come save you.”

“Thank you.” She jumps down and hugs me.

She’s halfway up the stairs before I get over my shock that she hugged

me and I call out, “You’re welcome.”

WANT A SHOT BEFORE YOU GO?

TYLER

WE FINALLY GET A NIGHT TO RELAX AND CUT LOOSE ON FRIDAY. OUR NEXT game isn't until Sunday, so Coach gave us tomorrow morning off to rest up. We have a big push until the end of the season to make the wildcard cutoff for a chance at the playoffs, so a night to chill is exactly what we all need.

Ash tosses me a beer. I catch it and hand it back. "I have to take Everly to a friend's house first."

On cue, she comes downstairs with a bag slung over one shoulder, hugging her pillow to her chest. She looks around at the guys and girls already over, drinking and hanging out. "Figures you guys throw a party the first time I'm leaving for the night."

I take her bag from her, and Ash throws his arm around her shoulder. "We aren't having a party *because* you're leaving, Little Sharpie. It's just convenient timing. Want a shot before you go?"

I glare at him, sending him chuckling and stepping back.

"Kidding. Have fun."

Ev and I start out the door. Jack is walking up the drive. He eyes the bag and pillow. "Where are you two going?"

"Tyler is dropping me off at a party."

Jack stops in front of her, one dark brow raised. His gaze slides to me. "An overnight party?"

Everly rolls her eyes. "I swear, it's like I have a whole team of big brothers. I'm eighteen, not eight. Besides, this place is far less kid-friendly than where I'm going tonight."

"Except we can't keep an eye on you there," he says. He crosses his arms

over his chest. Jack is an intimidating guy when he wants to be, and right now he wants to be. “Is your loser boyfriend going to be at this party?”

Instead of answering she steps around him and heads to my car.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Jack yells after her. When she flips him off without looking back, he grins and slides his gaze to me. “Are you coming back?”

“Yeah.”

He nods, gives Everly another glance, and then continues inside.

Everly’s friend Grace doesn’t live too far. I pull up to the house and kill the engine.

“Please don’t come in,” she says as she opens the door.

Relenting, I stay in my seat. “If you need anything, call me.”

“I already promised Piper I would text her if I wanted to leave.”

“I was actually thinking more along the lines of you burning the house down and needing me to drive the getaway car.”

“Ha, ha,” she says, and then sticks her tongue out at me.

She hurries away from the car. I wait until someone opens the door and Everly steps inside before I pull away from the curb.

An hour later, I’m sitting in the living room with my teammates and their friends. I haven’t had a lot of time for branching out to meet new people, but right now the person I’d like to see is nowhere around.

I’m slowly working on my first beer as I wait for Piper to show up. I told her to take the night off since I was free, but I obviously didn’t think that through because I assumed she’d stick around for the party at our house.

“Have you seen Piper?” I ask Ash when I see him playing video games on the couch with Leo.

“No, not since this morning. Why?”

“Nothing. I haven’t seen her either.”

“She’s probably enjoying her night off. Like you should be doing.” He tips his head toward my mostly full beer.

Jack’s sitting on the chair closest to me, not playing but watching them. A girl is perched on his lap and one hand rests on her thigh. “Looks like our little stunt at the school worked?”

“I guess so. She made a friend.”

His nod is slow, and he takes a long swallow of his beer before he says, “Good for her.”

Scarlett arrives a little later. Leo hands me the controller so he can say

hello to his girl by attacking her mouth.

I sit and play, but as soon as they come up for air, I ask, “Have you heard from Piper tonight?”

Scarlett shakes her head. “I talked to her earlier. Why?”

“She’s not here.”

“Is she supposed to be?” Scarlett asks with a smile. “She said something about going out to dinner. Do you want me to text her?”

“The boyfriend,” I mutter. Fuck. I keep forgetting about that dickwad.

Scarlett’s gaze narrows and she bites the corner of her lip before saying, “Yeah, maybe. I’m sure she has her phone if you need something.”

“Nah.” I stand and thrust the controller back at Leo. “I don’t need anything.”

I bounce around the house, saying hey to everyone and keeping one eye on the door. I should have asked her to hang out tonight. Would it have stopped her from going to see him? Maybe not, but at least I wouldn’t be standing here wondering.

Declan and Maverick are playing pool in the game room. The latter steps up to me and offers me a wrist bump.

“Ty, my man. You’re just in time. Declan is kicking my ass. I can’t take any more.”

I take the pool stick when he hands it to me and nod toward the Mad Dog bottle sticking out of the back of his jeans pocket.

“I think it might have something to do with that,” I say, pointing the cue toward it.

“If you mean I haven’t had nearly enough yet, you’re absolutely right.” He takes the bottle, unscrews the cap, and takes a long drink.

Chuckling, Declan rounds the table and asks, “Do you want to break?”

“Nah, go for it.”

“Let’s make it interesting,” Maverick says. “Every sunk ball earns someone a drink.”

“Fine by me.” Declan shrugs and looks at me.

“I changed my mind. I want to break.” I move to the end of the table and rack the balls.

The music is going, more people are starting to show up. By the time I rack the balls and set to break, we have an audience of three girls.

Maverick might be happily married, but he’s never met a stranger. They gravitate to him, and he chats them up. Which is good because neither Declan

nor I give them more than a nod and hello.

I sink the first three balls. Declan drinks after each one. I move robotically dropping ball after ball. Thoughts of Piper on her date have me in some sort of trance.

“Eight ball to the left pocket,” I say without even realizing I’ve just run the table. It isn’t until I stand tall and everyone is looking at me that it hits me. “Guess I won.”

Maverick laughs and comes over to slap me on the shoulder. “Damn. That was impressive. Another round?”

“Maybe later. I have something I need to do.”

I drop my beer in the kitchen, grab my keys, and then text Piper on my way to my car, ***Need to talk to you. Where are you?***

She responds immediately. ***Having dinner at Pink Mamas. Is everything okay? Did Everly call?***

I don’t feel the least bit bad for her thinking something is up with Ev. Not right now when she’s with him. She doesn’t belong with him.

She texts again as I’m driving, but I don’t look. I push the car downtown to the restaurant with the pink neon light in the window. I stop at the valet and toss my keys. It’s a nice place. Somewhere I wish I’d brought her.

I bypass the hostess stand and weave through the tables until I spot her. She’s in a corner booth. Her back is to me, but I swear even from behind one look at her knocks the air from me. Her long, brown hair hangs down her back. She laughs and gives me her profile, and I hate him for making her look so happy.

I let my gaze go to the guy across from her, sizing him up. Light brown hair, glasses, smaller than me but still built. He tosses a playful smile at her, then tips his head back and laughs at something she said.

For a flash I question if maybe she does belong with him, but I squash it as quick as it comes. She can’t because she belongs with me and I’m not interested in sharing.

My legs eat the space between us. I stop at the end of the table, ignoring the guy and facing Piper.

“Tyler,” she squeaks in surprise. “What are you doing here? Is Everly okay?”

“She’s fine,” I assure her. “I’m here for me.”

Her brows draw together. “For you?”

“I don’t know him”—I jab my thumb toward the direction of her

boyfriend—“but I know you’re wasting your time on anyone that isn’t me.”

Her brows lift and her body tenses. “Is that right?”

“Yeah. And you can be pissed at me for saying it, but I think deep down you know it’s true.”

I’m not done, but I stop to give her a chance to speak. I’m putting it all out there. We’ve been dancing around it for weeks, and I’m done pretending she isn’t everything.

YOU KNOW WHERE TO FIND ME

PIPER

MY PULSE THRUMS LOUDLY IN MY EARS AS TYLER STARES AT ME, WAITING for a response. God, he's beautiful. *Heartbreakingly* beautiful when he looks at me like he's doing now.

I feel Steve's gaze bouncing between me and Tyler. Heather just went to the restroom, so I understand how this looks to Tyler. I should tell him, but my throat feels like I swallowed nails. I part my lips but can't make the words come out.

But apparently Tyler isn't finished anyway. His voice softens as he says, "Piper, I've never stopped wanting you. I screwed up. I know that. I let you go when I should have fought harder for us. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I wanted you to have everything—all of the high school and college experiences you had dreamt of—and I couldn't give them to you. I thought I was doing the right thing. I'm still not sure I didn't because you had a life you wouldn't have had if I'd stayed in it. But things are different now or maybe I'm just more selfish. I don't know, but I do know that I want this more than I've ever wanted anything. And I'm not going to walk away so easily this time."

I believe him, can read the sincerity on his face, but his words still toss a lit match on the lingering pain and frustration over our breakup.

He makes it sound like he broke up with me for my own good. Ha! Yeah, it felt really great to have my boyfriend dump me because of some preconceived notion he had about what he thought I wanted and who I needed him to be.

Was it hard? Yes. Did I want him to be able to attend dances and parties with me, meet my friends, have more time outside of hockey? Of course. But

it wasn't fair that he took the decision out of my hands. Shouldn't I have had a say in what I was and wasn't willing to give up to be with him?

I would have dated him if he lived on the moon. The distance meant nothing to me. It was hard, but he was worth it.

The server comes with our drinks. She stands awkwardly taking in the scene. Tyler steps to the side to give her room.

"You need to go, Tyler." My throat feels raw, and my eyes burn with unshed tears. I can't do this here. I need to think, and I can't do that with him so close.

He nods. "I've said what I needed to. You know where to find me."

I finally let out a breath as Tyler turns and leaves without another word. I'm frozen, body humming with his words, and emotions swirling inside of me.

"Who was that?" Heather slides into the booth next to Steve. The server sets our glasses down and I take mine and cradle it in both hands.

"I think that was the infamous Tyler," Steve says.

"What? Really?" She sits taller and careens her neck. I don't look back to see if he's gone already. I think I'm in shock. He never stopped wanting me?

Heather's lips twist into a smile. "Well, that's the last time I'm ever going to the restroom. What did he want?"

"Piper," Steve continues to answer for me. "That was a hell of a speech. I wish I'd written it down in case I ever screw things up and need to win you back."

"I am so sorry." My face is on fire as I glimpse back at Tyler. He's gone, but I still feel the impact of his presence and words. "I need to go."

"Go," Heather says, smiling. I start to get up and then remember we've already ordered. I reach to open my purse, but she waves me off. "We've got it. Go."

"Thank you." I smile at both of them, but it's all I can spare before I jump up to go after Tyler.

And I thought a night out would help keep my mind off him. I'm almost to the front of the restaurant when a server carrying a tray of drinks steps in front of me. She doesn't see me and I'm moving too fast to stop before we collide.

I gasp as the cold liquid and ice spill down the front of me. I glance out the window in time to see Tyler's car pulling out of the parking lot.

By the time I get to the house, the ice has melted in my bra and water has

pooled in my shoes. And whatever it was the server spilled on me, it's sticky. In short, I'm a mess. But I don't stop upstairs to change before I circle around the party to find Tyler.

I find him in the game room. He's standing in a small group of guys and girls. A beer bottle hangs from his fingertips. Everyone else is smiling and laughing. Tyler wears a smile that I can tell is fake even from across the room.

The girl standing next to him puts a hand on his arm. He doesn't even look at her, but I still feel an all-consuming rage to claim him. I already knew what I wanted, but it pushes me to act.

My strides are long and sure as I start for him. I don't take my eyes off him, but I notice the group around him goes quiet as I approach.

When Tyler's green eyes finally lock on mine, I summon every bit of courage in my body, close the remaining distance between us, and kiss him.

He's shocked and slow to respond. His teammates and friends are cheering, but as soon as his arms wrap around me, I couldn't care less. He picks me up and squeezes me to him.

And it feels like no time has passed at all.

CALMLY WALKED, OBVIOUSLY

TYLER

I SET PIPER DOWN BUT KEEP HER PRESSED TIGHT AGAINST ME. ASH CLAPS ME on the shoulder. “Well, all right. Now this is a party. Let’s play some pong.”

“Maybe later,” I say, my voice a rough scrape as I keep my gaze locked on Piper’s lips. Goosebumps dot her arms and she’s wet and cold in my arms.

“You’re soaked.”

Declan spits out his beer and starts coughing.

“Not like that,” I mutter to him, then stare down at Piper’s wet dress. “Is it raining outside?”

“Uh, no. I had an unfortunate incident with a server as I ran out of the restaurant. She was carrying a tray of drinks. Long Island iced tea, I think.”

“You ran?”

She scrunches up her face. “Did I say ran? I meant calmly walked, obviously.”

“No shame in rushing to your man.” I smirk. “Let’s get you in some warm clothes.”

I walk her through the party, holding on to her hand—clutching on to it is more like it. I can’t believe this is finally happening.

My chill demeanor doesn’t last long. I scoop her legs out from underneath her and take off running.

Laughing, she grabs my shirt to hold on.

“This what you looked like, Pipes?”

“Much more graceful.” She giggles.

“Says the girl who is covered in liquor.” I set her down at the bottom of the stairs. “Come to my room and change.”

“All of my clothes are in my room.” Her lips twist into a smile.

I take her hand and tug her to me. “You don’t need any clothes.”

Adrenaline pumps through me. I don’t even know where to start. This isn’t our first time, but for years I’ve dreamt of this moment.

My mouth crashes down on hers and I capture the tiny yelp that tries to escape her lips.

When she recovers from the shock, Piper presses back. She’s as eager as I am, and we’re a tangle of limbs and teeth grabbing at each other, exploring and caressing, while refusing to break apart.

A squeal cuts through our make-out sesh. I pull back to see Scarlett approaching us. She throws her arms around Piper’s shoulders. “Yay. I’m so happy for you two. Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Piper says.

Scarlett pulls back and knocks her elbow into my bicep. “Sorry about lying to you earlier. I didn’t want to be the one to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” I ask as I think back to what she said earlier.

“Oh.” Scarlett’s gaze darts between us. “You know what. You two probably have a lot to catch up on and I am working on getting Leo good and drunk. He has the dirtiest mouth when he’s wasted.”

And just as quick as she came, she’s gone.

“What did she tell you earlier?” Piper asks, facing me.

I place both hands on the curve of her waist. “Not much. I asked if she knew where you were, and she said you were having dinner with your boyfriend. Wait. No, she said you were having dinner. I pieced together it was with what’s his face.”

I wonder how the end of their date went. Did she apologize, give him one last kiss? Fuck it, no I don’t wonder. It’s over. The details don’t matter.

“I wasn’t with Chris. I broke up with him more than a week ago.”

“But...” I trail off, mouth gaping.

“I was with my roommates. Heather, who happened to be in the restroom when you showed up, and her fiancé, Steve.” She smiles sheepishly. “He really loved your speech by the way. He asked if you’d write it down for him in case he ever screwed up with Heather.”

“You broke up with your boyfriend a week ago? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because...I needed to take a breath and make sure that this is what I wanted.”

I mull that over while I glide my thumb along her hip bone. “And now?”
“I want this,” she says, but I can read the hesitation in her body language. I guess I deserve that for ending things the way I did last time.
“What do you want to drink?” I ask, forcing a smile.
Confusion plays over her face.
“Go change and I’ll get us something to drink. There’s no reason to rush things. We can take it as slow as you want.”
“Oh. Okay. Surprise me.”
I lean forward and brush my lips over hers, pulling back far sooner than I want.

She comes back down fifteen minutes later in jeans and a cropped sweatshirt that shows off a sliver of smooth stomach.

“Here’s your drink.” I hand it to her, our fingers brushing and a shy smile tugging at her lips.

“Thanks.” She steps closer so that her arm hugs mine.

Leo and Ash are playing darts. Maverick is behind the bar mixing drinks and showing off some really bad bartending skills. Declan and Jack sit on stools in front of the bar. The latter with a girl in his lap. A different one from earlier. She’s talking to a friend and Jack has an arm around her in almost a bored, lazy way, his focus on the TV on the opposite wall where a college basketball game plays.

Scarlett hangs by Leo, the two of them kissing and touching every time he’s finished with his turn. It hits me—that’s what I want. It’s why I didn’t follow Piper upstairs five minutes ago when all I could think about was being inside of her, finally.

I want all the moments we’ve missed out on—the fun, the flirty, the drunken nights, the PDA, and yeah, the sex. And while I’ve spent the last four years thinking of nothing but earning that second chance, Piper might not be on the same page just yet.

ALL THE DAMN TIME

PIPER

TYLER AND I END UP HANGING WITH SCARLETT AND LEO MOST OF THE NIGHT. We play darts, but I'm so busy catching up with Scarlett and touching Tyler any chance I get that I don't even know if we win or not. Afterwards, we sit on the couch; Scarlett's on one side of me, Tyler on the other. She's planning a couple's getaway for her and Leo, dates unknown since it depends on the season.

"You guys should come with us," Scarlett says. Her excitement at the idea is contagious but since Tyler and I literally just found our way back to each other, I think planning a trip together might be a little premature.

"Maybe," I say. "I have school until the first week of June."

Leo wraps an arm around her waist and tugs her closer. "Easy, tiger. How about we give them five seconds together before we start packing their weekends full of couple things."

"Sorry. I'm just so excited for you two. Let's take a picture!" She pulls out her camera and we all crowd together.

"Who knew you were such a romantic?" Leo kisses her.

My head spins and I turn to Tyler. "I'm gonna grab another drink. Do you want anything?"

He shakes his head. "Nah. I'm good."

In the kitchen, Ash is pulling a beer from the fridge. He sees me coming and pulls a hard seltzer for me, then a beer for Tyler.

"He said he didn't want another."

"Tell him I said to live a little. He doesn't get a lot of nights off."

I take the drinks and then lean against the counter. "I haven't seen Talia

in a while. Where is she tonight?”

“Not sure,” he says casually. “She broke things off with me.”

I don’t know Talia well. Any time she came over, she pretty much kept to Ash’s room, but Tyler said they’d been together for a while, so I just assumed things were good.

“I’m sorry.”

“Eh, it’s fine.”

“What happened?”

I’m not sure if it’s because of how things ended with Tyler or if it’s just some part of me that needs to understand the intricacies of relationships, but I always find breakups so interesting. I want to analyze and fix them.

He’s quiet for a beat as if he’s trying to compose his thoughts. “It really came down to us wanting different things.”

“Like marriage?”

He laughs. “No. I mean, someday, sure, but we were both good with casual and fun.”

When I continue staring at him, he steps closer and lowers his voice. “Since Ty and Everly moved in, things are a little different around here.”

“Oh.” I’m so genuinely shocked that anyone would break up with him for taking in a teammate and his sister when they needed it. What a bitch.

“Please don’t mention it to Ty.” He winces. “Talia and I were probably not going to last anyway. This was just a good excuse for her to duck out and blame it on someone else.”

“She didn’t deserve you.” I reach out and squeeze his forearm. “What you’ve done for them is amazing.”

“Oh, I know.” One side of his mouth pulls up. He drapes an arm around my shoulders. “Everything happens for a reason, right? I mean, if they hadn’t moved in with me, then you and I wouldn’t be roommates either and I’d miss out on your bomb pasta.”

“True,” I say.

Tyler looks up as Ash and I walk into the living room. He stands and flashes Ash a possessive glare that has the guy next to me chuckling.

“Now, I have a very important question.”

“O-kay.”

“What exactly are your intentions with the rookie?”

I hold in a laugh. “My intentions?”

“With Tyler.”

“Uh...”

“When he’s around do you feel like your heart is going to bust out of your chest? Do you find yourself dreaming about him in the middle of the day? Do you see him in crowds of people and then they turn around and it isn’t really him at all but some guy that looks nothing like him, but like your brain is searching for him everywhere?”

“I...” I wait to see if he’s going to start laughing or tell me he’s kidding, but Ash just stares at me and waits for me to respond. “Wow. Umm...yes?”

He finally cracks a smile.

“Good. Now that we got that out of the way, I need to go see if one of those girls over there”—he points with the hand at my shoulder toward two girls at the bar talking to Jack—“wants to console a brokenhearted man for the night.”

He takes off to the other side of the room and I go to Tyler. “Here. Ash said to live a little with your night off.”

At the reminder of Everly, I pull out my phone from my front pocket to make sure I haven’t missed a text from her.

He glances down at the screen. “Anything?”

“Nope. All clear. See? You can relax. She must be having a good time with her new friends.”

“Or she snuck out and is God knows where.” He tips the bottle of beer back and swallows a long drink. “This is my last one. I don’t want to get drunk and then not be able to get to her if she needs something.”

I reach out and stroke his hard jaw, admiring the light stubble that’s grown since this morning. “You’re kind of sexy all overprotective and worried.”

He huffs a laugh. “So, all the damn time?”

He was kidding, but he got it exactly right. “All the damn time.”

The air shifts between us. I close the space between our mouths. His arm comes around me and flattens me against his chest as he takes over the kiss. My head spins and my stomach flutters. God, I missed this. Not just Tyler. I mean, of course Tyler, but it’s more than him. It’s us. I’ve never had this type of insane chemistry with anyone else. My body comes alive when he’s nearby. A hit of dopamine, a rush of adrenaline, and an underlying connection that tugs me toward him.

He pulls back, drops his forehead against mine, and groans. “Cherries. You always taste like cherries.”

“It’s my favorite Chapstick,” I say and pull out the tube from my pocket. It’s true it had been my favorite when I’d met him, but now I don’t know if I continued to wear it all these years because I really liked it or because I knew he had.

An embarrassed smile takes over his face. “The amount of cherry-flavored stuff I’ve eaten just for a reminder of what you taste like is damn right embarrassing. Ice cream, pie, taffy, protein bars with little bits of cherries.”

A happy laugh bubbles up my throat. “Why didn’t you just eat cherries?”

“I never really liked them.”

I laugh louder as I link my arms around his neck.

“What do you want to do?” he asks, then tips his head toward where people are still playing pool and darts. A few guys are playing cards, others are on the PlayStation. I think Leo and Scarlett already left because I don’t see either of them.

What I’d like to do is go upstairs and kiss him until the sun comes up, but I know how rare a night like this is where he can let loose with the guys, so I step back from him and survey the options.

“I have an idea.”

He cocks a brow but doesn’t speak as I lead us to two open barstools. Johnny Maverick is still behind the bar. He’s acting as DJ and bartender.

He leans over the bar when we sit down. “Can I get you two something to drink?”

“What can you make?” I ask.

“Anything in this book.” He stands tall and drops a cocktail recipe book on the bar in front of me.

“Tyler here will have one of these.” I point to a blue drink that has a cherry garnish, then flip a few more pages until I find another that looks interesting. “And one of these.”

“On it.” Mav takes the book back and gets busy finding the ingredients.

I turn so that my knees bump against Tyler’s. He looks like he’s going to protest the drinks and I understand why, but I really want him to have this. Just tonight.

“I know. You don’t want to drink so that you are available if Everly needs you. I can’t tell you how sexy that is. She’s so lucky to have you. But tonight, let me be the responsible one.” I set the unopened hard seltzer on the bar. “I only had one. I have my phone on me and I promise to check it every hour. I

will make sure Everly has a ride or bail money if she needs it.”

He glowers at the last remark.

“You need a night off. Every parent and overprotective brother does.”

The corner of his mouth twitches.

“Plus, I’m curious what kind of drunk you are.”

He lifts his brows and leans forward. His legs envelop mine on either side.

Maverick sets the first drink down on the bar, complete with a cherry.

“Thanks,” I say as I scoot the glass toward Tyler. “Do you have any water back there?”

“Yep.” He gets it for me, even putting a coaster down first.

I look at the glass expectantly when Tyler still doesn’t pick it up.

“I’m not really that different from when I am sober,” he says.

“Prove it.” I lift the fruit from Tyler’s drink and pop it in my mouth. He watches my lips with heat that pools in my stomach.

I’m not sure he’s going to give in, but eventually he wraps those long fingers around the glass and brings it up to his lips, drinking as he keeps his gaze locked on me.

“Verdict?” I ask as he swallows.

“Would have been better with the cherry.” He moves in, sweeping his lips over mine and then diving in for a kiss that curls my toes.

“That’s so sweet,” I say. Even off his tongue, my mouth puckers.

“Mav, can I get another shot of whatever’s in this.” He slides the glass across the bar. “I’ll have a sugar rush before I’m drunk with that drink.”

Excited, I sit a little taller. “We should play a drinking game.”

He keeps one hand on my thigh as he leans back on the stool. “You’re not drinking.”

“I’ll drink my water.”

He smiles and lifts his hand in a *whatever you want* gesture.

“Let’s play ‘I’ve never.’ It’ll help us get to know each other again.”

“All right.”

I think for a minute. “I’ve never had sex in public.”

Tyler brings the glass back up to his lips and drinks, then I do the same.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” I admit as jealousy surges through me.

I want to know all these things about him. What his life has been like, who he’s dated, how serious he was with other girls, etc... but I was not prepared for how angry it would make me.

“The beach with you,” he says, and the memory hits me so hard I can almost taste the salty air from that night. “There hasn’t been anyone but you.”

“You mean...” I let his words bounce around in my brain. “What do you mean?”

He drinks the rest of the blue drink in one gulp and then stands. He takes the other drink waiting for him. “Thanks, Mav, but don’t quit your day job.”

We wander through the game room and then the living room. He gets stopped a few times by guys excited to see him out drinking, but when it’s just the two of us again, he says, “I didn’t really date after you. No, correction, I didn’t date after you. Period.”

“That was almost four years ago.”

“I focused on graduating and then hockey.” He shrugs one shoulder.

“But...” I glance around the party. There are so many girls here tonight. Beautiful girls that I know would jump at a shot with him. I mean, who wouldn’t? He’s gorgeous and smart, considerate—the total package.

“Why?”

“At first it was because I was still too in love with you to even think about someone else. And then at some point I stopped considering it because I knew this moment would come and I wanted you to know that I might have been the one that ended things then, but it wasn’t because I stopped wanting you.”

I exhale a long breath, my lungs suddenly feeling tight. “That’s crazy.”

He slides a hand around the back of my neck and his thumb glides along my skin. “There are a lot of things we should talk about, but tonight let’s just enjoy being with each other again.”

He waits for me to nod, then places a soft kiss on my lips. “Wanna see my pool skills?”

A weight lifts. He’s right. We’ll have time to dive into all of that later. “Absolutely, I do.”

For the rest of the night, we bounce around the party. Every chance he gets, he kisses me or holds my hand. I don’t accomplish my mission of getting him drunk, but I really just wanted to make sure he had a night off to relax and I think he did that.

Sometime after two, the party starts to die off and we head upstairs. He squeezes my hand as we pass his room. I think he’s going to come inside mine, but he hesitates in the doorway.

“You don’t want to have a sleepover?” I ask, smiling and trying to pull

him closer.

“We don’t have to rush or cram an entire relationship into a weekend. I’m not going anywhere.”

Tyler of four years ago would have already had me naked, and I don’t think it’s because he was trying to fit a lot of sex into the few days we got to see each other. Or at least not entirely because of that.

“Is this because I said I wasn’t sure what I wanted?”

He steps to me and tips my face up with a hand at my chin. “I’ve waited a long time for this, another week or month won’t kill me. I’m a patient guy.”

“That’s great for you, but what about me?” I whine. I feel like I might burst at the seams. The entire night his hands roamed over me and now I want more.

Chuckling lightly, he presses his hips against me to let me feel how hard he is. “Take your time and figure out what you want, Piper, because I plan on being the last guy inside of you.”

NOT EVEN A DRY HUMP OR A FINGER IN THE ASS?

TYLER

DESPITE THE BOOZE, AND THE FACT I'VE BEEN UP FOR ALMOST TWENTY-TWO hours, sleep is nowhere to be found. I can still smell Piper on my T-shirt and my hands. I roll onto my back and adjust the pillow behind my head. The house has quieted except for the faint sound of the bass of the music downstairs.

My dick is so hard the sheet over me is almost painful. I'd jerk off if I thought it'd help. There's only one cure and she's in the next room because I'm an asshole who wants to be positive that she's really mine this time.

The floorboards creak and I sit up in time to see a shadowed figure step through the bathroom.

"Piper?"

She doesn't answer, just walks the rest of the way to the mattress. Her legs are bare, and an oversized T-shirt hangs down past her hips.

"I might not have all the answers, but I know what I want tonight." Slowly, she pulls her shirt over her head. Her tits are pushed up in a black, lacy bra, and her chest lifts and falls with rapid breathing in sync with mine.

I hold out the blanket and she climbs in next to me. Smooth legs tangle with mine and her scent envelops me. My heart hammers in my chest as she grips the hem of my shirt. I left it on so I could keep smelling her all night long.

I let her remove it, then she reaches out and places a hand on my shoulder while I'm still admiring the smooth skin on display in front of me. Her fingertips move across my pecs and down over my stomach, stopping before she reaches the top of my boxers.

“Your body is insane.”

“You’ve seen me naked before.” I tuck her hair behind one ear and let my hand graze along the circle of her neck.

“You’ve changed.”

I know what she means. I’m two inches taller and I’ve added a lot of muscle thanks to strict dieting and workouts, but inside I’m exactly the same—still obsessed with her.

“I didn’t have you. I had to work out my frustration somehow.” I bring my lips to the sensitive skin above her collarbone.

Piper sinks back onto the bed. My eyesight goes a little blurry as I stare down at her mostly naked on my bed, dark hair and flushed cheeks.

“Damn, Piper.” I’m frozen just staring at her. She’s real and she’s here.

“I have not spent the last four years in the gym like you, and I’ve developed a pretty serious Kit Kat addiction.” She rests her hands on her stomach, hiding herself.

I move my hand up to lightly grip her neck and use my thumb to hold her chin, so she has to look me in the eyes. “You are perfect. You were then and you are now.”

A smile graces her lips, and she lets her hands drop. Then, she hooks a finger under the waistband of my boxer briefs and tugs me closer. Her fingers slip inside and wrap around me. I see spots.

“Condom?” she asks, stroking me.

For all the ways I imagined it, fast and furious wasn’t the plan. But I should have known this is the only way it could have been after so many years of denying myself. Actually, no, that isn’t even the truth. I wasn’t punishing myself. I just knew that no one would compare.

She pushes my boxers down my hips as I grab a foil packet from the bedside table. I tear it open with my teeth and cover myself. She continues to run her hands all over my body. A shiver rolls down my spine.

I’m going to last all of five seconds. It’s been too long and she’s too fucking perfect. I bring my mouth to hers, kissing her softly as I line up at her entrance, not pushing in but teasing her.

“Hurry,” she says, nipping at my bottom lip. She arches up until the head of my dick nudges at her entrance.

Oh goddamn. I push in so painfully slow. Piper’s groan mixes with my own. I consider pulling out and going down on her, so I don’t finish on my next exhale, but she lifts her hips and claws at my back, all while squeezing

me so tight. There's no other option than to give her what she wants.

I'm out of my mind, but so is she. I place my hand around her throat again, not squeezing, just caressing it with enough pressure to get her attention.

She looks up at me with those dark blue eyes.

"You're mine. Always have been. Always will be."

Her head tips back and she starts to close her eyes. I stop moving and increase the pressure ever so lightly around her throat. "Say it, Piper."

She bucks into me and whines. I'm so close, if she does that a few more times, it'll be game over. But I don't relent. I need to know that this means the same thing to her.

"I'm yours," she whispers.

I slam into her. "Mine."

I repeat it with every thrust until she cries out and clenches around me. I follow a second later and I think I might black out from the pleasure that zaps through me.

This right here is why I never moved on. There is no comparison to her, to us. No one else could even come close.

I roll onto my side next to her as we catch our breath.

"Wow," she says, arm thrown over her face. "Just...wow."

I tuck her in close to me and breathe her in. Then I let exhaustion and happiness pull me under.

By some miracle, Piper wakes up before me the next morning. I smooth a hand over her empty spot. Stretching, I sit up and lean forward to look through the bathroom toward her room. It's as dark in there as it is in here.

I swing my legs over the bed and grab a pair of sweatpants, pull them on and wander into her room just to double-check, but she's not there.

I have a slight headache from the fruity drinks last night, and a delicious ache in my body from holding on to Piper all night long.

After a quick shower, I head downstairs. Piper is in the kitchen, dark hair pulled up on top of her head in a messy bun. She stands in front of the stove with a spatula in one hand. She points it toward the bowl of cherries on the counter and grins.

“Something to snack on while you wait for breakfast.”

“I have another idea.” I lift my brows.

She leans over the island to kiss me.

“Morning,” she says breathlessly against my lips.

Ash walks in as I kiss her again.

“Morning, lovebirds,” he says, smiling.

“Good morning,” Piper chirps. “Do you want an omelet?”

“Did you cut up ham?” He slides onto a stool next to me.

Laughing, she nods. “Of course.”

He groans and cuts me a look. “I am so glad you screwed things up with this one and had to convince her to live with us so you could win her back.”

Piper just laughs.

“I’m meeting a few of the guys at the arena in about an hour for a light workout,” Ash says, running his fingers through his long, messy hair. “Do you want to come or are you two going to be busy making up for lost time?”

Piper sets a plate in front of me. Egg whites, onions, tomato, and ham. My stomach growls loudly.

“I’m not sure,” I say before I dig in. “I have to pick up Everly this morning.”

“I’ll do it,” Piper says. “I need to run a few errands today anyway.”

“Perfect.” Ash grins.

I guess that’s settled. Disappointment sits on my chest. I would love to spend all day in bed with Piper, but it looks like that won’t be happening. I knew last night was a rare free night to do whatever we wanted, but the reality of my busy schedule smacks me upside the head a lot faster than I expected it to.

Ash and I devour breakfast. Piper’s finishing her own food when I come around with my and Ash’s plates. I put them in the dishwasher and then wrap my arms around her waist.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay and go with you to get Everly?” I drop a kiss to her shoulder where my T-shirt hangs off her.

“I need to update my wardrobe, or at least buy a few pieces for school. Last week I was wearing the same dress as one of my students and she complimented me on my *vintage* find. I bought it new when I was in high school.”

“Professional stuff?” I ask with a vision of Piper in some business-type outfits that are more fantasy than school-appropriate.

“Yep.” She turns and places her arms around my neck. “Although from the look on your face I think you have a very different mental image than me on what constitutes professional.”

“Garters are professional, right?”

She laughs. “I need to shower. See you later?”

“You can count on it.” I step away from her, walking backward.

I ride to the arena with Ash and Leo. Jack, Declan, and Maverick are already here. I have an extra pep in my step. We’re supposed to be doing a light workout, but I can’t resist adding a little more weight and doing an extra few reps on each set.

“Did you not wear yourself out last night?” Jack asks as he spots me on the bench press.

“Seriously, Ty,” Mav says, sounding genuinely concerned. “Did you make her do all the work?”

Their jokes don’t even phase me as I rack the weight and jump to my feet. “Fuck off. I’m just feeling good today, strong, re-energized, alive.”

I’m aware I sound a bit ridiculous, but honestly, I can’t remember the last time I felt this great physically.

After we work out, we lace up and hit the ice. I’m flying, making moves like the guys are standing still. Jack rests both hands on the top of his stick and grins at me. “Rookie, you need to get laid more often if this is the result.”

“No kidding.” Leo wipes the back of his glove across his forehead. “I think I’m doing it wrong. Scarlett and I were up all night, and my legs feel like lead.”

“Four years of pent-up frustration gone,” I say. “I feel lighter or some shit. I don’t know.”

“Wait a minute.” Mav continues to skate around as he talks. “Are you telling me that in the time you and Piper were apart you didn’t hook up with anyone else?”

“No way,” Ash says, then looks at me. “You’re fucking with us, right?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m serious.”

“Okay, so you didn’t go all the way, but you fooled around, got a blow job or a handie or something during that time?” Ash pushes for clarification.

I shake my head again.

“Not even a dry hump or a finger in the ass?” Maverick finally stops and all the guys are staring at me waiting for an answer.

“I didn’t even kiss anyone else.”

“Fuck.” Declan looks impressed. The others are still staring at me in disbelief.

“Well, damn.” Ash shoots a puck to Leo. “If you and Scarlett broke up, would you hook up with someone else?”

“Scarlett and I aren’t going to break up. We’re engaged.”

“I know, I know, but humor me. Let’s pretend that she hates your guts and moves back to London for the next four years and is banging every dude in sight.”

Leo’s jaw tightens. “I don’t like the pretend game.”

“Would you?” Jack asks him.

“How did this get turned on me?” Leo asks. “Maverick’s married. Ask him.”

“Four years is a long time,” Mav says. “But I’m not sure anyone would compare after Kota.”

“Yeah, I hate to agree with the rookies, but I think they might be right.” Leo cocks his head to the side.

“You’ve all lost your minds,” Ash says. “Back me up, guys?”

“I’d never be in that position,” Jack says. “When I’m done with a girl, I’m done.”

“More like she’s done with you.” Declan elbows him.

“At least I’ve gone on a date recently.”

The guys turn on each other, playfully teasing one another and I just stand back and enjoy it. They don’t need to understand or even agree with it. I know I made the right decision for me because it brought me back to Piper.

IF THEY CAN'T BREAK YOU, IS IT EVEN TRUE LOVE?

PIPER

MONDAY MORNING I'M GETTING DRESSED FOR SCHOOL WHEN TYLER WALKS IN through our adjoining bathroom.

"Is that new?" he asks, running a towel over his damp hair, shirtless, only a pair of sweats hanging from his hips. Basically, looking too good to be true.

"The skirt is." I use a Sharpie to darken the worn spots on my favorite black heels.

He comes the rest of the way into my room and slides his hands around my waist. "Why are you coloring your shoes?"

"They've seen better days," I say, and drop them to the floor. When I step into them, I'm closer to eye-level with him.

"Maybe you should have gotten new shoes yesterday too."

"I had planned to," I admit. "But I underestimated how much a new wardrobe would cost."

"I have something for you." He dangles my old bracelet in front of my face. "I thought you might want it back now."

He clasps it around my wrist, and I hold it up to inspect it closer.

"God, I loved this bracelet." I gave it to him the first time we were separated. I thought as long as he had it, I'd always have a reason to see him. It became tradition or superstition. Every time we were separated, I'd send it with him, insisting that he hang on to it until we were together again.

"We're leaving for New York this afternoon and probably won't be back until pretty late."

"I can wait up."

"Just be in my bed. I don't care if you're awake or not." He stops and

looks up at the ceiling. “That sounded creepy. What I meant to say is that all I want is to fall asleep and wake up next to you.”

There’s a small part of me that’s freaking out, worried this is all happening too fast, but it’s drowned out by the much larger part that is all too eager to jump back in headfirst.

“I’ll be there.” I hold my wrist against my chest.

Tyler gets dressed and then walks me downstairs where Everly is waiting in the kitchen.

“See you tomorrow, sis.” He grabs a banana from the fruit bowl on the counter. “Try to stay out of trouble and call if you need help with your homework. I’ll get one of the guys to help.”

“I think I’ll just ask Piper,” she says.

I secretly love that all the guys are so invested in helping Everly with her schoolwork. She told me that Declan is good at helping her with memorization stuff, Ash loves to discuss history or current events, and Leo is good at anything with numbers. Even Jack, who I wouldn’t have pegged as an especially patient or nurturing guy, apparently pitches in when it’s business-related.

“I’ll call you later to check in,” he tells her.

Before I have time to consider if we’re doing the whole PDA thing in front of his sister, he steps to me and brushes his lips over mine. It starts as a soft, sweet kiss but then his arm comes around me and his mouth slants so he can sweep his tongue inside.

He pulls back too quick and not quick enough. My face heats.

Everly looks between us with brows raised. “Gross, but good job, bro.”

She lifts her backpack, slings it over one shoulder and then leaves us alone.

“That’s one way to tell her,” I say.

“Sorry. I actually just forgot. Now that I can kiss you whenever I want, that’s all I want to do.” As if to prove his point, his mouth drops to mine again.

“You’re going to be late,” I say.

He whines, but his lips curve up into a smile against mine. “I know.”

He gives my bottom lip a final nip before he pulls away. “I better go. Jack is a real pain in the ass when he’s pissed off.”

We walk outside together. Ash is already waiting in the car for him.

“You know, I leave my car every time for a reason.”

“Don’t offend my baby,” I say, and glance over at my car. It looks especially rough sitting next to Ash’s truck.

Tyler just shakes his head.

“Good luck tonight,” I call after him.

When I get into my car, Everly glances over from the passenger seat with a small smile. “You and my brother, huh?”

“Yeah. Is it weird?” I ask her. “If it’s too weird then I can—”

“It’s not weird,” she interrupts me. Which is good because I don’t know what I would do if she had said it was. I like Everly, but I don’t want to stop making out with her brother.

“I’m glad. Maybe he’ll stop being such a grump and loosen the reins on me.”

I laugh. Unlikely, but at least she isn’t weirded out.



After work, I go over to Scarlett’s to watch the game. She had a photoshoot and couldn’t go to New York with the team, but it works out great because I need some serious girl time.

Everly comes with me, but she’s video-chatting with Grace. Jade shows up as Scarlett is filling three glasses with wine.

“Did I miss all the juicy details?” she asks, stripping off her coat and falling into the chair next to me.

“I just got here,” I say.

Scarlett puts the game on the TV and the three of us settle in. I’ve been jumpy and nervous all day. I am so excited, but also terrified. It doesn’t make any sense, but here we are.

The Wildcats are warming up and the camera pans around the ice. Scarlett and I are glued to the screen as we spot our guys.

Jade nudges me with her knee. “So, are you two back together officially?”

“Yes,” I say, then, “I think so.”

My mind goes back to him claiming me again and again. *Mine.*

“You’re blushing,” Scarlett says with a grin.

“We skipped over a lot of conversation, but yeah, we’re together.”

“Why do you look like you want to throw up?” Jade asks.

“I don’t think I’ve processed it all yet,” I admit. “A month ago, I was still planning on never seeing him again and now...”

“But you’re happy, right? This is what you want?” Scarlett asks, lowering her voice and checking to make sure Everly is still preoccupied.

“Of course. I’ve never stopped wanting him, even when I hated him, but am I being dumb? I mean, the guy shattered my heart into a million pieces. And that was before he was all...” I struggle to find the words again. “He’s this grown man now who is super hot and built, and that isn’t even the sexiest thing about him. The way he cares for his sister and his teammates.” I blow out a breath, and Jade and Scarlett laugh at me.

“If they can’t break you, is it even true love?” Scarlett asks.

Jade snorts. “God, I hope so. I’d like to keep my black heart perfectly intact, thank you.”

“If things ended with Sam, you wouldn’t be devastated?” I ask her.

“I’d be upset, but broken?” She takes a drink of her wine before shaking her head. She looks at me and then Scarlett. “Does that make me an awful fiancée?”

“No,” Scarlett says immediately. “Relationships are different. You’re different.”

“That I am.” Jade smiles proudly. “Sam and I picked out our wedding flowers today. We’re doing tulips. Tulips are going to be big this year.”

The attention turns to Jade and her upcoming wedding. She refuses to pick a date or venue, but basically everything else she’s selected so she could feature it in her articles for the magazine where she and Scarlett work.

Maybe Jade is right. Just because Tyler and I are together again doesn’t mean I have to hand over my heart on a silver platter. Okay, she didn’t say that exactly, but I think she might be on to something.

When Everly and I walk home after the game, I text Tyler to congratulate him. The Wildcats won and he got an assist. He played great and I’m proud of him, but I turn off my phone and go to sleep in my own bed because I’d like to keep my heart in one piece this time around.



The next afternoon Everly stops by my classroom after school.

“Hey,” I say, smiling. “I thought you had stage crew today.”

“I do, but Grace invited me to dinner and then to the basketball game.” She looks at me expectantly. “Is it okay if I go with her?”

“Yeah, I don’t see why not. I can come get you after the game.”

“That’s okay. She said she could bring me home. She has a car.”

“Do you need cash or anything?” I pull out my wallet from my purse.

“Nah, Ty always makes sure I have cash when he leaves for games.”

“All right. Well, have fun. Text me if you need anything.”

Her smile is maybe the biggest I’ve ever seen out of her. “Thanks, Piper.”

She hurries out of the classroom, and I sit back in my chair behind the desk. I shoot Tyler a text to let him know Everly’s plans and then, because I don’t feel like facing him just yet, I grab a stack of art projects to grade.

Tyler and Ash both slept in this morning. God knows what time they got in. I half expected him to climb into bed with me last night, but I guess my message was pretty clear when I chose not to wait for him in his.

My head is a mess.

He finally texts back about thirty minutes later. ***Free for dinner?***

Dinner sounds great, I type back. I can’t hide from him forever. ***I’m getting ready to leave the school now.***

I grab all my stuff and head out, giving myself a pep talk as I push out into the parking lot. I tell myself all kinds of things like we’re going to take this slow and that I’m going to do a better job of guarding my heart, and that I’m going to keep him at arm’s length until I’m certain I can survive him again.

But in the middle of my mental pep talk, I glance up and there he is. Leaning against the hood of his car, arms crossed over his chest. He pushes off when he sees me, but he lets me come to him.

“Hey,” I say tentatively when I’m within arm’s distance. “You’re here.”

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t run off.”

My face heats, but I don’t try to deny it wasn’t on my mind.

“Is your car okay here overnight?” he asks.

“Yeah, but I can just follow you to the restaurant.”

He shakes his head, then rounds the front and opens the passenger side of his car for me.

My nerves bounce along with my leg as he drives away from the school.

“Did you have a good day?” he asks, one hand on top of the steering wheel and the other rests on my thigh.

“Yeah. You?”

He glances over and his smile says more than his words. “Getting better by the minute.”

He pulls into the parking lot of an upscale mall.

“What are we doing here?” I ask.

“I made reservations for seven at the place across the street, but I thought we could wander around here first.”

“Okay.” I’ve been wanting to come to this mall, but I knew I couldn’t afford anything except for maybe a pretzel in the food court.

The architecture is beautiful with lots of glass and open space. A Tiffany’s is at the front of the mall, and I stare at the blue accent boxes inside with longing.

“Do you want to go inside?” Tyler asks when he notices me staring at the jewelry store.

“Oh, no. The sales associates will want to help us or think we’re engaged or something.” I bark a laugh, then anxious giggles follow.

Tyler takes my hand. His thumb strokes mine in a reassuring way that makes me blow out a nervous breath.

He stops a few steps later and steps into my space. “Are we okay? Because yesterday before I left I thought we were on the same page, but now I’m thinking we should have spent a little more time talking and less time kissing.” He bobs his head side to side. “More talking, but same amount of kissing.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just freaking out a little. I like you. I like you a lot, and I am terrified that I will end up heartbroken again.”

“You think this isn’t scary for me too?” He brushes my hair away from my face with a hand. “I spent the last four years wishing to have you back in my life and now that it’s happening, I feel like I’m gonna screw it all up. Or blink and realize I was hallucinating.”

A true smile finally tugs at the corner of my lips and my body relaxes. “So, it isn’t just me?”

“No, of course not.” He glides his thumb along my lower lip and then drops his mouth to mine. When he pulls back my heart is racing, but not because I’m nervous—because I know it’s already too late to be trying to guard my heart. He’s had it since I was eighteen.

“Be terrified with me, Pipes? Give me a real shot to get it right this time. That’s all I’m asking.”

I nod. “Yes. A thousand terrified yeses.”

He grins down at me, steps back to my side, and laces his fingers through mine again. “Now that we have that out of the way, I need to get a few things. Do you mind?”

“No. I’d love to watch you shop. I thought you hated it?”

We walk into a department store. The racks of clothing and shelves of shoes look so pretty.

“Well, it turns out it’s a lot more fun when you can afford to buy whatever you want.”

“Ah, yes. I remember those days.” I sigh.

“But we’re not here for me.”

My brows scrunch together.

“I remember what it was like. A year ago, I was sharing an apartment with three guys and every last dime I had went toward rent or feeding myself.”

“No, Ty—” I start when I realize where this is going. “You have already done so much for me with my car and don’t think I didn’t notice all my favorite foods stocked in the fridge.”

“Then do it for me. All the shit I wanted to buy for you when we were together the first time and couldn’t. I hated that I couldn’t buy you jewelry and flowers.”

“I didn’t need any of that then and I don’t need it now. I have a few tutoring gigs next week. I’ll be fine.”

He sticks out his bottom lip in a pout. “Then let me pay you for watching Ev.”

I relent with a sigh. “Okay. I could use a new pair of shoes, but nothing too over the top.”

“And a dress.”

I cock my head to the side.

Tyler grins. “The dress is for me.”

I DO LOVE A GOOD ART PROJECT

TYLER

IT'S TRUE, I DREADED SHOPPING WHEN I COULDN'T AFFORD THINGS AND I still don't enjoy buying myself things—my car excluded, but buying shit for Everly and Piper, yeah, that's fun.

And the bonus with Piper is when she tries on a dress that shows off her cleavage and long legs, I don't want to maim anyone that looks her way like I did with Ev. Well, okay, I do but it's different.

"I think this is the most beautiful dress I have ever worn," she says as she comes out of the dressing room. Her face is all lit up and I haven't seen her smile so big in years.

My throat is tight as I stand from the chair I've been sitting in while I wait. "Damn, Piper."

"Think Principal Best will have a problem with me teaching in this?" She pops a hip and sticks out her boobs.

"I don't think a lot of learning is happening with you in that dress." I stare at her, too entranced to do anything else. "I know somewhere you could wear it though. I have a fundraiser I have to go to in a few weeks for the Wildcat Foundation. Food, drinks, and a bunch of hockey players. Come with me? I'm sure Scarlett will be there."

She drapes her arms around my neck. "Oh, well, if Scarlett's going to be there, then yes, I'm definitely in."

I kiss her and push her backward into the dressing room. She squeaks and giggles as I pull the curtain closed behind us.

Every time I kiss her, it feels so unreal. I frame her face with my hands and urge her to open wider so I can sweep my tongue inside of her mouth.

The silky material of the dress pressed against me is sexy as fuck. I run my hands down around her waist and up her back to the zipper. The only thing sexier than Piper in this dress? Taking her out of it.

Nothing is more satisfying in this moment than the purr of the metal coming apart.

“How’s it coming in there?” the sales associate’s chirpy, helpful voice interrupts as I’m sliding one strap off her shoulder.

Piper straightens, but I’m far more reluctant to stop.

“Tyler,” she hisses. It’d be more convincing if her tongue wasn’t still in my mouth.

I step back and pull the curtain open. The woman on the other side has one dark brow arched up and a smug smile.

“The zipper was stuck,” Piper says, cheeks red. She pulls the curtain back to shield herself while she changes.

“We’ll take the dress.” I retake my seat and anxiously wait for the next outfit.

We go to several more stores. I lose track, but the shopping bags looped over both arms are starting to add up.

“No more,” Piper insists. “This is too much.”

“We haven’t even looked at shoes yet.”

She shakes her head and peers down at the ones on her feet. “These aren’t so bad.”

“Baby, you look great. You’d look great in anything, but you shouldn’t need to color your shoes every morning.”

“I do love a good art project.”

I tip my head toward the shoe store. “One pair.”

Man, it makes me happy to buy her shit. Is that wrong? I don’t care.

Piper and I walk hand in hand as she looks at shoes. Every pair she gives a second glance, I nod to the sales guy to get her size.

When she finally sits down to try them all on, she has a stack of boxes nearly as tall as her.

“How am I going to pick just one?” she asks as she slips on a pair of tall, strappy-looking heels in bright red. Standing, she does a short walk in them, staring in the mirror at her feet. “These are gorgeous, but not very practical for school sadly.”

She gives them one last longing look, and then takes them off and places them back in the reject pile.

The guy tries to take them back and I give him a subtle head shake. So, I lied. There's no way she's walking out of here with just one pair of shoes. My girl needs at least as many pairs of shoes as me, right? And I have a lot of sneakers.

The funny thing about having money—people give you free stuff because they know you have the cash to buy more of it if you like it. I don't have any big sponsors or anything like that, but stuff randomly shows up. A pair of shoes here and a few protein bars there.

Piper finally narrows it down to black shoes that look nearly identical to the ones on her feet.

I hold out my hand and she gives me the box. "This is it. We're done."

"This is the last store," I say with a wink. She doesn't notice the stack I've already had put at the counter until the guy starts ringing them up.

"Wait. No," she says. "Just the black pair."

The guy stops and looks from Piper to me.

"All of them."

"Tyler," she whisper-screeches.

"Yes, Pipes?"

"You don't need to do this."

"I know." I hand over my card and we get four more bags to add to our collection.

Outside, Piper watches as I load her bags into the trunk. Happy laughter turns into a worried, nervous-sounding giggle.

"Oh my gosh, Tyler. Are they even going to fit?"

"Maybe we should have stopped at three pairs of shoes, eh?" I close the trunk and put the remaining bags in the small space behind our seats.

A guilty expression washes over her face and I stop and go to her.

"I was kidding, Pipes. This was fun."

"I can't pay you back. At least not for a long time. Do you know what the starting salary is for a teacher in this state?"

"No, I guess I don't, but you don't need to pay me back. It's the least I owe you for taking such good care of Ev."

She nods. "Thank you."

"You love it? Teaching, I mean." I know it was her dream, but sometimes dreams don't work out the way we think.

“I do. It’s different than I expected, but the kids are great.”

Smiling, I wrap an arm around her waist as we walk toward the restaurant.

“I think it’s a really admirable profession. Way more important than getting paid to play hockey. I mean, who knows where Everly would be without you. And money isn’t everything.”

“Says the guy that has a lot of it now.” She laughs softly. “Everyone says that until they don’t have it. I’m sure I did too. Don’t get me wrong. It’s not that I need to be stupid rich.” She waves a hand back toward the car and smirks at me. “But worrying about how you’re going to pay for things all the time is stressful.”

“Calling those shoes stupid, baby?”

“The shoes, definitely not. Just the number of them you bought.”

I squeeze her side playfully and she laughs again. God, I love her laugh.

“I can’t explain it. I just feel like it’s what I was meant to do. I’m going to grad school next year. A master’s degree will help my starting salary, and who knows? There are lots of private schools and opportunities beyond what I’m doing now. Maybe I could keep tutoring on the side. Or I could start an after-school homework help company and pimp you and the guys out.”

“They’re really good, right?” I ask.

“Surprisingly, yes.”

I hold open the door for the restaurant. A hostess leads us to our seats. Once we’ve ordered and have our drinks, Piper places both elbows on the table and leans forward.

“What about you?” she asks. “What’s your next big dream?”

I take a sip of my water. “What do you mean?”

“All you ever talked about was becoming a pro hockey player. Now that you’ve made that happen, what else do you want to accomplish?”

“I think this is it,” I say.

“There isn’t anything else you want?”

“I guess I haven’t really made room for much else. Every day is survival right now. If I have a couple of bad games, I could be sent down like that.” I snap my fingers.

“Yeah, that’s brutal, but you won’t. You’re good. Really good. I always knew you would make it.” She ducks her head to sip from her straw and looks up at me through thick lashes. “I saw you play once after we broke up.”

“You did? When?”

“I came to Green Bay about a month after we broke up. I planned to talk to you after the game. I still hoped that you’d miss me so much you’d call me. I sent you a text before the game. The one about how you inspire me to keep pushing toward my own dreams.”

“The last one you sent.” I must have read it a million times. I don’t think she realized how much her words of encouragement meant.

She stares at me with disbelief like she’s still surprised that I remember this stuff. I don’t know when it’s going to sink in for her that I remember it all. She wasn’t some girl that I dated and broke up with, then forgot and moved on. I couldn’t cling to her, but I held on to everything else.

“Not calling you nearly killed me. It was a struggle every day. From the time I woke up until I fell asleep. It’s all I wanted, but I couldn’t help but worry that you were going to resent all the things you were missing out on. And maybe more than that, I wanted you to have it because I couldn’t. I don’t know. I’m not saying it’s right, but I can’t change it.” Not sure I would even if I could.

“I was so lost without you,” she says. “After my dad’s stroke I felt like I didn’t have anyone. Dad could barely talk in the beginning and Mom spent every second caring for him—as she should have. My friends from high school tried to be there in the beginning, but I was miserable to be around and they couldn’t really relate to the stuff happening at home. I missed you so much.”

My chest tightens. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

Old wounds threaten to derail this night, so I add, “I’d like to see Everly graduate high school and maybe go to college. Hockey and seeing that she gets an education—that’s about all I’m capable of dreaming of right now.” A hesitant smile tugs at my lips. “And you. I always dream about you.”

She finally smiles in a way that has me hoping the night isn’t ruined. “Have you talked to her about college yet?”

“No. I keep meaning to. I will.”

“Soon,” she adds. “She should apply to several. The sooner, the better.”

We spend the rest of dinner catching up but avoiding anything too heavy. Talking with her feels so easy, so good, but the underlying tension from earlier hasn’t totally dissipated.

I know I hurt her and I’m not sure if she’s ever going to truly be able to forgive me for it.

I think about the other things I dream about, things that are more like

fleeting thoughts than actionable items. I am busy, and Everly and hockey are all I can focus on right now, but the truth is, I do want a family and to get married someday. I just know that the person I want all those things with is her, and I'm not sure she's ready to hear all that.

When we get back to the house Ash is watching TV in the living room. Piper and I take a seat with him.

Ash looks over and grins at us. "Hey, lovebirds. Where have you been all night?"

"Dinner," I answer, and nod toward the TV. "New season of *The Bachelor*?"

"Yeah. This poor guy is dealing with some crazy drama already on night one."

"I'm pretty sure he knew what he was getting into," Piper says.

I lean back and throw an arm around the back of the couch. Piper snuggles in next to me. It's nice. We sit like that until the front door opens and Everly comes inside.

"Hey, how was the game?" I ask, giving her a once-over in her Park Academy shirt. I've never seen her with so much team spirit before.

"They won." She takes in the scene in front of her. "I'm gonna go to bed. Night."

"Wait," I call before she can head up. "I need to talk to you."

She looks nervous but eventually nods. "Okay."

"I think I'll head up, too. Night, all," Piper says, then shoots me a look that I hope means she'll be in my bed instead of her own tonight.

Everly takes a seat in the spot Piper just vacated. "What's up?"

"I keep meaning to talk to you about college. Piper said you might be interested in attending this fall."

"Oh." Everly fidgets with her hands in her lap. "Maybe, I'm not sure."

"College is a blast," Ash says. "Why wouldn't you want to go?"

"More school is a blast?" she asks him.

"A few hours a day of school, but all the rest of the time is one big party."

I cut him a look. "Not helpful."

"Sorry," he tells me, but then looks at Everly and mouths, "Huge parties."

“You should at least apply. That way you have options. Do you have a list? Are there ones you want to go visit?”

“I filled everything out online, but I need help from Mom with the financial aid stuff.”

“I’ll call Mom tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” She starts to get up and pauses. “Was there something else?” she asks.

I clear my throat. “I’m proud of you.”

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “Who are you and what have you done with my grumpy brother?”

“Did you do your homework tonight?” I ask.

Laughing, she stands. “That’s more like it.”

GOOD GIRL

PIPER

I WAKE UP WITH TYLER'S BODY DRAPED OVER MINE AND AN INCESSANT buzzing on the nightstand. I don't know what time it is, but it's way too early for my alarm clock to be going off.

I elbow him. "Ty. Your alarm."

He groans, eyes still closed.

He looks so peaceful, but I know he has a routine in the mornings that does not include sleeping in until sunrise.

I turn in his arms and frame his face with my hands, enjoying the feel of his day-old stubble. "You have to get up for your run."

Before I know it, he has me on my back and his heavy weight settles on top of me.

"I worked out enough last night. I think I can skip this morning." He turns off the alarm and then buries his head in the crook of my neck.

His hands find their way under my shirt, and he cups my boobs as he continues to kiss his way along my neck and collarbone. He sucks and kisses, and it feels so good I stop pushing for him to go.

His phone starts buzzing on the nightstand again. I don't even notice it at first, all my senses are honed to him, but Tyler reaches over and silences it while rubbing his erection along my core. "Got about five minutes before Ash comes looking for me."

"Go. I'll be fine," I say as I arch into him.

He laughs and disappears under the blanket. He slides down my body and works my panties down over my hips. Then his mouth covers me with no prelude or teasing. He dives right in. A moan slips past my lips and my hands

thread through his thick hair. Every time I think it can't get better with Tyler, he proves me wrong. It's like he has some secret key to my body that even I don't possess.

He brings me over the edge so quickly that it doesn't seem possible. I cry out in the quiet, dark room, chanting his name almost like I'm trying to convince myself it's really him. Maybe I'm having a really amazing sex dream.

He doesn't relent after the first waves roll through me and my second orgasm builds just as quickly. This one hangs in the distance just out of reach. I reach for him and try to get him to move up and inside of me, but he keeps his hold on my thighs and continues licking and sucking on my clit.

"Tyler."

He hums a response, the sound vibrating through my body.

"I need you inside of me," I mutter.

He stops his torment and repositions so that his dick nudges my entrance. Pleasure spreads through me. I'm so close.

He reaches over and gets a condom from the side table. "Whose pussy is this?"

"Yours." I'm so close if he blew on my clit I think I'd come.

He covers himself and rubs the head of his cock along my slit. "Whose pussy?"

"Yours," I repeat.

He drives in an inch. "Whose?"

"Yours, Tyler."

"Good girl." He drops a kiss on my lips and then pushes in all the way.

His phone vibrates on the nightstand but neither of us stops or makes any move to shut it off. We've been making up for lost time with sex that's sweet and mildly possessive, the latter a kink we've both always enjoyed, but this is something more. It's hard and fast and claiming in a way I didn't know existed. As my orgasm finally hits, he drops his mouth to mine and kisses me in the same hard, greedy way that he slams into me.

"Mine." He speaks into my mouth. "You're finally mine again."

My car finally decides that today is the day it's no longer going to run. Tyler

pops the hood and diagnoses the problem, but says it'll be a day or two before his guy can fix it. After a lot of back and forth, I relent, and Everly and I get in Tyler's Mustang to go to school.

He gives me a wicked grin as I adjust the seat so I can reach the pedals.

"What if I wreck it?" I ask, running my fingers along the soft leather of the steering wheel.

"Don't," he deadpans.

"I'm serious! I'm not that great of a driver."

He leans against the door, holding it open and leaning inside. "It's just a hunk of metal, Pipe."

Everly laughs in the seat next to me, and Tyler drops a soft kiss on my lips, then shuts the door and steps back with a wave.

I drive like a granny headed to church. The gas pedal is touchy, and I hold my breath every time another car gets close.

A text notification pops up on the screen of the car with Tyler's name. I wait until we're at the school, parked, and headed inside to read it. ***Is my baby okay?***

I turn and snap a quick picture of the car and send it to him, ***Not a scratch or dent!***

I meant you. ;)

At lunch, Kim delivers a large bouquet of flowers with a curious smile. "Either you did something right or someone did something very wrong."

I call Tyler immediately, assuming I'll get his voicemail, but he answers on the first ring.

"Hey." The single word comes out with a lot of concern. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything here is great, but I just got a very large, very expensive display of roses, so maybe I should ask you the same thing. Are you about to break my heart?"

In the background is music, metal clanking, and a few voices I can't make out.

He laughs and it fills me with such hope and happiness. I never dreamed we'd be back at this place.

"They're gorgeous. Thank you." I let my fingers brush a drooping petal on one of the roses. "What are you up to?"

"Getting some weights in before lunch, then I have a community service thing this afternoon."

“What kind of community service thing?”

“Some of the guys and I are going to the children’s hospital.”

“I didn’t know you did that.”

“We hang out, bring merch, and sign stuff if they want. It’s pretty cool.”

“And seriously sexy.”

His laugh deepens. “Well, I can’t wait to tell you all about the other good deeds I’ve done recently.”

One of the guys calls his name and he says, “One sec.”

“I should let you go.”

“Yeah, I gotta finish up. My girl seems to like the muscle I’ve added to my body.”

“Your girl does,” I say, grinning so big my face hurts.



The team has a series of away games coming up so the night before he leaves, Tyler and I order food in and hang out in the living room watching TV and making out. More making out than watching the TV, if I’m honest.

Everly hasn’t come down from her room since we got home from school. I think things with her and River have been tense because she was in a terrible mood on our ride home. Ash went with some of the team to Wild’s for drinks, so it’s just the two of us, hanging at home like it’s our own place.

Tyler has one arm around my shoulder, his fingers teasing the side of my boob when Declan arrives a little later. He knocks on the door three times and then calls out, “Hello?”

“In the living room,” Ty yells. He turns to face him. “Hey, man. What are you doing here? Ash is still at Wild’s.”

Declan nods his head to me. “Homework duty.”

Everly bounds down the stairs a second later looking happier than she did earlier. “Hey!”

I don’t know Declan that well, but he doesn’t smile all that often except with Everly. He raises his hand, and she bumps it. “Ready?”

“I thought you were done with your homework already.” Tyler looks at Everly with a crease forming between his eyes.

“I am. Declan is teaching me how to drive. His car is so fast.”

I can tell by Tyler’s expression that he’s caught off guard. Declan reads

his body language and adds, "Sorry, I thought you knew. We stay in the neighborhood."

"I had no idea you wanted to learn how to drive," Tyler says. "You could have asked me to show you."

"I know how to drive. I just need practice," Everly insists. "I have my permit and took driver's ed, but I never bothered to take the test."

Tyler stays quiet.

"Come on," Everly tugs Declan toward the door. He resists, walking slowly and waiting for Tyler's approval, which he gives with a nod.

A minute later, Declan's car starts up outside, and Tyler sits forward and pauses the TV.

"Did you know?" he asks me.

I shake my head. "No, but it's not a bad idea for her to have her license."

His jaw works back and forth. He doesn't say much while they're gone and I'm not sure how to navigate the situation. Did he have a right to know? Of course, but I don't think that's why he's upset.

"You know, it's okay that other people do things for her."

"I know." He runs hand through his hair and sinks back into the couch. "I just feel like this thing should be me. I never even considered that she might want to have a car. I should have known."

I angle my body so one leg rests on top of his. "You're not a mind reader."

I place my hands on his shoulders and thread my fingers through his hair at the nape of his neck. "You do a lot for Everly. A lot. No one expects you to do everything. Not even her."

His shoulders loosen under me. "You always know what to say."

"I know, that's why you like me so much. I give great pep talks."

"Yes, you do." He pulls me onto his lap so I'm straddling him. His lips hover over mine. "The best pep talks. I don't know how I survived without them. I don't know how I survived without you."

The sincerity of his words strikes me and my heart squeezes. "I'm here now."

When they return, Everly goes back upstairs after thanking Declan and he comes into the living room and takes a seat.

"I'm sorry. I really thought you knew. I didn't mean to step on your toes. You can take over. She's getting pretty good."

"No." Tyler shakes his head. "Unless it's too much. You've already

helped more than I could ever repay you.”

“Don’t even worry about it. It’s kind of fun. Your sister is a trip. Reminds me of myself at that age.” He stands. “I gotta get home and pack. See you in the morning.”

Tyler stands and they slap hands. “Thanks, man.”

Declan nods and starts toward the door. “Word of advice.”

Tyler waits for him to continue.

“Don’t buy your sister a sports car. She’s fearless.”

THAT HAS TO BE RIPE, BABY

TYLER

WE'RE ON OUR SECOND STOP OF THE THREE-GAME ROAD TRIP. I'M SHARING A room with fellow rookie Johnny Maverick. He's in the shower and I'm scrolling through Piper's and my most recent texts when a new one pops up.

Good luck tonight. X

Instead of replying via text, I hit call.

"Hey," she answers hesitantly. "I figured you'd be getting ready for the game."

"We don't leave for the arena for another hour. Most of the guys are napping."

"Still hate naps, huh?" she asks.

"I always feel worse when I wake up."

"You're doing it all wrong."

I crook a hand behind my head. "Well, feel free to come show me."

"That sounds pretty great right now. I'm cleaning out my closet. *Someone* bought me a bunch of dresses and they're making my old stuff look sad."

I chuckle as I picture her face and the haughty smirk she'd be giving me if I were there. "I miss you."

"I miss you too."

"What's Everly up to? I texted her this morning, but she hasn't replied."

"I dropped her off at the school this morning. They have extra practices on Saturdays from now until the show."

"Ah." I close my eyes. "So, you're home all alone?"

"Mm-hmmmm." She draws out the word.

"What are you wearing?"

“Uh...”

I smile at her reluctance to answer. “You’re in sweatpants and your hair is in one of those messy bun things on top of your head, right? I can almost picture you.”

“If you think I spend my alone time not showering and wearing comfy clothes, you’re absolutely correct, but you’re wrong on the wardrobe. I have on a pair of your boxers and the T-shirt you were wearing the day before you left.”

“This I have to see.” I hit the video button and a second later her face fills the screen. Brown hair is on top of her head as I predicted, and she moves the phone to show me she’s wearing one of my old hockey T-shirts.

“That has to be ripe, baby. I worked out in that.”

“I don’t care. I like smelling you.” She lifts the collar to her nose.

“Well, it’s fine by me. You wear that out of the house, and no one is coming near you.”

“You want people to avoid me?”

“Something like that.”

“Haven’t we already established I’m all yours.”

A memory flashes from the night before I left—Piper screaming my name as I devoured her sweet pussy. Maverick comes out of the shower, singing loudly and bopping his head.

“Sorry,” he whispers when he sees I’m on the phone.

“You’re fine.” I stand. “Are you done in there?”

“All yours. I’m gonna call the wifey.”

I head into the steamy bathroom and start the shower. I pull my shirt over my head and Piper’s gaze falls to my chest.

“If you’re about to kick me off the phone, you should have hung up before taking off your shirt.”

I push my pants and boxers down. “I’m not kicking you off the phone.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widen and then she understands. “Oooh.”

“Lift your shirt up, baby.”

She complies, raising it so her tits are bared to me. I stroke myself and set the phone on the counter. “Fuck, I miss you.”

I went years without having her, but now two days feels like an eternity.

She sits on her bed, holding her phone so I can watch as she trails her fingers over one boob and then the other. The bracelet, the one I wore for years, hangs from her wrist and glides over her skin as her hand moves south

and disappears into the waistband.

“Is my pretty pussy wet?”

She nods and flips the camera so I can watch as she pushes the boxers down to her ankles and circles her clit.

“You’re so damn beautiful.”

“I would give anything to have your hands on me instead,” she says.

“Me too. Close your eyes and increase the pressure, imagine it’s me.”

Her hips rise and she picks up the pace. My dick pulses in my hand, but I force myself to go slow until she’s closer.

“So beautiful and you feel so good.” The words come out in a low growl. Ah fuck, I’m never gonna last.

“Turn over, Piper.”

She does and switches the camera so I can see her face again. “Ride your hand, baby. Pretend it’s me.”

Her tits smash into the comforter, and her ass lifts and falls as she moves her hips against her fingers.

She moans and her lashes drop closed as she gets closer.

“When I get back, we aren’t going to leave my bed for days.”

Her moans get louder.

“You want that, baby? You want to ride my dick until you’re so sore you can’t walk?”

She cries out and I finally move my hand, squeezing myself as hard as her pussy would be if I were really inside her.

“Yes. Yes.” Her orgasm hits and her body stills, then she whimpers as she rolls her hips slower.

“Ah.” I grit my teeth as I come all over my hand and stomach.

She meets my gaze in the camera and then her eyes flutter closed, and a happy smile pulls her lips wide. “Wow. Why weren’t we doing that when we were doing long-distance the last time?”

“No fucking clue.” I turn on the shower and readjust the phone closer so I can still see and hear her while I get under the hot spray. “What’s your plan for the rest of the afternoon?”

“Nap, of course.” She curls up on her side. “What do you do before away games?”

“Mav and I usually hang in our room. We’re working our way through Keanu Reeves’ old flicks.”

We keep chatting while I shower. Piper stays curled up on the bed and I

lather my entire body, including hair, with the hotel soap, which she makes fun of me for.

“It all works the same,” I insist, not for the first time, as I turn off the shower. “And at least I’m wearing clean clothes.”

She laughs and then yawns.

Maverick is on his bed, holding his phone out in front of him just like I am, and I catch his wife Dakota’s voice.

“Hey, Kota,” I say to her as I grab a pair of clean sweatpants from my bag.

“Hey, Tyler.”

Maverick hits play on the movie. Today’s pick is *The Replacements*.

“Do you need to go for Keanu?” Piper asks.

“Nah, Mav stays on the phone the whole time we watch, but if you want to nap, that’s cool.”

“I can talk a little longer.” She sits up. “Actually, a movie sounds good.”

I fall onto my bed, and Piper goes downstairs in the theater room and puts it on. I can hear the opening music just a few minutes behind us.

And that’s how I spend the next forty minutes before my alarm goes off.

“Good luck at the game,” she says.

I pull on a T-shirt and my shoes, then shoulder my bag. “You can finally nap.”

“Are you kidding? I’m too invested in this movie. Keanu was hot.” She smiles. “Plus, I have to get Everly soon.”

“Bye, baby. I—” The words *I love you* almost tumble out, but I catch them in time to recover. “I’ll talk to you later.”

On the bus to the arena, I listen to music and get my head ready for the game. I’ve been playing fantastic, and I’d like to keep it that way. As we pull in and the bus comes to a slow stop, my phone vibrates with a text from Piper.

I’m concerned at first by the paragraph staring back at me, but when I start reading, I’m hit with nostalgia and happiness, and all the adrenaline I need to get me through the game.

She sent me a pep talk. Just like the old days. Except better, because it’s now and I’m not screwing it up this time.

SHE'S A BETTER DRIVER THAN YOU

PIPER

OVER THE NEXT TWO WEEKS, TYLER AND I SPEND EVERY NIGHT THAT HE'S not traveling together at home. We make dinner together, help Everly with homework, watch TV with Ash, one night we even go over and have a drink with Leo and Scarlett.

Living in the same house as the guy I'm dating is different than living together, but it still has a lot of perks that I could get used to.

Like how every night when it's finally bedtime, we disappear into his bedroom and stay up too late kissing and making out until we pass out in each other's arms.

Actually, I think if we didn't live in the same house, we'd see a lot less of each other. Which is why I haven't mentioned that Heather's sister left yesterday.

Tyler's free time is found in the minutes between spending evenings with Everly and his practice and game schedule. Every night is different, but that's okay by me. When we were dating and living in different states, I didn't get any of these little moments, and now I'm here for all of it.

The groan he makes every morning when his alarm goes off for his morning run. The way he always kisses my shoulder before getting out of bed. The way his face lights up every single time he walks through the front door and sees me. And how he never leaves my side without kissing me first. Even if he's just going in the other room. Those little kisses pile up inside of me filling me with such happiness and hope for our future. It's like, this is what things could be like with us. Not just now while I'm the live-in nanny, but in a future where we have a family of our own.

We haven't exactly talked about any of that, but he's been very clear that he's in this for the long haul. And so am I. I've never wanted something to work more than I want him.

Tonight we're hanging out downstairs with Ash while he plays some new video game. I'm not really paying attention. My head rests in Tyler's lap and one of his muscular arms hangs around my waist. The other arm rests at his side, fingers absently stroking my hair as he watches Ash, occasionally commenting on the game.

"Oh, no, no, no," Ash mutters, pounding the buttons on his controller harder. "Ah, fuck. I died again."

Ash drops his head back to rest on the chair and then glances over at us. "I'm happy for you two, but it's a real bummer to watch you make out all night and then go to bed alone."

Tyler's chest moves with a silent laugh. "Where's Talia been?"

"We broke up," Ash says. "I told you that."

"Yeah, but Leo says you guys are on and off all the time."

"Not this time."

"Sorry to hear that."

Ash shrugs just before the front door is flung open and Everly rushes into the room with a big smile. "Declan says I'm ready to take the test! Will you take me tomorrow?"

I sit up as Declan ambles in after her, much more composed but smiling like a proud brother. He takes a seat in an empty chair.

Ty looks to him for confirmation.

Dec nods and rests both hands on his massive thighs. He's a big guy in general. Tall and muscular, but his legs are truly impressive in size. "She's a better driver than you."

"It was an accident," Tyler insists with a whine to his voice. He glances at me with a pouty face. "I rear-ended his bike a couple of months ago. He's never going to let me forget it."

"And to think I've ridden in the car with you," I say dramatically.

The guys all laugh, but Everly draws the attention back to her.

"Will you take me tomorrow or not?" She's practically bouncing up and down with excitement.

Ty makes a low sound of regret in his throat. "Probably not tomorrow. We have the Wildcat Foundation fundraiser tomorrow night. What about sometime next week?"

“You’re gone most of the week. Pleeese?”

“I could take her,” Ash offers. “Little Sharpie and I are hanging tomorrow night anyway.”

“Same,” Declan says. “I’m not going to the event tomorrow so I could take her.”

Tyler and I are going to have a real night out while Ash stays with Ev. I love our nights in, but I’m so looking forward to dressing up and going on a real date with him.

“Thank you, guys. I appreciate it, but I will figure something out.”

Everly visibly deflates in front of us.

“What time are you done with school and stage crew?” he asks.

“Five, but they’re closed by then. I need to go during the day.”

“Right.” Tyler runs a hand over his jaw. “I have a break around noon. Can you miss an hour of school?”

They both look at me like I’m the school attendance monitor.

“I think that’s probably fine. Kids miss for appointments all the time. You’ll just need to sign her out.”

Everly squeals. A real, happy squeal that I’ve never heard come out of her sullen body.

“Thank you.” She hugs Tyler around the neck and then races out of the room.

And the smile on his face as he leans back is so happy I don’t think I realized just how much it means to him to do right by his sister until now.

The next afternoon, I’m leaving school when Tyler calls.

“Hey, I was just about to text you,” I say. “I heard about the test.”

“Total bullshit,” he says. “We waited for two hours and then I had to call it to get back.”

“I’m sorry. She understands.”

“I hope so. Are you with her now?”

“No, Everly is getting a ride home from Grace so I’m heading home to get ready.” *Home*. It’s amazing how quickly it’s started to feel like just that.

“Are you already at the house?”

“No, I’m running late.” He grunts. “Since the DMV took for-freaking-

ever, I missed a meeting that I have to make up now. I swung by the house and got my tux for tonight. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to meet you at the event."

"That's okay," I say, tamping down the hint of disappointment that we won't get to ride to the event together. "Scarlett and I are going to get ready together and then I'll just ride with them."

"I'm sorry," he says again. I can hear how genuine he is in the apology. It's laced with frustration, and that reminds me just how much he has on his plate.

"It's fine," I say cheerily. "You can make it up to me later."

He chuckles. "You can count on it."

WORTH THE PAIN

PIPER

THE EVENT IS HELD IN A ROOM AT THE ARENA. IT'S A WHISKEY AND WINE tasting with small plates of food that pair well with the alcohol. Leo says most of the older guys opt out of this one in favor of events where they get a real meal, which makes me laugh. I've seen how much food they put away, so I guess I get it.

I hang with Leo and Scarlett, tasting wines and snacking on bread and cheeses all while keeping a clear view to the door. Fifteen minutes late, he comes through the entrance adjusting his bow tie and looking so good it takes my breath away.

I walk toward him, body tingling as he gives me an appreciative once-over, smiling big when his gaze lands on my face.

"Wow, Piper. You look..." His deep voice trails off and he takes my hand and tugs me flush against him. "So fucking hot."

He kisses me hard and groans into my mouth. I forget where we are until I hear someone laugh next to us. I pull back and blush. "Ooops."

"This is why I wanted to ride over with you. I could have gotten it all out of my system." He kisses me again, quicker and softer this time.

"Do you really believe that?" I ask, smiling and wiping my lipstick off him.

"No, but I still wish I'd been there. I could have felt you up on the ride over." His arm circles my waist and his fingers dip low on my back until they're almost palming my ass.

"I'm starving." He glances around the room. "Anything good?"

"Lots of cheese, some crackers and bread, nuts." I lead us back through

the room and to one of the tasting stations.

His arm never leaves my waist as he tries different whiskeys and eats his weight in nuts and cheese. He introduces me to more of his teammates and then his coach.

“This is Piper Vaughn, my girlfriend.”

I vibrate with happiness next to him. It’s the first time he’s called me that since we’ve been back together, and it feels even better than it did then.

“You’re Tim’s niece,” Coach Miller says, and lifts his glass to take a sip.

“That’s right.”

“How’s he doing? I haven’t seen him in a couple of years. He did some skill clinics and drop-ins for a junior team I coached. Great hockey player, great guy.”

I catch him up on Tim, and Coach tells me a couple of stories from when he watched him play early in his career. Uncle Tim retired by the time I was in middle school, so I don’t remember it that well, but I love hearing stories about him.

Eventually the Wildcats’ head coach gets pulled away and Tyler and I are alone.

“Someday people are going to tell stories about you like that.”

Tyler’s brows lift up toward his hairline. “Comparing my hockey skills to your uncle will get you everywhere, baby—not that you need an advantage.”

Laughing, he pulls me off to the side of the room where Scarlett and Leo are standing.

“Having fun?” Tyler asks his teammate.

“A blast.” He looks at Scarlett. “How much longer do we have to stay?”

Scarlett elbows him and shakes her head.

“An hour?” he asks.

She smirks.

“Two?” His voice borders on a whine, and he sighs.

“We have to stay at least as long as my parents, but Mom is tired so that shouldn’t be much longer.”

“I’m starving.” He makes a sound like a growl, and a smiling Scarlett brings her lips up to meet his.

“Yeah, I need to get some real food soon or I’m going to die,” Tyler says, and brings our joined hands up to his mouth to kiss my fingers. “I see the VP of marketing. I’m going to say hi and make sure she sees me so we can split soon.”

“Coming with you,” Leo says, walking behind him.

Scarlett takes a step closer when they’re gone. “Leo hates these things. I spend more time getting ready for them than we do at the event. His agent has him signed up for so many functions, he’s getting a little grumpy.”

“Why so many?”

“His contract is up at the end of the season. She’s trying to make him seem indispensable to the team and the community. If the guys don’t make it to the playoffs, he’s afraid he’ll be traded.”

I wonder about Tyler. Is that true for him? I never asked about the terms of his contract or thought about how he could be sent somewhere else. Then what would we do? Sure, we’ve done long-distance but look at how that ended.

I’m still worrying about it forty-five minutes later when we leave, hand in hand. Leo and Scarlett took the car back, but Tyler wanted to take me to dinner and make the most of our night out.

“What do you feel like having for dinner?” he asks, scanning the street. There are several restaurants on the blocks surrounding the arena, but most are likely busy, and I don’t feel like sitting across from him in a nice restaurant. I want to kiss him and touch him and enjoy this night out. Who knows when we’ll have the chance again?

“Do you remember that time when I came to visit you in Green Bay, and we went downtown to explore and got caught in that crazy rainstorm?”

“Yeah,” he says, mouth tipping up on one side. “I had a whole day planned around the city and we didn’t get to do any of it.”

“We sat in your car talking and eating gas station food for hours.”

He nods. “Not the day I imagined for us.”

“It was perfect. I loved that day.”

“Me too.” He squeezes my hand. “You want to walk around downtown?”

“Not in these heels.”

His gaze drops to my feet, and he gives them an appreciative brow lift. “They’re worth the pain.”

“Easy for you to say when you’re not the one they’re inflicting pain on.”

“Oh, trust me. Looking at you in those shoes is painful. My dick has been trying to wrestle through my pants all freaking night.”

I laugh at the visual, and then lean in under the guise of hugging him and cop a feel. “Oh, you weren’t kidding.”

He groans. “You’re killing me, woman.”

Peering up at him, still plastered to his front, I say, “Let’s get food and take it somewhere where we can sit and talk with no one else around. I want to be able to kiss you and talk all night long. Just the two of us.”

I start to pull back, and his arms circle my waist and hold me there. “I know the perfect place.”

THIS SHACK IS BEAUTIFUL

TYLER

WE GRAB BURGERS AND FRIES, AND I DRIVE US AWAY FROM DOWNTOWN IN the general direction of home. Except I turn off onto a different road where the houses aren't quite as extravagant.

Piper doesn't seem to notice we aren't going toward Ash's house, or maybe she just doesn't care. She's had as few nights out as I have recently, and she hasn't stopped smiling all night.

She was always the social butterfly in the relationship. I prefer quiet nights with the guys, hanging out at home, chill stuff, but Piper loves a big get together or dinners out. I couldn't give a lot of those to her the last time because of the distance, and now when I'd love nothing more than to whisk her away on a tropical vacation with all our friends or even a weekend away with just the two of us, I still can't do that. At least not in the same way.

Everly is my priority. She's doing so much better. I just need to stay the course for a little longer. She'll graduate soon and, fingers crossed, get into college. Even if she decides she still wants to live with me, I won't need to look out for her in the same way I do now. Or hopefully not, anyway.

When I pull into the driveway of a large gray house with a stone front, Piper finally looks around at the surroundings.

"Where are we?"

I cut the engine and open my door. "You'll see. Come on."

She smiles and undoes her seat belt as I jog around the front of the car and help her out.

"This place is gorgeous." Her gaze lands on the For Sale sign hanging in the yard. "Whose house is this?"

“It was Jack’s a few years ago. He’s been renting it the past couple of years since he moved into his new place.”

I take her hand and we walk to the garage. I punch in the code, and it lifts.

The garage, like the rest of the house, is empty, but I lead her inside through a mud room, past a laundry room, and giant kitchen, into the living room.

“Wow. Why would he ever move?” She turns in a circle. It’s all white with dark gray accents, modern and clean.

“You’ve seen his place now. It makes this one look like a shack.”

“This shack is beautiful.” She runs her hand along the mantle above the fireplace.

“This is my favorite part,” I say, and open the big, glass sliding door that opens up to a covered sitting area outside.

It has a great wooded view—not a house in sight. But in case the landscape isn’t enough, there’s also a fireplace and spot for a TV above it, plus lots of room for couches and chairs. All the furniture is gone now, but Jack showed me some pictures from before he moved out, and I just know if this was my house, this is the place I’d want to be.

Piper walks out and rests her hands on the railing. “This is really nice.”

“There’s no pool, but the agent said there’s enough room to put a decent-sized one in right over there.” I point over her shoulder.

The breeze moves her hair around. She looks back at me, brows pulled together. The question is on her face, but I don’t give her time to ask.

“I was thinking about buying it,” I say. “What do you think?”

“Really?” Her face lights up and she glances back out at the view like she’s seeing it for the first time again, hopefully trying to picture waking up to it.

“You didn’t think I was going to live with Ash forever, did you?”

“No, but I didn’t realize you were actively looking. You...” She stops herself and bites the corner of her lip. “You and Everly would live here?”

“And you, of course. Do you like it?” I push her hair away from her face and let my fingers linger at the base of her neck.

“Like? It’s perfect for you. I can totally picture you here.”

“Us.” I rest my hand along her hip. “Do you like it for you, Pipes?”

She opens her mouth to speak, closes it, and then finally speaks. “Is now a bad time to tell you that my roommate’s sister left? I wanted to wait until after tonight to tell you. I guess I wanted to enjoy a couple more nights under

the same roof too.”

Her expression goes sheepish, and it makes me laugh. Like I care that she hasn't gone back to her place.

“Move in with me, Pipes. Not because I need help with Everly, but because I want to live with my super hot girlfriend.”

She rests a palm on my chest. I brace for disappointment. Somewhere in the back of my mind I know it's fast and impulsive. But it feels like four years too long.

Her smile starts small and grows into a wide grin that I want to kiss. “Okay.”

“Really?”

She nods. “Yes, really. I love falling asleep with you every night.”

“And waking up with me?”

“I would if your alarm went off about two hours later.”

“So this is really happening? You're moving in with me?” I am grinning like an idiot and I don't care.

“I just want to be where you are. Don't get me wrong, this is so nice and of course I want to live here with you, but I'd say yes to that regardless of where you live.”

She moves for me while I'm still basking in her answer. Piper slides her hands up my chest and slants her mouth over mine.

Sometimes I wonder what life would look like if I hadn't lost her the first time, but I'd spend another four years missing her to make her this happy now.

“Do you want to see the rest of the house?” I ask, lips still pressed against hers.

“Yes!” She pulls away, tugging me after her.

We see five bedrooms, an office, a workout room, and another living area. The house is way more space than I need, than any three people need, really, but I love the idea of growing together here—making it our own, having kids, all of it.

“Are you sure you like it? We can look at others.” It's nicer than anywhere I ever lived, Ash's house excluded, but Piper's family had money when she was growing up. Her childhood home was probably twice this size.

“It's perfect.” She turns in a circle and glances over her shoulder at me. “By the way, I will be paying rent.”

We're standing in an empty living room, nothing but blank walls and a

window that looks out into the dark night, but the view and the promise of what it could look like makes my chest tighten.

I go to her and kiss her, then back Piper up against the closest wall and slide my hand up the slit in her dress until I reach the lacy panties underneath.

She widens her stance, giving me better access to slide my fingers inside. A gasp slips past her lips as I move in and out of her in slow strokes.

Her fingers fumble for my belt and she has it undone and my pants falling to my ankles so fast. I love how much she wants me. It's a fraction of my feelings mirrored back at me.

I reach down to grab a condom from my wallet, but she stops me. "I'm on birth control."

She turns and moves her long, brown hair so I can unzip her and then she lets the red material fall to the floor. She's bra-less and only her small, matching red panties adorn her skin.

"I don't know how I survived a day without you."

She smiles. "I don't know how you did either."

Our kisses are slower and deeper as I lift her in my arms. It's the first of many times I plan to fuck her in this house, but tonight I want to cherish her in a way that makes that promise for me—no words necessary.

I push inside of her, and still with my forehead resting against hers. Piper's chest rises and falls. Her words come out in a rasp. "Oh God, why are you stopping?"

A rough chuckle escapes as I pull back a fraction to look at her. Face flushed, eyes so dark blue I feel like I'm drowning in them.

"I was trying to savor the moment, baby."

"Savor on your own time." A smirk flashes across her face.

"Yes, ma'am." I drive into her. That smirk falls and she gasps.

She clings to me as I fuck her against the wall. We eventually move to the ground where she rides me, then we switch again so I can take her from behind. Every position, every kiss, every thrust is a promise.

When she finally comes, Piper falls on her back and takes in big, deep breaths. "Wow. I think this place has the magic touch."

"That's all me, baby." I curl up next to her. Our clothes tossed in every direction around us. I bring our joined hands up above us and admire how well we fit together in every way.

I kiss her knuckles and then turn to face her. "I love you, Piper."

"I love you too."

I shake my head slowly. “I know we’ve said the words to each other before and I meant them then, but I’ve never loved you more than I do now.”

Her head falls to the side, and she stares back at me with the biggest smile on her face. She eliminates the space between us, placing her lips against mine. “Same for me.”

She props herself up on an elbow. “How long is your contract?”

“Two years, why?”

“Talking to Scarlett tonight reminded me that you could be traded.”

“Yeah. Lots of guys bounce around.” I shrug. “Does that bother you?”

“No. I meant what I said earlier. I just want to be with you. Wherever that is.”

One of our phones starts ringing from somewhere in the room.

“I think that’s yours. I’m pretty sure I left mine in the car.” She sits up and reaches for my pants, then pulls out my phone. “It’s Jack.”

She gasps and covers her chest with both hands. “Does he have cameras in here?”

Laughing, I take my phone. “I wouldn’t put it past him, but he’s probably just wondering if I made up my mind. I’ll call him back later.”

“Take it. I’m gonna grab some water and then I want to do that again but this time in the master bedroom.”

She heads for the kitchen. I accept the call and place the phone to my ear while admiring her naked backside sauntering away from me. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Tyler. It’s Jack.” His voice sends a chill down my spine. It isn’t what he says, but the tone. He sounds like he wants to murder someone. “Where are you?”

“I brought Piper—”

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter. Get home. It’s Everly.”

YOU BUSTED HIS LIP ON ACCIDENT?

PIPER

TYLER DOESN'T SPEAK AS HE DRIVES US BACK TO ASH'S AT A SPEED THAT IS well over the limit. Not that I can blame him. The little he said as we got dressed after Jack's phone call was enough to have me anxious to get there and see Everly too.

When he pulls into the driveway, Jack is outside waiting for us. River is sitting on the ground a few feet away, legs bent and elbows resting on his thighs.

"What the fuck happened?" Ty asks, peeling himself out of the car almost before it's come to a full stop. He glares at River and starts for him, but Everly's voice calls out from the front door.

"Ty." She takes off running for her brother and throws her arms around his neck.

A lump forms in my throat as she clings to him, tears falling down her cheeks. Something tells me this is the first time she's hugged him with so much need because Ty stumbles back as her body collides with his. He moves to action quickly, though, cradling her against his shoulder and running a hand down the back of her head.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yes." She pulls away as if she's just realized she's hugging him.

He ducks his head to meet her gaze, then brings his hand under her chin to get a better look at the bright red streak across her cheek.

"You piece of shit," he says so quietly and filled with so much anger that I hold my breath as he stalks toward River.

Jack intercepts with a hand to Tyler's chest.

“You fucking hit her?” He yells around Jack, still trying to get to him.

River scowls and runs his tongue along his busted lip. “She hit me first.”

Jack releases Tyler, but spins and lunges for River first. He pulls him to his feet by the front of his T-shirt.

“If I ever see you again, I will kill you, then bring you back to life and let Tyler kill you. I don’t want to see your pathetic face. Not just here, anywhere.”

River glances at Everly without moving his head.

Jack tightens his grip on the front of his T-shirt. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah.” He shrugs, and Jack lets go of him. He brings a hand to his split lip. I wonder if that’s from Everly or from Jack before we got here. “What the fuck ever. She isn’t worth it.”

“You’re just going to let him go?” Tyler asks as River gets in his car.

Jack glances at Everly, then back to Tyler. “You don’t want the cops in the middle of this.”

“He’s right,” Everly says, voice sounding stronger now that River is gone. “I’m fine.”

“He *hit* you.”

“I hit him first. Not that he didn’t deserve it.” She grits out the last part. “But he won’t come back.”

Tyler runs a hand through his hair and his shoulders sag with relief as he puts an arm around Everly. “I need a drink and then I want to know what the hell happened. Exactly what happened.”

We all start to go in, except for Jack. He heads to his car which I just now realize is parked at the curb.

“Where are you going?” I ask him.

Tyler and Everly stop and wait for his answer.

His jaw flexes. “She should get some ice on that face.”

Ash and Declan hang in the kitchen while Tyler takes Everly into the living room. With no ice pack in sight, I grab a beer from the fridge. I hand it to Everly.

“Have anything stronger?” she asks.

“It’s for your face.”

She rests it against the side of her cheek with a small wince. “Thank you.”

Her gaze scans me still in my dress. “I’m sorry I ruined your guys’ night out. You look so pretty.”

Tyler cuts in as I’m reassuring her.

“What was he doing here? Ash said they didn’t even know he was coming over.” Tyler stripped out of his jacket and the top two buttons of his shirt are undone. Ash pours him a glass of whiskey, but Tyler just holds it in one hand on the top of his thigh.

I don’t know if I should stay or let these two talk in private, but before I can decide, Tyler reaches for me, his gaze never leaving Everly. I drop to the cushion next to him, and he presses his leg against mine as if he wants the smallest bit of reassurance and support for this conversation.

“He called and wanted to come over. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

Ty’s brows raise.

“Okay, fine. I knew sneaking him in was wrong, but if I’d asked Ash or Declan, they’d have called you and then wanted to chaperone the whole thing.”

His jaw flexes, but he nods. “Do I want to know why you hit him?”

“Probably not.”

He takes a drink and then says, “What happened?”

She’s quiet for a moment, then blows out a breath. “It was an accident.”

“You busted his lip on *accident*?”

She rolls her eyes. “We were messing around. He kept pushing my head down.” She motions toward her crotch.

I can almost feel Tyler wince at the image.

“He had a tight grip on my hair, and I couldn’t get up, so I swung my hand to get him to let go, but I missed and got him in the face.”

“And then he hit you?” The words fall out of my mouth.

“Well, first he ranted on about how I was too young and stupid to know what I was doing, and how no one was going to want to date a high school chick that couldn’t even give a decent blow job.” She looks me dead in the eye. “I know how to give a blow job, thank you very much, I just didn’t feel like bobbing up and down on his small dick.”

Tyler groans, places his drink on the coffee table, and runs two fingers over his forehead.

“I said that last part to him, and he got pissed and slapped me.” She

shrugs. “It’s true though.”

She removes the beer bottle from her face. It’s still red but it isn’t as puffy.

“He shouldn’t have hit you,” I tell her. “No matter what you said or did.”

“Yeah,” she says in a tone that makes me wonder if she really believes that. Then she sighs. “I’m tired. Can I go to bed?”

“Yeah. We can talk more in the morning.”

She gets to her feet and Tyler does too. She hands over the beer. “I’m sorry I ruined your night out. You clean up nice, bro.”

“I’ll always come if you need me. Got it?”

She nods. “Am I grounded for life?”

He chuckles softly. “No, but if I find out you’re talking to that prick again, I will—”

“I won’t. I promise. I already blocked his number.”

“Good.” He lifts his arm, and she steps into his side for a small hug.

When she leaves the room, he falls back on the couch and lets his head drop back.

“She’ll be okay.” I run my hand through the hair at the nape of his neck.

He closes his eyes and leans into my touch. “I’m so glad she hit him. I wish it’d been me.”

Ash pokes his head in. “I’m heading to bed, but I want to make sure everyone is good.”

Ty opens his eyes and nods. “Yeah. I think so.”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I didn’t hear him come in.”

“Not on you, man,” Tyler says. And I don’t have to wonder if he’s putting it all on him instead. I know he is.

NO TALLY. NO JUDGMENT.

TYLER

WE HAVE AN AWAY GAME ON THURSDAY, AND I SPEND THE DAYS LEADING UP to it feeling off and not sure why. Other than a shiner that Piper helps her cover with makeup, Everly is fine. Or that's the story everyone keeps telling me. Despite the good conversation we had the night of the 'blow job decking incident' as Ash has started calling it (cringe), we haven't really spoken since then.

Sure, we do the usual small talk, but neither of us seems to know how to navigate things anymore.

On Wednesday, Piper and Everly are sitting at the dining room table with a stack of college brochures next to Piper's open laptop. I kiss Piper and then take a seat next to Everly.

"Heard anything back yet?" I ask my sister.

"Not yet." She shakes her head. "But Piper got into Madison."

"Wisconsin?" My gaze snaps to Piper.

She looks away quickly as she responds, "I applied to a bunch of places just so I'd have options."

"Their campus looks gorgeous, and you'd be close to Milwaukee which is so cool," Everly adds.

"Congratulations." The information catches me off guard, but I wrap both arms around her in a loose hug. I'm sweaty from working on my car in the garage.

She waves it off but doesn't pull away as I lean in for another kiss. I don't press on Madison, for now.

"What about you?" I ask Everly. "Do you have a favorite yet?"

“I’m going to whichever one will take me, assuming any of them will.”

“You’re gonna get in somewhere,” Piper reassures her. I hope she’s right. I think it hit me this week how important it is for her to do something. I’m not saying it has to be college, but since she doesn’t seem to know what it is she does want to do yet, then I think college is the safest bet.

Grace comes over after dinner and the two of them spread out in the living room to do homework. Piper pulls me upstairs with a knowing smile.

“She’s not going anywhere,” she says once we’re in my room. I leave the door open and can faintly hear them talking downstairs.

I lay on the bed with my back resting against the headboard. “I can’t shake this awful feeling. Not just about Everly. It’s just everything.”

She sits next to me and curls up with her head resting on my chest. “You have a lot going on.”

“Yeah,” I hum my agreement at the same time Piper’s phone pings.

“That’s going to be Heather. I promised her I’d swing by and hang out for a little bit,” she says without checking. She hasn’t seemed to want to leave Everly’s side any more than I have this week, but since I’m going to be gone the next two days, I encouraged her to take the night off and get out. She never complains about how we rarely go out (and the one time we did we came back to chaos), but I don’t want to lose her as my girlfriend because I hired her to be the nanny.

“Go ahead. I’m going to shower and go to bed early.”

She moves onto her stomach so she can look at me. Her face is inches from mine. “Can I wake you up when I get home?”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t,” I tell her honestly.

She wiggles closer until her lips touch mine. I could get lost in her kisses right now, but if I do then she might never leave.

I lean forward to kiss her quick and hard, then sit up and force her to her feet.

She lingers another moment, stealing another kiss. “Okay. I’m going. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will.” I absolutely won’t. She’s been a saint, and obviously the lines are blurred on what she does for Everly, and what she feels like she should do as my girlfriend, but I think the shit with Everly has exceeded what any rational person would sign up for on either front.

We split our away games, winning in Toronto and losing in Vancouver. The road was good to clear my head a bit. Everly is staying at Grace's house tonight, and I'm anxious to get back, kiss my girl, and show her how much I missed her. Her old roommates are having a party, and she's been torturing me with dress and shoe options the entire time I've been gone.

I'm sitting next to Declan on the plane back to Minnesota. He has a tablet in hand, watching video of his time on the ice, but when I call Everly to check in, he pops his head over.

"Hey, Little Sharpie."

"Hi, Declan." I don't miss how her greeting to him is way friendlier than the one I got.

With him listening in, she gives us a few more minutes of her attention before she says, "I have to go. I'll talk to you later."

"I don't know how you do it," I say to Declan when she hangs up. "You're the teenage whisperer."

He grins. "I was a hellion at that age. She just wants to be taken seriously and feel like she has some control when everything feels out of control, you know?"

"Well, I know I've said it before, but I really appreciate everything you've done for her. She looks up to you a lot."

He nods slowly and works his jaw back and forth. "I'm no role model, but I'm happy to help. We all are."

A rueful laugh escapes my lips.

He drops the tablet to his lap and sits straighter in his seat. "I'm serious. We're a team, a family. I don't know about you but it's a hell of a lot better family than I had growing up. So it's no big deal, Ty. If you need something, we're here. No tally. No judgment. We're just here. We look out for one another and we do it without a second thought because we're all used to doing what needs to be done."

His words silence me. I give him a nod and he goes back to his tablet while I close my eyes and mull over everything he said.

I doze off and wake to my name being called, and an elbow to my bicep.

"Wake up, Ty."

Sitting up, I look around. "Are we back already?"

Damn, it feels like we just took off.

"No," Declan says. "They're grounding us in Spokane."

"What?" I crane my neck toward the front. "Why?"

“They have to check something on the plane. Not sure. Looks like we won’t be back until morning.”

“No.” I get up from my seat and move up to talk to Jack.

“Hey, Rook.” He tips his head in greeting.

I skip all niceties. “Can’t we take another plane back tonight?”

“Everyone’s tired,” he says. “We weren’t going to get back until late anyway. Is Everly expecting you?”

“No.” I shake my head. “She’s staying with a friend.”

He lifts a brow.

“A girl friend. She’s good, but I was supposed to stop by a party with Piper.”

“She’ll understand.”

He’s right. She will, but I hate that I’m constantly having to disappoint her or change things up. Everything has to revolve around me and my schedule and my sister, and it feels like four years ago all over again.

WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH US?

PIPER

I WAKE UP WITH TYLER'S BODY WRAPPED AROUND ME, AND I SMILE EVEN before opening my eyes. I can tell by his breathing that he's still asleep, so I turn in his arms and drop my mouth to his neck.

He doesn't shave during away games, one of those weird superstition things, I think, so depending on how long he's gone, he always comes back with a varying degree of facial hair somewhere between sexy stubble to the beginnings of a beard.

I have no idea what time he got in last night or this morning, and I should let him sleep but I've missed him so much and I have to go pick up Everly soon.

I press my body tighter against him and suck lightly on the warm skin just above his collarbone. In a flash, he has me pinned underneath him. A sexy, sleepy grin pulls at his mouth.

"Morning, baby." His voice is thick. "Miss me?"

"Yes." I run my hands up his chest. "I had a whole 'shove you into the corner of the bar and have my wicked way with you' thing planned last night."

A look that I can only describe as guilt crosses his face. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I say with a light laugh. "Heather drank too much, and I ended up holding her hair back for an hour in the bathroom."

The playful and sexy glint still doesn't return to his eyes.

"I could shove you into the corner of the shower instead."

He nods and we get up and head to the bathroom. We strip out of our clothes and step into the warm water.

“What time did you get home?” I ask.

“Around seven.”

“You have to be exhausted. Do you have the day off?”

“Yeah, but I need to go to the realtor’s office to sign some stuff for the house. What time is Everly coming home?”

“I’m supposed to pick her up at eleven. She and Declan are doing another practice drive before her test on Monday.”

“Oh shit.” He rubs body wash all over himself. “I forgot.”

I lather up myself and then run my hands along his sudsy body. “That’s okay. You don’t need to do anything but pick her up and take her.”

He nods and lets out a slow breath.

After showering with my best sexy, cheer-up seduction, Tyler leaves looking a smidge happier. I know everything that’s going on is wearing on him. Even Ash, who always seems to be peppy and upbeat, is quieter when I get back with Everly.

She goes up to her room, but I go to the kitchen where Ash is pouring a cup of coffee.

“Long night?” I ask, reaching for a mug.

He pours my coffee before answering. “Long month.”

“Is it always like this?”

“What do you mean?” He leans against the counter and takes a sip from his mug.

“I’m not even sure how to describe it. You all just seem extra stressed lately.”

“Final months of the season are a push. We’re playing so inconsistently I think it has us all on edge more than normal.” He stares at me for a beat. “It’s his first year. It would be stressful even if everything else in his life were going perfectly.”

“I just want to take some of that weight off him, but I think I accidentally added to it last night.”

His brows pull together in question, so I tell him about how Tyler was supposed to meet up with me after they got back last night.

“That shit happens all the time. Not that exact scenario, but something in

our schedule is always changing. He's going to have to get used to that. So will you."

He says the last part as Tyler is coming in from the garage.

"Hey." Ash tips his head to him. "Are you officially a homeowner yet?"

"Closing is tomorrow." Tyler looks at me. "Ev home?"

"Yeah, she's upstairs."

"Cool. I asked Declan if I could take her for her final practice drive."

"Oh, okay. Do you want me to come?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Take the day off."

He blazes past me to make a protein drink, and I stand there trying to decide if he's being considerate or pushing me away.

Everly gets her license Monday and that night a bunch of us go to Jack's for a little mini celebration. Ash, Declan, and Jack are teaching Everly how to play poker while Tyler and I sit on the couch with Scarlett and Leo.

Tyler has one arm thrown around behind me and a beer in hand, but he's barely drinking. He's barely speaking, too.

Scarlett is on the other side of me. Leo's holding the hand closest to him, his thumb gliding over the diamond on her left finger as he watches her so adoringly.

"I can't believe you're going to be moving," Scarlett whines. "I love having you across the street."

"We won't be that far away." I lean back a little more against Tyler at the same time he sits up.

"I'm gonna check on Everly," he says, but he goes toward the kitchen instead of where I can see his sister sitting in the dining room.

Scarlett doesn't comment on his sudden departure, and I excuse myself to go after him.

He's in the kitchen, both hands braced on the counter. He looks up when I enter.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry. I'm shit company tonight."

"It's fine. What's going on?"

He works his jaw back and forth. "I didn't sign on the house today. I'm

not sure it's the right time. I asked Jack to give me a couple days."

"Okay."

"That's not all." A muscle in his cheek flexes. "I talked to my mom today. No, actually I yelled at her. Or her voicemail, anyway."

"Oh." I go to him.

He pushes off the counter and stands beside me, body brushing against my side. "Everly told me today she hasn't talked to her in weeks."

"You thought they were still in touch?"

"I know it's been spotty, but I didn't realize she'd just gone silent," he says as he rakes a hand through his hair. "I don't get it. I mean, when I left home, it was different. I was staying with another family, and I didn't run off because I was getting into trouble at school." He shakes his head. "She just doesn't care. Not about me and not about Everly. What the hell is wrong with us?"

"Nothing." I wrap my arms around him as my heart breaks for him. "This is about her. You are amazing. So is Everly."

I squeeze tighter and he drops a quick kiss to the top of my head. "We have a couple of days off next week. I'm going to take Everly to visit her top college choices."

"Oh, that's great. She'll love that." I tip my head back to look at him and then lift onto my toes to place a kiss on his lips. "You're a good man and a great brother."

He hums. "Today, maybe, but ninety percent of the time I just feel like I'm a bad substitute for the parent she deserves."

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

"I'm always letting you or Everly down. Most of the time I'm not any more reliable than my mother."

"Hey." I smack him playfully. "It isn't the same."

"It isn't?" he asks. "I'm gone half the time, and even when I'm here, I can barely find time to do stuff with her or you."

"The difference is that we feel your presence even when you're not here."

"Is that really enough?"

"I love you, Tyler. That includes all the things that make up who you are, your insane hockey schedule, and the fact you're basically raising your younger sister. So, yes, it's enough. You're enough." I pour every bit of emotion I can into the words, but if they soothe him, I can't tell.

He doesn't say anything back, but he wraps himself around me, like he

seems to be doing more and more lately. Like I'm the anchor holding him steady.

AIN'T THAT THE TRUTH

TYLER

THE MADISON CAMPUS IS NICE. REALLY NICE. I NEVER HAD ASPIRATIONS TO go to college, but even I can admit this place would have been cool.

We get a tour from a college senior named Maddie who is so bubbly and enthusiastic I'm afraid she's going to scare off Ev, but my sister matches her excitement as we see dorms and class buildings. I barely recognize her, but it's good to see her like this. It's the third campus we've seen this week, and the one she seems the most in to.

At the end of the tour, she and Maddie follow each other on Instagram, and then Everly and I head off to explore on our own.

"Do you want to grab something to eat?" she asks.

"Nah. Unless you do."

She stops on the sidewalk in front of me. "What is up with you? You barely said a word the entire tour."

"Nothing. I'm good." I point to the bookstore up ahead. "Let's stop in there."

"You just passed up food. Something is clearly wrong."

Chuckling, I hold open the door for Everly to walk in ahead of me. "I'm all right, just sick of cafeterias and fast food."

What I wouldn't give for some of Piper's pasta right now.

As if her mind is on her too, Everly asks, "How come Piper didn't come with us?"

"She had to work."

"Did you even ask her to come?"

I hold the door open for Everly to walk in ahead of me. "No, because she

has to work. She can't just take off every time one of us needs something from her."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "You broke up with her, didn't you? Or she broke up with you."

"What? No. Where is all this coming from?"

"Things have been so weird lately. I can feel it. You guys both seem so serious and stressed. You don't laugh or go out anywhere together. Did you have a fight or something?"

"No, nothing like that. We're both just busy, Ev."

She nods. We circle around the large bookstore. She picks out a T-shirt and I grab an extra one for Piper. She hasn't mentioned coming to Madison for grad school again, but when I get back, I'm going to tell her I think she should go.

When I was eighteen, I knew that she deserved more, and I couldn't give it to her, so I walked away. Four years later, and I still want to give her more than I seem capable of right now. I want to be able to give her so much more than the stolen moments between everything else.

I pay for our stuff, and we step back outside. "Is there anything else you want to see?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I like it. It's a great campus." She says all that in a way that doesn't convince me she's decided to come here.

"It's not too far away. You could still visit on weekends and holidays."

She whirls around and faces me. "Is it because of me? Did Piper decide dealing with me was too much? Is that why you're pushing me to come to Madison, too?"

"She didn't come because I didn't ask her. That's it. Okay?" I squeeze her shoulder. "And I thought you were excited about Madison. You were saying how awesome the city is and all that."

"It is." She glances around. "And this campus is beautiful, but I was sort of thinking I'd like to stay closer to you."

I'm quiet as I wrap my brain around that.

"I will move out or live in the dorms. You won't have to worry about me."

"I'm always going to worry about you," I say. "Especially if you're living in a dorm. Which school are you thinking about?"

“I think I’d like to stay local and go to Whittaker. Grace is going there, and I like seeing you more often.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner? I just dragged you around for the past few days to places you weren’t even interested in.”

“It isn’t often I get to go on a road trip with you, and I thought maybe if I saw some other campuses, I could convince myself to go somewhere else so that you and Piper could work things out.”

“Piper and I are fine.”

“Then why isn’t she here?” Ev pushes with a whine.

“Because...” I run a hand through my hair. “You and I have a lot going on and I don’t want to dump more on her. Piper has her own stuff going on, and she needs room to do that without us getting in the way. I don’t want her to feel like she has to be with us all the time. She’s looking after you and dating me. It complicates things a little. She needs a break. She’s not that much older than you.”

“She’s the same age as you.”

“Yeah, but as much as she likes you, Ev, she’s not your sister. It’s different.”

“I don’t think Piper looks at it like that,” she says. “She never makes me feel like she doesn’t want me around or like I’m a burden.”

“That doesn’t mean she doesn’t feel it. It just means she’s responsible and a decent fucking human.” I’m pretty sure that’s what good parenting looks like. Something Everly and I don’t know a lot about.

“Oh.” Everly’s brows tug together like she hadn’t thought about it like that.

Now I feel like a jerk because of course Piper adores Everly. I just don’t want her to expect more than Piper might be willing to give after the whole nanny-thing is done. We haven’t talked about it. It’s a conversation I’m not sure how to navigate. When Piper and I first started talking again, I still thought there was a chance Everly would go back home. I didn’t see this as a long-term thing. But now, I know she needs me to be the steady in her life. Not until she graduates, but always. And that’s a lot to ask of the woman I’m dating.

“Piper is the best,” I tell her. “I love how well you two get along, and that won’t change when she’s no longer keeping an eye on you, but let’s not abuse how giving and awesome she is because I’d like to keep her.”

I get the smallest smile. “Does this mean you’re not breaking up with her

then?”

“What?” The sentence makes my brain hurt. “Of course, I’m not breaking up with her. Why would you think that?”

“You’ve been pushing her away all week. Every time she asks to come along, you tell her no. Like with driving or when you took me to Grace’s the other night. Or how you didn’t invite her to come with us. She looked really sad when we were leaving.”

I think back over it, trying to see it with fresh eyes. “I was trying to give her time off.”

“From spending time with her boyfriend? If it were reversed, would you want to have time off?”

My jaw drops, and I suddenly feel like a giant asshole.

“Just realizing you screwed up?” Ev asks with a smirk.

Well, fuck.

“See?” She shoves a pointy finger in the middle of my chest. “You need me around as much as I need you.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” I wrap an arm around her shoulders. “Come on, let’s go home.”

LET ME CLARIFY

PIPER

EVERLY AND I WILL BE BACK IN ABOUT AN HOUR. CAN WE TALK?

“He’s going to break up with me,” I say after I read the text from Tyler. My heart drops into my stomach.

“What?” Scarlett’s eyes widen.

“He wants to talk when he gets home.” I hold up my phone, and she and Jade lean in to read it.

“I think you’re reading too much into that,” Jade says.

“Maybe. I can’t help it. It feels so similar to the last time. He’s pushing me away, and he has so much on his plate I almost don’t blame him. I’m one more commitment he doesn’t have time for right now.”

“You are amazing, and he’s lucky to have you.” Jade points a finger at me to punch her point.

“She’s right,” Scarlett adds. “And all the guys are stressed right now. It’s that time of year. They’ll get through it, and so will we.”

She reaches over and takes my hand.

“Aww.” Jade smirks. “This is some serious WAGs love. I almost feel like I’m missing out.”

“I’m sorry. This was supposed to be a fun night to celebrate you and Leo and his contract.” I lift my glass. “To another eight years in Minnesota.”

My friend’s face lights up with happiness and relief. “Thank God. Can you imagine me trying to keep up with this one from another state?”

She tips her head toward Jade, who smiles. “I’m practically married. I’ll

be old and boring in no time.”

“When is the actual wedding?” I ask Jade as I plaster on a happy smile for my friends. She’s been documenting the whole engagement process in her magazine articles, but otherwise doesn’t talk about it much.

“Who knows,” Jade says. “My editor is so happy with the followers and engagement we’re getting online from my articles that I think I can milk this for at least another year.”

“And things with Sam are good?”

“Yeah.” Jade shrugs. “I’ve been working a lot, which has been good for us.”

“Spending less time together is better for your relationship?” Scarlett asks her.

“I have never been one of those people who wants to spend every second of the day with the person I’m dating. I like my independence too much.” Jade looks at me. “Maybe that’s what Tyler is feeling.”

“I don’t know. When things are good between us, he’s possessive and greedy.” My body tingles. I can almost feel his fingers around my neck lightly applying pressure as he tells me over and over that we belong together.

God, the more I think about it the less upset I feel and instead I’m angry. We do belong together. Why when things get tough does he lose sight of that?

“He’s had a lot going on. He probably just needs a reminder that you’re a goddess,” Scarlett says.

“How do I remind him of that?”

“Oh, I think you know.” Jade smirks and gives me a slow once-over that feels downright sensual. She laughs, and in case I didn’t pick up her hint, she says, “Take off all your clothes and lie on top of him.”

“Sex?” Scarlett asks with a snort. “Your answer to this is sex?”

“I’m sorry,” Jade says with a roll of her eyes. “Let me clarify. Lots of sex. Repeatedly until he can’t think of anything else.”

She looks from me to Scarlett. “This isn’t that hard of a concept, ladies. I do it all the time.”

I laugh. Small laughter that builds. “I’m going to seduce him until he forgets he wants to break up with me?”

“Oh. I have just the thing!” She goes to her purse and pulls out a lacy, white...something. I’m not even sure.

Scarlett snatches it from her. “You were carrying this in your purse? For what purpose?”

“I got it from a bridal boutique. My next article is all about the honeymoon.” She waggles her brows.

“God, your job is awesome,” I mutter.

“Right?” She smiles.

“It is pretty.” Scarlett holds it up against her.

Leo jogs down the stairs. His steps slow and he pauses, brows lifted toward his hairline, as he takes in his fiancée holding up the white lace against her body.

“Hey,” he draws out, not taking his eyes off Scarlett.

She drops the lace, and he just keeps staring at her like he’s in a trance.

“I think we’ve made our point.” She tosses the lingerie to me. “It’s worth a shot.”

“You can thank me later,” Jade says. She grabs another white lacy number from her purse and hands it to Scarlett. “You can both thank me later.”

An hour later I head back across the street. I pull at the lacy material underneath my sweatshirt. Jade insisted I put it on before going over so I could attack him the second I see him.

I’m nervous. Not about the lingerie, but that he’s going to break up with me or say we need space before I can distract him with it. And even if it works, I can’t keep his mouth occupied forever. Or can I?

The downstairs is quiet. I head straight up to my room. The shower is going so I slip out of my jeans and sweatshirt and pull on a dress that will be easier to rip off in front of him.

Oh, God, what am I doing?

The water in the shower goes off and I check my reflection in the mirror one last time and take a steadying breath. “Here goes nothing.”

I cross through the steamy bathroom and into Tyler’s room. When he spots me in his doorway, a smile tugs at his lips. “Hey, I didn’t know you were back.”

“I just got here.” My voice shakes. I stay in my spot just inside his room.

He drops the towel from around his waist and opens a dresser drawer for clothes. Gosh, he’s beautiful. The muscles in his back and arms work as he pulls on a pair of athletic pants.

“I missed you. I got you something.” He grabs something off the top of

the dresser and throws it to me.

I unfold the T-shirt to see the University of Wisconsin-Madison name and mascot on the front. “Did she decide on Madison?”

“Nah, she wants to stay close and go to the same college as her friend Grace, but we did the tour, and it seems like a great college. The tour guide even mentioned how good their education department is.”

So, this gift was to convince me to go to Madison, not celebrate Everly. My heart dips in my chest.

Tyler goes for his bed, eyeing me when I still haven’t moved.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

This is it.

I swallow down some confidence and do my best strut toward him. “Perfect.”

When I get to the side of his bed, I drop the T-shirt to the floor and then reach down and pull the dress up and over my head in a quick, swift motion.

His eyes bulge and his back goes straight. “Well, hello, wet dreams.”

I resist the urge to move and let him take in every inch of my body in this seriously amazing lingerie. His throat works and his gaze finally makes it back to my face. That’s my cue.

I climb onto the bed and straddle his hips. “You’re not dreaming. I missed you too.”

His hands caress my waist, and he drags his long fingers over the white material. “I spent so much time thinking about us while I was gone.”

My pulse races as I watch his green eyes lighten. He looks like he’s just about to speak again, so I crush my lips to his and fight the tears stinging the back of my eyelids.

His shock only lasts a second before he’s meeting the kiss with everything he has. My seduction attempt quickly turns into his show as he flips us so he’s on top. Then again, a good seduction should push him to action so maybe I’ve won after all.

I don’t care. As his hands roam over the lingerie and his tongue tangles with mine, I just know that I will do whatever it takes to show him how perfect we are together. He might not have tried to make a relationship work with other people while we were apart, but I did. And although my attempts were half-hearted, I have to believe that if someone else would have come along and made me feel even half as alive as he does, I would have jumped at another chance at happiness.

“How do I get this thing off?” he asks, nipping at my lower lip and running his big hands along the lacy material at my stomach.

I lean back and pull the straps down one by one. He buries his head in my neck and breathes me in and something locks into place.

I get it. I understand what’s happening. I’m embarrassed it took me as long as it did. Tyler doesn’t want to break up with me. He never did. Not four years ago and not now. He thinks he isn’t capable of being what I need or deserve or... I don’t even know because it blows my mind.

He’s always the first one to give up what he wants or needs for the people he loves. He thinks I’m giving up going to a great college because he’s here and going means we’d be long-distance...again.

The realization of what he’s doing is as annoying as it is touching. We. Belong. Together.

And he damn well knows it, but still he’s doing it again—making decisions for me based on what he thinks I want when what I want is him. What I *need* is him.

That’s why he brought me back the college T-shirt and is trying to push me away. He wants me to have everything.

Stupid, stubborn, amazing man. Everything is nothing without him.

After a world-class performance, thank you very much Jade for the inspiration, I lie next to Tyler waiting for him to start the talk he said we needed to have.

Knowing he’s pushing me away for what he perceives as my benefit, doesn’t make it any easier to figure out how to stop him. In fact, I’d say it’s harder because no matter what I say, he probably won’t believe me. Which means I need to show him how great we are instead of telling him. He just needs a little reminder. Or a lot of little reminders.

“You said you wanted to talk,” I say by way of guiding us to the topic.

“Yeah.” He shifts.

I sit up and place my hand over his heart. I wish I could zap him with my touch, get through his stubborn head and make him understand just how much he means to me. “But before you say what I think you’re going to say, can you just not?”

One dark brow lifts and his lips curve up.

“It’s a rare week that you don’t have any away games, Everly’s rehearsal schedule is intense leading up to the show, and I have a big week at school. I’m running lessons every day this week.” My stomach clenches with nerves

at the reminder of that. “It’s just been a lot lately and I’m craving a little calm, so please, can we save any serious conversations until Friday and spend this week enjoying each other in all the moments in between the chaos?”

He cups the back of my head and lets his fingers glide down over my hair. “Yeah, Pipes. Whatever you need.”

What I need is to figure out how to use every second of this week to make him realize that the best thing for the both of us is to be together.

KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT AND DON'T MESS IT UP

TYLER

“HOW OFTEN DO YOU AND SCARLETT HAVE SEX?”

Leo's brows raise and Declan almost spits out his beer.

Ash cackles and rubs his hands together. “Finally, some good happy hour conversation.”

The five of us are at Wild's after a meeting at the arena. Piper and Everly are still at school. Everly has had long rehearsals all week leading up to the theater performance tomorrow night.

“Hit a dry spell, Rookie?” Jack asks with a smirk.

“No, the opposite. I can't keep her off me. We've had sex six times today.”

Ash chuckles and makes a low whistle. “Damn.”

Everyone else looks to Leo. Instead of answering my question, he deflects. “No wonder you were slow on the ice.”

He isn't wrong. I was exhausted this morning.

“Look I'm not complaining, I just want to know if this is normal when you live together or if Piper is using sex to avoid talking.” I know the answer, or at least I think I do, but I need confirmation, which from the look on Leo's face, I just got.

“That sounds like the perfect relationship to me. Keep your mouth shut and don't mess it up,” Jack says.

Ash leans forward on his elbows. “Normally I would agree, but I feel like I have a vested interest in this relationship. What exactly is she avoiding talking about?”

“Going to Madison for grad school and me breaking up with her again.”

“What?” all four guys ask in unison. Their outrage makes me smile. They like Piper, too.

“Relax. I’m not breaking up with her, but I think she thinks I am.”

“I don’t follow,” Leo says.

I tell them about how I was giving her space after everything went down with Everly and River, and how I’ve been encouraging her to go to Madison because it’s the best. “She thinks I’m pushing her away like I did last time.”

They all still look angry on her behalf.

“I’m not.”

“So tell her that,” Leo says plainly.

“I’ve been trying all week, but she asked if we could have some time to just enjoy without all the heavy, serious stuff.”

“Ah, now I see. She’s using all this”—Ash waves a hand in front of his chest—“to distract you.”

“Shoot her a text,” Declan offers.

“And miss out on another opportunity for sex?” Jack lifts a brow. “This is why you’re single.”

Declan lifts his middle finger from around his beer to flip off our captain. “I’m single because I want to be.”

“At first, I didn’t understand, or I thought she just missed me a whole bunch, but once I figured it out, I decided to go along with it for a little longer.”

“Can’t blame you there. Six times a day. Props.” Ash raises his hand for a high five.

I slap his hand, but that isn’t why I’ve put off talking to her.

“No, not because of that. I needed a little time to get things in order.” I pull the ring box from my pocket and set it on the middle of the table. “I’m going to ask Piper to marry me.”

“Holy shit.” Ash chokes as he stares down at the engagement ring.

The guys congratulate me, and Jack decides we need another round to celebrate. I follow him up to the bar.

“I’m sorry about the house.” I officially withdrew my offer yesterday. It was hard to let go, but I think I made the right decision.

He shakes it off. “Don’t be. I can find another renter.”

“I thought a lot about it. Everly and I didn’t have people we could count on growing up. It isn’t easy for either of us to ask for help or even accept it when it’s freely given. I don’t want to take her away from that.”

A small smile tilts up one side of his mouth. “Admit it, you don’t want to give up the free homework help.”

I laugh. It feels good.

The drinks come and Jack pushes one toward me. “Congratulations. I’m happy for you and damn glad to have you as a friend and teammate. And the house will be waiting for you.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Shut up and drink your drink, Rookie. The house will be waiting for you. You decide you want a different one, then I’ll sell it, but until then, consider it yours in theory.”

“Thanks, Jack.”

He smiles as he tosses back the liquor.

An hour later, we head to the school to watch the Park Academy theater performance.

Piper waves from where she’s saving our seats. I go in first to sit next to her. We get more than a few looks from parents and students as we take up nearly an entire row.

“Hey,” she says with a shy smile on her lips. She hesitates and then leans forward and kisses me. She’s nervous and I don’t know if it’s for Everly or because after this she’ll have no more excuses to avoid talking to me.

I pull her closer and deepen the kiss.

She pulls back as the lights flicker. “It’s just about to start.”

I gotta admit, I don’t spend a lot of time watching what’s happening on stage. I’ve got a diamond ring in my pocket, and the love of my life sitting next to me. I’m a little bit distracted.

Besides, Everly isn’t actually on stage except between scenes where she helps move props and backdrops. I reach over about halfway through and take Piper’s hand, intertwining my fingers through hers. She seems to relax a little more after that.

As far as high school plays go, this one isn’t bad. At the end, when the stage crew finally comes out to take their bows, Piper and I stand and clap for Everly. All the guys join in, yelling and whooping. Making a damn scene, but I love that she has all these people ready to cheer her on.

Everly’s face turns red, and she gives a little eye roll, but she’s smiling.

As the applause dies down, Ash leans over. “Tell me why we came to see a play that our girl wasn’t actually in?”

“Because that’s what family does,” Jack says, eyes still on the stage.

“They show up.”

The guys and I head back to the house with Everly in tow. Piper drove separately, and when I tried to get her to leave her car for the night, she gave me some bullshit excuse about needing to do something in her class.

The closer it comes to proposing, the more nervous I am that she isn't actually afraid that I'm going to break up with her, and instead is about to break up with me. Maybe she wanted to wait until after Everly's big night.

“I'm so proud of you,” I say to Everly when we get to the house.

She smiles. “I know, I know. Can I go celebrate with my friends now?”

“You're not going to stay and celebrate with us?” Ash holds a hand to his chest and pretends to be shocked.

“Yeah, of course,” I say. “Do you need a ride?”

She bites her lip. “I was hoping I could take your car.”

Ash barks out a laugh next to me. “And so it begins.”

I hold up keys from my pocket.

“You're really gonna let me take your car?” Her eyes go big with excitement.

“No way, but I thought you could take your car.”

Her brows furrow and then she whips her head around, finally noticing the little, red Mercedes at the curb.

“Oh my God!” she squeals so high that it makes my eyes squeeze shut in response.

She takes off for it, circling around with her hands over her mouth. Eventually she throws open the driver's side door and sits inside. She runs her hand over the steering wheel.

I don't think a gift has ever felt this good. I walk over and she rolls down the window.

“How do I look?”

“Dangerous,” I say. “Be careful.”

“I will. I will.”

“I'm serious. No speeding, no texting and driving, and wear a seat belt at all times.”

“I promise.” She gets out of the car and hugs me. “Thank you.”

“Nice wheels, Little Sharpie.” Declan steps up and eyes her car with a whistle.

“Want to be my first passenger?”

“Hell yes,” he says.

I step back and watch Everly and Declan take off. When they come back, Piper is behind them.

“Tyler bought me a car,” Everly gets out and runs to Piper, then drags her back over to see it.

I thought about taking Piper with me to pick it out, but then I thought it’d be way more fun and unexpected when I take her to pick out her own.

After Everly has shown Piper every inch of the car, she finally leaves to meet her friends.

“Be careful,” I yell after her.

“Ah, they grow up so fast, don’t they?” Ash tosses an arm around my shoulder.

Declan steps up on the other side of me. “You look like you need a drink.”

“Definitely,” I agree.

Inside we raid the fridge and then the liquor cabinet. I’m just about to pull Piper off to the side to talk to her when there’s a knock at the door.

“Arrested already, you think?” Ash asks with a big grin.

“I can’t even joke about it,” I say. I’m going to have a pit in my stomach until she makes it home tonight.

Laughing, Ash heads to the front door. Declan sets up for beer pong and Jack pours a row of shots.

“Got a minute?” I ask Piper.

Her bottom lip quivers as she nods. “Yeah. I need to say something first, though.”

“All right.” Fuck, I’m nervous all of the sudden.

Ash comes back in, a serious expression on his face. “Ty, the door is for you.”

“For me? Who is it?”

A woman steps into the room behind him. One I haven’t seen in far too long.

“Mom?”

I DON'T KNOW YOU

PIPER

TYLER'S FACE GOES ASHEN AS HIS MOM STEPS CLOSER. I NOTICE THAT neither of them makes any move to hug the other.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

"Everly invited me to her play, but I got held up at work." Her gaze moves past him and takes in the house. "This is where she's been staying?"

I see it from her perspective. The beer pong, the shots on the counter, these four big burly hockey guys. Right now, it doesn't look like the homey environment that it is.

"Uhhh... yeah." Tyler rubs at the back of his neck. "My apartment wasn't big enough for the two of us."

"Mom?" Everly's voice snaps all our attention as she steps in through the front door.

Ty's brows pinch together. "What are you doing back? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just came back to grab my phone charger for the car." Everly walks into the room and hugs her mom. It's a quick hug without a lot of feeling behind it like you might expect from a daughter who hasn't seen her mother in months, but her facial expression reads all excitement.

"I can't believe you came!" Everly says. "I didn't think you were going to make it."

"You said it was important so here I am."

Everly beams. "You can stay for the weekend, right? Tyler has a game tomorrow, and I can show you around town."

She smiles stiffly. "Slow down. I just came to check in on you. Between your brother's messages and the things you told me last night, it sounds like it

might be time for you to come home, huh?"

"Home?" Tyler cuts in.

Her smile is tense. "Maybe we can talk in private."

Tyler waves a hand toward the guys and introduces them. "Mom, these are my teammates and friends." They step up to shake her hand, one by one. "Guys, this is my mom, Stephanie."

"Nice to meet you," Ash says. He looks at Tyler. "We're gonna run to Jack's for a bit. Holler if you need us."

"Thanks," Tyler says.

I wonder for a second if I should go with them, but Tyler rests a hand on my lower back and draws me closer. "And this is Piper, my girlfriend."

"Nice to meet you," I say, though I'm not sure that's true. My feelings towards this woman aren't anywhere near nice. I have such animosity towards this woman, but I don't really know her, only what Tyler has told me. So, I suck it up and put a smile on my face as Tyler leads us into the living room.

Tyler and I sit on the couch; Everly and her mom take the love seat.

Their mom reaches out and runs her fingers through Everly's hair. "You need a trim."

Everly gathers her hair on the other side of her face. "I haven't found a new stylist here yet."

"I can take you to mine," I offer.

"Thanks." Everly gives me a grateful smile.

"Nonsense. Marianna has been cutting your hair since you were three years old. I'll call her on our way back."

Tyler stiffens beside me. "You can't be serious?"

Stephanie sits tall. "Everly and I had a long talk last night. She filled me in on some of the things that have happened since she's been here. Honestly, I'm surprised you haven't sent her back yet. It's clear that you're in no position to take care of her. I mean, honestly, living with a bunch of hockey players?"

I can tell her words cut Tyler to the quick. It's the very thing he worries about constantly. It's impacted every decision he's made since she arrived. And it pisses me off.

"Ty has been great, Mom," Everly says.

"You said that on the phone, but I think we can all agree that this setup is less than ideal. He isn't even here half the time."

“I’m fine, Mom. Piper stays with me.”

I try to smile but I’m not sure I nail it.

Stephanie barely gives me a second glance before saying, “It’s time for you to come home.”

“She’s just starting to settle in here. She has friends and extracurricular activities.” His voice raises with each word. “She’s applying to colleges nearby.”

“College?” Her head whirls to her daughter. “You never had any interest in college. You hate school. You’re barely going to graduate high school.”

Everly shrinks beside her and twists her hands in her lap. “It’s not so bad. I was thinking about going to Whittaker.”

Sometimes I forget that Everly is so young. She’s so mature and confident in so many ways, but in minutes her mother has reduced her to a shadow of the young woman she is, and I’m struggling to stay silent beside Tyler.

“Let’s just focus on finishing high school for now. This summer maybe we can talk about taking classes part-time once you get a job. We’ll talk about it on the way home. Go grab your stuff, Ev.”

Everly gets to her feet reluctantly. Ty jumps up. “No.”

“This is crazy. The first month that she was here, you begged me to come get her and now you’re putting up a fight. Why?”

Everly’s eyes widen with hurt and betrayal with this new knowledge.

“Because she’s my sister. I’d do anything for her. Can you say the same?”

Stephanie’s mouth puckers. “Then you should be able to see that this is not the best place for her. I mean really, living with a bunch of older guys who are drinking and partying every night. I’m not even going to mention the incident with River that happened while you were supposed to be looking after her.”

Tyler is vibrating with anger and hurt. His hands ball into fists at his side. “Ev, can you give me and Mom a minute?”

“Go grab your stuff, honey. If we head out soon, we can still make it back tonight.”

“No, don’t pack anything,” Tyler snaps, then softens his tone when Everly shrinks even further. “I’ll be up in a minute.”

She rushes off like she’s happy to get away from us. Quietly, I follow her, but pause at the stairway when Tyler speaks again.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks.

“Because I am her mother and I say it’s time for her to come home.”

“She has less than two months until graduation. She can finish her senior year here.”

“I talked to the principal at her old school, and he said she can transfer back and still graduate on time.”

“And if she doesn’t want to do that?” Tyler’s voice has an edge that slices my heart.

It’s a beat before she responds. “Then you tell her it’s the only option.”

“You want me to kick out my own sister? No way. Everly is always welcome with me.”

“It’s what’s best for her,” she insists. “I’ll be waiting outside.”

“Don’t make her leave like this. At least let me talk to her. You owe me that.”

“Fine. I’m tired from the drive anyway. I will be back in the morning to get her. Please make sure she’s ready.” Stephanie comes out of the living room, gaze flitting over me on her way out.

I wait until she’s gone and rush back to the living room.

Tyler has his head in his hands.

I’m torn between wanting to console him and yell at her. Luckily, the guys come back in almost like they were watching and waiting so they could be here for Tyler and Everly, so I give them a small smile and slip out.

“Wait.” I jog down the driveway toward her.

I’m out of breath from nerves and exertion when I reach her car.

“Don’t make her leave. Not now when she’s just getting settled. I’ve watched her transform over these past months.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I think I know what’s best for my daughter.”

“Look, I don’t know you.”

“No, you don’t.” She turns to get in her car.

“But I do know your kids. Everly is smart and stubborn and weary of letting people in. When I first met her, she was so angry. She barely spoke and she lashed out. But now she’s become this amazing young woman. She hasn’t failed here, she’s blossomed.

“And it’s no coincidence that she did that here surrounded by people who love and support her. Each one of those guys inside would do anything for her. None more than Tyler. He is the best big brother. He has this huge heart and always puts everyone else’s needs before his own. He has sacrificed a lot

for her and expected nothing in return. Do you know that the first thing he does after every game is call her to check in? Or that he took her on college tours? Or that he added a back seat to his precious car, so it'd be more family-friendly?"

Emotional laughter bubbles up in my chest and I let it free. I realize no matter what I say, if she hasn't figured out by now how amazing of a son she raised, she may never. And because of that, and a million other reasons, I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure I tell him.

"Don't tear them apart," I plead. "They need each other."

"Tell Everly I'll be back in the morning."

She gets into her car without another word, and I walk back into the house. I left the door open as I ran out, and Tyler stands just inside. The look on his face is stricken.

"Did you hear all of that?"

"Yeah." His voice is gruff.

"I'm sorry for meddling. I couldn't help it."

He yanks me to him and kisses me hard. "No one has ever stood up for me like that."

Tears burn the back of my eyes because someone should have.

When he pulls back, he lets out a tired moan. "I need to check on Ev. Don't go anywhere."

"Go. I'll be here."

Always.

I WANT TO SMASH SOMETHING

TYLER

DECLAN IS STANDING IN EVERLY'S DOORWAY. HIS BIG FRAME RESTS AGAINST the wood and his arms are crossed over his chest.

“Hey,” I say as I step to him.

He lets his arms fall to his sides and he pushes to his full height.

“Everything good?”

“Yeah. Thanks, man.”

He looks at Everly and smiles. “See you later, Little Sharpie.”

Ev doesn't respond but her mouth pulls into a small smile at Declan, which quickly falls as I enter her room.

Her backpack sits on the bed and she's stuffing clothes in it, packing like she's leaving.

“I'm sorry.”

She snuffles and refuses to meet my gaze. “For secretly wishing I'd left months ago?”

“I don't wish that.”

“But you did.” Her hazel eyes water with unshed tears when she finally looks me dead on.

I sit on the edge of her bed. “That's not on you or anything you did. I was selfish. It isn't an excuse, but I think I forgot what it was like to have people in my life that really cared about me. People that I could trust to show up and support me no matter what. I forgot what it was like to have family. I should have done a better job staying in touch when I left. I'm so sorry, Ev.”

With a snuffle she perches on the other side of the mattress. “Is Mom waiting for me outside?”

“No. She left for tonight, but she’ll be back in the morning.”

Her chin lifts and she nods slightly.

“You don’t have to go. I mean...” I run my hands through my hair. “I don’t want you to go.”

“You don’t?”

“Of course, I don’t.”

“I’m sorry that I told her about River. I didn’t know she was going to use it against you.”

“Don’t apologize. She’s your mom, Ev.”

“Yours too,” she tosses back.

I think it might be too late for me to repair any kind of relationship with her, but it isn’t for Everly.

“I admit that I didn’t roll out the welcome mat when you showed up, but I have loved having you here. I also know that it’s important for you to try to have a good relationship with Mom. Trust me, it does not get better by leaving home and ignoring her.”

“I miss her, I do, but I really like it here. I feel like myself for the first time maybe ever.” She fidgets with the comforter, tracing the design with a single fingertip. “But I also feel like I’m intruding on your life.”

“You’re not.”

“I overheard Jack saying you pulled your offer on the house. Is that because of the car and college tuition and all the other things you’ve been buying me? Because I don’t need any of that. You can have them back. I just want to stay.”

“I pulled the offer because for the first time in my life I am surrounded by people that feel like family. I want that for you, yes, but I want it for me too. I mean, honestly, how boring would life be without Ash’s terrible humming over breakfast every morning or Jack waltzing in and barking orders?”

She laughs, but then she goes quiet and her smile falls. “What will happen if I go against her and stay?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “But you’re eighteen, so take tonight and think about it, then talk to her in the morning before you make up your mind, okay?” I’m so damn sad at the thought of her leaving, but I will not make this about me. “You are always welcome here. No matter where I’m living. You can call me or just show up, whatever you need. Day or night. And don’t think I’m gonna stop checking in or worrying about you if you aren’t living here.”

“Okay.” I get the smallest of smiles.

I move closer to hug her. She launches herself at me, squeezing me tightly. “Thank you for everything, Ty.”

When she pulls back, so do I and clear my throat. “Whatever happens, I’m not going anywhere, okay?”

“Yeah,” she says, and inhales a deep breath.

I stand and wait for her.

“Go ahead. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Everyone is gathered in the kitchen. When I walk in, they go silent.

“Is she okay?” Jack asks.

“I think so.”

“Is she really leaving?” The question comes from Ash but they all wait, hanging on my answer.

“Maybe. I’m not sure, but let’s not make a big thing of it tonight. I think she’s had enough drama for today.”

“This is bullshit,” Jack says.

“Maybe, but what am I supposed to do? Who am I to decide what’s best for her? I’m just her brother.”

“You’ve been a lot more than that,” Declan says.

“She’s an adult. She can’t make her go.” Ash sets his beer on the counter with a clank.

I shrug and let out a long breath. My relationship with our mother isn’t the best, but I don’t want that for Everly, and getting in the middle of it isn’t going to help.

“There she is,” Ash says brightly as my sister comes into the room. The guys all transform from angry and brooding to cheery as they take turns hugging her.

“Let’s check your poker skills,” Declan says. They move to the game room, and Piper and I hang back.

“Are you okay?” She wraps her arms around me.

“I can’t believe how much I don’t want her to go,” I say as I breathe in the scent of her familiar shampoo. Piper being here is the only reason I haven’t completely lost my shit.

“Me either.”

I peer down at her. “Thank you for having my back. It means more than I can say.”

“Always.” She tugs me toward the group. “Come on. Let’s try to enjoy

tonight.”

SEXY DEATH GLARES

PIPER

“YOU TWO STILL HAVEN’T TALKED?” SCARLETT ASKS.

She and Jade eagerly wait for my answer. We’re sitting in the stands watching the team warm up, and I’ve just told them how I successfully managed to put off all serious conversations with Tyler so he couldn’t break up with me.

“I was going to talk to him last night, but then everything went down with his sister.”

In hindsight, I should have probably sucked it up and told him straight away that I wasn’t going to let him push me away this time, and that we belong together instead of distracting him with lots of hot sex. I have regrets, but a week of nonstop hot sex isn’t one of them. Still, I could have spared a few minutes before or after to tell him what was on my mind. Saying it now with everything going on, the words don’t feel like they’re nearly enough.

“And the lingerie?” Jade asks.

“It was well appreciated,” I say, heat spreading over my skin at the memory of Tyler worshipping me that night.

“Ditto.” Scarlett sips her drink with a playful smirk.

Jade pulls out her phone. Good to know. I’m going to rearrange the article to put it at the top of the honeymoon must-have list. And then I’m going to order it in every color.”

Scarlett snorts and then her gaze scans the ice. Tyler keeps looking up into the stands to the seat next to me.

He plays it off by smiling at me right after, but I know he’s checking to see if Everly is here. It breaks my heart to see him like this. Everly and her

mom are spending the day together, so I haven't had a chance to talk to her and see where her head is with everything. I thought they were coming to the game. We saved them seats, but we're minutes from puck drop and it doesn't look like they're going to make it.

"How is he?" Scarlett asks.

"Quiet," I answer. "He barely spoke last night or this morning. He won't say that he hopes she stays because he doesn't want to sway her decision, but he's going to be sad if she goes."

Scarlett gives me a reassuring smile. "It isn't just him. I have never seen them all look so dejected over something non-hockey related."

"I thought it was just me projecting."

"No. They're really upset. Some of them just because they feel bad for Tyler, but they all got pretty attached to that little spitfire."

"Me too."

Scarlett reaches over and squeezes my arm.

When the game starts, I settle in. Watching the guys play I forget about everything going on until Everly takes the seat next to me.

"Hi. You're here." I move my coat off the armrest to give her more room. "We thought you might have left already."

"Left? No, I'm not going anywhere." She says it all with such teenage indifference like we all haven't been stressing over her decision all day that it makes me laugh.

"You're staying?"

"Y-yeah," she says slowly, giving me a curious look with a small smile.

"Really?! For good?"

The small smile on her face falls. "At least until graduation. After that it depends on if I get into college or not." She looks down at her hands quickly, then back at me. "I'm sorry. I know it's weird having the tag-along little sister hanging—"

I lunge for her and throw my arms around her shoulders. She freezes at my outburst, but then laughs. "I guess you're not mad."

"No. I'm so glad. Have you told Tyler?"

"Not yet." She shakes her blonde head.

"But your mom..."

"She still isn't one hundred percent on board, but I told her about all the things you and Tyler, and the guys, have done for me."

"And that convinced her?"

She bobs her head side to side. “Not exactly, but when I showed her my report card, she was shocked. I’ve never had all As and Bs before. She’s here. She’s getting popcorn.”

I hug her again. I can’t help myself. Tyler is going to be ecstatic, and I guess I am too.

A moment later, Everly and Tyler’s mom, Stephanie, shuffles down the aisle and takes the seat on the other side of her daughter.

She hands Everly a drink and our eyes meet. I give her a polite smile. One decent decision doesn’t undo all the hurt she’s caused, but it’s a start.

I find Tyler coming off the ice from his shift and taking a seat on the bench. A glimmer of happiness crosses his face when he sees Ev, and something else when he sees his mom.

“Is this the first time she’s seen him play?” I lean closer to whisper.

Everly nods. “Since he was like fifteen or something.”

“Wow,” I mouth the word.

The first period is fast-paced and high-scoring. Leo gets a penalty for hooking in the final minute. An echo of boos surrounds us. Scarlett makes a little sound, like a happy squeal next to me.

“You almost seem happy about your man being sent to the penalty box.”

“Oh, I am. Not about the penalty but wait for it.” She nudges me with an elbow, and I watch as Leo skates off the ice and into the penalty box.

“What exactly am I waiting for?” I ask as the jumbotron zooms in on Leo. He throws himself onto the bench and glares ahead.

“That look.” She shivers. “It’s the same one he gets on his face during sex.”

She says the last word quietly so Everly can’t hear.

“Sexy death glares do it for you, huh?”

“Everything about Leo does it for me.”

Jade makes a gagging sound then grins at her best friend.

Nashville scores during the power play and Leo comes out of the box just in time for the first period to come to an end. As the guys head down the tunnel, I catch Ash, Declan, Leo, and Jack all staring at Everly and smiling. She’s oblivious as she chats with her mom.

I try to silently communicate the good news that his sister is staying with Tyler as he goes by, but I don’t think he gets my wide eye, big grin as anything out of the ordinary. Fair. Giving him big, toothy smiles is pretty common these days.

During the intermission, Scarlett's mom comes over to say hello, and she and I talk about school, and I update her on my plans for next year.

"If you're looking for something part-time while you go to school, the middle school where I work is hiring."

"Really?"

She nods and smiles. "Think about it."

"I will. Thanks."

Everly is grinning at me when she leaves. "You are a badass. You haven't even graduated, and you already have a job."

"I don't have it yet. Besides, I think I might want to stick with high school."

She doesn't shudder at the idea like she would have when I first met her, but she still makes a face. "Only you, Pipes."

From the start of the second period, the Wildcats have a completely different energy than the first. They score within the first ten seconds. Ash holds up his stick as the fans cheer, then he skates by to tap gloves with the bench. He points to Everly as he circles back to the center ice.

"I think that one was for you," I tell her.

She laughs it off with a shake of her head. "I think he was just pointing to the crowd in general."

I know better, but don't push the issue. The action starts back up and only a minute later, the goal post lights up again. Jack does the same thing, skating by and pointing at Everly after he's congratulated by his team.

This time she rolls her eyes. "Are they trying to guilt trip me in to staying?"

"They think you're leaving," Scarlett tells her. "It's their way of saying goodbye."

I glance at Everly's mom, trying to get any kind of read on her, but she has a really great poker face.

The momentum from the two early second period goals has energized the stadium. Nashville loses a little of their spark and the Wildcats take full advantage.

The next goal is Tyler's, a tip in from a rebounded shot. Leo and Declan crowd around him. Two guys sitting in front of us stand and high-five. They have on matching Wildcat number twenty-one jerseys.

The announcer lets everyone know that the goal pushes Tyler back to the number one spot for most points this season among rookies in the NHL.

“Atta boy, Sharpie!” One of the guys in front of us calls, cupping a hand to his mouth to make his voice louder.

Everly and I throw our arms up as we scream with the rest of the fans. I don’t think it will ever get old watching Tyler play hockey. I know what it means to him and how hard he’s worked. Being here to witness it is one of the most fulfilling things to ever happen to me.

Tyler points to Everly, just like the guys before him, but he lingers on her just a little longer. Then he winks at me.

“Are those guys friends with your brother?” Stephanie asks, pointing to the guys wearing Sharp jerseys. They’re still standing and cheering even as the rest of the crowd has quieted down.

“I don’t think so,” Everly says, and looks at me.

I shake my head. “I don’t know them.”

Stephanie lets her gaze go back to the guys and she smiles, small at first but it grows like she’s slowly realizing her son is a famous hockey player.

Tyler has her smile.

DAMN STRAIGHT

TYLER

BY THE TIME I COOL DOWN FROM THE GAME AND AM READY TO LEAVE THE arena, I have a text from Piper. *Waiting for you xo*

“Heard anything?” Declan asks.

I grab my bag and shoulder it. “They’re still here so I guess we’ll know soon enough.”

Outside of the locker room, we follow the hall down past the media to an area where family and friends wait for us.

With every step, my pulse kicks back up like I’ve just stepped off the ice. Not knowing has been the worst. I can deal with whatever happens, I just need to know. Look at me, I’ve become a planner. A guy who needs to know what’s what so he can get his family calendar in order.

Piper stands a step ahead of Everly and my mom.

“You were amazing tonight.” She hugs me quickly and I place a kiss on her lips.

“Thanks, baby.”

My mom comes forward next. “You were...” She pauses. “Congratulations, Ty.”

“Thank you.” My throat tightens. I can’t remember the last time she came to a game.

“How’s it feel to be back on top?” Everly asks with attitude, one hand on her hip.

“Feels pretty good,” I say. “Did you have a nice day?”

“I did. Mom helped me pick out a few things for my room here.”

The words register too slow and I’m just catching on when Declan lets

out a whoop beside me.

“You’re staying, Little Sharpie?” he asks.

“Yep. As long as it’s still okay with Ty.”

I’m flooded with relief and happiness. The words come out gruff. “It’s still okay.”

I meet my mom’s gaze. “You signed off on this?”

“The time here has obviously been good for her.”

“She saw my report card.” Ev beams.

Jack, Ash, Maverick, and a couple of other guys are hanging off to the side.

“Looks like we’re still on homework duty,” I call.

They cheer and then Jack tips his head to me. “I made reservations for all of us. I’ll text you the address. Meet you guys there.”

I take a step closer to my mom. “Can you stay another night or for dinner at least?”

“I have to get back for work,” she says.

“Okay.” Awkward silence fills the space between us for a beat. “Thanks for coming to the game.”

“I’m glad I did.” She smiles. “You still get the same look on your face when you score a goal that you did when you were seven.”

“I do?”

She nods. “On the ice is always where you seemed happiest.”

I don’t know what to say so instead I lean forward and give her a one-arm hug. “I’m glad you came.”

“Me too.”

I step back and lace my fingers with Piper. She squeezes my hand. Mom and Everly hug their goodbyes, and my sister promises to call and check in more regularly. They seem like things are better between them. I hope so. And maybe someday Mom and I will get there, too. I want that, don’t get me wrong, but I know that even if that doesn’t happen, I have family in Piper, Ev, and my teammates.

Mom leaves from the arena and the rest of us head to the restaurant. I get pulled up to the bar with the guys.

“Hell of a game tonight, boys,” Jack says. “Keep that shit up and we’ll be playing hockey in May.”

We lift our glasses and cheers. I’m anxious to talk to Piper so I cut out and stride back to the table. She and Everly are huddled up together. I slow

my steps as I get close.

“This is for you,” Piper tells her, and places the gold Gucci bracelet she and I passed back and forth so many times in my sister’s palm. Ev might not know the significance of it, but I do. Piper’s father gave that to her. It was her most favorite possession when she was Everly’s age. Still might be for that matter. I think I fall even more in love with her.

“It’s so pretty.” My sister wraps it around her wrist and Piper helps her clasp it.

Everly sees me hanging back and holds up her arm proudly. “Look what Piper gave me.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“I love it so much. Thanks, Pipes.” Everly squeezes her and then gets to her feet. “Grace is waiting outside. Is it okay if I go?”

“Yeah. Home by ten,” I say.

“Midnight?” A mischievous smile tugs up the corners of her mouth.

“Eleven. Final answer.”

“Thanks, Ty.” She hesitates before hugging me again. While she’s in close, she whispers, “Are you going to do it tonight?”

I glance at Piper. “I’m not sure. Waiting for the perfect moment.”

“Ask her,” she demands before pulling away. “Bye, Piper.”

I rub at my chest as she says a quick goodbye to the guys and then rushes for the front doors.

“You’re stressing again already, aren’t you?” Piper comes to me and rests her hand over mine.

I capture it and bring our joined fingers to my lips. “I’m good.”

“Liar.” She presses her body flush to mine. “I have something for you.”

“Oh yeah?” I waggle my brows. “I have something for you, too.”

“Not *that*. It’s in my purse.”

Piper tugs me toward her purse sitting on the table. She unzips a pocket in the front and pulls out something, hiding it in her palm.

“I know that you want me to go to Madison, and I understand why, but I have decided to stay here for grad school.” She holds her hand up in front of me and dangles a Whittaker keychain in front of my face.

I take it and hold her hand hostage with it. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Yes. I have given it a lot of thought. Their program is good, too, and I already know all the professors. I can keep tutoring and maybe even find a

long-term substitute position. I love you so much, and I don't want to spend any more time living away from you. We belong together."

"Damn straight we do."

"You agree?" The way she asks makes it seem like she's surprised by my answer.

A small laugh escapes. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about all week. I mean, I want you to go to Madison if that's what you want. We'll find a way to make it work either way."

"You weren't planning to break up with me and ship me off against my will?"

I pull her against me. "Fuck no, but I was prepared to let you seduce me all week to keep you from realizing it."

Her mouth falls open. "You knew?!"

"I'm sorry that I let you believe that I was pushing you away. It took me a little bit to figure it out. Though to be fair, every time I opened my mouth the past few days, you shoved your tongue down my throat."

"I was trying to keep you from breaking up with me long enough to show you how much you mean to me."

"Break up with you? Not a chance, baby. It's me and you." I snake a hand around the back of her neck and with my other hand I dig out the ring box in my front pocket. "Now my gift."

Her eyes widen as I bring the box into view. "You asked me what was the first thing I bought when I signed my contract. This."

I hand it to her, and she opens it slowly. Tears fill her eyes. "Why?"

"Because I wanted to share that moment with you, and I couldn't. And when I realized that, I just knew you were my end game. I used to think relationships were all about timing, but since you came back into my life, I've had to accept that maybe there is no such thing as the right time. There is always going to be something I can't give you or some event during the season I'm going to miss because I'm traveling. But I promise you that no one has or will ever love you more than I do. I love you, Piper. I've loved you since I was eighteen years old. Fuck yeah, we belong together, always. Marry me, Pipes?"

"Yes." She nods. "Yes, I'll marry you."

I slide the ring onto her finger and then kiss her. The cheers from the bar make me pull back. The guys are all watching us with giant grins.

"She said yes," I say, a thrill shooting through me.

Piper wraps her arms around me, and I kiss her. Damn, it feels good.

When we untangle ourselves, Jack hands me a glass and holds up his. “To Piper and the rookie!”

PARTIES ARE THE BEST FOREPLAY

PIPER

WE HEAD BACK TO JACK'S HOUSE TO HANG OUT FOR THE NIGHT AND WITHIN an hour, news of our engagement has spread. His backyard hang has turned into a full-blown party.

"Do you know all these people?" I ask Tyler. We're stopped every few seconds by someone congratulating him or asking me to see the ring.

"Some of them I know by name, others I just recognize from parties. You'll get used to it. Jack knows a lot of people." He wraps his arms around me and pulls me against him. "Are you sure you know what you're marrying into? I come with a whole team of dudes that are often obnoxious and sometimes awesome."

Laughing, I lean forward and brush my lips over his. "I have a pretty good idea."

The music is blasting, and people are standing in groups talking, some girls are dancing, and a few guys are playing cornhole. But Tyler and I make our way to the edge of the yard where we find a little slice of privacy.

His phone vibrates and he pulls it from his pocket. A grin tugs at one side of his mouth. "Looks like Everly is staying at Grace's tonight."

He taps out a response and then puts it back in his pocket.

I place my hands on his shoulders and then eliminate the space between our bodies. "Oh no. What will we do?"

"I have a few ideas." His deep voice vibrates low in my stomach as his fingers glide around my waist to my lower back and then dip to palm my ass.

I squeak my approval and kiss him again.

"I love you so damn much," he whispers into my mouth. "But why did

you have to wear jeans tonight? My access points are severely limited.”

“When have you ever backed down from a challenge?”

His eyes darken, and I can practically see him calculating a hundred different ways to get into my pants without anyone noticing.

But before he’s able to act on it, Jade finds us. She’s beaming as she launches herself at me in a bear hug.

“I just heard. Oh my gosh! I swear I leave and ten minutes later you’re getting engaged.” She shoots Tyler a disapproving scowl. “A little heads-up would have been nice.”

“Sorry.” He chuckles.

“Scarlett is grabbing a bottle of champagne so we can pop it in a proper celebration, and I want to hear all about it.”

Tyler looks like he might want to object, but Jade shakes her head. “No, you get her for the rest of your life. I’m stealing her for thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes.” He taps the face of his watch.

I kiss him before Jade pulls me away.

Scarlett is waiting for us with a bottle in one hand, and three glasses in the other. She hands them out, pops the bottle, and then fills us each a glass.

“I am so excited for you,” Scarlett says.

“Same.” Jade lifts her glass, and we clink them together before drinking. “The way he looks at you is really something.”

“How does he look at me?” I glance over my shoulder to find Tyler chatting with Leo and Declan. He catches my gaze and grins.

“Like he can’t believe you’re really here.”

My heart races because that’s exactly how I feel about him each and every time I see him.

“I have news too.” Jade holds out her glass for Scarlett to refill it.

“Good news or bad news?”

“Good,” she says in a tone that sounds unsure. She takes a large sip before continuing. “I’m getting married this summer.”

Neither Scarlett nor I say anything as we wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn’t.

“Congratulations,” I say. “What made you set the date so soon? I thought you wanted to wait?”

“My editor. She wants to cash in on all the buzz I’m getting. She thinks that if I drag it out too long, people will lose interest.” She shrugs. “Anyway, I know it’s a big ask since you’re planning your own weddings, but will you

both be bridesmaids?”

“Of course.” Scarlett hugs her, then I do the same.

“Yes, absolutely.”

She still looks nervous. “I thought I had another year. I’m freaking out a little. Marriage. Bleh.”

Scarlett bites back a laugh, then Jade looks at me. “I’m sorry. I know you got engaged like three hours ago, so I don’t mean to be all anti-marriage over here. I am so happy for you and Tyler. You two are perfect together. I just thought I had more time, that’s all.”

“You can always say no.” Scarlett bumps her with an elbow.

“No. I’d be crazy to turn down this opportunity. The magazine is basically paying for my dream wedding, and I love Sam.”

I feel like there’s a *but* coming; instead, she smiles. “It’s crunch time, ladies. Let’s plan some weddings!”

Jade makes me recap the entire proposal, then we do talk a little about weddings, but it isn’t long before Leo wanders over, followed by Tyler.

“Time’s up.” He kisses my neck.

Jade laughs good-naturedly. “Fine. Take your hot fiancées back. I need to go find my man and attach his ball and chain.” She gets a serious look on her face. “Where do you buy those? Target? The Container Store?”

“Ikea,” Leo and Tyler say at the same time.

A little later we escape the party and head home. We don’t make it all the way into his room before Tyler has his mouth on mine and his hands going for the button of my jeans.

Parties are the best foreplay.

Instead of taking my jeans off, he slides his hand down the front and inside my panties. The tips of his fingers brush over my pussy sending heat rushing to my core.

He deepens the kiss but doesn’t make any move to get us on the bed or undress me.

“You know you can take off my clothes, right?”

“Not yet.” His thumb drags along my clit. “I spent all night imagining how to get you off just like this.”

And get me off just like that he does.

We're downstairs on the couch looking through pictures the next morning.

"Holy shit. This is you?" Ash asks Tyler as he picks up one of me and Tyler on the beach from that summer we met.

"He looks exactly the same," I say.

"No way. I'm a good fifteen pounds heavier." Tyler seems genuinely shocked by my comment.

"Okay, yes. You've added more muscle but look at this face." I grab his chin and then kiss him.

When I pull back, Ash is watching us with a smirk. His tone is all sarcasm as he says, "Aren't you two adorable."

"Yes, we are." I lean over Tyler and snatch the picture back.

He coughs and makes a face. "Whoa, Ty, my man. When is the last time you showered?"

My face heats, and Tyler starts chuckling. "It's not me."

"Throwing your girl under the bus?" Ash quirks a brow. "Real nice, Sharpie."

"I'm serious."

Ash leans closer again and then his eyebrows raise. "P. Vaughn. Wow."

Tyler kisses me.

"Well, I guess love is blind *and* has a loss of smell."

"She likes to wear my workout shirts." Tyler's gaze dips over me.

"Do us all a favor and give her one that is a little less...used." He shudders.

We're all laughing when Everly comes in.

"Hey." She walks into the living room. She glances at Tyler, and he nods, then she squeals. "Yay, we're going to be sisters."

She comes in for a hug, then starts coughing.

Ash laughs. "Bet you wish your new sister had showered first this morning."

I stick out my tongue at him. It feels so good to be silly and joke with this group.

"Have you checked your email this morning?" I ask Everly.

"No. Why?"

"Check it."

She smiles tentatively and pulls it up on her phone. I can see the moment she finds the email. Her face pales and I hold my breath, hoping it's the same good news I received.

“I got in,” she says, calmly. She looks up from her phone and her smile widens. “I got in to Whittaker!”

EPILOGUE

WE LIKE THE CHAOS

Piper

Four years later

“EVERLY WILL BE HERE IN AN HOUR,” I YELL FROM THE BATHROOM AS I TURN on the shower. I smell like baby vomit and dry shampoo.

Two kids under three is no joke.

After Everly got settled in at college, Tyler and I got married and moved into our dream home—Jack’s old house. I can’t believe he held on to it for us. She still has a room here, though she rarely stays anymore except for holidays or an occasional long weekend.

The plan was to wait to have kids and enjoy being together again. But it turns out, we like the chaos.

Tyler is a great father. No surprise there. No matter how tired he is, he makes time to have tea parties with Charlotte and read to Sofia. They have him absolutely wrapped around his finger, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

He comes into the bathroom, pulling off his T-shirt and tossing it in the hamper.

“Good. She owes me years of babysitting for looking after her. You know, I found a gray hair today. That’s definitely from her.” He shakes his head. His hair is still full and thick and not at all gray.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he pushes his pants and boxers down.

“Showering.”

“Oh no. That’s my shower. I want five minutes completely alone.”

He looks down at his dick, which is slowly growing hard. “I thought we could shower together. Both girls are sleeping at the same time. It’s a miracle.”

“Alone,” I say again as I step into the warm spray. “Come back in five minutes.”

He groans but disappears.

I close my eyes and relax as the water soothes me. I think I could fall asleep standing up these days. The girls are a handful. They both got Tyler’s nonstop energy. Our days are filled with sports (Tyler taught Charlotte to skate before she was walking), play dates, and so much love.

I never knew I could love someone so much. All three of them. They are my entire world.

I wash my hair and body, then step out of the shower and grab the baby

monitor. I can't believe they're still sleeping. It really is a miracle.

I shut off the water, wrap a towel around me, and pad out of our room to the hall bathroom. The door is ajar, and steam billows in the small space. I step into the shower with Tyler.

"Changed your mind, huh?" he asks with a grin.

"I guess I only needed three minutes." I link my hands around his neck and bring my lips to his.

He takes over quickly, kissing the crap out of me like only he can do. My body has changed since having kids, but Tyler still worships it just the same. I love him a little more for that—especially since his just seems to get better with age. His shoulders are broader, his chest and biceps are more defined. The amount of work he puts in to staying in shape is pretty incredible. Two years ago, he had to sit out for half the season with a lower body injury.

A sedentary Tyler is a grumpy one. Though that's how Sofia happened, so I'd say his time off was well spent.

A small cry from the baby monitor makes us both freeze. We wait to see if she'll go back to sleep, but Sofia cries out again, this time much more insistent.

"I'll get her." He gives my ass a playful smack before getting out. By the time he's pulled on his boxers and heading out the door, she's crying so loudly that I'm not shocked in the least that Charlotte's sleepy voice calls for me.

Laughing, I get out and dry off, then pull on a robe.

I creep to the girls' room. Tyler is sitting in a chair with Charlotte on one knee and Sofia curled up on his chest.

"I've got them," he says quietly when he sees me.

Charlotte looks over at me with big, blue-green eyes. "Momma."

I start in the room, and she gets off his lap and comes to me. I pick her up and Tyler moves over to make room for the both of us to sit next to him.

"And miss out on all this?" I ask, leaning my head on his shoulder and breathing in Sofia's sweet baby scent. "Not a chance."

Thank you for reading Wild About You! If you enjoyed Tyler & Piper's story, sign up for Rebecca's newsletter to receive an [exclusive bonus scene](#).

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PLAYLIST

- MEMORIES! by 347aidan
- A-O-K by Tai Verdes feat. 24kGoldn
- Livin it Up by Young Thug feat. A\$AP Rocky, Post Malone
- Life Goes On by Oliver Tree
- She's All I Wanna Be by Tate McRae
- Everything We Touch Remix by Say Lou Lou
- Sunroof by Nicky Youre feat. Dazy
- Let's Go To Hell by Tai Verdes
- F With U by WONDR
- ONE PUNCH by Aries
- either way by Arden Jones
- M.I.A. by Miles
- Big Energy by Latto, Mariah Carey feat. DJ Khaled
- Hands On You by Austin George
- Stay by Bryce Vine, Cheat Codes
- god of the sunsets by SEB
- Feel Good by Fresco Trey feat. Lil Tjay
- Get Into It (Yuh) by Doja Cat

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Rebecca Jenshak is a *USA Today* bestselling author of new adult and sports romance. She lives in Arizona with her family. When she isn't writing, you can find her attending local sporting events, hanging out with family and friends, or with her nose buried in a book.

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