



LOVE

&

Stocken

*I was a wildflower,
stubborn, difficult, strong,
and impossible to tame.*

MONTY JAY

LOVE
&
Hockey

MONTY JAY

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Love & Hockey
Monty Jay

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Cover Design: Cover design © Arijana Karčić, Cover It! Designs

Formatting: Pink Elephant Designs

*This is for the girls who didn't get asked out much by boys in high school
due to your height, weight, strength, intelligence, etc.*

I just want you all to know that strength is beautiful.

*Tall is beautiful
Smart is beautiful.
Weird is beautiful.*

Broken or bent, you are still beautiful.

*Just because you are not a dainty flower does not make you any less of a
woman.*

You are beautiful.

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” - William Shakespeare

PROLOGUE



"Are you sure that you are ready for this?"

This feels like the twentieth time Eric has asked me that since we left the house. I know he's worried, maybe a little anxious, but me? My heartbeat is steady, my breathing slows. I've waited for what feels like my entire life for this one moment.

I nod my head again, giving him another soft smile, reaching over and squeezing his hand. Eric's eyes are focused on the road, shielding me from the warm, chocolate, irises that lay under his lids.

He was handsome, and I do mean that in the most legitimate way. He looked like the offspring of Channing Tatum and Liam Hemsworth, so therefore, he was beautiful. But, when you come from the world I came from, handsome didn't matter. Men of all shapes and sizes were dangerous.

In my world men wanted one thing from women like me.

"We are just warm bodies they make temporary homes in, Anna."

My mom used to say to me before she'd take another random guy into her room and let him use her body up. Use, use, use...

Use it until she was hollow. Calling her a human after all of that was pushing it. She was empty, all gone, nothing left but bones and skin. The electricity inside her soul had been past due for too many months.

I promised myself I wouldn't be that girl. I'd find a handsome prince and he'd love me. We would be the kind of love story they make movies about. He'd save me from the fire breathing dragon and take me far away from the lonely tower. We'd run off into the sunset towards our happily ever after.

But like children eventually realize that Santa Claus is fiction. I too realized fairy tales are just the same.

I told myself I wouldn't be that girl, until I was that girl. Until one of those men got bored with my mom, who was too drugged out to know he'd even left her room. I told myself I couldn't be that girl, until he was in my room, on top of me, inside of me, robbing me. Stealing my hope, my innocence, my magic, the light inside me. What he left? Ice, bitterness, and dried blood on my pink sheets.

I didn't even flinch when he zipped his pants up, ran his hand across my face and smiled. I curled into a naked ball freezing for a moment. It was a moment in time when an hourglass stops before it turns upside down completely. I was suspended sideways, unmoving. When the hourglass finally flipped, and the sands of time started suffocating me, I walked into my mother's room seeking naive comfort.

She rolled over on the stained mattress covering her privates with a dirty silk robe. I watched as she grabbed a half smoked cigarette from the ashtray, lit it, and inhaled deeply.

"'Bout time you start earning your keep around here."

I was twelve.

What followed was natural. Not like plants growing or rain after a drought, natural like a disaster. A hurricane, an earthquake, chaos, destruction, darkness.

I started running after that, running towards another trap that disguised itself as an escape.

I wanted to forget. I wanted to go to a place where men who could be my grandfather didn't leave their sweat on my body. A place where the sun always shone, the water was warm, and people loved me enough to say something. To help. To care.

I wanted to be free.

Eric's eyes held the kind of freedom I had spent my entire life searching for. The kind of eyes that told me he slayed dragons and saved girls trapped inside of dark towers.

Except I wasn't a princess, I was a homeless junkie, two days sober, and going through the early stages of withdrawal when I met Eric.

I was staying at a shelter in the middle of a bum-fuck town, just trying to stay warm, and earn enough money to buy my next high.

When I started drugs I was in middle school, just a little pot to numb my mind from the demons and paralyze my body from the men who treated me more like property than a human being.

"A hole to keep their dicks warm, Anna."

"You're worthless, Anna."

Self-worth never existed in my life.

High school came fast. I started pills, LSD, and molly. I needed something more. I got older and they got rougher, pot wasn't cutting it anymore. I needed something stronger to fend off the voices.

After graduation, I left my hometown and started traveling, hitchhiking, stripping, whatever to get me where I was trying to go.

Blow came next, and then like a snake who'd always been waiting for me, he found me.

Heroin found me on the floor of a dirty bathroom of a trap house, cross faded out of my mind. He slithered through my veins, and I swear, I could touch God, if he was even real.

Heroin took it all away, everything. I couldn't feel anything, fuck, I didn't even know if I was alive until I woke up a day later.

I'd never felt more alive than when I was half dead.

I was on a road to nowhere. A dead end street screaming my name. But like a silent guardian, a mysterious savior, she happened. She was fate's retribution for all the pain it had threaded me. She was my angel, the wakeup call I so desperately needed. All because of a one night stand with a guy who had gentle eyes and a charming smile.

He was one of the few good ones. One of the best. Every day for the rest of my life I'd be thankful to J. He tried to love me, tried to heal the broken pieces of me, and he gave me the sweetest gift.

When she started growing it was as if she was healing me from the inside. I was determined to be someone she could be proud of, to be the person I needed when I was young. Every night she comforted me, her heart

beat lulled me to sleep every night. With her, I felt hopeful for the first time in my life.

I was okay in the beginning, but when she came into the world, when she left the safety of my body, I was alone again. The demons came back and I couldn't fight them off.

Who was I to taint this innocent soul? This angel who deserved the world? How could I do that?

So I did the only thing I'd ever known in my life.

I ran.

I was the worst kind of person, and I still am, just sober now. I left her. I left my angel. I left her with those big green eyes, wondering what she ever did wrong to make me leave. My spirit broke every time I thought about her waiting up for me to come home on many countless nights, wondering where I was. Hoping, I'd walk through that door. I did the worst possible thing you could ever do to a child.

I made her feel as if she wasn't enough. In reality, she was everything.

I never deserved Eric. I never deserved anything life had graciously gifted me, not J, and certainly not my little girl. Yet, here Eric was. Swooping in with a heart of gold trying to save me. And here I was, driving to seek redemption, three years later, and two years sober.

Eric and I happened as a slow burn. I was so broken, so screwed up, the possibility of dating seemed out of reach.

With no false motive, he came to the shelter every day. Guided me through detox, even the parts where I screamed through the night and the puking. Eric didn't heal me, Eric paved the trees down that were blocking my road to recovery.

I was six months sober, working in a diner and attending therapy. I was on my feet, wobbly, but standing. Eric came in for coffee every day, until he finally worked up the courage to ask me out.

I smiled at him, a genuine smile, feeling that I could take on the world with him by my side.

He takes a slow breath when we pull into a recreational arena. Something I'm all too familiar with. I can hear the sounds of blades on ice and we are not even out of the car.

Eric and I make our way through the bodies of people. The nerves have finally hit. I'm scared. More terrified of this moment than I have ever been.

Once we reach the arena, we pick seats up above the penalty boxes.

My leg is shaking softly, as my eyes scan the empty ice. Waiting for the players to make their appearance. Eric places a calming hand on my leg, in an attempt to soothe the ache in my chest.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to clog the emotions threatening to spill out. I watch as small, tiny, people skate on the ice. Most of them can barely skate, others look sloppy, as most five-year old children should be, just now learning the rules and the basics. But not her.

At five years of age, she's already taller than the children around her. She glides with the elegance of someone who has been skating for years. Confidence pours from her posture, no doubt a lesson taught to her by her father.

I watch with glassy eyes as she warms up. I'm in awe of the little life. My stomach churns, and my heart screams in pain. She skates to the left of us, coming closer, her face covered in her mask.

In almost slow motion she removes her helmet, her red hair already messy in its braid. Our hair is identical. A sound of pure torment rips through me gently, and I cover my mouth with my fingertips, tears spilling from my eyes with no mercy.

She's so...perfect. Her button nose, splattered freckles, and a smile with so much happiness I can feel it all the way up here. I watch as she taps her chest twice before pressing her hand to the glass. Only now realizing her father is the one she is doing this with.

"She's beautiful." I croak with a voice that shreds my throat. I try to swallow the lump in my throat but it stays there through the whole game.

I admire her from afar, trying to imagine a world where things were different. A place when I was stronger than my addiction, stronger than my demons, better for her.

Her team wins, and I can't help but feel guilty for being proud of her. I have no right to be proud, I left her, abandoned her before she even got the chance to know me, before I got the chance to know her.

I wanted to know if she liked Froot Loops or Cap'n Crunch. If when she laughed her nose scrunched like her fathers, if she shared the same magic I had as a child all those years ago. I wanted to know her.

Numbly I make my way down the arena steps, towards J. It feels like centuries since I've seen him, but just as before, the only thing I feel for J, is gratitude. He never made my heart race, or my toes curl, not like Eric. J was kind, and we happened to make a baby one night.

Eric was my happy ending if I was ever going to have one.

J turns, looks around, and then sees me in front of him. His mouth falls open, shock registers quickly, before anger and resentment settle in.

Eric takes a protective step forward in an effort to shield me, but this, this sadly isn't his battle. He can't protect me from this. I walk towards J slowly, until I'm standing directly in front of him. He's still just as tall as I remember.

"What are you doing here, Anna." It's not a question, it's a demand. He hates me, I can feel it radiating off him. Loathes me. Fuck, I'd hate me too.

I fiddle with my hands nervously before stumbling towards my words. "I want-t another chance, I'm two years sober, I'm re—"

"Don't you fucking dare finish that sentence." He pauses looking me up and down with a stone hard gaze. Those gentle eyes I fell into were gone. Distrust drowned his gaze. My throat burns as he starts to talk.

"You don't get to come back here, unannounced, whenever you feel like it. Where the fuck were you when I had to stay up all night long consoling a two-year-old who wouldn't go to damn sleep until Mommy got home? Huh? Where in the hell were you when I had to explain why you left, why you wouldn't ever be coming back? Where the fuck were you when she started having the nightmares? When she needed her hair fixed? Anything! You can't just decide to be a part of her life whenever you feel like it, Anna!"

He seethes with those words. They burn my flesh and brand me with the term, 'Dead-Beat Mom.' Tears sear my eyes. My throat is ablaze with apologies that he won't hear. My body is shaking with regret, he's right. I wasn't there when she needed me, and now she thinks I left because of her.

Eric wraps an arm around my waist, and I whimper softly.

"Listen, bud. That's uncalled for. All she wants is a chance. She is her mother." Eric's soothing voice floats through the air and I wince, knowing what is about to follow. I'd watched J play hockey, and he wasn't exactly a player you wanted to fight. J takes a menacing step towards Eric, and I reach my hand forward palm out to put some space between them.

"Unless you have anything to do with the care or happiness of that little girl, I suggest you fuck off, bud. She carried her for nine months and left two years later. That doesn't make her a mother. She left our child, and I was there to collect her broken pieces. Not her, sure as fuck wasn't you, it was me." J is rightfully angry. He's protective, he loves her. If it were me and the roles were reversed, I'd react the same way.

J returns his eyes to me, and they soften for a moment when he sees the tears falling quickly down my face.

I hear girls laughing, and we all look over to see our angel talking to her teammates. I smile, painfully, but still smile. She hasn't noticed us yet, and so for another moment I get to unapologetically admire her.

A bomb explodes in my body, shaking me to my core as I see her fifteen years from now. She'll have grown into her height, into her body. She'll be stunning. I can see her at prom, at graduation, the moment an unworthy boy breaks her heart. I can see it all, and at the moment I know.

This is all I'll ever get.

"That little girl..." he points towards the ice where my angel is laughing loudly, "is my entire fucking world. No, fuck that, she's my universe, Anna. She is my sun, the moon, the stars, all that shit. Her happiness is the only thing I care about and if you genuinely believe she will benefit from having you in her life, go right the fuck ahead." J looks over at her, and my heart beats a little slower.

What I have learned about life is letting go doesn't mean loving any less.

In this story, I am the villain from the very start in one character's heart. I am the one you all curse, scream, and shout at for doing the wrong thing, for hurting the ones I'm supposed to love. I am not a good person.

In another character's heart, I am a second chance. The love they desperately needed to heal. The house they call home. A soft place to land and everything I hoped I could be to others. I'm a good person.

The truth? I'm both. I'm both the warm, comforting hand someone needs, and the evil witch that haunts someone's past.

CHAPTER 1



Asymptote Lines

VALOR

There is Chinese folklore that some people still follow, about a magical connection between two people. It's called the "red string of fate." Two people are said to be connected by one single string. From the time they both enter the world to the moment they leave. Two people are destined to be lovers, regardless of time, distance, space, or circumstance.

Others believe that at the beginning of the universe we were all stars, nothing but particles and gas. After a time, we evolved and became human. This theory details how we as humans are created from the same particles as the stars we once were. Meaning pieces of us and pieces of another human come from the same star. They believe it is why when we meet particular people, it feels almost magnetic, irresistible, out of this world. They call them our "Stardusts."

Another speculation is the "Twin Flame." It's basically soulmates on fucking crack. When we were created in the heavens, one single soul was split into two bodies. Soulmates are just that, mates who complement or join your soul. A twin flame? They are your soul. The other half of you.

The left brain to your right brain. Without them, you are only half of what you could be. So, while you may have five to a hundred soulmates, you only have one Twin Flame.

Hindus believe in something called Lehnū, while Buddhists believe in Pratītyasamutpāda. Soulmates, fate, destiny. There are a million different religions, stories, and theories about how we are connected to others.

I'm not religious, spiritual, or astrological...

Wait, back up, that's a lie.

I'm a Cancer, born on July 18th. I hate to admit that I secretly read my horoscope every once in a while.

So, besides that, and a fortune cookie from my favorite Chinese restaurant down the street, that was as close as I had come to *spiritual awakening*.

Until him.

I'm not sure what, how, when, or who the fuck decided it would be a good idea to merge our paths. Whatever it was that picked him up and dropped his frustrating ass into my life could go fall in a hole.

They just had to pick the one human who could push all of my red buttons. The only person on planet earth who liked picking fights as much as I do. Someone older, more stubborn, and more hard-headed than I ever thought about being.

Why couldn't I fall in love with someone unproblematic?

I'd like to sucker punch the fuck outta fate if that's who it was. Because they enjoyed watching me hurt, hearing me cry, and feeling my pain. They thrived on it, fed on it like vultures. Sadistic fuckers.

See, even though I never followed a religion. I knew.

I knew when I met Bishop. The same way you know the smell of your home, the way the stars knew. B walked into my life thinking he was just another person, but he walked out of it being the other piece of my soul. B and I—proof that something other than us brought people together.

I knew that something had burst into our lives, something like fate. It messed with our strings, the ones that tie human beings. Fate twisted, looped, and knotted ours. Until it was so messy, so dirty, they weren't strings anymore.

"No slap-shots from the slot, Sully."

I roll my small green eyes, I'm fully aware of that...

"It's just practice, Pops." I sigh, blowing a piece of dark red hair away from my face. Damn this braid is already falling out. Granted my father had fixed my hair and let's just say, he's much more elegant on the ice than with hair.

He skates towards me, his six-three frame overlooking mine. I was tall for my age, just not THAT tall. He crosses his arms, giving me a comical eye raise.

"Just practice, huh?"

I nod, shrugging my shoulders casually.

"What happens when there are ten seconds left in the game, and because you 'just practiced' a slap-shot in the slot, you miss the goal?" he declares giving me a smirk and I sigh.

He's right, as per usual. On the ice you never do anything halfway, you give everything you have. Give your all, or don't do it at all. The amount of times I'd heard that should make me nauseous.

"No slaps in the slot. Got it," I say flicking my wrist gently with my stick in my hand demonstrating a wrist shot.

He nods in approval with a smile on his features, "That's my girl." He ruffles my hair and I lean into his touch.

I know a lot of kids would hate the idea of playing the same sport as their parents who do it professionally, but not me. The pressure made me better. The constant need to prove myself pushed me to play better. I wanted to be the best.

So that meant no slap-shots in the slot.

Try saying that ten times fast, slap-shots in the slot, slap-shots in the slot, slap-shots in the...

"Do you ever leave this place, JR?" The voice drifts towards me. It was a vocal paradox. Soft, coarse, shallow, deep. It made my stomach flutter in anticipation.

I turn my head to the sound catching my very first real-life glimpse of Bishop Maverick. He is skating towards us wearing practice gear, his helmet tucked under his arm, and his stick in his other hand.

Eighteen-year-old, first-round draft pick. Bishop was born about four and a half hours away in Alton, Illinois. He was an only child and was raised by his father. I want to say I knew all of this because my pops talked about him, but no. I knew because I had Googled him.

You'd be amazed at what you could find on Wikipedia about people. I had ogled his pictures on the internet for hours, watching game highlights, obsessing over his every move as if he were some raging pop star. The only reason I stopped is because Riggs had come over and told me I was too cool to be drooling over boys.

I knew Bishop was eight years older than I was, but it didn't matter. I just knew my heart fluttered when I looked at his pictures.

Right now my hands were sweating underneath the thick gloves, and my stomach was flipping upside down like I'd been on a rollercoaster too many times.

The only way I could describe him was bright. Bright hair, bright eyes, bright smile. He was blinding. It reminded me of when you stare at the sun for too long.

My small eyes climbed up his body, tired once they reached the top. I let them rest on his own that were the clearest blue I'd ever seen.

My dad always said, "Eyes tell more than words ever will."

I'd never really understood that statement until I looked at Bishop. It was as if the color and the emotions behind them didn't add up. It made me upset as I noticed it. He had these vivid eyes but a sadness sat behind them, like a shadow.

His hair is long, brushing the tops of his shoulders. It doesn't part to either side, it's just pushed back out of his face. It looks like strands of gold curls, woven through pieces of blond hair. Even though it looked messy, I would bet my favorite pair of skates that it was soft, smooth like silk.

I liked the messy, liked that he wasn't afraid to be completely himself. It was the prettiest hair I'd ever seen. I remember reading a story about a man who turned straw to gold, I wonder if that's how his hair turned out so shiny?

"Earth to Valor?" I am snapped away from starring by my dad's hand in my face moving up and down. Jesus, I'm an idiot.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek as my face flames to the color of my hair. Speaking of my hair... I frantically try to smooth the frizz away but even I know it's no use. Riggs once said I looked like a cotton ball dipped in cherry cough syrup. Not to mention I have on thick hockey gloves that don't help.

"Yeah, what's up?" I say trying to play off the fact I just got caught full-on gaping at him.

I move my teeth to my bottom lip, chewing it, as I swipe my stick back and forth on the ice restlessly. Hoping I can disappear into the water below the ice and never resurface.

"Valor, this is Bishop Maverick. I'm trying to show him how to play hockey too, which if I'm honest, you're much better." He bumps me with his hip and I laugh softly.

Bishop rolls his eyes, a small grin on his face. "Keep telling yourself that, old man. Don't listen to him, kid, if anything I'm teaching him a thing or two."

I give a tentative smile, trying my best not to be awkward. I was never good at making new friends or talking to new people. I'd gotten lucky that Riggs and I met on the ice, or I wouldn't have had the courage to talk to someone who looked like her. Riggs was pretty, like, pretty pretty.

"Stop lying to my kid, I don't need your lazy ass corrupting her," my dad says as he pushes Bishop lightly.

"So, this is the infamous hockey prodigy? Nice to finally meet you, Vallie." He gives me a wide smile and a head nod.

I'm so blinded by his smile, I almost miss the nickname. He just called me Vallie.

Ew, it's so girly. Everyone had just called me Valor or Sully since I was born. I'd never really been called anything so soft before, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

I was strong and I played hockey, I wasn't the kind of girl who wanted to paint her nails or wear pink. Vallie sounded like someone who wanted to spend all day at the mall and I hated shopping.

"My name is Valor. Not Vallie," I quip.

I watch as his lips tilt up into a smirk, and he crosses his arms over his chest. Jesus, his arms have muscles bigger than my head.

"I hear other people call you Sully, so why can't I have a nickname for you?" he banters with me, trying to push my buttons.

"Because Sully is my ice name, and it doesn't suck. Vallie sounds like a girl who hosts weekly how to be a puck bunny meetings and writes the first and second edition of 'Trophy Wife for Dummies.'"

His face registers shock, and my dad laughs tossing his head back. I was always told I didn't have much of a filter. My dad slaps him on the back.

"Looks like she won't be taking any of your shit either, rookie," he jokes, and I smirk. I was raised by a single father whose idea of keeping me busy was sitting me in a rink with men who cussed more than they breathed.

"How about you give me a nickname, and I get to keep calling you Vallie?" he tries bargaining with me. And I just raise my eyebrows in a bored expression. Riggs always says playing hard to get is the way to get attention, so that's what I am doing.

"How about bitc—" My dad puts his hand over my mouth, glaring down at me.

"Not old enough for those yet, I don't need another letter from your school or a meeting with your teacher about your potty mouth," he lectures. I give a really, dad, really? look.

He removes his hand and I sigh, looking over at a grinning Bishop. I fight a blush from being treated like a child in front of someone so cute.

"I think I'll get the nickname to stick eventually," he states confidently.

"Doubtful."

"What position do you play, Vallie?" His voice is so gentle, but teasing with the added nickname. I grind my molars in irritation. This guy has gone from being extremely cute to annoying in a matter of seconds. If he could just keep his mouth shut, I think we would be fine.

"Left-wing, best in my league," I reply smugly. I was never really cocky in front of other people, if anything I was humble, but something about his teasing demeanor makes me want to prove a point.

"Jesus, did you just hit duplicate when you had her? Cocky and snarky. She's your kid alright," Bishop comments, shaking his head with a short laugh.

Well, when you only have one parent, dipshit, you tend to only pick up traits from them. I want to snark, but I keep that comment to myself.

I saw how men treated women in sports. Like they weren't good enough to share the ice or to even play the game. If a man was cocky it made him better, but if a girl was even a little confident? She was a stuck-up bitch. I hated that.

I was going to be the girl who changed that. I was going to be the hockey player who made men see how good women could be.

"What? Girls can't be cocky?" I question in an accusatory tone. I lean on my stick, trying to be cool, but end up slipping slightly. I catch my balance, only making a slight fool of myself. Smooth, Valor, real smooth.

Bishop runs a hand through his hair, catching my graceful slip. "Has nothing to do with you being a girl. You're just a bit young to be so overly confident. What are you eight? I mean can you even use that thing?" He motions to my stick.

This. Little. Bitch.

Could I use this thing? He's kidding, right? He has to be freaking joking. But his face doesn't hint at any humor, just a teasing glint in his eyes.

I slit my eyes at him, glaring. I look him up and down, scoffing.

"I'm ten, thank you. How about you play me and find out?"

He quirks an eyebrow, allowing a deep laugh to emit from his stomach. His eyes crinkle at the edges, and he tosses his head back. I'm about to be real funny when I deke the fuck out of you.

"You've done it now, you idiot." My dad breathes out as he shakes his head, "Good luck. I will leave you two to duke this out," he comments turning and skating towards the boards leaning against them with his arms crossed, leaving me and Bishop on the ice face to face.

Yeah, he's taller than me, and yeah, he may beat me but that doesn't mean I have to back down or surrender. That isn't who I am. Go big or go home.

"I'll play you for the nickname," he states, putting his helmet over his golden locks, the clear visor stops right in the middle of his nose, just like mine will when I put it over my head.

I slip my helmet on. "For the nickname? I'm just playing for bragging rights."

He shakes his head. "Such a smartass. If I win, I get to keep calling you Vallie. You win, I stop," he states easily starting to skate backward towards the middle of the ice.

I tilt my head to one side, popping my neck, and following him.

"Game on."

Bishop, he believed in reincarnation. In soulmates. That souls were recycled into new bodies over and over again. That love was to be done the same.

So basically we were doomed to repeat this heartbreak. We were trapped in this painful circle. The only break is the moments we spend apart and even that seems cruel.

Fuck reincarnation. This kind of pain? Heartbreak? It was too much to handle in just one lifetime. I don't wanna know how it feels in the next one. I can see it now.

I'd probably be a butterfly. I'd land in the palm of his hand after flying the globe. He'd brush me away and the rejection alone would kill me. Reincarnation makes for great stories, but early deaths and unhappy hearts.

Or maybe, just maybe, we were asymptote lines. A line that continually approaches a given curve but does not meet it at any finite distance.

We could get closer and closer but we would never be together. That may sound sad, but it is much more humane than being played like a puppet in this giant love production.

I'd always be his Vallie, and he'd always be my B.

If we were lines, I wished we were never on the same plane. If we were twin flames, I hope I burn out soon. And if a red string connected my soul to his?

We picked up the scissors.

CHAPTER 2



Saints & Sinners

VALOR – 13

The arena was packed, the red and black of the Chicago Fury clashed with the opposing yellow and blue that represented the Toronto Blazers. Men, women, and children, of all shapes and sizes, were on the edge of their seats.

You could feel the tension in the air and even though shouts, cries, and cheers could be heard all I could detect was the sound of blades on ice. There is no noise on this earth that can equal the peace that settles in my body when I hear that.

The air was chilly, but the large, long-sleeved Fury jersey that swallowed my thirteen-year-old body had done a great job keeping me warm.

I could feel my heartbeat in my toes. My eyes were chasing the number sixty-three around the ice like it's my job. Which to me it was.

Watching my dad glide across the ice makes everything else fade away. The crowd was silent, other players were in slow motion. It was just him. I watched as he swiveled down the rink with precision in every movement. There wasn't one step out of place. Everything he does is for a reason.

Do you know when you get that sense, the feeling that something astonishing is going to happen? Your skin gets all tingly, your body temperature shoots sky-high? That's what I felt every single time I watched my dad skate. He was magic.

My father was my superhero, in skates.

I heard the clock ticking away, every second we were losing time. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. Thud, thud, thud.

My eyes darted to Bishop. My Bishop.

Even through the glass I could see the exhaustion in his body, he was running on fumes. His long hair peeked out of his helmet, the normal golden blond had turned dark brown because of the sweat.

It was no secret that our defensemen were too exhausted to go against Toronto's first line, and we wouldn't last in overtime. Just when that fate started to settle into the minds of the Fury fan.

The twenty minutes that once occupied the game clock at the start of the third period was at a lonesome five.

Everyone stood up, I followed suit, pressing my hands on my thighs.

I watched as Bishop flew past me, right in front of the glass, a resounding thud thundered through the arena as one of Toronto's men went down hard. The puck was loose when our centerman quickly gained possession, spotting my dad up ice.

With a smooth pass to my father, I watched as the black biscuit caught the blade of my dad's stick perfectly. A breakaway.

The fans erupted in collective cheers and booing.

Chills rolled up my arms and to my neck. Defensemen were scrambling forward as my pops passed the blue line into our attacking zone. My eyes were shooting from the ice to the clock.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Five seconds: Pops sprints down middle ice, two Toronto players close on his heels.

Three seconds: His stick moves quickly, forehand, to backhand, forehand. The goalie opens up just enough, he pulls him just enough to the

side that it leaves a spot open. Top shelf.

"Take the shot, Pops, take the shot!" I yelled loudly.

One second: He sends the puck forward with a quick wrist shot that sails across the goalie's shoulder and into the white net behind him. The loud buzzer filling the arena around us.

"CHICAGO FURY HAS DONE IT AGAIN!!! THEY HAVE WON THE STANLEY CUP!" The arena erupted in chaos—pure, heavenly chaos.

The buzzing among the sea of red and black, the hum of satisfaction that for one moment connected every single one of us. It was a perfect harmony, a time where it didn't matter if you were gay or straight, black or white, democrat or republican. If you wore a Red and Black Fury jersey, you were in an ecstatic balance.

The players clustered together, in what I know was a sweaty, blood-stained hug. I was witnessing history. The men who I considered family came together, sticks, gloves and helmets scattered across the ice and air. Fans throwing hats, popcorn, whatever they could grab onto the ice with them. Praising them.

The friends and family of my father's teammates surround me, cheering, screaming. Hell, I think I saw Benzo's mom crying. My eyes watch in awe, in total satisfaction.

My father's body breaks away from the cluster of men, and his eyes scan the crowd. Quickly, as if he can feel me, his eyes find mine. A wide smile breaks across my face, as he hurriedly skates towards me. Tears coat my small face. A smile that radiates behind his scruffy playoff beard warms my heart. Soft, kind green eyes that we share are full of love, love for hockey, love for his team, love for me.

Once he is in front of me, he taps his chest twice, before laying his palm on the glass in front of me. I raise my own hand to lay it on top of his. The glass is the only thing keeping us apart. Win or lose, he did this. It was our thing.

"You did it, Pops!" I yell.

He smiles. "We did it, my Sully girl."

Did you know that when a team wins the Stanley Cup, each player receives a personal day with the trophy? My dad and I ate chocolate ice cream out of the silver trophy the whole evening. We ate so much of it that my tongue was cold for hours afterwards. The following day I proceeded to puke my guts up. Then, when it was passed to the next player, I cried.

As I look around my room, I can hear the lively noises downstairs. All of my pop's old teammates: Howerd Yesbeck, who retired with my father, Taylor Lionel, Axel Jalak, Benzo, the list goes on and on. All of them standing downstairs ready to celebrate my thirteenth birthday.

Hockey was what brought us all together. I guess it's true when they say you don't always choose your family, sometimes they choose you.

"Are you trying to avoid human interaction, Vallie?"

Bishop Maverick.

Always him.

Always him. I hadn't even realized I was gone from the party that long, but of course he noticed. Bishop, I think, was the only one who understood how much I disliked my birthday. I'd never tell my father that. I know how much it means to him to see me happy, but I hated celebrating this day.

Bishop knew that, before I even told him about my mom, he knew why I wanted to be alone on this day. My mom left two days after my second birthday. Just picked up her shit and left. She didn't leave me a note, a picture, nothing. She left like I meant nothing to her, like she didn't carry me for nine months.

Years later and it still hurts—the sting of rejection. I'm not sure if it gets better or worse with each passing year.

I look at B seeing his freshly shaved face, entering my room. Six-feet-four, two-hundred and seventy-five pounds of pure man. His build looked like a hockey player—tall and lean. The kind of muscles you could see beneath his shirt when it clung to him, but not the kind that made you think he was on steroids. You just knew he had that v-line, and those muscles in his back that made women dizzy.

He'd just turned twenty-one in March, making us eight years apart, eight years and eight months to be exact. His birthday on the eighteenth of March and mine on the same day in July.

As much as he pisses me off, I could never deny just how gorgeous he is.

You know what I'm talking about, that classic kind of handsome. The mixture of the boy next door that the older women drool over when he mows their lawn, watching him slowly morph into a scruffy man. An angular jawline sharp enough to cut diamonds, high cheekbones, long nose, symmetrical features that make him look unearthly, heavenly, superior? Some word like that.

He's edgy, with a scar in his left eyebrow that hair won't grow over. If you didn't know him you might be afraid to talk to him because he looks like trouble, but when he smiles at you that smile that showcases his pearly white, straight teeth, he's approachable.

And he is staring at me with those eyes, my favorite thing of all.

My pops used to take me to Banff National Park. It's located in Alberta, Canada. We'd vacation there on the off season, or we'd visit when he played up there. There is a body of water named Moraine Lake. It's breathtaking.

Due to glacier runoff the water is a blue-green color that differs through the seasons. It's ethereal. If there was ever a fountain of youth, or a place where a liquid could make you young forever, it was Moraine Lake.

Bishop's eyes are the exact same pigment. I wanted to drown myself in his eyes. Bathe in those turquoise gems for an eternity.

His lean body is resting against my door frame, legs crossed and muscular arms crossed over his strong chest.

Broad shoulders strain against a black fitted T-shirt, all of which taper into a fit waist. Tree trunk size thighs that look about as dangerous as his massive hands that are attached to tan, veiny arms.

"Just needed the peace and quiet for a little bit, B," I say brushing a piece of hair behind my ear. Bishop made me feel. Whenever he was around, I brightened up instantly.

I didn't fool myself, I knew I was younger than him, and plus I was five feet something of legs, and more fucking legs. Raging lion's mane red hair and a face with more freckles than skin. I wasn't B's type, even if I was of age.

But I couldn't explain that to my heart, she didn't care. She just wanted Bishop Maverick, and there was no telling her any different.

I was awkward when I wasn't on the ice. My form of communication scared boys my age off. I didn't want to talk about how cute they were. I wanted to talk about last night's game, or the new Call of Duty that I am absolutely dominating at.

It's as if guys thought I was an alien because I enjoyed sports and didn't have an obsession with boy bands. It was bad enough that I was taller than most of the guys in my grade, but I made it worse by being, 'more of a man' than they were.

Apparently boys like soft, dainty roses for partners, and I was a wildflower—stubborn, difficult, strong, and impossible to tame.

Talking to Bishop was like talking to Riggs and my dad. Easy. Natural. It was like skating. We just clicked. He didn't ask me why I never fixed my hair, or why I always wore band T-shirts. Hell, he bought me some of them, like the wicked Jimi Hendrix shirt I'm wearing now. He got it for me for Christmas last year.

He got me on a level other people didn't. When I was sad, he saw right through me. He'd take me to the ice, because he knew the only place that truly cheered me up was the rink. He knew that pizza cured my attitude, and Lemonhead candies were the only way you were getting your way.

He was my closest friend, my best friend. Of course, Riggs was my best friend too, but it had always been different with B.

My body is tucked into my nook in my room. My eyes look out the window at the buildings that litter Chicago. I didn't grow up in a house with a yard, with a quiet neighborhood. I lived in a loft apartment in downtown Chicago, where the sounds of sirens, trains, and wind lulled you to sleep at night.

The windy city wasn't for everyone, but it was home to me.

"Would giving you your gift early cheer you up any?" Bishop says playfully as he moves from the doorway towards me. At the sound of a gift, my ears perk, and I twist my body letting my feet dangle off the edge of the nook.

"Maybe, I'd have to see it first." I shrug with a smile on my features, letting him know I am joking.

My black T-shirt hangs loose on my body, as do the boyfriend jeans that sit on my waist. A pair of old Converse completes my look. The look of a girl who looks like she dresses in the dark inside a boy's closet.

Bishop tosses a box of Lemonhead candies at me, and I catch them gracefully.

I raise an eyebrow. Don't get me wrong, I love these things, and I am thankful for anything B gets me, but Lemonheads? Really? For my birthday?

"Whoa, big spender," I joke, opening the box of candy and popping a few of them into my mouth. The sweet, tangy taste coats my taste buds. I ate these things so often it cracked the roof of my mouth.

He continues to walk towards me, pulling a black box out of his back pocket, and holding it out towards me. It's too big to be a ring, so obviously

he isn't proposing. Bishop knows I hate surprises, and I can't stand not knowing what someone is getting me. It irritates the shit out of me.

I reach forward trying to grab the box, but he pulls it away from me.

"Ah ah, not so fast, kid." He smirks, and I glare at him. I cross my arms pouting. My pouty face always works.

"We are going to do this? Really B? You're going to act like you aren't going to give me that, old man?" I say, throwing out the 'old man' because he called me a kid.

He scoffs, "I'm not old, you shithead!"

"What about that gray hair you found the other day?" I snap back raising my eyebrow.

"It was one hair!" he complains, defending his youth. He'd come over—stressing over the fact he'd found a gray hair the other day, and I thought my dad and I were going to laugh ourselves to death.

I hold my laughter in, as I pull the blackmail card.

"If you don't give it, I'm telling Coach Reynolds the reason you couldn't make the benefit game was because you were hungover!"

He challenges my glare with one of his own, two lions facing off as per usual. I'm the one who wins, always. I don't know why he bothers at this point.

"I was not hungover, I overslept. Such a drama queen, Vallie." He brushes off my accusation with false confidence.

"Oh, so oversleeping is you showing up at my house smelling like cheap booze and stale perfume, at seven in the morning looking for my dad, who was at the benefit that YOU were supposed to be at?"

I watch his face shift from amused to slightly embarrassed, checkmate.

I also didn't mention how I force-fed him Tylenol and Gatorade until he passed out on the couch. Then proceeded to cover for his drunk ass by telling Dad he was sick and forgot all about the game.

"First of all the booze was very expensive, and how do you know what stale perfume smells like?"

My stomach rolls at the question. Well, Bishop, because I'm not fucking stupid. You smelled like all those blondes you leave games with. I know you're hot, and I know what sex is.

Some of them are brunettes but normally, it's always blondes. Puck bunnies. They hover after the games trying to get a wedding ring by flashing their tits at the hockey players. They think if they spread their legs

quick enough it'll end with a ring on their finger and a brand new BMW to go shopping in with their AMEX card.

However, he has never, not one time, brought one here. Not a single one has made it past my front door. The day one does, I think my heart might break.

I know I have zero chance of ending up with Bishop. But the thought of him with anyone for longer than one night makes me sick. But I know one day, she will walk past that door frame and break my heart.

She will walk in with her long, blonde hair, small frame, and pretty smile. I will have to do my best not to be a snarky bitch, and my dad will tell him that he's glad Bishop is finally settling down. It'll be one of the worst days of my life. I know it.

I shrug my shoulders, "Because I'm not stupid, and I have eyes. Now can I please have the gift?" I ask sweetly.

He runs a hand through his golden locks, and takes another step closer to me, placing the black box in my hand.

I raise my gaze to his eyes, smiling, and even though there is a matching grin on his face, I swear his eyes say he is nervous. He sighs, shoving his hands into his pockets. A few pieces of hair fall into his eyes.

I swallow and run fingers across the long square box. I pop the box open, and I'm confused at first.

I stare down at the gold chain, shining in the black box. Attached in the middle of the necklace is a matching gold circular pendant. My fingers reach out and trace the outer edges where it reads, 'Saint Sebastian, Pray for me.' The inner image of the pendant is an image of two hockey sticks crossing.

"Saint Sebastian," he says before bending down to squat to my eye level. He takes the box from my fingers, gently removing the necklace from its perch. He continues talking as he unclips the back of the necklace. My eyes are glued to him, waiting for his next words.

"It's said that Roman authorities tried to kill Sebastian with arrows. However, he returned to taunt the Emperor and was beaten to death after. Later he became the patron saint of athletes because of his ability to suffer and push through."

I feel the warmth of his hands as he reaches around my neck to clip the necklace in place. His fingertips barely graze my skin and I swear I feel sparks. His fingers are softer than I imagined.

I didn't even know Bishop was religious, and my throat is itchy with questions.

"Dear Commander at the Roman Emperor's court, you chose to be also a soldier of Christ and dared to spread faith in the King of Kings, for which you were condemned to die. Your body, however, proved athletically strong and the executing arrows extremely weak. So another means to kill you was chosen and you gave your life to the Lord. May athletes be always as strong in their faith as their patron saint so clearly has been. Amen..."

With the necklace clasped, he pulls back, looking at it dangle above my shirt. My fingers nervously grab the pendant, playing with it softly. I look down at the shiny new necklace, tracing the engravings.

"Where did you learn that?" I ask curiously. It's the only question I can get out.

"My high school hockey coach's wife was Catholic. Gave me that same necklace on my thirteenth birthday. She told me I needed protecting. I've worn it every day since she gave it to me." The weight of his words makes the gift much more important. This means something to him, and obviously I mean enough to him that he is sharing this moment with me.

"I didn't have a lot growing up, but Coach and Anna gave me hope that one day I could be something. This was their way of showing their faith in me."

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, trying to hold the tears in. "What did you need protecting from?"

He sighs, standing up, running his hands through his hair. His eyes have lost all their warmth, replaced with a much darker color. I can see the emotion that passes through them. I know because it mirrors my own.

Pain.

"Ghosts."

He says it in a way that leaves no room for questions. My heart squeezes in my chest, and I grip the necklace a little tighter. He reaches forward, bending at the waist, and grabbing the necklace from me.

"It served its purpose for me. So I'm passing the magic to you. This pendant, this..." He shakes the gold jewelry for good measure.

"It is my faith in you when you step out on the ice. Every time you look at it, or touch it, I want it to remind you that someone always has your back no matter what. No matter how many people tell you no, one person will always say yes." He pauses. "Remember that I'm always in your corner,

always, Vallie and I am never leaving. Not now, not ever. I am always with you."

My eyes are burning. Wet, hot tears gather in my eyes. So heavy they fall in large drops. I bite my bottom lip. Looking down and quickly wiping my tears away. I sniffle softly. This feeling in my stomach that feels like butterflies on steroids won't leave.

I just nod, swallowing all my words. When I get like this it's hard to form words without getting more emotional, and I hate crying. I throw my arms around his neck, surprising him with a hug. I bury my head in his neck.

"Thanks, B. You're the best," I whisper.

"Always, Vallie..."

I enjoy his embrace for a little longer before he pulls away, ruffling my hair with a casual smile.

"Come on, let's go get some cake, kid."

To Bishop the gift is to a little kid who doesn't have a mom and needs support. But to me, this is a piece of him, something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. A reminder that Bishop is more than just a person to me, he's my person.

I follow Bishop down the steps of my apartment, meeting my pops at the bottom.

"Hey, there's my champ!" It didn't matter how I felt, my dad always knew how to cheer me up no matter the situation. Even when he didn't understand it himself.

I smile, his beard is shaved, and his age is starting to show, which for a thirty-seven-year-old retired hockey player doesn't look too bad. Nostalgia washes over me as I think about the last time I saw him on the ice. He was...unbelievable.

My father, John Reid Sullivan, or JR, announced his retirement two days after his third Stanley Cup win, nearly a month ago. After thirteen seasons, winning the Selke Award twice as the NHL's top wing, and hoisting the Stanley Cup three times for the Fury, he had called it quits. Hockey had lost a great one that day. After 1,160 games played, thirty-four game-winning points, and over twenty-five hat tricks, my father went down as a legend.

When he was asked about why he was retiring, he shrugged and said, "Never thought I'd see the day but," he paused, letting his eyes fall to mine,

"I've found something I love much more than hockey, and they need all my time now." Then he winked at me.

I knew from the day I was born I was meant to play hockey. It was the kind of thing that wasn't a question, it just was. He didn't ask if I wanted a stick and a pair of skates, I just had them. He never had to ask if I was ready to practice, I was waking him up at five in the morning packed and ready to go.

I wanted to be the best. The kind of player who inspired people. I wouldn't settle for good, I wanted to be great.

As the child of a legend, the pressure was intense but only from outside forces. Media, friends, all made comments about me being like my pops one day, being a hockey superstar. I thrived off it. The need to make sure people never doubted me or my talent.

My dad showed me how to play. He taught me everything I knew, but he never pressured me to love the game. I knew that if I looked at him and said I was done with hockey, he would love me the same.

He told me he was proud after the first game I won, after my first hat trick, my first fight, my first loss. He always made sure I knew he was proud, even without hockey. I was his daughter and to him, that was enough. It was us against the world, and although most girls would have been sad that they had to wear ball caps everywhere and didn't get taught how to apply makeup, I was the happiest kid in the world.

I got to watch NHL games whenever I wanted, eat my stomach full of pizza, and wear jerseys with baggy jeans. I grew up around grown men who burped, farted, and cussed. A world where I could be anything I wanted to be, and I wanted to be just like them.

I don't remember anything about my mom, she left when I was so little that I don't even recall her face. I don't even know her name, and honestly? I don't want to know. Putting a name to her, would be giving her power over me. Pops didn't talk about her, only a few words here and there. I know that she hurt him.

I knew I was the result of a one night stand, and when I asked him about it he told me that he didn't think he was ready to be a father. That he was nervous, and didn't think he was fit to be a dad. He told me that when he first held me, it all changed for him. At that moment, he knew I was always meant to be his daughter. In this life, and the next, we would be a part of each other's life. Even if he came to me as my best friend or a stranger,

something in the sky knew that he needed me, and he would always need me.

My pops was all I needed, just me and him.

And of course, Bishop.

When I left for practice in the morning, he'd meet us at the rink, always ready to push me. While my father was the supportive role, the one who never pushed too hard, Bishop was the drill sergeant. I think it's why we fought so much. B wanted my best every second I was on the ice. He pushed perfection, and I loved him for that.

By age six, I was playing for a league. At age nine, I was ahead of the game. I never wanted to stop though, that's why Bishop said I was so good because I had the heart of a champion.

Women weren't treated on the same playing field as men, but I was going to change that.

"Hey, Pops." I sigh, wrapping my arms around his waist and burying my face into his chest. The comforting smell of Old Spice tells me everything will be okay.

"Having a good birthday?" he asks.

I nod looking up at him with a smile.

"Good." He kisses the top of my head.

"SULLY! Will you please come tell this twat waffle why we, Chicagoans, don't eat ketchup on hot dogs?"

The guests burst into a united laughter, including me. Aurelia Elizabeth Montgomery Riggs. What a fucking mouthful.

She was born into a world of socialites and old money, but you'd never know it when you met her. Riggs was gifted with the type of beauty people deemed, *Lucky* magazine cover, Victoria's Secret model, pretty.

Except with beauty came pain, and no one knew that better than her. Her dad was a politician and her mother was a southern debutante queen. I assume when they had Aurelia they were extremely excited to dress their little princess up and make her into the perfect daughter. I'd give anything to know what their faces looked like when she asked for a pair of skates instead of a dress.

A sport designed for men and the complete opposite of pageants like her mother had imagined for her little girl. Once they tossed her a pair of skates, she became nothing but an object to them. They never came to practices or games. They were shitty fucking people.

It's where all the anger came from on the ice, Riggs was a hurricane out there. If she went one game without ending up in the penalty box, I'd worry something was wrong with her. Hockey wasn't a love for her like it was for me, it was a way to let out all the anger she had built up inside of her.

I make my way towards her, letting her throw an arm around my shoulders.

"How is it that Bishop has been around this long and still eats that tomato diarrhea on his food?" she states watching B eat with a disgusted look on her face.

Riggs has zero filter, isn't afraid to tell you like it is. It's what makes us so close, we are honest with one another.

Bishop takes a huge bite of hotdog, chewing it and humming just to piss her off. They argue like siblings, always. They never get along, ever. I think it's mostly because Riggs has never been easy to love, and she rejects it most of the time. Bishop just isn't the type to back down so easily.

"Fucking delicious. Maybe you shouldn't concern yourself with my eating habits so much, Aurelia," he points out, and I roll my eyes. Great, now she's going to be pissed.

She shoots him the middle finger. "Stop calling me that, Maverick. If your eating habits didn't make me want to vomit, I wouldn't fucking mind, dick face."

"Don't call you what? Your name? Aurelia," he pushes, his smirk growing as her anger rises.

"You motherfu—"

"Children, let's rein it in, it's time for cake!" Pops states from behind us, stopping Riggs from ripping Bishop a new asshole. Bishop covers up a laugh, while Riggs stares daggers at him. I shake my head laughing.

This home is filled with love and support. My favorite people in the entire world gather to celebrate my life and that makes this day worth all the pain it brings. My life was not perfect, and neither was I, but I had people in my life who made it worth living.

All of this is possible because of two things.

Love and hockey.

CHAPTER 3



Broken, Bent, Bishop

BISHOP - 23

I seriously need to cut this fucking mop on my head, and my beard needs a major trim. I make it a point to not cut it during playoffs, but now that the season is over, it's time I stop looking like an angry lumberjack.

I can go from clean cut to scary Bigfoot real quick. I push the hair out of my eyes the best I can and continue my workout.

Five cones are set up on the ice in a large five-point star formation. I make my way through them guiding a puck along the way. Making tight movements around the cones, exploding open, and making sure I'm able to change directions quickly.

Always need to make sure I'm quick on my feet. It's the key to a great defense.

But man, I fucking hate agility days.

I've hated them since I started. Which is stupid because almost every day was an agility day. This is hockey we are talking about. Maybe I

should've played something less physically demanding, like baseball or chess.

My calves are burning, lungs are aching in the middle of the rotation. And now my peaceful practice is destroyed by the loud voice of Pat Benatar blasting through the arena speakers. I jump slightly not expecting the sound invasion. Imagine that. A six-foot-something grown man getting startled by "You're a real tough cookie..."

How fitting.

A smile breaks onto my face, and I shake my head, mostly because of that image in my mind, but also because of who just skated on the ice bobbing her head like a professional '80s singer. I personally prefer to practice during the off-season in silence. Just me and the sounds of skates on ice. I don't need anything else.

However, there is only one person I know who practices, warms up, hell, even listens to eighties rock music anymore. It gets her in the right mindset, she says.

"Are you trying to cause me to go deaf, Vallie?"

Valor Sullivan.

She looks up at me, her freckled face breaking into a grin. I watch as her beautiful long legs skate towards me. She's such an old soul. What fifteen-year-old do you know to listen to Eddie Money, Queen, and Mötley Crüe? Most kids her age are warming up to some rapper with a rainbow grill and face tattoos.

But not Val.

She's her own damn enigma. A confident, insecure girl with a whirlwind of red hair. Even with all her quirks, including her obsession with Lemonheads (They are disgusting.) and band T-shirts, she's still one of the coolest people I've ever met. I just hope she stays that way. Pure, untouched, not broken by the world, and hopefully, she doesn't let Riggs corrupt her. Her helmet is tucked under her arm as she starts to speak a few feet away from me.

"Don't insult Benatar like that. It's not my fault your taste in music sucks ass." I don't think we could go a day without insults or bickering. It was coded in her DNA to bitch at me.

"Just because my music was made in the last five years doesn't make it bad, it makes it popular," I counter with an eye-roll.

"Yeah, yeah, spare me. I'd rather gauge my ears with a rusty pop can than listen to that electronically manufactured donkey shit."

I laugh loudly, pushing my hair back out of my face completely. Maybe it's because she was raised by only a father who played hockey for years, but she has the worst mouth. Sailors would blush. I'm not joking either. As she's gotten older it's only gotten worse.

Her hair is in a messy braid, pieces of curls fly out. I imagine they are angry for trying to be detained in a lethal knot, sorta like her. She has on a school practice jersey and regular hockey attire, the gold pendant hangs from her neck, standing out from everything else.

The first few months without it made me feel naked. But when I saw it on her, it made it worth it. I wasn't religious, not really, but something higher than me had placed Annalise in my life, and then placed me in Valor's.

"You'd think you were your dad's fucking age listening to this music."

"It's called taste, Maverick. You should try to get some."

"Working on your chirps, I see?"

"Nah, giving you shit just comes naturally."

I roll my eyes, a chuckle leaving me.

"I've gotta get to practicing, superstar. If I'm not warmed up by the time Pops gets out here, I'll be doing laps for days." She starts to skate backward as Crazy Train blasts from the speakers, giving me a head bang, and Metal horns. I shake my head with a laugh, flipping her off as she starts to warm up.

Valor Sullivan. One of these days, she's going to arrive like a hurricane into some poor boy's life and fuck his whole world up. And I'll be there to fuck him up if he hurts her.

With a smile on my face, I skate around to gather all my equipment. I can hear Valor in the distance, humming along to the music. I sling the bag over my shoulder, heading towards the exit off the ice when I hear my name.

"Bishop! I was just about to call you."

When I was drafted from Alton, the only home I ever knew, I came alone. My small town in Illinois was its own world. Its own little nook, and even though Chicago was only a four-hour drive, it still seemed a world away from me. My family, my real family, couldn't uproot their life. I wouldn't let them. Coach Finnegan had a job, a wife, Annalise, and two

twin girls, Lily and Violet, who I adored. As for the biological sperm donor that called himself my father? He could barely keep his head up long enough to realize I even played hockey.

So as an eighteen-year-old in a new city, JR Sullivan made sure I settled in well. He allowed me into his home, helped me find my first apartment, made me feel welcome with the team. Made sure that I felt at home under the big city lights.

Plus he introduced me to Val. Another person I could protect, watch over. Another little sister I never had. Out of them all, Lily, Violet, and Valor, the redhead was my favorite. Maybe because the twins were girly, more concerned with Barbie dolls and Justin Bieber or because they were only ten. Vallie was different, we were closer. We could talk about how shitty the new league rules were, shove our faces full of pizza, and argue about whose slap-shot was better. I'd never tell her cocky ass but hers would be better in a few short years.

Not to mention, I know what it feels like to lose your mother. Somedays Valor isn't all sunshine and rainbows. Sometimes she mourns the loss of a woman she barely met. She knows the inside of her womb, she knows her heartbeat, and that's enough to kill someone emotionally.

"I'm not driving you home from a doctor's appointment if that is what you want. The last time you got handsy with me," I joke.

"I was doped up on pain medication. Get over yourself, idiot. No doctor's appointment. I need you to stay and drop Valor at the house after we get done with practice."

I nod. I'd done that a million times over the years. The formal question was throwing me though. Normally he'd just tell me I was taking Val home, and I'd give him a thumbs up. It had been forever since he asked.

"Sure thing. Everything okay?"

He scratches the back of his neck, and I swear his cheeks turn slightly red. "Yeah, I just. I have this date thing. Just a woman from Valor's school. It's no big deal or anything..."

I quirk an eyebrow smirking at him, hitting his shoulder.

"Ahhh shit! Hell yeah, man! Getting back out there, finally!" I cheer.

In the five years since I've known JR, I'd never seen him go out with a woman, not even take a puck bunny home. He'd been focused on hockey and once that was over, his sole attention was Valor. I'd never met Valor's

mother. I didn't even know her name. JR never talked about her, but whoever she was, she fucked them both up. Royally.

I hated her for them.

"Shh, I don't want Valor to know unless it's serious," he shushes me. He looks onto the ice to make sure she didn't hear anything, and once he is happy that she hasn't, he turns his attention back to me.

"I got you, old man. Have fun ton—"

"Who invited fuckface?"

Riggs's voice drifts towards us. She's standing behind us dressed in a similar outfit to Valor's. I reach out ruffling her blonde hair.

"Aurelia, always a pleasure, sunshine," I say with a chuckle and she glares at me as per usual. She is the grouchiest little shit.

"Bishop, I like you, really. But, if you call me Aurelia one more time, I'm going to shove my skate so far up your ass my blade will slice your tongue in half. "

I hold my hands up in defense, as she moves past us, stopping to give JR a side hug which he returns with a smile. If he could prove abuse at Aurelia's house, he'd adopt her in a millisecond.

She skates onto the ice with Valor. They smile at each other before doing the same handshake they did when they were ten.

"I feel sorry for whoever ends up with that wild child," JR says watching Riggs with a smile. I nod in agreement.

"You better get out there before they lose what little patience they have." I pat his back and head towards the locker room to shower and change.

Once I reach the shower, I shed the sweat covered clothes and equipment, turning the hot water on and stepping inside the glass shower. One of my favorite things about the Chicago Fury arena was the showers. The floor was heated, and the water pressure was phenomenal.

I let the hot water wash away the soreness that will no doubt make an appearance tomorrow morning. The only sound is the water hitting the tile beneath me, and I bask in the peace.

My life since signing to the Fury has been...chaotic to say the least. From games, practices, and workouts to the charity events, fundraisers, signings, and paparazzi. So I live for the moments when everything is quiet.

I'd never thought I'd say that, after everything I'd been through as a kid. That silence was what I craved in my adult life, due to the fact as a child all

I wanted was something to distract me from the fact my life was a silent hollow.

I guess that's why they say be careful what you wish for, right?

After washing off, I step out of the shower, drying myself and slipping into a pair of boxers, then my jeans. My phone buzzes, and I pick it up, opening the text from Coach Finnegan. The smile on my face is wide.

There is a picture of Lily and Violet wearing one of my jerseys. Underneath is a message that says, 'Your biggest fans.'

I sit down on one of the benches, gazing at the picture.

To say my life is in debt to Coach Finnegan is putting it lightly. From the day I met him, I knew he was going to change my life. I just didn't realize how much.

I had my fingers pressed into the trigger of a black paint can, in the process of spraying the side of my middle school and leaving my name in large black letters when I heard someone clear their throat behind me.

There was a reason I was painting my name on the side of the middle school. I wanted to be caught. I wanted to be seen. I wanted the school to call my dad, to see if he'd care enough to ground me, yell at me, fuck, look at me even.

I didn't even have to vandalize to get caught, a bonus for me. I turned with a fake sigh, leaning against the brick wall, throwing my hands up.

"Fuck, you caught me, old man!" A deaf person could hear my sarcasm.

The person who caught me was Coach Eric Finnegan. He is the boys' varsity hockey coach, which is a huge deal because they have won state three times in a row. Personally I never found any interest in sports, hadn't found an interest in anything really.

Everything about me is numb.

He stalks toward me, towering over my twelve-year-old frame. He's wearing a pair of khakis, polo, and a hat. I look up at him with defiance in my eyes, he scoffs as he starts to chuckle. He takes his time to look me up and down, before crossing his arms across his chest.

"Well, it looks like you've got two options, kid." His voice is rough like he just woke up, it commands respect and attention. For a moment it reminds me of my dad before the incident.

I roll my eyes, as I raise my eyebrows waiting for his answer. "Any day now, buddy."

"I either drag your ass to the office and you get suspended or you can show up at the rink tomorrow at five in the morning for preseason practice," he states.

I let out a sarcastic chuckle, "I'm twelve, old man, I'm still in middle school," I reply curtly. "So let's head down to the office and get this over with."

I walk towards him, ready to face the middle school principal. A bitch of a lady. She's the woman you know has thirty cats and probably killed her husband. He lays his hand on my shoulder, stopping my movements.

"You wanted to get caught, right? That's why you did this in broad daylight, during school hours? Be there in the morning. This could be your way out."

Without another word, he pats my back, before heading towards the school. Leaving me shocked.

This man is delusional. Me? A hockey player? I weigh like a buck twenty, and that's giving me a few. I would get wrecked out there on the ice. Not to mention I have never skated a day in my life, and I have chicken legs. There is no way in hell. Nope. Not doing it.

That's what I told myself all day, and continued to tell myself as I walked to the school at five in the morning with my hands shoved inside my jean pockets. I was a curious kid, and a piece of me thought maybe he was right, maybe this could be my escape.

My escape from all the mess at home. All the demons, ghosts, all of it.

When he saw I showed up, he tossed me a pair of old skates, hand-me-down pads, and gloves. Told me they were mine as long as I wanted them.

They were used, but they were mine. It had been a long time since I felt like something was mine. My first day was awful, learning how to skate was rough. Once I picked up on it, I got demolished on the ice. I wasn't even close to the best, but I wanted to be.

Being out there lit this fire inside me. I wanted something. For once in my life, I wanted something more. This was my time to do something for me. I didn't have to worry about the past, my dad passed out on the fucking couch, or if I was going to be able to eat when I got home. I had something now. Something worth fighting for.

The months that followed I came home sore, bloody, and bruised. I was moved around a lot, Coach was trying to find my spot. Goalie sucked ass,

it's like being in front of a firing squad all the time. Pucks coming at you ninety miles an hour? No fucking thanks.

My handles were decent, but not nearly good enough to be a wing. My hand eye coordination was solid, so when I started defense it was like walking into a house and knowing it was home. All the aggression, pain, and struggles I had, I used it out there. I was the man behind the curtain, the play-maker, helping my team succeed.

During my first year of playing, I was a permanent punching bag. Not only because I was just starting out but also because I was still in middle school and they didn't have a team. So I practiced with varsity, went to the games, worked as the water boy until my freshman year.

My first game start was my first shot of heroin, and I was addicted.

I was there practicing, getting better every day, sometimes twice a day. Hockey was my way of blocking out everything. The only thing in my life that kept me moving.

Well, except for Coach.

When he realized just how dedicated I was to this sport, he started picking me up from my house so I didn't have to walk every morning. I was stubborn at first and refused. I didn't want anyone's fucking help. Relying on people made you weak.

But slowly I let down my guard. Like an abused dog, he slowly got me out of the darkness. We started getting breakfast, followed by dinner at his house, and now? Coach is the father I always wanted, and his wife Annalise was an angel.

My father, Robert, was an alcoholic. Whiskey was his vice, and he was a slave to that bottle. It's shitty to say, but I almost wish he was abusive. That way he'd at least look at me, acknowledge that I was fucking there, instead of staying so drunk he didn't even know he had a son anymore.

After we lost my mother, Caroline, my dad became a shell of who he used to be. The father that would take me fishing, throw a baseball with me, grill with me, taught me chess, was gone. In his place was a hollow man who felt he lost half of himself.

My dad used to say my mom had this spark inside her that was magnetic. You couldn't help but watch in awe of all she was, and he had to have her. She was the reason he believed in magic, in love, in happiness.

I watched my dad always hold the door for her, and when she was mad he never forgot to bring home flowers. She made him dance when he had a

rough day at work, and never failed to make him smile when the weight of the world got a little too much.

But no one is perfect. I learned that the hard way.

I always knew my mom was sick, just not in the same way as most people. She had 'demons' inside her head. They kept her up at night according to dad. Depression is a bitch. It's something that feeds off all the energy you have stored up and replaces it with sadness. It works from the inside out, so by the time you detect it's there, it's probably too late. It has no mercy and shows no prejudice.

Dad knew she struggled with it, but when they got pregnant, she had a different kind of happiness, a glow, he said. She was happy, smiling. They were great for the first seven years of my life. I was spoiled, cherished, loved endlessly. A kid couldn't have dreamed for better parents.

Until one day Mom just wasn't happy anymore.

After her incident, Dad lost himself, and he could barely breathe in my direction. Mostly because I had my mother's eyes. The same blue that died with her were the ones I would carry for the rest of my life. I was a constant reminder of everything he'd lost.

A piece of me died with her that day. The piece that believed in magic, happy endings, love, and all that bullshit. I'd never get that back.

I can't escape all the past pain, the damage my father and mother placed in me, in my everyday life. However, I can for those hours I'm on the ice. It's the time that makes me feel free. It's when the pain doesn't define me. I'm not the kid who lost his mother to suicide, the kid with a neglectful father. For those hours on the ice, I can do anything, be anyone.

Hockey isn't just a sport for me. It saved my life. It's still saving my life.

I quickly type a response, sending my love, and shove my phone into my back pocket. I throw a blue shirt over my shoulders along with a hoodie, running a hand through my slightly damp hair, and make my way towards the rink to watch Valor finish up.

The cold air hits my face when I walk out of the locker room. I can hear Valor skating before I see her. She glides, drifts across the ice. It's so smooth you can hear it from miles away. She'll be one of the greats. The one people will talk about for years after her time, they'll retire her jersey, little girls will want to grow up and be her. She's one of a kind out there, her movements, the communication, the vision. She was born to play, built to be out there.

The catch? She's only fifteen right now. Imagine what she will be like when she graduates college.

Fucking unstoppable.

I shove my hands into my pockets watching through the glass as she practices. Twelve pucks are lined up vertically in the center of the ice. All of them are about ten inches apart. Valor starts at one end and weaves her way through making an S shape as quickly as possible while remaining consistent. Once she reaches the last puck she curves towards the goal, deking Riggs and delivering a wrist shot sailing the black biscuit into the net.

She's about to make another rotation through when my phone buzzes again. I was expecting a text from Coach Finnegan, not a naked picture of a busty brunette whose name I don't remember.

Her name is under my phone as Bunny. So that means one of two things. Either she fucks like a rabbit, which would require me to text back with details about coming over later or because she has big ears.

Either way, I'm definitely making plans because her tits are phenomenal.

I smirk at the picture, my thumbs move across the keys typing a time to meet later. If we don't go to her place, I'll have to rent a hotel room which is always a pain in my ass, but I have a strict rule.

No women at my home. Period.

I don't like having leftover perfume on my sheets or underwear in random places. My home is mine for a reason, plus women get the wrong idea when you invite them to your house. It's like a fucking marriage proposal.

"Why do you look constipated? Are you taking your daily vitamins?" I raise my eyes from my phone to Valor's face. She is currently watching me with a playful smirk, raising her eyebrow in question. I let out a soft chuckle, obviously, I was way too consumed on my phone.

"Nah, that is not a look of constipation, he probably got a dick pic," Riggs adds.

"No, I am not constipated. But thank you, Vallie, for being so concerned with my bowel track. Glad someone is. Aurelia, I am very much into women and only women," I snap back.

"Could've fooled me!" she yells as she moves past me to the locker room. I rub my temples. That girl stresses me out.

"Give me ten minutes, and we can head to Gio's," Valor says, following Riggs.

"Who said we were getting pizza?" I shout at her back.

She turns, giving me a wide smile, flicking her braid over her shoulder.

"Me, Maverick, got a problem with that?"

CHAPTER 4



Ladylike

BISHOP - 23

"Bullshit, there is no way the Fury will draft Nico, he's too soft." I lean back in the booth of the small pizza place. My spine is digging into the rough material. I watch as she gives me a deadpan look as she takes a huge bite of pizza.

The left side of my mouth tilts into a lopsided smile. Her red hair is out of its braid and is starting to dry.

The frizz is real.

The longer we sit here the more it looks like she shoved her finger in an electrical socket. As per usual, the sleeves of her hoodie are too long and almost completely cover her hands minus the fingers.

Crossing my arms with a sigh, I give a lazy come here motion with my hands. "Come on, let me hear it, I know you disagree. You always fucking do."

With a mouth full of cheese and sauce, she answers, "Soft or not, he's good." She pauses to swallow, taking a drink of her water. "He can make plays and moves to where the puck is going to be, not where it is. He has great ice vision, everything you need out of a forward. All he needs to do is score and he can do that. Mark my words Nico Jett is gonna be a Fury member whether you like it or not, B."

If I told her the sky was blue, she'd argue it's red just 'cause she can. Her life goal is to piss me off. Very rarely does she fail. Instead of continuing this argument, I just nod my head. She isn't exactly wrong.

"He still has one more year of high school. Let's just see how that goes before we start talking about drafting him to the NHL. He might decide to go to college first, who knows." I shrug, reaching across the table and grabbing the crust of her pizza.

She never eats pizza crust, always eats fries with ranch, never leaves the house without Lemonheads, and can eat hot sauce on anything. She is the weirdest person I've ever met in my life.

With a scoff and an eyebrow raised, she reaches for another piece of pizza. "Whatever, you're just worried he is going to come in and take your Golden Boy image. God forbid the king of the Chicago Fury gets dethroned."

I feign sadness and pout, "I am not nearly that bad!"

"You were featured on the cover of ESPN's best body, yes, you are that bad. I'm just looking forward to plucking the heads off all the bobbleheads they make of you." I can barely understand her words as she swallows an insanely large bite of food.

I laugh as I reach for my water to wash down the food but realize it's empty, I'm about to wave down our waiter when I hear a wickedly sweet voice.

"Guess I have good timing."

I turn my head to the left and I am met with bottle-blonde hair, plump lips, and a fake tan that looks orange under the harsh diner lights.

My eyes travel over her figure. Her boobs are spilling out of her V-neck, which is no doubt on purpose. A pair of jeans with rips in them squeeze her legs so tightly I'm not exactly sure how blood is circulating.

All and all? She's the exact girl I go for when I'm looking to hook up. Easy on the eyes and easy to hook up with, which equals easy to get the fuck away from after we've had our roll in the hay.

I go for girls I know I'll never fall for. The ones who I know, one night, and that's it. I don't want to run the risk of falling for someone, so I avoid emotions altogether. I've known too many guys who sleep with someone and it ends up being more. It's all fun and games, simple, sex, and then boom. You're in love and she wants the white picket fence and twelve kids. Then she takes half of your shit in the divorce. Or she kills herself.

Fuck that.

Love has been and always will be my biggest fear, which when I say that, makes me sound like the biggest pussy. I'm not afraid to admit the thought of love makes me want to vomit. Sure, for some it's sunshine and rainbows. But for people like me? It's similar to swallowing battery acid.

Love can take a fucking hike, far, far away from me.

I run my eyes over her body making sure she sees me do so. She smiles back at me with a seductive glint in her eye.

"That you do, doll face." I shoot her a wink.

She twirls a piece of her hair, blushing lightly. I look at her name tag which reads Jessica. It should be simple enough, but I'll stick to doll face just in case. I don't want to get slapped. Been there, done that.

"You're Bi—" she starts but is abruptly interrupted.

"Yeah, he is Bishop Maverick. Yes, he plays hockey. Now if you are done eye-fucking him, can I have a refill to?"

Valor's voice comes as an intrusion to my lust bubble. I move my gaze to her, shock and confusion coats my face. She has her arms crossed, and a look of irritation settles on her features.

I tilt my head to the left and raise my eyebrow in question. My face has to read, *What the fuck?*

I've known Val for a long time. She's quirky, slightly introverted, and she's as sweet as they come when you get to know her. She'd give the shirt of her back to anyone in need. I've only seen her hostile when she's on the ice. This isn't Valor.

I slowly turn my head back to the waitress giving a forced smile, ready to apologize, when blondie starts talking.

She reaches for Valor's cup, pouring water into the glass as she talks, "Sure thing, kiddo. You know, it isn't very ladylike to talk with your mouth full."

I'm not sure how I landed myself in this position, pitted between one angry teenager and a passive-aggressive Barbie. All I know is Barbie is

being a bitch. Her comment was snarky, and anyone who needs to tear down a kid to make themselves feel superior isn't the type of person I want around, even if it is for a simple fuck.

Valor's face falls, and she turns her head to look out the window. Pink heats up her neck and works its way towards her face. I can visibly see her deflate.

She is the queen of hiding her emotions. Valor puts on a mask of confidence every single day of her life. Hoping that if she can make the jokes about being a tomboy first, people won't notice that it bothers her that she doesn't have a mom to teach her how to be 'ladylike.'

All I want to do is wrap her up in a cocoon and save her from all the hurt this world is going to put her through. Maybe that's why Vallie and I are so close, why when she feels the need to break down it's with me. Pain recognizes pain. Our mothers left because they chose to, not because someone made them but because they wanted to. My hurt and hers? It's the same breed of torture.

Water brims her bright green eyes that are turning gray by the second. Vallie has cried only a handful of times in front of me. The worst one?

Buzz* *Buzz

With a groan, I roll over and grab my phone off the side table. What fucking time is it? I pick the phone up and lay down on my back again. A loud yawn falls from my mouth as I answer with my eyes still closed.

"Hello?" My voice is groggy from lack of sleep. I run a hand down my face trying to wake up a little.

"B?" Her voice is quiet, small, and sounds full of tears.

I sit straight up in bed. My heart is thudding in my chest, and my veins run ice cold. I swing my legs off the side of the bed grabbing the jeans I wore tonight off the floor and start tugging them up my body. Fuck boxers.

"Valor? What's wrong, are you okay? Where are you?"

She laughs gently, but I can tell tears are running down her face.

"I'm okay. Um, sorry I woke you up, I-I... I need a favor."

I take a deep breath when she tells me she isn't in any danger, but my body is still on high alert. I tuck the phone between my shoulder and my ear as I slip my shoes and socks on.

"Anything, Vallie."

"I'm at a sleepover and I don't feel good. I want to go home. Dad is out tonight and I don't want to bother him. I want him to have a good time..."

she trails. Her voice is soft, and it cracks near the end.

"Text me the address, I'm on my way."

I quickly throw my shirt on and grab my keys. The ride to the small suburban house leaves me time to think.

Valor knows her dad would have come and gotten her no matter where he was, or what he was doing. I run a tired hand through my hair with a sigh. So, why did she call me? What happened at the sleepover that made her feel like she couldn't talk to her dad about it?

Worry racks my bones the entire ride until I pull into the driveway of the house. I pull my phone out, sending a text message to Valor letting her know I'm here.

I look out of the window towards the door watching it open slowly. Valor's red hair is in messy braids and a pair of hockey PJs adorn her eleven-year-old frame. My heart squeezes in my chest as I see her puffy face and wet eyes.

She jogs to my car, opening the passenger door and sliding in. I click the seat warmer on high and watch as she pulls her knees up towards her upper body. She lays her head on the window and sighs.

"Your car always smells like you," she mumbles. Heavy tears leaving a wet line to her chin. She sniffles and uses her sleeves to wipe her eyes. Her statement didn't really require a reply. It was just her letting me know that it made her feel comfortable.

I put the car in reverse and started the drive towards her house. The silence isn't awkward, it's just quiet. I'm letting her breathe, letting her know that she's okay now. She's safe. She needs a few minutes of feeling safe.

When we get back to the loft, I help her out of the car and use my key to get into her front door. I notice her dad's car is gone, and decide to tell him in the morning when he gets home.

"Go sit on the couch, find us something to watch, I'll be in there in a second," I say softly, and she nods. I head to the kitchen, opening up the cabinets grabbing a coffee cup, honey, tea, milk, and lemon. Once all the ingredients are out, I start boiling the water.

Anna made this for me when I had nightmares and couldn't sleep. It used to put me right to sleep, and as a kid it made me feel safe and loved. That's what Val needs right now. To feel loved.

I rest my hands on the counter, calming myself down from the adrenaline rush. Once the water boils I pour it into the cup, add a slice of lemon, tea bag, honey, and a splash of milk. I carry the cup into the living room where Valor is cuddled up on the couch in a ball with a blanket wrapped around her.

I sit on the floor in front of her and hand her the tea. She takes it, looks into the cup, and raises an eyebrow.

"Are you trying to poison me?"

I laugh, shaking my head. "No, not yet. Drink it; it'll make you feel better."

She takes a few drinks, before laying it on the floor between us and whispers a soft, "Thanks."

I clear my throat. "So, are you going to tell me what happened or am I going to have to force it out of you?"

With an eye roll and a groan, she starts speaking, "It's stupid, Katie's mom just said something that pissed me off. I didn't want to stay till the morning and hear her mouth again."

I raise an eyebrow, knowing that's not all. She sits up, the blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

"She said my dad needed to hurry and find a wife before I turned into a boy or a lesbian. All because I was talking to Katie about how hockey was going. All evening she was telling me how un-lady like I was. Cross your legs, Valor. Valor, don't talk with your mouth full. Valor, this. Valor, that. I mean what's so wrong with how I act?" Her voice falls at the end and tears gather up in her eyes.

She stands up abruptly, pacing the room. She's irritated that this situation bothers her, and watching her go through these rollercoaster emotions is painful.

"Yeah, I-I like sports and I am a messy eater, but that doesn't make me a boy! I can't help it that I don't have a mom to teach me these things, B. I can't help that she left me! I can't help that she left..." she all but yells as tears start to fall faster. I stand up quickly, moving towards her. I wrap my arms around her pulling her into my chest tightly. Her small hands cling to my shirt as she trembles against me.

"W-hy didn't she want me, B?! What's so wrong with me that people leave me? What did I-I do?" Her voice is wobbling. She can barely even get

the words out. I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't know. That is what I want to say.

I don't know, Vallie.

My mom left me too. I wanna say. She left me and didn't tell me why either and every night I cried myself to sleep asking this same question.

But I can't say that. I have to say something that will make her better; that will help her. I have to be the person I needed when I was young. I tell her the same thing Coach Eric's wife Anna told me when I was angry at the world, angry at my mother.

"What I have learned about life is that letting go doesn't mean loving any less," I say softly.

One tear falls down her pale face landing with a loud thud on the table. I grit my teeth, turning towards the waitress with a forced smile.

"That'll be all," I say.

"Oh, I was hoping we could exchange nu—"

"I said, that's all," I repeat in a slightly irritated voice.

With a hair flip, she storms off. My attention is back to Valor who looks more vulnerable by the second. She's insecure about the things normal teenage girls shouldn't be. She doesn't know how to fix her frizzy hair, because no one ever taught her. All the things a mother should have shown her, she never learned because her mom left.

I reach into my pocket grabbing a small box of Lemonheads, and I slide it across the table. I keep some on me when she is around, just in case.

Her eyes light up for a moment as she opens them, popping a handful into her mouth.

"You're going to turn into a lemon."

"Better yellow, than orange." She shoots a look at the waitress. "So, that's like, the kind of girl you're into?"

I raise an eyebrow, the question shocks me. Obviously, she knows I date women, but she's never asked questions about it.

"Into?"

"You know...the kinda girls you date or whatever."

My eyes find the waitress, and I think, yeah, that's the kind of girl I fuck. But I can't say that to a fifteen-year-old, so I just shrug.

"I guess, slightly closer to a normal skin color though."

"She isn't even that pretty. What is it about girls like her?"

Valor looks Barbie up and down. Taking in the same attributes I noticed earlier and then it hits me. The snappy attitude, the odd questions, all of it.

Val is jealous. I know women. I know women when they feel threatened and Valor is basically a cat hissing at the Barbie.

A frog the size of Texas lodges my throat. Valor is like my little sister, someone I am extremely protective of. Except Valor isn't ten anymore, she's a hormonal teenager who doesn't see me as just a friend anymore.

She sees me as more. She sees me as hers.

CHAPTER 5



Rookie, Rings, Regret

VALOR – 17

There is so much fucking sweat inside this helmet. Wouldn't that be a way to fucking go, to drown in your own sweat? It sounds like something off the show *a Thousand Ways to Die*. My braid has fallen out and my hair is sticking to my face like a crack on ass. I should've just cut it off like Riggs did.

"Sully, get your head in the fucking game!" Coach yells loudly at me. It jolts my thoughts to see the scene in front of me. My eyes shoot to the clock, thirty-five seconds. I move my eyes to the puck being carried down the ice by the other team's center.

This game had been neck and neck. It was no surprise we tied it up. Both teams had strengths, and both teams had weaknesses. Our goalie wasn't the best, which required our defense to push as hard as they could to keep from letting their offense get near the goal.

I see Riggs who has her eyes on that center like she's guarding the last hot dog in Chicago and no one, I repeat no fucking body gets in front of Riggs and food.

Before anyone can do anything that poor center gets crushed. Riggs absolutely fucking destroys her. The crowd eats it up. I hear shouts and cheers. Jesus Christ, that's going to fucking hurt in the morning, dude.

Riggs slings the puck towards our center while talking shit to the other team. She is a professional shit talker. I swear the girl is talented. Half of her job is getting under everyone's skin. I watch as our center, Megan, works her way down center ice with me flanking her left side, and Gina on her right.

We shred towards our attacking zone, two defensemen in front of us. Once Megan passes the blue line she sends the puck to Gina who pulls her stick back for a one timer. The puck flies towards the net, but it's not high enough.

I crash forward watching the puck reflect off the goalie's shin pad, the perfect rebound. I easily lift the puck into the net with my blade, my momentum sending me behind the goal as the buzzer lights up red, and a loud alarm sounds letting everyone know one thing.

Goal.

Warmth washes over me. There is no better feeling than a winning shot. I raise my stick for my celly as I glide across the ice listening to the roar of my high school. Students with signs and parents scream and cheer. A large smile paints my features behind my bucket. I feel my teammates tackle me in a huddle. We smell like an old gym bag, but it's all perfect. All of it.

I'd just won my second state title. The only time my high school women's hockey team had ever done that.

Once again, I get caught up in the beauty of the moment.

The connection between my teammates. Of the intensity that flows through me. Of Riggs fighting for her teammate. Of the magic of a breakaway goal. Of scoring a shorthanded goal to win the game. Of watching these incredible athletes I call family, sacrifice their bodies for the sake of the team.

In hockey, we don't play for ourselves. We play for our team and our fan base. Most importantly we play for each other. This game is in our blood and our blood is in this game.

It's our passion. It's what drives us. And that driving passion isn't just limited to us players—it appeals to every kid who has laced up their skates before playing some puck on the frozen pond out back. Every parent that has given everything of themselves to make sure their kids have the opportunity to play. Every coach who has taken the time to mentor and teach the game to the kids under their wing, and the everyday fan who can't play but lights up like a Christmas tree when opening up a \$3 pack of hockey cards.

I honestly can't imagine a world without this sport and the special kind of people who immerse themselves in it.

"Hey tendie, switch to Geico next time, you'll fucking save more!" Riggs chirps towards the goalie. I roll my eyes as she skates towards me.

"You just had to be the hero, didn't ya?" She removes her helmet.

I shrug with a smirk on my face. "You just had to hurt someone, didn't ya? Come on, that first penalty was a cheap shot and you know it," I say playfully as I shove her. We skate towards the middle of the rink where the team is gathering for pictures.

"That skank had it coming, talking trash, trying to be fancy with those shit ass handles. I know blind people with better stick skills. Fucking benders," she spews as we get behind the rest of the team due to our height.

I throw my elbow into her side. "Down, girl. Smile for the picture, Mike Tyson," I say with a laugh as we look at the camera.

As a senior at West Chicago High, this was just another shot to make my statement, to leave my imprint. This was another step towards the final goal. With two state championships, going into college the expectations were extraordinary. I liked it that way though. It made it that much better when I exceeded them.

The hockey was never-ending, and I loved every second of it.

I watch as fans toss flowers, stuffed animals, popcorn, anything and everything onto the ice as we take pictures. My classmates are in the stands cheering. It's a feeling that I can't explain. A feeling I won't ever get enough of.

My father yells my name, and I turn my head to see him standing behind the glass near the penalty box. I smile widely, grabbing Riggs. I drag us towards him where he holds his camera up ready to take our picture.

I stand in front of him, his once black hair is turning gray, and wrinkles have begun to sink in. I tap my chest twice and touch the glass, the same

thing I do after every single game. His eyes crinkle, and I watch them glaze over as he beams at me with pride.

"Great game, girls. Nice hit, Aurelia. See what happens when you hit legally?" he says looking at her with a playful scowl.

She rolls her eyes, crossing her arms and fake pouting. "Yeah yeah, whatever," she mumbles. A smile is on her lips, but I know she is hurting. Her eyes still look around the arena for any sight of her parents even if she says she doesn't care. What kind of parents do that? With that thought in mind, I wrap my arm around her shoulders and jerk her towards me.

"Wait, let me get a picture!" My dad grabs the camera. "Say cheese!" he states, holding the camera up. I am taller by a few inches, but I lean my head down to rest on hers as I close my eyes and grin widely.

"Okay, get off me, you reek," I state, shoving her away.

"I stink? Really? We're just not going to talk about how your father refuses to have you ride home with him without shoes on after a game because they smell that fucking bad?"

"It's not that bad, he just has a weak stomach," I say looking at her with a laugh threatening to spill out.

"Sully, he played with other grown ass men for years! Years! They are 100% that bad." Before I can reply, the coach is yelling at us from the ice.

"Greeeeat, more pictures." She tilts her head back looking at the ceiling as she whines.

"Come on, killer, I'll buy you a hot dog after," I inform her after grabbing her hand and dragging her towards the rest of the team, listening to her bitch the entire way.

Before I turn completely around my dad yells my name, I turn and hear, "Proud to be your pop, kiddo! Love you to the moon!"

I smile brightly, my heart squeezing in my chest. "Love you all the way back!" I call out waving.

I skate towards my team who all have their heads tucked into their jerseys when I get closer I can smell why.

"Fuck Riggs, did you shit yourself?" I say covering my nose.

She shrugs. "You'd think you all would be used to it by now."

I shake my head.

My best friend, ladies and gentlemen, you'd never guess her mother was a pageant queen. You should've seen Cordelia's face when she came home after chopping all her hair off into a stylish pixie cut with bangs.

Maybe if they cared enough they'd realize she did it so they would pay attention to her. Nonetheless, the hairstyle framed her strong bone structure. If anyone could pull ice blonde hair off in that style, it would be her.

She's the definition of sex on a stick. Thanks to years with braces, she has perfect teeth, even for a hockey player. While my left front tooth has a slight chip from a flying puck. Riggs has curves for days, piercing chocolate eyes, plump red lips, and a natural tan. She's a knockout by anyone's standard. That Megan Fox type of beauty. Then there is me.

I'm long.

That's like the best compliment I can give myself. I have a long torso, long arms, long legs, long red hair. Just long.

And flat.

I'm the human equivalent of North Dakota.

If you need someone to reach the top shelf in your kitchen I am your girl.

See Riggs, she didn't need a boy to tell her she looked pretty because she knew she was. I'd kill to not need that reassurance. Sue me for being the girl who wanted to hear she was pretty every once in a while.

According to Riggs, guys my age did call me pretty. Just not the guy I wanted. High school boys were intimidated by my athletic ability, by me in general. I was taller, could bench press more than I weighed and don't even get me started on my sailor's mouth. I wasn't a porcelain doll, a trophy they could wrap their arm around; they'd need a step stool to do that.

Bishop didn't need a stool. He was all man. He never made me feel like I was too much or too little. He had this way of making me think I was perfect the way I was.

As his image crosses my mind, I reach for the pendant under my jersey and pads, clinging to it. I look around again, knowing I won't see him, but trying to be hopeful. My feelings for Bishop had shifted from innocent to rated R after I hit puberty. I no longer saw him out of my reach, the closer to eighteen I got, the more hopeful I was that we could be together.

After what felt like a thousand pictures, we were finally allowed to head towards the locker room. A shower was just what my aching body needed. The only thing better than winning was taking off your equipment after. I took my time, putting all my things in my bag, before stepping into the steam-filled shower.

I washed the game off my shoulders, letting the warm water beat down on my tired muscles. I could tell my ribs were going to bruise after that hit early in the game, but nothing an ice bath wouldn't help. My fingers find the gold pendant hanging down my neck. I instantly missed him. I wish he would have been there to watch the game.

B had been busy. He'd become the new face of the Chicago Fury, now that my dad wasn't playing anymore, so I didn't see him as much as I used to. I missed him.

With a sigh I turn the faucet off, realizing I'm the last one in the locker room. Quickly drying my body, I slip on a pair of tight-fitting blue jeans, Dad's old Chicago jersey, letting my slightly damp hair fall down my shoulders. I shove my feet into an old pair of Converse not even bothering to tie the laces. I sling my bag over my shoulder and make my way outside the locker room.

I hear squeals of excitement when I get to the arena, my eyes search until I see Riggs.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"The girls are having orgasms because some of the guys from the Fury are here. You know how hormonal girls are around hockey players," she states giving me a knowing look.

My eyes widen, instantly I begin looking for my dad. After a minute I spot him, he's facing me but an even taller body is chatting with him. Goosebumps riddle my skin. They walk up my arms and ride all the way down my spine.

It's like this every single time. This feeling never goes away no matter how many times I have tried to ignore it. Bishop Maverick was my kryptonite, my Achilles heel, my weakness.

His blond hair is a mess of curls, falling right above his shoulders. I know when he turns around the less curly pieces will be pushed out of his face, but a few will have fallen down in his face. His playoff beard will be a light scruff peppering his jaw and chin.

I know him better than I know the back of my hand. Ugh, wait. I hate that saying. Who even knows the back of their hand?

I know him better than hockey and that? That's pretty damn amazing. A smile creeps onto my face, happiness blooms in the pit of my stomach as I cup my hands over my mouth.

"B!" I yell to him loudly, above all the voices, all the noise, the laughter. My voice carries across the arena and taps him on the shoulder making his head turn first, just slightly over his shoulder. Giving me just a peek of his smirk. Once he sees me out of the corner of his eye, his muscular frame shifts completely around and it's like fireworks.

There he is wearing that shit-eating grin I love. Perfectly placed teeth that give the sun a run for her money. That's what he is, the sun. Always leaving me blind. Extremely painful to stare at and hard to ignore for the fear of being frozen.

My stomach erupts in chaos, like butterflies on steroids, Godzilla sized butterflies.

I take off in a slow jog towards him, until I get within range. I fling my body towards him. Wrapping my arms tightly around his neck, his strong arms flex as they slide around my waist. He lifts me up, spinning me around with a laugh full of joy.

"I'm so fucking proud of you, Vallie." His voice is a murmur in my ear that brings chill bumps to my skin. I squeeze him tighter before he puts me on my feet and pulls away.

"That was amazing, V. You're amazing." His eyes are glowing with delight, and I fight a blush.

I playfully push him. "Why didn't you tell me you'd be in for my game, jerk?" I ask with a smile.

He shrugs. "Figured I'd surprise you and your teammates, you know me, always the saint saving the day." He flicks his head towards my team who are eye raping very scared looking men.

I laugh somewhat, rolling my eyes. "Your teammates would argue that you are quite the opposite of a saint, maybe something similar to a little red man with horns and a tail." I stick my fingers up on my head sticking my tongue out.

"Devilishly handsome." He winks childishly.

I stick my finger in my mouth and fake gag before laughing. Is he handsome? Absolutely. Am I going to tell him that? Hell no.

He throws his arm around my shoulders pulling me closer with a grin. "I must've forgotten that you're immune to the effects of boys." He sighs happily as if my singleness makes him happy.

"Hopefully it stays that way," my dad butts in with a fun-loving glare.

I roll my eyes, poking Bishop in the side with my finger, looking up at him. My body subconsciously clings to his side.

"Hey, sorry about the playoffs. I know how hard you all worked."

He looks down at me, ruffling my hair like I'm a child, which makes my blood boil. Just once I want him to see me as more than just a kid. As his equal, someone he could be with. How can he not see that his touch sets my entire body on fucking fire?

"Ah, it happens. We will get it next year; just have to get a few things settled," he replies.

I raise an eyebrow in a *come on* look.

"You mean, Nico Jett needs to get his head out of his ass? The first-round draft pick and predicted Calder winner, but barely scored forty points all season? Fuck that shit. I'm surprised the organization hasn't started talking about a trade deal." Bishop starts to chuckle and my dad just shakes his head hiding his laughter.

"You don't have to be so harsh on the kid, it's his first year," my dad inserts with a sly smile.

I throw my hands up. "First year or thirteenth year, Pop. Hockey is hockey. The kid is six feet two, two-hundred and forty pounds. He is plenty big enough to handle the hits. It's all the same, college, high school, NHL, you skate, you pass, you score, and you add a hit or two. He should be able to perform. If he isn't, send him back to Boston."

"Valor—" my dad starts but I just shake my head, interrupting him.

"I mean do you honestly disagree with me?" I ask them both. They stand there silent, both red-faced trying to keep from laughing. A look of confusion paints my face.

"What the hell is up with you tw—" I start but never finish because life decides to throw a big, *Fuck you, Valor Sullivan* with an extra-large middle finger.

"I'm actually six-three and I'm pretty interested to know if they disagree myself."

I flinch at the masculine voice behind me. Well isn't that just great.

My gaze immediately shoots to my father and Bishop for help, but those idiots are looking anywhere but at me, while trying to contain their laughter. Fuck those traitors.

I lick my bottom lip. I really don't want to turn around. My body aches in protest as I turn slightly watching him walking towards my father who

stands in front of me with a cat who ate the canary smile.

I cringe when Nico reaches forward to shake my father's hand with a smug look. "Pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm Nico, but I think you already know that," he says.

"Fuck my life," I whisper looking up at the ceiling. My face is flame red, as I try to avoid his gaze which is now directed at me. Bishop's arm tightens around my shoulder slightly. I assume he is trying to reassure me in my state of embarrassment.

"And you...you must be the infamous Valor Sullivan I hear so much about. I feel like I already know you. I wasn't expecting you to be this beautiful though." His voice is smoothly mixed with the roughness from his Boston accent.

If my face was red before, it's a fire engine now. My eyes fall to meet his dark blue ones, so dark they look like the color of angry waves. They are intriguing, just not the turquoise gems I so desperately love. I step away from the comfort of Bishop's arms, reaching my hand out to shake his.

Those eyes are twinkling with stars of mischief and it makes me smile softly knowing he isn't mad about the things I said. This is my first ever real-life once over of Nico "Southie" Jett. I swallow the lump in my throat and bite the inside of my cheek. A nervous habit I've done since I was a kid.

Nico is slightly shorter than Bishop, but still just as intimidating to my five-foot eleven frame. His inky black hair is pushed out of his face. It's cropped close to his head on the sides, but the top is long. The color pairs well with his pale complexion. He is built like a hockey player, just slightly leaner, instead of buff.

He's got that boyish face that's slowly morphing into a man, clean-cut. In short, Nico is hot as fuck. He's the type of guy you might bring home to Mama or might break your heart. Just depends on his mood.

"Not immune to all boys I see..." My dad elbows Bishop with a smirk and a laugh.

Oh my fucking GOD. That did not just happen. I groan out loud when Nico laughs.

"Sorry about them, and for...well, you know. I didn't think you were THAT bad. I mean...fuck. You just have a few jitters to get out. You're good, a lot better than most people. I'm sure next year you will be fine, I mean, you're fine now. Wait...shit, not like that. Alright, I'm going to shut up now," I ramble nervously.

See. This is why I don't talk to boys, at all. Because I do this dumb shit. I embarrass myself. I'm a fucking idiot. My God. Miniature Valors are running around in my head screaming as they search for the flirt button, while others continue to work the word vomit machine. My brain is breaking down.

Nico looks shocked at first, but a smile slowly blooms. "Nice to meet you too, Valor." He chuckles.

I take a deep breath and shake my head. "Sorry, call me Sully or Val. Everyone else does. It's nice to meet you, Nico."

Nico was a rookie, just drafted to the Chicago Fury from his hometown in Boston a year ago. Plays right-wing and from what I have seen, the dude is a savage on the ice. He has all the right characteristics, strong poise, an awareness of other players. He is a playmaker, and we needed someone like him. However, his temper on the ice had gotten slightly out of hand during a few games this past season. I'll chalk it up to rookie jitters.

"I don't think I've ever had a girl talk about me like that before," he continues with an arrogant smirk.

Oh. So this is how it's going to be? He's gonna be cocky? As much as I hate that look, it also makes me feel giddy. This is the first time a boy has looked at me like this. Like I'm a girl. Not a hockey player, just a regular girl.

"I guess the girls you talk to lie to you then. Maybe you should rethink the people you hang out with," I reply, crossing my arms over my chest hoping my fake confidence will get me through this conversation.

Nico breaks into a full-blown grin and I match it with one of my own. A feeling of accomplishment washes over me.

"Maybe I should, are you always this serious about hockey?" he asks with a raised eyebrow.

I laugh, opening my mouth but my voice doesn't come out.

"Always."

Bishop's' voice is a pitchfork to my flirty bubble. I turn my body to look at him. His arms are crossed over his chest, no emotion on his face. Stone. His voice lacked all the joking nature it held earlier.

What. The. Fuck.

His eyes are zeroed in on his teammate with a look that says, *You should be six feet under*. My stomach rolls in excitement, all my skin buzzes with anticipation. Is he...jealous?

No, stupid brain. Stupid. Bishop sees me as a younger sister. I need to stop letting myself believe these naive thoughts. It is only going to hurt me in the end. My irrational mind needs to pick up the *Team Bishop* T-shirts and burn those motherfuckers. Bishop and I? We will never happen.

Nico clears his throat causing me to turn my head back to him. This is who my brain needs to start shipping. This boy. The one who is only two years older than me. The one who looks at me like I want to be looked at.

"Anyway... Killer moves out there. That deke in the first period? Fucking dirtyyy," he compliments. I smile widely. I always love when someone strokes my hockey ego.

I shrug like it isn't a big deal, trying to hide my smile with a smirk.

"Ya know, if you need someone to show you the ropes, I'm more than happy to help you out," I offer, shoving my hands into my pockets and rocking back and forth on my heels. The response was impulsive.

I can feel Bishop's eyes on the back of my head. A heated warning burned through my skull, but I continue to face Nico. I am tired of Bishop controlling my life.

My head.

My heart.

Both of Nico's eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but he quickly recovers.

"I think I'll have to take you up on that offer. Want to give me your number?" he asks and I nod softly, moving closer to him as he offers me his phone. I quickly punch in my number along with my name.

"There you go." I hand his phone back to him gently.

"Alright, Rico Suave, stop making my kid swoon."

It's official, my father is going to send me to an early death. Thank you, Dad, for efficiently ruining Nico's name for me. Now all I see in my head is Gerardo Mejia in a really shitty music video singing, "Ricoooooooo... Suaveeee."

I palm my forehead loudly, drawing yet more attention to myself. Nico clears his throat, and I notice a hint of color tint his pale skin. Is he blushing?

Oh, he is totally blushing.

"Um, I just remembered I forgot something in the locker room. Nico, it was nice meeting you!" I say as I start my way back to the locker room to retrieve an object that doesn't exist.

"You too, Valor Sullivan!" he calls out, a smile in his voice. I quickly make my way down towards the locker rooms just to get a few moments of quiet to myself.

The room is empty when I enter and for that I am thankful. I walk towards the wall in front of me and lean against it with a sigh. The coolness from the wall calms my racing heart. I tilt my head back to rest there as I close my eyes.

"You want to tell me what that was?"

My eyes snap open and I jump forward. I slap my hand over my chest like that'll keep my heart from leaping out of my chest.

"Jesus fuck, Bishop! Don't scare me like that!" I yell, breathing deeply.

His footsteps thunder in my ears as they move closer and closer. My eyes look up to meet his blazing blue ones.

"What. The. Fuck. Was. That. Valor?" he grits out, his teeth are grinding together, and his jaw is clenched so tightly I can see the muscles flinch.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I spit back, my eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Is he really that mad because I was talking to Nico? There is no fucking way. I know he's protective over me but this is a little much.

"Letting Nico eye fuck you while you ate that shit up." I flinch from the harshness of his words, his tall frame towering over mine a few inches in front of me, our shoes are almost touching.

"Are you fucking shitting me? I'm almost eighteen. I can flirt with whoever the fuck I want to. You aren't my damn dad!" I seethe loudly. After all the times I watched him flirt with puck bunnies and I can't flirt with one guy? I am calling bullshit.

"What happens when Nico wants to cash in on that flirting, huh? Are you going to be able to back that mouth up?" he threatens taking another step forward moving into my personal bubble.

My blood sears through my body as I take a step forward pressing my hands into his chest. I push roughly. "Fuck you, Bishop. Just because I flirt with someone doesn't mean I'm promising to fuck him. That's the sluts who throw themselves at you!"

He grabs my wrists squeezing them tightly, leaning his face closer to me. Effectively shutting me up. I gasp when his nose touches mine. I can smell him... He is consuming me everywhere. My entire body is alive. A

constant ache flows through my bones as the scent of pine and spice fills my senses.

"Those are random girls that I don't give two fucks about, Valor." He slows my name down, pronounces each syllable dangerously slow.

"Yeah, and what does that make me, B?"

Without hesitation, no doubt, he responds with something I never saw coming.

"You're *everything*, Vallie."

I gasp softly but it is quickly swallowed up when Bishop presses his lips to mine in a scorching kiss that melts my insides. Just like that. My entire world shatters into pieces.

My eyes snap shut, and the little people in my brain pause unsure if this is a dream or reality. I'm frozen for a moment until his lips start to slowly move against mine in a rhythmic pattern. I sigh in contentment as my fingers spread over his chest gripping the soft material of his shirt between my fingers.

I need him close, so close we could be one person. I want him everywhere. I want there to be no point where he ends and I begin. I'm not the first person to kiss him. I'm only retracing the marks made by others before me. Women have inhaled his scent longer than I have. I don't fool myself by thinking I am the first. But my fucking God do I hope I'm the last.

The sun. My sun has set my body ablaze. The throbbing finds its way right between my legs as our lips move together in sweet harmony. His lips are soft, pillowy, and they are killing me slowly.

I let my back fall into the wall and Bishop catches himself by placing his hand beside my head on the wall. The other hand makes its way to the back of my head where he gathers my hair at the base of my skull pulling softly.

I moan into the kiss, giving him access to my tongue, and he groans. The sound alone sends electricity straight to my core. I let him massage my tongue with his just enjoying the taste of spearmint. My hands are clinging to him so tight that my knuckles are cramping, but I don't dare let go, afraid he will move.

He pulls away from my lips resting his head on my forehead, breathing deeply. My eyes flutter open meeting his phosphorescent ones.

Bishop leans forward, tucking his face in the crook of my neck and inhaling. He's trying to suck me into him, make me completely one with him.

"A boy like Nico wouldn't know what to do with you, Val." His voice is husky, ridged. He rubs me in all the right places.

I'm on fire. My core is burning and dripping with heat. I squeeze my thighs together, trying to build friction. Something, anything, to ease this pain. I'd touched myself before, but it never felt like this. I was convinced that nothing would ever feel like this.

"And you would?" I choke. My pulse is hammering over and over again in my throat. My hands still clutching him like he's a life preserver and I'm drowning in shark infested waters.

He chuckles darkly. I can feel his smirk on my skin. He runs the tip of his nose up and down my neck slowly, humming to himself as he does.

"I know exactly what to do with this body, baby. It was made for me. Every inch of you, all of it is mine, Vallie."

I nod my head softly, my stomach fluttering. I already knew that, but hearing it from him means I'm not crazy. Bishop and I? We have this connection, and now, I'm not the only one who notices it.

Feeling his soft lips on the skin of my neck. An inaudible moan leaves my mouth as I tilt my head giving him more access. I can feel the smile on his lips.

"B, touch me," I choke out pushing my hips towards the bulge in his pants. I was a burning house in search of water.

He presses his body into mine, molding us together above our clothes. I know he can feel how perfectly we line up, how perfectly we fit. I can feel how hard he is. How excited he is for me, and only me, right now.

I lift my leg, wrapping it gently around his hip, allowing him to slip perfectly in between my legs. His cloth covered member rubs against my jeans, and I moan loudly.

"Bishop..." I trail leaning my head back on the wall. He goes stiff, and my eyes snap open. There it is, regret shining in his eyes.

"No, don't. Stay with me in this moment. I need you. God, can't you see that? B, I'm gonna combust if you don't soothe this ache. I need you, please," I beg tightening my leg around his waist, anchoring him to me.

His jaw tightens and he sighs, opening his mouth to talk but closes it again. He leans back towards me, placing butterfly kisses on my neck.

"I'm not going to touch you anymore than I already have. Are we clear?" he hisses in my ear and I whine, ready to beg for him again. I need this, more than I need to breathe.

"But, if you keep quiet, I'm going to show you how to make yourself feel good, so good, Vallie baby."

The dissatisfaction settles in my stomach. I want his hands on me, his fingers, his tongue, all of him. He moves his hands to lay flat on the wall beside my head again, keeping his hands away from my body. He's not touching me, but he wants to.

"Unbutton your jeans and slip your fingers inside your panties," he whispers.

I sigh, taking my right hand and doing as he says. I slide my hand into my panties, and I gasp at how wet I am. I can feel my juices slip between my fingers.

"If it were my hand, I'd circle your clit first, just to tease you. I'd let you get used to the feeling of my big hands and long fingers on your tiny little pussy."

I moan low in my throat as my fingers circle my clit, just as he says. My eyes close imagining him, his fingers touching me, rubbing me.

"God, I bet you taste like fucking lemons. I can smell it. Sucking on all that candy all these years," he groans.

"How about you taste for yourself," I snip. An internal battle, angels and demons fighting inside of him keeping him from saying yes.

"Move lower, insert one finger inside you and tell me what it feels like," he orders.

I dip my middle finger inside myself for the first time in my life. I rubbed my clit before, but nothing like this. This was all new, and all too much. The sensation is unlike anything I'd ever felt before. I can't even think straight.

"What does it feel like, Val?"

This is erotic. The air is so charged with sexual tension that I can't even breathe.

"Waa-rrm...Wet...uh, tight," I strain out.

"I bet it is tight, baby. Warm and wet just for my cock. You want my cock stretching you out, don't you?"

I nod, quickly moving my fingers faster. I can hear my lubricant slapping against my skin. The sounds echoing off the locker room walls.

The smell of my arousal lingers between us keeping us tangled in our own world.

His forehead is resting on mine, like he is struggling to stand up.

"Pump in and out, slowly at first, and then pick up the pace."

I follow his instructions down to each filthy detail, pumping my fingers in and out of myself. He's in charge of my body without even touching me.

"Another finger..."

"Harder..."

Command after command sends me into a blissful heaven. Something big is swelling in my stomach, something I have never felt before. I'm tingling all over, warm, and heating up by the second. And of course, Bishop knows it.

"Come for me, Valor, come all over your hand like you would on my dick. Squeeze me so tight, baby. Milk my cock," he hisses.

I tighten around my fingers as my orgasm hits me like a semi-truck. I moan out loudly and Bishop covers my mouth as I ride out my high. My eyes roll back into the back of my head.

I slump against the brick wall. My legs are going numb. The exhaustion from the game and my orgasm hitting me at once.

"Breathe baby..." he coos in my ear, easing me out of my high.

My breaths are labored as I move my fingers from my jeans. They are soaked with my hot, sticky liquid. My blush coats my cheeks, embarrassment zips through my body. I look around for something to wipe them off when I feel Bishop's warm mouth wrap around my small fingers.

He swirls, twirls, dips, and curves. Cleaning my fingers completely. My shocked eyes never leave his, not even when he removes them with a *pop*.

"Fucking lemons," he groans softly before pressing his lips back to mine for another earth breaking kiss.

I smile into the kiss wrapping my arms around his neck and happily pulling him closer to me tasting myself on his tongue.

I thought this would be the start of our happily ever after. He'd finally seen me.

But it was only the beginning of our inevitable end.

CHAPTER 6



Boys. Bars. Breaks

BISHOP - 26

"My God, could you have bought a heavier couch?" Nico protests. His difficult breathing can be heard for miles as his back appears at the top of my steps.

"Shut the fuck up. I'm basically carrying this motherfucker by myself, *Hooy morzhovy*." The top of Kai's head is showing over the couch as he carries the couch from the back. I can only imagine the last few words are bitter Russian insults, but I simply stand at the top of the steps directing where the couch is supposed to go.

"Fuck off, not all of us eat people for breakfast and break bones for fun, fucking asshole," Nico grumbles as they rotate the couch, setting it down on the floor.

"Are you ladies done bickering?" I ask as I start to sort through boxes on the floor. I didn't have much to move, mostly because I didn't own a lot.

"I need a beer," Kai grunts and goes to the kitchen. His Russian accent is still harboring over his English words. Nico flips him two middle fingers while his back is turned to him and I smirk.

A bunch of teenagers, that's who I choose to surround myself with.

Malakai 'Kai' Petrov is a six-five Russian monster. Every inch of him is concealed in muscle. Other teams in the NHL mentally sigh when they figure out he is just a goalie. This is Kai's second year in the NHL, both with the Fury. When he was drafted we hit it off, well, after he growled at me. Literally growled at me like some kind of rabid dog.

I got that he was guarded. We all saw the scars on his back under the huge tattoo that covered them. No one asked questions, but we all knew he was that way for a reason. We accepted him, offensive, ill-tempered and all.

Kai was the kind of friend you wanted next to you when the zombie apocalypse happened or if you needed to hide a dead body. Not to mention, he's the only one who knows about Valor.

He was different. He was withdrawn around anyone who wasn't on the hockey team. Talking to the media wasn't a strong suit, puck bunnies? He'd rather die than stick his dick in them. Every time I'd seen him with a woman, it was a chick in a suit or dressed like she was headed to a business meeting.

He was peculiar, but hell, who wasn't these days?

Kai leans on the counter and Nico flops onto the couch with a sigh. I look around the new apartment still in shock. I can afford a place like this now. If my ten-year-old self saw me now? He'd laugh.

"Nice place, jealous I didn't find it first," Kai says from the kitchen and I scoff.

"As if your apartment doesn't cost the same as a human heart," I retort.

When I was drafted and saw those numbers on my contract I almost shit myself. I knew I was going to be making quite a bit of money, but this was insane. I went from eating ramen to being able to afford a brand new Lambo if I wanted one.

I've never seen a number that high in my life and to have it in my bank account was a fantasy. I used to count change in order to eat, now I was moving into a loft apartment with an entire wall that was a window and cost more than most people make in a year.

I had already been living in Chicago for a bit. A modest one-bedroom apartment. It had a bed, a roof, and heat. I was content there until JR saw it.

He insisted we look around for another apartment better suited for my 'lifestyle.'

That was a nice way of calling me a manwhore.

Granted I was a professional athlete now, except what JR didn't know, what none of the guys knew besides Kai was I didn't take women back to my home. It wouldn't matter if I lived in a cardboard box or a mansion in The Hills. Some guys have a no kiss rule, and I have a no coming home with me rule.

We went all around the city but everything always felt too...big.

I was a kid who grew up in a run-down two-bedroom apartment in a small town. It always smelled like smoke and booze. I guess I was looking for somewhere that felt like Coach Eric's house. I wanted a place to make me feel welcome, felt like home.

This was one of the last stops. If any place was going to be my home it was this one. Except even as I look around something feels missing.

Kai and JR were hesitant to look at it, but from the outside, it was exactly what I wanted. The inside was much the same, unique, three-level floor plan, and a twisting contemporary staircase.

It's on the fifth floor of an old brick timber warehouse building. The main level contained the living room, dining room, master suite, and kitchen. All of which are decorated with old wooden planks, metal decor, and edgy colors. The living room wall is a giant window that allows one of the best views of Chicago.

The next floor has its own private entrance leading to a home office which I made into my hockey memorabilia room. Old broken sticks, my first pair of gloves, trophies, etc. There was another bedroom that I left empty, and a man cave that had a pool table, Xbox, Sports Illustrated posters. Everything the guys would want in there. I didn't spend much time in that area. I just figured it would be a great place for Nico to crash.

The last level is probably my favorite, a roof deck with retractable glass doors, a fire pit, and a brick privacy wall frames the skyline to the east. It's peaceful up there, and in a world where I am continually thrown into chaos, it's refreshing.

"I'm hungry and I want a beer that doesn't taste like shit, can we go to the bar?" Nico whines from the couch. I roll my eyes as I walk up the steps with a box in my hands.

I can't help but wonder if my mom would be proud? Maybe if my parents were still alive I'd be a lawyer or maybe a mechanic. Would I have even met Eric and Anna? Maybe I was always meant to play hockey. This life has always been so uncertain up to this point. This was the first time I was putting down roots.

I walk into my hockey memorabilia room when my phone starts buzzing in my pocket. I set the box down and pull my phone out, answering it without looking at the screen.

"Go for Bishop," I mumble squatting down to look through the box on the floor.

"Guess what I'm wearing right now..."

I nearly drop my phone and choke at the same time when her voice penetrates through the speaker. I stand up, looking around to make sure no one is around, peeking out in the hallway, and swiftly closing the door resting my back on it.

"Vallie, you can't say shit like that," I whisper yell into the phone. I let my head fall back onto the door with a thud, shutting my eyes and all I see is her.

She's like a mirage always coming and going in my mind constantly. That smirk, that laugh, her crazy ass hair, and fucking lemons—always lemons.

I'm not sure when Valor went from being a lanky, frizz head to a bombshell with a model fucking body, but it happened.

And let me just say, I was not equipped for it. Hell, no man was ready for that.

My morals are slapping the shit out of me for thinking that Valor is attractive but the heterosexual male in me? Thinks she's...something.

"Check your messages."

"I swear to God, Valor Lila, if you sent me a fucking..."

"Just shut up and look, B," she cuts me off and I groan. I remove my phone away from my ear to check my texts from her.

A smile brightens up my face as I stare at the picture. There she is. Her fun-loving self, always grinning. The picture is of Valor in a Chicago University hoodie standing in front of her mirror. her jeans cling to every curve she has. Fuck no. She does not have curves. Bad Bishop. Normal thoughts, I tell myself.

The Catholic necklace dangles on the outside of her hoodie, my necklace. Another reminder of how connected we are. Her room is a disaster, much like her hair. I see hockey skates, pants, shirts, her covers are thrown off her bed and in its place is a bunch of different textbooks and papers. I shake my head, with a laugh, as I look at her mess.

I put the phone back to my ear and I hear her soft voice filtered through the phone.

"Guess who just signed with Chicago University?" she almost murmurs. I can hear the tremor in her speech and all I want to do is wrap my arms around her.

"I'm so proud of you. You earned this. God, Valor, you deserve everything," I breathe into the phone. My heart is swelling. She's the only girl, the only person who makes me feel my heart in my throat like this.

"Yeah, well I just thought I'd let you know," she smarts off. I can almost see her biting the inside of her cheek.

"Vallie..." I start but she's already talking again.

"If you're so proud of me, then where have you been? Why haven't you answered my phone calls, my texts? You tell me we were a mistake and then you just...you just leave me?" The emotion is thick in her voice. I can see the tears falling down her face, and those green eyes are shining gray.

I shut my eyes hoping this door will be able to hold me and my emotions up.

My lips mold to hers flawlessly, and she tastes like goddamn lemons. All that fucking candy she has been engulfing on all these years has made her sweet, tart, tangy, sugary. A holy combination determined to send me straight to purgatory.

I feel her delicate hands wrap around my neck, dragging me closer to her body. I am plastered to the front of her, and her back is burrowing into the wall behind us. My hands halt on her hips, my fingers digging into her skin.

My lower half is perfectly lined up with hers. The heat from her core is radiating straight to my dick, and that's when this moment crashes into flames. Watching her come was a beautiful moment. I've never seen anything more stunning.

I want nothing more than to bend her over and fuck her until she can't walk. My cock is begging me to bury him inside her tight walls. My mind is wandering to a dangerous place.

I pull myself off her, stepping away altogether. I look at her with wide eyes the vision before me makes my stomach twist and my hormones skyrocket. Her red lips are swollen, her jeans are unbuttoned, hanging low on her hips and her breathing is heavy.

What the fuck did I just do?

Fuck Bishop, what did you just do!

Oh, that's right. I just made out with a fucking underage girl, who happens to be not only one of my closest friends' daughter but someone I'm supposed to protect from guys like me. I run my hand down my face in shock, then through my hair.

"Fuck!" I cuss aloud. I turn around so my back is facing her, I don't think I can look at her right now. What have I done?

"Bishop, don't. I wanted this. I've wanted this forever. I-I love you."

As if this situation can't get any worse. My heart smashes into a million pieces, tiny little bits. Motherfucker. Love? She doesn't even know what she is saying.

I turn immediately. "Love me? Valor, this," I say motioning between us, "This was a mistake. I don't know what I was thinking! It was a mistake. You don't love me," I tell her with a rigid look.

And just like that, for the first time, I watch the light that blazes so brightly inside Valor dim. As if one of the candles inside her soul blew out. I watch as a piece of her hardens from my words starts to build a wall around her innocent heart. A wall I created.

Now the man she's supposed to be with will have to wonder endlessly why he can never break this wall. Why one of the candles that helps her shine so brilliantly doesn't glow. All because of me.

"Vallie, I—"

"Is it because I don't have blonde hair? Or fake tits? No fake tan or perfect teeth? Why not me, B?" she fumes. My radiant girl is decomposing every second I stand here. She is shredding herself down in front of my eyes, and I swear I've never felt pain like this in my life. Ever.

Hurting her is annihilating me. It's eating me alive. Except I can't go console her. I can't go fix this, because that'll make it more detrimental in the long run. She can't be pining over me after this. She has to let this go. Let this naive crush on me go.

I look her straight in the eyes and fire the last bullet to her.

"It was a mistake, Valor. That's all it will ever be."

"Val, I would never leave you. I'm still here, I-I've just been busy is all." That's a lie. It's a bald-faced lie and she knows it as much as I do.

"You've been missing Sunday dinners. My dad misses you, I miss you."

"I know, Vallie, and I'm sorry. It's just, it's better this way. We needed some space so that you could—"

"So that I could, what? Learn to stop loving you? Move on? Well, congratulations. You've got your fucking wish. I'm over it. So much for always being there for me, huh? Turns out you're just a fucking liar," she croaks out the next part, and then the line goes dead.

All that I hear is dead silence from the other end. I'd done it. I did what needed to be done. I pushed her away. It was for the best.

Then why does it feel like the complete opposite? Why does it feel like someone has reached inside of me and pulled my heart straight out of my chest? It's not supposed to fucking feel like this. I don't feel like this. I don't do feelings.

It's just hurting because I care for her, as a protector, as her friend. That's it, I tell myself. But even that doesn't feel right. Nothing feels okay right now.

The door vibrates behind my head, knocking my train of thoughts around. "Bishop, are you jerking off in there? Come on, we are leaving for the bar," Nico yells from the other side.

"Be down in a second," I say, clearing my throat.

I look down at my phone, at the image of Valor, and my heart aches a little more. If only I knew then that this wouldn't be the first time I'd hurt her or myself.

CHAPTER 7



Eighteen & Enlightened

BISHOP - 26

"Hey! This is Valor, sorry I missed your call. Leave a message at the beep!"

Sweet like honey, sweet as they motherfucking come. Vallie was a hard ass on the outside, but she was all sugar on the inside. Her voice was like aloe over a blistering sunburn. I could listen to her talk all day.

I sigh deciding that ten damn phone calls today are enough. I grip the edge of the sink. Thankful the bathroom is empty at the moment. I reach forward turning the sink on and splashing cool water on my face.

I lift my head. Kai's standing at the door with a look of no emotion on his face.

"No answer?" he asks simply walking towards the sink next to mine.

I shake my head no, sighing again. Of course, she didn't fucking answer me.

"It's been goddamn months, Kai. She has avoided me like the fucking plague," I trail. I roll my shoulders trying to alleviate the stress sitting on

them but it does no good. She'd ignored all of my texts and calls.

This was the first birthday I was missing, the first one where I didn't know if I'd get to wish her a happy birthday. That hurt me more than I cared to admit.

"She's hurt, Bishop. Women treat grudges like we treat our dicks—with care." He grabs his junk for extra emphasis.

I scoff, "She's acting like a kid who didn't get their way." I huff.

Kai smirks, coughs slightly, and I watch as he runs a hand down his mouth trying to hide a smile.

"Shut the fuck up," I bark. If I heard one more dumbass joke about her being so young, I was going to go nuclear. One person could only handle so many diaper jokes.

He raises his hands in defense with a laugh on his lips. "I didn't say anything."

I flip him off before heading towards the bathroom door. He grips my shoulder before I open the door, a serious look on his face.

"You miss her. Man up and tell her that. Denying how you feel is going to destroy both of you." The laughter is gone from his voice. He isn't wrong.

I do miss her.

I miss our conversations about hockey. Talking for hours about new movies and fucking arguing about everything and anything. I miss watching her eat Lemonheads for hours. Mostly? I miss being the person she went to for everything.

Not having Valor in my life was like having a huge hole in my heart. I didn't realize how much of my life she filled until she left.

With that, he slips by me like the ghost he is and heads back into the club.

"Since when did you become a damn fortune cookie?" I yell after him. He just tips his fingers into the air at me before disappearing into the chaos.

I can hear the music outside, the muffled voices, and when I head back to the VIP lounge I know my teammates will be there celebrating for what feels like the millionth time.

We were Stanley Cup champions this season. I was surrounded by people. Hell, Eric and Anna even came with the girls. My teammates, my friends, all there. And I felt lonely. Like something was missing. It's how I've felt since the day Valor stopped talking to me. Cold, empty, and bitter.

She took all the damn light with her when she left. I let her go because she deserved better, she needed better.

Some days, I wonder if I should've just been better.

I head out of the bathroom towards my teammates who are dancing with women I don't know, and each of them has alcohol in their hands. Nico, who was sheltered as a child, is drunk.

He's sitting on the lounge couch while a puck bunny tries to keep his attention. Nico is the type of guy who will marry a girl three months in. He's not the quick hookup type. Nico wants the marriage, the kids, the love, all the shit I have tried to avoid my whole life. I shake my head with a laugh, sitting next to Kai, and order another beer.

The club's called Disobey, right in the middle of downtown Chicago. It's two stories, the bottom being the general club area. A large all-glass bar and a large dance floor occupy the first level. The second is the VIP lounge with a glass balcony that overlooks the bottom floor. Each private area has black leather couches, glass tables, and private waitresses.

Strobe lights of red, blue, and yellow fill the room. It almost gives me a headache with all the lights and music. Once they bring me another beer, I stand up, walking to the balcony to rest my arms.

I just reached a point in my life where the parties, the celebrations weren't what they used to be. I'm twenty-six and I have spent seven years in the NHL. My entire life all I ever wanted was to be better, to be something. I made it. I am living the dream and yet I still feel empty.

Hockey is amazing. I want to do it until I'm too old to skate. I'll be on the ice with a fucking walker. Hockey was my first love and it'll always be that for me. But what do I have other than that? I have Eric and Anna, but they have two little girls of their own. And me? I have hockey. That's it.

"Damn." I hear behind me. I turn my head to face my friends and I see Nico stand up from the couch with a puzzled look on his face.

His eyes look down at the floor below us, and I watch as lust fills his stance. I raise an eyebrow at Kai, and he just rolls his eyes, shrugging. I chuckle, shaking my head, walking towards him. I sling my arm around his shoulder.

"Someone special catch your eye, pal?" I say wiggling my eyebrows at him.

He nods his head up and down slowly, never moving from the dance floor like he is in some type of trance.

"Who's the blonde with Sully?"

I shrug. "Probably Riggs," I answer easily. Those two are attached at the hip. They go everywhere together. Wait, what? I snap my head towards him, confused.

"Wait, what the fuck did you just say?" I hiss.

I could have sworn he said Sully, and I only knew of one person we both called that. That would mean Valor was here. In a goddamn club. A club that you have to be at least twenty-one to enter. My hands twitch as they grip the balcony rail.

My entire body feels on edge. I can't even begin to describe how pissed the fuck off I am. If she's here that means she's probably drinking with Riggs. Now worry racks my spine. I love Aurelia Riggs, but she isn't the most responsible. In her defense I'm not okay with anyone but me looking after Val.

"Sully, JR's daughter? Tall, redhead, killer legs?"

He says that like I don't know who she fucking is. Like I don't know her better than anyone else in the world. Like she hasn't been in love with me since she was fucking ten. I know her, and if I wasn't so fucking mad that Valor was in a club I would tell him that, and I'd punch him in the fucking throat for calling her legs killer.

I clutch the balcony tightly. "Yeah, I know who the hell she is," I grit out.

"The blonde, her name is Riggs?" he says pointing down to the dance floor. My eyes follow the trail of his finger and while he is staring at Riggs, my eyes catch the only person my mind has been on for the past year.

I swear to fucking God the air left my entire body. How I am even goddamn standing is beyond me.

There she is in all her beauty in the middle of a club dancing like no one is watching her. Like the ball of light she is. She glows, even from up here.

Valor Sullivan was beautiful. Except so were a lot of other girls. Beauty was something people saw every day. Beauty wasn't a novelty anymore, but she? She sure as fuck was.

Valor was beautiful in the way she shined. The way she radiated from the inside out. There were golden wings on her back that made her float and a halo decorated her head to remind everyone just how angelic she truly was. She was opening day of the hockey season. She was broken in skates,

fresh ice, and last-minute goals. She was all the laughs, all the smiles, all the joy you could conjure times a million.

She is not just the kind of girl guys fall in love with. No. Never that simple.

She was the fucking girl renaissance artists saw in their dreams but could never paint because her beauty was intangible.

Her hair covers her like a curtain as she sways back and forth to the music. When her head tilts back it shows her bare face. No barrier, no makeup, just Valor. I can count the freckles on her face even from up here.

Those green eyes were shielded by her closed lids as she lost herself in the music, in the moment.

I watch her mesmerized by the sway of her hips. She's like a backroad I'd drive every day even if it made me car sick because it led me home. Legs that traveled eons, and skin so fucking pale it made the snow look dirty. I wanted to taint that skin.

Val wasn't dancing for anyone but herself. She was in her own bubble of delight, a cyclone of chaos, pure, unscathed, anarchy. But that smile? That smile dared someone to fall in love with her.

I turn and begin to head towards the first floor, I hear Nico's voice behind me. "Dude, what the fuck?" he calls but at this point all I see is red.

My steps are slow, calculated, as I make my way to the dance floor. There are bodies packed so tightly there is barely space to breathe let alone move. I make my way past sweaty groping hands, it reeks of hormones and all I want is to bury my face in Val's hair and inhale the scent of her shampoo.

Her back is facing me when I get closer to her. I take this moment to admire her up close without her knowledge. Even in heels, I'm still taller than her but damn those heels. Flashes of her long legs wrapped around my waist. Naked of all clothing except those red bottom heels. I lick my bottom lip as I step forward, my arm reaching forward to slither around her waist.

I can feel the heat of her body through her clothes. She's combustible under my touch. I pull her flush against my chest hoping she can't hear my heart knocking on her spine. I hear her gasp when she makes an impact on my hard chest, and I smirk. Sweet, innocent, Vallie girl.

I dip my head into the crook of her neck inhaling deeply. My nose finds her shoulder and I drag it all the way to her ear blowing warm air onto her

skin. Goosebumps riddle her skin and she raises her arms wrapping them around my neck to pull me closer.

Our heights are perfect for each other. She's just tall enough that her hips are lined up with mine, which sucks for me because my lower half is pressed tightly against her ass. Her hips start to sway to the beat of the thumping music. I move my hips with hers letting her take control of the dance. I tighten my grip on her, digging my fingers into her hips. Partly because I want her closer, and another piece of me is angry as fuck that she is here dancing with a guy she doesn't know.

I press my growing erection into her ass and she lets a small moan slip past those pretty lips. My body is pulsing with heat. I feel her from the tips of my toes to my head. My left hand moves forward splaying across her exposed flesh on her stomach.

She melts into me, fitting perfectly against my chest. Fuck this. I could be a fucking perv for all she knows and here she is grinding against my cock like she's a cat in heat. Fuck no.

I hastily spin her around so she is facing me. I put my pointer finger under her chin and tilt it up to meet my gaze. There they are. Those pretty green eyes with all the emotion in the world swimming in them. She has her bottom lip trapped between her teeth, and her cheeks are flushed.

I run my thumb across her lip pulling it from her teeth. Valor is turned on and legal as hell.

This is a terrible fucking situation to be in. Absolutely the worst. I need to find a way out of this using my head, except that's what got me in this situation in the first place. Now both heads are involved, which is never, and I repeat, never good.

It's a bad situation but it doesn't stop me from grabbing her hand and dragging her towards the door. She follows helplessly. I can hear Riggs cussing me as I tighten my grip on Valor's hand. I press the door open. The brutal Chicago wind hits my face. You'd think it would calm me down some.

"Fuck, Bishop. You don't have to jerk my godforsaken arm off!"

She pulled her arm from my grasp and I let her. My jaw twitches, watching as she bites the inside of her cheek wrapping her arms around herself. There she is. My sweet girl.

"I'm sorry, Miss red bottom heels, am I ruining your night?" I snap bitterly.

"It's not your fucking job to guard me like a fucking hound dog, Bishop. You're not my dad," she mutters rolling her eyes like a pissed off teenager.

Oh wait, she fucking is.

"Does your dad even know you are here?" I quip raising an eyebrow.

She grinds her teeth, her temper rumbles under the surface. God, she's stunning. The image of her in front of me physically makes my chest ache.

"Oh so you're going to snitch on me now? Real mature, Maverick."

She is infuriating. How a woman can make my cock hard while simultaneously pissing me off is a mystery I'll never understand. I turn my body towards the street, whistling at a taxi parked near the bar. I wave him my way, and I watch as he pulls to the curb in front of us.

"I'm not leaving. I can't leave Riggs by herself."

I groan rubbing my forehead, running a hand through my hair.

"Stay here, do not move," I order, moving past her and heading towards the steaming hot club.

I move through the crowd of people, searching for Aurelia. My plan was to direct Riggs to the exit and get her to the cab. I was going to get them both home. I didn't care if I had to throw them both over my shoulder.

My eyes spot the blonde pixie in the middle of the dance floor. Except she's not exactly alone. Her lips are locked with Gabe, a member of my hockey team. His hand has disappeared underneath her dress, finger banging her in the middle of a bar. Classy, really classy.

"Jesus, give me strength," I utter doing a quick Hail Mary and walking towards the two of them.

"Riggs!" I yell loudly over the music, trying to hurry and get back out to Valor.

She removes her lips from Gabe, her face is flushed and her lips are cherry red from the make out session. When she realizes who I am her eyes slit.

"Where is Sully?" she yells back in an accusatory voice.

"In a cab, which is where you are headed. Let's go," I grunt, grabbing her upper arm. Gabe looks confused, and slightly embarrassed I caught him with his hand up a girl's skirt.

Riggs rips her arm away roughly. "Take Sully home, I can handle myself. I'm not leaving. Just make sure she texts me when she gets home," she hisses.

I don't have the time to argue with her right now. "I'm not leaving you here, Aurelia," I bite back.

She rolls her eyes. "Spare me the Prince Charming bullshit. You may have Valor eating out of the palm of your hand, but I see right through you, Bishop. You can't play a player. I can smell your phony act a mile away. Go, I don't want or need your help. And for the last goddamn time, stop calling me Aurelia."

Her speech shocks me, mostly because I don't know when Riggs went from being friends with me, being the kid I used to share the ice with to this cold hearted person I don't know anymore. I'd grown up with this girl, and now look at us.

Gabe decides now is a good time to speak, "I'll get her home. I'll message you when she's safe. I got her." He slaps my back for a reassuring bro moment. I could give two shits less about his bro moment.

I give a fleeting look to Riggs, whose face is passive. I look at Gabe. "You text me when she's home," I command. He nods, but I barely see it because I'm basically running outside to get to Valor.

When the door pushes open, she turns to look over her shoulder. The wind pushed the air out of my lungs and not just because the cold air knocked the breath outta me.

The nightlife of Chicago rushes behind her. The lights from the buildings cast a glow onto her pale skin. Her red hair is blowing in the wind, and her hands are cupped together as she blows into them to warm her small hands. Her skin is tinted with redness from the cold. I don't think I've ever seen a person more perfect.

It's like the slow-motion endings in all of those romance movies that I hate. Except I don't mind this one. Only because she's the one in front of me. I feel my heart skip a beat and another. I try to force my lungs to work but they refuse.

The overwhelming urge to kiss her hits me like a ton of bricks.

"Are you just going to stand there and stare at me while I freeze to fucking death?" she says irritated.

My footsteps towards her aren't my own. For a few moments, I'm just a guy who left a bar and saw a girl he wanted. A girl he wants more than anything in this world. I'm just a guy and she's just a girl.

I'm in front of her with lightning speed. I feel like that vampire dick head in that movie Moonlight or something. My hands cup her small face.

Her cold face chills my warm hands as my fingers tangle in the back of her hair. I press my lips to hers before she has time to open that smart-ass mouth.

A small whimper passes her mouth and mingles with my groan of pleasure. Her lips are soft, and her taste pours onto my tongue. Sweet, sour, tangy, lemons. I smirk into the kiss at the thought of her still sucking on all that candy. She keeps Lemonheads in business. I'm sure of it.

I want to bottle her taste and keep a secret stash under my bed. Which sounds like I'm a serial killer, but if you could taste this girl, you'd feel the same. Her small hands fist my shirt tightly, pulling me closer. I want to be skin to skin with her. I wanna feel every inch of her body on mine. To feel her tremble as my tongue drinks every drop of the sweet nectar that pools between her thighs. My cock is stiff, pressing on my zipper.

"Hey! Do you guys want the cab or no?" I hear from behind Valor. I pull my lips away from hers. The cab driver has his window down. My gaze hazy as I peer down at Val's rosy red lips, a smile toying on my lips.

"Come on, let's get you home," I mumble pressing a kiss on her forehead.

She's shocked, but she doesn't argue with me. I hold the door open for her letting her slip inside while I readjust my massive boner in my jeans. I climb into the backseat next to her, giving the driver my address and her dad's. He pulls out of the bar, and I look over at Valor.

"Riggs didn't want to leave. She is leaving with someone she met in the club." I try to fill the empty space between us with conversation. But all she does is nod.

"Are you ok—"

I start but before I finish her lips are plastered to mine. My eyes snap shut as she anxiously moves her lips. I grip the back of her head as she climbs on my lap tangling her hands in the back of my hair.

Her hips rotate over my jean clad cock, and I groan into the kiss. My hands drift lower settling on her hips guiding her body up and down my shaft. I can feel the heat from her pussy seeping through her jeans. The friction has me seeing double. Her moans and whimpers fill the backseat of this cab. All my blood is in my dick, and I just want to bury myself inside her.

She removes her lips from mine just enough to mumble a few words that set me on fire.

"I need you." Her voice is hoarse from all the hormones. I squeeze the life out of her hip bones, leaving bruises I am sure. I freeze, not knowing if I should speak or not. Her lips descend to my neck leaving open mouthed kisses along the column of my throat.

"Va—" I start but never finish.

"B, please. I want you. I want this, I need this," she whines in my ear. Her voice sends chills down my arms. The words that fall from my mouth are my death sentence.

"Just one stop," I choke out to the cab driver.

I'm going straight to hell. I do not pass go and I do not collect two hundred dollars.

CHAPTER 8



Give Me Love

VALOR - 18

His hands are everywhere. First they are at my shirt removing it from my body. I push my pants off my legs while shoving my feet out of the heels I am wearing. It's slow motion in my head, but reality is fast forward. His large palms are exploring the dips, curves, and edges of my body. He's an immigrant to a foreign land and he wants to commit me to memory, swear his citizenship to me, abide by the laws of my body, make me his home.

While his lips mold to mine, moving in sync, our tongues are fighting for dominance, but I soon give up to him allowing him to intrude my mouth. I'm afraid that is what my entire life will be like if I give myself to Bishop.

I tried telling myself that it would just be sex. Nothing more, nothing less.

But I know, I know when I leave, when the sweat dries, and I throw my clothes on to walk out his door, it won't just be sex. I'll still feel him

everywhere, even after the shower washes away the evidence of our encounter. Every touch scars my skin, it burns the flesh, until it's in my bones and that's where he will stay.

Because he's my B. Nothing between us could be casual. Not now, not ever.

Bishop picks my body up as if I weigh nothing. My legs wrapping tightly around his torso, my hands running along the unreal ridge of muscles in his back.

I can feel the heat underneath his shirt, and I want it off. I want to feel bare skin. I want to feel all of him pressed on all of me. I need more, more of him. All of him. I push my hands underneath the material, slowly starting to unbutton his shirt when I become way too impatient. My eager hands rip at the expensive top, hearing the buttons scatter across the floor sends chills up my spine.

"A little eager, don't you think, Valor?" His words are molten lava pouring across my body. I press myself tighter to his body, feeling his growing bulge rub me over my panties. He groans at the contact and I smirk.

"A little excited, don't you think, Bishop?" Just because I was a virgin didn't mean I was going to submit my attitude.

His lips are on my neck and I feel his smile, his hair is rubbing my face.

"Always a smart ass," he grumbles into my skin, and I laugh gently.

He pulls his head up to look at my face, and I study his in return. My hand moves from around his neck, pushing his hair out of his eyes. He watches me, watching every movement, every breath. He leans closer to me, rubbing his nose on mine, before letting out a breath of words.

"You're going to be what destroys me, Vallie. But I think I'm going to let you do it anyway."

His lips are on mine again before I can reply, but I feel the severity of the words. My heart aches, thumps loudly in my chest, because it knows. Now one hand is wrapped in my hair at the nape of my neck keeping my head where he wants me, and the other is wrapped around my body, his fingers splayed out on my stomach because his toned arm is holding me tightly to his torso.

I moan into our kiss loving the way our tastes mingle together in passionate harmony. My nipples are hard enough to cut diamonds and every

time they rub against his chest it sends another electric shock to my wet core.

My stomach feels like it's on a merry go round. It never stops spinning. This moment will change everything between us and that thought alone makes me want to jump into ice cold water. He's been so unattainable all my life and here he is. Racing his hands across my body, seeking the finish line.

We are moving, somewhere, and I'm not sure how Bishop is navigating his way through his house because his lips have moved from my own and are delivering dangerously good kisses, nips, and licks to my neck. His hand has pulled my hair allowing him more access to my pale skin.

Right when I'm starting to think he is godlike, he trips slightly on what my back finds out is the steps. He gently lays me down on the hardwood step hovering over me like a lion trapping his prey.

His lips travel up my neck to my ear. "I can't wait. I feel like I've waited all my life for you." His tortured groan has me pulling his waist into me allowing me to rub myself along his hardened length that is trapped in his pants.

I gasp as I feel his long skilled fingers travel down, down, down... fucking finally. Flashbacks of the night in the locker room have me reeling. I've dreamed of this, of his fingers making me fall apart.

They dip into the lace thong that is doing a shit job at hiding my wetness. One slow middle finger glides across my slit, spreading my juices across the soft skin.

"Fuck, you're soaked for me, Val. This pussy is dripping, waiting for my cock to claim her isn't it?"

His breath is cooling the burn on my skin, and I grip his shoulders pulling him closer to my body hoping it'll aid this sensation I'm chasing. He adds another finger, but only slowly rubbing up and down, teasing me. It's torture, the worst kind imaginable.

"Bishop, more, please..." I beg. My heart is playing the drums in my chest. My body feels like it's connected to an electric current. I've never felt more alive.

"Be patient for me, Vallie baby."

I can be the most patient person on the earth. I have to wait for perfect opportunities to shoot throughout an entire game, but being patient while Bishop's body is playing games with my vision of a perfect orgasm is not an

option at the moment. He continues to tease, until finally he slips one finger inside me sending me into heaven. One finger pumps inside of me, slowly, twisting ever so slightly hitting all the right spots.

"You're squeezing my fingers so tight, Val. Am I even gonna fit inside this little pussy?" he purrs as he kisses his way down my body. My eyes fly open as his head dives towards the inside of my thighs and I nearly scream when his plump lips meet my clit.

"Holy shit!"

He moans into my pussy, sending toe-curling vibrations throughout my spine. Adding another finger he makes sweet love to me with his mouth. His lips, tongue, and fingers working together harmoniously to give me the best experience of my life. He hums softly while he flicks his tongue in a circle pattern on my clit before sucking on the tiny bead, all the while his fingers pump in and out of me.

My left hand is latched onto his head, digging my fingernails into his hair, while my right hand pushes my weight off the steps to allow myself leverage to push my hips closer to his magical tongue.

I'm right there, waiting on the edge, needing to fall off the cliff into an abyss of unicorns, rainbows, and orgasms. Of course, Bishop knows that, so he holds back. Hitting so close to the spot I need, giving me everything I want but not enough. Never enough.

My chest is heaving at a scary rate, sweat is falling between the valley of my breasts, and I watch as my stomach clenches. I can hear the sounds of my lubricant smacking against his fingers and mouth, driving me so much closer to the Promised Land.

I look down at his head full of golden hair that contrasts against my almost white skin. It's picture worthy. I want to frame it on my wall.

His dark eyes are nearly black as they meet mine. He pulls his mouth away from my pussy, his stare is captivating. I'd never seen his eyes that color before. The light catches my juices that are coating his chin, beard, and the tip of his nose. He's devilishly gorgeous—coated with me. My heart jumps at the thought of this being our way of claiming him.

With one more pump of his fingers, he then moves them in a come hither motion inside me, before setting me on fire completely.

"Come for me, Valor."

And I do just that when he presses his thumb into my sensitive bud like an explosive device. I come so fucking hard, I really think I might pass out.

My legs straighten out as my toes curl downward. My thighs clench around him as blissful spasms shoot inside my body like fireworks.

I'm delirious, and the room is spinning from pleasure. I try to control my breathing, taking deep breaths. "Oh my God..." I moan as my body comes down from its high. Bishop is looking at me with a smirk.

Cocky bastard. He leans forward pressing his lips to mine and I sigh in contentment. I taste my tangy sweetness on his tongue. It makes this more erotic. Tasting myself on his lips makes the hunger return to my stomach. I push myself closer to him.

"So responsive," he groans. His hands come around my body picking me up again. My shaky legs attach around him. My lips place kisses to his chest and neck as he continues the walk to what I assume is his bedroom.

Once we arrive, the darkness in the bedroom encases us. In a matter of seconds I'm flat on my back in the softness of his bed. Bishop makes his way on top of me. Slowly, he leaves gentle kisses from my ankle to my calf, my thighs, hips, stomach until he reaches my breasts.

Worshipping my body.

I gasp as he takes my nipple into his mouth rolling it around, biting softly. His hand is pinching, and working at my other boob. He pays much needed attention with his mouth to the other breast before working his way towards my throat, leaving scorching hot, opened-mouth kisses along the column of my neck.

The back of my head is pressed into the pillows, while my fingers are digging into the skin of his back with little mercy, leaving marks, evidence of my pleasure.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he growls.

Once his mouth finds home on mine again, our tongues twist, tangle, and mingle together. It's addictive. I tangle my fingers in the back of his silky hair pulling him closer to me. I run my tongue along his bottom lip before biting it and pulling back softly. I shiver at the animalistic groan that leaves his mouth.

I grab his pants and shove. Somehow, they come off. He's kneeling between my legs, boxer-clad, and looking like a fucking god. His washboard abs cut into an Adonis belt that disappears into the black boxers he is sporting. I moan as I run my hands down his body, my fingers slipping underneath the material.

He's so ghostly handsome, untouchable. My eyes take their time admiring every inch of him, giving him the worship he deserves. My small hand barely wraps around his length. I work my way up and down slowly pulling the sexist groan from B's lips.

I continue, my thumb swiping across the swollen head, rubbing the precum around in circles. He grabs my wrist tightly, throwing both hands above my head and holding me there. I surrender myself to him. My body grows rigid. I'm not just offering my body to Bishop. I'm surrendering my mind, my soul, my heart—all of it.

It's his, it's always been his.

He looks at me, a spark of nerves flashing in those blue eyes.

“Have you...?”

I shake my head immediately, not admitting that I'd secretly waited for him. That I'd hoped it would be him, be us.

“No, it's just been you,” I responded. My voice thick with lust and my breathing is uneven.

“*Goddamnit*, you're trying to kill me, Vallie.” His voice rips through the veil of fear, pulling me right back to the lust bubble we are trapped in. His tone is hoarse, like even his vocal cords are trying to hold it together.

I can't find any words so I just nod my head, pushing his boxers down his waist. Getting the hint he moves like a panther. First he rips the flimsy material protecting my core, then he pushes his boxers down the rest of the way. I suppress a gasp as his cock springs from the darkness. Fuck.

I'm not a physics major, actually I almost failed it in high school, but I know that it is physically impossible for that to fit inside of me. Not to mention I am a virgin.

I didn't care. I wanted it to hurt. I wanted to remember it. I wanted it to scar me forever because this? This with Bishop is more than just losing my virginity. It was two souls who had wandered the earth for years joining together.

I watch as he reaches over to the nightstand before there is a flash of foil and then once again he is on top of me. His weight is resting gently on mine. Both arms resting next to my head. The moon is shining over the side of his face. I take a deep breath. My fingers dance along his chest. I let them trail to his face, tracing the lines of his nose, lips, jaw, all of it.

His cock slides through my crease, up and down. He's coating himself in my juices.

"Bishop?" My voice is slightly broken, soft, gentle, it doesn't even sound like me.

"Vallie?"

"It's always been us, right?"

The pained expression that spans across his face almost brings tears to my eyes. The mask of the confident man I know is gone, and in its place is just B. He looks so broken, and all I want to do is open up my arms and let him find refuge inside my skin. I want to protect him from the pain.

He drops his head to my forehead and kisses the tip of my nose.

"It'll always be us, Val."

I am leaking, proof of his effect on me is running down my thighs, pooling beneath me. A soft whine leaves my mouth as my back bows, hips lifting to meet him. His hand trails down the valley of my breast to my stomach before he grips my hips tightly.

"Stay still, V."

I obey his request. I watch as he slowly starts to enter me. The experience is so erotic. His massive member forces into my small opening I relish in the burn that comes with it, painful with so much pleasure. He's stretching me to the point I feel like I might break, but I know Bishop will be right here to piece me back together.

I hope.

"Fuck, you're so tight. Relax, Vallie baby, let me in," he groans the command softly. I relax my body more, allowing him to fill me completely. He pushes past what feels like a wall and I hiss in pain.

Jesus, fuck, this shit hurts. Why does no one tell you how much it hurts? It's a pinching, burning sensation that feels the complete opposite of good.

I let out a breath I didn't even realize I was holding, biting a hole through my lip. I clench my eyes shut, trying to breathe slowly. I'm so full, full of him.

Instead of focusing on finding pleasure, I focus on the feeling between us. The electricity that keeps our bodies buzzing. The sheets beneath me rub against my spine, and his breathing fans across my face. I revel the feeling of him. His voice floats across my skin, coaxing me to relax.

Let me in baby...

Let me inside of you. Let me inside your heart. He wants all of me, and I want to give it to him. His lips find my skin, peppering soft kisses on my

face and neck. "You alright, V?" he strains. I can only imagine how difficult this is for him, but the thought of him moving makes me nervous.

His lips dip into the spot that connects my neck and shoulder, sucking lightly as he rubs soothing circles into my hip.

I nod slowly. "Slow..." I whisper, wrapping my arms around his neck. I feel him pull out of me, before sliding back inside. It's smoother this time, but the biting pain is still there. I clutch onto his shoulders tightly, digging my nails into his back.

He groans into my neck as he pushes inside of me again.

"Breathe, Vallie, breathe." I follow his direction, letting my lungs fill with air before releasing it.

His skin burns under my touch, his smell wraps me in comfort. I focus on those things, the connection between us as he pushes in and out of my wet channel. The sounds of our lower halves meeting in unison fill the room. "

The gasps that leave my mouth as he starts to find a rhythm fill the room. His name is a prayer that begs to be answered. I know I'm not going to finish, but the burn has slowly faded, so now it is only a dull pain.

Bishop moans above me, gripping my left hip a little tighter as he works my body faster.

"Fuck, this pretty cunt feels so good. So wet for me. She keeps sucking me in, milking me. She won't let me go," he grunts loudly.

I moan as I push my hips to meet his, needing to feel him explode inside of me. Wanting to bring him the same bliss he gave me on the steps. The euphoria that comes from pleasing your partner is indescribable.

I can feel everything. He's everywhere. In my body, my soul. I claw at his back wanting to leave my mark. A statement that I was here and I made him feel this way.

His thrusts push inside me deeper and deeper. I bite my bottom lip, trying to keep from screaming. These emotions that are rocking through me are wave after wave of undeniable pleasure. My body has never felt more alive, I can feel everything.

He jerks my mouth open, by pulling my chin down. "I want you to scream, baby. Scream. Let everyone know my cock is stretching this tight fucking hole..." His voice is commanding and it makes me groan.

A loud gasp escapes me as his calloused fingers find my clit, rubbing circles in the same rhythm of him rocking in and out of me. My stomach is

burning, red hot, and a feeling that can only be described as magical starts in my toes and works its way to my center.

I didn't think I was going to come, but the more he rubs my clit, the closer I feel to falling off the edge.

"Fuck, fuck. Goddamn this tight cunt. Begging me to fuck it. Gonna make me come..." His voice is animalistic. He pounds into me over and over. He comes with a hard shove forward buried completely inside of me.

He presses roughly on my clit and it sends me over the edge. I spasm around him. My pussy spills juices all over his dick and my thighs. It's pooling beneath me as I scream his name in pure bliss.

My breathing is heavy, and he matches me. Slowly he pulls out of me, tossing the condom in the trash. I watch as he stands up, his ass flexing as he walks to the bathroom.

I couldn't move even if I wanted to. My body's numb, blissfully tired. A buzzing cascades my skin, as I roll to my side watching him exit the bathroom with a washcloth.

I lazily raise an eyebrow in question, but he doesn't answer me. Bishop moves swiftly between my legs, spreading them slowly. He leaves kisses on my knees and my inner thighs before he wipes me off.

I blush at the thought of me bleeding. What a virgin thing to do Valor, nice.

"Hey, look at me." His voice comes to me quickly. I meet his gaze while he cleans between my legs, pure desire swirls in his gaze.

"Yeah?" I mumble.

"You were perfect. We were perfect," he promises. I can't tell if it's lack of sleep, or the moment but I could've sworn love filled his irises.

My eyelids grow heavy, and the night starts to catch up with me.

The last thing I remember before darkness overtakes me is Bishop's lips on my forehead and his soothing voice.

Just like that, eighteen has arrived and my virginity hit the exit.



I feel the sun on my face. It warms my skin with a bright good morning. I move my hand to shield my eyes as they begin to flutter open. A sharp ache settles between my legs, it's more uncomfortable than anything.

My eyes adjust to the light, and I roll to my side. My mind starts to replay last night's events as my gaze falls upon Bishop.

Michelangelo once said every block of stone has a statue inside of it. It's the job of the sculptor to discover it. He saw an angel in the marble and he carved until he set David free.

If that's true then the sun was Michelangelo and Bishop was a piece of unscathed marble. The sun released all the beauty and softness of B. It carved away the indifference, the damage, and made him look godly.

My stomach flips as I lay on my stomach next to him. My head rests on the soft pillow as my hand toys with the golden pieces of his curly hair while he sleeps peacefully.

The black sheet is pulled up to right above his waist, and he's lying on his stomach. His hands are tucked under his pillow and his soft breathing flexes his muscles. My fingers reach out tracing the lines of his smooth skin.

I could lie here all day if my bladder wasn't screaming at me to pee. With a sigh, I slink out of the cozy bed and pad across the hardwood floor to the bathroom. I realize on my way that B ripped my underwear last night, so I grab a pair of his boxers.

After I clean myself up a little, I slip into the boxers and tug his shirt over my head. I stretch my sore limbs out as I make my way to the kitchen.

I'm ninety percent sure he never uses this kitchen. Anytime he wants food he comes to my house. Pops and I made breakfast on Sundays. It's his day off, and I always looked forward to making French toast. Ergo Bishop knows nothing about cooking.

Bishop would roll in hungover in the same clothes he wore the night before. Pops and I would always save him a plate. After he'd eat we would lie on the couch and watch movies all day.

Bishop was my happy place. That wouldn't ever change. When I was on the ice I felt content. It felt comfortable like it was where I was always meant to be. But when I was with Bishop? That's when I felt at home, the place I could come to rest.

Happy memories flood my thoughts as I navigate the kitchen gathering the necessary ingredients for breakfast. I spot my phone on the counter as I am doing my searching I check my messages.

I notice a message to Riggs that I know I did not send last night. It says I made it home safe, so I assume that was Bishop. I shoot Riggs a text

making sure she's okay and then click my dad's name.

I type out a quick message letting him know I'll be home later today and finish it with an *I love you*.

After I make sure no one is going to send a search party for me, and my dad knows I'm not dead in a ditch somewhere, I play some music and begin cooking.

Eighties rock plays through the speaker and the sounds of crackling bacon fills the space. I'm in the middle of licking pancake batter off my thumb when I hear a throat clear.

I spin around holding a whisk and a bowl as if that'll protect me from an intruder. Bishop is resting on the counter, his elbows on the marble as he stares at me with a dangerous, lazy smirk.

His eyes slowly roll down my body. He takes his time admiring my outfit, the smirk growing to a smile when he sees his boxers on my body.

"Making me breakfast?" he hums, raising an eyebrow. His eyes are devouring me. I set the bowl down, moving towards him. I lean on the counter beside him.

"Nope. This is all for me," I joke, a smile on my features.

"You're not gonna share with me?" He proceeds to exaggerate a pouty face and I laugh.

"Why should I?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

He gives me a wicked grin moving towards me like the predator he is. He cages me in against the counter, taking my waist and hoisting me onto the counter. I take a deep breath, inhaling his scent. Spicy, warm, exotic.

My eyes drift closed, imagining what it'd be like to be like this with him every day. To just enjoy the presence of him when I wake up in the mornings.

He drops a kiss on my shoulder. "Because I can give you something in return..." he murmurs on my skin. I tilt my neck letting him explore my body.

"I think I'm a little sore for that." I laugh gently as his breath fans across my skin. My breath catches as he pushes his hand inside my bottoms. His fingers spread my juices across my pussy, and I moan softly.

"I'm not talking about fucking you, Vallie," he says softly in my ear. I push myself closer to his fingers. I shut my eyes and the image of us ten years down the road pops up.

The thought of getting to do this every day with him. Making breakfast, fooling around, loving each other. This is the only thing that I want more than hockey.

He chuckles on my skin, running circles around my clit. I moan loudly. I could never have anything in small doses. I am an all or nothing kind of girl. I want to overdose on Bishop Maverick.

"You want me to make you feel good, Val?"

I'm about to answer when my phone dings. I planned to ignore it, except it continues to make that annoying ding sound. It stops, and I am about to press my lips on Bishop's when my ringtone fills the void.

"Shit, I gotta answer that before someone has a stroke," I whine. My sexual tension fading as he slowly removes his hand from my shorts.

"Tsk tsk," he hums, placing a kiss to my forehead. "What a shame," he states before letting me off the counter smacking my ass as I walk away. I pout all the way to my phone, placing it to my ear after pressing the answer button.

"Hello?" I say softly, leaning on the counter.

"What color curtains do you and Riggs want for your dorm again?" A surprise laugh takes over my body. Only my dad. I can see him now wandering around Hobby Lobby.

"We already got the curtains, Pops."

"Shit, well, I picked up a few things. I got you one of those weird bean bag chairs you two like so much. I heard you talking about it. I finished packing your stuff last night, what do you want for dinner when you come over today?" he says softly, and my heart warms. I was beyond thankful for my dad, not many people could say they had someone as great as my pops.

"What would I do without you, Pops? And tacos!"

"Tacos, it is, Sully girl. You'd be fine. The real question is what am I going to do without you? My girl is all grown up and going to college."

"Dad, please don't get emotional. I can't handle that again." He'd already cried last week, which in turn made me cry.

"I'm just really proud of you, kiddo. That's all. I'll see you tonight. I love you!" he says into the phone and I want to clutch my chest. My dad. What would I ever do without my dad?

"Love you, Dad." I click the end button, set my phone on the counter, and watch Bishop eat bacon.

The truth is I'll miss him just as much. The freedom is exciting, but I'm going to miss waking up to breakfast or my protein shake already made before morning practice.

"How's your dad doing?" he says leaning on the counter across from me, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Good. He misses you. You should come over tonight. He'd be excited to see you," I say softly walking towards the stove to finish the pancakes.

"I'll pass." His carefree attitude leaves as quickly as it came, and I turn to face him raising an eyebrow.

"Why not?" I say curiously.

"Yeah, I'll just walk into your dad's house after I fucked you. That'll go over really well," he jokes but I don't find it funny.

"So, that's all this was? Fucking? I didn't even ask you to tell him! I just wanted you to come with me. Furthermore, if I did ask you to tell him, is telling people you like me that fucking hard for you?"

"No, Val, that's not what I meant and you know it. You're fucking amazing. I just, I mean we should've thought a little more clearly last night about what we're doing."

"So you're saying last night was another mistake? God, you're such a fucking asshole, Bishop."

"Valor, babe, I'm not saying that. I just think... I think we should think about this before doing anything crazy."

"Crazy as in letting people know we are more than friends? Whoa, you're right. That is fucking crazy, Bishop. Don't worry, your secret is safe with me."

I push past him, moving to the bedroom to grab my jeans. I shove my legs into them, not bothering to change out of his T-shirt. I storm out of the bedroom, and he chases behind me.

I'm so tired of him telling me that what we have, what I feel for him is a mistake. My love is not a mistake.

"Shit," he curses as he trips over something on the floor. "Valor, goddamnit wait! Be a little fucking reasonable here, babe. You're starting college this year. You'll be a damn freshman. Let's just fucking talk about this. I don't want you to leave angry."

I slit my eyes. Blind, red rage surges through my body. I've never thought about homicide before, but right now, I'm seriously debating cold-blooded murder.

He grabs my arms turning me to face him, placing both hands on my face. Warmth spreads across my face where his thumbs rub my cheeks.

“Vallie, just listen to me,” he states slowly. My breathing is heavy, and my heart is thudding in my chest. God, he would use my nickname. He knows it’s my weakness.

“I want this. I want you, okay? I want you. Just give me some time to get my thoughts together before we start screaming it to the world, okay? Can I not enjoy you before the paparazzi takes you away?” he jokes lightly, peeking down at me with a smile. He’s trying to lighten the mood.

I bite my bottom lip, glancing down at the floor, warm tears wetting my eyes. I want to believe him, to trust his words.

“You have no problem getting photographed with puck sluts. Why can’t the media see you with me?”

B’s eyes shut, he sighs, before they open again.

“Because you’re not just some girl, Valor. I didn’t give a fuck about those girls, I care about you. You are different. We are different. Our relationship moving from friends to dating is going to affect more people than you and I. I just want to be ready for it.” His voice is steady, always the voice of reason inside my head. He has been since I was a kid.

“Plus I can’t tell JR I’m dating his daughter without taking her on a proper first date,” he comments, making a smile tilt at the edges of my mouth.

Maybe his actions will match his words and soon he’ll be ready to tell people. I continue to tell myself that I’m not the reason he doesn’t want to say anything. It’s my dad, and he doesn’t want him angry. It’s not me. It’s not me.

But a little piece of me is whispering in my ear that it is me. It’s because I don’t look like his normal girls. I’m not a hockey trophy wife.

I shove the voice away. Looking up to meet his blue eyes, I allow them to drown me in him.

“I won’t wait forever, B.”

“I won’t make you wait forever, Vallie.”

I’m going to give him the benefit of the doubt. I’m going to trust that he wants me, that he wants us, and that he really does need time.

I lean into his touch, letting his thumbs roll across my cheeks to wipe my tears.

“Always us?” I whisper.

He smiles, moving his hand to tug on one of my loose curls.
“Always.”

CHAPTER 9



Dancing with Your Ghost

VALOR - 18

“That is fucking bullshit, Sully!” Sara yells noisily, removing the bucket from her head exposing her brown ponytail.

I turn on my skates, viewing the goal where she stands. I take my helmet off too, tucking it underneath my arm, skating towards her. My messy braid is letting pieces fall in front of my face, and I try my best to push them back.

I’d just scored on her again, and if I knew one thing in this sport, it was that goalies have the worst fucking temper.

My freshman season began weeks ago, and our first game was coming up shortly. Our team dynamic was smooth, and we all got along decently well. The first few practices were rocky. Some of the upperclassmen were struggling with the fact that two freshmen were going to be starting.

“If you were half as good of a fucking goalie as you are a chirper, that shit wouldn’t happen as often,” I retort. I was never one for team on team

violence, but I'd come to appreciate that Sara liked to push people's buttons to see how far they'd go before they blew up.

She was a senior this year, and it was her way of trying to put us freshmen in our place. I'd been around enough hockey rinks in my life to know this was an initiation to the team. She'd been dogging my ass all week.

I attempt to place my helmet back on when she persists to argue with me.

"Oh please, freshman. Your luck will run out eventually."

I grew up around grown men, backing down was not something I was good at. I was always up for a challenge.

"That's the second hat trick I've scored on you this week, luck hasn't got shit to do with it. Maybe luck is what you need, that or we need a better fucking goalie."

Riggs stifles a laugh from across the ice, while the rest of the team watches. Not sure if they should intervene or let it play out. Aurelia Riggs, my partner in crime. They say if you are friends for seven years, you'll be friends for a lifetime. We'd been attached at the hip for close to eleven.

"Fucking eat me, bitch," she snarks. Jesus, at least give me a good comeback to work with Sara. You've been doing this longer than me; I would think you'd have this shit down pat by now.

"Spread 'em, skank. You should be good at it with all the practice you've had. That five-hole is always wide the fuck open."

She opens her mouth but no words come out because she is interrupted.

"Girls!" our coach yells plainly from his position in the middle of the ice. He moves towards us, speaking as he does. "Sara, you've got all kinds of holes lately, get your shit together or I'll bench you. Sully, watch your mouth. Stop acting like a toddler, and remember you're still a freshman. Now, wrap it up, ladies, that's it for today!"

I give him a smirk, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

"Yes, Coach," I grumble, before skating towards Sara and smacking her ass with my stick. She rolls her eyes grinning at me, flying the finger as I skate away. Teammates, what can you do? I love to hate them.

I throw my arm across Riggs' shoulder. "I don't like that bitch," she grumbles as we skate in harmony towards the exit between the player's benches.

“I’d be more surprised if you said you liked her. There aren’t many people you tolerate,” I joke. I wasn’t even joking honestly. Riggs was a tough nut to crack, she didn’t like many people.

College had been great so far, for us both. I managed to get along with everyone on the team, and classes were running smoothly. I was excited to see what the new competition collegiate level sports were going to bring me.

Riggs was enjoying the parties, the experience, the freedom, but there were days I worried. Most of the time she was up and ready to go by five in the morning. She’d go all day with this positive energy, bouncing around, smartass comments, her normal self. But there were days when she’d roll out of bed late, and getting ready seemed like a task too difficult for her.

On those days I tried not to comment on it. I just make her coffee extra strong and treat her to lunch. I knew her parents were being more prominent assholes than usual, mostly because she vented about it once a month when she had to attend their family dinners. I’d tried for months to get her to stop going, but something in her wouldn’t let her give up on her family.

“I guess that makes me pretty special, huh?” I say bumping her shoulder as we walk into the locker room, moving towards our lockers that stand side by side. She rolls her eyes, taking her helmet off, and laying it inside the space.

I toss my gloves and start to slowly work the laces of my skates so I can slip my feet out of them.

“It makes you something, alright.” A smile adorns her features as she follows my movements. I’d do just about anything to get my best friend to smile, because when she did, it nearly blinded people.

“I vote we go to the dorm, order take out, and rewatch a TV series on Netflix,” I suggest, taking my hair out of the braid it was in. Messy waves fall down my shoulders; I can only imagine how frizzy it is. Times like this I wish I had Riggs’ pixie cut. I tug my practice jersey and pads off in one go leaving me in a sports bra.

“Sorry, my little lion.” She ruffles my hair like I’m a child. “I have a date tonight. I haven’t been laid in a month, and my pussy is angry with me.”

I cough, choking on my spit at her bluntness. Always honest. Always Riggs. She laughs at me, removing the rest of her equipment with me. Until we are both standing in sports bras and spandex.

“Are you going to let this one have a second date?” I ask, lifting my eyebrow, already knowing the answer to that question. A grin sets on my lips, awaiting her response.

“Sully, honey. Do we remember my rules?” she coos sweetly, the hint of southern showing in her voice from her mother's side. “No feelings, no sleepovers, and no second dates. Simple rules men must abide by if they want a piece of this.” She gestures to her body, which is always banging. She gives me a side-eye before talking again.

“Plus...” She clicks her tongue. “You spent yesterday at the dorm, which means tonight is your night to shave your legs, and stay the night at Prince Charming's castle or,” She looks at me, pursing her lips. “I should say dungeon,” she snips, and my stomach swoops.

I think Riggs started hating Bishop the more she realized how genuine my feelings for him were. Whether Riggs wants to admit it or not, she loves with fierce loyalty. If you cross the ones she cares about, it's like poking a venomous snake. She didn't hesitate to strike.

“It isn't a dungeon, I actually like his apartment,” I argue, even though it's partly a lie. I did love B's apartment, it smelled like him. But I wanted to be with him everywhere, not just within the walls of his place.

Bishop and I had been continuing this *secret* relationship for a month now. In a short time, we'd gone from being best friends to being two sex-crazed adults who couldn't keep their hands off each other.

Being with him felt like a dream that I never wanted to wake up from. There would be some mornings he'd wake up before me, and there would be a new pack of Lemonheads with a note next to them. Each one was different, but all of them made my heart beat a little faster. Little things like keeping extra ice bags in his deep freezer for me because I was addicted to ice baths after hard practices.

He was addictive, leaving him was like neglecting a piece of myself. It was ridiculous and cheesy, but I hated leaving his apartment. I hated sleeping without him even more, but I knew if I stayed there every night it would be giving him too much.

I had to set at least one boundary. Until he was ready to tell my dad and the rest of the world about us, I refused to stay over longer than one night. No matter how many times he begged. And let me just say, when Bishop begs, it's with his head buried between my legs. Telling him no physically feels impossible.

“I’m not trying to be a bitch, V. I’m just trying to have your six. You deserve someone with big enough balls to tell people how he feels. This isn’t kindergarten where boys get disgraced for liking girls because they have fucking cooties.”

I know she’s right, and I’m not denying it. I’m just, I don’t know, I’m trying to trust him. To have faith that he will be ready soon and that it really is just him trying to prepare himself for telling my dad. I don’t want to believe it’s me, that the reason he isn’t telling people is that he is embarrassed to be seen with me.

“I know, Riggs. Believe me, I get it. But I need you to trust me on this, okay? I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. If he proves me wrong, and he doesn’t man up soon, I’ll be done,” I declare. Even saying the words makes my stomach churn. Being done with Bishop would be similar to cutting one of my limbs off. He’s an essential part of my life.

She gives me a *really, you expect me to believe that look* and I shrug.

“You? Valor Sullivan? Done with Bishop Maverick? The day that happens, hell will freeze over.”

She’s right, of course. She always is. My heart squeezes in my chest, and the taste of blood sits on my tongue. I don’t want to be done with B. I just want to be with him. I just want him to prove Riggs wrong.

“I’m serious. If he doesn’t want me publicly, he can’t have me privately! I’m just trying to give him some time.”

“You do know I will kill him, right? A slow, painful death. I’ll waterboard the motherfucker with gasoline. I don’t care if I go to prison, you know that?”

I laugh, pulling her close to my body for a hug.

“I know, my Tasmanian devil. I know.”

She returns my hug for a moment before pushing me away. “Enough with the hugs, you’re going to make me sick. I can only handle so much lovey-dovey shit. I’ll see you tomorrow. I’m going to shower at the dorm. Text me and let me know you are okay later,” she informs me before she promptly gathers her things and proceeds to head to her car in just her spandex and bra.

“Aurelia, you can’t go into the student parking lot dressed like that!” Coach yells from his office. She doesn’t even bother turning around, shouting back to him.

“Who is Aurelia?”

The girls in the locker room laugh as she exits the building in perfect Riggs fashion. I toss my hair into a quick messy bun. I grab my phone from my bag, checking to see if I have any messages. The daily twenty-five text messages from my dad fill my screen, and I smile.

I quickly tell him that I will be over for Sunday dinner and that I miss him more. The rest is a few Facebook notifications, but not a single text from Bishop. I type out a short message asking if he is alive, before setting it back down and heading towards the showers.

I don't bother washing my hair. I just want the dried sweat off my skin. To wash away today's practice and prepare me for tomorrow's. Showers after hockey kept me humble. No matter how I played that day, it didn't matter if I scored a hat-trick, or played so badly I was benched. The water washed away everything so that I could focus on tomorrow.

Once I am sure I don't smell like a dirty gym sock anymore, I wrap a towel around my body and head to get dressed. I'm always the last one out of the locker room, mostly because I take my time to clean up my locker and Riggs'. I swear to God she'd lose her head if I wasn't there to screw it on.

After pulling on a pair of black athletic shorts, an oversized Chicago University hoodie, and making sure all of my stuff is organized, and Riggs' locker isn't a disaster. I start to head towards the exit. I hike my gym bag on my shoulder, moving towards the door.

I pull my phone out, checking the screen but there still isn't anything from Bishop. I type a message but delete it before I send it. I'm not double texting him. I'm not that girl. I refuse to be that girl.

I press the doors open exposing the student parking lot. The air is warmer than normal. One of those days that smell like summer. We don't get these days often in Chicago. I spend eighty percent of my time on a cold-ass rink, so I try to enjoy the sun as much as I can.

I start to dig into my bag looking for my keys when I feel my phone start to vibrate. I assume it's my dad, so I hit the answer button, holding the phone between my ear and shoulder while I look for my keys.

"Hey, Dad," I say into the phone smoothly.

"Oh, it's Dad now? That's not really a kink I'm into, Valor. But hey, if it'll make you come, I'm down to try it."

Oh, well. That's fucking fabulous.

Bishop's voice filters through my speaker reminding me that I need to learn how to check the caller ID before answering the phone.

"Considering I hadn't heard from you since this morning, I thought you were dead. I wasn't expecting your call," I tell him honestly, a hint of irritation in my voice.

His laugh fills my ears. "I was taking care of some things. I've got plans tonight and I had to get everything straightened out."

Instantly the image of him on a date with a puck bunny invading my thoughts. I genuinely might barf in this parking lot. I grit my teeth.

"Oh."

"Ya know, you need a new pair of Converse, Vallie." I can hear the smile in his voice which only makes me angrier. I look down at my feet seeing the old black Chucks. They are dirty and look like they might come apart with my next step. But I love these shoes.

"Wait, how the hell do you even know what shoes I'm wearing?"

I feel my keys finally at the bottom of my bag, and I pull them up as I raise my gaze to the empty parking lot in front of me. I spot my car, with a body leaning on the side of it.

"Fuck, V. Give me some credit, you don't think I know my girl?"

My girl.

Bishop is leaning his shoulder on my passenger door, a grin planted on his handsome face. His golden blond hair is pushed back out of his face, and he's staring at me. He's looking at me like all girls want to be looked at.

That look that makes time suspend for just a solitary moment. All the commotion, the anarchy, everything is paused and the world hangs between us. Our eyes keeping each other grounded to the bond we could no longer deny.

I felt like someone had pressed slow-motion on us, and the vibrations of soft violins danced through the wind. Everything felt alive, brought to life by our electrifying connection. A child had finger painted the sky. Soft yellows, dark oranges, and bursting reds meshed together in a blissful symphony. The rays of light cast a glow onto his face, highlighting his sculpted cheekbones, and steady jaw.

He was a piece of art brought to life by the sun, and I was simply a spectator fortunate enough to witness it.

My feet start a leisurely walk in his direction before it becomes a steady run. When I am close enough I launch my body at his, and he catches me

gracefully. We feel like two puzzle pieces that'd been searching eons to find each other. For this moment to come together. My arms are locked around his neck, my legs looped around his waist while his arms press me into his body. My head is buried in his shoulder, breathing his scent.

He smells like sunshine.

“I missed you too, my Vallie girl.”



BISHOP

The wind was blowing throughout the car, the sound of music coming from my speakers. I looked over in the passenger seat seeing the only person who has the ability to take my breath away.

I have never been so terrified looking at anyone in my life. I know if I give her the chance, she'll be the woman I can't live without. Hell, she's already there. The one thing I promised myself I'd never do. To rely on someone for happiness, to trust someone with what I feel.

She's leaning her back on the passenger door, her legs are across the console and her feet are resting in my lap. Every once and a while she'll lean her head back out the window to let her hair blow in the wind. Her feet move in tune to the music, and the smile that sits on her face is enough to make me drive her around for hours upon hours.

My stomach is a mixture of unease and contentment. I feel my hand grip the steering wheel a little tighter. What was worse? Leaving Valor and never speaking to her again? Or allowing myself to fall into her until I can't figure my way out?

It all feels like a double-edged sword. My biggest fear and losing the one person who makes my blood pump. I never wanted to be my father. I never wanted to trust someone with my heart just for them to leave and take a piece of me with them.

I feel her body move towards the back seat, grabbing another piece of the pizza I had picked up before getting her from practice. Pepperoni and cheese, extra pepperoni. It never changes with her. I didn't really do too much planning for this. I just knew she was getting restless in my apartment. I knew not going out in public was taking a toll on her.

I'd been ready to tell JR for a few days now. I was tired of Valor leaving after only staying the night for one day. I wanted her in my bed all weekend, not just every other day. I wanted her near me all the time.

She'd been in and out of my bed since her birthday. I'd given in to her. It had been game over. Once I was inside Valor, I never wanted to be inside anyone else. I fucked her wherever I could—shower, kitchen, balcony, floor. Hell, I can't remember the last time we had sex in my fucking bed. My hands were always on her.

I wanted to be surrounded by her at all times. She made my life a little brighter.

The only way I could explain what being with Valor felt like was sleeping on my right shoulder. Vallie rests on her right side, doesn't matter what position she falls asleep in, she always ends up on her right side.

I hated cuddling. I wasn't the kind of guy who held girls until they fell asleep. Fuck all that. After I hooked up with a chick, I wanted to leave. It's one of the reasons I never brought them to my place, to avoid her staying over. We fucked, and I left. That was it.

But after the sweat from Valor and my sexual escapades dried, all I wanted was to feel her warmth pressed against me when we fell asleep. To close my eyes with the smell of her lavender shampoo filling my senses. She's like a personal scent diffuser.

So because I want her close to me, I have to sleep on my right shoulder. I have an injury in that shoulder, and it hurts like a fucking bitch sometimes. But I would rather wake up with an ache from hell and barely get any sleep than to not be touching her.

Having her around my apartment brought it to life. The music was always loud, and it was always made in the eighties but it was her. Everywhere she went, everything she touched was intensified. Walking around my space as if she owned it, and if I'm honest, she did. The nights she wasn't with me, it felt a little dimmer. She was the light in my home, in my life.

I knew that telling her dad would allow her to fully give herself to me. She'd stay the weekends, and not just days. It wasn't telling the world about her that worried me. Fuck, I wanted to claim my territory. I hated how guys stared at her. Valor was oblivious to just how hot she fucking was.

It wasn't telling JR. I was prepared for the ass beating I was going to get from him. I wasn't holding back because of her dad. I was holding back because of myself.

I watch as she takes the first few bites of the greasy slice, humming happily to the sound of the music.

"You are still the messiest eater I've ever met," I comment, moving my eyes to her and then back to the road.

She lifts her foot and then drops it on my thigh roughly digging her heel into my muscle.

“I am not!” she calls, with food still in her mouth as she does. I choke out a laugh, reaching over with my free hand. I look over at her, swiping my thumb across her chin. I collect the excess sauce on my thumb before bringing it back to my mouth. I suck the tomato flavored paste off, a smirk settling on my lips.

I can see her blush out of the corner of my eye making me smile. That tough girl act on the ice? Yeah, it melts as soon as she’s in my arms.

“Whatever,” she grumbles, finishing the slice of pizza with an attitude.

I’d been driving around back roads in the more rural areas outside of Chicago for a few hours now. I knew she needed a break and I wanted to see her happy. Cyndi Lauper’s “Time After Time” comes on the radio. I roll my eyes, looking over at her for a second.

“What is up with you and eighties music?” It’s all she listened to. Not just some of the time. It was all the time. She never listened to anything made in today’s time. I’ll give it to her, she’s consistent.

“My dad. Simple as that. When I was young we’d listen to it for hours in the house. It feels like a part of me now. Just like you probably have something special you share with your family.” She pops a few Lemonheads into her mouth.

At the word ‘family’ I tense involuntarily. Yeah, Valor. I do have something special I share with my mother and father, it’s called pain. An intense amount of grief. The kind of pain that makes looking at Valor hurt.

“Not really,” I replied firmly. I return my gaze to the road in front of me. One hand on the steering wheel and the other is on Valor’s legs in my lap.

“You’re not close to your family, are you, B?”

Hard to be when one is dead and the other is drunk all the time. Vallie didn’t know much about my past or my family. I didn’t talk about it. Ever. No one knew about how I grew up, or what my mom went through. It was my secret to keep.

I shrug my shoulders. I want to move away from this conversation as swiftly as possible.

“Why do you do that? Change or avoid the topic when I bring up your family? You’ve done that since I was a kid. Why?” She moves her legs off my lap and the loss of her touch has me wanting to pull them back.

She’s still facing me, but now she’s sitting cross-legged in the seat staring at me with those Cleopatra eyes. Those eyes that have been torturing

my soul for years. Even as a kid she looked at me like she saw more than the mask I put on every day.

“My past isn’t something I like talking about. It’s not really that important anyway.”

My answer is simple. I don’t want to talk about this. But she’s an adamant little thing. Always poking around shit that isn’t her business.

“If it has to do with you and why you’ve never been in a committed relationship, I think it’s pretty important, B.”

I jerk my head to the side. Where the fuck did me being able to commit come from? I have barely looked at another woman since I got with V. My jaw ticks.

“Are you saying I’m not committed to you?” My voice is closer to a growl than my normal tone.

“Don’t turn this around on me!” she snaps, throwing her hands in the air. I decide now is a good time to look for a spot to pull over, this conversation isn’t going to be productive if I am driving. Plus, Valor is crazy when she’s angry, and I don’t feel like wrecking this car.

“I’m just trying to understand. You’re twenty-six, Bishop! I’ve never even seen you with the same woman twice, neither has fucking TMZ,” she continues as I pull off into a wide spot, putting the car in park.

Vallie looks out the window, biting the inside of her cheek. She’s the second person I’ve met who does that when she is stressed or agitated. It’s her tell that she is upset. It’s Anna’s too.

“How am I supposed to know it’s different with me?” she declares, rolling her tongue across her bottom lip. I quickly unbuckle my seatbelt with a sigh, grabbing the back of her neck and pulling her towards me.

The smell of Lemonhead candies and lavender overwhelms my senses. I lean my forehead on hers, digging my fingers into her hair.

“Fuck, Vallie. You know it’s different with you,” I whisper softly. Her body melts into me as if just my touch is enough to soothe her spirit. I feel her hands run up my chest to the sides of my face.

She moves her eyes to meet mine, and it takes all the breath out of my lungs. The brightest eyes I’d seen in my life. They hold galaxies and solar systems inside them. Her lips hover over mine, a ghost of a kiss. I can feel the smooth skin of her mouth on my own.

“Prove it.” She hums against my lips, “Let me see you, B. Let me see all of you.”

My soul nearly splits in two. Literally. She's taking all the air from me. I don't have anything left, she has it all. This moment feels so raw, and it rubs me to the point I'm exposed. I hate it. It's like she can see all the ghosts hiding behind my eyes.

I move my hand to the side of my seat, pulling it back, and then placing my hands on Valor's hips, easily lifting her body onto my lap. I grasp her body tightly, pressing her into my lap. I move my lips to hers, bruising a kiss to her lips.

It's not a romantic kiss. It's full of pain, raw, real. It's us. It's waves crashing onto the shore with a ferocity that I can't explain. Her lips are my safe haven. They want to know all the places I have been damaged and heal them.

She whines into my mouth, and I swallow it with a groan of my own. Our lips move in harmony as if they always should have been attached. My tongue darts across her bottom lip, teasing it gently. Her hands fist my T-shirt, she wants me closer.

I feel the loss of her lips when she pulls her mouth away from mine. Her lips float over mine, barely touching, she breathes out the words, "Please, let me see you..." I squeeze her hips so tightly I'm sure they will leave marks, and I grit my teeth, letting out a sigh I didn't know I was keeping.

Her delicate fingers rake through my hair, massaging my scalp, comforting me with her touch. I shake my head, sinking back against the headrest. My eyes open to see her staring at me. I take a deep breath in, and then let it out.

"My parents taught me a lot of things in my life." I clear my throat, hoping the words don't get stuck. "My dad showed me how dangerous loving someone can be."

She sits there quietly, staring at me, letting me talk. Allowing me to exercise my demons like the saint she is.

"My mom taught me that even the happiest of people hold the darkest demons." I pause, letting those words settle. "She killed herself when I was young. My dad found her on the kitchen floor, and I found them when I came home from school. He was just holding her, rocking back and forth calling her name like it was going to wake her up from a bad dream." I shake my head, running my hand down my face.

"I watched what happens to one soul when the other leaves it to walk this Earth alone."

And it was the most traumatic moment in my life. It was a giant fuck you to every happily ever after I'd ever seen or heard about.

I remembered the room smelled like sadness. It was stale and cold. Without any warning, my entire life had changed. I fucking hated this. This feeling of being vulnerable. She could see all my bloody cuts, all the wounds were open for her viewing pleasure.

"Rock bottom was when I met Coach Eric and Anna. My dad was hollow and I was trying to raise myself. Coach introduced me to hockey and Anna, his wife. They showed me love. I, I think I'd be dead if I hadn't met them. I owe them both everything. Ya, know, it's weird, but I think Coach and Anna were my mom's way of saying sorry that she left."

Valor's thumbs rub calming circles on my cheeks, still sitting there with a passive look on her face. I bite my bottom lip, letting my words settle in the air around us. Her fingers traced my nose and eyebrows.

"I'm so sorry, B." Her voice cracks like she's trying not to cry. My sweet girl is trying to be brave for me. She's fighting the tears because she wants to be strong for me, and I couldn't be more thankful for her at that moment. I cough, opening my throat somewhat. I give Valor a forced smile, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

"My old man may not have taught me a lot, but he was right about one thing." I try to make my mood a little lighter, attempting to pull myself from the gloom towards the light that is Valor Sullivan.

She gives me a tiny smile, raising an eyebrow. "Yeah, and what's that?"

I sigh, taking my right hand and tracing her bottom lip with my thumb. My other hand pulls her closer to me by her hip. This position makes her look down on me, her head almost touching the roof of my car. Her hands rest on my shoulders as I look up at her.

"He told me that one day I'd believe in magic."

I can see the shock register on her face, her freckles shifting as she scrunches her nose. I nip at it with my teeth listening to her squeal. She squirms in my lap, making me groan. Her ass grinds against my cock who has already been working towards a hard-on with her in my lap.

"Does that mean you're going to pull a bunny out of a hat now?" She laughs softly, making me grin. I tug on one of her curls that hangs next to her face, spinning it around my finger.

"No, it just means I have a little more faith than I used to." My eyes flick to her lips, before moving back to her eyes.

“So what made you realize he was right?” She tilts her head to the left, lifting both of her eyebrows with a grin on her face. The freckles that splatter her cheeks and nose move with her every action.

She shouldn't have the right to look as fucking good as she does right now. Fresh-faced, empathetic, her light scorching holes in the oblivion I had encased myself in.

“Looking at you.”

It's the truth. All of it. She's the only person who knows all of me. Who gets to see every single piece of me. The one person who makes my days a little more vivid. I place my forehead on hers, snapping at her bottom lip.

“You, Valor Sullivan, are what magic is made of.” My lips stroking hers, just casually, my fingers grasping the back of her neck. “The kind of person even time will cease to worship. Light, wonder, excitement, passion, joy. You're what turns loveless souls to hopeless romantics. You're my kind of magic.”

I just wish I would have known then that I would be the reason she lost her magic. The reason she wasted her spark. All the light. Gone.

Because of me.

CHAPTER 10



Puck You

BISHOP - 26

Game day.

Two words that set my body on fire.

My team and I wait in the tunnel for the time we can burst onto the ice. My heartbeat is steady. My fingers itch underneath my gloves. All the practices, the workouts, it's for these moments. Game days. When we can step onto the ice and prove we are the better team.

The sticks are taped, skates sharpened, uniforms on. Our last names are marked on our backs for the entire world to see, to watch as we build our legacy from the letters that make up our name. We represent the city on the front. We are the hope, the strength of Chicago. We hold an entire city on our shoulders.

I can detect the fans outside in the arena, their powerful voices. I can see the ones hanging over the edge of the tunnel dying to catch a glimpse of us. To get a high five, a glance, which they will talk about for the rest of

their lives. We are warriors to our fans and letting them down is a miserable feeling.

Little kids wear my jersey; my name printed on their backs. I'm their hero, the person they want to be. I play for them. I play for the ones who sustain our city. The ones who love hockey. The kids who want to be me. I play for myself. For redemption I've been seeking my entire life.

Rolling shoulders, the vibrations of sticks striking the ground, roars, and pregame handshakes. Kai bumps my shoulder twice like every game before because that fucker's superstitious even if he won't admit it.

Nico flies down the middle of the tunnel bumping off everyone's shoulders, bouncing back and forth. His energy makes the rest of the team buzz with anticipation. Nico needs the excitement to get his head right. He's a ball of energy at all times. Nico and I were always night and day.

"He looks like a human pinball machine," Kai comments with a chuckle watching Nico leaping back and forth between the team, each shoulder slamming him into another one. Our blood pumps faster and faster each second.

"It's Southie, what do you expect?" I say with a grin. Nico had been dubbed that nickname in high school, and it had just stuck with him.

"Let's go, boys! Let's fucking go!" he barks and everyone shouts in agreement with him. He stops in front of me, slamming his face into mine, our helmets clanking at the connect.

"You ready, baby?" he yells, and I nod my head vigorously, a severe expression on my face. I shove his shoulders back, turning to look at the rest of the team that fills the shadowy tunnel. The lights dim behind us, strobe lights casting a glow across all of them. Their faces looking at me expectedly.

"Who's ready?" I say lowly. Just enough for them to hear me.

"Fury ready," they reply, their bodies rocking back and forth, side to side.

"Who's ready?" I yell louder. They start to jump up and down. Excitement on their faces, once again we are just young boys who love a sport. Not grown men, this moment makes us remember why we love this game so much.

"Fury ready!" they scream back, and I give them a nod. I hear the screaming alarm, signaling like it does every game, loud and abrupt letting our fans know we are headed into the rink. I turn and start to jog out of the

tunnel. I can feel them behind me, my teammates, my brothers, always having my back.

It's the adrenaline that will rival any drug on this planet.

My skates hit the ice and once again...

I'm home.



“If you want more I'm right fucking here, pal. Right fucking here!” I shout towards the opposing team player. His nose is bleeding as we are being pulled towards our respective penalty boxes.

“Bishop, get in the fucking box before I take you out of here,” the ref comments as I slide inside the clear box. My team is banging their sticks and the fans are screaming in euphoria. People live for hockey fights.

I have a seat on the bench, taking my helmet off to brush the hair out of my face. The sweat has drenched my blond hair to a dark brown. My lungs burn and my legs will be aching by tomorrow. The fans beat on the back glass of the penalty box, cheering me on.

The fight between me and Ross Jenkins had escalated throughout the game. I'd never been a fan of the guy. He was too much of a show-off for my liking. He was the type of player to make his team look bad just so he could look good. Half the time he barely looked decent.

I'd watched as his poke checks to Nico had quickly turned into full-on whacks to his shin guards. One? An accident. Two? We are heading into intentional territory. Three? You are deliberately trying to hurt my teammate and that shit pisses me off. The refs hadn't called shit our way all fucking night. So if something wasn't going to be done, I'd take care of it my way.

“Hey, bitch, watch your stick there. Don't take another whack at him,” I had commented as a warning. I was a physical guy. Everyone in the league knew it. I wasn't the kind of player to go out of my way to start trouble, but I sure as fuck finished it.

All it took was one more backhanded remark from him. “I'll take a whack at whoever the fuck I want, *golden boy*.”

I couldn't even remember how the fight started. All I knew was my knuckles were busted open from making solid contact with his nose. Blood

poured onto the ice and followed him all the way to the penalty box on his side.

We needed a change of pace anyway, we were losing momentum. I was determined to redeem ourselves for last season. Chicago deserved better, our fans deserved better.

Last season was tough. We'd battled for a spot in the playoffs, and lost in the first round. I cringe at the thought. The team dynamic was off. Nico had been in and out for a recurring groin injury, and something had happened to Kai that threw him off his game. I'd tried for months to get him to talk about it, but he never budged. Something had rocked him to his core. The rest of the team depended on us, the leaders, to set a pace, a standard, and if we couldn't get our shit together it was hard for everyone else also.

It was a disaster. Losing playoffs like that was gutting. We knew how good we were, how good we could be.

But what I have learned over the years of being in the NHL is that you don't learn who the best teammates are when you're popping champagne in the club. You don't learn who you can count on when you win 5-0. You learn who the best teammates are when you lose. You learn when the champagne is opened in the locker room down the hall when you take the loss in a playoff game. That's when you know who you can count on. That's how you become stronger. It's how you become better.

Through hell and high water, I was going to make sure we had our shit together this season.

The fight had shifted the energy in our favor. The lines were coming off the bench faster with higher intensity. That next play attitude, that next shift attitude. The adrenaline had breathed new life into us.

I watched as the clock for my adult timeout counted down. The seconds seemed to hang for hours. I stood up ready to bolt through the doors. One of my teammates gained possession of the puck, gliding down the ice.

Once the timer runs out, I dart out of the penalty box. I'm late for the shift, so I passed the blue line a little slower than everyone else. The puck is passed in my direction and I catch it on my blade easily.

I have one hand on my stick, guiding it forward. I cut from the left side to the middle lane. My eyes spot an opening where I could take advantage of some space and I take it quickly. I fake a drop pass to Nico which pulls one of the defensemen. I go around the other one with swift handles and bring two hands back to my stick at the last second.

I lift a backhander over the goalie seeing it fall into the white of the net. The red buzzer sounds off into the stadium. Fans erupt in joint chaos, cheering and smacking the glass in ecstasy. I turn to the crowd doing the universal sign to come here with my hands, the old showtime. My team huddles around me. Nico slams his body into mine shoving me into the boards.

Cuss words and congratulations are exchanged in the small circle. I can hear Nico's voice in my ear.

"Atta fucking boy, Bishop! Atta way, baby!! It's about goddamn time you showed up to the party, buddy!" I chuckle with a smile on my face.

The shouts, cries, and cheers continue until the end of the game. We'd won three to four, a great way to start the season. This was a new day, a new season, our spirits had been lifted. Kai was in a better mindset, and Nico was, well, he was Nico.

As we walked out of the locker room down the long corridor we prepared ourselves for the swarm of fans. Kai avoided any and all puck bunnies, only stopping to sign autographs for young kids. Malakai never did media interviews, not after an unfortunate event with the paparazzi a few years prior. It took a fuck ton of lawyers and money to keep him out of jail.

Nico was the social butterfly. He floated from group to group, taking pictures, flirting, signing his name on people's skin. He loved the attention and lived for it.

I'd grown used to the attention. It wasn't something that affected me nearly as much as it did during my first few years as a professional athlete. The females who wore revealing clothes to grab our attention had blended together. Their faces looked the same, hair the same color, a merry-go-round of basic bitches.

Maybe because I'd been with enough of them to know they weren't worth it, or maybe it had to do with the fact that all I could think about was my hand fisting a mane of thick red hair. My testosterone was through the roof after games, and normally any blonde puck bunny would do, but not anymore.

This feeling, this primal need was for one person and one person alone.
Valor.

I wanted to be so deep inside her she'd feel me for months after. To bury myself in not only her body but her soul so that even looking at another man would be impossible because she is so embedded with me.

The image of her galaxy splatter face, her soft moans of pleasure, and the feeling of her tight walls clenching around my cock while she breaks into a million pieces? It's enough to make me want to fucking come in my jeans thinking about it.

Speaking of the devil, there she is, waiting patiently at the end of the corridor talking to one of the long-time equipment managers who used to work with her dad. Her smile is distracting the fuck out of me. I can't even sign my name correctly on this kid's jersey.

I can hear her laugh. It's the only sound I hear above all the noise, all the chaos, it's just her. I start to walk towards her, and as if my soul said to hers "Hey, look up, pretty girl" she lifts her head to meet my gaze.

A wickedly sinister grin breaks out across my face, letting her know exactly what thoughts are running through my mind. They involve her naked and bent over my kitchen counter or whichever fucking flat surface is closest.

I move closer to her one foot after the other forcing my body not to take off into a full sprint. I'm crazy about the girl, but the whole world doesn't need to see me act like a twelve-year-old boy.

I'm nearly there when a brunette steps in front of me. She reeks of hair spray and self-tanner, not a flattering smell. I have no problem with women wearing risky clothing. Do what you want with your body. I do, however, have a problem when my girlfriend is waiting for me and a girl with nearly nothing on is blocking her from me.

Girlfriend?

"Bishop Maverick, I guess what they say is true, you are a lot bigger in person," she hums with a thick southern accent that most men would find attractive, just not me. Her eyes roll up and down my body taking me in.

"Thanks. Can I sign something for you?" I say politely trying to get her out of my fucking way so I can spread my girl's legs and tongue fuck her to oblivion.

She smiles at me, stepping closer which causes me to step back. "I was thinking you could prove all the rumors," her eyes flick to my crotch, "true."

I bring my fist to my mouth, clearing my throat and forcing a toothless smile. "I can't help you there, but the guy with black hair? Number 48? He can."

I slip past her, looking forward to meeting Valor's gaze but all I see is her staring daggers at the girl behind me. Her arms are crossed across her chest, and her jaw is tightened. It's the universal woman sign for *pissed the fuck off*.

"Fuck," I mutter. I hate the fact she compares herself to the other women, and hate that I can't just jog towards her and plant my lips on hers. Show her that the only one I want is her. Once I'm directly in front of her, I give a smile hoping that'll soften her anger. Her slitted green eyes meet mine, and I want to hide in a fucking corner.

"Ya know that shit wouldn't happen as often if they actually knew you had a fucking girlfriend," she exclaims. Shock passes her face when she hears that she called herself my girlfriend. We hadn't put labels on our relationship yet but *girlfriend* didn't hold a candle to what Valor was to me.

"I know, Vallie. I just want to tell your dad first before I announce it to the press. You're the only one I want, you know that."

She scoffs, "Yeah and when is that going to be, B? Admit it, you're fine with keeping me as your dirty little secret. Meanwhile you let the press see you with every bimbo in fucking Chicago."

Fucking hell. Always fucking worried about puck bunnies that I don't fucking want. Every time this conversation comes up, my faithfulness to her comes into play. I've never given her a reason to think I want anyone else but her.

On the other hand I haven't shown her to the public. I haven't made it exclusive so in her eyes it means I'm ashamed or some shit.

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. She catches my hesitation, rolling her eyes, and turning on her heel to walk away. My last name is printed in bold red letters on the back of her hoodie and even though we are arguing, I smirk. My girl is wearing my name. Always my girl.

Her frame slips through the doors toward the office section of the building. It's where we have team meetings, Coach's office, board meetings, all of the shit I hated dealing with as a hockey player. Valor knows this place better than anyone I've ever met. She probably parked near the west exit for less traffic. She used to play hide and seek in this building. I'm sure she's been her curious self and found herself eavesdropping on conversations.

I catch the door, following after her. The place is quiet during the evening, maybe a few people still making their way to their cars to head

home. Valor still handled her emotions like she did as a kid. She ran. It didn't matter if she was angry, sad, or in this case jealous, she ran from her emotions.

She always talks about how I hide myself from her, how I hid my past. Well, I'm not the only one hiding. There are pieces of her that she keeps from me. She shies away from conversations about how she feels, what she's thinking. She'd never admit that sometimes she doesn't feel like she's enough.

I fucking hated myself for being the reason she questioned herself. Why couldn't I just fucking get the fuck over this irrational fear of loving someone? The overwhelming need to be anything other than my father?

I was pissed the fuck off at myself, at her, at everyone. I didn't want her looking in the mirror asking herself if there was something wrong with her like the night she came home from that sleepover or the day that waitress made her feel worthless.

Valor wasn't just a girl, she was mine, and it was about damn time we both accepted that.

I grip her arm, turning her to face me. "Nice hoodie, wonder where you got it?" I smirk, trying to keep my temper in check. It was mine. I'd given it to her this morning.

"Yeah, a fucking coward gave it to me," she snaps the words like venom. Fury flares in her eyes, and it's burning just for me. I run a hand down my face, letting out a sarcastic chuckle.

My tongue rolls inside my cheek, as I reach forward, pushing her into the nearest door. Her back makes solid contact with wood, and I press my entire body into her. My fingers trail up her arms, skimming over her breast, and laying gently on her throat.

"What do you want from me, Valor Lila? You want me to fuck you in front of the media? Bend you over, make you come on my cock for the headline of the Chicago Press? Is that what you want? You want me to treat you like a fucking puck slut?" My words come out way harsher than I intended them to, but the point is getting across.

"No, B—"

"Well guess what, I can't fucking do that. I can't just fuck you like I would those other women. It's different when I'm with you, and I know you feel it. I can't just fuck you. You're the only female to ever step foot into my apartment, to share my bed, to stay the night. It's just fucking you." I

pause pressing my forehead into hers, my teeth bite her bottom lip, pulling it out slightly. “And now I’m going to prove it,” I whisper.

Confusion knots her brow. I lift her body to mine allowing her legs to wrap around my waist. I open the door, hoping there is a flat surface I can lay her on. I spot a large round table and decide that will do. I sit her ass on it, reaching my hand to the base of her neck, gripping her hair, and jerking roughly so that she is forced to look up at me.

“Strip.”

It’s not a request, it’s a demand. I want her naked. There are too many articles of clothing covering her. She nibbles on the inside of her cheek, nervous. The lights are on in this room, so I can see every inch of her body. The fact she still feels insecure in her skin is a punch to the gut.

“I’m not going to ask again, strip, Valor.” I pull away from her taking a step back, crossing my arms, and waiting for her to start.

She releases a shaky breath, standing up but still leaning on the table for support. Her pale fingers reach for the hem of her hoodie, gripping it tightly before pulling it up her body and over her head. A baby blue lace bra covers her breasts, but I can still see the perky, rose-colored nipples beneath the material. My eyes don’t know where to look. The exposed flesh, the blush tinting her cheeks, or my Catholic pendant dancing on her chest. She never takes it off.

“This what you want, Bishop?” The confidence in her voice doesn’t match her body. I don’t want Valor to fake confidence when it comes to how she looks anymore. I want her to know just how fucking breathtaking she is. She kicks her shoes and socks off with an attitude that has me fighting a smile. My cock is straining in my jeans, hard as fucking rock, and she’s just in a bra and jeans.

I nod my head curtly, flicking two fingers at her so she will continue. She sighs, sucking on her bottom lip. Her fingers undo the button of her jeans before she starts to shimmy out of them. Once she adds them to the growing pile, I move to her.

My pointer finger starts a trail from her arm, up to her collarbone, down the valley of her breasts, and to her back. I rub my fingers up and down her spine, hearing her fight a moan.

“What don’t you like about yourself, Vallie? When you look in the mirror, tell me what you see.”

She tries to shrug the question off, scoffing and rolling her eyes. I grit my teeth, my jaw clenching. I unsnap the back of her bra, letting it slip off her shoulders. I lay a soft kiss on her collarbone before my rough hand grips her jaw.

“Tell me, I’m tired of fucking asking twice.”

Her false confidence starts to falter, softness gathers in her eyes. I can see the water building in her green eyes, and if they fall I have every intention of kissing them away. That is exactly what I do when the tears slowly fall. I catch each one with my lips.

“I see someone who is too long and not enough curves.” She pauses trying to pull away from me, but I refuse to let her. “Small breasts. A girl whose hair is too messy to be found attractive. A broken smile. Too many freckles but not enough makeup experience to cover them. I’m too intimidating, too masculine.”

Her tears taste like sadness, and I want nothing more than to fucking destroy society’s ability to make women feel this way about themselves. Especially Valor.

I clear my throat, making sure she can hear my words. “Let me tell you what I see.”

My fingers move down her body, massaging her nipples slowly. Just enough to see her nipples harden under my touch. They slide down her stomach, hooking the material of her panties and pushing them down so they pool at her feet.

“I see a woman who’s so fucking beautiful,” I whisper, lifting her back onto the table. Her naked thighs spread for me. I avoid the area between them, focusing on her face.

I rake my fingers through her hair, caressing her cheek, “A body that is strong, but so fucking sexy when it’s laid out before me. I see softness when you laugh, when you sigh, when you moan.” I tug on a curl of her hair. “Uniqueness in your hair.”

A smile starts to appear on her lips, the tears starting to slow. I run my thumb across her bottom lip. “I see a woman whose femininity isn’t defined by society’s standards. Just because you are tall and athletic doesn’t make you any less beautiful, Valor Sullivan. You’re magic, remember?”

This wasn’t going to heal her insecurities completely, but I hoped that now when she was around me, she never doubted that she was the only one I wanted.

“And you’re the sun, always there, always blinding me,” she whispers as her leg finds its place wrapped firmly around me. I lean forward, feeling her rock against my body. I can’t help but move myself to rub against her. It is an instinct, the movements came naturally; it’s almost feral.

My lips trail down from her neck, my tongue tasting her skin and halting at her chest. The magnetism I feel towards Valor is unending and as I reach closer to her, my lips wrap around her nipples with a playful ferocity. I feel them stiffen and harden with anticipation. It’s clear she aches for this. My cock is stiff in my jeans, rubbing against the material with every movement.

“I want you, B,” she moans softly, gripping my shoulders tightly. I look up at her, a possessive glint in my eyes. I harshly slam her back onto the desk, hearing her gasp as I do so. My large hand extending across her delicate throat, clasping the sides just enough to make breathing a little harder for her. I move back up to her lips, squeezing tighter before releasing a little.

“Ask me to make you come, pretty girl. Ask me,” I murmur against her lips holding her in place by her throat. She tries to look away from me, embarrassment sliding up her face. No, she doesn’t get to be shy right now. I’m going to fucking show her just how much she means to me.

“I’m not going to fucking ask again, Valor,” I seethe the words into her skin, needing her to hear the urgency in my tone. She bites her bottom lip, debating it, before letting out a breath.

“Make me come.” Three words. That’s all I needed.

“That’s my girl,” I mumble before I make my way down her body again. I keep my left hand on her throat, just because I fucking can. Once I reach the apex of her thighs, I groan. I can see how badly she wants me. It’s slicked on her thighs. The lights catching it making it glisten in front of me. My tongue goes first, gliding effortlessly up to her thigh and stopping right before I reach her clit, then moving to the other thigh to do just the same again.

My steamy breath blows on her clit, as my arms wrap around her legs splitting them open for me. My lips touch first, wrapping around her clit and giving a playful suck before I remove it completely. I place my tongue on her center, moving slowly, deliberately.

I want her to feel every single second of this. To realize that she is the only pussy I want to taste, the only fucking woman I ever wanted. When we

were done here, she'd never forget. Every time she questions herself, an ache would start between her thighs.

"Goddamnit..." she whines aloud, tangling her hands into my hair. She keeps raising her hips to my mouth, trying to get more, needing more. I hold her ass down to the table with my arms, forcing her pussy to remain still as I pleasure it the way I want to.

I hear her whimper, the climax she so urgently needs is close. My tongue begins to quicken its pace against her clit, only pausing for me to wrap my lips around her hood and suck teasingly. Her scent surrounds my senses. The muskiness mixed with the sweetness of her taste is fucking amazing. I move only one finger inside of her at first, the familiar 'come hither' motion serves me well.

"More, please, more..." she pants loudly. A crooked grin sneaks onto my face as I easily slide another finger inside of her earning me a loud moan of approval. That's Valor for you, always wanting more. If she wanted more, more is what I give her.

My free hand creeps up her soaked thigh, coating my fingers with her juices, while my other hand and tongue work in harmony. I move my middle finger toward her ass, teasingly rubbing circles around the bud. I hear her shocked gasp as I began to push it inside. Her ass clenches around my finger so tightly I can barely move in and out of her.

I move slowly making sure she feels both of her holes consumed by me. I want her to be full of me. There is no part of her that I don't occupy. So full of me she'll never be free. I want all or nothing. This isn't sex. This is me marking her soul, engraving my heart with her name. It isn't just a physical desire that pulls us together, it's something more.

Valor's body pushes against my arms, her body starting to twitch. Every inch of her is aching to orgasm. She's so fucking close. I slowly start to pull away. The finger in her ass slides away. I know just how close she is, but I'm not ready to give her that yet. I want her to come knowing who she belongs to.

My tongue slows down and the fingers that were directly pushing against her G-spot again and again slow down as well. Valor's back arches off the table, her muscles tight. I smile as I move away from her entirely.

"No, no, wait..." her voice is cracked and broken. She's helpless in this situation. She looks down at me with bewilderment in those hazy green

gems. Sweat clings to her forehead, and frustration tints her cheeks bright red. She is so damn beautiful.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, moving back up her body and placing my lips on hers in an aggressive kiss. I plunge my tongue into her mouth, forcing her to suck on it, to taste her own juices from me. She moans into me, eagerly taking everything I am giving her.

I remove my mouth, replacing it with my hand. I can feel her heavy breathing pounding against my palm. My other hand reaches down to pull my jeans down just enough to release my cock from its jean-clad prison. It springs free, with a pang of hunger that I've never experienced. I place my mouth next to Valor's ear, whispering,

"I don't remember saying you could come, did I?"

My tone shifted. It's stern now. My hand slowly moves from her mouth and I slip my fingers into them, having her taste the wetness her pussy had given me. I smirk and rub my cock against her clit. Her moan vibrates around my fingers, feeling her suck greedily.

Such a good fucking girl.

My good girl.

"I want to hear you beg me to fuck your pussy until your legs give out. Beg, and maybe I'll give you what you want."

I push my body forward feeling my cock rub up and down her slit, torturing myself as well. I move my fingers from her mouth resting them beside her head as I brush a few stray pieces of hair behind her ears. She's a withering mess underneath my body. Gasping and panting for release, it's enough to make any man come in his fucking pants.

My cock prods against her entrance. My body is desperate to push inside of her tight walls and never leave. I bite my bottom lip roughly to keep from slamming inside of her just to feel her squeeze me once.

Her green eyes are full of pure ecstasy.

"Please, Bishop." Her voice is raw from screaming and moaning. It makes my cock throb. She pushes her hips up towards me, and I can't fight her anymore. I need her so damn badly I can't even see straight.

I stare down at her, a feeling I can't explain runs down my spine. I'll never be able to have sex with another woman like this. It's a shift in our relationship, a change for me. I never want to be without her. This isn't fucking. This is much deeper. Chill bumps run across my skin, an unseen force pulling me closer to her.

The head of my cock slips inside, and I move the rest steadily into her tight walls. It grips me so fucking tight, I can't help the animalistic groan that I release that matches the gasp she lets out. Goddamn. I hold myself still inside of her for just a moment, just wanting to feel her twitch around me. I am so fucking glad she came home a few weeks ago and let me know she started the pill. The condom was fine, I just didn't feel as close to her as I wanted to. I can feel fucking everything right now.

"Good fucking God..." I moan as I continue to pump in and out of her. I lean up, standing to my full height. I grip her waist aggressively, slamming her to my waist to fill her completely. Using her hips as leverage I start to shove myself inside of her over and over again. Each time I pull her to me she is filled full with my cock.

I can hear the sloppy sounds of our body connecting. It ricochets off every surface in this room. The slapping of our skin each time I bottom out inside of her. My fingertips are digging inside her hips as Valor screams in pleasure beneath me. I'm marking her skin while she's marking my soul.

"I-I'm gonna... Fuck, I'm gonna come," she whimpers. I press my thumb on her clit, slowly massaging it, watching as she breaks apart.

It is a spiritual moment more than anything, watching her let down all of her guards, all the walls. She is completely vulnerable to me. Her walls clamp down around my cock like a vise, pulling out of her will be physically impossible.

My climax knocked the breath out of me as I fill her completely. She twitches, the aftershock of her orgasms milking everything I have left. Sweat coats my body, and the smell of sex wafts throughout the room.

Taking deep breaths, in and out, my head rests on her shoulder as she gasps. Her fingers tangling in my hair, playing with the ends of it while I just stand there inside of her. Enjoying the feeling of being close.

I lift my head to meet her eyes, and she gives me a breathtakingly tired smile. I brush a few stray pieces of hair off her forehead, matching her grin. Her mouth opens and I expect something along the lines of 'that was amazing' or something giving me a pat on the back for my amazing sex job, but of course with Valor it's never the obvious thing.

"Can we get pizza?"

I drop my head down on her chest, laughing slowly at first, but it builds to one of those laughs that make your stomach hurt. The ones that you want

to live in forever, the kind of laugh I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing with her by my side.

I think that was the moment I realized I was in love with her.

CHAPTER 11



Wakeup Call

VALOR - 18

Bang* *Bang

I groan, rolling over onto my back covering my face with my hands. I peep through my fingers, looking for the clock on Bishop's bedside table. The clock reads five. Five in the fucking morning. I don't have class till nine.

I roll towards B, smiling at his messy hair. It's thrown all over his face, his soft breaths blowing it up and down. I move towards him, crawling until I am sitting on his lap. He'd sleep through fucking World War III, I'm sure of it.

I lean down, nibbling on his ear lobe.

"Bishop..." I whisper softly. I can feel his morning wood rubbing against my already wet slit. I'm completely naked due to the fact Bishop couldn't keep his hands to himself all night. After the intense moment in the office my body was dead tired, but after he fed me pizza he wanted more of me.

I hear him groan softly, and I smirk. I sit up, looking down at him watching as he opens his eyes. Those blue irises shine with the morning light catching them. His hands find my hips, rocking me softly against his shaft. I moan, biting my bottom lip. My body is so sore, but already so ready for him.

“You’re insatiable.” I giggle, placing my hands on his chest. He leans up, wrapping his arm around my waist, kissing my shoulder and collarbone.

“And you’re wet.” His morning voice is husky, rough, and it’s making my nipples hard. I tangle my fingers in his hair, placing a slow kiss on his lips. It’s leisurely, lazy, like we do it every day.

I hear the knocking again, and I sigh, “Who the hell is here at five on a Sunday?”

He whines, tightening his grip around me. “Maybe if we ignore it they will go away,” he mumbles into my skin. I laugh a little louder pushing him away from me. I kiss his forehead. Rolling off his body.

“Go get the door, babe.”

Bishop slips out of bed, pulling a pair of boxers on, then shorts. He has an attitude the entire time, making me chuckle. I watch his body walk to the door, and I clear my throat lifting an eyebrow. He smiles, walking back to me, laying a soft kiss on my lips.

“Happy?” he snarks playfully.

“I’d be even happier if you made some coffee.” I give him my best puppy dog eyes and hope it works. He laughs, shaking his head, and heads towards the front door to see who is here.

“Is that a yes?” I call to him, but all I hear is his laugh.

Dick. I think before I throw the sheet off my body and walk to the bathroom to pee. After I clean myself up, I search for some clothes to put on so I can go make myself coffee. I find a pair of sweatpants that I have to roll up and one of Bishop’s T-shirts.

Last night made me confident that he was ready to tell my dad, so confident that I was going to leave my toothbrush here today. I’d refused to leave clothes, socks, toothbrushes, or anything here until we told people about us.

I toss my hair into a bun, making my way out of his room and towards the kitchen. The closer I get the heavier my head feels. It’s one of those feelings that you know everything is about to go to shit. I hear voices,

voices I know. My feet pad down the steps, moving towards Bishop and the visitors. B isn't facing me but the two men in front of him are.

Nico Jett and Malakai Petrov.

Nico is still handsome, and Kai is still scary as fuck.

"What's up, baby Sullivan!" Nico walks towards me, slinging an arm around my shoulder and giving me a smile. "What are you doing here this early?"

Kai stands by the door, eyeing Bishop carefully but he did give me a head nod and what I assume was a smile. You can never tell if he is happy or just pissed the fuck off. Nico's smile is too much this damn early in the morning. I can't deal with chirpy humans before I've had coffee.

My stomach knots, and I move my eyes quickly to B. I raise a slow eyebrow at him, asking him without using my words, *You haven't told them?*

Panic sets in on his normally stoic face. I turn to look up at Nico, ready to answer his question when Bishop interrupts.

"Vallie got a little too drunk last night, so I let her crash here." He shrugs off the statement.

Shrugs it off like last night meant jack shit to him. Like he hadn't been moaning my name, and dropping his semen inside of me like he wanted me to have his fucking baby. My heart is hammering in my chest, and I hope no one notices.

"Still learning to handle your liquor? Bishop, dude, I figured you would've taught her that by now," Nico jokes. He is the only person in the room who doesn't notice the tension, even Kai is aware of what's happening to me internally.

"I guess he hadn't got around to it," I say, trying to keep my words calm. I can't believe I'd trusted him to live up to his words. I believed him when he said it wasn't that he was ashamed to be with me.

I feel awkward standing here, embarrassed that I let him play me like this. I feel stupid for thinking I was special. I thought he would be ready after everything that happened last night. I thought—

I thought wrong.

I though very fucking wrong. My heart deflates in my chest, and I feel like I might puke. Bile rises in my throat. My throat burns with words I want to say and unshed tears sit in my eyes. I bite the inside of my cheek, clearing my throat, and giving them a smile.

“Vodka is never a good idea.” I fake laugh. “I was getting ready to leave, is there any way one of you could call me a cab while I get my stuff?”

“I thought I was going to take you home after you got coffee?” Bishop’s voice says one thing but his eyes are begging me to hear him out, to listen to what he has to say. Well, I’m fucking tired of listening to Bishop. All he does is talk, he never acts. I’m tired of trusting him. I should have listened to Riggs.

Fuck this. I feel like such an idiot.

“Nah, it’s okay. You obviously have plans for today with the boys. I have to be on campus soon anyway.”

I don’t look behind me as I walk upstairs to gather my stuff. I pull all of his clothes off my body like they are burning me. I pull my jeans on and throw the hoodie over my top half. I don’t even bother with the bra and underwear. I grab my phone off the dresser shoving it into my pocket, while putting my feet inside my Converse.

I wipe the tears that have escaped, take a deep breath, and move to the steps. I turn to look at his bedroom one last time. I remember all the talks, all the laughs, the pillow fights, the love that happened in this room. This is a goodbye to all of it.

I can’t do this anymore. I don’t want this pain anymore.

I make my way down the steps and see Nico on the phone and Kai in the corner talking to Bishop. Well, more of Kai yelling at him than anything. I clear my throat to gather their attention. Nico covers the speaker on his phone.

“The taxi should be downstairs any minute,” he mumbles before returning to his phone call. I give him a thumbs up. I turn to Kai and Bishop noticing that B is already walking towards me. I look at the ground before meeting him halfway.

“Vallie—” he starts but I cut him off by wrapping my arms around his waist. I lay my head on his chest feeling his heartbeat loudly in my ear. I clutch his back, inhaling his scent. It used to comfort me, now it just makes me want to cry.

Every second I’m in his apartment is another reminder of all the lies he’s told me. Bishop doesn’t want anyone to know how he feels about me. Maybe it is because of how I look or maybe he is embarrassed because I am so young.

Either way, I am tired of not feeling enough.

“Thanks for last night, I appreciate it,” I tell him truthfully. One day I will thank him for this moment too, for showing me that I’m worth more than this. I deserve someone who isn’t afraid to love me.

“I’ll see ya around, B.” I pull away from his body even though he tries to hold me there. I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear, and wave at Kai.

I need out of this fucking apartment. It is all too much. I can’t fucking handle this shit anymore. I am suffocating. I all but run to the door, pulling it open and making my way down to the street.

The wind hits my face, knocking the breath out of me. I let some of the tears fall freely now, not even bothering to wipe them away. I’m so fucking stupid for trusting him. I grab my phone quickly and send a message to Riggs. All the message says is *pepper*. It’s our code word for when we have a bad day.

She responds just as fast.

Riggs: Chocolate or Strawberry ice cream?

Riggs: Never mind I’ll just grab both, see you soon, babe.

I let out a painful laugh, sniffing a little. I feel my arm being grabbed before I’m turned around facing a shirtless Bishop. I jerk myself away from his grip automatically. He looks down at me with a painful expression.

“What do you want, B?” I sigh. I’m tired, mentally and physically. My head is bursting with a migraine. My heart is currently splitting into pieces, and I look like death warmed over. I just want to curl into a ball on my bed and cry.

He furrowed his eyebrows. “What do I want? Are you fucking kidding me?” he scoffs.

With a breathy laugh that has zero amusement behind it, he continues, “I want to talk to you. I’m sorry about that, it’s just...” He runs a hand through his hair, something he does when he is trying to find words.

Fresh tears well up in my eyes, and the feeling of nausea washes across my stomach. This is harder than not saying goodbye, because I know what I have to say. I know what I have to ask. The answer is going to end me.

“It’s just what, B? When are you going to be ready to tell people about us? When will you tell my dad?”

It is a simple question for any normal relationship. When are you ready to make this official, to put a title on us. It should be easy. If you both care

like you say you do, then it's easy. Except Bishop and I have never been and will never be easy.

It catches him off guard, and he stutters slightly, "I-I just. I need more time, Vallie. A few more months."

He purrs my nickname. It's like warm water down my spine. He knows what it does to me; it softens all my defenses against him. A simple word can make me so much more susceptible to his fucking bullshit.

I shake my head, chewing on my bottom lip. More tears fall from my eyes, and I use the sleeves of my shirt to wipe them just as quickly as they fall. I give him a forced, toothless smile.

"I'm done, B." He flinches like I smacked him. I look up to the sky willing myself to get my fucking shit together. I'm done giving him time. I'm done being the one woman on this god forsaken planet he won't be seen in public with. I'm done.

"I get it. After all these years I finally fucking get it." I pause, glancing at the ground and wiping more tears away. My chest is burning, tightening with each word. I can barely breathe. I refuse to give him this moment of weakness though. I refuse to give him any more power over me. I refuse to let him make me feel unworthy anymore.

I raise my eyes to his. My eyes are leaking, but my gaze is strong. Bishop reaches his hand forward to wipe my tears but I jerk away, holding my palm up to him with a shaky hand.

"I thought it was because I wasn't blonde enough. I was too tall, wasn't tan enough, or didn't have big enough tits." I pause, trying to clear my throat.

"I thought I wasn't good enough for you to claim, for you to be with. But it was never me. It's always been you."

Hot tears leak from my eyes. They scorch my skin all the way down.

"So thanks, B. Thank you for showing me that I deserve better."

My heart is screaming at me, stomping her feet, beating on the walls, begging me to stay. She wants me to hug him. She wants to feel his heart next to us and seek comfort in it. But my words drop venom. I want him to hurt, to ache like I do. To feel the pain I'm feeling.

I keep my head up, even though I am crumbling inside. I turn on my heel, to walk out of the courtyard and to my taxi where I can scream in peace. I want Riggs to hug me and tell me everything will be okay. I want her to cuss Bishop out and make me laugh. I just need my best friend.

He grabs my wrist and I hate how warm it feels. How it feels like home. The only place I feel safe.

"Don't leave, not like this. You're enough, you're so much. Too much. You have to know that, Vallie, baby."

With all the strength I have left. The last bit of gas in my emotional tank, I turn my head slightly. I pull my hand away from his grasp.

I raise my eyes up to meet the turquoise gems that have been my demise. My turmoil. My happiness and my destruction. My throat itches. My skin is crawling. Everything hurts.

Looking at him hurts. Looking at Bishop Maverick used to be my favorite thing in the world. When I was sick or sad, I'd look at him and he would...he just made everything that much better.

Now?

It just fucking wounds, it rips me to shreds, and leaves me bleeding for the wolves.

"If I am enough, let's go right back up there and tell them about us. They are your friends, Bishop. Hell, they are my friends! They'd have no problem with us dating. You can't even tell them, how are you going to tell my dad?"

I watch the uncertainty run across him. I deserve someone who knows what they want, who knows that they love me. I don't deserve this. Bishop's eyes are bleeding with pain. I know this is hurting him, but not like it's hurting me. He opens his mouth to say something, but it shuts before he does.

Coward.

Fucking coward.

"Exactly. Now, I'm fucking leaving. I'm done. I have to nurse the nonexistent hangover you so graciously told them about. Thanks for taking care of me, by the way, really fucking appreciate it," I bite at him. I can cry later. I'll heal my broken heart on my own, but for right now Bishop had to know I was done.

"Valor, please," he mumbles, his voice thick with tears. I'd never seen Bishop cry before, ever. In all the years I'd known him, he'd never cried in front of me. I almost stay, I almost give in.

My poor heart bangs at the door of his, but there is no answer, with Bishop there never is.

“I deserve more. I deserve someone who is proud to love me. I deserve more than you,” I say abruptly. A group of girls walk past us and I hastily wipe the tears away. I don’t need the entire city knowing I’m crying over a guy.

“Oh look,” I scoff with a sarcastic grin on my face. “Perfect timing. Run along, I think I saw a blonde in there somewhere. You can plaster her face all over TMZ tonight. I’m sure she won’t mind. Make sure you pull the ‘what do you see in the mirror’ move, it works like a fucking charm.” I move myself away from him, forcing my body to walk.

“Valor!” he calls as I open the door to the taxi. I turn to look over my shoulder at him watching two solid tears slip from his eyes.

“We’re done, B. It’s done.”

Since I was ten years old, I’ve been infatuated with B. I’d imagined our life together, our love, and it never played out like this in my naive head. I saw him. I saw him more than anyone else, the pain, his past, and yet he still didn’t trust me with his love.

Love wasn’t supposed to feel like this, to hurt like this. Love was supposed to be given freely, and shown to the world. This was not the love I deserved. I didn’t deserve this from B, and I never deserved it from my mother.

Fuck them.

Bishop Maverick was no longer my happily ever after.

CHAPTER 12



Time Heals No Wounds

BISHOP – 30

There are people in this world who say time heals all wounds. They tell us that if we give ourselves the room to grow, the hurt we felt will become a distant memory.

Those people are fucking cock sucking liars. All of them. Time doesn't heal shit. Sure, it allows the wound to close up and scar, but the pain is still there. It never leaves. It's a constant reminder of what you lost. What I lost.

"Bishop, Bishop! Dick for brains!"

I look over at Nico, raising my eyebrow, trying to act like he didn't just catch me staring off into space. "Yes, honey?" I say sarcastically.

"You have a ten out of fucking ten checking you out. I'm talking lips like suction cups. She's got that suck the fucking soul out of your head game." He takes a sip of his beer, looking at the girl with no shame in his eyes.

Nico was straightforward. He knew what he wanted, and how he wanted it. He was crude, and a little too honest sometimes, but at least you didn't get any bullshit when it came to him.

“You’d fuck a goat if it sat still long enough. It’s not hard to impress you, *rogovoy der'mo*,” Kai chimes in, with a tilt of his glass. He looks over at me shaking his head no, “Her lips look like she got them done in a Bangkok prison. Do not turn around, it’s not worth it.”

I snicker, taking a sip of my alcohol. It was always a party with these two, it never changed. Bickering back and forth constantly. What most people wouldn’t realize is that even though they argue like they hate each other it’s just brotherly love. I’ve watched Nico back check someone into the boards so hard it knocked them out because they tapped Kai’s helmet during a game.

It was dysfunctional, but it was our family.

“Apologies, master Malakai. I forget that you’re into the ones who look like they need to be spanked and locked in a basement.” Nico says.

I laugh out loud, watching as Kai flips him off before smacking the back of his head hard as fuck. Nico, being his nosey ass self, stumbled upon a whip in Kai’s house and now he never lets him live it down. I didn’t know what Kai was into when it came to sex, and I didn’t want to. If I was assuming, I’d say Nico wasn’t too far from it.

The local sports bar was crowded, but of course, we got a table after a few autographs. It was a small bar in Chicago, filled with basketball, hockey, and baseball fans. TVs filled the area. Everyone was watching some type of sport.

Another summer had come to an end. Another year playing the sport I loved. The looming preseason was hanging over our heads, but to be honest? I was excited for hockey to start up again. It gave me something to do.

My month with the Finnegan’s had come to an end quickly. The girls were growing like weeds, teenagers now. Very girly teenagers. They were obsessed with boy bands and the color pink. It hurt my head, but I loved every second of it. I was surrounded by people I cared about, which was all I could ask for.

Eric was still coaching and Anna was still being the light of the home. Their love grew every day. It was a beautiful thing to witness. I’d never seen a couple be more in love than those two. Spending time with them during the summers was both a blessing and a curse.

They showed me everything I’d ever wanted and everything I’d lost.

When I got back to Chicago, I had to get Kai to get my ass back in gear. Anna's food was delicious, but the main ingredient in everything was butter. When I wasn't working out, playing hockey or with the boys, I was alone.

I'd sit in my apartment and binge watch movies, eat takeout, maybe read a book. That was it. I sounded like an eighty-five-year-old man. I felt like it honestly. I felt like I'd been through so much shit that this was my retirement for my mind.

I'd fallen into a routine, just making my way through life. I tried to distract myself from the fact that most of the time I felt alone. I'd never felt more alone in my life than I had these past few years. I could never fall asleep, not until at least two in the morning. I'd come to realize that two a.m. wasn't for the partiers or couples.

Two in the morning was for lonely people like me who were in love with someone they could never have.

I down the scotch, waving to my waitress for another one. I needed to burn those thoughts away. I wanted them far from my mind.

"Bishop, on a serious note, how long has it been, man?"

I choke on the fiery liquid going down my throat, not expecting that question. I cough up a right lung while Kai pats my back for support when really all it's doing is annoying the fuck out of me. I wipe my mouth, taking a breath.

"That long, huh?" Nico remarks.

I slit my eyes at him.

"I get plenty of pussy all on my own, Southie. Thank you for your concern."

Lies.

He raises his hands up, palms towards me. "I'm just asking, damn! I just haven't seen you with anyone in a long fucking time, man. I'm worried. Does your dick still work? I won't judge, plus they make pills and shit for that now."

I shake my head, rolling my eyes, using my pointer fingers to rub my temples. This idiot.

I'm not sure if my cock still works, to be honest. I wouldn't know considering I hadn't had sex in a little over four years. I had my dick sucked, or should I say attempted to have my dick sucked at an after party, but the girl was a brunette. So when I looked down and I didn't see those red waves spilling out around me, or those green eyes when she looked up,

I couldn't keep it up. Sex felt pointless now. Everything that required me to give any type of emotional effort felt fucking irrelevant.

Everything after her seemed like a waste of my time.

"Hey man, change the channel off this shit!"

I turn my body slightly, seeing an insanely overweight man cussing a bartender for changing what I assume is ESPN. People and their sports. I start to turn back around when I hear something that makes my ears pique with interest.

"It's on all of the sports networks right now, *man*." The bartender snaps back, "This chick apparently broke a fuck ton of records. She's supposed to be a first-round draft pick."

Chills roll up my spine, the taste of lemons build on my tongue, and I think for just a moment I can smell her lavender shampoo. I move my eyes to the TV screen they are focused on, trying to slow the cotton in my throat.

The screen blacks out before a video starts playing. A tall figure makes its way through a hockey tunnel, the number thirty-three printed boldly on their jersey. Long, red hair sways back and forth as she walks. Once she reaches the end of the tunnel, a voice plays over the video.

"*The daughter of a legend,*" it starts before showing highlights of JR Sullivan in flashes. I'm in some of those moments, I think to myself. My eyes are glued to the TV. They wouldn't move even if I wanted them to.

"*A hockey prodigy who owned her talent at a young age...*" Video clips of a small kid weaving, and deking other kids, scoring goals, celebrating with her team. It's a montage of all she is, all she has become, all she will be.

"*She broke records, won championships, built a program.*" A collage of goal after goal after goal appears on the screen. Highlights from her high school and college years. It shows the moments she won championships, the times she broke records that no one will touch for years.

My chest burns with pride, I have no right feeling. But I feel it anyway. This moment she worked so fucking hard for. All the early morning practices, the blisters, the broken ribs. It was all worth it now. Yet, I'm not there to celebrate it with her.

Now it shows her sitting in her college locker room, her head is down, the sounds of loud music plays throughout the video. Her hair is falling down in front of her face, her elbows rest on her padded knees. It zooms in on her taping her stick in slow motion.

“Now? She’s coming to change the game for women’s sports. She has unfinished business. All she is waiting for is her name to be called. Are you ready to see what’s next?” The camera pans to her skates before moving up to her face.

I watch as she lifts her head to face the camera. Those green eyes pierce me through the screen keeping me in place. I take in an audible breath as her name appears over her face, closing out the video.

I didn’t want to watch this, but I couldn’t not watch her. I owed her this much.

I can’t believe I forgot about the women’s draft tonight. Fuck, how had it been almost four years? How had it been that long since I’d seen her? The wounds I’d tried to heal were ripped wide open again. I’m losing blood in the middle of this dive bar.

Four long fucking years. I didn’t even try to reach out at first. I knew she was hurting. She needed time. Then she ignored me after I tried to contact her. I’d avoided seeing her dad as much as possible. I couldn’t stand looking at him in the eye after everything that fucking happened between us. I’d lost so much of myself the day she left. It was pieces I’d never be able to get back. They were hers to keep, forever.

The television shows the inside of Montreal’s hockey arena. Gone are the fans and in their place are fifty-two of the best players across the globe with their families waiting to hear if their dreams are going to come true. Nervously praying their hockey dreams will continue to the next level.

I know Valor is probably chewing on her cheek, trying to act calm, but on the inside, she is so nervous she could pass out. She isn’t comfortable being in front of that many people unless it’s in a pair of skates.

I hope someone has Lemonheads for her. They always calm her down.

“Hundreds of young women have worked their entire lives for this moment. To be here and be a part of this special event. To be a part of this draft and perhaps become players in this league.” The Women’s National Hockey Commissioner stands at the podium speaking loudly into the microphone.

“Their families have sacrificed for years while supporting their hockey careers, and now they get the privilege of witnessing all their dreams come true.” He pauses, giving a smile. “Now, let’s get started. The first selection of the Women’s National Hockey League draft goes to the Chicago Wings.”

The clock begins ticking, meaning there is only three minutes for the organization to finalize their pick. My heart is hammering in my chest. It's like I am there. I can feel how nervous Valor is. Her knee is bouncing like crazy. She's probably chewed all the skin off her cheek, and I know she's holding her dad's hand for dear life.

"With the first pick overall, the Chicago Wings are proud to select, from the University of Chicago, Valor Sullivan."

The arena goes crazy with applause, and the camera pans to Valor and her family. My heart aches. I want to be there. I should have been there. I am her family too. Or I guess I was her family.

"Fuck yeah, Vallie girl, fuck yeah," I say out loud without even noticing it. I don't even care though. There is no one here who will understand the pain of missing something like this.

I'd fucked up with her. I know I did. I regret it every day. But it doesn't take away from the fact that I was there to witness her become the star she is today. It doesn't mean I'm not proud as fuck of her. I showed her how to toe drag, and how to throw a left hook. I picked her up from practices when her dad couldn't. I spent birthdays and holidays with her. I was there to watch her become the athlete she is today.

So fuck these people in this bar, I'm going to cheer her on from a distance.

When the camera hits Valor I try not to reveal in my face just how badly I want her. Confidence radiates from every inch of her. Gone was the girl ashamed of her height and her legs. In her place was a stunning woman wearing heels that made her tower over most men.

She'd grown into her body more, and the glow of confidence made her shine with attractiveness that wasn't obtained by many people. She is beautiful. She is the woman I always knew she could be. The dark green pantsuit clings to her curves. The color makes her eyes sharper and her hair brighter.

She celebrated with her family quickly, wrapping her arms around Aurelia, who looked like she was ready to cry. Then she moved to her dad who kissed her forehead, leaning down to whisper something in her ear. The smile on my face was the first genuine one I'd had in a long time. I felt like me again.

"I didn't know baby Sullivan has a boyfriend." Nico's voice reminds me I'm not alone in this bar, and simultaneously makes me want to smash my

fist through a wall. I want to swallow battery acid.

Valor's body is being held by a douche nozzle who is wearing a pink suit. Fucking pink. That color that men try to say is salmon, but really it's fucking pink. I bet his name is Anston or something that sounds like it came out of a Hallmark movie. His manicured hands are resting on Valor's face while he presses a soft kiss on her lips. The gloss from her lipstick transfers to his mouth, and she wipes it off, laughing with him.

She's mine. That's my girl he's touching in his goddamn flamingo suit. I want to physically jump through the TV and rip his face off. I decide that's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm thinking irrationally right now but I don't fucking care.

I can make this right. I'll leave right now and go to her. I'll tell her father everything. I'll scream it to the fucking world until I'm blue. I know that if I can get to her right now we will be okay. I can fix it all. It's Vallie, my Vallie. She's loved me her entire life. I'd told myself this same thing so many times over the years, but this was the first time I felt like I had to or I'd lose my fucking mind.

With those thoughts running through my mind, I press my hands on the table and scoot the chair out from its place. I go to stand up when a large hand grips my wrist.

"Don't." Kai warns, "Don't Bishop. Look at that screen." I fuse my eyebrows together. I have been looking at the fucking TV that's why I'm so mad. He should know that. He of all people should know that. "Look," he says again motioning his head toward the TV, his eyes holding so much emotion. It's the first time I recognized a feeling in Kai's eyes.

It was empathy.

I shift, glancing at the screen to see my girl glide across the stage. Her smile lights up the stage as she walks toward the podium. She is addicting to watch and impossible to ignore. From the inside out, she glows of happiness surrounding her.

She laughs as she gives her speech and thanks her dad for everything he's ever done for her. They give her a jersey, and she makes her way off the stage straight for her dad. He catches her in his arms, spinning her around with glee. I can feel the joy. Two peas in a pod, those two. There are unshed tears resting in JR's eyes.

Once she lets go of him, she falls into the arms of another man. Pink suit cradles her head as he hugs her to his chest, a smile on his sharp face.

He looks at her like she's gold, like treasure he earned. She isn't just a prize you can claim. She isn't some monetary thing you can show to the world. She deserves to be looked at like she is...

Like she's fucking magic because she is. Valor is the softness of a hug, the first day of spring, the sound of laughter, she's love. What she is isn't tangible. You can't contain all she encompasses.

Valor is my kind of magic.

My eyes burn, and I grind my teeth together. I want to leave this place. I don't want to be here anymore. I shake my head, ready to leave when something catches my eye. Valor turns to face the camera, answering questions for an interview, and that's when I notice it.

The piece of me she always carries with her. I'd never seen her not wear that necklace. The gold chain rests over the green material of her top catching the light, mocking me. Her fingers grip the pendant, and she toys with it. I don't think she even realizes that she does it anymore, that's how long she has had it. Hope builds in my chest, but it soon falls away with Kai's voice.

"She's happy, B. She's happy..."

Naively, I thought that if I couldn't move on, she must have felt the same way. I foolishly believed she would love me for the rest of her life, but that isn't the case. I'd convinced myself she'd never be with anyone else, and that we would both be miserable without each other.

But I was wrong because she was happy, without me. Pink suit held her future, and I held a small area of her past. That necklace proved it.

Right here, in the middle of this bar, on a Friday night, my entire life changed because I realized something that I'd never been able to understand before.

Letting go doesn't mean loving any less.

I had to let her go so she could live. So she could laugh, smile, enjoy her youth. I needed to let her go so that she could be happy because that's all I ever wanted for her. I want her to be happy, even if it's not with me. That's love, isn't it? When someone else's happiness becomes more important than your own.

It's why her mom left her.

It's why my mom left me.

CHAPTER 13



Rookie vs Veteran

VALOR - 22

When I was a kid I dreamed of playing for the city of Chicago. It was all I wanted to do when I grew up. Some little girls wanted to be a princess, others wanted to be a doctor, me? I just wanted to play professional hockey. It's all I ever wanted to do.

I thought that if I worked hard, practiced, sacrificed for my dream, that I would be happy once I achieved it.

What they do not tell you as a child is dreams become messy. They get hazy, bumps get in the way, curves take you in different directions. Life happens. Then when you finally accomplish your dream, you realize just how much more work you have to put in to make that dream enjoyable.

I loved everything about the city I grew up in. I loved how the "L" Train weaved through the roofs of houses, going to Lincoln Zoo as a kid, the endless deep-dish pizza, the culture, the atmosphere, the overlooks of the city. Chicago raised me into the person I am and I was thankful I got to represent them.

But there were parts of me that wanted to leave my corner of the world. Because with all of the beautiful things to love about this city came memories attached to it. Memories of him, and like Riggs said...

“Thinking about him gives him power.”

So how do I tell her that merely looking at the sky makes me think of him? When someone tells a joke I look around to see if he is there to laugh about it. If someone puts ketchup on a hotdog, I think of him. Any time I can't sleep? I selfishly wear his T-shirt to bed. When I miss him? I gripped onto my necklace for dear life.

I wanted away from him, but fate or God had a different plan. They wanted me to stay right here in Chicago. To fight off his memory every day of my life. My mind wants to forget, but my heart? She holds onto him.

“Killer job out there, Sully.” I feel someone slap my back as I tie my Converse. My shoulders are aching, and there are blisters the size of quarters on my feet, but I'll be damned if they know that. I'll just take an ice bath and hope the soreness goes away.

I had a decent practice today, I could have done better. My accuracy was not where I wanted it to be, but I was still getting in the groove with a new team. I also had to deal with my own teammate chirping the fuck out of me. There was a major difference in giving someone a hard time and being a bitch.

“Thanks, D!” I accept the comment graciously. The goalie had been one of the only players who'd said anything positive to me since I got here.

“She does okay for a rookie.”

Another thing I didn't like about playing for Chicago? Jane West. Five-year veteran, left-wing, and total bitch. Being the rookie meant all eyes were on me, and that was not okay with her. I honestly think she would rather die than let me be on the line above her, or God forbid, start.

I'd planned to come into the WNHL with my head down, or at least I tried to. That plan went to shit after I broke my fourth record at Chicago U. Sports networks from all over were on me like white on rice. My face was across ESPN. I was talked about on podcasts. Everything I did was under surveillance when it came to hockey.

I didn't want people to think I had let the press get to me, or that I conceded. I wanted them to know me for the player I was on the ice, not the image the media painted. I never referred to myself as the daughter of a legend or a hockey prodigy. That was stupid.

I was just a girl who loved hockey and wanted to change the game for women across the globe. I was just Valor.

But apparently my success had pissed off my new teammate. What a great way to start the season. Go me!

Everything about this place felt different. For the first time in my hockey career, I wasn't confident in myself. I'd always prided myself on being a leader, but here? I was at the bottom of the food chain. I had to grovel to get respect from these women.

I think a big part was the fact I missed Riggs playing with me. I'd find myself looking around the ice for her at practice only to realize she wasn't here. Aurelia had hung the skates up after a knee injury in our junior year of college. I was probably more upset than she was.

But that was Riggs, always afraid to show too much emotion. After we graduated, we moved in together. I think we are going to be living together in our eighties. We both are going to have three cats by then, and we are probably going to be arguing about who stole the last bit of oatmeal. But I didn't want to be old and gray with anyone else.

Riggs had landed a public relations job with Chicago Golden Media. She was an agent with the company, and she represented some of Chicago's biggest athletes. Including me. Much to her disappointment, I hated media attention. Even though she begged for me to do a photoshoot with a magazine, I still denied. To be honest she probably hated being my agent.

I decide that keeping my mouth shut and not replying to Jane is my best bet. I quickly pack my stuff up into my duffle bag, hoping to avoid the rest of this conversation. If they want to talk shit behind my back after I leave, more power to them.

"Did you hear me, kid?" she says stepping in front of me. I don't think I've ever wanted to head-butt someone so bad in my life. But I refrain from violence.

For now.

"I hear ya, Jane. I'm just not listening." I'd noticed that Jane didn't like me the day of my first practice when she back-checked me into the boards twice, slipped a slew foot in, and then hit me with a suicide pass that got me laid the fuck out by a defenseman.

I wasn't a teammate to her, I was a threat.

She grips my forearm. "You think you're hot shit, bitch?" She leans closer to me, and I so badly want to tell her she needs a breath mint. "Be

sure to remember that I'm not losing my spot to a rookie, especially one that got here because of her daddy's last name. Okay?" She gives me a sideways smile.

I rip my arm away from her grasp. I need to start breathing and praying to Buddha and do some Namaste shit or I'm going to rip her face off. I clench my fists, digging my fingernails into my palm to keep me from laying hands on this fucking bitch.

At this time I realize I have been friends with Aurelia Riggs for too long.

I take another step closer to her, smirking. "You think I'm scared of you?" I scoff, rolling my tongue. "It's going to take a hell of a lot more than a bitch with a bruised ego to run me off. I'll take your fucking spot and skate circles around you while I do it. Don't threaten me."

I don't wait for a reaction. I just turn on my heels, and head out of the locker room. Once I am out of the view of her, I try taking a deep breath. I run a hand down my face when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out quickly, glancing at it with an aggravated sigh.

Preston: Hey, don't forget we have dinner at my parents at 8, wear that dress I like, the black one. I'll be there to pick you up at 7.

Preston Alexander Huntington the Second.

Yes, he is just as preppy as he sounds.

The son of a Wall Street lawyer and professional stay-at-home wife. He was raised by dirty money and high standing morals. He hadn't even stepped into a hockey rink before, rarely cussed, and used more product in his hair than I did.

I would like to say I had no clue why I liked him, but I knew, I knew before Riggs called me out on it the night I met him.

"Riggs, I don't want to be here," I complain for the hundredth time. I hated parties, she knew that. Riggs thrived for these frat house raves. It was her element, not mine. I didn't even drink that much, but she had been tossing down tequila shots like it was water all night long. How she had not passed out or vomited was a mystery to us all.

It was the summer before my junior year, and I still hated parties.

"I'm going to whoop this guy's ass in beer pong and then we will go, okay?" she says pouting her bottom lip and widening her brown eyes giving me her best puppy dog look. We'd been here for almost three hours, but I knew she was having fun. She had been having a rough few days with her

parents up her ass. She'd slept all day yesterday, and I knew she needed to have some fun.

I roll my eyes, smiling. "Fine, go. Make it quick, run the table on his bitch ass."

I watch as she sways her hips on the way to her side of the beer pong table. The guy she is playing against checks out her ass the entire time. And I shake my head resisting the urge to call him a pig. But if I were to get angry at every guy who checked Riggs out, I'd be pissed at the entire male population.

"Maybe if you'd stop staring at my ass you'd have a chance at winning," she comments to him as she takes another shot of tequila. "Here," She rolls the white ping pong ball his way, "you can shoot first. You'll need all the help you can get."

I lean my back on the wall, holding my solo cup of water, watching her work her magic. Riggs played men like puppets. She could pull one string and they'd fall to pieces in front of her. It was a superpower all women wish they had. I looked at her short skirt and simple camisole that makes her look like a model about the walk down the fucking runway.

My eyes fall onto my own outfit. My simple skinny jeans and cropped hoodie don't seem as cute as it did when I left the dorm. My kinky hair is in messy curls down my back, and I'm tempted to pull it up. I move my eyes around the party, glancing at couples dry humping and frat boys chugging beer. Then my view of people watching is blocked by someone.

"I need you to pretend to be my girlfriend, really quick."

Is this guy on something? I lift my gaze to his face, noticing that he is only a few inches taller than me. My first thought is this guy looks like he has money. If I didn't get that from the blazer he is sporting at a frat party, I'd pick it up from his perfectly sculpted brown hair that has a deep side part. There was not a single hair out of place.

"I'm sorry, what?"

He gives me a smile that looks like it cost years of braces to make that straight. He has a very aristocratic face. It's a timeless handsome that reminds me a lot of Chuck Bass from Gossip Girl. I bet he plays something like polo or cricket. His frame is lanky, the kind of abs you don't have to work for, just naturally blessed with an athletic body. Hollow eyes the color of obsidian framed with dark eyelashes that look longer than mine. I'm

almost so distracted by how perfect his eyebrows are that I forget the conversation at hand.

“My ex is a stage seven clinger, and I need you to just act like my girlfriend for a few seconds.” He bites his bottom lip, and looks at me as he waits for an answer.

I look around for someone who might be his ex-girlfriend hoping that if I agree with this it won't land me in a fight with a chick who could kick my ass. I sigh, moving my eyes back to him.

“Okay? What do you need me to do? Hold your hand or some—”

Lips cut me off, and not with words. His long fingers tilt my chin up to meet his mouth in a surprising kiss. I hadn't been kissed since Bishop. I almost forgot how to do it and what it felt like. This guy tastes like mint gum, and some type of whiskey. It's a nice combination.

I shut my eyes, moving my lips against his, allowing his other hand to pull me closer by my hips. My hands rest on his chest, as he moves his mouth on mine in a slow kiss. I don't feel fireworks, and nothing explodes in my body, but it's nice. I feel light on my feet. I've missed the feeling of having interactions with the opposite sex.

I pull my mouth off him, pushing him back. “I think she got the hint,” I mumble breathlessly.

A smirk pulls on his features. “I'm going to be honest with you, shortcake.” He moves his finger towards my face, and I breathe in shakily terrified of what he is about to do. A blush creeps its way onto my face as he grabs a stray curl that fell in front of my face. Every single piece of me thinks he is going to tug the piece and unravel all the memories of B. My heart is pounding in my ears.

But slowly he tucks it behind my ear. I let out a relieved breath.

“I have quite a few ex-girlfriends here, but none of them are clingy. I really just needed an excuse to kiss you.”

My eyes widen and I push him back a little farther. “What the hell? Here I am trying to be a good person and you're just trying to cop a feel?”

There is humor dancing in his eyes, and a smile on my face. I will admit, it was smooth.

“Preston Huntington, and besides the obvious answer of my future girlfriend, what's your name?”

He sounds like he is running for president with that name. I bet he's like Preston the Third or some shit. I'm about to answer when I hear Riggs. Like

the guard dog she is, her eyes are glued to Preston, eyeing him carefully.

“You okay?” she asks, but her eyes never leave him. I don’t know what I did to ever deserve someone like her, but every day I’m thankful. I sling my arm over her shoulder.

“Yeah I’m good. Let’s get out of here. I’m starved.” She nods in agreement, leading us toward the exit of the loud fraternity. My stomach is growling for greasy takeout.

“Hey, wait! You never told me your name!” I hear from behind me. I turn my head slightly, looking at Preston Huntington, and I smile. He’d managed to get a laugh, a kiss, and a smile out of me all in one night which was more than any other guy had gotten in the past few years.

“You look like a smart guy, figure it out.” I shoot him a wink, and see him smirk. He raises his red solo cup up to me, nodding his head in a salute of sorts. I turn back and make my way out of the house with my arms linked with Riggs’.

The cold air is refreshing. The night sky is lit up with stars and I can’t think of a better night to walk home. We begin our journey down the sidewalk, passing other drunk college students, one of which is passed out in a bush.

Riggs takes off skipping down the sidewalk, spinning in circles. “I feel like I’m top of the fucking world, Sully!” I follow, joining hands with her.

We laughed and spun in circles over and over again. She had these moments where she wasn’t always made of stone, she let the light in, and it was beautiful. The times when she didn’t let her parents faze her and she was just Aurelia.

Once we finish spinning, we continue our walk. She lies her head on my shoulder as we walk arm and arm.

“You don’t actually like him, right?” I turn my body to look at her as we continue our walk. I think about the question for a moment. I didn’t NOT like him. He isn’t what anyone would expect me to like, but there is something about him that had me interested.

“I don’t know.” I shrug my shoulders. “There is something about him I find kind of charming.”

She tosses her head back with laughter. It’s one of those extremely loud laughs that cause people to look at us like we are crazy or extremely intoxicated. She wipes under her eyes, removing the fake tears.

“Valor, he was wearing the same shoes my grandfather wore when they buried him!”

I shove her shoulder, laughing with her. “Shut up!” I warn. “They are not that bad.” A smile warms my face, thinking of how bad they actually were. They did look like the kind of shoes grandfathers wear to go golfing in.

“Honestly, I’m not surprised you like him. What surprises me is YOU don’t know why you like him.”

I raise a questioning eyebrow, tilting my head to the left, and she just rolls her eyes at me.

“Don’t look at me like that. You and I both know the reason you like him is because he’s the exact opposite of Bishop.”

At the sound of B’s name, I stop walking. I hated hearing his name. Every time it came on the sports channel, or someone talked about how great he was, I hated it. It made me sick to my stomach. It made me think of his hands on me, his laugh, his eyes. Fuck, I hated it.

“What?” I say softly. The problem with having a bad bitch as a best friend? It also meant you got the God’s honest truth every time she opened her mouth.

Riggs stops walking, she sighs, “I’m not blind. I see you, Sully. If a guy has blond hair? Forget it. Blue eyes? No chance in hell. You avoid the guy’s hockey team like the fucking plague. You like him because he’s the first guy who doesn’t share one single quality with Bishop Maverick.”

Her words are like getting your mouth washed out with soap. Disgusting, but sometimes necessary. I bite my bottom lip, looking at my shoes. My eyes burn with tears.

If Bishop was the sun, Preston was the moon.

Mysterious, dark, unknown, and illuminating.

Riggs’ hands cup my cheeks, making me look at her. “Hey, look at me.” My eyes meet her brown ones. “I’m just saying you deserve someone better than just an opposite. You deserve someone who makes you happy, Val.”

I nod, taking a deep breath, forcing myself not to cry.

“Come on, let’s buy you some food. You’re less emotional after you eat.”

Preston had tracked me down on campus and wouldn’t leave me alone until I agreed to go on a date with him. He’d taken me on his family’s yacht. I think he wanted to simultaneously show his family’s wealth while also

trying to be cute because he had set up a picnic on the upper deck for us. The first time we had sex, I didn't orgasm, which sucked. He wasn't terrible in bed. He knew what to do with his fingers, and his tongue wasn't bad.

I honestly think it was just me. I wouldn't let my mind completely blank out and enjoy the moment. I think I was scared I was going to accidentally think about Bishop in the middle of sex with Preston. It was shitty, but it was true.

When I was with him I felt safe. My heart felt safe from harm. I couldn't risk getting into a relationship with someone who would break me again. I was still under construction from the last heartbreak. One day I'd be able to trust him with my entire heart, but just not today.

It felt like everything was just piling on top of me right now. My feet were aching, my calves were sore. I was dealing with a hormonal egotistical cunt of a teammate. Preston had been mentioning marriage. Now I had to spend an hour straightening my hair to sit and eat cold fucking soup while I listen to Preston's mother talk about how pretty I would be if I wore a little makeup.

Tears of frustration build up in my eyes, and I slam my fist straight into the first wall I see. Maybe if I had a female role model I'd know how to handle these situations better, but I was raised by a gaggle of hockey players who dealt with all their problems by punching shit.

This theory, I have learned, is flawed. It only makes you angrier because now my hand hurts.

"Fuck," I hiss holding my wrist to my chest. My knuckles are dark red and throbbing. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." All the built-up emotions feel like they need to explode out of me. It was all becoming too much.

"What'd the wall ever do to you, Vallie?"

I am more positive than ever that the universe hates me. This has to be a nightmare that I'll soon wake up from, because I can't catch a fucking break anymore.

Obviously I fucking knew I'd run into him eventually. It was inevitable. We played for the same hockey organization. Our practice facility was in the same place. We played games in the same arena, and we traveled together for away games. I knew this was going to happen. I just wish it weren't when I was already twenty seconds from a mental fucking breakdown.

Vallie.

I hadn't heard that nickname in four long-ass years. It felt like dusting off an old record that hadn't been played in years, and finally hearing its song again. It was painful at first, but once it settled in, it reminded you of why you liked vinyl music in the first place.

It made you want to dance.

Bishop Maverick aged like fine wine. I hated him for it. I'd hoped that once he turned thirty he'd start going bald, gain a few pounds, and start to get wrinkles. But no. He still looks like a GQ model fresh from a magazine cover.

That golden blond hair was shining as always, tan skin, and it seemed his body had gotten more defined over the years. It had been almost exactly four years now since I last saw him. Four years. For us it seemed like a lifetime. We had gone from seeing each other almost every day of our lives and then it all ended. No phone calls, no text messages. Looking at him reminded me that we were strangers now, and I think that hurt the most.

"I thought I heard it talking shit about me earlier." I shrug trying to lighten the heaviness between us. However, there is an elephant in the room. An awkwardness between us that had never been there before. We were in uncharted territory with each other.

I try reminding myself and my ignorant heart that he hurt us. I try remembering the pain I felt the day I left his place. The feeling of dread every time his name popped up on my phone, and how hard it was to decline the call. The endless tears I cried, the hurt I felt. Except now as I look at him, all I feel is longing.

I missed him.

"Listen, Valor, I—"

I hold my hand up to him gently, shaking my head with a soft smile. I was not ready for the conversation he was about to start. I'd forgiven him a long time ago. The hardest part was moving on without understanding why. Why I wasn't the person he wanted to go public with. The not knowing killed me.

"You don't have to say anything. We don't have to talk about it, it was forever ago anyway. It's fine. We are cool." I nod my head more than I should, trying to enforce the fact that I'm okay.

He runs his hand through his hair, before shoving his hands into his pockets. A sigh escapes his body. Those blue eyes meet mine. I feel my soul

wave to his in a formal greeting. I know he wants to say more but I'm not in the right headspace to have that conversation with him yet.

He motions to my hand, raising an eyebrow, when he notices how swollen it is. "You okay?"

My eyes soften at his statement, and I can't help but smile even though I want to cry. I'm not okay. My life is fucking stressful. I don't want to do anything but cuddle up on the couch and eat Chinese food. I want my best friend back. I want to tell him everything. I want to find comfort in his arms. I want him to make me tea, because he's the only one who makes it right.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from getting emotional.

If I had one wish in this life, just one? I'd take it all back. I'd erase the memories of our first kiss. All of the sex, the confessions, all of it. I'd take it all back if I could have him as my friend again. I'd do it in a heartbeat. I needed him right now, but I couldn't have him because the truth was... I didn't know who Bishop was anymore.

We were strangers.

"I'm fine, B."

"So you're lying now?" Obviously I wasn't a stranger to him. He always could read me like a book.

I roll my eyes, fighting a smile, "I'm serious, everything is fine." I pause, hiking my bag higher on my shoulder, and moving towards him. "I don't want things to be awkward. We are going to be seeing each other a lot now. So can we go back to being friends?" I say sticking my hand out to him for him to shake in an agreement.

I know we will never be the kind of friends we used to be, but I don't need to act like a Russian spy every time I come to practice in order to avoid the awkward tension between us.

He steps closer to me, and now he is in my space. I swallow loudly. I can smell his cologne and it takes me all the way back to being eighteen years old, wrapped in his sheets. He takes his hand out of his pocket, grabbing mine. The warmth of his hand encases mine, and I feel it all the way in my toes.

There is something resting between our palms, and my eyes raise in confusion. He doesn't say anything though, he just moves his hand from mine, leaving the item with me. I feel his body lean closer to me, his head resting right next to my ear.

I look down in my palm, letting a small gasp of surprise leave me as I glance at the small box.

“Lemonheads,” I mutter softly.

I don’t move my body, but I can feel the smirk on his features as his fingers grip one of my loose curls, tugging it softly.

“We’ve never been just friends, Vallie. I don’t plan to start now.”

CHAPTER 14



Away Games, Home Feelings

BISHOP – 30

I follow the skaters on the ice, particularly the jersey-wearing thirty-three. She was on the first line tonight. It's her moment to prove she belonged in the hockey league. Tonight she played with a fire I hadn't seen in a long time.

Valor already had a goal and an assist. I had selflessly made sure to record her game on the DVR in my hotel room. After our game, I headed straight for the room and turned the TV on. ESPN had notified me they won halfway through watching the game, but I still wanted to finish it, just to watch how she played.

"Bishop, are you even listening to me?"

Shit.

"Yes, I'm listening. I am getting plenty of sleep, Anna. Don't worry."

The last thing I remember her saying was something about me not getting sleep, and I prayed she hadn't said anything more.

"You better not be lying to me, Bishop Andrew." I can see her standing in the kitchen with her hands on her hips. I'm thirty years old and she treats me like I am thirteen again. You'd think I was irresponsible or something.

"I'm not lying. I got a full seven hours last night, so you can calm down now. I'm not a little kid anymore."

She made sure that she called me at least every other day if I didn't answer. I had forty text messages from Eric telling me to answer the phone before Anna drove him up the wall.

"You're always going to be my sweet rebel, the one who showed up at my front door with greasy hair and a hateful attitude." She reflects on those times fondly, when I'd truly prefer not to talk about them.

"Ask him if he is working on his conditioning, he looked slow tonight!" I hear Eric yell from somewhere in the house. I roll my eyes. These two are doing a fantastic job at making me feel like I am a child.

Valor skates down the ice with a breakaway. She dekes two defenders and shoots the puck into the top shelf of the net. Chicago Wings win three to one. I smile, watching her celebrate with her new team. My girl, all grown up and showing the world what she's made of.

I wonder if the flamingo suit is there or if he even watches her. He doesn't look like the kind of guy who watches hockey, let alone plays it. I have to take a deep breath at the thought of him. I swear he looks like the guys who wear boat shoes and play lacrosse. I bet he is in a fraternity, and his best friend's name is Chad. I fucking know it.

"Tell him the TV is slow, not me. I'll make sure to buy him a new one."

"Bishop, no. No more gifts. Buying the girls cars? It was plenty. We don't need you to shower us with your money for us to know you love us, my rebel. Just answer your phone and visit during the summer. That's all we need." Her soothing voice is a balm to my soul; it's as if she always knows what to say.

"You all deserve it. I owe everything to you guys."

"Enough of this, you're going to make me cry! Now tell me, have you made up with that girl yet?"

I sigh, sinking into the leather hotel chair, taking a drink of the scotch in my glass. I think I might just tell the guys I'm not going out tonight. I loosen the button on my dress shirt.

“No, but,” I tell her with a breath, “I saw her the other day.”

“And? Did you apologize? Grovel? Women love a man who grovels.”

I chuckle. “She wouldn’t let me get to that point. She’s stubborn.”

“Smart girl.”

Anna had picked and picked until I told her the basics of my relationship with Valor. I never mentioned her name, just that I had fucked up. Anna could read me like a book. It didn’t take long for her to realize something was up with me after everything with Valor blew up.

You never know how much losing someone can change you until they are gone. I should know that better than anyone by now. What’s worse is I’m the reason she left, just me. I could have avoided all of this if I would have just had the balls to admit what she means to me.

If I could have let go of my past long enough to see that I had a shot at a future with her. I couldn’t even look JR in the face after it. Being in that house, the house where she lived and thrived was a fucked up kind of torture.

“That she is. I think you would have loved her.”

That’s the truth. Anna and Valor have so much in common it’s almost hard to explain. They both had red hair, but it was more than that. They both carried this light with them that they shined on the ones they loved.

“I can’t wait to meet her.”

I bite my bottom lip, taking another drink. “I don’t think you will be meeting her. She has a boyfriend now.”

Douche nozzle. That’s what she has.

“Okay? I know you, Bishop Maverick, when you want something there isn’t a single thing in this world that will stop you from getting it. I have faith in you, sweet boy. You’ll get the girl.”

I wish.

I know that I want the girl, but getting her is something else entirely. Seeing her the other day nearly killed me. All that pent-up frustration she was holding in, it was all over her face. Valor was tired. I wasn’t sure what it was that was stressing her out so much, but the weight of it was wearing her out.

I would’ve pushed the subject, if it was four years ago, and we were different people. Now, there was too much history there. I couldn’t just act like the friend she needed anymore.

A knock at the door jars me from my thoughts. I can hear the laughter of my teammates outside.

“I’ve got to go, Anna, send my love to everyone.”

“Be safe, my rebel. We love you dearly.”

I click the end button, standing up and walking towards the door. I look in the mirror because I’m human. Plus, even though I haven’t had sex in four years, I have stopped waiting around for Valor. She was happy, so the least I could do was get laid. I just, I hadn’t found anyone who’d even piqued my interest since she left. Fixing the black on black suit I’m sporting, I run a hand through my messy blond hair, staring into the mirror and seeing someone I don’t recognize anymore.

I sound like a pathetic whining bitch, but I look and feel hollow. It just seems to be getting worse.

I pull the door open. Nico and Kai along with some of the other guys are waiting for me.

“Took you long enough, prima-donna. Were you brushing your hair, Goldilocks?”

I shove Nico roughly. “Go before I kick your ass.”

They all laugh, and Nico starts walking. “I’m going, I’m going. Yeesh. Who pissed in your mouth?”

With a shake of my head, I tuck my room key into the inside of my coat pocket. I slap Kai on the back, tossing my head towards the rest of the guys who have already started walking towards the elevator. We’d all decided that after tonight’s loss we wanted to go drink.

Nico was always a positive Polly, even if we lost and Kai was the complete opposite. He took losing the hardest. I think he had this idea in his head that he was carrying the team because he was a goalie. He forgets it’s a team sport, and most of the time he’s way too hard on himself.

We were on a wave of away games. We were in California today. We’d leave tomorrow for Arizona, play there, and then to Texas. After those two games, we would go back home to Chicago. The best part of away games was the fact the girls’ team had to travel with us. We took separate planes, but we stayed at the same hotel. That meant I’d gotten a glimpse of Valor’s plane hair when we got here a few days ago.

Once again, she just looked tired. I was worried about her, but I couldn’t exactly walk up to her, and be like, “Hey! Sorry for breaking your heart.

I'm a pussy whose mom and dad scarred him, but can you tell me if you're okay?"

She'd probably slap me. Actually I know she'd slap me.

The elevator dings when we reach the top floor. When the doors open the thick California air smacks me in the face. I followed the boys as they walk to the hostess. We had a space reserved. There was a bar on the roof of our hotel. We wanted to avoid having to deal with the press, due to our loss. The sounds of music fill the night air. There is a large circular wooden bar right in the center of the roof that many people are standing around. String lights illuminate the roof and the people on it. Chairs and tables are scattered strategically around the area, couples and friends fill the spots.

A waitress leads us to a private seating area where we all sit down. I order a scotch as per usual, and Nico orders a tequila shot. This means Kai will be ordering water so someone can watch over Nico tonight, we do not need him on the front page of the news.

"If you throw up tonight I'm not babysitting you," Kai states.

"Yes, Dad," Nico grumbles.

The rest of the guys laugh. We all fall into random conversations. The usual stuff, women, hockey, life. One of the guys just had a baby, so he's showing pictures to everyone. He'd just gotten married about two years ago and was still in the smitten stage.

Conversations like this always make me think of Valor. If things went differently all those years ago, we'd still be together. My stupid ass would have gotten the shit beat out of me by her dad, but he eventually would have approved, I think. I would have been there at her college graduation, at her draft, and I probably would have proposed that night.

My life wouldn't feel so empty. The apartment wouldn't feel like a kaleidoscope of memories of her, because we would have made new ones in them. I'd try to convince her to move in, and after asking many times, and using my tongue to persuade her she would have said yes. I wouldn't have been going on a four-year dry spell because every night I'd be buried inside of her one way or another. Her mouth, her pussy, and if she was feeling frisky maybe her ass. Then we'd fall asleep and I'd wake up with her there.

Our story was shitty and I hated it.

I was working on my third glass of scotch when I saw her. I wish my fucking body would stop reacting to her like this. Every time I see her it's like seeing a different side of her, a different piece I didn't notice before. It

knocks the damn breath out of me every time. My arms got goosebumps, and I instantly clench my fists. My chest tightens. I look at her like if the world came crashing down around us right now, I wouldn't blink.

Don't even get me started on what she does to my dick.

She was leaning on the ledge of the roof looking out at the night sky. Curls blowing with the wind. Sometimes when I'd look at her when she was in my bed at night, I'd wonder how a person could be so fucking perfect and still not see it. I wonder if she learned to look in the mirror and love what she saw.

Because when I looked in the mirror all I saw was her broken face leaving my apartment.

I stood up, setting down my glass, walk over there. We were friends, right? I could talk to her as a friend. I had talked myself out of it halfway to her and convinced myself again. Then the wind blew, and I caught the smell of lavender.

Everything after that was an afterthought.

I leaned on the ledge next to her.

"Good game tonight."

God, Bishop. You are such a fucking idiot. Good game? Next, you'll be smacking her ass as she skates off the ice. Dumbass.

She looks over at me, not a hint of emotion on her face. "Wish I could say the same to you, you played like shit."

Like she already knew I was there before I walked up, she tries not to smile. I laugh, placing a hand on my heart, and grimace.

"Damn, shots fired at my ego! You know how to break a guy down." I match her stance, trying not to show her that I am mentally breaking the fuck down being this close to her again. I hate fucking feelings.

"Don't worry your ego can take more than a couple of hits before it affects you, Golden boy." Her fingers draw shapes on the ledge, and she chews on her cheek.

Talking to her like this reminds me of when she was younger. Always trying to argue with me about something, constantly giving me shit, never afraid to say how she was feeling.

I roll my eyes, "Well hotshot, you had two goals and an assist. Out there living up to your name." The comment was supposed to be a compliment. I expected her to smile and say thanks, not blow the fuck up on me.

“Ya know...” She turns to face me completely, slitting her eyes. “I’m more than my goddamn fucking name.” The sneer on her face makes me frown. My eyebrows come together in confusion. She’d always loved being told she had a legacy she lived up to. Valor had never been ashamed of her father's last name if anything she was honored to carry it.

“Hey,” I start, pushing my hands into my dress pants pockets, “I know that V. You don’t have to bite my fucking head off. I of all people know that. I’ve seen the work you put in. It kind of ticks me off that you think I’m someone who believes you got to the league because of your last name. I thought you knew me better than that.”

I knew the press, and the interviews could be a lot, it’s overwhelming at first. I had to deal with their pressing questions about my mother and my father when I first started. Now everyone knows not to ask that shit anymore. Valor’s last name had gone from something she was proud off to something she was working against.

“That’s the thing, Bishop,” she pauses, looking away from me, “I don’t know you anymore and you don’t know jack shit about me. How about we stop acting like we are something we aren’t, we are strangers now. That’s it.”

I step closer to her, gripping her chin between my thumb and forefinger. I jerk her face to look at me, those emerald eyes flash with emotion, and for just a second I think she wants me to kiss her, but it’s gone as quickly as it came. Those eyes never lie to me.

“A lot of shit may have gone down between us, but I never,” I stare into her eyes, my jaw ticking, “Not one fucking time, did I ever, doubt who you were as a hockey player.” A smirk spreads on my lips as she tries to look away from me, but I just hold her there. “Say what you want, but I know you. I always have, always will. You can’t hide from me, and it pisses you off, doesn’t it? A few years and a douche boyfriend aren’t going to change what I know about you.”

I didn’t mean for the boyfriend comment to slip out. But my emotions were turned up too high. I never knew what I was going to say to her, she evoked things in me I didn’t even know existed. Fire burns in her eyes, and she smirks.

Little fucking shit.

“You know I have a boyfriend? Have you been keeping tabs on me? Stalk much? He isn’t a douche. I don’t recall you meeting him, so how do

you know how he acts? That's right...you think you know fucking everything." She jerks her face from my grasp, brushing her hair behind her ear.

Since I'm already busted for knowing about him, I might as well spill all the fucking beans.

"He wore a fucking pink suit to your draft. Pink, Valor. How much more of a douche can he be? I'm betting his nails are better taken care of than yours. Or let me guess, you all have matching mani-pedis?"

I was being a dick, but I didn't fucking care. How the hell did JR even like this guy? I know he thinks he is a pussy too, hockey players all think the same way. We are all wired differently than regular athletes.

She rolls her eyes, crossing her arms across her chest. "There is nothing wrong with male grooming. Some guys take pride in how they look. Not everyone wants to roll out of bed with sex hair smelling like pussy. It's called class, maybe you should try it, Maverick."

I know I should be angry, but all she is doing is making my dick hard. Her snarky mouth is simultaneously the most annoying fucking thing on the earth but also my favorite thing about her. I laugh out loud, a sarcastic smile on my face.

"You used to be the reason my hair was so fucking messy, you nearly pulled it out. If I recall correctly, you had no problem with my smell when my face was buried between those thighs of yours." I run my eyes up and down her body, licking my bottom lip.

Lust flashes on her face and the color of fresh roses tint her cheeks.

Checkmate, Vallie baby.

"Stop staring at me like that! Jesus, you are infuriating!"

She brushes her hair over her shoulder, chewing on the inside of her cheek. The wind blows, brushing a piece of hair in front of her face. I run my tongue across the front of my teeth, reaching forward and tugging on the lonesome curl.

"I can't not stare at you, Valor. Even when I'm not looking at you, I still see you. I see you, just like you saw me in that car four years ago. We don't have to look at each other to see."

She steps back like I tried to stab her. "I'm leaving now," she mumbles. Valor turns and starts to walk towards the exit, fleeing from me as quickly as possible. I can't let her leave again without apologizing. It was physically killing me.

“Wait, Valor, wait!” I call out walking quickly to catch up and grabbing her wrist. I turn her to face me, and I notice the redness in her cheeks. Her eyes are softer, and they look glassy. I swear if she cries I’ll break down in front of all these people.

“I need to say something, just let me say this and I’ll leave you alone.”

I watch as she bites her lip, pulls her arm from my grasp, and looks at me with so much sadness in those green eyes I love that it breaks me even more. The people around us walk past us, like my world isn’t being tilted on an axis, like we aren’t two souls clashing together for what feels like the hundredth time.

“No, fuck you. Whatever you’re about to say isn’t to make me feel better, it’ll just make me feel worse. You only want to make yourself feel better for being a shitty boyfriend or whatever the fuck it was. So don’t sit there and act like whatever you’re about to say is for me, it’s for your guilty fucking conscious.”

One tear falls from her eye, and she wipes it away. Once again she starts to walk away from me. Fuck this shit. Her back is to me as my voice carries across to her.

“It was never about telling people about us! It had nothing to do with you, Valor!” I yell this out, in front of all these random people in California. People who were enjoying their night, and are now pulled into a real-life Days of Our Lives episode.

But I didn’t care.

I was tired of hiding how I felt about her, not from everyone else, but from myself.

She freezes, turning around to look at me as do all the rest of these people. I walk towards her, ignoring the stares.

“Christ, Bishop, keep it down, will you? People are going to sell this shit to the press for a slice of pizza. I don’t want to be on the front page of the Chicago news with you.” She tries her best to hide her face from the surrounding audience, but it doesn’t faze me.

“I remember a time when that was all you wanted.” Saying that out loud takes a piece of my soul I won’t ever get back.

As she looks around nervously, she chews her cheek. “Yeah well, shit changes.”

I smile, tilting my head to the side. “Not you. You’re a creature of habit, Valor Sullivan.”

My eyes look to her neck, seeing the golden chain hiding beneath her hoodie. I reach forward, pulling it out, and holding the pendant. My thumb swipes over the engraving; the familiar metal feels good underneath my fingers.

“You still use the same shampoo.” I know because I can smell it and it reminds me of when she went to bed with wet hair. My voice is soft, almost a whisper. All the fight in me is gone.

“You have the same warm-up playlist as you did when you were twelve.”

I know because I’ve listened to it over, and over, and over again. I laugh softly, letting go of the necklace.

“I bet you flamingo suit still hasn’t noticed that you count the cracks in the sidewalk on the way home. But let me guess, pretty boy doesn’t walk anywhere, he has a personal driver who lubes his ass for—”

She places her hand over my mouth.

“Please, just...” She shakes her head, and I can tell she is trying not to cry. “Shut the fuck up and say what you have to say. I want to get this over with.”

I nod, removing her hand from my face, letting it fall and she wraps her arms around herself for comfort. I take a deep breath trying to figure out a way to start this, and just settle with what I think feels right.

“I didn’t tell anyone, because you scared the fuck out of me.”

It’s the truth, but I see she doesn’t believe me. She scoffs.

“I didn’t know you scared so easily.”

I run my hand through my hair, then down my face,

“Valor, I saw my father become a zombie after my mom died. That’s what love did to him, to me. Love has never equaled happy endings for me. I never wanted anyone to have that kind of control over my heart. Then you, you grew up, Valor, and you tasted like lemons and your laugh sounded like a song I once heard and had spent forever trying to remember...” I stop talking, knowing I’ll talk for hours if I don’t stop there. I look at the ground, then back up.

“I was afraid of the person I’d become if I allowed myself to love you, and then you left. You left and I realized that I was already in—”

“Stop, please. Please, B. Just stop. Don’t finish that sentence.” Her voice is cracked and wispy. I want to scoop her up and hold her. But that

isn't my job anymore, it's douche nozzle's. He is the comfort she seeks, not me.

I nod, clearing my throat, looking around to see that most of the people have gone back to their own conversations. Drama wasn't a novelty in California.

I open my mouth to end this on a good note, but she beats me to it.

"I waited. I waited for years for you to come after me. To chase me, to tell me the exact words you were about to say. I waited for you, Bishop. And now, I, I just..." She stops, taking a deep breath and wiping the tears from her eyes.

"I got tired of waiting, B. Now? Those words just are not enough anymore."

CHAPTER 15



VALOR - 22

If I had a mother, I wonder what advice she would give me right now. Would she approve of Preston? Or would she have preferred Bishop? I needed someone to tell me that walking away from him the other night on that roof was the right thing to do.

No, stop. Stop, Valor. You know it was the right thing to do.

Okay, then why did it hurt so fucking bad?

My eyes cut to Preston, who is sitting beside me in the backseat of my dad's car like we are teenagers. He had offered to provide a car and driver for the night, but my dad laughed and told him, "I'm a grown man. I'll drive my own car."

If I didn't know my dad didn't like Preston before, I know now. Preston's freshly pressed dark purple suit sits on his body, including a color-coordinated tie and pocket square. His hair is gelled back out of his face, his perfect jawline on display. There isn't a single thing about him out of place.

Everything about the Huntington family was pristine. I seriously think his father could be a serial killer and no one would know. I was a circus

clown compared to them. They were always nice to me, but I knew as soon as I left that house they talked about how I was just a ‘phase’ for him. Soon he’d fall for a pretty brunette, looking to be a trophy wife and own one of those poodle dogs rich people have.

Maybe they were right.

“What’s running through that pretty head, kiddo?” I jump, turning my head to see my dad staring at me through the rearview mirror.

I give him a smile, waving it off. “I’m fine, Pops. This dress is just annoying.” I look down at the silky baby blue material. The dress was a thin spaghetti strap that fell right above my knee. Riggs had thrown it at me, claiming she found it in her closet, but it still had the tag on it and it was in my size. I hated it when she spent money on me. The dress probably cost more than the red Louis Vuitton’s she bought for my eighteenth birthday.

“You look beautiful, though. I can’t help but wonder how you’d look with your hair straight though. Those crazy curls are distracting from your beauty!” Preston’s voice comes as no surprise. It’s rare he doesn’t have an opinion on a topic.

I give him a smile at the compliment. I tug at one of my kinky curls, agreeing with him. They can be a little wild sometimes. I bet if it was straight this dress might not look as crazy on me. I’ll try it next time, I guess.

“I think her curls are perfect with that dress. She hates straightening her hair anyway.”

I look back at my dad. He is glaring at Preston through the rearview mirror making me want to smack the back of his head for staring. I am surrounded by the most protective people on the planet.

“Oh, I meant no offense, love. Just an option,” he states quickly, his hand lays on my bare knee, rubbing soothing circles with his thumb. My dad just grunts in response. I lean back into the seat staring out of the window, thinking about how different my life is now.

I went from being a kid who just wanted Lemonheads and to be on the ice, to a woman in the WNHL with little girls looking up to her. I have a boyfriend whose family had more than God, a healthy father, and the best friend I could ever ask for. I had a life people only dream of and yet, it still felt empty.

Missing him was the hardest part. I missed him all the time. His voice, his company, his hugs, all of it. It would have been easy to fall into

Bishop's arms the other night, to let him tell me he loved me, and we might have ended with a happy ever after.

But I owed it to myself to demand better. I wasn't a girl he could want behind closed doors, and then when she moved on, he wanted her. I wouldn't be that girl. I deserved better.

I owed it to Preston to be faithful to him. Falling back into Bishop looked a lot like jumping headfirst into a pitch-black hole. Would I fly? Would I die? Is there a bottom? Does it go on forever? There were too many what ifs to risk my heart with the person who broke it in the first place.

Preston leans closer to me, whispering in my ear, "Have you given any more thought about what I asked you the other day?"

I bite the inside of the cheek, holding back my temper. He waited until I was around my dad to ask this again, probably thinking I'd say yes to avoid an argument in front of him. That's the lawyer in Preston coming out, always thinking with a second agenda.

I look over at him. "I'm not moving in with you yet."

Preston had begged me to move in with him after college. He had just gotten a new luxury apartment from his dad in South Loop. The view of the skyline was beautiful. Sometimes when I would stay over, and he fell asleep, I'd walk to the window and just overlook the city. I loved the apartment, but I didn't want to live with him.

Plus, Riggs and I had already had a great Brownstown apartment in East Lakeview that was five minutes away from Riggs' work, seventeen minutes from the arena, and twelve from Preston's apartment. It was perfect. Plus, I loved living with Aurelia. It was a sleepover every night of the week.

"You can't live with your friend forever, Valor. Plus you are wasting money paying rent there when you stay at my place anyway." His brown eyes plead with me to rethink this, but my mind is already made up. I'm not ready. Plus if I am anywhere all the time it's the arena. I'm there more than anywhere else.

I lean forward, pecking his lips. "Not happening."

For one second I see anger flash behind those obsidian gems, but he covers it up with a smile. I'm not in a rush. We just graduated from college. There isn't any need to rush things. He was just starting law school, and I hadn't even made it through my first year in the league.

We had time.

“I’ll tame that wild side one of these days, Valor Lila,” he says sweetly, kissing my forehead. I just shake my head laughing it off.

“Looks like we are here,” my dad announces, and I nod. Once we pull into our appropriate parking spot, we all get out of the car and head towards the entrance of the event. It’s being hosted at the arena, like most of these things.

Today we are hosting a charity event for children with chronic illness. This is one of my favorite parts of being an athlete. We get to have a hand in making these young children happy. There is no greater feeling than seeing a kid light up when they see you. You are their hero, and it makes all the lost games, the hard practices, and injuries worth it.

I make my way through the event, greeting coaches, players, and members of the organization. I don’t bother introducing Preston. He is fully capable of making himself known in the conversations.

I watch Jane cut her eyes at me as I walk by. I decide avoiding her is the best bet today. I don’t want her to sour my mood at this event. Since I start on the first line and had been moved up the other day, she’s been even more up my ass. They moved her down to the third line wing, and she isn’t happy about it.

I’ve learned to ignore her. The rest of the girls are warming up to me though. I think they just like winning and I’m their best shot at doing that. I am over people asking me questions about the epic legacy I have to live up to. It’s all anyone talks about—my last name. That shit has gotten old.

I was walking away from a little girl with epilepsy when I heard my name.

“Baby Sullivan?”

I turn to see Nico. He opens his arms for a hug. I swear this guy never ages. He still has that boyish face he had when I met him all those years ago. I smile warmly, stepping into his arms and hugging him tightly.

“How is it that you’ve been tearing up the ice for the same organization as me, and this is the first time I’m seeing you in what, three years or something?!”

I pull away from the hug, four years actually. I don’t bother correcting him. There isn’t any point. I gave him a smirk. “It’s all those women who keep you busy, Southie.”

“Hey now, keep it down. I don’t want all these kids’ moms to know I’m a player. I gotta keep my boyish charm intact.”

“God forbid,” I joke. “Where is Kai? I haven’t seen him.”

“He had a family emergency or something. He’s real secretive about it. I don’t even think he told Bishop.”

My dad arrives shortly after, shaking Nico’s hand. It pulls the conversation away from Malakai which has me curious. The longer we stand with him, the more nervous I get that Bishop is going to show up.

“Sorry love, I was talking to the general manager. Apparently he’s worked with my dad in the past, what did I miss?” Preston announces as he slips his arm around my waist looking at Nico.

“Preston, this is Nico, he plays for the men’s team. Nico, this is Preston.” I look at Nico. “My boyfriend.” Nico’s eyebrow rises at me. If faces had voices, he would be saying, *this guy? Really?* He reaches forward to shake Preston’s hand which he returns.

“I don’t know much about hockey, but I have heard great things about you,” Preston compliments. That is also a lie. He doesn’t even watch hockey. I’m one-hundred percent positive he doesn’t even know Nico’s last name, or what position he plays. I keep that information to myself though.

“Nice to meet you, man,” Nico replies. They exchange simple conversation and I seem to be in the clear from any awkward run-ins. But like normal, the universe hates me.

“Am I too late for the introductions?”

Great timing as per usual. I look behind me and see Bishop’s looming figure. I wish he was ugly, it would make ignoring him that much easier. I have to physically grab my eyeballs to move away from him. I hate when he wears the color blue, it always makes his eyes look that much more intense.

The navy suit clings to every muscle, moving as he does. No tie, which isn’t a shocker. I want to make a joke about how after all these years he still doesn’t know how to tie one. But I don’t.

The room always feels smaller when he is in it. It’s like I can feel him on me even though he’s not.

“Bishop! Long time no see, where have you been hiding?” My dad greets him with a smile, wrapping him in a hug. The worst part of our break-up was watching my dad lose a friend. Sure he had plenty of others, but he and Bishop were close.

“Just been busy with hockey, old man. It’s good to see you,” Bishop replies hugging my father back. When they let go of each other, he gives

Nico a head nod in greeting, and then those eyes fall to me. I hate the way he looks at me.

His eyes have x-ray vision. I was sure of it. The way he could see straight to my core. Bishop looked at me like he had seen me naked. And not just physically either. Naked of all my walls, all my secrets—he saw just me.

We stood there, staring at one another. There was so much history in the way we looked at each other. We were a constant electric current, it never went away. I never stopped loving Bishop. I just had to stop waiting.

Someone cleared their throat, and I heard Preston's voice.

"Sorry, I don't believe we've met. I'm Preston." He sticks his hand out to Bishop, the other wraps securely around my waist. My cheeks warm, and I duck my head slightly.

I take a deep breath, saying a silent prayer to myself.

Lord, I will go straight to church after this if you make this painless.

There they were. My sun and my moon. This was my lunar eclipse. The sun, moon, and earth had lined up perfectly. I was pinned between two celestial beings who both held their own power. We were a battle in the sky that only I could see.

As I looked at these two, I realized more than ever before the moon was simply a reflection of the sun's light.

Preston was hiding in the dark, with millions of stars surrounding him. He was something I never would have noticed had the sun not looked his way. There he stood with his dark brown hair and obsidian eyes. Poised, clean, collected, perfect.

And there was Bishop. The sun. So fucking bright. Even when you didn't want to look at him directly, you still saw him, because he shined. His golden locks were messy, his suit wasn't freshly pressed, and his jaw was sporting a five o'clock shadow. Messy, wild, free, perfect.

Bishop grabs his hand a little rougher than someone should, shaking it up and down, a toothless smile on his face. "Bishop Maverick, I'm a," he flicks his eyes to me quickly, "close friend."

I bite my tongue, watching as this horror film unfolds before my eyes. Nico and my father are just standing there watching as if this is a normal occurrence, while I'm having a mental breakdown.

"Bishop? I don't think Valor has mentioned you before. It's nice to meet you, nonetheless. I'm Valor's boyfriend." His grip on my waist tightens.

Preston is the king of passive-aggressive comments. I've watched him in action multiple times, and I can assure you he got it from his father.

They stop shaking hands and Bishop smiles. It's a wicked grin, one that tells me he is thinking of saying something inappropriate.

"Boyfriend? Shit, man. I thought you were the fucking designer for the event! The suit threw me off. I didn't even know they made clothes in that color for men. In that case, it's nice to meet you."

My mouth drops, and I hear Nico spit up some of his drink. My father coughs, covering up a laugh, and pats Nico's back as he coughs. I'm still standing there like a fish out of water.

Bishop has lost his goddamn mind.

Preston's face morphs so quick, you would think a different person walked into the room. His grip on my waist is heading towards the painful direction. He is trying to mark his territory, while Bishop is barking at him like a rabid dog.

I watch as Preston forces a smile and a fake laugh. "No worries. Valor insisted I wear it. It's her favorite. She helped me pick it out earlier today. It took her *hours* at my apartment. I thought she'd never pick one. Isn't that right, baby girl?"

Bishop's jaw tightens, the vein in his neck popping out a little more. The way he says hours hints that we had sex. When he knows good damn and well, he doesn't last longer than twenty minutes. I hate that nickname, *baby girl*. My dad calls me that, not my boyfriend. Preston knows this. I'm about to say something to avert this pissing contest, but I'm too slow.

"I know all too well how long it takes for Vallie to *finish* making up her mind. She's the most indecisive woman I've ever met."

I'd never seen Preston angry before. Sure, we had gotten in small arguments, but he was always really quick to talk me down. It never got to the point we were angry. This version of him was something I'd never seen. If looks could kill, Bishop would've been chopped into little pieces and thrown into a river.

"Valley? Like the river that's in between mountains? I don't think I've heard that one before." Preston laughs loudly, and my heart breaks a little. No, not like that kind of valley.

Bishop snickers. "Nah, it's a me," he nods his head towards me, "and her, kinda thing. Isn't that right?" he says towards me but he never moves his eyes from Preston.

My dad is looking at both men confused. A silence passes. they just stand there staring at each other. They are having an imaginary dick measuring contest. There is too much testosterone in this fucking space.

“Has anyone tried the pigs in a blanket? They have this honey mustard dipping sauce, it’s seriously good.” Nico’s voice tries to break the tension but it only aids in making it more awkward.

If I could facepalm I would.

I clear my throat, stepping out of the way of alpha dogs one and two. “I’m going to the restroom. I’ll be right back.”

I don’t bother to listen for a reply. I just move toward the bathroom. I want to hide in there for the remainder of the evening.

Once I reach the women's restroom, I slip inside. I look around for any other occupants, checking the stalls. When I know I am alone, I take my heels off. Yes, I know I am in a public restroom and there are germs, but I don’t give a fuck at the moment. It’s not like I am going to be sucking on my feet anytime soon.

My feet ache, and my head is bursting with way too many emotions. I sigh when they come off, I place my palms on the sink and lean on it. I drop my head between my shoulders. I hate this feeling. I am tugged into two very different directions. My head and my heart aren’t agreeing. They are constantly battling it seems like.

I hear the bathroom door open, and I sigh. “I’m sorry, I need just a moment and I’ll be out of your way,” I say, bending down to pick my shoes up.

click

I rise up slowly, turning to face the door. Bishop is leaning against it, arms crossing his chest. He has one foot crossed over the other staring at me like I’m a little kid who just got caught stealing candy.

I swallow loudly. My heart is in my throat. I hear it beating, *thump, thump, thump*. It doesn’t slow for a second. A tingling sensation spreads across my stomach. My toes twitch. I lean on the counter for support, afraid my knees may give out. I’m locked in a bathroom with Bishop.

Fucking fantastic.

“He’s cute, *baby girl*. Real fucking cute.”

Bishop’s voice reminds me of the night we had sex in that office. Dark, sultry, rubbing all across my body. I grip the counter tighter, clenching my

jaw. Everything in my body feels alive under his gaze. His eyes were an on switch to my sexual drive.

“What are you doing, Bishop?”

He clicks his tongue, shaking his head back and forth. “Tsk, Tsk,” he starts as he pushes off the door walking toward me like a predator stalking his prey. I try to sink into the counter, pushing my body flush against it.

“Is that what gets your panties wet now? Pretty boys in purple suits?”

The closer he gets to me, the faster my heart beats. This must filter into the room. It’s so thick I can barely breathe. The tension building in the room is heavy, almost tangible. At any second one of us could reach out and lose control of it. A hidden flame, something that burns so brightly, but somehow we’re the only ones who can see it.

“Are you asking if he’s fucked me, Bishop? Is that what you want to know? Will that make you leave me alone?” I stare at him with a fury buried so deep inside of me I’m sure he can feel the heat of it on his skin.

“Yeah, B. He’s fucked me. He’s be—”

His arm reaches forward at lightning speed. His large hand wraps around my throat aggressively, but the placement keeps it from hurting me. The pads of his fingers dig into the sides of my neck, and I know they can feel my pulse quicken.

I’ve pissed him off now.

He jerks me forward by my throat and leans closer to my face breathing down on me. “Watch your fucking mouth, Valor. I will fuck you in front of him and wink at him while I do it. I’ll make you beg me to let you come right in front of that piece of shit. Do. Not. Push. Me. Are we clear?”

His words make my thighs shake. They squeeze together trying to aid the throb between them. I want to head-butt the fuck out of him, but my body wants him to help us find release. Bishop notices this, of course, and he smirks.

“Do you love him?”

His words make me feel weightless, like a feather caught in a breeze, or a dandelion carrying a wish. My fingers are going numb from the death grip I have on the counter behind me. I don’t move to open my mouth. I just stand there staring at his eyes.

He tilts one side of his lips up, scoffing. The smell of his cologne makes my body hotter. My personal aphrodisiac.

I was frozen under his touch. I didn’t dare breathe, let alone move.

“You see,” he purrs in my ear, “I need to hear you say them. Tell me the words, Vallie and I’ll walk away.” His teeth playfully bite my earlobe, tugging it. I feel him inhale deeply, his body stiffens above mine. I feel his other fingers grip the pendant that hangs on my chest, his necklace, the one I still wear every day.

His grip on my neck tightens and I whimper in pleasure. My thighs are slick with the heat that’s leaking down them. He nudges my ear with his nose, leaning his face on the side of mine. I don’t even realize there are tears in my eyes until I see them drop onto his suit. Emotions of all kinds bubble inside of me. Love, sorrow, lust, pain, rage, they all fuel each other. I’m a volcano about to explode.

“But if you can’t tell me. If you don’t love him, it means you’re still mine,” he whispers.

“*Mine.*” The torment in his voice rips my heart to shreds. Once he pulls back, his thumb reaches up running along my bottom lip slowly. He watches my lips, staring at me like I’m his last meal on earth.

It’s all too much. The lust suffocates me like smoke. I’m inside a burning house and I need out of it. There is no hope here. If I stay here I will die. I need out, out, out.

I push him back roughly. Before I can even stop myself, my hand swipes across Bishop’s face leaving a bright red spot on his cheek. The slap stings my hand, and the shock that rocks my body is like an earthquake. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Go fuck yourself, Bishop Maverick. You don’t own shit. I’m not yours, I don’t belong to anyone. Fuck off,” I spew, as my emotions bleed out onto the floor of the bathroom.

I push past him, unlocking the door, and make my way out of there. I clutch my chest, trying to gulp all the fresh air I can. Anytime I’m around Bishop it’s my own personal labyrinth.

He burns me alive. I guess that’s that downside of loving the sun.

You can’t get too close or you’ll be consumed.

CHAPTER 16



How to Save a Life

VALOR - 22

After I got my shit together, I went looking for Preston. I found him on the phone. When he saw me he raised a finger at me, letting me know it would only take a second. Once he finished his call, he walked up to me rubbing my arms.

“Bad news, love. I have to leave.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What for?” I ask softly.

“Work just called. They need extra help on a case they just got in. Your dad can give you a lift home right? I’m just going to call an Uber.” He was interning at the law firm where his dad worked. Of course, he got the first call.

I nod my head giving him a forced smile. He sighs in relief. “Great, text me later, I love you!”

I don’t think he even waited for me to say it back. Preston leaving meant less emotional stress, so maybe the universe was going to start working in my favor. I visibly sighed and began searching for my social butterfly of a father.

I found him and Nico by the food table eating, figures.

“Hey Dad, is it okay if you go ahead and take me home?” I couldn’t be in the same space as Bishop anymore. I needed out. I wanted to go home and eat ice cream with Riggs.

He nods. “You feeling okay? Where did Preston go?”

I give him a smile. “Yeah, I’m just tired. Plus all the kids have left anyway, that was the whole reason I came. Preston had to leave for a work emergency.”

“Come on, kiddo. Let’s get you home,” he says before looking at Nico. “Nico, you need a ride home, buddy? You don’t live far from Valor and Aurelia, it wouldn’t be any trouble,” he offers.

Nico swallows an ungodly amount of food, nodding. “Yeah if you don’t mind, it’ll save me from having to get a taxi.”

With everyone gathered, we head towards the vehicle. I want as far away from Bishop Maverick as I can get right now. I’m in the backseat, while dad and Nico take the front. The entire drive consists of the two of them going back and forth about hockey.

I mindlessly stare out the window, watching as the cars and buildings pass me by. I can’t help but wonder how different my life would be if I never met Bishop. If he was never drafted to the Chicago Fury I never would have crossed paths with him.

Would I be a different person? Would I be playing professional hockey? Who would I have become had I never met him?

My dad pulls to the curb and turns off the car. I see Riggs’ car parked in front of his, and that was when I first noticed something was wrong. She always texts me and lets me know she is home. I hadn’t gotten any texts or calls from her.

“Dad, you don’t have to walk me up. This is a good neighborhood,” I joke as I slip out of the car. He gets out, as does Nico. My dad hugs me to his chest.

“I know, kid. I want to see my other child. She missed Sunday dinner last week, and I want an explanation. I even made her favorite food!” he complains.

“Fine, fine.” I roll my eyes waving him and Nico up towards the apartment.

The walk is quick, only one flight of stairs before we arrive at our door. I push my key inside the doorknob, and when I go to turn it, I realize it’s not

locked. My eyebrows come together in confusion. Huh, that's odd.

I open the door, and the air feels strange. It's sticky, sharp, not like it normally is. When I walk into our apartment normally it was warm, it felt like home. It always smells like those vanilla candles she burns, but it doesn't right now. It smells musty.

My dad and Nico don't realize anything is off as they move through my door. I rest my hand on my stomach an uncomfortable feeling propelling through my body. I bite the inside of my cheek, looking around the apartment for signs she is here.

Her briefcase is on the couch, and her phone is on the table. The kitchen is empty, and I don't hear the shower running. The more empty rooms I find, the worse I feel.

"Riggs! Get your ass in here and give your second dad a hug!" he calls out as they make themselves at home on the couch.

"I'm going to check her bedroom," I say calmly as I move through our home. When I reach her bedroom and open the door, I see emptiness. Her bed is made perfectly, untouched by anyone. I'm three seconds from calling 911 and telling them we had a kidnapping. This wasn't Riggs. She always let me know where she was going, and she never left her phone.

I immediately move to her bathroom, turning the knob, and see that it's locked. A wave of relief should wash over me, but instead, it was more dread. What was going on? Why was the door locked?

"Riggs, are you in there? Open up! You scaring the shit out of me. I thought I was going to have to send a search party!" I try to laugh, but it's like my body won't let me. It knows something is wrong.

I hear nothing but deafening silence on the other end of the door. I try to clear my throat, but I realize anxiety has clogged it.

"Riggs, open the door! Are you okay?" I call out a little louder. My fist hits the wooden door. When I hear nothing again, I bang on the door again and again. Each hit is harder and harder. I'd been hitting the door so powerfully that my dad and Nico appear at the frame of Riggs' bedroom door.

"What's wrong?" my dad says troubled. I don't know how I even get the words out, how I tell him that the door is locked, and I can't find Riggs. Everything is happening so hastily. My dad hits the door, calling her name, and when he hears nothing he pushes on the door with his shoulder. The door squeaks, but it doesn't give.

I watch as Nico moves him out of the way, and slams his shoulder into the door, breaking it. He does it again, and it splinters a hole that allows us to move into the bathroom.

“Oh my God...” I wasn’t sure who said it, maybe it was me. At this point, everything felt like a nightmare. A bad dream I wanted to wake up from right now.

My beautiful best friend. My strong Aurelia was sitting with her back leaning on the side of the tub, her feet out in front of her. The mirror was fragmented, and a bloody piece was lying by her side. She had mangled her wrist in an attempt to kill herself.

My friend had reached a point so low she felt the only way out was to end her life.

Dense, wide, matching, jagged horizontal cuts adorn her fragile wrists. The bathroom floor is covered in a deep puddle of blood. I thought the blood would be cold, but it’s warm and thicker than it looks. Her head is hardly being held up, her eyes meet mine, and it’s as if her spirit is leaving her body. Her normally tan skin tone is an unsightly gray, almost blue.

“Valor...” she weeps.

I propel towards her before anyone can stop me, the sounds of the blood being squished under my feet pervade the room. I straddle her waist, my body sinking into the liquid that surrounds us both. It feels like being absorbed by quicksand. I grab her wrists with my hands, shaking as I do so. I can’t even see straight because of the tears that are descending from my eyes.

“I need a shirt. I need something to cover it!” I shriek. I think Nico hands me his, and I wrap them together, holding pressure to them so tightly it must be painful. I can feel her heartbeat through the wounds, each steady pump.

I hear my dad and Nico scrambling around, the dialing of a phone and faded voices, but the only thing that seems clear is Aurelia. The odor of blood riddles my soul, I’ll never forget it. Not ever. There is so much fucking blood. It’s all over my dress, my hands, the floor. How the hell is there this much blood? I can’t even tell if my face is wet from tears or the red liquid drowning us.

“Riggs, look at me, Riggs? Please look at me,” I say softly, I lean my head on her forehead, shaking as I cry. How could I be so selfish? So fucking blind that I didn’t see her struggling? Had there been signs? Had

she tried to tell me? Was I so fucking consumed with my own shit I didn't notice the closest person in the world to me was hurting?

She was so golden all the time, and now she's so cold. Like ice. She looks at me with watery eyes, so cracked that all I see is darkness inside of them. So much misery, an abyss of ache and self-loathing. I cough out a cry that rips through my body. Her eyes flickered from open to closed. She is gradually losing a battle she doesn't want to win.

"Riggs, talk to me, please okay? Just talk to me." I try to keep her awake until help gets here. Why are they not fucking here yet? Her breathing is so shallow I wouldn't even consider it breathing.

"I-I just wa-want to feel something, Sully," she whispers. More tears leak from her eyes. I press my forehead into hers trying to force my love, my life into her body. "I can't ev-ever fe-eel anythi..."

Blood is all over both of us, encasing us at this moment. Her heartbeat is getting slower and slower with each passing second. Snot and saltwater mix together on my face, and I can't wipe them away. I don't want to wipe them. I just continue to squeeze her wrists. My hands are cramping, but I don't dare let go. I can't let go. I don't want to let her out of my sight. I have to save her.

"I can't fe-eel my fingers, S-sully. I-I can't feel-I can't feel anything!" She tries to scream but it just comes out cracked, and you can barely understand it. Her body is so tranquil under my trembling one. "Wh-hy can't I feel anything..." she calls to me. She's begging me to give her an answer, an answer to a question I can't understand.

Aurelia had always felt things so boldly, so fiercely. Her emotions were always so obvious, it didn't matter which one it was. When she was happy, she was flying. When she was angry, it was ballistic. When she was sad, she slept. How did I not see this? Why? I never noticed that maybe she was compensating, that maybe I overlooked signs, a warning that she was going to do this.

"I know, Aurelia," I cry out, trying to breathe. "I know, okay? Listen, don't give up on me." Another sob wracks my body. "Please, please don't leave okay?" I shake my head, not even wanting to think of a world where she wasn't in it. "You aren't going to leave, okay? You are going to be all right. It's you and me, ride or die." I pause, swallowing as trying to get the words out.

“You remember when we were kids and I scraped my knee riding my bike?” I nod my head up and down. “You told me to let you help me and you carried me home. Let me help you. Please just hold on and let me help you.” She tries to smile but she is so weak. It didn’t even look real. Maybe I just imagined it.

I could hear the commotion behind me, people shouting but all I could see, all I was focused on was Aurelia.

She cried with a hopeless sob, “I’m...I’m co-cold.”

I shut my eyes, letting more tears fall. I force my eyes to open. I had to be strong for her. If she dies right here, she is going to leave looking at someone who loves her.

"I know, Aurelia, I know," I repeat over and over hysterically. Everything around us was moving at the speed of light, but we were moving in slow motion. Our eyes met and I thought of the time we spun in circles in the middle of the road. That’s what It felt like, spinning around and around and around...

"Ma'am, you have to move, we need to get to her!" I hear screamed above me. Voices coming from all directions. Her eyes shut, they flutter closed and her heartbeat slows even more. I feel her pulse stop through my fingertips. I physically feel the moment she dies. I’m screaming; I can feel it. Screaming until my throat is raw. I’m shaking my head violently back and forth, repeating the word ‘no’ over and over again. Everything is a blur. I hear voices screaming, but they all run together.

I see a glimmer of us. All of our memories are unfolding before my eyes, a miniature clip of all our accomplishments together. She won’t ever laugh with me again, argue with me about what TV show to watch. We won’t get to grow old together. She won’t be a mother or see my kids grow up. She won’t ever wake up again...

“Hey! Nice hit out there!” I smack her back as I slide onto the bench next to her. Aurelia was quiet, she never talked to a lot of people, but I always thought her hair looked like Barbie’s. I made it a point to talk to her every day. My dad said she just needed a friend.

“Your hair looks like a lion’s mane.” She doesn’t even look at me, just watches the rest of our team on the ice.

I laugh softly, pulling at one of my curls. “I know I get that a lot. It’s cool though, I like the curls.”

“Why do you keep talking to me?” she snaps as she turns to look at me. I shrug, smiling. I was missing my front tooth but I didn’t care.

“I want to be your friend!”

She scoffs, “Friend?”

“Yes, we can get hot dogs together, play hockey, and I have a really cool pinball machine at my house!”

A small smile breaks onto her small mouth, but she tries to hide it with a shrug.

“That sounds pretty cool, I guess. We have to get ice cream too!”

“Chocolate or strawberry?”

“Valor!”

“One, two, three, say cheeeseee!” my dad says loudly.

I smile closing my eyes, and I can only imagine what Riggs is doing on my back. She is clinging to my neck, her legs wrapped around my waist as we pose for another picture.

She jumps down, taking her cap off her head, and tossing it behind her somewhere on the school grounds.

“Can we please get drunk tonight? Four years in that hell hole, we deserve it.” she asks and I laugh.

Our matching caps and gowns adorn our bodies. High school graduation, one of the best days of my life.

“Wait till we hit college graduation, then I’ll really need a drink,” I joke, and she nods in agreement.

She pulls me forward hugging me tightly to her. “Ride or die, bitch.”

“Ride or die.”

“Ma’am, move!”

“Do you need another tub of ice cream?” she asks me, from her end of the couch. I’m lying on one end and she is on the other, our legs are interwoven in the middle.

I just shake my head, hugging the pillow closer to my chest and sniffing.

“Are you sure you don’t want to kill him? Because I could easily—”

“I’m okay, Riggs. I promise.” It’s a lie, but I don’t need her going to jail.

She stands up, walks towards me, and squats in front of me. She brushes a piece of hair out of my face, smiling.

“No, you aren’t. But that’s okay. I’ll be here to pick up the pieces, little lion.”

“Valor!”

I feel arms wrap around my waist, yanking me off her. I claw and kick, fighting the person’s hold. More screams leave my body, more pain, more everything. Pieces of my soul that I will never get back. I wither back and forth, begging them to let me go. Begging them to let me go to her.

“No, NO, I don’t want to leave her! Please, she needs me. Please, Riggs, Riggs, please answer ME!” It’s a prayer to a dark nothingness, no one answers me.

I remember screaming.

Then everything goes black.

CHAPTER 17



Cover Me Up

BISHOP – 30

I hated the smell of hospitals. The last time I was willingly inside of one was when my dad passed out in front of a bar when I was fifteen. Before that, it was when my mom killed herself. This place smelled like bad luck and alcohol swabs. It made my mouth water, like when you know you're going to throw up.

As I swivel through the hallways I realize how erratic my heart is beating. Nico said Valor was fine, but I needed to lay eyes on her. To see that she was okay.

I need to make sure my girl is okay.

Sure, she was with some other guy, but until the day I died, Valor Sullivan was always going to be my girl.

JR had been the one to call me, said that Valor needed me and Riggs was in recovery. He also told me that Aurelia's parents hadn't shown up yet. He had called them many times but they never answered. It made me sick to my stomach.

I could hear the sorrow in his voice. He felt as if he'd failed Riggs. Aurelia was JR's kid more than she was her own parents'. They both knew that.

When I get to the room, and open the door, I'm not sure what to feel first. The first person I notice is Riggs.

The urge to vomit hits me full force. I've known her since she was ten. I've known her for over half her life. I've watched her grow up, and I never thought... I never expected her to be here. Not like this.

This is one of those cruel truths of life. The one that reminds us the brightest of smiles hide mountains of pain.

Machines, cords, and wires connect to her body. Her almost white hair is stained with blood and sweat. She looks dead. Her skin is an ugly shade of blue, and if no one told me, I wouldn't know it was her.

A selfish piece of me wants to be angry with her. Angry that she wanted to leave Valor, to leave this life she lived. Then I felt understanding. The pain had become so terribly bad for her that she honestly believed dying was easier than taking another breath. Something we all take for granted.

Finally I felt regret. A sickening feeling. I'd seen someone die from suicide before, and I didn't notice the signs until it was too late. How am I in this situation again? How did I not notice anything? What could I have done to stop this?

I think it just shows that the people who want to kill themselves don't tell you about it until it's too late.

I advert my eyes to the left of her, noticing Nico leaning on the wall, and Prescott, or whatever the hell his name is on the phone next to him.

Nico is pale, staring at the bed like an alien landed in front of him. I think we all lost a piece of ourselves today, and I think Nico lost a slice of his carefree attitude. I'd met Nico's parents. They were in love and happy. They were good people, and they raised him in a home that never saw any turmoil. Nico has never experienced something like this.

He's naive to this kind of pain. A pain so deep you feel the need to kill yourself to escape it. Nico's life was sunshine and rainbows, and this was his first real glimpse of just how cruel life could be to some people.

Flamingo suit is on the phone, mumbling about paperwork and lawsuits. As if Valor's world isn't crumbling down around her. He is going on as if nothing has happened, meanwhile his 'girlfriend's' entire life has just stopped.

Nico walks towards me, a solemn look on his face. He runs a frustrated hand through his hair, over and over again. All of his positive energy he carries is now negative, and he doesn't know how to release it.

"Where's JR?" I say quietly looking at my friend.

He sighs. "He went to get coffee. Needed some air, said he couldn't stand seeing both of his kids so broken."

JR had been there for Riggs since she was six. She stayed with them, traveled back and forth to hockey games, ate dinner with them. He threw her birthday parties. He was the only real father Riggs had ever known. The other one was a piece of shit more concerned with his political agenda and which secretary would be sucking his dick.

"Fuck, man. Fuck! This is so fucked," he whispers yells. "How does it get this bad for someone? Riggs is loaded, man, she's a fucking knockout. What is so bad with her life that this is what she wanted? I mean how selfish can you b—"

"Nico, how long have you all been here?" My voice is calm, not raised or angry. I know people like Nico who have only seen the good in the world can't imagine ever wanting to leave it.

Some will never understand that sometimes the fear of living with your pain is greater than the fear of dying. It's the lesser of two terrors.

Everyone thinks suicide is selfish until the person you love slits their wrists.

He stops abruptly and shrugs his shoulders. "A couple hours, maybe more, why?"

"Look around." I pause. "Who are the only people you don't see here? The two people that still haven't called to check on their daughter, even after I called them."

I cut my eyes to him. "Some people have demons, Nico, and sometimes, they overtake you."

His eyes widen as my words settle in. As he realizes that Aurelia's parents are alive and healthy, but have yet to check on their daughter. That harsh reality sets in. We all lose our innocence at some point. Mine and Valor's has been gone a long time, but Nico's? Nico's just got up and walked out the door.

"How is Val?" I couldn't make myself look at her yet. I didn't think I could handle it after seeing Riggs.

Nico continues to run a hand through his hair. “Physically? She’s fine, just covered in blood because she refused to leave Riggs’ side. Mentally though?” He bites his lip, trying to find the words. “I don’t think there is really a word to use besides broken.”

Broken.

A word that means having been fractured or damaged, and no longer in one piece or in working order.

Valor and I were so broken that our pieces had found a way to mend each other. Our story was a tragically beautiful mosaic created from trauma. It’s why we were so connected. There were pieces of me holding hers together and vice versa.

I want to give her all of my pieces if it could take this sadness away.

“Valor, love, Valor look at me.” I hear Prenal coo loudly to my right. I snap my eyes towards him, seeing him standing above Valor’s frame trying to get her attention.

When my eyes finally land on her, I want nothing more than to take her far, far away from here. Valor was always a strong woman, it was something I admired. The way she carried herself, never afraid to speak her mind, bold, unstoppable. I loved all of it. But right now she isn’t any of those things.

It’s the most fragile I’ve ever seen her. She is a chipped porcelain doll whose owner forgot about her. Not only is she cracked on the inside, but so is her spirit.

Her head lies sideways on the hospital bed, allowing me to see her face. Both hands cling to one of Riggs’. If Valor was any closer she’d be on top of her.

There isn’t a single inch of her body moving. It doesn’t even seem like her chest is rising with her breathing. The look in her eyes will haunt me forever.

I’ve always loved her eyes, the purest green on earth. And now they just seem hollow. I’d realize that it isn’t the color of her eyes that always draws me in, but the spark behind them. And now it is gone.

They are full of hopelessness. Void of any and all emotion. They look just like my dad’s. That thought alone had me spiraling. Drops of blood cover her freckles, while heavy amounts of the dark liquid stain her hands, clothes, and some is even in her hair. She isn’t crying. She just sitting there with her eyes wide open. I don’t even think I see her blink.

I walk towards Valor like she's a beaten dog. I don't want to spook her. When I am next to Pretzel, Prescott, whatever, I look at him, and clear my throat.

"You mind?" I say referring to Valor.

He slits his eyes, looking me up and down like I'm gum beneath his Christian Louboutin shoes.

"Yes I mind, but you don't plan on listening to me, do you?" he quips, and I just give him a sarcastic smile. I didn't come here to argue with him. I'm here to make sure Riggs and Valor are okay. They are what is important at the moment, not my pissing contest with douche dick.

I move past him, and start to squat slowly so that I'm eye-level with her. My eyes are on hers, but it's as if she doesn't even see me. She's looking through me. Valor isn't here right now. She's locked inside the closet of her mind. A place she created for when her emotions became too much.

I swallow the itch in my throat, as I move my hand towards her face. She still doesn't budge, not even when I drag my thumb across her cheek. My fingers find a loose curl. I run the pads of my fingers up and down it slowly, before tugging it down just enough that she'll feel it.

I hold my breath, I think we all are. The only sounds that fill the room are the sounds of Riggs' machines beeping. Everyone is hanging on a thread looking at Valor. I wait patiently for what feels like hours but it's really just a few seconds. I'm about to call her name when she blinks, and her green eyes move to mine.

It's such a soft movement like she just woke up and her eyes are adjusting to the sun. Realization sparks behind those gems, which also means tears start to leak from them. She still hasn't said a word, but I know she knows I'm here now. She sees me.

"I see you, Vallie girl, I see you," I whisper softly as I rub my thumb across her cheek ignoring the feeling of crusty blood on her skin.

More tears fall from her eyes, along with a small whimper. I try to give her the best smile I can manage to comfort her.

"We have to get cleaned up, okay? We gotta get a shower," I state softly. Fear lights up in her eyes, and I feel her move away from me and closer to Riggs. Her poor hand is squeezing so tightly it's white. I soothe her, rubbing my hand across her face.

"I know you don't want to leave her. I know you're scared. But we have to get cleaned up. It'll only take a few minutes. I need you to trust me,

Valor. Riggs will be okay. She's going to be okay."

I lied. I know Riggs is alive and she will walk out of the hospital in a few days, but I don't think she will ever be okay again.

"Look at me," I state, "I'm right here with you, the entire time. I'm not leaving."

She just stares at me with those hollow eyes, but she isn't fighting me. After she releases a shaky breath, she nods her head just slightly. I slowly run my arm under the bend in her knees while the other cradles her head to my chest. Once she is scooped up into my arms, I stand to my full height.

She leans into my chest, inhaling deeply, and I fight off a smile of contentment. All these years later and the smell of me still comforts her. I clutch her tightly to my body, hoping the steady beat of my heart will calm hers.

I look down at her fragile body in my arms. The only thought that passes through my mind is...

I'm so fucking in love with her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I look up from Valor to see Preston blocking my path to the bathroom that is connected to the hospital room. I feel Valor's body flinch. Her grip on my shirt tightens.

I raise a suspicious eyebrow at him. "I'm going to get her cleaned up." I pause, "And stop fucking yelling, you inconsiderate prick, you're freaking her out."

Preston doesn't even move his eyes to Valor to check on her, he just keeps making eye contact with me like it will make me disappear. It's getting weird. If I didn't know any better I'd think he was trying to snake charm me.

"Sorry, what was your name again? Bishop? I barely know you, and obviously you weren't important enough for Valor to mention in the years we have been together, so I'm not letting you see her naked. You could rape her for all I know." His pompous attitude makes me want to slam his head into the wall just so he will shut up.

Every movement is pretentious. I know men like him, everything they do has a hidden meaning. He has an agenda. And I know for certain he doesn't deserve someone like Valor.

I grind my teeth. "You think I'm going to cop a feel while she's covered in her best friend's blood?" I scoff, "That's what you are worried about right

now?”

I look down at the girl in my arms, shaking my head, before looking back up at Preston. “She just watched her best friend, who she has known since she was six years old try to end her life. Valor held her wrists when she died. This girl just went through fucking hell, and you are more worried about me seeing her naked? Get the fuck over yourself, and get the fuck out of my way.”

His face is shocked before he reverts back to his JFK impersonation. I watch as he clears his throat, standing firm in front of me. If I didn’t have Valor in my arms, I’d punch him. I’d knock him flat onto his pretentious ass.

“It’s not happening. I can take her myself,” He chides with his jaw raised like he is giving his election speech. He moves his arms towards her, and she buries her face into my shirt shaking her head back and forth.

I can hear her soft cries and this overwhelming urge to try to destroy every single thing that has ever hurt her passes over my body. I want to take her back to when she was little and the world was pure. I want to talk to her mom, make her stay; give her the life she always wanted growing up. I want to take away Riggs’ hurt, and I want to go back and fix that day all those years ago.

“Look, man. Obviously she doesn’t want to go with you, just leave her be,” Nico chimes in from next to Preston. “Look at her,” he motions to Valor with his head, “she’s clinging to him for dear life, just let this one go. If you care about her, just let him help her.”

“I’m not letting you take my girlfriend in there to undress her. I saw the way you were staring at her at the event!” he continues to push the subject. If Valor wasn’t holding onto me so tightly, I’d set her down and knock this guy the fuck out.

He reaches for her again, gripping her arm. “Come on, Valor, this is ridiculous. Quit acting like a child. This is obviously a stunt for attention. From you and Aurelia.”

Valor jerks her arm away from him, cutting her eyes in his direction for the first time since I have been here.

“Don’t touch me!” she shrieks loudly. I try to hug her closer to my body, trying to calm her down as she falls into a state of hysterics.

“Valor, this is silly,” he comments. When he moves to grab her again, I remove one of the hands from behind Valor, and place my palm on his chest

shoving as hard as I possibly can.

Preston falls backward hitting a medical tray, knocking the contents all over the floor. The equipment rattles on the floor, and before anyone can do anything else, two nurses walk inside the room demanding to know what happened.

“This man assaulted me!” Preston accuses as he stands up dusting himself off.

The nurses look over at me. “Bullshit, I was defending myself. He was trying to take her,” I nod down at Valor, “against her will. When I refused to give her over, he tried to punch me so I shoved him back.”

Preston obviously argues his point, but soon all is settled when Nico speaks up.

“He is telling the truth, he tried hitting him, so Bishop defended himself.”

The nurses look at Preston. “Sir, you’ll have to come with us or we will call security.”

I withhold a smirk as I watch him gasp, “This is absurd!”

“Sir,” they warn, and he rolls his eyes.

“Fine, you are all delusional,” he mumbles storming into the hallway. Once they all leave the silence settles back in.

“That guy is a dick,” Nico states and I nod in agreement. I start to walk past him when Valor’s arm reaches out and grabs Nico’s forearm tightly. She digs her nails into his skin, turning her head to peer up at him.

“Don’t leav-ve her. She can’t feel alone. She can’t feel alone. S-She can’t f-feel alone...” Her voice is raw and cracked. You can barely hear the words, but Nico nods. He takes in her plea and gives her a soft smile. His hand runs down her hair soothingly.

“Shhhh... I got her, Baby Sullivan. I got her.”

Valor’s eyes hold all the gratitude in the world, and I watch as Nico takes the seat Valor just left. I look down at her, and I smile gently.

The walk to the shower is slow, and everything feels like it’s in slow motion. Her shoes are no longer on her feet and all she is wearing is the same light blue dress she wore to the event. When I saw her earlier, I thought about how stunning that color looked on her. It accented her skin tone and made her red hair stand out. She looked soft, elegant, beautiful.

Now whenever she sees this dress, whenever she sees this color all she is going to remember is when it was coated in her best friend’s blood. All

she will feel is the hurt. The pain of this night will never go away.

I turn the shower on, adjusting the temperature so that it's steaming hot. Valor liked to burn my skin off in the mornings we would shower together. I can't help but think how different this shower is compared to the last one we took together.

The last time we were laughing, covered in soap, and our wandering hands searched for areas to please each other. It was sensual, light, fun; it was us.

Now it's quiet, and it smells of medical equipment. I watch as she slides the straps off her shoulders, letting the dress pool at her feet exposing her body to me. It's not sexual. It's bitter, cold, painful, and it is also us.

I guide her under the stream of water, the instant it hits her body the water below us shades to a dark red. All of the blood that once was inside of Riggs' body is now floating down a drain. It's sickening, isn't it?

I keep my clothes on because I don't want to make her feel uncomfortable. I have extras in my car anyway. So there I stand in front of her in all my clothes minus my shoes, and I just watch her. I run my hands down her hair, leaning her head back to rinse the blood away from her curls.

Her eyes just stay on me. They never move. I think she is afraid if she blinks I'll disappear and she'll be all alone.

The droplets of water that hang around her eyes and lips, I wipe away. Her tears slowly start to mix with the shower, and it's hard to tell which ones are falling from her eyes. I pour shampoo in my palm and begin to work it through her hair.

The foam quickly turns a pink color the more I massage it through her scalp. I let the water wash away all of it, repeating the process with the conditioner. When I start to wash the blood from her face and body, that's when she finally talks to me.

"B..." she whispers softly. I move the washcloth across her arms, looking in her eyes.

"Yeah, Vallie?"

"I'm scared."

My heart breaks even more for her. Her bottom lip quivers as more tears fall from her eyes. I pull her into my body, letting the hot water cascade down around us. I hold her there as she sobs into me.

"I've got you, Vallie. I'm right here," I speak into her ear, just holding her tighter to me.

“She lost so much blood; they didn’t think she was going to make it.” She cries into my shirt. “She wanted to die, B. How did I not know that my best friend wanted to die? How did I not see that!” Her cries turn into wails, deep and broken.

They echo off the walls. They’ll haunt me forever. I just hold her there hoping I’m helping her in some way. There are no words I can say to heal her pain. I can’t say anything that will make this better. All I can do is hold her.

This was the ugly side of loving someone. This is what they don’t show you in movies, in books. Sometimes the people you care for go through shit and you have to watch them. You have to hold their hand and hope...

They make it out alive.

CHAPTER 18



Lost

VALOR - 22

“So does that mean we like this therapist? Or do I need to start calling other offices?”

I sling my bag over my shoulder walking towards my car, as I wait for Riggs to give me the verdict on this new therapist she saw today. This was her third therapist since her incident a month ago, and the two before this one had ended terribly.

The first one didn't even get her to talk. Apparently, Riggs just sat on the couch and took naps. That's it. She never even looked at the lady. The next one was a man, and from what Riggs described, he was a creep that kept staring at her boobs so she left halfway through the session.

“I think I'm going to give this one a chance. She called me a bitch within the first ten minutes. She does not beat around the bush, plus I like her hair, it's fucking purple.” I can hear her keys rattle from the background, and I know she is walking into the apartment.

I'd asked her multiple times if she wanted to move, we both had the money, but she kept telling me no. She just said that seeing that bathroom

reminded her that she never wanted to feel like that again. She wasn't going to let her disorder ruin a place she felt safe.

"She called you a bitch? Jesus, Riggs, talk about tough love."

"I think that's what I need. She said something about it being my defense mechanism. I automatically go to bitch mode when I feel threatened or vulnerable. It makes sense, so I think I like this one," she replies.

Riggs had been diagnosed with bipolar I disorder.

It's a mood disorder. You suffer from severe periods of depression and mania. It didn't mean that she was like the hulk and flew off the handle. It just meant that when she experienced mania she was in a state of euphoria. It was a party girl. The impulsive, on top of the world, go-go-go attitude she couldn't control. That was the Riggs we all knew. The hyper-sexuality and invisible vibe she carried.

But when she bottomed out, that's when the depression settled in. She could go on mania episodes for weeks, and then one day wake up at rock bottom. That's what she never let me see. All I got were the glimpses. The sleeping in and sluggish mood.

After a psychotherapy exam and the doctor gave her the diagnosis it was like she was relieved to know she wasn't crazy. There was a legitimate imbalance. There was a reason she felt like this. That might have been the best thing to come out of her incident. She got answers.

The amount of research I had done over the month was crazy. I'd read articles published by doctors, blogs by people with bipolar disorder. I'd even contacted a specialist to see what I needed to know about supporting her through this.

The biggest struggle Riggs was worried about was not being labeled by her disorder. She didn't want to be the girl who was bipolar. Or the girl who tried to kill herself.

She just wanted to be Aurelia.

It had been one week since we got back from the hospital. My dad was sleeping on our couch in the living room, and I was currently facing Aurelia in my bed. We were both wide awake, just staring at each other.

The bandages on her wrists were sticking out of the jacket she was wearing, and my face was slightly damp from the tears. I'd already told her that she didn't have to tell me why. I just wanted to be there for her.

The first thing she said to me when she woke up in the hospital was that she was sorry. She said sorry to me. Riggs wanted to die and she apologized to me. If it wasn't frowned upon, I would have smacked her. If anyone was sorry it was me. I was sorry for not noticing she needed help.

"Stop. I know what you are thinking. It wasn't your fault, Sully."

I try to smile, but it probably doesn't look that way.

"I just wish I could have done more for you. I wish I could have understood better what was going on."

She sighs, rolling onto her back and looking at the ceiling. A few tears escape the corners of her eyes.

"You couldn't have known. I hid the bad days from you. The days when everything was too much. I told you I was going out with a guy, but really I was just walking around the city. There wasn't any way you could have stopped me. I didn't want you to know."

I wipe the tears on my cheeks, sniffing, trying to gather my emotions.

"Why'd you do it? What happened that day that made you do it?"

"I did it because my whole life I was numb to feeling and I wanted to feel something."

I keep quiet, not wanting to disturb her train of thought or interrupt.

"My parents never loved me. They still don't. I was never hugged or touched by a parental figure or friend until I met you. I was raised by nannies who cared more about a paycheck than my wellbeing. I was raised in a glasshouse, Sully."

She rolls back over, facing me again, more tears falling from her eyes. She wipes them away, before continuing.

"Everyone jokes about me being the ice queen, but the truth? It's cold being her. Something is wrong with me. I can't let people in. I felt so unworthy of you and JR. My entire life I felt so unworthy of the love you two give me. I want to let love in, but I feel so incapable of doing that. I want to feel."

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close to me. I let her cry into my shoulder, she laughs a little.

"Is it insane that I'm kind of glad I'm bipolar? That there is a reason behind why I feel this way? Is that crazy?"

I shake my head, smiling lightly. "No, that's not crazy. You're going to conquer this, okay? You are more than just a disorder."

She lifts her eyes to me, and I sigh.

“We are going to do this together, okay?” I say each word slow and steady staring into her dark brown eyes.

I don’t care how long it takes, or what I have to do, she’ll believe that for herself one day. Every day I’ll remind her that she is worthy of love. That she is capable of loving someone. Because she deserves it.

“Okay, little lion. Ride or die.”

“Ride or die.”

Everything that her parents had put her through mixed with the disorder had caused her to fall into a toxic tornado of feelings she couldn’t control. The doctor told us that most cases like Aurelia’s didn’t get diagnosed until someone had a mental breakdown, or sadly tried to kill themselves. So he gave her the number to group therapy for people with disorders like hers.

I had yet to convince her to attend a group meeting. She said she didn’t want to sit in a circle talking about her feelings like she was in kindergarten. So we just worked on finding her a therapist, and I think we found a match.

Slowly we found a routine. Nothing would ever go back to the way it was, because things were different now. But we were all finding our footing and trying to make our way through this together. My dad was struggling the most, I think. Riggs had told him multiple times she didn’t want him to treat her differently than before, but it was hard for him.

Every time he saw her, he hugged her and asked her how she was doing at least fifty times. But she understood it was his way of dealing with everything. I think secretly she was thankful for him caring so much. It made up for the fact her parents still didn’t even bother to ask if she was all right.

They hadn’t so much as acknowledged the fact they almost lost their daughter. I honestly don’t think they cared either way. Losing Riggs wouldn’t have affected them. Not the way it would have affected me and my dad. We were her family.

“Was today okay? Did you try that nausea medication this morning?”

They had her on a mood stabilizer for her disorder, but it had been making her sick when she took it in the morning, so they had tried a few different nausea medicines. Although she wasn’t telling me, I think she hated taking the medicine, she had mentioned it made her feel like a robot.

I’d seen that some people experienced the same feeling. They missed the mania, the high, the euphoric feeling. But I think Riggs was taking the

good with the bad. If it meant she could avoid the depression, she'd take anything.

"Today was good. The nausea pills worked fine. They taste like swamp ass though. Those things are the size of fucking horse testicles!" I hear her moving around more. "I didn't feel like killing my boss today, but I did flip him off when he wasn't looking. I chalk that up as a good day." I roll my eyes. Riggs loved her job, but her boss was a fucking idiot.

"How many text messages have you received from the dollar store John F. Kennedy?" I hear her throw something that sounds a lot like heels onto the floor, and I laugh slightly.

"Only a few today."

"No, he's fucking mental. That's what he is. Who says the shit he said to you and then expects you to be okay with it?"

I remember bits and pieces of the fight between Bishop and Preston. My mind was running on auto-pilot most of that day, but I do remember him saying that Riggs was doing it for attention.

I've never wanted to head-butt somebody so badly in my life. How fucking ignorant do you have to be?

For obvious reasons, I told him I was done. That did not go over well. Apparently, "No one breaks up with Preston Huntington." His words, not mine. I thought I was going to have to get a restraining order, because he had shown up at the apartment one to many times.

He stopped showing up when my dad answered the door and threatened to kill him. Now he just messages me constantly about how sorry he is, and that he misses me. I was done talking to him, so he can continue to text me as much as he wants, but I will not be replying.

He, of course, accused me of leaving him for Bishop. The number of times he told me how inappropriate it was for me to be naked in front of another man was ungodly. I had plenty of voicemails about how much of a 'bad woman' it made me, how he knew I was cheating on him, the list goes on and on.

How could I explain to him that the only person that was going to pull me out of the darkness I was drowning in was Bishop? How did I tell him that I was still in love with someone who was so bad for me?

For the first time in my life the one person who wasn't involved in my stress or pain was Bishop.

Bishop Maverick was the most unproblematic person in my life at the moment. He had called me a few days after Riggs' was released and told me everything I needed to hear before I could even explain myself.

He said he knew I needed time, that I needed a moment of quiet to gather myself. He wasn't rushing me, he was waiting. Whenever I was ready, he was ready.

The scariest part about that? I think I believed him.

When B came into that hospital, I felt him.

He was my sun, and I could feel his warmth from the moment he walked into the room. That's what it felt like to love Bishop Maverick. It felt like watching the sunset at the end of a long day. You'd walked for miles and miles for the perfect view and then you found it. That's what loving him felt like.

I'd never needed someone so badly in my entire life as I did when I was in that hospital room. I just wanted B.

Loving Bishop had never been the problem. Trusting him with my love was.

"Does that mean you're team Bishop again?" I'm joking, of course.

"I'm on the team that isn't a piece of shit, and at the moment, Bishop is the lesser of two evils."

I scoff, "You're a drama queen. Do you want Chinese food tonight? I'll pick it up on the way home."

I open the car door slipping inside and tossing my bag onto the passenger seat. I'd just left practice and my legs were Jell-O. I did not feel like cooking anything today.

"I already ordered Thai food, so hurry and get your ass home. I'm picking the movie tonight, sick and tired of you making me watch fucking rom-coms."

I laugh. "Fuck you. It better not be Saw or The Hills Have Eyes. I'm not watching the gory shit while I eat my food."

"You are such a pussy. Be safe, see you soon."

She hangs up before I can say anything else, typical Aurelia.

I let out a deep breath leaning my head back on the headrest. The moments I took for myself in the car were my favorite.

The rain was tapping on my windshield and the sounds of cars in the distance filled the void in my passenger seat. For the past month, I have been losing my mind. My mind is exhausted constantly. I wake up at five in

the morning for conditioning. I come home, make breakfast, and force Riggs to take her medicine. I call my dad so he knows we both are okay, then head back to the facility for the second practice. I'm on edge all the time. I know Aurelia told me it wouldn't happen again but every second that my eyes aren't on her, I worry. I'm always worrying.

Every day is a battle for her. Each day she wakes up she has to face the world. There isn't going to be a day that she doesn't feel like a victim of depression. She's bipolar and she has to accept that every day. There will always be bad days, always. And I'll be there.

On the days she doesn't feel like waking up, I'll be there to push her out of bed. On days it gets hard and she just needs a break? I'll be there with ice cream.

I'm just thankful I can be there for her. That I can attempt to support her in any way she needs me to.

I hear my phone buzz in the passenger seat and I sigh, maybe if I answer Preston he will cool it with the messages. I know he is doing it because he cares, but Jesus Christ does his phone ever die?

When the screen faces me, it isn't Preston's name that greets me it's Bishop's. Just like that, he went from being unproblematic to the center of my strife.

An ESPN headline lights up my screen. The title is something I didn't think I'd ever read.

"Chicago Fury's Golden Boy Talks Leaving and Being a Free Agent."

I'd known Bishop was a free agent this year, but I never thought he'd leave the Fury. Chicago was his home. It's the only team he has ever played for. Why would he want to leave? The only thought that popped into my mind was...

Me.

He was leaving because of me. My first year at the Chicago organization and he was ready to leave.

I watched the interview listening to him discuss leaving for New York or maybe California. My stomach hated me. I just kept watching him answer questions the reporters threw at him, but I couldn't get past how easily he talked about leaving this place, leaving his home.

Leaving me.

Was he leaving because he couldn't stand not being with me? Or was he running from us again?

It felt like another sick sign from the universe, telling us that we didn't need to be together. We weren't supposed to be.

I wasn't mentally capable of dealing with this. Did I care about Bishop? Yes. But was I ready to give him my heart completely? Not yet.

And I don't think giving him a small piece of me is going to be enough for B. I can't give him what he wants right now. I can't give him all of me, because I'm not ready. I'm not ready to trust him again. How do I know he's ready this time? Truly ready?

If I give myself completely to Bishop and he breaks me again?

I won't be able to recover this time.

I'm not ready to love anyone right now. I can't be with Preston, and I can't be with Bishop. I can't be with anyone because I almost lost one of the most important people in my life.

Getting close to someone just to have them ripped away in a blink of an eye scared the shit out of me.

I'm not ready.

Bishop deserves someone who is ready. And that isn't me right now.

I start my car and start my drive to the apartment. The soft sounds of eighties music carry me through the traffic. I just feel numb to it all. I am so mentally exhausted from everything that even feeling something as simple as sadness isn't a possibility.

I am too weak to even be sad. My body aches, and my mind does the same. My poor heart has taken so many blows that she can barely feel herself beat.

When I pull into my apartment complex, I can barely manage the strength to get out of my car and up my stairs. I just want to lock the world out for a little while.

But the world wasn't done royally fucking me yet. The universe was determined to fuck me over. I wanted to look up at the ceiling and just scream, "OKAY, I GET IT. YOU WIN, YOU SICK FUCK."

Bishop is sitting outside of my apartment door. His head is down as I approach him.

"Is there a reason you are camping outside of my home?" My tone meant to be light, but it just comes out flat.

He lifts his head and stands up quickly, running a hand through his hair. "I was waiting for you to get here. I want to talk to you."

I raise an eyebrow. "So you waited outside instead of going inside?"

The front door opens, and Riggs is standing in her favorite silk robe. She leans on the doorframe, eyeing Bishop carefully.

“I wouldn’t let him in. I was going to let you decide if I should call the police or not.”

Bishop rolls his eyes, and I laugh. One thing that her disorder will never change is her sense of humor.

“I can handle him, thanks though.”

She nods, making eye contact with Bishop before stepping closer to him. She’s an entire foot shorter than him, but she doesn’t give a shit. She looks like a Chihuahua trying to back down a Great Dane.

“Don’t get it twisted, I will gut you if you hurt her. My father is a politician; I know how to cover up a fucking scandal and a body.”

I giggle, covering my mouth as I do so. Bishop holds his hands up in defense. “Glad you are feeling better, Riggs.”

She flips him off, turning to head back into the apartment. “Only because my therapist says I need to work on being more thankful, thank you for the sunflowers you left in my hospital room when I woke up.”

B looks at me confused, then back at her, “I didn’t get you sunflowers, I bought the roses. Do you have a secret admirer, Aurelia?”

For two seconds it reminds me of when we were all younger. Always bantering back and forth. There was never a dull moment. It takes me back to when things were simple. When life wasn’t so messy.

Riggs doesn’t bother answering him. She just slams the door behind her leaving Bishop and me in front of my apartment door.

“Typical Riggs,” he mutters, and I nod my head in agreement. My smile begins to fade and silence falls between us. I hate that it feels like walking on eggshells when it comes to talking to him. It used to be so easy, and now it feels impossible.

Bishop scratches the back of his neck, taking in a deep breath. “So, I know you saw the interview. All of Chicago has seen it by now. I just want to let you know that I did that interview two months ago. It was before Riggs’ accident.”

I nod my head slowly. “So what does that mean? Are you staying, or are you going?”

B steps closer to me and I take a step back. It’s a tug of war between us. Except we don’t give. We just take until there is nothing left of either of us.

My back is pressed into the wall, and he's directly in front of me. His breath is fanning across my face, and I feel his fingers gripping one of my curls tugging it lightly. It's our hello, our goodbye, our I love you. It always has been.

"I'm not going to fuck up again. I'm done fucking things up with us. I'm not leaving Chicago, because I'm waiting. I'm waiting for you. Whenever you need me, I'll be here."

His eyes, those blue eyes hold everything I've ever wanted in life. Everything but what I need. What I need right now isn't something Bishop can give me.

Tears sting my eyes, and I don't bother trying to hide them. I embrace this emotion, this feeling. I lift my hand moving a piece of hair out of his eye, trying to smile, but I know it looks awful. I shake my head back and forth, biting my lip.

"I feel like I'm holding you back from an opportunity. What if New York is better than here?"

His pretty blue eyes darken, storm clouds hover over them. He swallows, and I watch his Adam's apple bob up and down. Bishop looks down, shaking his head.

"When I did that interview, I was being a selfish piece of shit. I didn't want to be around you if I couldn't have you. Seeing you, being near you, not being able to touch you? It kills me. I wanted the opportunity to get away from you, but I realized something."

My heart hears the hope in his voice and it's like that was all she needed. His voice is the magic that scatters along with my cracked heart and makes flowers sprout from their crevices. He is the only person I know capable of taking something broken and making it beautiful.

He places his hands on either side of my face, making my eyes meet his. A few tears fall down my face.

"You're my home, Vallie. I can't run away from you. You're in me, you always have been. Leaving you is worse than not having you as mine. I want to be here for you. Whenever you decide you need me, I'll be right here. I'm not leaving you. I'm never leaving you again."

His thumbs wipe the tears from my face, and his fingers tickle the back of my neck as he plays with the hair that grows there. This undeniable warmth spreading across my stomach, and I lean into his touch. This feeling of lightness attempts to lift the burden off my shoulders, Jesus fuck.

I love him. I'm so fucking in love with him.

"I'm," I pause, "I'm not ready yet. I ca—"

"I know you're not ready. One night of being there for you isn't going to heal four years of me being gone. I'll wait, because you and me?" He motions between us.

"We're connected, Vallie baby. You are in me like a fucking drug. Whether it be twenty years or ten decades. I know you'll find your way back to me. Until then, I'll wait."

I lean my head on the wall with a thud, sighing, the tears still falling. I give him a sad smile.

"I'm just trying to find my way back to me, B. I can't ask you to wait for me to do that."

He gives me that crooked grin that I fell so hard for, his fingers move to the pendant dangling on my neck. "You're a little lost right now, Vallie girl. That's okay. I know that you'll find your way back home. And I'll be there when you do."

My entire life Bishop has been this armor that protected me from the world. He's not as shiny as he used to be, and there are a few dents but he's still there. He's always strong for me when I need him to be. Whenever I need to fall apart, he's always there.

I'd been wearing this pendant for nearly ten years. I never took it off. Not once. It was a constant reminder that Bishop was always there for me. That he was always there no matter the circumstance.

I've lost my way but the road back home doesn't look as dark anymore. The sun is lighting the way.

CHAPTER 19



Letters from Ghosts

VALOR - 22

Do you think people know when their life is going to change forever? Like did Princess Diana know she was going to get in that car accident? Did Abraham Lincoln think he would die the day he was shot?

I wonder if they ever got these feelings, an overwhelming sensation that screamed trouble. I wish I would have gotten some kind of warning, if I had, I wouldn't have even gotten out of bed today.

"You're telling me you haven't fucked him once? Sucked his dick? Bishop hasn't eaten the cat in five months?"

I whip my head around to face Riggs, "Can you be any louder? Jesus, my dad is going to hear you!" I exclaim as we make our way towards my dad's door.

"And no, we haven't had sex. We are just friends right now, I'm going slow."

She scoffs, "Bullshit."

I roll my eyes, I wasn't lying. Even though I had been the most sexually frustrated I had ever been in my life I hadn't touched Bishop, and same for

him. He meant what he said, that he would wait for when I was ready.

The past five months had been about recovery for everyone, not just me. I focused most of my time on hockey and Riggs. I didn't want my game to be affected any more than it already had. Hockey was my escape from everything, out on the ice is where I healed myself.

I poured myself into every practice, every game. I was playing the best I ever had. My rookie season was one for the record books. The harder I pushed the more respect I earned in the league. I was no longer 'JR Sullivan's daughter,' I was just Valor, a girl who loved hockey more than anything. Jane was still a bitch, but we'd learned how to work together to ensure our team won games. I think she secretly liked me, but she's afraid to admit it to herself.

The season was nearly over, which meant playoffs were upon us. I always loved this time of year for hockey. The pressure was on for everyone. The games were more intense because everyone was battling for a spot. We were sitting at number three in the league which meant if we kept winning, we'd be guaranteed a spot.

The boys were doing equally as well. Kai was at an all-time high with saves, and shutouts. Bishop was still Bishop, one of the best defensemen in the league. There wasn't anything that man couldn't do. The rest of the team followed him, if he was playing good, they were too. He kept the momentum up at all times.

Nico was the only player a little off. Bishop mentioned something about his family having a hard time, but he didn't go into details. Nico was still scoring goals, but you could see, even on the ice, he had lost some of his spunk. That happy-go-lucky attitude had slowly faded away and no one could seem to figure out why.

I open the front door, calling into the home, "Dad, we are here!"

Walking into my dad's house was like taking off your bra after a long day. You could relax, breathe, be yourself. I didn't have to be anyone but Valor in this home. The place he raised me, where all our memories were held. This house was a time capsule of his love for me, and I'd cherish it for a lifetime.

My eyes scan the home, My fingers graze the entry way into the kitchen where my growth chart is marked with black sharpie. The place we made breakfast every Sunday. The time I forgot to put the lid on the blender when I was making a smoothie for Father's Day when I was eight. Nights my dad

spent slaving in here to make cupcakes for my class because he never wanted me to feel like I was different because I didn't have a mom.

My entire life he busted his ass to make sure I always felt loved.

A wave of nostalgia washes over me when I see the pictures on the fridge. I picked up one of me on Bishop's back when I was sixteen. My fingers run across his face. These were some of my favorite memories of us. Before all the bad shit, when we were just Bishop and Vallie.

A smile builds on my face at the thought of him. Bishop and I were taking things day by day.

I think we were just enjoying the fact we were in each other's lives again. He wasn't rushing me to be with him. We just took it step by step. I couldn't be more grateful for that. It felt like we were friends again. Hell, he and Riggs were getting along. As much as oil and water can get along.

We'd grab pizza after practices or celebrate wins together. He'd come over some weekends for movie night with me and Riggs. We'd all fallen into this routine of being around each other again. It was almost if we had never left one another.

However, the only thing I hated about being around Bishop was not being able to touch him. God, I wanted him so badly, sometimes it physically hurt me. I wanted his hands on me, wherever, whenever. I missed them.

But I knew sex would make things messy. It did the first time we did this. I wanted it to be different this time. So I refrained from touching him, and my fingers kept me company at night.

"Girls! I'm in the attic!" I hear my dad yell, which makes me place the photo back on the fridge where I found it.

Riggs is looking through the cabinets for food, which is no surprise. I was happy to see it though. She had lost some weight after her hospitalization and the nausea from the medicine had made her lose her appetite. About three months into her therapy and treatment, it had come back. She looked healthier than ever.

Mentally too. There were still bad days here and there, but she was handling them better. She wasn't as secretive about them. She had gotten better at asking for help when she needed it.

To say I was proud was an understatement.

"Has your dad never watched a horror movie? Nothing good comes from being in the attic," she mumbles with a mouth full of chips.

“Not everyone watches scary movies for fun, Riggs. Come on, he probably has a ton of shit up there, and we promised we would help him go through it.” I walk towards the hallway. The ladder is already pulled down for us.

My dad wants to clear out the house a little, the Fury Organization was having annual charity donations, so my dad being my dad wanted to take part. Once or twice a year the Fury would host a donation center for toys, clothes, really anything you could think of to give to children in foster care or the homeless. Once a Fury, always a Fury.

“I haven’t been up here since I was a kid. I don’t remember it being this dusty,” I say once I make it to the top. I was twenty-two and I hadn’t been up here since I was six or seven.

My dad is going through a shelf of old boxes, when he turns to face me. I’d just noticed how much my dad had aged over the years. I think we all see our parents as who they were when we were little. We become blind to their aging. His once brown hair is darker, with flicks of silver running through it. The same with his beard. The crow’s feet on the corner of his eyes seem more apparent, and the wrinkles on his face are more abundant.

“Hey, Pops,” I say softly as I wrap my arms around his waist, pulling him into a hug which he returns. The familiar smell of Old Spice invades my senses, and it makes me feel more at home.

“Hey Sully girl,” he says back and I smile.

I pull away from our hug. “Hello, my other child,” he says to Riggs as he watches her look around with a skeptical gaze.

“All I’m saying is if I find some murder tapes, or a Ouija board, I’m fucking out.”

My dad and I laugh at her, always the drama queen.

“Where is Bishop? I figured he’d be with you guys.”

I make my way towards one corner of the attic, wiping my finger across the dust that lays on one of the many boxes. This is going to take forever.

“It’s his high school hockey coach's birthday. He is celebrating with their family in Alton for the weekend,” I call over my shoulder, opening up the cardboard and searching through it.

“How do I know what to donate and what to throw away?” Riggs yells across from me.

“If it looks broken, or unusable, throw it away. If it’s something of Valor’s, pictures or something, keep it, otherwise donate it,” Dad says, and I

nod, starting in my first box.

The boxes seem to unpack themselves as we all find a rhythm. I've mostly pulled out pictures of me as a baby, my old awards, report cards. It's like this area in the attic is memory lane. Every once in a while I'll show my dad one of the pictures and we will laugh.

I guess they mean it when they say you never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory. There were times when I would give anything to be a kid again. Despite everything, I had an amazing childhood. I got to travel all across the country with my dad, and there was never a moment I didn't feel loved by him.

I was one of the lucky ones.

I'd even found a picture of Bishop with cake all over his face that I sent to him. His response was simple, "Share that with anyone and I'll hurt you."

This evening had slowly turned into an enjoyable one. Riggs was playing Don't Stop Believing on her phone, and we had all joined into a harmonious singing group. My dad was playing the air guitar, while Riggs and I were on lead vocals.

The chorus was approaching and I was trying to keep from laughing at my dad long enough to try to hit this note. I looked down, noticing a medium sized rectangular box. I raise my eyebrow, wiping my hand across the top of it.

The dust reveals my name. *Valor* is written on the top with a black sharpie.

Now, I'm not sure what it was that told me this wasn't just any box of pictures, but I knew. Chills ran up my arms and a shiver went down my spine. The music had fallen on deaf ears as I lifted the lid off.

I felt like I was looking into a pit of darkness. It's where all the monsters hid, and I was staring at them. My fingers move shakily towards the contents, picking them up gently.

Open when you graduate.

Open when you fall in love.

Open when you need me.

Open when you want answers.

Open when you get your first period.

Open when...Open when...Open when...

"Valor! Where are you on the vocals?" my dad jokes.

A wave of nausea passes over me, and the emotions I have been burying for so long start to bubble up inside of me. Tears swell in my eyes, and I take my bottom lip between my teeth. The churn of my stomach makes me want to hurl.

I'm staring directly at my past, and it's staring back at me.

Hundreds of letters fill this box. All of them with a different label, all in the same handwriting. I'd never seen these before. I don't think I was meant to. My hands are shaking as I continue to look down at them.

She's touched these. Her fingers have grazed each of these letters to put them inside this box. My fingers are touching something she has come in contact with. It's the closest I have ever felt to my mom.

"Hey, Sully girl, what's wrong?"

My dad is behind me now, and I know it's only a moment before he realizes what I have found. I've never, not once been angry at my dad. I don't think I'm angry right now either, but I'm shocked. I'm upset, I feel robbed of this.

"Val—"

"How long have you had these, Dad?" I cut him off, placing the letters in the box, putting the lid on the top and picking it up from the floor. I stand with it in my hands, turning to face him.

"How long?" I repeat, my throat starts to tighten, sending a radiating pain to my chest. Tears start to fall, and I try to catch them with my sleeve.

"She sent them when you were twelve," he says with a heavy voice. The fun in his tone is gone now. In its place is a man who is trying to fight off his pain.

For years he has had these up here. Years. He knew all the pain I went through. All the questions I had and he had these letters from her for years and never told me.

"How could you?" I croak out. The pain in my voice is raw and gritty. I feel every word come up, it feels like razor blades.

Do you know what it feels like to be a stranger in your own mirror? To look at yourself and not know what the other half of you is? The older I get the worse it is. I look less like my dad and more like a ghost.

Dad clears his throat, running a hand through his hair, "You and I should have had this conversation a long time ago, Sully." He pauses. "As a parent you're supposed to have all the answers for your children, but this

was something I was clueless about. They didn't give me a manual for how to deal with this, Valor. I was just trying to protect you."

I want to scream, yell. I want to be angry at him. But I can't. Even after he hid this from me. I know my dad would never intentionally hurt me. I know he loves me. But it doesn't make this hurt any less. It doesn't take away this hurt.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to keep myself together,

"Your mom used to do that when she was upset too," he says it like we talk about her all the time. As if she is a topic we bring up all the time.

This was the most I'd ever talked about her. He never mentioned her, not her name, not what she looked like. Not a damn thing. The woman was a ghost to me.

"I know we should have talked about her earlier, Val. I should have said something about the letters. I fucked up, and that's on me. But you have to understand, I was terrified of seeing you hurt again. You were so little when she left and it nearly killed me watching how broken you were." His confession makes me want to cry, and it also warms my heart.

I had missed out on having a mother. Someone who could have shown me how to use a tampon, instead of Riggs having to. Someone who would have told me how to deal with my feelings for Bishop. She would have braided my hair tighter and helped me with prom if I would have gone. All of the things a mother was for, I might have had that.

But what did I have? I had a father who loved me. Who guarded me with his life. He showed me how to shoot a puck, change a flat tire, and how to be the woman I am today. He showed me how to be strong, to be independent, and how to love people. I didn't have a mom growing up, but I had a dad. I had an amazing dad.

"I'm sorry, Sully girl. I understand if you're mad at me, hell," he sighs, "I'd be mad at me too."

I stare at him for a moment. Not moving, not talking. Just looking at him. This hurts him too. I am his daughter and he can't do anything in this moment to help heal my pain.

I set the box down on a shelf and throw my arms around his neck. Letting the tears fall freely. He quickly wraps me in a hug, holding me there. He's my safe place, who I go to when I'm scared.

I inhale deeply, the smell of Old Spice wafting my senses reminding me of times when I was little. When I'd get scared or have a nightmare, I'd run

into his room. He'd just lift the blanket up, like he knew I'd be coming in there. I'd move my small body under the blankets and bury my face into his pillows, letting his scent put me to sleep while he played with my hair.

"I love you, Pops," I whisper into his shoulder, clutching onto him tightly.

"I love you too, Valor."

I slip out of his grasp, grabbing the box again. I look down at my name on the lid, wondering what she was feeling when she wrote my name on this. Was she crying? Did she miss me? I have so many questions that I never got answers to, and I feel like they are waiting for me just underneath this lid.

I hear Riggs clear her throat before stating,

"Someone want to let me know what the fuck just happened or..."

CHAPTER 20



Open When

VALOR - 22

I believe when we are born the universe has a plan for each of us. They have certain people placed in our lives, certain destinations we are meant to reach. They plan our checkpoints, but they leave us with choices. It's up to us to make our own decisions. Either way, we end up exactly where we were always supposed to be. Sometimes you choose the easy path, and other times it's more difficult.

For those who never believed in a certain kind of divine, a destiny, or supernatural power. How is it that the earth is a billion years old, and by a stroke of luck we ended up existing at the same time?

That is not luck. That is something beyond the human body. It's sometimes beyond the human mind as well. But every once in a while we catch a glimpse of fate working. We see the little people weaving the strings, measuring the length, connecting them.

We see the blueprint that the universe created for each of us, and the souls they mapped us with.

Dear Valor,

If you're opening this letter it means your dad finally gave them to you. How old are you now? Eighteen? Twenty -five? I doubt you're twelve. There is no way that stubborn father of yours gave them to you when I sent them.

I'm not sure where to begin so I guess we can just start with the obvious.

I know you probably hate me. That's okay, you can hate me if you want. I'm simply a random woman writing you these letters. You don't owe me anything, especially the title of mom. But I would like to write to you as a friend. A guiding hand when you need it. So don't think of me as your mother, think of me as a random pen pal. I want to tell you everything. The reasons behind why I left, and why I believed that leaving you was better than staying. No, I don't want you to feel sorry for me. I just want you to understand a little better. When I was a child, I didn't have a father. He was a random man my mother let use her body for fifty bucks and a pack of smokes. At least I could give you a dad who loves you, that is the only thing I did right by you, Valor...

My hands are squeezing the steering wheel for dear life. There are heavy drops falling from my eyes straight to my lap where the open letters sit. I was barreling down the interstate going faster than I should have, but it didn't feel fast enough.

The first letter I read titled *Open When You Need Answers*. It didn't do anything but leave me with more questions I'd read word after word for hours. I read about how she was sexually abused, how she started drugs, how she met my dad, and when she had me.

How I was this beacon of light for her and then one day she woke up scared she'd taint my soul. I read about how she got clean and she came to see me. She came to see me when I was five years old, but decided that I would have been better off without her. Isn't it funny how people think they can decide shit for you?

How can someone assume they know what's best for you? Tell me, how is leaving me behind what's best for me?

I sniffle, wiping the snot from under my nose with the sleeve of my shirt, trying to see the road through my watery eyes. My mind is swimming

with questions, doubts, and fears. I'm tired of feeling this way.

Dear Valor,

If you opened this it means you needed me and I wasn't there.

Was it a bad date? Or did you have your first period? Are you pregnant? I hope your dad told you to use protection. If I were there, I'd make you tea. I'd make you some chamomile tea with honey, lemon, and a splash of milk. I fully believe it heals all heartaches.

I know that a letter will not comfort you the way my touch or my voice would. I know that a thousand of these letters will never make up for a second of the pain I caused you, but I want you to know that I am here. Whenever you are ready, no matter your age, I will still be here. I'm ready whenever you are, angel.

Please know that letting go doesn't mean loving any less.

I love you. I miss you. I hope to see you.

-Annalise

Another word and another shot to my heart. I was being beaten down emotionally by words on paper. Open when this, opens when that. I wasn't just opening letters I was exposing the darkness in my soul I had tried to bury for years.

Tell me how is it that a woman named Annalise could cause me to drive four hours to an address I wasn't even sure she lived at anymore?

Well, I will tell you.

Fate.

I'd always known that Bishop and I had this bond. I just never knew how far back that bond went. You see, Bishop was always meant to be my B, and I was always meant to be his Vallie. If there was any doubt before, it was wiped clean now.

He'd always been my safe place, and my heart was a home built just for him. Everyone talks about how fate brings souls together, but no one ever talks about what happens when life rips them apart.

It's up to those souls to find a way back to one another. Every time we tried to find our way back, something got in the way.

Maybe it was the universe's way of telling us we didn't belong together. That we had outgrown one another. Our time was up.

Dear Valor,

I'm writing this because, well, I need a favor.

I know that I am in no position to ask you for anything considering everything, but this is important. Plus, you may not even read these, so what is the harm?

There is this boy, a boy who I have looked after for the past few years. A boy, very near and dear to my heart is a part of that hockey world you all have in Chicago now. His name is Bishop. Your dad will love him. He is a great player, with the work ethic of a champion. If there is a chance you read this, look after him, will you, angel? So if by some chance, you cross his path, and I have a feeling you will, take care of each other. You and Bishop will have a lot in common. He is a little older than you, but you share a common issue.

You both grew up without mothers. I know I will never make up for the brokenness you feel inside. I will never heal what I damaged. But maybe together you can heal. He tries to act stronger than he is some days, but I can see it on his face. He misses his mom, too. Take care of each other. Can you do me that favor? Lean on him when you are sad, and let him do the same when he is down. I think you two will be close friends if you do.

I have faith you won't let him get into too much trouble.

I miss you. I love you. I hope to see you.

-Anna

A blaring horn pulls me from my thoughts. I see bright headlights in my windshield causing me to gasp and jerk my steering wheel to the left. I take a breath, trying to drive and wipe the tears away. I decide that one near-

death experience is enough for the day and pull over to the shoulder of the road.

I lean my head on the steering wheel breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth. The shock of everything is hitting me full force. My head is pounding with questions, with pain, with confusion. The biggest one being,

Does Bishop know?

Does he know that after all these years my mother was the woman who helped raise him? That the mom I cried to him about was right under my nose this entire time? Does he know?

Was there a possibility that after all we had been through he was lying straight to my face? The thought alone made me want to hurl.

I look over at my passenger seat that is littered with envelopes and letters. I reach forward, picking up one of the few I haven't read. I rip the envelope open, wiping my tears so they don't blur the words on the paper.

Dear Valor,

You're in love.

For the longest time, I didn't know what love was. I had been through so much darkness. My past was filled with cruel memories. I loathed the idea of love. Then, I heard your heartbeat for the first time.

You brought light in my life I never knew I needed. I was smitten with you, the moment your small self showed up on the monitor. Your dad was so nervous until he heard the soft rhythm of your heart. You're the reason we both believe in love, Valor Lila.

I hope this man or woman, whichever, loves you the way you deserve to be loved. I may not know you the way I want to. I don't know what you like, or your favorite food, but I do know what your heartbeat feels like. I know your smile even as a child could power an entire world with light. You are special. You lead the broken home, my angel.

I hope they realize just how lucky they are to be loved by you.

I miss you. I love you. I hope to see you.

-Annalise

Did you love me though? You could have come back when I was older. You could have been there but you chose not to.

You don't leave the people you love. You don't abandon them without so much as a goodbye or an explanation. You don't leave your child to wonder where you went, to wonder what was wrong with them to make you leave. That's not love.

That's fucking abandonment.

I want her to say the words to me. I want her to look me in my eyes and tell me why she left. I don't want these bullshit letters. I need a mom, not this sad attempt of trying to be there for me.

She is going to look me in the eyes and tell me why she left me when I was two years old. Why I wasn't enough to stay.

I was a swirl of emotions, ranging from sadness to pure rage. I couldn't hold onto one without the other crashing into me. I was an angry sea of confusion, dark blue, and filled with so much wrath. I was the kind of ocean that swallowed incoming ships and made surfers go missing.

I continue my drive towards the small town of Alton, not stopping until I arrive at the house that corresponded to the letter's address. I sit in my car, parked on the opposite side of the home just watching like a fucking serial killer.

Bishop's car is the first thing I notice. There it is. The house he got to grow up in with my mother. A fucking two-story duplex with a wrap-around porch, and those stupid wind chimes hanging from the banisters. I was in the middle of a suburban neighborhood surrounded by houses with matching green lawns and customized mailboxes.

I was tired of waiting, of being in the dark about the person who made me. I wanted to see her with my own eyes. I wanted her to see me. To see the little girl she left behind. I wanted to see Bishop's face.

My feet move of their own accord across the road. Each step is another move closer to the answers I've been seeking my whole life. On the other

side of that door is the cold, hard truth.

No one can run from this anymore. We all have to face the music.

The walk up the sidewalk and to the door seemed to take hours. Once I am standing in front of the nicely made door, I hesitate before knocking.

Do I really want to do this? Do I want to risk hearing something worse than silence? Do I need answers so badly I'm willing to sacrifice my peace of mind? Do I want to know if Bishop has been lying?

I chew the inside of my cheek, leaning from one foot to the other on the front steps of this woman's house. I take a deep breath, closing my eyes to gather myself.

You can do this, Valor, you can do it. I peel my eyes open, and with one final breath, I knock on the door of my past, hoping, praying...

Whoever opens doesn't ruin my future.

CHAPTER 21



Fate Comes Knocking

BISHOP – 30

I'd always found a sort of comfort being in Anna and Eric's home. As a kid it was my safe place. When my dad was passed out on the sofa and our apartment smelled like burnt cigarettes, I'd come here. Anna would make dinner and it would fill the space with the aroma of spices, it felt like home.

Except now it feels empty because I know that my home is wherever the fuck Valor is. Buried inside of her, lying next to her, being in the same room as her, that's home. My soft place to land. The love I've needed my entire life. It was her.

These last few months have been simultaneously amazing and shitty.

My dick has passed the stage of blue balls. They might as well be shriveled up fucking oranges at this rate. I'm respecting her space, and her decision to take things slow, but my God. My right hand is going to fall off, but my imagination of Valor is soaring to new heights.

Do you understand how fucking difficult it is to be so close to the woman you love but never being able to touch her the way you want to?

It's a slow torture.

Whenever she is ready, I'm not letting her leave the bed for a year. A full fucking year. It has been to goddamn long since I have been inside of her. Inside of her is my fucking home, and she's locking me out in the cold.

Today has been a good day. I constantly tease Eric about getting old. The girls are at the age where all they care about is cellphones, and Anna is gliding around the house cooking like a maniac.

I've enjoyed the time away from the city, from the chaos of hockey, all of it. Eric and I are in the living room going over some of my old game footage. He'd tried to record every single game I'd ever played in, but his DVR couldn't handle that much space. Eric was the dad I always wanted. The dad I needed. I'd be forever thankful for him.

That's why when I drop this bomb on him, he's going to lose his shit.

"I think this year is going to be it for me."

I'd been thinking about it for a while now. I was thirty, and hockey just wasn't what it used to be for me anymore. At the end of this next season, I'd be thirty-one and I would have been in the NHL for fourteen years.

I still loved the game, and a part of me was always going to love the game. But I didn't have the fire in me I used to have. So much had changed, I had changed. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. I was going to be done with hockey after this season.

Eric looks like he saw a ghost, his mouth hangs open.

"Retirement? You're kidding! You still have four more years in you, Bishop. What's going on in that head of yours?"

I shrug, taking a sip of my scotch. "I just think it's time I start focusing on something else. I'm not the same fire chasing eighteen-year-old kid anymore." I try to make the conversation light, easy, even. But Eric is still trying to come to terms.

"I'm not dying, old man. Calm down, it's just retirement. It's not the end of the world!" I exclaim.

"Are you sure this is what you want, kid?" His face is serious. I think he believes I've lost my mind and maybe I have.

Maybe I was fucking insane for wanting to retire. But I was thirty, and truthfully I wanted to start my life with Valor. I'd had fourteen great years in the NHL. I loved every second of it. I'd never regret any of my time spent on the ice.

But it was Valor's time to shine for a little bit. From the moment I met her, she'd been at all of my games. Home and away. She alternated between

wearing my jersey and her dad's. Even though Anna and Eric couldn't make my games, I knew I had someone cheering me on in the stands.

I have had her support my entire NHL career. Now it's time for me to return the favor.

"Yeah, Coach. I'm sure."

I knew what I wanted out of life, and I wanted Valor.

"Are you having some sort of midlife crisis?" he asks with concern in his voice.

I laugh, shoving his shoulder. "I'm just getting old. We all have to toss in the hat sometime. I don't want to be out there with a walker."

He leans back in his chair with a sigh, still trying to process I suppose. I hear a loud knock on the door, which gives me the chance to allow my words to sink in with Eric. I stand up with a chuckle.

"I'll get the door, old man," I state with a smile on my face.

I waltz towards the door, grabbing the handle and pulling it open with the same smile resting on it. Then I realize who is on the other side.

You know when you're watching a movie, and you know the actor is walking into something he shouldn't? You're chanting over and over in your head, "don't go in there" or "don't open that door" because you know bad shit is on the other side of that door.

That's what this felt like. The irony is not lost on me.

"Valor?"

She lifts her head exposing her puffy face. Her bright green eyes are a steel gray color from all the tears that she has cried. How can one person be so beautiful no matter their state of emotion? When she's mad, she's hot as fuck. When she's happy, she's gorgeous, and even when she is sad, she manages to steal all the air from me.

My first thought is who died? Is Riggs okay? Is JR alright? Why did she drive all the way from Chicago to here? How the hell did she even know how to get here?

Her response to seeing me only manages to confuse me more.

"Do you know?" she remarks.

My face screws up in a look of confusion, what the hell is she talking about?

"Do I know what? What are you doing here? Is everything okay?"

"Do you know, B? Please tell me you don't know," she pleads with a look so full of agony that it makes me want to break apart.

I step towards her, and she moves back from me.

God, please don't do this to me. Fuck, don't let her pull away again. I won't be able to handle losing her again. This sick feeling rises in my throat. I just know that something fucking awful is about to happen and I can't stop it.

"Do you know she's my daughter? That's what she wants to know."

Valor is a fire of emotion, and Anna's voice is gasoline. I see Vallie's eyes move behind me, it's as if I'm not even standing there. All she sees is the woman behind me. There is a hurricane of emotions swirling inside of her. I can see it. I can see it in her eyes.

I turn slightly, seeing Anna standing there. The confusion in my head lasts for another second before a grim realization settles in.

It was like I had been struck by lightning. All at once these puzzle pieces started to fit back together, and everything starts to add up. I'm not sure if I just hadn't noticed the resemblance before, or maybe I had and chalked it up to a mere coincidence.

Until they were standing right in front of me.

They were a mirror image. Valor was staring at the older version of herself, and Anna was seeing what she looked like as a young woman. The long willow frames, their heart shaped faces, and soft button noses. They were carbon copy images of each other, and I'd never even fucking thought about it.

Valor was slightly taller than Anna, and Vallie had gotten her eyes and curly hair from her dad. But the color of it was the same fiery red as Anna's. I was stuck in a doorway of past and present.

Maybe I didn't want to believe this woman who had raised me was capable of leaving behind a child, and that's why I never connected the dots. I didn't want to admit to myself that ugly truth. But now I had to. I had to accept the fact that Annalise was Valor's mother and that she left her.

It's the reason they never made it to any of my games. I always assumed it was because Eric was coaching during the same season I played and he never got time to. But now I know it's because they didn't want to run into JR or Valor.

"So this is where deadbeat moms hide out?" Valor's voice is harsh, and I know that mood. She doesn't care what she says because she is hurting. She's in attack mode, and that means there is zero filter.

Anna flinches from the gravity of her words, but Vallie doesn't care.

Valor looks around the house, scoffing, “You know when I was kid I used to think you were trapped somewhere, and that’s why you couldn’t come to see me. Then I got older and I convinced myself you were sick or on drugs. I wanted to blame it on everything, but you. Even after you fucking abandoned me, I still gave you the benefit of the doubt and yet, here you are.”

Mine and Valor’s relationship had this connection because we both lost our moms so young. I had hated Valor’s mom since I found out what she did to her. She left. She wasn’t forced to leave, she chose to leave.

I was torn between my gratitude to Anna and my love for Valor. How was it that a woman I saw as a mother figure could hurt the woman I love so badly? She was the reason Valor couldn’t look in the mirror someday. It was why she was made fun of in school, and the reason she hated her birthday.

I hated Anna for Valor, but I loved her for all she’d done for me.

She tosses her hands in the air waving around, motioning at the house, “Here you fucking are in the suburbs with your perfect fucking family.”

Anna hasn’t moved from her spot in the hall behind me, she’s just standing there like a statue. I’d never seen someone so collected in a state of crisis before. This only enrages Valor more.

“You’re not going to say anything to me? After all these fucking years, all you’re going to do is stand there?”

I step onto the porch, attempting to wrap her in my arms, but she holds her hand up, “Don’t touch me,” she snaps.

Don’t touch me.

Don’t touch her? Is she insane? All I think about is touching her. Why does she think I knew about this? Does she honestly believe I knew after all these years? She thinks I knew about this?

“He didn’t know, Valor. We never told Bishop about you.” I turn to see Anna walking closer to the front door, so I automatically step in front of Valor.

Facing her so that my body acts as a shield in front of Valor. Anna’s face is the textbook definition of misery. I’m hurting her.

I love Anna. She helped raise me when I had no one. But come hell or fucking high water, I’ll defend the girl behind me. Anna had scarred her in a way no one should hurt a child. Every time Valor cried over her mother,

over not being enough, over not understanding why she left, it was because of her.

I wasn't going to let anyone hurt her anymore. I was sick and fucking tired of seeing my girl cry.

"Is that true?" Valor says from behind me. I turn quickly, facing her again. My hands cup her cheeks, lifting her head to face me. My thumbs smooth the skin underneath her eyes.

"I fucking swear to you, Vallie. I didn't know anything about this. I wouldn't lie to you. Tell me you know that," I whisper softly. I'm hoping that the mixture of my touch and my voice will be enough to calm her down. Just enough so that the neighbors don't call the police. Valor's temper isn't something the Alton police are equipped to handle.

Her green eyes search mine, looking for any ounce of deception. When she's happy with whatever she found, she pulls her face from my grasp and motions to Anna.

"Valor, did you read my letters?"

Letters? Why do I feel like I was sent into war without any weapons? What kind of letters?

Valor chuckles harshly, a bitter voice to match, "Yeah, all three hundred of them. And you know what, *Annalise*?" she spits her name at her feet like venom.

"I think they were all bullshit. Anyone can hide behind a piece of paper, but you don't get to do that anymore. I want you to look me in my face and tell me why you fucking left."

Valor shoulders through me, walking with her head held high towards Anna when I know she is weeping on the inside. That's what I love about her.

Her strength is unmatched. Valor doesn't need my protection. She never did. She can handle anything the world throws at her with a smile, she never needed my protection.

She just wants my support. After she's done having a brave face, and she wants to take off the mask of strength. I'm the person she breaks apart for. I'm the guy lucky enough to catch her when she falls. The one she runs to when the weight of the world gets too heavy.

The world has tried so hard to break her and here she is, standing there like she's never felt pain and never experienced loss.

My girl is a fucking warrior. She doesn't need me to be a shield, she just wants me to hand her a sword.

"Valo—" Annalise starts but doesn't finish.

"Mom, what's going on? Who's that?"

As if there wasn't enough fuel to Valor's figurative fire. More secrets just kept pouring out of a closet that was long overdue to be cleaned out.

Violet and Lily appear from the kitchen. They both looked like their dad, minus a few things. But you can clearly see that Anna's their mother. It didn't take a genius to figure that out.

This was a fucking tornado of bad timing.

"Girls, go to your room." Eric orders. They stare at Valor curiously as if their brain wants to make the connection but their heart won't let them. They disappear upstairs moments later and once again this emotional battle is back on.

"Oh this is fucking rich!" Valor announces. She runs a hand through her hair, and I know it's because she is struggling to mask her sadness with anger. Her shield is cracking.

"I have fucking sisters! How old are they? Seventeen? You waited all of a year after you came to see me to replace me? Am I that fucking disposable to you? Was I that easy to throw away?" Her voice starts to quiver at the end. However the octane of it is only growing. She is getting louder and louder with each discovery.

I walk towards her, dipping my head to meet her ear. I whisper softly,

"Vallie baby, calm down."

She whips her head around to me, glaring.

"Goddamnit, don't tell me to calm down!" she yells. Her chest is rising and falling rapidly, her cheeks are tinted a bright red, and her eyes are the brightest shade of green I have ever seen in my life.

Valor takes a deep breath looking back at Anna. They are inches away from each other. Mother and daughter. But in reality, they're two strangers who happen to share DNA.

"I waited twenty fucking years to hear what it was about me that was so worthless that made it impossible for you to tell me goodbye." She pauses, gathering herself.

"So I want you to look at me. I want you to look me in my eyes, at the daughter you created, and tell her why you left her when she was only a baby."

The silence that falls upon this moment is sinister. All that you hear is heavy breathing, and the soft howl of the wind outside. No one is moving; no one is talking. Eric and I are just standing there watching these two.

There is nothing we can do but watch and see what happens. We can't prevent the inevitable.

"Because I was a drug addict, Valor. Is that what you want to hear?"

I had never in my life seen Anna upset. I had never seen her angry or even close to it. She was always calm, collected, poised. I had assumed Valor had gotten her snappy temper from her dad, but the more I watch this the more I think differently.

I look at Eric with shock. I never knew any of that. I didn't know about the drugs or the reason they never came to my games. I felt betrayed. Lied to by the people who raised me. Was Anna really the type of person who could leave her child behind? Was she that hypocritical?

"I was a shitty mom from the start. I had postpartum depression after I had you. I was sick, Valor." She tries to lower her voice but it doesn't help much.

"When I got clean, I had every intention of becoming a part of your life. But I didn't want to shake you. You were happy without me." Her tone falls off into a sound of agony. "I had to sit back and miss all of your accomplishments. I missed everything, Valor." Her voice breaks off, and a whimper falls from her lips. Eric steps closer to her, but she holds her hand up to him. She wants to handle this on her own, like she should have years ago.

Tears spring in her eyes, but she tries to keep a straight face. "Don't you dare act like leaving you was easy. I miss you every day, and I hoped, I prayed that one day you'd come find me for yourself. That maybe we cou—"

"You should have fought for me!" Valor screams. Tears spilling from her eyes. "I was your daughter, and you should have fought for me!"

Valor was getting to say her piece to her mother. It was something I never got to do, but if I did have the opportunity, I would say the same thing.

Children are not responsible for keeping a parent around. It is the adult's job to fight for their kids, to protect them, to battle the hard things in life so they don't have to. You don't leave your children. You fight for them because they can't fight for themselves sometimes.

I stand behind Valor, close enough that she can feel me, but far back enough that I'm not touching her. I'm letting her know I'm here if she needs to fall.

"I know, Valor and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, angel," Anna cries. "I want to make up for it. I want to be a part of your life, Valor. We can work this out," she tries to bargain, but obviously she doesn't know how stubborn her daughter is.

"You should have made up for it when I wanted you in my life."

It's a brutal statement. I feel for Anna, I feel for the part of her that helped guide me as a child. But the piece of me that grew up without my actual mom, the part of me that lost his mother believes she deserves it.

I owe my entire NHL career to Anna and Eric. I owe my life to these two people. Without them I would be nothing. I would have grown up alone, with no one. Valor stands there for another moment, before turning around and walking towards her car.

I stare blankly at Anna. I don't know what to say at this moment. What could I say? Anna looks at me with a sad smile, wiping the tears from under her eyes.

My eyes move to Eric who looks like he wants to explain more, but I don't give him the time. I just head towards the only person who matters right now.

CHAPTER 22



Game On

BISHOP – 30

I should have been tired. I'd been up since eight in the morning yesterday, and now the sun was starting to rise. I should have been tired.

But I wasn't.

Instead I was lacing up my skates in the Fury locker room when nobody was there. The quiet around me was uncommon. It's usually bustling with noise from the managers, the coach, the players, the fans. This time it's different.

It was just me. I'd been inside this locker room thousands of times but it never carried the weight like it did now. I still had on jeans and a normal T-shirt so putting my skates on with this on made me feel like I was going on an ice skating date.

If someone would've told me fourteen years ago that I'd be in here, on a Saturday when there was no practice and no game, because a girl asked me to be, I would have laughed in their face.

However, when Valor asked if we could come here when we got back to Chicago. I said yes. I didn't hesitate, because this is where she feels at

peace and she needed that more than I needed sleep.

I refused to let her leave without me in the car. I didn't want her wrecking or doing something crazy. So I took the driver seat and drove us back to Chicago when we left Anna and Eric's house. The ride was silent. Only the dull radio in the background.

Valor just stared out the window the entire time. Not a word came from her until we entered the windy city. That's when I asked her if she wanted to go home or to my place. She simply looked at me and told me she wanted to be on the ice.

So that's where we went. I would have fucking taken her to Egypt if that's what would've made her happy.

After I lace up my skates, I sit there for a moment. I bow my head, shutting my eyes.

The image painted on my eyelids is haunting, like a ghost she follows me everywhere. My mind sketches the memory so perfectly, it hurts. She's sprawled out in my bed. The only light is from the sun beaming through the blinds. Giving me just enough shine to see her completely. My black sheets wrinkled under her contrast with her porcelain skin, like stars in the night sky, she twinkles.

Her slender arms rest above her head, and those honeysuckle lips are parted slightly. Her tall frame is covered with her favorite Led-Zeppelin T-shirt, and due to the placement of her arms, it's risen above her navel giving a damning view of the soft flesh of her stomach. The shirt has a hole in the lower-left corner that she fiddles with when she's nervous or wants to say something. Like a digital pencil, the image continues to be drawn out before me.

From the tips of her toes to her hip bones, her long legs look corrupt. They stretch for miles along the silk sheets, a pair of white panties cover my own personal heaven. She's the sin and the salvation all wrapped into one five-foot eleven package. Vallie's hair is draped inconsistently on the pillow.

It's the color of newly bloomed roses and similar to every other time it's untamable, with wild curls framing her heart-shaped face. I know it smells like lavender, feels like velvet. The freckles that decorate her face shift as she breathes, her almond-shaped eyes are closed, covered lovingly with jet black lashes. I know behind those lids are the rarest emerald jewels anyone has ever seen. If she were to open her eyes right now the sun would cause them to have sprinkles of yellow.

My eyes open due to the sound of my phone ringing. It pulls me from my thoughts, and I pick it up hitting the green answer button on the screen.

“Hello?”

“Do you know where Valor is? We haven’t seen her since last night and her dad is freaking out. She won’t answer her phone.”

Aurelia Riggs. Had this not been a serious conversation I’d interrogate the fuck out of her, and ask why the hell Nico Jett is fucked three ways to Sunday by her. Every time he sees me, Riggs always gets brought into the conversation.

How is she? Is she okay?

Nico has fallen in Riggs’ web, and he doesn’t want out any time soon.

I clear my throat. “Yeah, she’s with me. We are at the rink. Tell JR I’ll have her call him when we are done here.”

“Thank fuck. Tell her I’m whipping her ass for not answering her phone. We had a deal about that shit.” We both laugh and I inform her that I will tell her she sent that message along.

I was thankful that Riggs and I were able to get back to our brother, sister relationship we had when she was younger. I’d missed annoying the fuck out of her, and each day she seemed to be healing more and more. She was healthy. Everything had seemed to fall in place.

Until this moment when it seemed everything was now hanging by one loose thread.

“Bishop, I need you to do me a favor,” she says, and I can only imagine what she is going to say.

“What do you need, Aurelia?” I say jokingly into the phone.

“Don’t fuck it up this time, okay? She loves you, so don’t fuck it up.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, sighing. Riggs had always been protective of her best friend’s heart because she knew how damaged it was.

“I won’t, Riggs. I promise.”

The sound of the call ending rings in my ears, and I toss my phone on my bag. Running my hands through my hair as I stand up. I slowly make my way towards the tunnel to enter the rink, and chill bumps run the length of my arms.

The memories that fill this space are ones I’ll keep forever. The first time I stood here for my first professional hockey game. Running through here after we won my first Stanley Cup. It was the place JR told me he was retiring, and it was where I planned to tell Nico and Kai.

I moved through the dark hallway, breaking out onto the bright ice. My freshly sharpened skates glide on the surface below me. Hockey was my first love. When I first learned to skate and picked up a stick, I was hooked. I had never felt passion like that before. It started this burn inside of me that fueled me to want better for myself. There used to be no feeling like touching this ice.

Until her.

There she was, standing in front of the goal. Her back was to me, and her long hair was cascading down her back. It brought me back to when I first met her all those years ago. This is the place it all started. The day fate chose to cross our paths for the first time.

How fitting that it was on a hockey rink.

She'd been mine since she was seventeen. I owned her heart, her essence, her mind. I was there when she needed to cry. To remind her how strong she really was. I was who she ran to when she had good news and when she was happy. The person who always picked up the phone. Our future was hanging in the balance of this moment.

I wanted her. I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anything in my fucking life. I wanted early mornings with her grouchy ass. I wanted to make her coffee so she wasn't so hateful. I wanted to bring home Chinese food when she had a hard day. I wanted to keep extra ice in the freezer because I know how she loves ice baths. I wanted the house, the kids, all of it.

I owned her past. But I wanted her future.

"Can I ask you something, B?" she calls from her spot on the ice. I slowly start to make my way towards her.

"Anything."

"Do you believe in fate?"

The question makes me pause. I stop skating when I'm a few inches away from her. I know what she is asking. How is it that the mother who left her is the woman who replaced the mother role I needed? How was it that our paths were this intertwined? I sighed.

Did I believe in fate?

Had my mother never killed herself would I even have picked up a hockey stick? I would never have made it to Chicago. I would've become a lawyer or accountant, and I would have married my high school sweetheart.

I would have never met Valor, JR, Riggs, Nico, Kai, Anna, Eric. I wouldn't have any of them in this life.

So was that fate's plan all along? Or was it fate's apology for my mom?

If Anna would have never left, Valor would have grown up in a two parent household. Would she have played hockey? Probably, because that shit is encoded in her DNA. But where would Eric be? Would he have been willing to help a kid like me if he hadn't met Anna? Once again I never would have met any of the people I have in my life.

I clear my throat, skating closer to her. My front is pressed against her back. I love how warm she is all the time. Even on the ice, she's burning up.

"I believe that you were made for me. I believe that whatever created us took a piece of my soul and placed it in you. I believe that the spaces in me are the spots you fill, and the sun always shines a little brighter when I wake up next to you. I know that I have loved you before, I will love you in this life, and I'll love you in the one after. It's always us, Vallie."

I breathe the last words, leaning and tucking my head into the crook of her neck, inhaling her shampoo. One of my favorite places to be. "Whether that is fate, chance, or destiny, I don't know. But I plan to spend eternities with you figuring it out."

She slowly turns to face me, once she is all the way around, I tug on one of her curls in greeting. A smile on my face.

Valor is the girl who is too tall for some guys. The girl who isn't afraid to tell you how she feels; isn't scared to take the lead. She's the girl most guys are intimidated by in life, due to her success, her drive, her passion, her presence. The one who doesn't need a man to support her, but wants one by her side. She cusses, burps, doesn't care if she makes a mess with her food, laughs too loud, and loves hard.

And that is exactly what makes her so goddamn beautiful it hurts. It's why I'm hopelessly in love with her.

She's magic.

"Nothing makes sense anymore, B. Where do we go from here? What does this mean for our future?" she asks. I swallow roughly, licking my bottom lip.

Her fear is pulling her away from me. Her self-doubt. I'm not fucking losing her again. Not when I just got her back. I refuse. So I do the only thing I can think of. The only thing that makes sense to her right now.

"I'll play you for it."

The dullness in her eyes evaporates and a spark of excitement ignites. Got her.

“Play me for what?” she questions, with a quirk of her eyebrow.

“Your future.”

Laughter spills from her, that soft airy laugh I love. Her freckles move with every giggle, and I refrain from touching them. This is how I want Valor all the time. Laughing and free. I want her to be happy.

“I’m a lot better than I was when I was ten, Maverick.”

I smirk. “I’ll be the judge of that. I’ve still got some years on you, Sullivan.”

“What do I get when I win?” she questions with a confidence that has my cock stiffening. Jesus fuck, this girl has me twisted in a knot.

“If you win, I’ll leave you alone. You won’t hear from me again. I’ll go to New York and let you live your life, Vallie girl.”

The thought of living a life without her in it seems colorless. She’s the light in my day, and I know without her, it’ll all just be darkness.

“But,” I start, I grip her chin between my fingers, pulling her face closer to mine, “if I win, it’s game over. It’s you and me forever. No more just friends bullshit. You’ll be mine and I’ll be yours. The way it was meant to be.”

She peers up at me with those jade colored eyes that I adore and says nothing for a moment. The seconds tick by, and she just looks at me. When she pulls away from me, I furrow my brows. Then, like an act of fucking magic, she pulls her hair into a messy bun, and smirks at me.

“Game on, B.”

Game on indeed, Vallie.

CHAPTER 23



Play Like a Girl

VALOR - 22

My heart was pounding loudly in my chest. My hair was falling down, and my jeans were sticking to my body from the sweat. Playing hockey in street clothes was not a good idea.

Bishop and I were shoving each other back and forth at the boards for the puck that was trapped there. We were in his zone. All he had to do was win this battle for the puck and slip it inside the empty net.

His thighs bump into mine, and my butt pushes into his crotch as I shove him out of my way. The sounds of our sticks echo through the arena, and our heavy breathing is the only type of communication going on.

In a normal game, I wouldn't be focused on how the defender feels pressed against me. The sexual tension that surrounds us is something you can feel in the air. This wasn't just hockey. It was like our mating ritual.

Each bump of his skin on mine sends me into a state of frenzy. He shoves me hard into the boards, pinning me there with his stick across my back, which would definitely be a penalty in an actual game. His entire

front half presses onto my backside. I can feel how hard he is through jeans, and it makes me fight off a moan.

The puck is between my legs, but Bishop isn't paying attention to that. He's pressing himself into me, making my world go hazy. Every breath, I feel. Every shift, I feel. We are moving as one, but towards different directions.

Maybe that's how our souls split in the first place.

"Vallie," he whispers in a breathless smoky tone that makes me want to fall apart.

I squeeze my eyes shut, taking a deep breath. I slip my skate inward, knocking the puck away from us. I shove my back into his chest, giving me enough space to get away from him. I gather the puck on my blade and start shredding down the ice to my end.

Bishop gains on me quickly, circling around me so he is skating backwards in front of me. The net closes in on me, and then everything after that is slow motion. I drag the puck, causing him to break position to go for it, but I quickly toe drag around him. With the same motion, I pull it to my back hand and shoot the puck right inside the white net.

3-2

I won.

Game over.

I drop my stick, placing my hands on my knees trying to catch my breath.

The first time we did this all those years ago he'd won 3-1, and it nearly crushed my ego. We were playing the same rules, the same game, but the stakes were raised. This was the future of us on the line.

I turn on my skates, facing Bishop who is staring at me with a passive look on his face.

I was playing to win, to redeem myself for the first time we did this. I was proving a point to myself. Proving that I was the hockey player I always knew I could be. Bishop was fighting for our love, he was giving it his all, and I beat him.

Fair and square.

The prize that came with winning wasn't what I was battling for. I knew the moment he said what we were playing for what I wanted.

I wanted him.

I'd always want him.

My future belongs to him, and I think I always knew that.

We're both looking at each other trying to catch our breaths. We're covered in sweat, and the emotions coursing through both of us have never been higher. My eyes meet his, blue meeting green once again. An ongoing battle.

I move towards him quickly, and he meets me halfway. I toss my arms around his shoulders, pulling his head down to meet my lips. It's electric, just like the first time he kissed me. I moan into his mouth as he wraps his arm around my waist lifting me up off the ice.

I carefully wrap my legs around him, careful not to slice him with the blades on my skates. I move my mouth hungrily and he matches my energy. Our breath is huffing into each other's mouths as we move together.

"I don't have a condom, are you clean?" I mumble into our kiss. I wasn't going to fool myself; Bishop was one of the NHL's biggest stars. I wouldn't have blamed him if he slept with someone else. I had.

He smirks, running his tongue across my bottom lip. "The only way I wouldn't be is if you lied about being a virgin."

I pull away from the kiss slightly, looking into his eyes. There is no fucking way.

"You haven't slept with anyone since we broke up?"

He leans his forehead on mine. "What was the point? All I would see when I would be inside of them would be you."

My stomach flutters into a mess of butterflies. I press my lips back to his, replying with my body instead of my words. I dig my teeth into his bottom lip roughly, pulling it out and sucking on it. He groans into me, and I notice he has been skating with me in his arms. We have arrived at the penalty box. He shoves the door open with his free hand and lays me on the bench.

My hair spills around me, and I whine when he pulls away from me.

"I've got to get these skates off you. I love you, but I'm not into knife play." His voice is masked with lust, but it doesn't distract me from the fact, he just told me he loved me.

Instead of my heart exploding in my chest, the pieces start to fold back together. Bishop and I had always had a backward relationship. We never did anything in order. We had started as two broken people and throughout the years we had healed each other.

“Did you just say you loved me?” I say as he hurries to get his skates off, once they are both off, he starts undoing mine.

“You’re surprised?” he says with a smirk on his handsome face as he looks up from between my legs as he slowly takes off my laces.

I shrug, fighting a blush as heat surges to my core. I can’t think of anything else when he is down there like that. My body is in one mood and in one mood only when Bishop is kneeling between my thighs, and that’s climaxing.

“You’ve never said it before,” I say softly.

His eyes zero in on me. He looks like a rabid dog craving a bone, ravenous.

Bishop’s starving and I’m food.

His lips are tilted in that panty dropping smirk, it causes his eyes to squint slightly, and the left side of his face rises. I watch his tongue drag across his bottom lip. It’s dangerous.

“Vallie baby, I’ve been telling you I love you for years now.” His voice is like lava on my skin, it pours across my body leaving me scorched.

Once my skates are off he goes for my pants, undoing them quickly and jerking the material down. His hands run the length of my legs, when his hands reach my waist he pulls me on top of him. Bishop’s body is straddling the bench and I’m straddling Bishop.

My fingers work to release him from the material in his jeans. My hand grips his thick member, rubbing up and down softly. The veins are bulging on both sides, and hot pre-cum leaks from the tip.

Bishop’s head dips into the space between my neck and shoulder, leaving kisses along the column of my throat. Soft moans filter through the air as his gentle lips pepper me in open-mouthed kisses.

“I tell you I love you when I tug on that curl of hair every time I see you,” he whispers. The mixture of his voice and his mouth on me has my body jerking forward. I want him inside of me so badly. Every atom in my body is pulling me closer to him.

I pull my panties to the side, lifting my hips and using my hand to slide him back and forth over my wet slit. The tip of his cock teases my entrance every time, and it has us both on the edge.

“I tell you in the way I kiss you,” he groans in my ear as his mouth sucks on the sweet part of my neck where my shoulder and throat meet.

I slip him inside of me, shocking him for a moment. The head of his dick is encased with my warmth, and I moan at the feeling of him being inside of me. I look at his face, his eyes are nearly black, they are consumed with so much lust.

With one smooth movement, Bishop's hands grip my hips and he slams me down onto his shaft making me scream in ecstasy. Every inch of him is buried inside of me. I can feel him so deep inside of me. Not just physically, but everywhere.

An animalistic groan leaves his mouth. "I tell you every fucking time you look down at that necklace of mine."

We both still have our shirts on. We're both sweaty and dirty from the game we just played, but we don't care. It doesn't matter. We can barely contain our need for each other. His hands move my hips up and down on his dick aggressively.

This wasn't how normal couples made love.

But it's how we did. We were consumed with so many emotions, that it was just hands, sloppy kisses, sweaty bodies, and loud groans of pleasure. We weren't slow, and it wasn't easy. It was hard and fast. We had waited for what felt like eons to be with each other like this.

Every time he slams my hips down, he lifts his waist up meeting in the middle to pound into me mercilessly. Over and over again. The sounds of our skin slapping together echo off the walls of the arena, but it only fuels Bishop to thrust harder.

"This is my home. Buried inside of you, it's my home. Do you hear me, Vallie?" he commands in my ear. I nod helplessly.

Bishop wasn't just making love to me with his body, but he was using his words. Every stroke of his dick was matched with either a sweet or demanding word. Combining to make the most addictive feeling. I was euphoric.

The feel of my juices sliding between us and coating his thighs has my body aching for release. I'm right on the edge of falling into a blissful orgasm. The tingle in my toes has worked its way up to my stomach, and I'm so ready to explode.

"*Bishop, Bishop...*" I moan over and over again.

With one more shove inside of me, he bottoms out inside of me splitting me in half. I clench his cock tightly between my walls as my climax takes

over my body. My toes curl, and I arch my back as shock after shock of pleasure washes over my body.

I hear him groan the word goddamnit as he spills himself inside of me, tightening his grip on my hips. His head is bowed, and those blond locks I love are covered in sweat. His jaw is flexing and his eyes are shut.

I know that guys are supposed to have these ugly climax faces, but Bishop's isn't. It just makes me want to go again so I can see that face. The muscles in his face are flexed, and his jaw looks sharp enough to cut diamonds.

But my favorite part is when he opens his eyes, they are that turquoise blue shade I'm obsessed with. There is so much warmth and happiness inside of them. I press my lips to his, in a quick kiss. Before pulling back and looking at him with a tired smile on my face.

Through all the mess, all the trauma, all the shit life threw at us, we always seemed to find our way back to each other. We had made our way back. We were both home.

I finally say the words I have been waiting to say, the words that I have felt since I was only ten years old.

“I love you so fucking much, Bishop Maverick.”

EPILOGUE



YEARS LATER

There is something to be said about souls that meet time and time again. No matter the situation they end up in or how far apart they fall, they always come back to each other. The universe is telling them, ‘Stop. You are meant to be together.’

“Valor, angel, are you alright?”

I turn my gaze to the woman in front of me, and I smile. The years have been kind to her complexion; she doesn’t look a day over thirty. I hope I age the way she does. The older I get the more I see how similar we look. Down to the freckles on our faces.

Now when I looked in the mirror, I no longer saw half of me, there was no longer a stranger standing in front of me. It was just Valor.

There isn’t a right way to heal broken relationships. If you believe it’s worth it, you pick up what pieces you can, and you try to move forward to something better. That’s what Anna and I did.

I told her from the start that I wasn’t calling her mom and she was fine with that. I still don’t call her mom. I’m no longer bitter or holding a

grudge, but our relationship was mended into a friendship more than a mother and daughter situation. I was already an adult by the time I allowed her back into my life, so she couldn't exactly discipline me, now could she?

It took me eight months before I would even sit down and have a conversation with her. Even when I did that, I could barely say three words without wanting to scream at her. But slowly, I accepted that our past was never going to change. I either had to move on from it or leave her out of my life completely.

Through the years we met once every month, we would meet halfway at a little coffee shop and talk. It started as a way for me to vent my problems to her, but once a month turned to two, and so forth and so on. Without realizing it I'd developed a friendship with Anna, an understanding I never had before.

She'd shown me a book of newspaper clippings, print outs, and photos of me over the years. Every time I was in the media she had it documented in a scrapbook. Every year on my birthday she burnt a candle, and put the wax on a piece of paper in the book. It was her way of supporting me from afar.

The child in me still hurts that I never experienced the things a normal kid did with their mom. But I have forgiven her. I guess you could say that I got a new perspective. I had someone new come into my life that changed my mind.

"I'm fine, just dozed off. I didn't get much sleep last night," I explain softly, rubbing my temples to prevent the oncoming headache I knew I would be getting soon.

"Did Bishop keep you up?" she says wiggling her eyebrows and I snort.

"The better question is when doesn't he keep me up," I joke with laughter. She joins me in a laugh and I take a sip of my coffee.

I had matured a lot over the years. I had learned what letting go meant. I learned how difficult it was for her to leave me. A maternal instinct isn't something that can be easily broken. It's something that is wired in you when you find out you are expecting a little one. They grow inside of you, they find shelter in your body, and it is your job to protect them.

"How are Violet and Lily? Is Lily still heartbroken over that guy? Vi is still buried in her books, I assume?"

She sighs, biting the inside of her cheek, chewing it softly.

“Lily has moved on to the next target boy. I’m so worried she’s going to truly get attached to someone and end up devastated. Not to mention she is going to send Eric into cardiac arrest with the boys she picks. Violet is still Vi, refuses to do anything but study for LSATS.”

I chuckle. Lily was a mess, for lack of a better word.

My sisters could not be more opposite of each other. Violet was soft spoken, quiet, enjoyed reading more than talking, animal lover, and didn’t care about anything other than becoming a politician. She had a strict plan, she wanted to become a lawyer, and then she wanted to get into politics. Bishop bugged her all the time about who was going to be her first ‘man’ when she was president, and she’d simply state that assuming she needs a man to run the country is sexist.

It effectively shut him up.

Lily is loud, energetic, hates anything school related, and falls in and out of love so quickly it makes my head spin. She talks all the time about how she's waiting for that love that will sweep her off her feet. The knock the breath out of you love, the love Bishop and I have. She calls us ‘couple goals.’

Like Anna, I was afraid one of these days Lily was going to fall head over heels for a boy who doesn’t feel the same and it’s going to crush her. As much as her hopeless romantic attitude annoys the shit out of me, I don’t want to see her be a cynic.

“Hopefully she finds her prince charming, and I’m already planning to wear ‘vote for Violet’ buttons when she announces she is running for president,” I say happily.

I heard the bell on the coffee shop door, and I didn’t even have to turn around to know he was here.

When my skin prickled with anticipation was the moment he stepped into the room, I always knew, because things with Bishop weren't just things you saw with your eyes.

He was something you perceived in every sense.

I could smell him, the same cologne he'd used since he was eighteen. I could hear his weighted footsteps, heel-toe, heel-toe. I hear the way his shirt moves against his body when he takes a deep breath.

Mostly...mostly, I felt him. His presence was a zippo that lit me on fucking fire. From the bottom of my feet all the way to the crown of my head, it was all burning for him, burning for him like it did when he first

touched me, when he smiled at me, and now all these years later he is still affecting me this way.

He consumed me, he was all the oxygen in the entire galaxy, and I was one tiny flame. I couldn't breathe, couldn't function correctly. I turn softly, just my head. My eyes see him entering the doorway and my chest throbs when I see him.

Bishop is beautiful.

I know I should describe him as hot, or smoldering, or sexy, something masculine, but it just isn't right. It's not that he isn't sexy, because he can inspire lust, trust me, it's just...

He inspires awe and admiration, a remoteness that is pretty to look at, it's inaccessible. It evokes an introverted depth, a longing, dreamy quality. He's like a dream, a ghost, like when you reach out to touch him he'd disappear into your imagination.

His hair is pushed out of his face grazing his broad shoulders in soft waves with a few pieces dangling in front of his face, but I know soon he'll take those large hands and press it back. He cut his beard about a week ago, so a five o'clock shadow brings out his jawline.

My hand instantly reaches up to graze the catholic pendant dangling from my neck. All these years and I still haven't taken it off. The chain snapped a few months ago and I nearly had a breakdown. He kissed my forehead, and told me he would fix it. So he bought me another chain and slipped the pendant on it.

This necklace is so much more than just a necklace. It's a constant memory of all we've been through, all the universe did to make sure we ended up together. Anna had given him this once, on his birthday, and then he gave it to me. Somehow fate new I needed a piece of my mother.

He's so different from when I first saw him. He was fresh-faced, young, full of life. He wasn't the same young man I met all those years ago. Our history, our past were the aging marks on his face.

He looked hardened from the world, stronger, less likely to break than when we were young. My heart was running a marathon; it would never win inside my chest when his bright blue eyes met my stare.

When he sees me, his face turns into a wicked grin that makes my stomach erupt in butterflies. He sends me a sly wink, and I roll my eyes at his goofiness. He is wearing those jeans that make his ass look great and a T-shirt with the name of the high school he coaches at.

Bishop retired the year we got together, and he picked up coaching a few months later. He had been offered the position at a few big colleges and even an NHL team. But he turned them down. He wanted to stay near home for a little while. He wanted to support me and that's exactly what he does every day of our lives.

Our romantic moment is interrupted though, I watch as a small body pushes past him and comes barreling towards me.

“Momma!”

I never knew a love so small, yet so big in my life. I stand up, squatting down and holding my arms out for her to land in. Her curly hair bounces with every step. It's soft red, with bits of natural blonde woven in it. My dad calls her his Shortcake. Those big blue eyes are staring at me like I hold the world, and to her I do.

She smashes into my chest and I laugh. I pick her small frame up, spinning her around in my grasp. I blow strawberries in her neck, making her giggle.

“Momma, quit! Momma!” she begs with more laughter.

I always loved the nickname Vallie, but I love being called Momma more. It's my favorite title. I had won a lot of things in my life. High school awards, college accomplishments, I'd won two Stanley Cups, and I was working on my third. I'd won the Calder award for Rookie of the Year, and I had won the Hart Memorial Trophy three years in a row.

But nothing felt like being this little girl's mommy.

This was my last year in the league. I always thought I'd be upset leaving hockey, but I was looking forward to spending more time with Dalia. She was growing so fast, and I was afraid I was missing too much while I was on the road.

I understood why my dad retired now. As a kid I thought he was crazy, I wasn't going to retire until I was forced to. Then I had Dalia and I realized there was nothing more I wanted in this life than to be her mom.

When we found out I was pregnant I nearly passed out, and when we found out we were having a girl I was terrified.

Me? The tomboyest of them all? Having a girl?

I didn't know how to braid or do makeup. I hated Barbies. I had no idea how I was going to do this. Until I realized that my dad had shown me how to love your children and that's all that mattered. They want to feel loved and cherished.

Plus, my munchkin hates having her hair braided and prefers being outside than playing with Barbies. So I got lucky on that part.

“Did you have a good day, Dalia Reid?” I kiss her forehead as I look at her in my arms.

Dalia Reid Maverick. Reid was after my pops, but Dalia? Dalia meant fate. Because that’s exactly what she was.

“Yes! I had the bestest day ever, Momma! Pop-Pop and Ni-Ni gave me all kinds of candy!” she says excitedly.

I laugh, looking up at my husband who is standing beside me. He tugs one of my face framing curls and leans in to peck my lips.

“Lemons...” he hums softly. It’s a quick kiss, like a habit. It’s something we do every day. We kiss every morning, before we leave each other, when we go to sleep, throughout the day.

“Remind me to punch your dad when she won’t go to sleep tonight and I can’t get laid,” he jokes, and I punch him in the shoulder. He taps my ass as he walks by me to hug Anna, once my wild daughter realizes Anna is here she climbs out of my arms and rushes towards her.

“Hi, Na-Na,” she says softly as she hugs her.

My sweet girl has a heart of gold and loves showing it. Allowing Anna to be a part of Dalia’s life wasn’t a hard choice. We had already mended our past wounds, and Eric and her had been the only parents Bishop ever really had. So they became Na-Na and Gramps. Violet and Lily were aunties and my dad and his wife Melisa, were Pop-Pop and Ni-Ni.

My dad had married a few years ago. She was sweet, and she loved my dad. I hadn’t seen him that happy in a long time. As long as he was happy, so was I. It took him three months of dating her to tell me about it! I think he was nervous I wouldn’t approve, but I didn’t mind. He was a grown ass man living on his own, he needed to find someone.

When Bishop and I walked into my dad’s home hand and hand, I thought B was going to pass out.

“Why are you freaking out? It’s just my dad. You’re making me nervous!” I say as we walk up to the apartment door. His hand is in mine, and it’s sweaty.

“Because your dad is going to kick my fucking ass, that’s why.”

The entire ride over here he hadn’t said a word to me, that’s how nervous he was.

“Hey, look at me,” I say softly, turning to face him. He stops walking and sighs, but he doesn’t look at me. So I reach up and grab his face, forcing him to meet my gaze.

“Do you love me?” I ask.

“More than anything,” he replies with zero hesitation. It makes my head spin with happiness at how sure he is of his love for me.

“Then my dad isn’t going to kill you. He just wants me happy, B. You know that,” I assure him. I bite the inside of my cheek, as he reaches up to tug on one of my curls. Slowly he leans down placing a kiss on my forehead.

Once we reach the front door and I knock, I think Bishop is ready to pass out. I squeeze his hand for reassurance, and when my dad opens the door I grow nervous as well. What if he doesn’t approve? Is the age gap too much for him? Would he make me choose between him and Bishop?

He leans on the door frame, looking at our interlocked fingers, and then to Bishop’s face. Then he looks at me. There is no emotion on his face, I can’t read him. My fingers twitch as I jump to explain ourselves, but I don’t get the chance.

“Well it’s about fucking time. Now stop standing there and come inside so I can grill Bishop about his intentions with my daughter.”

Apparently our attraction wasn’t a secret to others around us.

A smile stays on my face as I watch Bishop tug on Dalia’s curls playfully, and my heart warms. I could cry at the happiness my life brings me. Bishop is the best daddy in the world. He spent three days on YouTube learning how to braid. Do you understand how many times he watched those videos? And now Dalia doesn’t even like her hair braided.

He was her hero and he would do anything to make her happy. I could not ask for anything more in my life than I have right now. I ended up surrounded by the people I was always supposed to be with. My career was great, my husband loved me, and my little girl was happy. You can’t really ask for more than that, can you?

So looking back on everything, knowing that this started because a boy and a girl who loved hockey. We didn’t have the most conventional start. It wasn’t a once upon a time, but we did get the happily ever after.

This time, fate got it right.

Buzz* *Buzz

I pull my phone from my pocket, answering it with a quick hello.

“I don't care where you are. Or who the fuck you are with. I need you at my house in the next twenty minutes.” My brows furrow together.

“Riggs, what’s wrong?” I say quickly, looking at Bishop and waving my hand towards him, meaning we have to go right now. He picks up Dalia, and Anna walks off to pay. Bishop, with Dalia in his arms, walks towards me.

“My water fucking broke! There is water everywhere, and I’m in a damn robe. I can’t find fucking anything. I swear to God, this child is going to be the death of me and she isn’t even here yet!” she cries into the phone. I can hear her waddling around her house, and I hear things falling. I assume she is throwing things.

“And where the hell is your husband?” I question, Bishop is still staring at me with concern, and Dalia is playing with his hair.

“In fucking Canada getting ready to play!” she seethes. I hear her say a few more cuss words. “I hate fucking hockey, fucking hate it.”

I guess they meant what they said,
All is fair in Love & Hockey.

THE END

Want to find out who melted the ice surrounding Aurelia Riggs’ heart?

Find out in the second book of the Fury standalone series.

Coming 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



My dad has always called me his Wild Child. He raised me on his own my entire life. There were times I know I made it impossibly hard for him. However, he did a great job of being both parents. I never really had anyone to show me the ‘girly’ things in life. I started dying my hair a rainbow of colors when I was a freshman in high school. By my junior year, I already knew what my first ten tattoos were going to be. I liked rock and roll music, and this kind of spirit that wasn’t made to be tamed. Valor has a lot of me in her. All of her pain, all of her struggles, I experienced with her. Love & Hockey was a slow burn kind of novel for me. I’ve wanted to be a writer for most of my life. Valor and Bishop came to be gradually and then all at once. Their story will always be one of my favorites because it was my first. Their story is about how sometimes? Fate gets it right.

I have so many people I wanna acknowledge and thank. So bare with me. I used to skip over these when I was a reader, but now that I’m on the other side I realize that this is the most important part of the book. This shows readers what inspired these novels.

First and foremost, best friend, my love. Thank you for your undying support. Even when it got a little crazy you reminded me why I started writing in the first place. I love you to the stars, Fletch.

My friends. I'm blessed to be the wild one in our little gang. Thank you for allowing me to spread my wings and discover myself through writing.

To my dad, the inspiration behind JR, because of you I'm the woman I am today. You taught me how to reach for the stars, well dad, this is me climbing the ladder to the sky.

To Morgan, you were the first person I told about this book, and you never doubted me for a second. That's how you have been my entire life.

To a special group of women. This book would not have been possible without The Muses. Xee, Melisa. And Laurie. You all keep me forever inspired, always laughing, and on track when my plot goes off the rails. I can not thank you enough for everything you've done for me, and for Love & Hockey. From the bottom of my heart, I'm so grateful for you three.

To Shauna, my soul sister! Thank you so much for being the Obi-Wan Kenobi to my Anakin Skywalker (Minus the whole Darth Vader thing) You believed in Love & Hockey from the first page, I can't thank you enough for all you've done for me!

Finally, to the readers. Each and every one of you. Thank you for taking this journey with me, it was crazy, trust me I know. I hope you follow me on even more adventures, I promise I'll make it worth it.

With all my love,

MJ.

If you or someone you know struggles with self-harm, please contact this number,

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-8255

You are strong and you are not alone.

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