



Holdout

JACQUELINE SNOWE

SARINA BOWEN'S HEART EYES PRESS

HOLDOUT

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HeartEyes
 **Press**

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This one's for Parker

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Beggars couldn't be choosers. It would be fine. Probably. I chewed the inside of my cheek and traced the rim of my coffee mug, weighing my options of *which one is worse*. The smell of coffee filled my lungs as I took a deep breath, gazing around the café. The constant sound of happy chatter eased my mind a bit, and I leaned back onto the wooden chair.

The choice narrowed down to agreeing to this very detailed ad, or staying in the dorm with my live-on-the-edge roommate. The temptation of joining her on the wild side was too much, and with the scholarship being my lifeline to school, I couldn't chance having it taken away. My purple nails made a small clacking sound on the wooden surface of the table, and the muscles around my neck pulsed with tension.

Another *mess-up* in the dorms meant losing the scholarship, which wouldn't only defeat my dream of becoming a counselor, but it would leave me homeless. That wasn't something I ever wanted to experience, and god, I could only imagine how my older brother Michael would react. He'd lose it, mess up his scholarship on the team, and try to take care of me.

Yeah, that could *not* happen.

I stared at the ad in front of me.

Searching for roommate who is:

Clean

No parties

Takes school seriously

Not a sports fan

Split rent

No noise

Can move in ASAP

I was clean-ish. I never let my milk dry up in cereal bowls, but I'd been known to leave a shirt on a chair. Still, that was an easy fix. No parties was a no-brainer, since they'd gotten me into trouble in the first place. I took school very seriously. So seriously, I was searching to get out of my bad dorm situation one week into the year when every lease and dorm was taken. So yeah, not a problem.

Not a sports fan. Hmm.

I sucked in a breath and took creative liberty with that one. I *only* watched hockey because my brother was a senior on the Moo U team. It wasn't like I was a fan—hockey had been shoved in my face since birth and part of who we were as a family. Hockey. It was a way of life, ingrained in who we were. So, I *technically* wasn't lying.

Moving in ASAP was the least of my problems. It would be impossible to find a place closer to campus than this three-story house. Every apartment was booked or already leased so I couldn't be choosy. Getting out of the dorms was essential, and if I had to live in a closet for the year, so be it.

I'd shoved my stuff into two duffel bags after our RA did room checks, and I'd sweated so much I had pit stains on my red shirt. She didn't find my roommate's stash of weed or whiskey, but the sheer panic, no, *terror* causing my body to freeze wasn't worth it. I refused to live like that all year. Not with my academic scholarship on the line. I already had a slap on the wrist from the year before, and one more incident would ensure I'd be out of school, alone, and without a plan.

Yeah, that'd devastate my brother.

With a quick stretch over my head, I tilted my neck to the right and left, getting two cracks in before I typed out my response.

Hey Daniel,

I'm in. Where do I send the deposit?

The email sent, making a whoosh sound, and I waited. If I could move in, get settled, and gain my ground, *then* I would tell Michael. Not a second before, because I didn't need him playing the father card and trying to take care of me or freaking out. Either option was just as likely, and I needed my brother, not the parental role he tried to fill after we lost our parents.

My email pinged in less than a minute, and I took that as a good sign.

Ryan,

Here is my account. Once the payment is received, I'll set the key under

the doormat. I'll be out this afternoon, but feel free to move in. Your bedroom is empty. Text me if you run into any issues.

D

Thank you, baby Jesus. I did it. I found a new place when there was nothing available and all without bothering Michael. I relaxed into the wooden chair. He needed to stop viewing me as helpless, and getting my own place would be the first step. Money would be tight until I could find a way to make a few dollars, but I had at least a month to worry about it.

The scholarship covered room and board in the dorms and classes—not off campus living, so this new arrangement meant I needed a job.

“Good news, huh?” My barista, Hannah, walked by with another glass of water. Our campus on the northeastern part of Vermont was beautiful, and the summer air breezed through the open windows. She owned the small café—*Beans N Books*-- attached to our school’s library. “Your smile is bordering on terrifying.”

“Like *Joker* terrifying or you’re so jealous of my smile, it terrifies you?” I replied, jutting my chin to the chair across from me. She sat and yawned for a good ten seconds before she shook her head. Her red hair hung loose around her face in an effortlessly beautiful way. “Hannah, be honest with me,” I said, leaning onto my elbows. “Do you live in the café? Like, is there a sleeping bag in the back room or something?”

“It would save me money on gas if I did.” She rubbed her upper left arm. The bags under her eyes seemed darker. She took a deep breath and leaned onto her elbows. “I need good news, so, the smile. Explain it.”

“Found a new place to live,” I said, appreciating the fact our friendship was simple. She was in her late twenties but definitely had an old soul. We were both too busy to hang out beyond the café, but we offered each other an ear, someone to talk to about life. I knew about her struggle being a newly single mom and how her son’s father was awful, while she knew about my scholarship and how much was at stake if I lost the money.

Trusting each other without showing every card or vulnerability was my safe zone. It was where I kept most people besides my brother, and I was okay with that.

She arched one eyebrow, a talent I always wanted but never had, and said, “Is it close to the cafe?”

“Six blocks, don’t worry, I’ll still be here every day annoying you and drinking all your coffee.”

She rolled her eyes, but her lip quirked up on one side. “When do you move in?”

“Tonight.”

“Uh, that’s fast.” She tilted her head and frowned, worry lines forming around her eyes. “Shouldn’t you meet them first?”

“There’s nothing else in my price range. Nothing. It’s not ideal, but I doubt Captain America needs a roommate, so I can’t have it all.”

She snorted and rubbed her palms against her eyes, reminding me again of how tired she looked.

“Hannah, seriously, you need some time off.”

She blew out a breath and looked a bit helpless. “All my workers are temps or students who are here for a few months at a time. I can’t trust them.”

An idea took root in the back of my brain, starting as a little flicker, and it grew. “Hire me.”

“What now?” She blinked, slowly, and her nostrils flared. “Hire you?”

“You’ve heard me complain about needing a job the past thirteen months, and I think I can manage my time better this year. You know me more than my roommate did. I’m trustworthy and loyal as hell.” The flicker billowed into a fire in my mind, and I clapped twice, making her jump. “We can compare your schedule with your kiddo and my classes and arrange it so you get some damn time off to rest. Seriously. This is a totally appropriate example of quid pro quo.”

Her pale brown eyes crinkled on the sides as a smile stretched across her face. “Yes. Yes. This could work.”

“No lie?”

“I trust you. Really.” She leaned into the chair and closed her eyes. “The thought of taking a night off makes me want to weep with joy.”

“Let me get settled in at my new place today, and I’ll be back tomorrow with my schedule and planner.” My words tended to slur together when I got excited, partly due to my slight lisp but also because my manic energy caused my brain to move faster than my mouth.

Hannah sighed and reached over to pat my hand, making me freeze. Overt displays of emotion got me queasy and nervous, but I remained quiet when she said, “Thank you, Ryann. I... I need this.”

“You’re welcome.”

She removed her hand, my muscles relaxing, and she got up as a line

formed by the counter. “Good luck with the new roommate tonight.”

I winked at her and logged back into my laptop, pulling up my bank and sending the required amount to Daniel. It was only then that I realized *Daniel* was not Danielle. Daniel was typically a male name, but their gender didn’t bother me. I grew up with hockey players and Michael. My worry stemmed from the typo I missed in the email.

Daniel had typed Ryan. With one N.

Not Ryann, with two.

The second N was essential.

Shit.

He might think I’m a dude.

The momentary bliss of finding a place evaporated, and nervous energy had me biting my fingernail and chewing on the skin until I tasted blood. I could send the money to at least guarantee a place for thirty days, but I needed a contract first.

Daniel,

To protect myself, I’d like a contract that can be used in court.

R

R seemed honest enough, right?

Wouldn’t even know how to write one up. We’ll figure it out tonight. I really need the help with half the rent, and I’m assuming you need a place, so it’ll be fine.

He wasn’t wrong. I did need a place, so I had to take a chance that this wasn’t totally going to blow up in my face. My knee bounced up and down as I said to hell with it. I sent him the money, closed my laptop, and packed up my bag.

Daniel was going to have a roommate for thirty days, that was for damn sure. Now I needed to move in and figure out a way to break the news to him that Ryan was very much a girl.

Before I headed over, I called Hannah and told her the address of the place so someone knew where I was, to be safe.

The old Victorian house had a wooden staircase up the back to the third floor. It creaked as I put my weight on the first tread, and I gripped the

railing, more than a little afraid the structure would crash down, bringing me with it.

My arms hurt from carrying my bags, but I got to the top and reached under the plain doormat with our school's logo to find the key. *Here goes nothing.*

I fumbled a few times but got the key into the handle and pushed my way inside. "Hello? Daniel?"

Nothing. Silence.

Probably better that way. Gave me time to scope the place out *and* move in. It would be harder for him to kick me out if my stuff was here. The first thing I noticed was the smell.

Clean. Lemon-scented cleaner hung in the air, almost like it was masking something. Michael's room always smelled like that, disinfectant and gross equipment. I turned on the light and made my way past the small foyer to the living room and mini kitchen. One small table with two chairs sat under a low-hanging light. A TV and large couch were the only things in the living room, and there wasn't a single item out of place. No pillow askew, book left on a table, or cup left on the counter, half-filled with water.

"He wasn't kidding about being clean," I said to myself. There were two doors on the right side, one containing a pristine, wrinkle-free bed. I snorted. I could count on my hands the number of times I'd made my bed in my entire life. If this guy expected me to make mine, there would be a war.

The second bedroom was empty besides a bed and mini dresser. My new home, for at least thirty days. Might as well unpack. I blasted some Taylor Swift from my phone and got to work. I didn't consider myself a slob, but I wasn't on the same level as this guy. I might have dust on my shelves, but organizing made me inexplicably happy.

I lost myself in the music, dancing as I put my clothes away and struggled to put sheets on the bed. I wasn't one to decorate walls with photos, but I did tape up the last family photo we had of Michael, me, and our parents. We wore large smiles and stood in front of our hotel in Florida. Our last family vacation.

Grief hit me, hard. My counselor had told me this could happen the rest of my life. I'd be fine, and then bam, sadness grew inside my chest and spread through my body, paralyzing me like hundred pound weights were in my shoes. I would never have my parents at my wedding. They would never see me graduate, find a career, or have children. I couldn't call them *just*

because.

The thoughts got sadder, and I collapsed onto the bed, exhausted from everything. I could take a mini nap before Daniel got back. Yes, that was a good idea. I lay on my side and took three breaths before sleep came.

“What the hell?”

I bolted up from the bed, a deep voice penetrating my dreamlike state. *I moved. I napped. New roommate.*

“Daniel?” I rubbed my hands over my eyes, the sleep blurring my vision for a few seconds. Once I cleared them, I got a view of my roommate as he stood outside my door, hands on trim hips, and a dark angry scowl on a face I knew well.

Very well, in fact. It was hard to not recognize the sophomore on the hockey team when his face was plastered on billboards and his infamous scowl was a hot topic in the gossip mill.

“Your name is *not* Daniel. You’re J.D.” Annoyance had my neck tingling. The severity of our situation made the weight on my chest double. My roommate was a hockey player. Shit.

“You’re not a dude,” he fired back, nostrils flaring as he huffed out an angry breath. “Is this a trick?”

“You tell me.” I got up from the bed and mirrored his battle stance. His jaw tightened as he stared me down, no doubt trying to intimidate me. He had another think coming if he thought a hockey guy could scare me. “I thought *Daniel* was someone in a pinch who needed a roommate.”

“I thought *Ryan* was a dude.” He ran a hand over his jaw, distrust and worry flashing across his face like fireworks in the heat of summer.

“Look, J.D.” I used his nickname because that’s how I knew him, as the young player with a chip on his shoulder and a determined grit that intimidated other guys on the team. Michael had told me a few times that J.D. was almost *too* intense. “I really need a place to stay. I paid for the month. Give me thirty days to try and find somewhere else.”

He paled and mumbled something under his breath. “I can’t afford distractions. You’re a girl.”

“Wow, well stated.” I laughed, and my breath came out heavier with emotion. “You can’t afford the rent either, so we can figure it out.”

His mouth was set in a hard line, and he glared at me for a beat. “You said you weren’t a sports fan. You *know* who I am, so you lied.”

I pointed a finger between us. “Neither one is innocent in this. You lied

too.”

“Yeah, because I can’t have some puck bunny trying to live with me and mess up my game, alright?” He pinched the bridge of his nose, and when he opened his eyes, there was fire behind them.

I tried to stop the laughter, but the more I tried to muffle it, the harder it came out. I giggled, slapped a hand over my mouth, and soon enough, I had a full-belly cackle going. “Puck Bunny. My god.” I laughed harder. “No, just... no.”

“What’s so goddamn funny?”

“Ask me my last name, J.D.,” I said, stopping the giggle attack and wiping the tears from my eyes. “Do it.”

He looked like he’d rather eat dog food, but he growled, “What is your last name?”

“Reiner. Ring any bells?” I said, smiling as the realization hit him. He furrowed his dark brown eyebrows, studying me, then his eyes widened, and he stood tall enough that his head almost hit the top of the doorframe. “Well?” I wiggled my brows at him. “Want to retract that asinine comment?”

“Michael’s sister. Michael Reiner’s sister.”

“And you get the grand prize.” I clapped my hands, making a real scene about it. “I’m not a puck bunny. I’m not a sports *fan*. Hockey runs in my blood. I technically *wasn’t* lying.” I shrugged, waved my hand around the room, and waited for him to say something. The puck was in his possession.

His hands curled to fists at his sides as he stared at the one photo on the wall. “Does he know about this?”

“No, but he will when I want to tell him and not a second sooner.”

Jonah Daniels did not like that answer. He sucked in a breath, swore, and marched into his room before slamming the door.

Awesome.

This went *great*.

What the shit.

What. *The shit.*

The senior alternate captain could very well kill me if he found out his sister was trying to move in with me. He talked about her enough that I knew he was overprotective and heavily involved in her life—and the last thing I needed was to piss off the senior on the team. Michael and the twins dominated on the ice and set the dynamics for the rest of us. If Michael was pissed at me, Paxton and Patrick would be too, and that couldn't happen.

Not with my year-to-year scholarship. Too much was on the line.

Panic clawed its way down my throat into my chest, and I took a deep breath. She was the *only* person who responded to the ad, and there was no one else to ask for money. My dad's face flashed in my mind, but my stomach ached with guilt. I couldn't tell him about my financial issues. Not with the divorce two years ago and a recent, ill-timed firing leaving him alone and broke. Plus, school had started, and people were settled in their housing. If I didn't accept her, I'd be out four hundred bucks I didn't have since the last guy bailed with zero notice. What an asshole.

She's the sister of Michael Reiner. I clenched my fist a few times.

I glared at the wall I shared with Ryann with two Ns. Her being here wouldn't work. She might bring her friends, girls who would start drama and unnecessary conflict in my life, or she could cause Michael to beat my ass. I rubbed my temples and fell onto my bed. Splitting the rent would give me enough money to pay for food and an occasional night out, plus it would ease the ever-growing anxiety about not having enough. Maybe I'd finally sleep without worrying...shit. I sat up and let out a resigned sigh that made every

already sore muscle in my body stiffen. I'd let her stay.

The money was too important.

Without overthinking my decision, I stomped out of my room and snatched a piece of blank paper from the bag hanging from one of the kitchen chairs. "We need rules."

She tiptoed from her bed to the edge of her room and tilted her head out. "I can stay?"

A growl escaped before I could stop it. "Yes."

"You sound thrilled," she said, her annoyingly upbeat voice making everything worse. She continued leaning on her doorframe, her green tank top bearing the word MOO U on her chest, pointing out she was very much a female.

And Michael's little sister.

"I'm not thrilled." I narrowed my eyes when she grinned at me, all wide-eyed and happy. It was like she knew the punchline of a joke I wasn't privy to. "Why are you smiling?"

"You really are grumpy." She lifted one slim shoulder in a shrug and adjusted her long blonde hair into a ball on the top of her head. Her walk was more of a glide over to the kitchen chair. She sat and pulled her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her knees. "You want to discuss rules?"

"Yes."

I fumbled around in the side pocket and grabbed a pen, writing RULES in all caps. "No mess, no parties, no friends coming over, no loud music, no hooking up, no girl stuff everywhere."

"Wait? Whoa, whoa, whoa." She held up a hand. She wore three small silver rings on her tiny fingers, and the light hit them just right, drawing my attention. "Settle down there, Jonah. You're going to burst a vein in your forehead."

I ran a hand over my forehead at her comment, smoothing down the lines that always appeared when I frowned—which was often. "I'm fine."

"Is this a dictatorship, or am I allowed to offer suggestions?" She tapped her nails on the table, and I hated how I noticed they were purple.

My left cheek twitched at her insinuation, and I swallowed down my initial reaction to tell her to pack her shit and leave. Clearing my throat, I said, "Well?"

"Being clean will not be a problem. I will respect your place. I know the season is long and demands a lot of you physically and emotionally, so there

won't be any parties or friends here. I like music and will listen to it at reasonable hours, but you *cannot* dictate my sex life. If I want to hook up, I will, while remaining considerate of your boundaries." Her high cheekbones reddened, but that was the only indication she was embarrassed saying that.

I clenched my jaw, imagining a fling discovering she lived with a guy on the team. If he shared that with his friends, people would show up here. Hockey was life on campus, and crazed fans came in every size, shape, and gender. Everyone wanted a piece of you, and once they got it, they left. "You don't tell *anyone* you live with me. Not a person."

"Deal. I'll make sure all my hook-ups have no idea a hockey legend sleeps on the other side of the wall." She grinned and jutted her jaw toward the paper. "Write the rules down, you ray of sunshine."

The nickname was the equivalent of a quick jab beneath my ribs.

My mom used to call me that—at least, before she left, deciding my dad and I weren't worth her time anymore.

"It was a joke, Jonah. No need to look at me like that."

"Like what?" I croaked, my voice scratchy and thick with emotions I tried my best to get rid of.

"Something between hate and murder." She sighed, her breath tickling my hand. I gripped the pen so tight my fingers turned white, and she pulled it out of my grasp. "I'll add the first rule. DO NOT CALL JONAH SUNSHINE."

She smirked, looking damn proud of herself as she handed the pen over to me. "Your turn."

Even the meanest, grumpiest face I had, the one that made our opponents fear me, did nothing to rid her of her smile. Maybe she didn't read social cues well. "Fine," I said through clenched teeth.

NO PARTIES

NO VISITORS

NO MESSES

NO DISTURBANCES

I moved down to write more, but she snatched the pen out of my hand, humming some off-tune pop song that usually blared on the radio at the gym.

"I wasn't done," I said.

"Your rules are so aggressive." She clicked her tongue and ran it over the side of her mouth as she eyed the list. She wrote in curly, pretty handwriting. HOOK-UPS REMAIN PRIVATE. "There. Happy?"

“Not particularly.”

“Hmm,” she said, narrowing her very blue eyes at me as she twirled some escaped hairs behind her ear. “How old are you? Eighty-two? Ninety?”

I closed my eyes, hoping she’d get the hint. “Nineteen, obviously.”

“Then stop acting like you’re on the last five years of your life, champ.” She got up, went to her room, and came back with a strip of tape. She put our list on the fridge and placed her hands on her hips, nodding at it. “Alright. You got a month’s rent, and we got the rules covered, anything else?”

“Michael.”

God, the thought of him learning his sister lived with me—I cringed. He was protective of her, and hell, I would be too after their parents died in an awful car accident. We all knew his story, and while I was aware of his sister, I hadn’t paid attention to her. Helping my dad, getting good grades, and playing hockey were all I had time for, certainly not blonde girls with large smiles who caused my left eye to twitch.

My roommate tapped one foot on the ground, assessing me with a silent glare.

After twenty seconds of it, I had it. “What?”

“Are you scared of your senior leader, Mr. Surly and Focused? Surprises me, that’s all. You seem to have the resting grouch face going perfectly, and Michael is a fluff ball on the inside.”

Not on the ice. Not when it comes to his sister. “He’s protective of you.”

“No shit.” She laughed for a beat before shaking her head as she walked into her room. She smelled like coffee, not a bad scent, and I gritted my teeth picturing all the perfume she probably had in her bathroom. I did not want this place getting all florally and shit.

But I wasn’t a total idiot and could bring that up another day.

“Your brother. I need to tell him now. This can’t be a secret.”

“No,” she fired back, retreating into the kitchen again. All the confidence and playfulness evaporated off her face, and her eyes hardened. “I will tell him when I am ready. Not you. Certainly not you.”

“He’s an alternate captain, Ryann,” I said, hating how the name really suited her. “I won’t keep this from him. It could change the team dynamic, and I can’t have that.”

“How would us rooming together for a semester change the dynamic? We’re not dating, and *certainly* not hooking up,” she said, laughing to the point I felt insulted. “I will abide by your rules, but please, don’t tell Michael

until I get some things sorted out.”

“You want me to *lie*?” My voice got all high, and my adrenaline spiked.

“I want you to keep quiet. Surely you can manage that for a few days? You don’t strike me as a small talk type of guy. I’m not asking for more than that.”

Damn it. Ryann’s face was expressive, like an open book, and I swore I felt every emotion she went through. Desperate, determined, worried. My gut told me hiding the truth was a bad idea, yet I nodded. “Fine. *One* week. That’s it.”

“Thank you,” she said, sighing so loud her relief was almost palpable. “I’ll get my shit sorted, hopefully starting tomorrow.” With that, she went into her room and shut the door. She didn’t come out the rest of the night.

It was not my ideal Sunday evening, wondering what the hell she was doing and why the hell I cared. But money was in my account, and for at least one month, I didn’t have to worry about my finances.

Monday morning workouts were my favorite. Most people grunted and complained at the gym, but I was in my element. Pushing my muscles, getting stronger, quicker... it all showed on the ice, and physically exerting energy filled me with a sense of purpose for the rest of the day when my body burned from a workout. Sweat dripped down my face after I finished running sprints, and I grabbed a towel to wipe it off.

“J.D., good weekend?”

Michael Reiner, the brother of my damn roommate, smiled at me as he grabbed a towel too and draped it over his neck. Apart from the same eye color, I couldn’t find a single shared trait with Ryann. The twins, Patrick and Paxton, were with him and talking shit about something, and my stomach filled with lead.

Damn.

My throat seemed to close up, and I nodded at him. “Yeah. You?”

“Got a little carried away at a party Saturday but burned off the hangover yesterday. When are you going to come to a party at the house, man? Don’t you want to have fun before the season starts?”

God, I needed water. I shrugged and went over to the fountain, taking my

time wetting my throat.

He waited for me with an expectant look on his face. “You can’t spend all your time here and on the ice. Trust me. Have an outlet. Get laid. Get drunk.”

“Right,” I said, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. Guilt ate at me, making my words choppy and short. If he knew Ryann was at *my* place, he wouldn’t be offering to have me hang out at the hockey house. Jesus. That was for damn sure. Flashes of his infuriated face last year when a guy on the team said his sister was hot popped in my mind, mocking me.

I wiped my face with the towel, attempting to act normal. He mentioned an outlet. Okay, small talk. “Uh, what’s your escape then?”

He grinned, pushing up the right sleeve of his arm. Ink covered from his elbow to his bicep in twisty, colorful designs. “Tattoos, but when I’m saving up or waiting for my artist to have an opening, I hang at the house. The parties aren’t crazy, if you’re worried about cops or anything. Besides, the season starts in five weeks. Have some fun before then, okay?” He clapped my shoulder and moved on toward Patrick, the captain on our team who was already drafted. The pair of them walked to the bench press. Patrick jutted his chin in greeting at me, and I returned it, feeling all sorts of conflicted.

Michael’s words reminded me of my mom, always telling me that hockey wasn’t everything. It was *ruining* our lives. It couldn’t be the only thing I had.

But she failed to understand that it was the only constant in my life, even more so after she left.

My shoulders felt heavier after I showered and went to my first class where I sat through a lecture on economics. Since money was the root of most of my problems, I figured I’d learn as much about it as I could. My phone buzzed, and seeing my dad’s name, I answered. “Hey, Dad.”

“How’s it going, my boy?” he asked, the greeting always the same.

“It’s going.” I shifted my backpack onto one shoulder and walked through the crowd. A few people recognized me from the stupid billboard, but I learned if I kept my head down, they tended to leave me alone. It was very isolating to hate the fame from playing hockey. “I found a new roommate.”

“Did you? What happened to Edgar? Eddy? What was that boy’s name?”

“You were close. His name was Edward.” The reminder of that asshole got my jaw tight again. “He bailed two weeks before classes started.”

“You’ve been living there alone for two weeks? Jonah,” he said my

name, piling on the guilt. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“No reason to worry you. I found a new roommate to split rent with me.”

He sighed, the heavy breath hitting the phone just right. I felt his annoyance in my bones. “Stop trying to take care of me by hiding important things going on in your life. I’m your father, and it’s my job.”

I cleared my throat and changed gears. “Any luck with the interviews?”

“Ha, no.” Something rustled in the background, and I imagined him sitting on his recliner with the newspaper, circling help ads like it was twenty years ago. “I made an online profile like you suggested, but who wants a middle-aged man not well-versed in technology?”

“Keep trying, Dad. You’re a hardworking, good man. Anyone would be lucky to hire you.”

“Thanks, J.D.” He went silent for a beat, and my chest tightened at the resignation in his voice. “Enough about that. How are your classes? Can you find time this week for a dinner with me or something?”

We chatted my entire walk home, making plans for a meal Wednesday at the pizza parlor. It was an all you can eat buffet, and we liked to get our money’s worth. My chest felt lighter every time I spoke with him. I hoped he was okay on his own, even though he was out of a job and still getting over the blitz attack divorce from my mom. I missed him.

He was my best friend and the reason I needed to both have the greatest season of my life and keep my scholarship for next year. Any penny I could save for my dad was a gift.

He had to worry about paying off his lawyer fees, finding a new place where there were no memories of her, and getting a new job before his savings ran out. I could handle my end of the deal as long as I kept my scholarship on the ice.

Nothing could prevent me from achieving that goal, not even a rift with a teammate. I took the stairs two at a time, ready to demand Ryann tell her brother about our arrangement before the downfall messed with my future. The words left my mouth when I opened the door.

She broke one of the rules in less than twenty-four hours.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” I said, watching flames come from Jonah’s ears. It would be funny if he didn’t look murderous. “I swear.”

He clenched his jaw, narrowing his eyes at the four-year old sitting on our couch watching Paw Patrol in Spanish. Preston *insisted* he knew the language, which was a total lie, but if Hannah’s kid wanted to pretend, who was I to stop him?

“We agreed *no* visitors.” He glared at the poor kid before stomping across the hardwood floor and tossing his bag into his room. He put his hands on his hips and stared me down.

Did he think I would kick a child out? Yeah, okay, grumpy.

“I’m sorry, do you believe a *four*-year old is going to sell pictures of you to the campus blogs? Or post photos of you on his Instagram with eight million followers? My friend was in a tough spot, and it was either take her kid to an appointment with a lawyer and have him witness an awful D-I-V-O-R-C-E or let him hang out with me for a bit. I’ll take your fury and stick-up-the-butt attitude, but don’t you dare subject P here to that garbage.”

He blinked and stared at the kid, the anger seeping out of him in one breath. The muscles in his face relaxed. It was like he literally flipped a switch to change his less-than-stellar personality. “Okay.”

“Just okay?” I bit my lip to keep from laughing. It seemed too soon to rile him up, even though the grumpy face made me want to mess with him.

“No kid should ever have to go through that.” He swallowed hard, gave Preston an unreadable look, and disappeared into his room, shutting the door and ending that lovely conversation.

Cool.

“Whatcha think, Preston? You want to put a movie on?”

“No.”

“You’re the boss,” I said, watching my phone to make sure I wouldn’t miss Hannah’s call. What was supposed to be her day to train me at work turned into a mess, and I was glad I could help her. I had gotten to know the little guy pretty well the past year on nights she couldn’t find a babysitter.

“I don’t have tands.” Preston put his arms behind him, smiling way too wide for me to trust his intentions.

“Tands?”

“Tands. How can I pick up the remote?”

“Hands. You mean hands.” I nodded. “I see them. You have two.”

“No. No tands. Change the channel, Miss Ryann.”

“I don’t have hands either.” I mirrored his movements, laughing when his frown took up his very small face. “What do we do?”

Jonah came out of his room and narrowed his eyes at Preston and me before arching one eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

“We don’t have hands, obviously,” I said, making a real scene about it by rolling my eyes and giving Preston a look like, *can you believe this guy?*

“Change the channel, mister,” Preston said, making his voice get all sweet. I’d give it to him, the kid had moxie. Jonah blew out a quick breath before taking three steps to the couch and grabbing the remote.

“What do you want on?”

“Movie with the yellow guys.”

“Yellow guys?”

“Mittens.”

“Yellow mittens?” Jonah asked, the absolute confusion on his face making me laugh. Preston might as well have told him aliens existed and chocolate coins were the new currency.

“Minions,” I said, throwing the guy a bone. “He’s asking for Minions.”

“Ah, I see.”

Jonah frowned at the remote and stared in utter silence. “Where would I even find that?”

Before I could answer, my phone rang and Hannah’s name popped up. I used my nose to answer, still keeping my hands behind my back. I hit the speaker button after the call connected. “Hey Han. Got you on speaker.”

“You never have to pay for coffee again. Ever. Thank you.”

“No sweat. He was great. He doesn’t have hands anymore, but I don’t

either, so we'll have to adjust to our new life."

"I'm sure we'll get through it. I'm heading back to the shop. Do you wanna bring him by in fifteen?"

"As long as he doesn't lose any feet on the way, we'll walk there now."

"Thank you, Ryann." Her voice got deep, and I understood the emotion in those words. They were often overused, but paired with intensity and sincerity, they became meaningful.

"You're welcome."

I hung up and waited for Preston to stand. "It's walking time, kid. Can you get your stuff, or are we leaving it here forever?"

"My tands came back."

"No way! Mine too!" I did a version of jazz hands, chuckling when Preston mimicked me. As I helped him get his small bag of stuff, I felt Jonah's stare on me. It wasn't like daggers poking my back, but there were questions.

"Need anything, roomie? I'm walking my guy here to meet his mom."

"No." He ran a hand over his jaw, his gaze dropping to the two goldfish on the couch.

Shit.

I dove for them, shoving them into my mouth and shrugging. "No mess. I swear! I followed *that* rule."

He blessed me with the smallest, barely traceable smile, and it felt like a gold medal. A warm, fuzzy feeling pooled in my chest, as if I'd just drunk a lot of hot cider, and I grinned back. Well, my smile was different. Bigger and made my chapped lips stretch, but it was worth it.

J.D., the ray of sunshine, rolled his eyes at me.

"Whoa, whoa. Don't overdo it. A semi smile and an eyeroll? That's close to being friends, which is moving way too fast for me." I faced Preston and held out my hand. "Okay, little dude, let's go see your mama."

"You think she'll have tands?"

"I'll bet you a cookie she does."

The last thing I heard before shutting the front door was a small chuckle. It was deep and rough, like his laughter had been bottled up for nineteen years and he was trying it out for the first time.

Man, what had J.D. so uptight and unhappy?

I couldn't spend too much time on analyzing my roommate though—Preston darted off the sidewalk so many times he needed every ounce of my

attention. I pushed thoughts of Jonah to the back of my mind and made sure to get my new four-year-old friend back safely.

I tied my plaid shirt around my waist on the walk back, enjoying a well-earned chocolate chip cookie. I even got a second one for Jonah as a thank-you for not kicking out a child. His rule of no visitors wasn't hard to live by, but it was weird he was so damn uptight. Was it really the hockey thing? Didn't he have friends? Michael loved the attention, so this completely opposite mindset was hard to digest.

The afternoon sun beamed down, and the brisk walk caused me to sweat a bit. It was an easy stroll to the Victorian house, and I smiled at ten different students walking with headphones in. It was wild how my overall nerves did a one-eighty once I was done with the situation at the dorm.

No more drugs and the potential to ruin my scholarship. No pressure of having Michael be disappointed in me.

I was hopeful and excited.

Hannah had promised me a job to help with the rent, and nothing would get in the way of getting good grades. I could actually enjoy this school year instead of just surviving it, as long as my grumpy roommate didn't throw a wrench in my plan.

With a huge smile, I jogged up the wooden steps and let myself into the place, the familiar scent of lemon and sweat welcoming me.

"Have you talked to your brother yet?" he asked, his tone sharp.

"Hello to you too," I said, ignoring where he sat at the kitchen table to weave past him and get a glass of water. "I brought you a cookie."

"Why?" He looked up from his laptop and frowned at the packaged treat I set in front of him.

"Because I poisoned it. My plot is to actually take this whole place for myself." I plopped down on the chair opposite him, and his nostrils flared at my joke. "Dude, relax. It's a thank-you and an apology for letting Preston stay here."

"Divorce sucks. I'm sorry he's going through it."

"I am too. I don't know his dad at all, but his mom is fantastic, and it's awful she's dealing with this alone." I studied my roommate with his intense

deep brown-eyed stare and messy hair. His dark features and chiseled jawline painted a pretty picture, but it was the lack of laugh lines that bothered me. Jonah was handsome, that was obvious, but the grumpiness seemed to overtake his features. “You going to eat that cookie or what?”

He sighed like I was forcing him to eat sweets, which made no sense because a cookie was a gift to us mortals. Cookies were there before heartbreak and would be there after. They were forever.

“Thanks.” He took it out of the plastic and took a bite before nodding. “Okay, this is good.”

“Preston’s mom made them.”

He swallowed and took another chunk. “If he needs to hang out here again, it’ll be alright. I know first-hand how bad divorces can go, and well, if pretending to not have hands is what he needs, I can relax that rule.”

“So, we have our first addendum. Nice.” I got up and snatched a pen from my bag, moving toward the fridge and making an addition to the *NO GUESTS* rule. “Except Preston.” I wasn’t sure what his change of heart meant but seeing this brief soft side to him was nice. I wanted to ask a million questions but thought better of it. I’d only make him more closed off, and I liked having a brief window into who Jonah was.

“Was it necessary to write it out?” he asked.

“Yes. These rules are important for us to get along for the semester.”

“So, no more thirty day trial?” he asked, his voice ringing with a hint of annoyance. “Did you talk to your brother, Ryann?”

I sucked my lip into my mouth and shrugged, ignoring the small ball of dread growing in my gut. Michael would not be pleased. Not after what happened in high school or the teammate who got too flirty with me last year. I plastered on a fake smile. “I haven’t talked to him yet. I needed to secure a job first.” I snuck a glance at him, and his face paled, making his hard features even angrier. “I’ll do it soon. I promise.”

“Please.” He swallowed hard. “He talked to me at the gym today, and I couldn’t focus. I was so worried he knew.”

“What is your concern there, actually? That he won’t pass you the puck or he’ll start a mutiny against you?” I asked, ignoring my own warning bells. My brother wouldn’t let anything happen on the ice, but he could in the locker room, after the final period ended. My mind flashed to my dumb decision in high school, but I shook it away. Things were different now—so different—and we both had grown up since we lost our parents.

“Team chemistry is essential,” Jonah said, making *essential* last eighteen syllables, like I’d never heard the word before. His tensed shoulders caused me to feel even worse.

“Again, I *understand*, but my brother wouldn’t let us living together get in the way of his game.” I chewed my lip, not quite sure if I was telling the truth. I didn’t want to make him more upset, but I had to figure out shit with Michael first. He could *not* hear it from Jonah.

“It doesn’t matter how well he can compartmentalize. I can’t risk him changing the dynamic,” he said, a slight color to his cheeks warning me. Jonah was as serious as a heart attack. Instead of backing off, I desperately wanted to know how he got this way. A dark past? A secret? Heartbreak? What made him like *this*?

“Tell me why.”

He tilted his head to the side, running his hand over his wicked jawline, and something dark and sad swirled in his eyes. “Why what?”

“Why are you so *grumpy*? Why are you so insistent my brother will be furious enough to change whether he passes you the puck? What are you so afraid of happening?”

Jonah’s grip on the table tightened to the point his knuckles were white, and his quick intake of breath seemed to steal the air out of my lungs.

Shit.

I went too far. Instead of focusing on my own guilt and worry, I pushed him.

I knew I had the second the words left my mouth and the air changed. I couldn’t get an apology out quick enough.

He stood, pushing the chair back with a loud noise, grabbed his schoolwork, and spoke in a calm, deep, and controlled voice. “You have twenty-eight days to find a new place.”

That was all he said before going into his room and shutting the door.

I sighed, leaned back in the chair, and rubbed my forehead. “Why did I do that?” I asked myself, annoyed at my roommate and the entire situation. If he meant what he said about having four weeks left... I groaned and stared at his door. It hadn’t been long, but this place felt more like a home than the dorms ever did, and it was close to the coffee shop and library.

I didn’t want to leave, even if the place came with a grumpy hockey player.

I’d have to show him I could be a good roommate. I could be clean and

avoid him and... tell my brother. That was all.

No big deal.

Not.

Morning weights.

Classes.

Lunch.

Classes.

Rink for practice.

Homework.

Wash, rinse, and repeat on an endless cycle. My schedule had been that way for years, varying iterations while the pattern held true. There was little time for much else and *zero* time for distractions. In order to get another scholarship, I had to be the best, which meant sacrifice.

Two days after I told Ryann she was leaving, she either avoided me entirely or made herself sparse. I hadn't seen her. The only evidence of her was the slight floral smell that lingered in the air, annoying because it was nice to smell something feminine. *Dumb distraction.*

My bones ached from going too hard at practice today, and while Wednesday nights were my scheduled time to do my reading for classes, I couldn't focus. It was nine at night, Ryann wasn't home, and the uncomfortable knot had only grown in my chest since the last words I said to her were about eviction.

Focus.

I shook my head and opened the used biology textbook. I got my pencil ready to take notes as the sounds of laughter stopped me. The pencil froze in my hand when the door opened and Ryann walked in, phone up to her ear and smile stretching across her face as she said, "Yup, love you too, idiot."

She held the phone against her ear and shoulder, turning to lock the door

behind her. When her gaze landed on me, all evidence of joy evaporated. “Oh,” she said, her forehead crinkling with a frown.

That one syllable made my head pound, irritation dancing down my spine that the mere sight of me upset her.

“I’ll head into my room.” She ducked her head, tucking her bright red bag under her arm before she marched through the foyer and through the doorway to her bedroom. A subtle hint of coffee lingered in the air, and her apron made sense.

She mentioned needing a job before talking to her brother.

“You tell Michael yet?” I called, my voice releasing from my body like I was a sergeant. It made me wince at the harshness of it. My mom, my ex, everyone complained I was too focused on hockey. Not that I was an asshole, but I hadn’t given Ryann any reason to believe I *could* be nice.

Her shut door didn’t open, but the sounds she made stopped. She heard me.

It took thirty seconds, but she came out wearing short black shorts and a baggy green sweatshirt. Her blonde hair was piled on top of her head, and she twisted the hem of her shirt in her hands.

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

She studied me, her normally expressive face not giving anything away. “I found some new places I’m going to look into next week. Don’t need to tell him anything if I’m moving out. None of it will matter, so why cause any drama?”

My jaw clenched, and I took a sharp breath. There were zero responses to the ad I’d left up, and my spreadsheet of funds had the amount highlighted in yellow. I couldn’t lose the money, even though living with her was a bad idea. A terrible idea.

A teammate’s sister.

I cringed.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out, my voice uneven and my heartbeat working overtime. I set the pencil down and wiped my hand on my thigh, hoping inspiration would hit me to finish the apology. None came though. “Don’t... move.”

“Uh, yeah, you’re sending some mixed messages here.” She scrunched her brows together and frowned. “I’m not trying to be dramatic, really. You’re so uptight about the situation though, so I’ll make sure I’m out. I just

have to find a place I can afford first.” Her voice got small, and her clear blue eyes clouded.

Guilt clawed up my throat, and I took a sip of water before deciding my next move. There were a million different things I could say to try to make this better, to get rid of the worry on her face. The hesitation in her eyes gutted me, like she was *scared* of me. Not physically, but emotionally. I desperately wanted her to understand a little part of me. Maybe that would help her get why I was this way—so focused. “I need to earn a scholarship for next year. It’s my only chance at staying here. My dad is... this is the only way I can help him.”

She sucked in a breath and blinked. “What do you mean?”

She pushed off the door frame and joined me at the table. Ryann pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees, just like she did the other night. She seemed smaller that way, like her arms were a shield protecting her from the world. “Help him?” she clarified.

Tell her.

Five people knew about the shitstorm divorce my parents were going through. Me, my dad, my mom, the man she was sleeping with, and my former best friend who happened to be her boyfriend’s son. It was a scene out of a damn soap opera, but the drama didn’t lessen the hurt.

I ran the pad of my thumb over my knuckles, finding myself continually looking at Ryann’s lips. They were full, pink, and expressive. Her mouth was pulled into a slight frown, like she already knew the torment of my family.

“My senior year of high school, my mom left my dad and me for my former best friend’s father. I haven’t seen her since. She’s taken everything she can in the divorce, my dad’s heart and his money.” I gripped the water bottle and took a long drink, wetting my throat and willing the ball of emotion there to lessen. “His company also let him go a few months ago. He’s drowning in debt, lawyer fees, and might have to declare bankruptcy.”

“The scholarship helps him financially,” she said. Her only reaction to my words was her face losing a bit of color.

“Yes.”

She tapped her nails on the table for a few beats, her eyes darkening as she nodded to herself. “Playing well with the team is everything.”

“Exactly,” I sighed, relieved she got it. “That and never asking my dad for money. I can’t do that to him.”

She wet her bottom lip and studied me. “Money is a sore spot for me too,

if that makes you feel any better. I have a very limited amount of funds since I'm ditching the dorms."

"Why are you?" I asked, not even thinking about how the question crossed the line from casual roommates to something more. I didn't expect her to answer. If it was me, I would've slammed my lips shut and retreated into another room, however, Ryann was so very much *not* like me.

"Drugs, alcohol." She shrugged and didn't say anymore. I wasn't sure if she meant she imbibed a lot or was tempted or what, but I didn't get a chance to ask before she spoke again.

"So, if Michael were to react *poorly* from us living together and take it out on you in the rink, it could hurt your chances of keeping your scholarship." She moved her hand to rub down the length of her shin, the movement bringing my attention to her leg. Her skin looked soft and smooth, and for the life of me, I wondered how it would feel to touch it.

Whoa.

"Yes," I said, relieved at having her know the truth, even though it gave her power over me. She knew my Achilles heel, yet despite the worry that came with sharing my past, my secret felt safe with her. Maybe it was the fact I knew her brother or the fact she wasn't looking at me with pity. No, definitely not pity. Something...else. The longer she stared at me with her big blue eyes, nerves exploded in my stomach like a cannonball of butterflies. No one typically wore the expression she did right now around me, like my ambition had merit. Like she got me.

"You're not grumpy. You're *focused*." She hummed, nodding to herself as a hint of a smile played on her distracting lips. "Makes so much sense now. I misread you."

"I'm not sure what to say to that."

"It's okay." She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. The soft material hung off her, exposing her collarbone.

Does she like being touched there?

I cleared my throat and shifted in my chair, needing the extra second to figure out what to say. Her gaze never wavered, even though I expected some emotion from her, like pity or disgust. After all, what mom left her son without a word? Still, she looked on with curiosity.

"So, can we talk about telling your brother, *please*?"

She nodded, and a troubled look entered her eyes. "I feel like I should share something since you did, you know?"

“Sure,” I replied, leaning toward her. It surprised me how much I wanted to figure out her secrets, her past, her real reason for leaving the dorms. “If it involves why you still haven’t told your brother, then yes.”

Her face tightened, and I regretted saying that last bit. But she had to know the continued lie was causing all sorts of anxiety for me.

“Michael is my best friend, but there is this blurred line of him trying to act like my parent and *not* be an idiot older brother.” She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and blinked a few times. “He’s going to be pissed I didn’t come to him for a solution, plus the fact I didn’t tell him about the drugs and alcohol. He’d have wanted to help me, to give me money or something, and he needs to worry about his own damn self.”

“So it’s pride?”

“And concern,” she said, her voice getting stronger. “He’s going to give up his dreams and goals to try and take care of me. I *refuse* to let that happen, so I have to prove to him, and myself really, that I can do this alone. He can’t make decisions for me.”

My tension loosened at her words, and something warm and sticky formed in my chest. She wanted to prove her independence to *help* her brother. “I see.”

“I’m not trying to cause you issues on the team, J.D.,” she said, giving me a sad smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “I want to settle into this new job, save a little bit, and *then* tell him.”

“I will...try to understand that.” I gulped. “When do you imagine you’ll feel ready?”

Her grin grew, and the sight made me feel a little better. “Was it hard asking that question all polite?”

“Yes, a bit.”

She snorted. “This week. I’m finalizing my work schedule for the month, and I’ll feel more secure knowing that’s settled.”

This week. *Good.*

“How will you *tell* him? I can’t imagine it’ll be an easy breezy conversation.”

Her eyes got as wide as the leftover dinner plate on the counter. “Easy breezy? Wow, J.D. look at you being all casual.”

My lip curved up before I could stop it. “Shut up.”

She laughed with me, not at me, and it felt good. Really good.

“He knows me well enough to understand I don’t get involved with

hockey players, so when I tell him about the name mix-up, I'm hoping he'll think it's funny." Her cheeks reddened, and she looked down at the table instead of my face.

Now my own curiosity piqued. "Involved?"

She grinned again, scrunching her nose in the process, but it felt like a knock-off version of the smile I'd seen before. "He doesn't need to worry about us having a sordid affair or anything."

It took a few seconds for me to process her words and their meaning. When they clicked, I clenched my fist around my pencil as anger bubbled up. "Do you think he'll be worried I'm going to hit on your or something? That would *never* happen."

The openness in her clear, sky-blue eyes faded at my words, and she sat up straighter. My heart lodged in my throat at her expression, and for the life of me, I wasn't sure why I'd said it so aggressively. *Probably because I'd thought about putting my mouth on her body.*

She spoke again, but her voice lost the softness it had moments ago. "My point *exactly*. He has nothing to worry about." She slid out of the chair and walked to a cabinet, grabbing a box of Pop-Tarts from the top shelf. The movement caused her sweatshirt to ride up, exposing a sliver of her lower back, and I darted my gaze away as heat filled my face.

I told the girl I would never hit on her, yet here I was, getting flustered over her lower back. And not *any* girl. My teammate's sister. A guy who made or broke the chemistry on the team. A leader on the ice. Michael was liked and respected, and everyone would follow his lead. This was not good. Putting my head down, I forced myself to read the same line in the text three times, hoping it would stick.

Her soft footsteps moved toward the living room, and I glanced at her as she bit into the Pop-Tart and walked into her bedroom. I should feel better.

She said her brother might find it funny, yet the unsettled feeling in my chest had me standing up and heading in her direction. The conversation ended without warning, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be done talking to her. When I got to her door, I spotted her sitting on her bed, her legs crisscrossed. She lifted her gaze from her phone to me.

Surprise registered for a second before she tilted her head. "Yeah?"

"Thank you for telling me about...why you haven't talked to Michael yet. Thanks for, uh, sharing it with me."

"Mm hmm."

She narrowed her eyes, paralyzing me in the doorway. Was she mad? Angry? Upset? I had no idea, and scratching the back of my neck didn't help me figure it out.

"Look, Ryann," I said, realizing I hadn't used her name out loud since the first moment we met. "You don't have to find a new place. We can figure this out once you tell him."

She bit the side of her lip, and her jaw tightened. She took a shaky breath and leveled her gaze at me. So much emotion swirled in her eyes that I couldn't look away if I tried. Then, she nodded. "Good. You're not the only one searching for something, Jonah. Our goals might be different, but I'm no less motivated than you are."

"What's your goal?" I tried thinking about what she shared and couldn't figure out her endgame. To be independent, sure, but was that it?

"Ah, *that* is personal." Fire flared behind her eyes, and a mixture of respect and curiosity had me taking one step into her room. Her gaze zeroed in on my feet, and I immediately backtracked.

"I'll call the landlord tomorrow and add your name to the contract so you can sign it. I hope that'll make you feel more secure."

"Thank you." Her tone was clipped, but her entire body sagged with relief.

I was so sick of pity and wanted someone to listen. Maybe it was how small and cute she looked in the stupid sweatshirt, the fact her toenails were a different color than the day before, or even how she didn't look at me with pity. Maybe one of those reasons was why I opened my mouth and said the words I never spoke aloud to another person since my ex—who told me to *calm down*.

"I'm the reason my mom traded our family in for another."

Her gaze sharpened, and she leaned toward me, the hand holding her Pop-Tart freezing midair. "Why would you think that?"

"She hated hockey."

"Okay, so?" She rolled her eyes, like I was a child spouting off nonsense. "A mother *leaving* her family because she dislikes something doesn't make a lick of sense."

Her words seemed to pierce the air, a knife stabbing through with her sharpness.

I gulped and found my nerve, the secret desperate to rush out. "She was tired of spending all her time and money for me to chase my dream. The last

two years before coming here, she refused to go to games, claiming she needed to be herself again. Something she apparently did with my best friend's married dad."

"Jonah," she said, the edge of her voice dulling as she slid off the bed and stood at the side. "That's so *fucked* up."

I barked out a laugh, devoid of real amusement, but it felt good to release the pent-up breath. "Yeah, it really is."

She didn't say anything, just shook her head with her lip curled up in disgust. What threw me for a loop was the fact she was on my side of this. The relief of hearing someone agree that my mom was awful and there wasn't something wrong with me was intoxicating. When I told my high school girlfriend, she said I was overreacting. People divorced all the time.

Forgive your mom for wanting her own life. Don't be an asshole.

I shook my head to get rid of thoughts of *her* and focused on Ryann. I needed to know if she truly understood. That was the only reason I continued. "Apparently all the women in my life leave over hockey. My high school girlfriend dumped me the day after we graduated because she was sick of my hockey obsession. This was after we both made plans to come here together."

Her chest moved as she studied me, and understanding relaxing her face as she smiled. "I know the perfect thing to help. Want some popcorn?"

My mouth dropped open. I was confused at her sudden change of topic.

"Wait. *What?*"

"These Pop-Tarts aren't doing it for me, and I want something salty. Come on, let's have a Wednesday night snack."

"I read on Wednesdays," I said, trying to find balance in the conversation. She took hold of the reins, and I couldn't do a damn thing. "It's my routine."

"Okay, are you allowed to snack? Do you pencil that in there? You can read, and I can make fun of you. It'll be our thing." She smirked as she walked up to me, jutting her chin for me to move. I stepped out of her way, trying not to enjoy how good she smelled. It was the same florally, sweet scent that lingered in our place now.

"You're teasing me."

"Yes, J.D." Her smile widened, showing all her teeth with the smallest gap between the two front ones. It wasn't noticeable at first. Our proximity granted me an up close view to the light freckles on her nose, the bits of yellow flecks in her eyes, and the mole right under the left eye that made me itch to touch it. The longer I studied her, the more her lips curved down.

“You’re mad,” she said.

Her brief joy evaporated, and I shook my head, hard. “No. I’ve never had *popcorn* for zero reason, and you blurted it out after I shared something personal.”

“One does not need a reason for popcorn, bud. Making food for people is how I take care of them, okay? You shared a personal part about you, so now I’m going to feed you.” She clapped her hands and pointed to the table. “Study. Read. Schedule times to take a breath or shower. I don’t care, but you will enjoy homemade popcorn because I’m so mad at your mom, and I need to busy my hands.”

Despite all the reasons I should insist on saying no, I nodded. My face heated at her answering smile, and it made no sense why my heart started beating a bit faster.

It was just a smile.

Sympathy played a weird role in my life. I was on the receiving end of it after our parents died, leaving Michael and me alone in the world, and what drove me mad was the looks. The whispers. The touches without permission. I cringed, imagining all the hugs and the hands people put on my shoulder.

Ugh.

But I got why people felt the emotion. Even after saying goodnight and leaving Jonah to finish his *Wednesday Reading*, I couldn't stop thinking about his story. His mom choosing to leave him was different than her dying, for sure, but her abandoning him and his dad was still tragic and made my chest hurt for him.

The one thing our neighbors, our parents' co-workers, our teachers, and friends did that helped was bring meals. We always had food at the house. It was a simple yet wonderful gesture, and an idea formed as I tossed and turned before falling asleep.

I woke up, yawned for a full minute, and eyed the clock. Six a.m. My first class was at eight, so I had plenty of time to cook and shower. Without making much noise, I started coffee, cracked some eggs, and made sure to not leave a trace of mess anywhere.

"What are you doing?" Jonah walked out of his room, the hard lines of his face soft from sleep, and whoa, his morning voice was somehow deeper.

"Making scrambled eggs." I picked up the spatula and used it to direct him to the chair. "I put too many in here for me to eat. Want some?"

He scratched his head, bringing up the dark blue T-shirt an inch to expose his stomach. My tongue seemed to get stuck on the roof of my mouth. I quickly took a sip of coffee, blaming the early morning on why my mouth got

dry. He was an athlete who took care of his body. It was normal to appreciate hard muscles on anyone.

“Sure?” He frowned and sat in the same chair he did the night before, his eyes blazing with questions.

But he wouldn’t ask them. He was too private and *focused*. Asking a question would distract him from his plan.

When the eggs cooked, I leaned against the counter and crossed my arms over my chest, hoping I looked relaxed. “So, reading is for Wednesdays. What’s your Thursday game plan? Crosswords?”

His nostrils flared twice before the realization hit him. “You’re teasing again.”

“Sixty percent teasing, forty percent I actually want to know.”

He cleared his throat and put all that intense focus on my face. Being the sole recipient of his attention made my breath catch in my throat. I could only imagine how his opponents felt when he stared them down.

“I spend less time at the gym since games will be Fridays and Saturdays once the season starts. I watch old games in the afternoon and do homework in the evening after practice.” He rubbed his pointer finger and thumb together, and it wasn’t the first time I noticed it. Whenever I asked questions, he did the same gesture.

The eggs sizzled, so I turned my back to him, pushing them around the pan so they didn’t burn. It was easier to talk when I didn’t see his very handsome face. “What are your Fridays?”

“Game days.”

“Not for another five weeks,” I said, looking at him over my shoulder. I sucked in a breath when I noticed his gaze was very much still on me. Just not on my face. My legs.

He sighed and dragged his attention up my body to my face. “What do you do for fun?”

I blinked in shock. He asked me a question and might’ve been checking out my legs. Had to be a full moon or mercury in retrograde type thing going on. “Watch TV, hang with my brother, go out with a few friends. I’m more of an introvert, actually.”

“Do you go to parties?”

My eyebrows about disappeared into my hairline. “Have I gone to them? Yes. Do I go a lot? No.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why don’t you go to parties? You don’t play a sport.”

Annoyance dripped down my spine at his tone. I took a beat to think about how to respond and put the eggs on our plates. I might’ve set the dishes on the table harder than necessary as I pushed his toward him, but he studied me with his eyebrows furrowed, like he really wanted to know my answer.

“What does going to parties have anything to do with playing a sport?”

“The risk. The risk is too high for me.” He released a long breath and picked up the fork. “Thank you for breakfast.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied, finally understanding the intention of his question. “Parties are fun, sure. The music, the flirting, the laughter. Having a few drinks and making dumb decisions. But to me, they seemed like a temporary escape that never really provided what I was missing. So, you say the risk is too high because you’re an athlete, but it’s there for me too.”

“How?”

“I’m here on an academic scholarship. My grades can’t slip. I can’t slip. My parents left us some money but not enough to allow me to stay.” I took a bite and waited, the urge to squirm under his stare lessening the more we sat together. He was intimidating, sure, but this wasn’t an act. Jonah was really an intense guy.

“You lost both your parents,” he said, not a question but a statement.

“Yes.” I gulped as the familiar wave of grief washed over me, gripping my heart for a few seconds. “They died in a car accident two years ago. It’s only me and Michael now.”

I didn’t know how it was possible, but his face set even harder to stone. It was like someone froze time, preventing him from moving at all. He didn’t blink.

“I’m sorry,” he choked out, tilting his head down as his shoulders slumped. “I remember hearing guys on the team talking about what happened but...Shit, I should’ve *never* complained about my mom leaving to you.”

“Why?” I fired back.

“Because what you’ve gone through is so much worse.” He met my eyes again, anguish swirling in his hazel orbs. “I’m so sorry, Ryann. I didn’t realize. I’m an idiot.”

“Thank you.”

He ate his eggs quickly, barely taking a breath before he finished. He got up, rinsed the dish, put it in our dishwasher, and placed his hands on his hips.

I continued eating, clearly not in a rush to escape our shared meal. He opened his mouth, closed it, and pressed his lips together in a firm line.

“Say it, Jonah. Whatever you’re holding back, just say it.” My tone came out more annoyed than intended, but I didn’t regret it. We *could* be friends and enjoy rooming together, but even as I had the thought, it disappeared. He didn’t seem the type.

“Have you been to a party at the hockey house?”

“Yes.” Okay, I was intrigued. “Why?”

“The guys want me to go.”

“Then do it?” I waved my hand in the air.

He rolled his eyes and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Are you going?”

“I don’t even know when it is, and I might have to work the next morning. So, doubtful.”

“Saturday night,” he blurted out too fast. His cheeks had a bit of red on them, and his chest moved faster than normal. Jonah was nervous.

“Are you asking me out?” I said, before thinking the sentence through. He’d made his thoughts on me very clear—we would *never* happen.

“What?” He took a step back, his movements awkward and nothing like the god he was on the ice. He was smooth, fast, and a beast. It was intimidating in a thrilling sort of way. Not like this, self-conscious and weird.

“No. No.”

Obviously, Ryann. Don’t be a moron.

“Then why are you getting all anxious asking me about the hockey party?”

“Because I don’t want to go, okay? Parties aren’t my scene, but the older guys said I needed to have an outlet, do something besides work out and watch tapes. I thought maybe, I don’t know, if *you’re* going, I could tag along. You know them, and they like you.” He ran a hand over his face and let out an unhappy groan.

“Sure.” I shrugged and took my last bite of eggs. “If you promise not to be rude and storm out of the kitchen when we’re eating together again.”

His mouth parted, and he stared at me with a slack jaw, his hand frozen at the side of his leg. “Wait,” he said, blinking. “Did I upset you?”

“Upset is too strong of a word for it. More like irritated.” I got up and rinsed my plate, still feeling the weight of his confused stare. A part of me felt bad for him. He was nervous about the party and trying to fit in with the

team when he had so much to lose, but his laser-focus could still hurt people around him. I leaned against the counter again and faced him. “Having a meal with someone is nice. Food was always a huge part of our family. Breakfasts, dinners, and brunches on weekends. It’s where we connected, and we always stayed at the table until we were all done. It’s a sign of respect, and I thought maybe we could be *friends*, J.D.”

“Jonah,” he said, his voice getting serious again. “I like that you call me Jonah.”

“Okay.” I curled my toes into the cold floor at the brief heat that entered and left his eyes in a single breath.

“I’ll sit with you next time.”

“Thank you.”

He ran a hand over his jaw, the movement showcasing how large his hands really were. They covered half his face. “You meant what you said about the party?”

“Yes. If I have to work early Sunday morning, then I’ll leave early, but I can go with you.”

His relief was evident. His mouth quirked up on one side, and his shoulders relaxed. “I think maybe we can be friends too.”

“Wow.” I put a hand over my heart and gave him my best fake smile. “Did it hurt to say that?”

“No?”

I snorted. “You’re too easy to tease,” I said, walking past him and into my room. “And I think the moment has already happened.”

“What has?”

“Us being friends.”

He turned, and we stood two feet apart, the air heavy between us. His answering grin was almost enough to knock me off my feet. His entire face lit up with the curve of his lips, and I open-mouth stared at my roommate.

“You’re right. Kinda snuck up on me, but I don’t hate it.” His grin fell when he studied my face. “Wait, did I say something wrong again?”

“No, sorry. Your smile. I hadn’t seen it before.” I shook my head, gaining my wits. “You have a wonderful smile.”

My extra-large, too focused new friend blushed, and it was about the cutest thing I’d ever witnessed. He looked at the ground, swallowing so loud I heard a click. “Well, uh, I have to go to the gym.”

“Ah, enjoy that.”

He ducked his head and went into his room for a few minutes before heading out the door. I couldn't stop laughing at my very interesting roommate. The intense guy who was going to a party to seem *not* obsessed with hockey and needed a buddy.

Well, that was something I could easily do. Now I had to tell my brother about him before he accidentally found out. And convince him Jonah and I rooming together wasn't a big deal.

I got out my phone and sent him a text.

Ryann: Can you meet?

Mikey: Absolutely, where?

Ryann: Quad, fifteen minutes. Near the clock tower.

That was one thing I admired Michael for—I was always a priority. Even if he was dating or midseason, he never made me feel like an inconvenience in his life, like he actually enjoyed seeing me and was glad we were close. I threw on jeans and a Moo U shirt and set out to meet him, my heart rate picking up the closer I got. It was easy to tell Jonah it would be no big deal, but it was only half true. Michael was going to be pissed he didn't know about the dorm situation. Super pissed.

And the rooming-with-his-teammate thing might not go over well.

"Ry, hey," Michael said a few minutes later, walking up from the sidewalk that twisted into the library. "What's up? Why are you coming from that way? Isn't your dorm on the south?"

"Ah, well, nice catch." *Shit. Say it. Tell him.* "I'm not living in the dorm anymore," I said, all in one breath.

"Why the fuck not?" His eyes got all big, and a vein popped out on his forehead. "Where are you living, and why didn't you tell me? When did this happen?"

Not a great sign. He spoke fast when his emotions got the best of him, and his eyes bugged out of his head.

"I found a roommate on a third floor of an old house. I love it actually, plus, it's close to the coffee shop attached to the library where I work now."

He blinked. "You moved out *and* got a job? Ryann... what is going on?"

"Sit down, come on." I moved us to the bench, and he plopped down next to me, anger rolling off his shoulders. "I was on probation last year after my roommates had weed and alcohol in our dorm. I didn't use it, but it didn't matter since it was *our* room. It was a warning, and after the first week back... she pulled the same thing. Parties, beer, handles of vodka. If we got

caught, my scholarship could've been in trouble."

He took a deep breath and pinched his nose. "Why the hell didn't you tell me? This happened last year? What the fuck?"

"Because you would've tried to fix it. It was during the season, and I didn't want to mess anything up. I needed to sort this out on my own, okay? I love you, but...you're my brother, *not* Dad."

He recoiled like I hit him in the right in the teeth. "Ry," he said, his voice breaking. Hearing the emotion in his voice and the look of despair on his face made my stomach twist in knots. I hated seeing him upset.

"Look, I'm sorry, you know I didn't mean it that way. I just..." I paused and adjusted my ponytail before looking at his sad eyes. "You need to focus on yourself, not me. I wanted to figure my shit out so you didn't have to worry. Maybe I need to prove to myself I'm okay alone. You're going to be gone next year, and you should graduate and move on. Maybe I needed to show both of us I'll be fine."

"But you're *not* alone. I'll always be there for you."

"I know." I leaned my head onto his shoulder for a second. "But we can't live in this bubble forever."

He sighed and let out a long growl before he stretched. "So where do you work?"

"The cafe by the library."

He nodded and tapped his fingers on the edge of the bench. "Okay, I like that. You're always there anyway, so you might as well get free food."

"Duh," I said, forcing a smile before I dropped the biggest bombshell. "There's one more thing."

"What is it?" he asked, his tone sharper than normal.

"I'm rooming with your teammate, J.D."

His entire body turned to stone, and he looked me up and stared me down like I was an opponent on the ice. "*What?* With J.D.?"

"I answered an ad for a roommate, and there was a name mix-up. He thought I was a guy, and I thought he was a girl." I paused and wiped my sweaty palms on my thighs. "It's working out well for both of us, actually."

Michael's expression could scare a serial killer. "You're living with *my* teammate?"

"Yes."

"A *hockey* player."

"Yes, you can clarify all you want, but... we both need the roommate,

okay?” I said, my throat dry and my skin itching with worry. “This isn’t high school anymore, Michael.”

His jaw tightened, and he brought a clenched fist to his mouth. “We could see if there’s room in like a girls’ dorm or something.”

“No. I’m staying.”

“Ry,” he said, his voice getting tighter. “I hate this.”

Shit. “I know you do, but you have to trust me. You do, right?”

He took a deep breath. “Yes, but—”

“There is no but here. Just yes. You either trust me or you don’t. This will be fine, okay? I’m not going to make out with him under the bleachers.” My face heated at the memory of the teammate who wanted to mess with Michael’s stats to make captain and used me to do it. It caused the one and only riff between my brother and me. That asshole was the main reason I never even looked at a hockey player that way. “That will *not* happen.”

He swallowed hard and nodded. “Okay. I’m still pissed as hell but not ready to punch someone. If I *had* to pick anyone on the team for you to live with... it would be him. He’s a recluse and a good dude.”

“Don’t take this shit out on him, Michael. I swear to god. This is my fault, and I’m not moving out because you might be upset.”

He nodded, and the anger seemed to dissipate behind his eyes. “Thank you for telling me everything. I hate that it took you this long, but... I can see you’re nervous. We aren’t the same people we were in high school.”

“I want us to remain close, but I gotta figure stuff out on my own, you know?”

He nodded and let out a long sigh.

“Oh, by the way, I’m dragging J.D. to the party Saturday. We’ll show up together so don’t be weird about it.”

He ran a hand over his face and nodded. “Well, that would’ve been a shock, so thanks for the heads up. I’m glad he’s loosening up. I don’t get him.”

“He’s focused, Mikey. Really focused.” I found myself defending him. “Saturday will be great.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.” He put his arm around me in a quick hug. “Thanks for telling me, even though I should’ve fucking known. Don’t keep shit from me again.”

“Love you,” I said, pinching his side and earning a yelp. “Oh, your fan club is arriving.”

A group of five girls giggled in his direction, and I pushed off him. “Be smart bro, I’m too young to be an aunt.”

His eyes bugged out of his head, and he flipped me off before turning on the charm and facing the girls. He was such a damn flirt, but it made me smile. He didn’t shy away from connections with others like I did. He took out his grief on the ice.

I curled my hair and wore dark skinny jeans, black flats, and a black chiffon top that dipped a little lower than normal in the front. While parties weren’t my thing, going out, flirting, and having a few drinks had their time and place when it wasn’t in the stupid dorms. It had been a long summer of *nothing* but working at the library part-time, so excitement grew in my gut all day. Letting loose sounded awesome.

I rubbed lotion on my hands and arms, made sure to put on an extra layer of mascara, and lined my lips with a deep red. It was the perfect combination of flirty but not overdoing it, which was about the only look I could go for knowing my brother would be at the party. Flirting was alright but never with the hockey team.

Music blared from my phone, and I turned it off to see how my roommate was doing. He sat on the couch, eyes narrowed at the TV, and he leaned onto his knees. “Hey, you getting ready to leave soon?” I asked.

He flicked his gaze to me and back to the TV but did a double take. This time, his intense stare started at my legs and slowly moved up my chest before landing on my face. There was a flicker of heat in his eyes, but it disappeared in less than a second. A warm, dangerous thrill went through me knowing he checked me out.

“Is what I’m wearing not okay?” He gestured down to a gray T-shirt and jeans.

“Oh, you’re fine.” I headed toward the other side of the couch and sat down. “I meant more like, is there anything you needed to do before we head out?”

Hockey played on the TV—shocking no one—and he paused whatever game he watched to focus on me again. “I’d like to finish this period. There’s five minutes left.”

“Yeah, for sure.” I squinted at the screen. “Okay, is this an old game from last year’s season?”

“Yes. I like to look for patterns. It might seem tedious, but watching rushes and possessions and studying other players’ moves can help me be a better teammate.” His focus was back on the TV, and I didn’t want to distract him, so I kept quiet.

Did Michael ever study his teammates so he could be a *better* teammate? I couldn’t remember him doing that, but maybe he did.

Doubtful, though. My brother loved hockey and was a great leader, but very few people were like Jonah. His desperate focus made him *more*.

More focused, more willing to spend every second getting better, and more to lose if he didn’t make it. My heart swelled again when I thought about how he blamed himself for his mom’s decision, and it made me want to try harder to be his friend.

That meant getting him to have a good time and relax tonight. I waited until the clock ran down before taking the remote from him and turning it off. “Okay, Jonah, you’re officially done. You push all thoughts of sticks, pucks, and ice out of your head.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, hinting another smile as he stared at me.

“I mean it.” I pointed a finger at his chest and hardened my face. “No sneaking off at the party to watch a game on your phone, and no talking shop. You will have *fun*.”

His lip twitched on the side. “Seems a little...forced when you say it like that.”

“Don’t care.” I stood up, jutting my chin toward the door. “Put your fun pants on, and let’s go.”

“Fun pants?” he said, this time letting out a small laugh as he grabbed his wallet from the side table. “Are you wearing *your* fun pants?”

“Yes. Made sure I washed them yesterday.”

He shook his head at me, but warmth flared in his eyes. “I appreciate what you’re doing.”

“And what’s that?” I asked, putting a hand on my hip.

“Distracting me from being nervous.” He ran a hand through his messy hair. It was so full and thick and paired well with his long lashes and dark brown eyes. There was a reason why girls loved talking about his picture on billboards: Jonah was handsome. “I’m glad I’m going with you,” he said, his voice low and deep.

“You know... I’m glad too.”

We shared a brief smile, and the strangest urge to *touch* him had me take a step back. I rarely touched anyone and that would cross a line. A huge one. Even if I wanted to know what his hair felt like, I couldn’t. “Party time, hockey man. Oh, I told my brother. He knows we’re showing up together.”

JONAH

The first college party I went to, I slept with someone I never saw again, woke up with a pounding headache, and threw up before practice the next day. The image of the girl, the gross feeling of the hangover, and the physical way it hurt my body never left my mind. Even now, walking toward the hockey house with Ryann, nerves exploded in my gut. Especially that her brother knew.

Too much could go wrong. Getting drunk meant losing control, and control of my own life was the only thing I had left.

“How did he take it?”

“He’ll be fine. He’s more annoyed at me than you.”

Not reassuring. *He’ll be here tonight*. Guess that would clue me in on my status on the team. *Shit*. “No punching me in the face the second I walk in?” I meant it as a joke, but her red cheeks paled a bit, and my jaw clenched with stress.

“No, he won’t. I’m almost sure of it.” She grinned, tooth-gap on display, and my insides felt warm for a second. Then Ryann sneezed three times, covering her face with the crook of her arm before she gave me a sheepish smile. “Ah, excuse me.”

“You’re all right.” I glanced down at her. Ryann’s full height came to my shoulders, her frame petite. If I wasn’t so nervous about the party, I’d admire her hair. It was the first time I’d seen it down and wavy, and damn, Michael’s little sister was pretty.

More than pretty.

I cleared my throat, and *my teammate’s little sister* flashed in my brain like a jumbotron. It didn’t matter if I craved her smile and enjoyed her

constant teasing. There wasn't time for anyone in my life, and even if I had free moments, she would be the worst person to get involved with. At least she told her brother about us living together.

"Do you drink?" Ryann asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I have, yes." My tone was clipped as we continued down the path toward the hockey house. Students were out on a warm summer night, and a few heads turned my way as we walked. They were easy to ignore though. A quick nod in greeting pacified them. "Do you?"

"Every once in a while. I have friends and I love people—the noise, the chatter, the questions. I can talk to anyone about anything, but I need quiet and time to retreat. If I'm around people too much, it's exhausting."

Two thoughts struck me.

Were my rules keeping her from friends?

Did she think I was exhausting?

I didn't get to ask though. Someone came into view and said Ryann's name in a way that had me suck in a breath. It was soft, tender, and intimate?

She stopped walking as the guy got closer to us, and her usual smile slid off her face. "Derrick."

"Hey. How are you?" he said, his gaze moving to me for a second before he focused on Ryann. "You look amazing. It's been a while, huh?"

"Yeah." She bit down on her lip, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "Been about six months since you decided to not answer my texts."

"Look," the guy said, wincing and gripping the back of his neck. "I'm sorry. Things got weird for me, and instead of being honest, I backed out. I tried calling you a few times to explain. Could we talk, just the two of us?" He glanced at me again and recognition hit me.

Derrick Flanigan. One of the top guys on the baseball team.

"There isn't much to talk about," Ryann said, her tone sad and without her normal zest. Hearing her voice devoid of emotion gutted me. She'd radiated so much joy and hope in the short time I knew her, and not seeing it, even for a second, made me want to do anything to get it back.

"I really am sorry," Derrick said, his shoulders slumping. "Well, see you around Ryann."

The muscles along her jaw tightened as he walked away. She took a deep breath, straightened her spine, and blinked away any indication of pain. "Now I want a drink."

"What happened with that guy?"

She blew out a breath so her lips made a raspberry sound and pushed her hair behind her ears. “We went out for a few months with *very* different definitions of what we were doing.”

“He hurt you?”

Her gaze moved to my face, the lines around her eyes softening for a second. “Yes. I’m over it now, honestly. The sting is there, but I think it’s more of an ego thing. We were together for about four months, and one day he stopped responding to me. There was no talk, no *hey this isn’t working out*, just... got a text that said he wasn’t interested since baseball started.” She blinked, and her eyebrows furrowed as she studied me. “I get that sports are important to athletes. But I never once had an issue with his schedule. I got it. I *still* understand it.”

Her words started a flame of anger deep in my gut, the same rage that made my muscles clench when I thought about what my mom did. “Ryann,” I snapped, making her recoil. “He should’ve been up front with you. That’s on him. You of all people understand the time restraints required of college athletes.”

“Oh,” she said. That one syllable made her red lips form an O shape, drawing my attention to how full and soft they looked. “You’re on *my* side.”

“Did you think otherwise?”

“I don’t know. You’re so focused with hockey, I thought maybe you’d agree with him because distractions aren’t allowed. I’m not sure.” She shrugged and gave me a crooked smile, like that would make it okay.

It did not.

Irritation prickled across my skin. “I would never *side* with anyone who thought leaving someone without a damn conversation was the best choice. Hard convos are preferred over nothing.”

Like my mom.

Ryann nodded, understanding dawning on her. She lifted her hand toward me for a second but let it hang by her side. “You know what I think?”

“What?”

“We *both* need a damn drink.”

It wasn’t quite a laugh, but her comment seemed to dissolve the tension coiled tight in my body, and I nodded. “You might be right.”

We finished the walk to the hockey house, and music boomed through the walls as people hung out on the porch. Students held red cups and laughed, and the smell of stale beer and skunk hung in the air as we neared.

“J.D.! Who would’ve thought? Dude,” Patrick said, jumping down from the porch and greeting me with a bro hug. “Little Reiner. My favorite Reiner sibling. Get over here.”

She rolled her eyes, and her smile was forced when Patrick pulled her in for a hug. He picked her straight off the ground and swung her around until she smacked him.

“Put me down, you idiot.”

He grinned as he set her back on the ground and juttied his chin toward the house. “Come on, I’ll show you where the keg is. We all know that’s why you’re here. It isn’t to flirt with me, unfortunately.”

She knew Patrick well, and seeing him touch her with ease sent an uncomfortable edge to my posture. But I didn’t think about it for long. Ryann followed him, leaving me to trail behind her. I didn’t mean to check her out. It just happened. The black shirt clung to her body, showing every curve, and the jeans molded against her in the best way. Something entirely new made my heart beat faster, but it didn’t last long when Michael Reiner walked into the entrance hallway and hugged his *little sister*.

“Everyone knows I’m related to you and won’t hit on me. Don’t make it worse,” she said, laughing as she swatted at him. “Don’t embarrass me.”

“It’s so easy though,” he quipped back, slinging his arm around her shoulders.

“Stop it! You’re pretty much guaranteeing no one will talk to me. I came here to flirt and drink.” She shoved him away, and she fixed her messed up strands of hair.

“That’s my goal forever.” He glanced down at his sister for a second before his gaze landed on me. “Hey, look who it is!”

He moved from Ryann to me, holding out his fist for a bump. “Glad you could make it. Come on, let’s get you a beer, J.D.”

Ryann winked at me before joining Patrick and his brother, Paxton. That left me to follow Michael. He led me through the living room where coeds laughed or sat cuddled up on one of the couches. The senior nodded to everyone—guys, girls, teammates, and people responded. He was one of those guys that people liked. His charisma and easy smiles translated over to his leadership on the team. He pushed us and made us better, but he wasn’t one of the alpha-assholes hockey often saw. How he brought people together made up for what he lacked in talent.

He was a good guy, which meant letting my thoughts about his sister

cross the line was unacceptable. I respected him *and* Ryann, and I needed to keep my unwarranted desires hidden.

“Here we go.” Michael grabbed a cup, filled it up with beer, and handed it to me before doing the same for himself. “Cheers, J.D.”

“Cheers,” I mumbled, feeling stupid and out of place. The back of my neck burned like everyone was watching me. I took a sip of the liquid, letting the bitter taste coat my throat and found him staring me with a curious look on his face. “I tried to have her move out,” I said, my voice cracking a bit.

His jaw tightened, and he narrowed his gaze. “Ry doesn’t work that way.”

“Yeah, figured as much.” I shifted my weight to each foot, hating the situation. I took another sip of beer, my face burning at his silence and the irritation rolling off him. Ryann’s laugh carried over from the other room, and it baffled me how I knew the sound after one week. My gaze moved to her without my control, and Michael followed, his dislike obvious.

“Let me explain two things to you.” He lowered his voice and waited until I looked at him before continuing. “My sister is my only family. *Nothing* bad can happen to her. She’s had some shit luck.” He paused, took a deep breath, and a line formed between his eyebrows. “I hate that she felt like she needed to solve her living situation without my help, but that’s done. She’s living with you now. If I push her, she’ll sink in further.”

I nodded.

“Don’t think for one second I’m cool with this. I’m tolerating it because she’s my sister and I love her.”

“Right,” I said, my stomach hardening to the point of pain. He flexed his jaw before blinking, and the turmoil in his eyes disappeared like a snap of fingers.

“I’m not bringing this shit to practice *unless* you fuck this up. That means no sleeping with her, no dating her, none of it. She’s off limits in every fucking way. That would change everything. Got me?” He smiled, the threat hidden beneath his eyes.

“Yes.” I took another drink, his meaning quite clear.

“Good. Now enough of that. Ryann would kill me if she knew we had this talk, so this never happened.”

I nodded, my throat dry, and I chugged half of my beer. I rarely drank, and the dark amber liquid warmed my insides just a bit. I welcomed the feeling. It put Michael’s warning and my lingering thoughts of Ryann to the back of my mind.

He left me in the kitchen with a wave to join some other guys on the team, and I finished the glass before filling it up again and returning to the main area of the house. Couples lined the walls, friends laughed, and some punk had one arm on the doorframe as he gazed down at Ryann. I squeezed the cup a little tighter at the way he leaned into her. Everything about her posture from the way she held her shoulders back to how she looked around the room every couple of seconds meant she was *not* into him.

Yet he didn't get the message.

Her eyes widened a fraction when I approached, and I regretted it when they both looked at me. I had nothing to say. I opened my mouth, unsure how to explain my interruption, but Ryann took charge and smacked her head against her forehead. "Shit, we're up next, aren't we?"

She gave the slightest nod, signaling me to agree, and I did. "Yes. We are."

"Damn, well, it was nice seeing you, Mark. We'll have to catch up again soon."

Mark nodded, but disappointment flashed across his features.

Ryann winked at me before weaving her arm through mine. "Thank you. Now, let's go kick some ass."

I had no idea what she was talking about, but the fact her warm skin pressed against mine made my thoughts funny. Would her brother see this and assume things? Was this an innocent gesture meant to confuse Mark? Where was she taking me?

Our arms were touching. That was it. Yet... I felt her softness *everywhere*. My body tingled from being so close to her, and every shift of her muscles caused a ripple effect. My blood threatened to go south, so I focused on anything except her.

The floor. The smell of stale beer. The screen door she pushed open.

She led us out into the backyard where people hung out around tables, cheering loudly. Once we got onto the deck, she released me and looked up to the sky with laugh lines around her eyes. "Thank you for playing along."

"He made you uncomfortable."

Her smile faded, and she tilted her head to the side as she asked, "How did you know?"

"Your posture. You didn't like it much when Patrick hugged you either."

She pressed her lips together for a second. "You're observant, Jonah. Not just when it comes to hockey."

My skin tingled with heat from the way she said my name, which was counterproductive to my talk with Michael. I waited a beat, found my focus again, and remained truthful. “You’re expressive. Anyone would notice if they were paying attention. It’s not that hard. Those guys should’ve realized it.”

There, that sounded safe.

“Ah, well.” She shrugged and took a sip from her cup. “Personal space is a thing for me.”

“How so?”

She moved to lean against the rail of the deck, lifting one foot to rest on the back of it while she pushed onto her elbows. She looked relaxed, and while this wasn’t an intended move to showcase her chest, her position amplified everything due to the way the light from inside carried out. The front of her shirt hung low, showing a hint of cleavage. My mouth watered. *Why haven’t I hooked up in so long?*

Focusing solely on hockey seemed like a dumb idea with the lack of control I had over my thoughts of her. Damn it. I took a large sip of beer to cool off and waited for her answer.

“When my parents died, everyone wanted to offer some sort of comfort. So many hugs, hand squeezes, people rubbing my back, that sorta thing. They meant well, but it was too much.” She eyed me over the rim of her cup, her blue eyes twinkling from the light, and she chuckled. “I haven’t shared that with anyone else. I keep it to myself because I figure it’s wrong to *not* want comfort.”

“It’s not wrong or weird. It’s your space.”

She hummed and glanced around the backyard, excitement making her bounce off the railing. “You’re not experiencing all the fun yet, but I know just the thing.”

“I’m not having a bad time,” I said, wincing at how lame that sounded.

She ignored me and bolted down the stairs, waving for me to come with her, so I did. It was hard not to follow when she smiled at me like that. She didn’t seem to notice how guys stared at her as she walked toward a table with eight other people. She had this energy, this *thing* about her that I couldn’t describe. Was it her smile? Her joy? Her blonde hair? Her way of still being happy despite the shit she’d lived through?

“Can we join the game?” she asked. Her welcoming voice was smooth and settled me like hearing skates hit the ice.

Some dude with a green hat and a piercing on his nose smiled. “Hell yeah. Each take a side.” His gaze moved to me, and his eyes widened. “Dude! J.D. is in the house! No way!”

The small group cheered, and my entire body flushed with embarrassment. The guy wasn’t on the team, but he clearly knew most of the players. I waved a hand in the air, feeling dumb. I understood the thrill of being an athlete, a well-known guy on campus, but I didn’t get why people cared about me at all. I wasn’t interesting. I didn’t have a huge following on social media and certainly didn’t do anything remotely cool. I practiced and played my heart out on the ice. That was it. Patrick and Paxton were already drafted while Michael had a large following and made videos all the time. I was as cool as a white wall. But I forced a smile and lifted my hand at them, feeling like a total dork.

“Huge fan, man. Can’t wait to see you play this season,” the guy said, pointing for me to join at the end of the table. “Your stats were great last season. Maybe we’ll win the Frozen Four this year.”

“Thank you.” I stood at the end of the plastic table next to a girl who was a foot shorter than me. Ryann was across from me, her lips curved up in a smirk.

Each person had a half cup of beer in front of them, and the two at the other end cheered with their cups, slammed the bottoms down on the table, and started chugging. The girl on my side of the table finished the beer in two seconds before placing her cup face-down. She then flicked the bottom of the cup, flipping it into the air so it landed right side up.

My side of the table cheered. The person next to her repeated the process while the navy hat guy struggled to flip the cup. The process clicked. I understood the game and focused on the angles they used—how much the cup should lean over the edge of the table, how hard to flick it. My heart pounded as it neared my turn.

The other side of the table caught up after the guy in the middle missed six times in a row. That meant it would be Ryann versus me. Competition flooded my veins, making everything laser-focused.

The short girl flipped it on the first try. Score.

I picked up my cup as Ryann did the same. She chugged, spilling some on her shirt in the process, and she finished before I did. I watched in horror as she flipped on the first try and missed.

Thank god. I hated losing.

I set my cup face down, flicked it, and on the first try, it landed. My side of the table jumped up and down and cheered, and I expected Ryann to be pissed.

She wasn't.

"Good game, J.D." She looked at the green hat guy. "Again?"

We played three more times, my side winning three out of four, and Ryann grinned up at me as we headed back inside.

"Does winning make you smile or is it the beer?" she asked, stumbling a bit. I didn't think about it before reaching for her, wrapping my fingers around her forearm to settle her. She glanced up at me. "Oh, thank you," she said, a little breathless.

"Of course," I said, my voice rough and deep, probably from the warm buzz of alcohol and not at all to do with the fact she didn't recoil from my touch.

She trusts me.

I should remove my hand from her softness, but I didn't. I couldn't. I kept it there to make sure she didn't trip. That was why. But her gaze dropped to my hand, and I released her too fast. She wobbled again, and I had to grip her waist to prevent her from busting ass. "Shit, Ryann."

The entire side of her body pressed into mine, and she laughed. Her sweet giggle caused all sorts of inappropriate thoughts, which escalated when she leaned into me for a second. Her floral scent intoxicated me almost as much as the beer, and she grinned up at me, the tiny gap between her teeth and all. "Thanks for catching me."

"You're tipsy."

"Yes." She placed one hand on my chest, pushing off me with it, and a slight blush crept up her neck. "Are you?"

"Am I what?" *Thinking about how soft she feels? Yes.*

"Tipsy? Having fun? I really wanted you to have fun tonight, and it seems I got carried away." She closed her eyes and swayed to the music. "Dancing. I love dancing."

She didn't wait for me before moving into the house toward the make-shift dancefloor in the basement. I followed her, because what else would I do? Talking to people who I didn't know sounded awful, and being around her gave me a level of comfort. She knew my past and how important hockey was to me...I could be myself with her and didn't have to worry.

So, I trailed her, admiring her tight jeans and all, and blinked when we

arrived in the basement. The meaning of her words hit me as I watched her sway her hips side to side. She wanted to make sure I had fun. Me. She tried for me.

I stood frozen, unsure if I should walk us home, dance with her, or try to convince her to drink water. Maybe a combination of all three. But the way she moved her body made me feel like a moth to a goddamn flame.

Dancing with her was too personal. Too much. Too everything. So, I waited, unable to take my attention from her until another guy approached. He slid in behind her, and what the hell?

There was no reason to feel white hot anger when his hands went to her hips. I slammed my eyes shut and took a deep breath. She had every right to dance with anyone. I needed to get away from the dance floor before I did something *stupid*. She was my teammate's damn sister, and I had no business wishing it was me holding her.

Dancing to the upbeat music released the pent-up *something* that took root in my stomach all day. Warm hands rested on my hips, and I moved to the beat, not thinking about running into Derrick, how attractive Jonah was when he relaxed, or how I'd regret having too much beer. Sweat pooled on my forehead by the time the song was over, and I thanked the guy who joined me for a few minutes.

He grinned and moved onto someone else before I could blink. Fair enough. Some people used the dance floor as prime hook-up potential. If meaningless flings were my jam, then I'd probably do the same. After my life spun out of control when my parents died, I craved stability, and while flings could solve the loneliness for a night, they left me feeling empty. I liked relationships.

I fanned myself by lifting the edge of my shirt to get air on my skin, and I scanned the crowd for Jonah. He'd followed me downstairs, that much I knew, but his large frame wasn't sticking out anywhere. I frowned, hoping he didn't head back without me, even though that seemed unlikely. While I didn't know him well, I trusted him enough to assume he wouldn't ghost me.

My breath caught in my throat at the harsh reminder of seeing Derrick, and I swallowed, searching for a bottle of water. There were a stack of them on a table in the corner, and I uncapped one and took a long swig, the uncomfortable feeling in my throat easing up.

Suddenly, my body sagged. I was tired. The fuzzy feeling from the beer started to wear off, and I wanted to wash my face and put on comfy clothes. It was already midnight, and if Jonah needed to *let loose*, he did a great job already. With my new mission, I went upstairs in search of him.

Michael walked past me on the stairs and put a hand on my shoulder. "Anyone get too flirty with you?"

"Jesus, no." I rolled my eyes and shrugged his touch off. "I can take care of myself, bro."

"I know. Just want to make sure. Guys get rowdy here." He narrowed his eyes, but the irritation in them disappeared. "We have a bet going about J.D."

My insides twisted at his tone. "What?"

He lowered his voice. "Does he sleep with a hockey stick in his bed?"

"Don't be an asshole." I scowled at my intoxicated brother, somehow wildly protective of Jonah. "He's focused. More than any of you."

"I'll say." He blew out a breath, the mixture of whiskey and beer making me gag. "I gave him the talk. You're untouchable."

My stomach sank, and I got pissed. "Michael, don't do this shit. We talked about it. Nothing will happen. It's not worth it, okay?"

"I know, Ry." His face softened, and a sad, tortured look crossed his face. I recognized the grief. It hit me out of the blue, and my eyes welled up. "Ah shit, don't cry," he continued. "Sorry, you just...you had this face, your brows coming over your eyes, and it was so *Mom*."

"Damn it, Michael. I'm at a party and a little tipsy. I'm emotional." I sniffed before he pulled me into a tight hug. "Ugh, enough."

"Love you, Ry."

"You too."

"Let me know if you want me to walk you home. I think J.D. is still here though. Can't say I'm bothered by the fact you're living with a guy who could beat the shit out of anyone who might threaten you. Makes me feel better than you at the dorms with all that nonsense."

Nonsense. Drugs, alcohol, pills. "I'll find you if he already left."

"Cool. Might stop by the coffee shop tomorrow since it's an off day." He ruffled my hair before a leggy redhead said his name from the bottom of the stairs. "That's my cue. I'll wait ten minutes, and if I don't hear from you, I'll assume J.D. is walking you home."

"Bye." I snorted at the way he jumped down the last five steps. We didn't talk about our sex lives, but it was clear he was active. He was single, decent looking, and a senior on the hockey team. My brother's bed was *not* lonely. If that worked for him, then good for him.

I made my way back up toward the main floor as people got sloppy. Drinks spilled everywhere, two girls were crying, and a couple yelled at each

other near the front door. My head pounded—it was definitely time to go. I found Jonah in the kitchen, pulling an overflowing trash bag out of a bin and looking so out of place it made me smile.

“Uh, whatcha doing?”

He flicked his gaze to me then back to the task. “It’s disgusting in here. I’m taking it outside.”

“You don’t need to clean up for them.” I frowned and moved under the sink to find an empty bag. “Are you heading back soon or staying awhile? It’s okay if you want to stay, so no pressure. I’m wiped and need to sleep.”

He stilled his movements, so quiet for a large guy, and I snuck a glance over my shoulder. Worry lines formed on his forehead. “This is my fault.”

“What?” I spun back around. “The mess? No it’s not.”

“You came here because of me. Come on, let’s drop this in the dumpster and we can go home together.” *Home* made me feel warm and tingly for reasons I wasn’t sure I wanted to figure out. He tied the top of it and picked it up with such ease, his arm muscles didn’t even bulge. I wordlessly followed him out the front door and waited as he hustled to the side of the house.

I hummed once he rejoined me, and we headed toward our place. We didn’t touch, but our hands were inches from each other, so when I stepped around a bump in the sidewalk, the backs of our hands brushed together, sending a tingle up my arm. He was just so tall and big.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“You’re alright.”

He kept his attention straight ahead, and while he gave no indication he’d had a bad time, his shoulders were tense.

“Was it awful?” I asked, chewing on the side of my lip and trying to read him.

“Was what?”

“The party? My brother’s *chat* with you? You seem really edgy, that’s all.”

He sighed and put his other hand in his pocket. “I had an okay time, and no, your brother...didn’t say anything I didn’t already know.”

“Care to share?”

His jaw tightened for a second. “No.”

“Alrighty then.” I yawned as we made our brisk walk back. Something felt off. Whatever comradery we had throughout the party was gone, and it was silly to miss it already. “Are you upset with me? I thought you’d enjoy

the game of flipcup.”

“I’m not upset with you.” He looked down at me, his dark eyes scanning my face for a few beats. “I shouldn’t have made you come with me.”

“Do you think it was a hardship for me to have a few drinks, play games, and dance? Because it wasn’t, Jonah.”

His left cheek twitched before he seemed to walk faster. I matched his stride but had to take twice as many steps to catch up to him, and after thirty seconds, I reached my arm out to block him from moving. His very toned chest ran straight into my hand. It was the second time we touched that night, and it took every effort to not dig my nails into him to see how strong he really was.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice rising in panic.

“Stopping you. Something crawled up your ass, and I can’t keep up with your pace.” My breath came out ragged from the sprint-walk. “Any reason why you’re trying to ditch me?”

“I’m not...I’m sorry. I’m shit at this kinda thing.” He pressed his lips into a firm line and waited for me to meet his eyes. I let go of his shirt and nodded. “You said you were tired, and it’s my fault you came because I was nervous. You were helping me out and you ran into that guy, and I don’t want you being run down for work.”

“By *this kinda thing* do you mean being friends? Heading to a party because a friend is nervous is what you do. I had a good time. Don’t ruin it with your grumpiness, okay?” I smiled, hoping it would help him lose the ever-present frown. “You kicked my ass at flipcup. I thought for sure you’d be walking around all cocky.”

“I did beat you every time.”

“Yes, I just said that,” I fired back, my face flushing when his gaze warmed. “No, don’t get all happy now because we’re remembering. Unfair.”

“You’re adorable when flustered.”

My face heated, and my insides flipped over at his compliment, but I scoffed and started moving again. It was better to not think about it. Our shoulders touched a few times, and instead of recoiling, I leaned into it. It wasn’t so bad having Jonah with me.

After a few minutes, we arrived at the stairs, and he motioned for me to go first, keeping a hand on the rail as we ascended. The wood creaked, and I swore the staircase swayed. Maybe it was the alcohol, but stairs shouldn’t move like that. He reached out and gripped my arm, his fingers coming down

around me as we waited for the sound to stop. The staircase kept moving, and the sound got louder.

“Shit,” I said, my blood roaring in my ears. Fear clawed its way up my throat.

“Get inside. Go.” He moved his hands to my lower back and pushed me up the rest of the way. He pulled the keys out of his pocket and opened the door. I bolted inside, exhaling at having my feet on solid ground.

“Uh, did those steps feel like they were going to fall?”

“I’m calling the landlord tomorrow. This is unacceptable.” His ragged breath matched mine, and he rubbed his forehead before pinning me with his stare. “We stay here until they can ensure they’re safe.”

I blinked. “I have to work tomorrow.”

He shook his head, the lines on his face sharpening. He ran one hand over his chest, right over his heart, and he glared at the front door. “Not with those fucking stairs like that. You’re not going down.”

“Are we sure it’s not the wind?”

“It’s not windy outside, Ryann.” He swallowed hard and moved toward the fridge to grab two bottles of water. “We have enough food for two days. Hopefully this can be fixed before then.”

“What about your routine?” I asked, unfiltered.

He handed me a bottle, and a moment of panic flooded his eyes. “I’ll survive.”

“Let me know when you call them in the morning. I want to be in the loop.”

“Will do.” He nodded at me, no emotion on his face, and I made my escape to my room. I wiped off my makeup, tossed my hair up in a bun, and put on my comfiest shorts and tank top. After sending a quick text to Hannah to let her know I couldn’t make it, begging her to forgive me, I closed my eyes and was asleep before I took my first breath.

The loudest beeping I ever heard jarred me from a much needed sleep. It was repetitive, high pitched, and sounded like construction, which made no sense. Why would there be construction going on at... seven in the morning? I groaned at my phone and wiped my hands over my face as an engine roared

right outside my window.

I bolted up, not even bothering to go to the bathroom before marching into the living room and almost running into Jonah. “S’what’s going on?” I asked, my sleep-fogged brain not quite computing it would be rude to stare because holy shiittt.

He was shirtless. Bare skin and muscles and hard lines greeted me. Pectorals that weren’t too bulky, trapezoids formed from hours at the gym, and his stomach. *Mamma mia*.

Something like a groan and a grunt escaped my lips, and he cleared his throat, making me halt my blatant perusal of his body.

“Been a minute since I’ve seen a chest. Yours is nice. Forgive me.”

He blinked, and his cheeks had the slightest tint to them. “They’re working on our stairs. I called the landlord at six.”

“That’s fast,” I said, glad my voice sounded normal and not all breathless because damn, seeing Jonah Daniels in the flesh was a lot to handle. “How did you get someone out here so fast?”

He almost smiled. One side of his mouth quirked up, and he scratched the back of his head, showcasing his very toned biceps. Jonah shrugged. “He knew I played on the team.”

“Ah, you used your name. Good for you.” I jutted my chin toward the door. “Can we see what’s going on?”

He furrowed his brows and followed my gaze. “Don’t see why not.”

I marched past him and carefully opened the front door, the cool morning breeze hitting me. “Shit.” I rubbed my hands over my arms, but it didn’t do any good. My urge to see them working outweighed the temporary coldness, so I held onto the frame and leaned a hair over the edge.

Jonah joined me, his shoulder touching mine when he adjusted his position to see, and it was so not sensual. There was no reason for my skin to prickle with awareness or for my heart to skip a beat. He smelled like laundry, which wasn’t that exciting, but I breathed him in a little deeper.

“Never seen stairs fixed before,” he said.

“Yeah, me neither. It looks like they’re securing the foundation? Making sure we don’t fall and bust ass or die.”

He slid me an amused look but didn’t respond. We watched in silence for a few seconds as a couple of guys hoisted up long planks of wood, nailing them on the outer side of the staircase. The culprit of the awful beeping noise was a mini lift. A guy in a yellow helmet raised a hand. “You two live here?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding and trying to prevent my teeth from chattering. “Thanks for fixing this.”

He smiled. “Should be done by midafternoon. If not, we’ll bring you both down with this lift so you can find somewhere else to go for the night.”

“Thanks.” I crossed my arms again and darted inside, the warmth and still air soothing my chilled skin. “D-damn, I’m cold.”

“You’re hardly wearing any clothing.” His voice was closer than I thought. When I got into the living room, I turned and held out my arms. His gaze moved from my face to my legs, up my stomach to my chest, where he sucked in a breath.

“I like to be cold when I sleep, plus, I’m covered everywhere that matters,” I said, looking down to make sure I didn’t lose my shorts or anything. Then I saw it. What caught his attention and had him focused on my chest.

My nipples were pointed, freezing cold and sharp enough to cut glass, and they strained against my thin tank top. He swallowed so hard I heard it. That little sound had the same impact of a bull crashing into a window, and every part of my body was attuned to what he did. His quick breath, how he wet his bottom lip with his tongue, and the way his fist curled against his leg.

Oh my.

Our eyes met, and in that moment, I really wanted to know how Jonah Daniels’s chest felt under my hands, and I was pretty sure he wanted the same from me. He took a step toward me as my phone blasted from where I left it on my nightstand. Sam Hunt’s sexy drawl snapped me out of the moment, and I darted into my bedroom, shutting the door and answering my phone.

“God, Hannah, I’m so sorry. Our stairs, it’s a disaster. We can’t leave, and I might have to take a lift down.” I threw myself on my bed face first, my brain an absolute mess. “Am I fired?”

She laughed and let out a long sigh. “No. Not even a little bit. I’m glad nothing happened before if the stairs were so old. You could’ve been hurt, so don’t even worry about the shift. I practically live here anyway.”

“I was so excited to come in too.” I rolled onto my back and stared at the blank ceiling. “Everything alright with your little man?”

“Yup. He’s good. I think we’ve figured out a custody agreement that works. He’ll still have a couple days away from me which I hate but... it’ll solve the battle.”

“Well, if you need me to hang with him again, let me know. I owe you, since I bailed on what was supposed to be your first weekend off!”

“Be safe, don’t worry. Keep me updated about tomorrow when you know more, okay?”

“You got it.”

She hung up, and I took a second to collect myself. Sure, that moment was weird. There was attraction. Probably two-sided. *Definitely two-sided*. But he was my brother’s teammate, and I told Michael nothing would happen. Plus, he said he would *never* go for me. Two strikes didn’t necessarily equate no attraction though.

Thinking someone else was hot was fine. Healthy. Normal. It was our actions that mattered. I could control my desire for him. For sure.

I put on my largest sweatshirt, an old hockey one from our high school’s team, and used the bathroom. My face was puffy from not sleeping enough, and I yawned. Caffeine. If that damn beeping was going to continue, I needed coffee. With a shaky breath, I went back into the living room and booked it for the kitchen. Music and grunts came from the TV, and my mouth literally fell open at what I saw.

Jonah was working out. Shirtless. Ten feet away from me.

Shit.

JONAH

My arms burned from the push-ups, but they were necessary. I straightened my forearms, held myself in a planking position, and did another set of twenty before flipping over to do sit-ups. Not going to the gym left me restless. Uneasy. Like there was a current inside my body that needed to find release and physical outlets were all I knew.

My skin had a layer of sweat as I worked my abs. I welcomed the familiar burn of my muscles and went harder. My pulse raced, and my head hurt a little from the couple beers the night before, but I powered through. Something clinked in the kitchen, and I froze, torn between wanting to see if she put a goddamn bra on or not. Even when I closed my eyes, the image of her pebbled nipples poking out of her thin shirt was there. Her breasts were the perfect size, lush and curvy, and *shit*. My mouth dried up, and awareness of how attractive she really was had my blood heading south without my permission.

“Why’d you stop?” she said, making me look over at her. She sat at the kitchen table, her knees up to her chest and a coffee mug in her hands. She wore a large navy sweatshirt, and disappointment hit me hard.

“Hmm?” I sat up and rested my arms on my knees. I couldn’t stop myself from staring at her long bare legs. Her shorts were so short there was no way she wore anything underneath them.

“Your workout. You were going hard, and bam, you stopped. I was enjoying the show,” she said, smirking over the rim of her mug. She said it with so much ease there was no way she was blatantly flirting with me. “Don’t look so affronted. I’m sure people check you out when you’re at the gym, too.”

“You were checking me out?”

God, why did I have to say it? Heat flooded my face, and I closed my eyes, repeating Michael’s words in my head. She was my teammate’s little sister. He warned me against this. There was too much at risk, even if I wanted to kiss that goddamn toothy smile and know how she felt underneath my hands.

“Absolutely.” She laughed, making me open my eyes. She set her feet on the ground, crossing one leg over the other. “*Obviously* you’re good-looking. That can’t be news to you.” She waved her free hand in the air. “But I was admiring the way your muscles move when you do push-ups. Every line is toned and hard-earned. Makes me want to drag a finger over your back and trace them.”

Her words muddled my brain so bad I couldn’t think. She wanted to touch me. She thought I was attractive. She didn’t care that I played hockey. She laughed a lot and smelled so damn good, and her body...I swallowed hard, the air in the room shifting.

Ryann stared at me for a few beats before she blinked, and the warm, teasing expression left. She set her mug on the table and walked over to me. “Do you have a headache from drinking? How can you work through it?”

“Sweating helps me.” My gaze traveled from her face to her legs and back up again. My throat got tight with how much I wanted to touch her. My fingers twitched, and I froze when she sat next to me, staring at the TV.

I *never* had lust like this, the need to know how she tasted, how she felt, how she kissed. It was maddening that I couldn’t stop my thoughts. She made a noise of disbelief, and I couldn’t remember what I even said.

“Working out helps with your hangover? I’ve never tried that. I usually watch TV in bed all day and replay everything dumb thing I’ve ever done in my life. I still get filled with shame thinking about stupid shit I did in high school.” She laughed, and any traces of heat I swore I saw in her eyes were gone. “Let me join you.”

It took a second for my brain to catch up. *Working out*. That’s right. “Join me?”

“Yeah. I literally have nothing else to do, and if it helps with this brain fog I have, I’m in. Show me how you work out.”

This was a terrible idea. The worst. But how could I explain that without crossing the line? There wasn’t a way to do it, so I nodded. “Sure. Right. Yeah.”

She grinned, the soft lines of her face making her eyes seem brighter, more alert. I sighed, every muscle tightening at her proximity, and I hit play. The video instructed us to alternate between push-ups, planks, and sit-ups, and my plan was to go through it three more times.

I had my hands together on the floor shoulder-width apart, and I started counting to thirty in my head. Ryann's soft groans drew me in, and I watched as she did the reps too, her form messy and her face turning red.

"My god. This shouldn't be that hard," she said through gritted teeth. "My arms are burning."

"Do them on your knees." My voice came out harsher than I wanted, but her floral lotion drove me crazy with each movement. "It's a modified form that helps."

"Okay, yeah." She wiped her forehead, the baggy sweatshirt hanging off her shoulder, and she finished the set on her knees. "That's it, right? We're done. It's over."

I laughed.

She snapped her gaze to my face with a smirk, but it disappeared. "Wait, it's not?"

"Not even close, Ry." Whoa. *Whoa*. "Ryann," I corrected. The nickname came out of left field, and I gulped, looking back at the TV. "Next round is sit-ups."

"Okay, Jo."

Her comeback made my heart swell. I chanced looking at her again, and she was smiling at me, the little gap in her teeth front and center. She scrunched her nose, almost daring me to complain about the nickname.

The instructor on the TV rambled encouragements, and I flipped onto my back, breaking the connection we had. I put my arms behind my head. "Fifty crunches, let's go, Reiner."

She groaned but did the same thing. I sat all the way up, using every muscle in my core and tightening them to complete the set quickly. Ryann struggled, and her face was red, her hair escaping her bun. Moisture dripped from her temples. "Dammit, I'm hot."

"Sweating out the alcohol helps."

She wiped her brow and grabbed the hem of the sweatshirt, pulling it over her head and tossing it to the couch. *Shit. Shit!* She still wore the thin tank top, very much without a bra, and I slammed my eyes shut as her breasts moved with each crunch. It was so not cool to stare, but...she did say she'd

watched me.

So maybe it wasn't inappropriate?

She grunted as she counted closer to fifty, and when she finished, she lifted the edge of her tank top toward her face, using the material to wipe her sweat. In the process, she showed off her stomach.

My god. This girl was hot. Smooth skin, a sparkling belly ring that I desperately wanted a closer look at, and a trail of birthmarks I wanted to touch. My neck burned, and I could barely swallow as my attraction threatened to take over my brain. How long had it been since I slept with someone? Months? Why had it been so *damn* long?

"Do I have abs yet?" she asked, her eyes closed as she panted on the ground. Each breath made her breasts threaten to spill over the tank top, and my lower gut burned with lust.

"Your stomach looks fine," I said, sounding like an idiot, and I slammed my mouth shut. Maybe I should open a window to get fresh air in here.

"I feel like I should have a six pack though." She opened her very blue eyes and patted her stomach over the material of her shirt. "I used muscles I haven't in years. How many more until I have abs?"

I snorted and wiped a hand over my face. "Uh, quite a few."

"Great." She pushed herself up, her perky, pointed nipples making my mouth water the longer I stared. It didn't matter that her face was flushed or that little pieces of her hair escaped and plastered to her sweaty skin—she looked gorgeous.

"What's next, J.D.?"

"Thought we agreed on Jonah," I fired back, my uneven breathing getting louder.

"Ah well, when you make *that* face, your *I'm a million percent focused* face, you're J.D. to me."

"I'm focused all right," I said, my voice going deeper than intended. It was filled with innuendos, but Ryann seemed unfazed and unaware of my struggle. She rolled her eyes and jutted her chin.

"What's next?"

"Planks." I got into the position, my weight on my elbows and my toes as I used every muscle in my core to balance. "Hold it for a minute, rest a minute, repeat."

She nodded, modeled my posture, and got into the position facing me. Her shirt hung low, too low, in fact. I could see almost *all* of her breasts. If

she shifted even a little bit, I'd get to see her nipples, and my god, I could think of nothing I wanted more.

She grunted and looked up at me, a determined smile on her face. "My entire body is shaking."

"That can happen," I said through gritted teeth. Never in my life had I been turned on during a work-out. It was uncomfortable, and I needed to cut it short. *Breathe in, breathe out.* I cleared my mind the best I could, but my effort was all for nothing when I opened my eyes again and stared down her shirt.

I had to be the world's biggest asshole.

"Checking me out, Jo?" she said, her face red from straining. There was a playful glint to her eyes.

"Uh, well," I said, gulping as my face burned with embarrassment. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Because I can't seem to stop." We held eye contact just as the instructor said time, and I collapsed onto my back, panting. The plank wasn't why I was out of breath.

"Jonah." Her voice pleaded with me, and I waited a beat before sitting up and looking at her.

She rubbed her lips together, her pulse racing at the base of her neck. "It's okay."

"What is?"

"You checking me out. I don't mind." She shrugged, and her heated gaze moved over my chest.

"We shouldn't," I said, unsure of what I meant. We weren't doing anything. Just sitting there sweaty from a workout, yet it was the sexiest thing I'd done in months. Years, even.

"Shouldn't what?" she asked, licking her bottom lip before her teeth came down on it. Her eyes heated, and her chest heaved. "I'm admiring you. Nothing wrong with looking, Jonah. Plus," she said, a dangerous lilt to her voice made me tense. "You made it clear we would *never happen.*"

She threw my words back in my face, and I growled. The need to prove my attraction to her battled with the promise I gave her brother. It was a full-fledged war, but before I could decide who won, she got up, picked up her sweatshirt from the couch, and stood in front of me. I was much taller, so even though I sat on the ground, her face wasn't far from mine.

“You look furious right now,” she said, frowning and almost looking disappointed. “There’s no harm in us being attracted to each other, okay? We’re single, healthy people who checked the other person out. It doesn’t have to be a big deal. I know you don’t have time for distractions, and my brother wouldn’t forgive me, or you, so there are a million reasons why I shouldn’t wonder what it feels like to kiss you.”

“Ryann,” I pleaded, unsure what I wanted her to say. Hearing her state it out loud made me focus on her lips, how full and soft they looked, and sparked my attraction even more. I’d bet my scholarship she kissed like she smiled, all-in, one hundred percent, and god, I wanted to find out.

“I know.” She smiled, reached over, and ran her fingers through my hair. I closed my eyes and almost groaned at how good it felt. She did it a couple more times before letting go. “I’m capable of ignoring this thing between us and staying friends. I think we make a good pair. But if you feel different and want to go back to ignoring each other... I could survive it. It would suck, but I’d do it because I really do like living here. It’s your call though.”

She didn’t say anything else before going back to her room and shutting the door. The sound of the shower came on, and knowing my ridiculous sexy roommate was wet and naked with a wall between us—I had to take care of this attraction. With inappropriate thoughts of Ryann, I got into my shower and wrapped my fingers around my already hard shaft, pumping and resting my head against the shower wall.

How would her skin feel against mine? Would she groan like she did with the sit-ups? How heavy would her breasts feel in my hands? God, pleasure zipped through me the harder I pumped. My balls tightened, and I cupped them, pulling on them as I came into my hand. Heat spread through me, my skin tingling from an orgasm that should’ve settled me down.

I hadn’t been controlled by lust in *years*. Sex was a release, a way to pass time, not something I sought out, yet I hadn’t even touched Ryann and I wanted her. This could very much be a problem.

I finished in the shower, feeling dirty knowing I thought of her nipples and her sounds the entire time I jerked off. I threw on a pair of athletic shorts and a long-sleeved shirt before heading into my bedroom without a plan. Not having the ability to leave should’ve stifled me, but instead, it was almost freeing. The pressures to get better, to work out, to skate on the ice all evaporated because I had no choice in the matter.

I wasn’t ready to face Ryann yet, so I plopped onto my bed as my phone

rang. "Hey, Dad."

"My boy, you seem happy." His scratchy voice brought me back to reality. He sounded tired and worn out. How the hell could I be thinking of Ryann when he was suffering? Was I going to risk my focus, my team chemistry for some girl? No. *Absolutely* not.

"I'm good. How are you?"

"Well," he paused and cleared his throat. My anxiety shot through the roof. "Your mom called."

"Lawyer bullshit again?" I scoffed.

"Well, she, uh, thinks I've tarnished your opinion of her."

"Nope. She did that on her own. All on her own." I gripped the phone tighter, the familiar rage burning up my chest, making my words come out choppy. "What does she want now?"

"She's going to reach out to you." My dad sounded so sad. I closed my eyes. "I know it's hard, Jonah, but she's your mom."

"She left us, okay? I'm never going to forgive her. She chose the coward's way out and crushed both of us. It's you and me, Dad. You and me."

He sighed, and I could hear the relief in his voice. "I know I'm not supposed to want to hear that and I would never, ever make you feel bad if you want a relationship with her. She's your mom, and if some day you make it work, don't hide it from me."

"Dad."

"Not done." He gulped. "But all that being said, you're my best bud, Jonah. I'm pretty damn lucky and thankful you're my son."

My eyes stung briefly, and I swallowed down the emotion. "I got lucky with you too, Dad."

"Now, I didn't call because of her. Wanted to see if we could get together since it's your off day."

"Well, I would, but I'm stuck in our place since the stairs went out. Ryann and I can't go anywhere."

"Oh good, how's the new roommate? He a hockey fan?"

"Ah, well." I cleared my throat, the guilt of what I did in the shower washing over me. "Ryann is a girl, actually. She's Michael Reiner's little sister."

It was rare my dad was speechless, but his lack of response made butterflies explode in my stomach.

“There was a little name mix-up, and well, he knows and it’s going okay. Better than okay. She’s...awesome.”

“Oh, that makes me happy.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t thrilled at first, but if anyone understands what my life is like, it’s her.”

“Is she starstruck with you?”

“Ha, no.” I leaned back onto my pillow, my lips curving into a smile. “I can’t think of anyone who cares less that I play hockey. It’s weird. She understands the sport but hasn’t asked me about it once.”

“I bet it’s nice having a friend on your side.”

His words hit me in the gut. She was my friend. She was on my side. There was no way I should cross that line and ruin it. I hadn’t had a *friend* who wasn’t on the team since high school, and even then, the betrayal of my former best friend siding with my mom still stung two years later. “It is nice, Dad. You’ll have to meet her when you stop by soon.”

“Can’t wait. Shit, I need to go. My neighbor said he’d pay me a hundred bucks to take care of their yard while they were on a trip. Gotta get started before the humidity is too much.”

“Love you, Dad.”

“You too, son, and hey, if *she* calls, you do what you need to. Don’t hold back because you feel like your loyalty’s to me, okay?”

God. It was like he twisted a knife into me. “Alright.”

He hung up, leaving me feeling flat. Moments like these were exactly why I craved the ice, the gym, the workouts. I could channel all my emotions into hockey, making me feel better about doing what I could to help my dad. Without those releases, I felt off-balanced. Unsettled.

Two questions circled in my mind, keeping me glued to my bed, confused as hell. What would I do if my mom tried calling me?

And even though I knew all the reasons why I shouldn’t, what would happen if Ryann and I did cross that line?

Franklin Smith.

He was the reason for the first and only real fight Michael and I had. Tricking me into being with him just to spite Michael was the ultimate betrayal. My brother had warned me too. Michael lost it and punched him before a playoff game. The coach benched my brother, and he didn't talk to me for weeks.

Franklin played me for a fool, and I let him come between my brother and me. Never again. I couldn't afford that no matter what because he was all I had left. Not speaking to Michael every other day was impossible to imagine.

So, my attraction to Jonah was complicated. I told Michael nothing would happen, that this wasn't high school, and I wouldn't mess with his team. It wasn't a lie when I said it...but I couldn't stop thinking about Jonah's lips.

Like, kissing him would probably be bad, right?

Or do more than kiss? His hot stare felt more than curious. It was like a caress, and I really wanted to know if Jonah focused on everything like he did with hockey.

Being stuck together in the apartment without an escape seemed to make my body sync with his. His heavy footsteps left his room, and his door creaked. When he stopped, my breath caught in my throat. I slid my attention away from my computer and to his face, worry lines encased on his forehead in a deep scowl.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

The muscles along his jaw clenched, and his nostrils flared as he went to the fridge and pulled out milk, spinach, and strawberries. He didn't answer as he got the blender out and added protein powder and ice to the mixture. Jonah

consumed protein shakes the way I went through chocolate when I had PMS. Even though his back was covered with a Moo U shirt, his muscles were still visible and tighter than a cord.

Did I do this?

I chewed on the side of my lip and waited for him to turn around. He had to at some point, unless he took the awkwardness up to another level and walked backward to his room. It took a couple minutes, but he made the shake, poured it into a glass, and took a long sip before he leaned against the counter and faced me. His eyes seemed sad or worried, and it jarred me.

I wasn't used to a sad and worried Jonah. Just focused or confused. "You okay? Did I...say something I shouldn't have? I'm sorry if I did." I focused on the tabletop, not his face, and he moved to sit in the chair across from me.

"My dad called."

I glanced back up at him and tried to decipher what could've set him off. "Is he okay?"

He sighed, looking lost and nothing like the intimidating guy the campus knew him as. "My mom wants to get back in my life."

"Oh," I said, sucking in a breath. Everything hit me. His worry, the sadness, and the clenched muscles. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." He put his face in his hands, releasing a long, frustrated groan, and remained as still as a statue. "My dad insisted it was up to me and that it wouldn't change our relationship at all, but how can I *talk* to her? I go a few days without thinking about what she did to us, but that's it. I *hate* her, Ryann. She left without showing an ounce of sympathy or regret. She bled my dad dry in the divorce, so why is she trying to come back?"

I placed my palms on the table, taking a few seconds to try and figure out what to say. This was so messed up. Was it worse than having my parents taken from us in a blink of an eye? I wasn't sure. My parents didn't choose to leave us. They loved us, and there was never any doubt. But this? My eyes stung at watching the absolute fear on his face. "Do you want to talk to her?"

"What is there to say? That I won't forgive her? That she has no place in my life anymore?"

"Do you want that?"

"I don't *know*, Ryann." He stood up and pinched the bridge of his nose. "God, of all days for this to happen and I can't even go on a run."

He looked so broken, distraught even, I got up and walked to him, wrapping my arms around his waist and resting the side of my head on his

chest. It felt nice, right, somehow, with our bodies pressed together.

It distracted him for a second, his body getting tighter before he brought his arms around me. "You hate touching."

"Yeah, not right now though." I squeezed him harder, taking in his clean laundry and soap smell, and did *not* run my hands up his back. I rested them nice and polite on him and waited for Jonah to end the hug. Thirty seconds went by, then more, and he made no move to end it.

He rested his chin on the top of my head and sighed, the sound piercing my heart. I decided that yes, his mom was alive, but this pain was sharper and harder to understand than me losing my parents. There wasn't a competition for who was allowed to be sadder, but in the months after losing them, I got caught up in how unfair it was that it happened to me.

This was unfair too.

"You're shaking," I said, leaning back and staring up at him. "Jonah, hey." I frowned, holding his dark brown stare for a beat. "Want to know what I did after my parents died?"

He nodded and blinked, his long lashes fanning over his cheeks. His eyes were beautiful, soulful, and an open window into his thoughts. Right now, he was swirling into despair.

"Binge-watched shows."

He scoffed, and I reached up to cover his mouth with my finger. "Shh. I know you don't have time for it, but we're stuck here for at least the rest of the day, bud. I'm telling you, *Stranger Things* is addicting and you can't stop watching. We'll be able to finish it in one day too."

"I don't watch TV a lot."

"I understand. Trust me, this show will distract you." I slid off him, already feeling the loss of his warmth, and went to the TV to get the show ready. He watched me carefully, and my face heated, remembering what happened when we both sat in front of the screen before. "Okay, it's loaded. Grab a snack and buckle up."

"I have my shake." He shifted, his movements jerky and stiff, completely opposite of how he was on the ice. He plopped down on the couch, not quite on one end, leaving me to either sit right next to him or make a point to sit against the opposite edge.

He grabbed one of the pillows and tossed it against the end furthest from him, meaning my only option was by him. My legs felt like Jell-O as I joined him, our thighs touching as the show started.

I had seen the show before, every season, but it was on my list to rewatch at some point, and today seemed like the right time. He remained stiff for the entire first episode, not making a single movement. By the second, he relaxed and set his empty shake on the ground. I snuck a glance—his eyes were narrowed at the screen.

“You like it,” I said, elbowing him in the side. “Admit it.”

“It’s fine.” One side of his mouth quirked up, and he sighed, relaxing further onto the cushions. His weight caused me to slide into him. My left shoulder leaned against his, and our legs were completely side to side. My heart raced with the contact, but my goal hadn’t deviated. He needed comfort, as a friend.

Friend.

“I can stop the episode.” I held up the remote, pausing it from playing the next episode. His gaze sliced through me. “Yeah, you’re not into it. I’ll keep watching in my room,” I said, toying with him as I stood up. He gripped the back of my shirt in his large hand and yanked me back onto the couch, the action so unlike him I gasped.

“Give me that remote.” He leaned onto me, his chest inches from mine, and reached out to try and get the device. His breath tickled my face as he looked down, his eyes lighting up in challenge. “I’ll take it from you.”

“Will you now?” I squirmed, moving my hips to adjust to the weight of him. Jonah sucked in a breath, his lips parting at our position. I didn’t move though.

Neither did he.

His gaze dropped to my mouth for a second before he snatched the remote from my hand. “Got it.” Once he held it, he moved back and had the biggest, *goofiest* smile on his triumphant face. He pressed play and positioned himself further into the couch, completely relaxed and not giving anything away.

My stomach somersaulted over and over, doing an entire gymnastics routine as I tried to catch my breath. He totally flirted with me, yet he looked too relaxed. I sighed and crossed my arms, moving one leg over the other to put some space between us. My attraction to him was becoming a problem, even though I said I could ignore it. I could.

But I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

It was tough, but I focused on the show rather than his body movements as the third episode concluded. He stretched, making the smallest groan, and I

clenched my legs together.

“God, it feels good to be right,” I said, smirking when he turned toward me. “You are so hooked.”

“It’s...decent.” He shrugged, his fingers twitching on the remote. He studied me, his tongue tracing the side of his lip. “Cocky is not a good look on you.”

“It’s a fantastic look on me.”

“Yeah, I lied. It is.”

Shit. Did his voice get warmer, or was I making it up? His brown eyes turned into pools of lust, causing me to forget why this wasn’t a great idea. His breathing got heavier, his jaw tightening as he seemed to take all my air.

He leaned closer just as I put my hand on his incredibly hard and toned thigh. I wasn’t sure if I was encouraging him or trying to stop our touches from escalating as his face drew near. My own lust reflected back to me in his eyes, and his fingers seemed unsure when he curled them around the back of my head, guiding my face closer to his. God, I had never wanted to kiss anyone as much as I did him in that second.

Being the sole focus of Jonah Daniels was addicting.

“This is bad idea,” he said, his lips grazing mine as he spoke. I shuddered when his grip tightened, our lips a hair apart. “Tell me to stop, *please*.”

His other hand rested on my hip, as if he was restraining me from jumping on top of him, and I slid my hand up his side all the way to his arm. He was hard, everywhere. I bit down on his bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth with a wet pop as someone banged on the door.

Life’s not fair.

“*Fuck*,” he yelled, leaping off the couch and wiping his hands over his face. He closed his eyes, tilted his head toward the ceiling, and mumbled something that sounded like *what am I doing* before adjusting the evident bulge in his shorts. Jonah headed for the door.

Cold washed over me the longer he was away. It was like his body heat transfixed me, scrambling my thoughts until he took over. I grabbed the pillow and hugged it to myself, the evident regret on his face making me embarrassed.

“We’re all done with the stairs.” The guy in the yellow hat from earlier stood at our door, an easy smile on his face. “We’ll bill the owner, but you two are free to go. Thanks for the patience.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jonah’s voice was deep, controlled, commanding.

“Appreciate it.”

“Call my cell if it feels off. If it rains within the next two days, it could cause the new foundation to shift.” He nodded at Jonah, then me, before heading back down the stairs with loud footsteps.

Once the thuds stopped, Jonah shut the door, leaned his back against it, and took a loud breath before he leveled his gaze at me. “I’m heading to the gym. I need to get out of here.”

“Okay,” was all I could say.

He grabbed his shoes from the doormat, took his keys from the small bowl on the counter, and without a backward glance, he left.

Guess we weren’t going to talk about our *almost* kiss. Something sticky, awful, and not unlike guilt crept down my body, making my stomach hurt. This was Michael’s teammate. My roommate. What if we kissed and hated each other in two weeks? What if Michael found out and messed up Jonah’s shot at the scholarship? What if Jonah didn’t forgive me? Where would I live then?

Wasn’t there a rule about roommates hooking up?

I blew my hair out of my face and dug my toes into the carpet for a second, grounding myself before escaping the confines of the two-bedroom apartment. I’d head to the coffee shop and see if Hannah needed time off. It would be better than waiting around feeling awkward when Jonah came home.

Yes, it’d be better if I was gone for the rest of the day.

“I think I’m staying in school another two years.”

“Wait, what?” I asked my brother a few hours later. We sat at *Beans N Books*, Hannah insisting she stayed busy—apparently it helped ease her anxiety over her ex—and demanding I relax. My nervous energy needed to be put to use, so I texted my brother for a coffee, and he arrived ten minutes later.

The fact he would drop whatever he was doing for me made my heart swell. He might be my only family left, but he made up for the absence of our parents with his protective, large heart. “Why wouldn’t you graduate in the spring?”

“Mom and Dad left us some money for tuition. I’m here on a scholarship,” he said, his voice strained, like it physically hurt to talk about them.

I understood the pain. It hit me whenever I mentioned them too.

“So, you’ll blow two years of school? For what?”

“Getting my master’s in business administration. It’ll give me the platform I need to start a good career when I’m done here.” He took a drink of his lemonade and broke the brownie into pieces on his plate. His gaze moved to Hannah for a second before returning to me. “Don’t get mad.”

“I sense a but coming.”

He flashed a quick smile. “I’m not thrilled that this program is hours away. It’s killing me a bit, actually. I know you want your independence but... I won’t be able to check in with you all the time. I’ll miss you.”

“Michael,” I said, my voice laced with anger and understanding. The thought of him achieving his goal brought me a huge amount of pride. “I’ll be *fine*.”

“Fine? Yeah, I’m sure you would be, but that’s not okay for me. I want you to be happy and successful.” He cracked his knuckles and studied me for a good minute. “You look tired.”

“I’m a bit hungover from last night. How are you unaffected? It’s annoying.”

“One of my talents.”

“Well, you suck, and I hate you.” My smile took away any seriousness of the words, and he rolled his eyes. “But really, if you need to move across the country or travel around the world, do it. Mom and Dad wouldn’t want you stuck here watching out for me.” My voice remained strong even though the thought of not seeing him every week made me sad. It was a double-edged sword to want him to live his life, but also that meant no random lunches, or dinners, or coffees.

“I’d like to think that... we can stay close, even as we grow up.” He cleared his throat, and his expression turned serious. “I hear some of the guys bitch about their siblings getting into their shit, being the favorite child, all that nonsense, and I don’t want that to happen with us.”

“It won’t.”

I almost kissed Jonah.

“It *won’t*,” I said again, pushing the thoughts of what almost happened out of my mind. “This emotional side of you is new. You sure you’re not

hungover or at least feeling sick?”

His body language changed from stiff to relaxed, and he winked as Hannah walked to our table. “Hannah, my favorite barista.”

“Owner,” I corrected him. “She owns this place.”

“Wait, I didn’t know that.” He sat up straighter, and his smile grew at my boss. “That’s badass.”

“It is, thank you for noticing.” She met my eyes as her brows drew together. “Anyway, Ryann, here is the schedule for this week, assuming you don’t have any more stair issues.”

“Stair issues?”

“Yeah, no big deal.” I told him what happened, the pair of them hanging onto every word. “It’s fixed now though.”

“I’m glad J.D. took care of it.” He winced. “I need to check this place out.”

“Ah,” I said, my ears burning hot. “Jonah has this *thing* about visitors. Not sure if it’s the same for teammates, but we even have the rules written on our fridge. Our first addendum is to allow Preston though,” I said for Hannah, who paled. “He’s always allowed.”

“Yeah, I think J.D. can handle if his *captain* wants to stop by to see his sister. Paxton and Patrick think this shit is hilarious and want to check the place out too. I’d really like to see Jonah try and stop me.” He laughed, like the idea was ridiculous and unbelievable. It caused an uneasy knot in my stomach. Bringing Michael back to the apartment would be like dumping ice cold water onto Jonah, solidifying that what *almost happened* would never happen.

And I really didn’t like that outcome.

“So, when can we stop by?”

JONAH

Two days since Ryann bit down on my lip and gave me a small taste of her, and I *still* couldn't stop thinking about it. Two days since we had spoken more than twenty words to each other and it was my fault.

I stayed in my room when she was home and waited for her to leave before going into the kitchen. Anything I could watch on the TV, I could access on my phone. Practice went well, my form on point and my body feeling even more primed for the season to start, yet the hot shower and fresh clothes did nothing to wipe the gross sensation growing in my chest.

She'd done nothing wrong, and I was acting like she had. Dammit.

Tuesday night was supposed to be when I completed all my discussion questions for classes, took quizzes, or did any work due that week, but my focus was shit. I cracked my neck side to side. Her soft footsteps stopped outside my closed door, and I tensed.

She knocked twice. "Hey, J.D."

Back to that name.

"If you have a second, I need to ask you something."

Great. She'd want to talk about the almost-kiss and why I'd been an ass, avoiding her. It was a real question she deserved to know the answer to, and I braced myself, hoping to be honest and firm. I couldn't stop thinking about that moment, but it couldn't be more.

"Sure," I said, realizing I remained quiet too long. I padded to the door and opened it, my breath catching in my throat at the way she looked. It wasn't her outfit, which was a T-shirt and cut-off shorts. It was the slumped shoulders and the way she wrung her fingers together.

Like she was scared of me *again*.

She took a breath, met my eyes, and drew her brows together. “I know you won’t allow visitors, but my brother has been asking the last two days to stop by. I told him about the stairs, and he’s obsessed about making sure they’re okay. It can be when you’re gone or something. I just... want to respect your rules, but I’d like if he could stop by.”

Christ. I ran my hand over the back of my neck, squeezing it and hating myself a little bit. “Yeah. Of course he can.”

“Great.” She smiled her toothy grin, and warmth spread across her face. “Thank you. He’s a pain in the ass, but I love him. Also, the twins will probably come with. You know how tight they are.” She brushed her hair behind her ears. “Is there a time that works? I know tomorrow is for reading, so maybe tonight? Or tomorrow during the afternoon?”

“Whenever, Ryann. Don’t make it about my schedule,” I said, my voice a little rough.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said, unable to stop looking at her face. The freckles, the eyes so blue they matched the summer sky, the full lips that tasted like icing when mine touched hers for a half a second. *This* was why I avoided her. This pull to her. “You started at the café officially, right?”

“Yup.” She moved on from our conversation and went back to the kitchen table where her school materials covered the tabletop. Her hair was in two braids, each ending on either side of her face. She sucked her lip into her mouth and frowned when I approached. “Oh, are you coming out here? I can go back into my room.”

“*What?* No. You can... you can stay.”

“But how will you avoid me then?”

Oh god.

Her words weren’t laced with venom. If anything, the soft voice made it worse. Death by a thousand papercuts. “Ryann,” I said, gulping as my throat got too tight to speak. How did I communicate my thoughts to her? “It’s not... I’m not...*fuck*.” I closed my eyes as shame consumed me.

“You’re right.” I met her gaze and expected her to be mad, victorious, or gloating even as I admitted the truth. But instead, she pressed her lips together, and the blue of her eyes dulled.

Her disappointment was the worst feeling. I sighed and sat in the chair opposite her, trying to figure out the right play. Did I admit everything? Yes. I hated lies.

But I didn't get a chance to explain that avoiding her was safer for both of us.

My phone buzzed, *Mom* flashing across the screen over and over. My pulse raced in my ears, and I had to fight for each pull of oxygen into my lungs. I froze, unable to silence the phone since I was incapable of reaching for it.

She's calling. It's happening.

Rage and hurt and fear coiled inside my body, flashes of my dad's face damn near paralyzing me. It wasn't until Ryann said my name, soft and hesitant that I snapped to the present.

"Jonah, hey, you okay?"

Was I?

No. Not at all.

"My dad warned me she would call," I said, my voice flat and void of emotion. "It shouldn't be a surprise, but it's like someone punched me in the gut."

"You're allowed to feel that way." Ryann chewed on her lip and hesitated before putting her small, soft hand on mine. "I'm trying to read your mood. Do you want to talk about it? Want to suffer in silence?"

"I don't know."

I stared at the phone, all the things I wanted to say to Mom blurring in my mind. I hated what she did to me, to my dad, and the fact she didn't care about our feelings. I hated her. My jaw ached from grinding my teeth, and I pushed out of the chair, desperate for something to do when it buzzed again.

My gaze flew to Ryann's, her big blue eyes wide and filled with concern. She jutted her chin to the phone and spoke in a soft, tentative voice. "I think you should answer."

Maybe that's what I needed. Someone to tell me what to do so I didn't have to make the choice. She nodded, and I reached out, hit answer, and waited.

"Jonah, hi," my mom's voice came through on the speakerphone, the familiar sound sending bolts of pain through my chest. How dare she sound the same? Was her life peachy without us?

"W-why," I started, emotion clogging my every word. I cleared my throat, not caring if she could hear my reaction to her. "Why are you calling me?"

She sighed and the sound went directly to my heart, squeezing around it

to the point I slammed my eyes shut. “I wanted to talk to my son.”

“Talk to your new one,” I fired back, hating how Ryann seemed to disappear under the table. She slid down and took one step toward her room before I wrapped my fingers around her wrist and yanked her back to the chair. I needed her there. She knew my past, and I couldn’t explain why her presence was essential, but it was.

She yelped but remained seated, her brows furrowed into a hard line.

“Jonah,” my mom said, her voice breaking. “I miss you.”

I remained numb to it. “You don’t get to miss me. You’re lucky I even answered the phone.” My head pounded, and I needed to end the call. “We have nothing to talk about. You don’t give a shit about my life, so if it’s money you’re after, I don’t have any.”

She gasped and let out a wretched sob that made me feel like I could throw up. I hung up the phone and panted like I’d run five miles. Everything hurt. My mind, my heart, my body. I wanted to simultaneously punch a wall and cry.

I rubbed my palms over my eyes and counted to ten with slow, deep breaths that didn’t help the growing pressure in my body. “I need to go.”

“Where?”

“Out. I don’t know.” I stood up and searched for my keys and wallet. I shoved them in my pocket and grabbed a sweatshirt. “I need to walk.”

“Alone or...?”

Her question stopped me cold. She studied me with her pretty lips pursed and her brows drawn in concern. It was the lack of fear or pity in her eyes that made me say the unthinkable. “You’ll come?”

“Of course.” She got up, slipped her sandals on, and stood next to me at the front door with her face set in determination. “We need ice cream and cookies. Hell, an ice cream sandwich made with cookies. I won’t take no for an answer, J.D.”

She led me out the door, pushing me through the frame before she locked up and we headed down the stairs. They were significantly sturdier with the new foundations in place, but my legs still shook from the adrenaline. Ryann walked fast, and I caught up so we were side by side.

Losing my mom to my best friend’s dad meant I also lost the person I talked to about hard stuff. And it wasn’t like I could complain to my dad because his life was even worse. Bottling my feelings up for years and avoiding them had caught up to me, and I was so thankful for Ryann, I

could've hugged her.

The fact that I wanted to ruin this by kissing her splashed over me like a bucket of cold water. I couldn't be an idiot when I had a friend for the first time in years.

She hummed a showtune and paused when we reached a corner. "I *think* it's to the right. The place."

"Where are we going?"

"Shh, don't worry, I'll figure it out." She bit her bottom lip, the gesture a sharp reminder of what we almost did two days ago. My head got lighter. Fuzzier.

I ran my hands over my face, groaned, and stilled when a small hand landed on my arm. My emotions were on overload, and without a physical outlet, I had no idea what to do.

"What's your favorite movie?"

"What?" I opened my eyes and glared at her. Why the hell would she ask me that now?

"You heard me." She headed right, not removing her hand from my forearm as she brought me with her. Instead, she looped her arm through mine and kept her attention straight ahead. "Mine is probably *The Day After Tomorrow*."

"That's a terrible movie."

"Doesn't matter if it's bad. It's a great escape."

"Kinda like *Stranger Things*?" I said, something warm and weird creeping into my chest. "It helped you heal?"

"Yes, J.D. Disaster movies with a happy ending helped me."

My eye twitched when she used my nickname. While I hoped she wasn't annoyed with me, more the situation, I tried to say something to erase the worry lines on her face. "I haven't talked to a single person about what my mom did besides you and my dad."

"You can't keep that bottled up. It'll destroy you," she said, her voice softening and her grip on me growing tighter. "Why not talk to your teammates?"

"I don't want them to treat me differently."

"They wouldn't. I promise you." She sighed, the sound was so feminine and sweet it almost made me smile. "Have you seen a counselor? Would you consider it?"

I gulped. "Maybe, I'm not sure."

“I know we’ve only been friends, uh, *roommates*, for a little while so I don’t think it’s my place to give advice, but...”

“We’re friends,” I barked out, recoiling at the aggression there. “We are friends, Ryann.”

“Right.” She grinned up at me, her gaze dropping to my mouth for a second.

I sighed and was about to respond when Paxton came into view. I let go of her arm so fast she had to take a step to settle herself, and I felt like such an asshole. It was a dick move, and I regretted it.

“Shit, no, I’m sorry.”

Her eyes hardened, but it was brief. She pressed her lips together just as Paxton walked up to us and smiled.

“Hey, Baby Reiner.” He grinned big at her before eyeing me. “Bro, heard you’re living with Reiner’s sister. Can’t wait to see the place.” The guy winked at Ryann and held out a fist to her. She fist-bumped him and grinned back.

“Weird coincidence we’re roommates,” she said, laughing and elbowing me in the side. “There was a bit of a name mix-up, if you can imagine.”

Paxton nodded, eyeing her for a second. “Ryann is typically a boy’s name.”

“There we have it.”

Paxton jutted his chin toward me. “You guys heading to a party or something? I’m bored.”

Ryann looked up at me, her blue eyes wide and clear and filled with *sympathy*, and my throat closed. She shook her head and let out a small chuckle. “No. I forced this ray of sunshine to get ice cream with me. I’m having a shitty day and wanted sweets.”

Paxton liked that answer and laughed. “God, ray of sunshine. Fitting.”

“Fuck off, Paxton,” I said, unsure if I was annoyed at him or how well he knew Ryann. It seemed pretty well.

He clapped my shoulder and started moving past us. He put his hands in his pockets, whistling as he walked down the sidewalk in the opposite direction. My neck prickled with irritation, my emotions getting the best of me.

“How do you know Paxton?” I foolishly asked, adding another reason for Ryann to punch me in the gut. She’d covered for me instead of spilling my secrets, and I had no idea how to thank her, yet my dumb ass was making it

worse by speaking. At this point, I was lucky she'd even look at me.

"My brother is best friends with the twins, and they hung out with me a bit last year." She put her hands in her sweatshirt pocket and hummed again. "It's just up here. Come on."

I remained silent as she skipped toward a door to *Colleen's Cookies* and opened it for me. She wiggled her brows once we were inside, and she went to the cashier. "The mega-dreambar, please."

"I got it," I said, handing my card to the woman before Ryann could. "I insist."

Ryann frowned for one second before shrugging. "If you're sure."

"I am."

The employee handed me the card back, and Ryann went to the other end of the counter with a dreamy expression that I only wore when I was on the ice. She was cute. Her messy hair, her long legs, the way she kept licking her lips as she stared at the various ice creams in the cooler. Ryann had a joy about her that was trouble because the more I was around it, the more I wanted to stay there.

They called Ryann's name, and she cheered before grabbing a huge cookie and ice cream dessert. She found the closest table and sat down before taking a bite out of it and closing her eyes. "Ohmygod," she moaned, and I cleared my throat.

"Ryann, your sounds are...obscene."

She flashed her eyes at me, shrugging. "Don't care. Take a bite and try to keep it in your pants."

She lifted it straight to my mouth, and I leaned in to take a bite. It was juvenile to think about us sharing food, but it felt intimate, like people who knew each other well. The flavors burst into my mouth, vanilla, chocolate, caramel. My eyes closed, and I groaned, not quite as loud as she did but *holy shit*.

"Told you. God, is this what winning a game feels like? I feel smug."

My lips curved up at her, and we shared a heated look. Was she thinking about earlier? She took another bite of the dessert and crossed her eyes. I laughed.

She was ridiculous.

"Two more bites for you."

"Then what?" I asked.

"You spill your darkest secrets." She smiled, tapping her finger on the

table and looking at me with zero judgement. It felt like a gift I didn't deserve.

"Don't have dark secrets." I took one bite and let it sit in my mouth for a second before swallowing. Then I took a second. "I swear."

"What are you afraid will happen if you talk to your mom?"

"Oh, we're going straight to it, huh?" I snapped, sucking in a breath and settling myself. "Ry, I'm a fucking mess in my head. I don't know what I should do or feel about anything. The only consistent thing is being the best on the ice and helping my dad."

"Why is the losing the scholarship so important? There's financial aid, right?"

"My dad is almost bankrupt, and honestly..." I trailed off, studying her freckles again. "My mom blamed hockey for leaving, and getting a scholarship makes it all worth it, you know?"

"You earned another bite," she said, her voice soft again.

I brought the sandwich to my mouth and bit down, unable to break our stare. She was watching me eat, which sent a thrill down my body. *Knock it off.*

"I understand why you're focused, but Jonah, you should hear your mom's apologies. It's not my place, okay? I *know* that. But look at me and Michael. I would much rather have my mom alive and be furious with her. You don't have to forgive her. I don't know if she'll ever deserve it, but avoiding her? You'll combust, and that's not productive to your goal."

My jaw tightened again. I wanted to end this conversation. My leg bounced up and down, and the door was two feet behind me. I could run out, and I knew she wouldn't be able to catch up to me. I could go for a late jog or head to the twenty-four hour gym. The physical release would help for sure, but then what?

She stared at me, her mouth slightly parted, her face void of any judgement, and the guilt from earlier returned.

"Thank you," I said, my voice gravelly. "For lying to Paxton."

"I wasn't technically lying. I do want ice cream." She took another bite and passed it to me. "But you're welcome."

She did it so easily, like we were on the same team. It had been so long since I had someone there for me, willing to take my side, and the notion caused my heart to swell.

That was unacceptable.

“Tell me something messed up about you. I need to even the scales right now. I hate...the imbalance.”

“It’s not a competition of who has a harder situation.”

“I know, but please,” I said, my mind swirling with so many goddamn emotions. The way she lied for me, brought me here, encouraged me to talk to my mom... throw in her full lips and our almost kiss, and I was fucked.

“Hmm, okay. Well, instead, I think we should talk about Sunday. You dodged me for two days, Jonah.”

I gritted my teeth. I was being a coward, plain and simple

“I can’t stop thinking about what almost happened, and instead of facing you and talking about it, I avoided it.” My heart hammered so hard she had to hear it. My pulse never pounded this hard on the ice. This was a new game, one I didn’t train hours on end for, and one I was a novice in. “Do you want to uh, talk about it now...here?”

“Not if you’re uncomfortable.” She traced her finger on the tabletop, and I noted the bright green color of her nails. It fit her so well that it almost made me smile.

We had insane chemistry. She understood my dedication to hockey and my need to be the best. I could talk to her about the shitty stuff with my mom, but none of that made it okay to think about my teammate’s younger sister this way when we both knew there was too much at risk.

“I have no idea.”

“We get along, Jonah, right?” she asked, her voice small.

“Yeah, we do.” I sighed, my lips curving into a smile the more I stared at her. Her eyelashes were longer than I remembered, and I wanted to erase the unease in her warm blue eyes. “I’m sorry for how I acted the past two days, now, all of it.”

“I get why you avoided me, even though I didn’t like it. Either way, we’ll need to talk about it.” She sighed, and her gaze moved over my face, mouth, shoulders before she blinked slowly, like being near me bothered her too. “Are you attracted to me?”

“Yes,” I blurted out, my ears turning into lit matches from embarrassment. “Sorry,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut. “Yes. I’m attracted to you, Ryann.”

I waited a second before looking at her again.

She smiled, and her teeth came down on her bottom lip as she scrunched her nose in the cutest damn smile. “I was pretty sure, but it’s good to get it

out in the open.”

“Are you into me?”

“I was the one who bit your lip, so if it wasn’t clear, yes.”

I sucked in a breath. “We can’t do this.”

She blinked. “I know. It’s too big of a risk.”

“I can’t... do this to my teammate.”

“I can’t do this to Michael *again*.” She chewed her lip, and her shoulders slumped.

“What do you mean again?”

She blew out a long breath and stared at something over my left shoulder instead of my face. “I fooled around with one of his teammates in high school, but apparently it was all a ploy to mess with Michael’s head. I didn’t know that, obviously. I got played, and Michael got benched. It was the biggest fight we ever got in and that was when we still had parents. Now? I can’t imagine fighting with him.”

“Huh,” I said, relaxing into my chair. While the thought of her hooking up with someone wasn’t pleasant, the fact she had something important to lose as well settled me. It wasn’t only my bullshit that prevented us from falling into lust. “You have a lot at risk too.”

“Yes. Because I can *never* lose my brother. It’s just us.”

I ignored the slight pang in my chest and blamed it on the shit with my mom. “So, we stay friends who get ice cream when one of us is having a meltdown.”

“Yes.” She smiled, a full grin that showcased her small gap and lit up her eyes. “And friends who might *accidentally* check each other out but don’t act on it.”

“Deal. Shake on it.”

She snorted as I held out my hand. She took it, her small palm pressing against mine, and I squeezed.

“Deal,” she said, winking before leaning back into her chair. “Okay, so tell me about what you’re working on to prepare for the season. I’ll be at every game, so I might as well get in on your plan.”

My heart grew in size again, but I swallowed down the emotion and started blabbing about everything I had been doing. She listened like she cared.

Maybe this roommate thing wasn’t such a terrible idea after all.

RYANN

Hannah was running late, which was fine, but Michael and the twins planned to stop by the place twenty minutes ago, and I wasn't there. I chewed on my hangnail, hating how nervous I was for Jonah. They were his teammates, and they'd respect his place, his privacy. I was sure of that.

But still. He was nervous to go to a party and so determined to not mess up the chemistry of the team that he had to be sweating bullets. We never exchanged numbers, so it wasn't like I could text him to see if he was okay.

I let Michael know I'd be late, and his 'LOL still going over' response wasn't reassuring.

My brother joked all the time unless they were on the ice, but I couldn't picture him making Jonah laugh. Maybe a slight curve of his mouth, but that was it.

Wait—why was I thinking about Jonah's smile? I shook my head as an attractive man approached the counter. It was my third shift at the café, and I already loved the smells, the customers, and the hours. My feet hurt from standing for six hours straight, but I needed the job and the independence.

"Hi! What can I get you?"

"Hey," the guy said, grinning and showcasing a bunch of beautiful white teeth. He was classically handsome and held himself with an air of confidence. "Could I have a black coffee?"

"Hot or cold?"

"Hot. I promise I'm not a psychopath." He narrowed his eyes at me and moved his gaze from my face to my nametag. "Ryann. Interesting name for a woman."

"I know. I have interesting stories to go with it," I quipped back. He liked

my answer. His face warmed, and he leaned closer to the counter. Maybe *this* was what I needed. Casually flirting. Maybe a date. I hadn't gone on one since Derrick six months ago. A date would keep my mind away from my off-limits roommate.

"Are you a student here?" I asked, not hiding my interest. I got a to-go cup ready and poured the fresh brew into it.

"Yes. Grad student, that is." He had his hands in his pocket and watched as I put the lid on and slid the coffee to him on the counter. "Thank you."

"Of course. This is my job." I winked. "That'll be three bucks."

He handed me a credit card, and I swiped it, going through the motions and catching his gaze three more times. Oh yeah, this guy was into me, but I wasn't going to make it easy on him. "Here you go."

"So, Ryann, are you a student here too?"

"Yup." I popped the 'p' and frowned when someone else came up to the counter. The handsome man took a step back and held my gaze for a second before he shrugged. The woman ordered five drinks for her study group and left a decent tip, which was nice, but seeing the guy still waiting there made my stomach flutter just a bit.

It wasn't anything like earning a smile from Jonah, but it was still there. The fact I intrigued him was good for my ego. "Finish your coffee already?"

"No, actually. I forgot about it as I waited for an opportunity to talk to you again."

"Great line." I nodded and smiled at him. "Almost worth giving you my number."

"Oh, what would do it then?"

"Your name."

"Zach George."

"Two first names? That's unfortunate."

He grinned and moved closer. "So, Ryann, can I have your number? I've seen you here a few times, and you have the best smile."

"Okay, that was a much better line. Yes, you can." I wrote it on a business card and passed it to him. "Nice to meet you, Zach George."

His dimpled grin was the perfect distraction, and I didn't think of Jonah the entire time. This was good. Better than good.

I helped three more customers before Hannah strolled in looking flushed and upset. "Han, I can stay if you want me to."

"No, no, I should be here. My ex wants to introduce his new *girlfriend* to

Preston, and the divorce papers aren't even done yet. It makes me so angry I could just... just...punch his stupid face!"

My heart broke, and I frowned. "I'll punch him. You can't do anything where the court can get involved. Text me a location and I'll do it."

She snort-laughed like I wanted her to before groaning. "The worst part of it is that he'll be in my life forever. I won't keep Preston from his father, but there isn't a light at the end of the tunnel. I'll always have to talk to him or share things with him no matter what. Maybe when Preston is older, but then if he gets married or has kids...."

"Sure, but it'll get easier. I'm sorry, Hannah." I meant it too and waited to see what she needed. She got an apron on and shooed me with a flick of her wrist. "You sure you want me to go?" I asked.

"Yes. I'd rather you be here on days I have P so I can enjoy time with him."

I nodded and eyed her another second. One reason I admired her so much was that she threw herself into her job and took pride in making a profit. She never let her personal life affect her customer service skills, and even now, a minute after she had frustration written on her face, she smiled with a customer like she was having a great day.

Knowing she trusted me warmed my chest. Like, *maybe* we were friends. I swept the main area to help her and then clocked out, grabbing my phone and headphones to make the short walk back home.

My pace quickened as I hustled back to the house, and nerves took over. Michael wanted to *ensure* the stairs were okay, but I knew it was more to check out the living situation. Maybe this was a good thing—having my brother at the place where I almost kissed Jonah was the dose of reality I needed. I refused to hurt my brother, and kissing Jonah in secret would do just that.

Content with my new resolve, I climbed the stairs and unlocked the door. The familiar scent of lemon cleaner hit me, and I smiled at the trio of guys staring at me. "Honey, I'm home!"

No one smiled except Patrick. He liked it a lot.

"Okay, it was a joke. God, what did I walk in on? Were you comparing stats or something?"

"I thought it was funny, Ry."

"Thanks, Patrick. You're my favorite twin." I winked at him and set my keys on the side table.

“Why are you so late?” Michael asked, getting up and coming to me for a hug. We always hugged. I hated other people touching me, but it was our routine.

“Hannah was running late because of her ex.” I set my apron on a hook and tossed the rest of my stuff into my room. “Did my lovely roommate give you all a tour, or did you sit here in silence?”

Michael laughed. “No tour.”

“Okay then.” I kicked my bedroom door open and walked in. “Pretty simple. Two bedrooms. We each get our own bathroom, which is nice.”

Not just Michael, but the twins also followed us into my room and took up way too much space. They were large men and had no qualms about looking at my one picture on the wall of our family and checking out the view of the window. “You can almost see the quad from here,” Paxton said.

“Yeah, it’s a great location,” I said to Paxton. He frowned as he stared at my lack of decorations before knocking on the wall I shared with Jonah. “What are you doing?”

“You share a bedroom wall?” he asked, making my brother tense and Patrick grin.

“Yeah, but it’s not like either one of us makes a lot of noise.” I huffed and tried to remember they cared about me. They weren’t all here to annoy me. I would never forget how the twins came to the house and helped us after the accident his sophomore year. Some things made you friends, others made you family, and how they helped us with the funeral made them the latter.

“Hmm,” Paxton said, frowning in the direction of J.D.’s room. “What if he’s hooking up?”

“What if *I* am?” I fired back, and he held up his hands, giving my brother a sheepish look.

My brother made a *bleg* sound. “Gross, stop it. I don’t wanna hear about it.”

“Then tell your teammate to not be an idiot. We have a list of rules about hook-ups, if that makes you feel better.”

“Jesus, you have a list of rules?” he laughed and walked out into the living room to stare at J.D. The twins followed, and it gave me joy to realize they wouldn’t come back here after this. Michael would see it was fine and safe and be done with it.

“Where are these rules?”

J.D. got up from the couch, all tense and quiet, and kept his face neutral

as he padded to the kitchen and held up the sheet of paper I wrote on ten days ago. *Ten days. That's how long I've lasted without kissing him. Wow.*

My brother read them out loud, and a huge smile broke out across his face. "Okay, this shit is hilarious. The urge to punch J.D. has lessened. This kinda works."

"What kinda works?" I asked, hands on my hips and my battle stance ready to argue if he said something annoying.

"You two rooming together." He opened the fridge and got a bottle of water. "Not gonna lie, I was worried I'd find something I didn't like."

Shit. My throat got tight, and I swallowed. "Like what?"

"I don't know, chemistry or something. You both look annoyed with the other. Makes me feel better. Not that it matters. Pretty sure it's sacrilege to mess around with your sibling's teammate." He didn't glare at J.D. at all. He smirked, and Patrick said something under his breath I didn't catch. I shifted my weight on my feet.

I sighed and caught Jonah's stare for a second. He looked *pissed*, and I forced myself to focus on my brother. "Stop making it weird. Jonah and I are friends. We get along."

"Jonah?" He raised his brows so high they disappeared into his hairline. "Did you call him Jonah?"

"I heard her say it. Full name," Patrick said, raising his voice and being real dramatic about it.

"Jonah, that's interesting," Paxton added.

"I'm not a hockey bro, so yeah, I'm going to use his real name," I fired back, already regretting inviting my brother over. "Wednesdays are for reading and catching up on classwork. Let's leave Jonah alone so he can study."

My brother narrowed his eyes at me then Jonah before he let out a long breath. "Shit, we're being tools."

"Pretty much." I put my hands on my hips and glared at all three of them. "You leaving now?"

My brother winced and squeezed the back of his neck for a second. "Okay, so you guys get along *and* this helps you from the dorm nonsense? It's weird, you know? My *baby* sister living with some teammate."

"Not *some* random guy," I said, raising my voice. "Your teammate and a guy I trust. Now, you either relax and chill with me or get out. Same for you two." I pointed at the twins and waited. A part of me wanted them to leave so

I could check in with Jonah and see how he was handling this. He hadn't said a damn word, and I could almost feel the tension radiating off him. But hanging out with these three also made me laugh a lot.

My brother got his phone from his pocket and wiggled it in the air. "Want to help me make some TikTok videos? My fans need constant updates."

"You're such an idiot," I said, laughing when he did a weird dance move by kicking his leg. "But obviously. Much rather do that than read."

"You have a quiz tomorrow," Jonah said, interrupting us and causing my brother and the twins to eye him. "You asked me to remind you, even if you tried to convince me you were prepared."

"I did not," I said, hating the truth to his words. He narrowed his gaze. "Fine, I did, but I really am ready."

"You're lying." He shook his head as he lowered himself onto his chair. He always sat there when he studied or did work. Never the couch. His routine was rigid and unflappable down to the final detail. With one more long look, he jutted his chin to the chair opposite him. "Ryann, study."

"Damn it," Michael stretched and let out a long yawn. "He's right. It's late, and you got here an hour after we were supposed to hang. You should review or get ready for school. I can see you anytime."

"What about your TikTok career?"

"My dream will be delayed, yet again." He snorted and nodded to Jonah. "Thanks for looking out for my sister. Appreciate it, man."

He nodded, his eyes serious and intense and avoiding me entirely.

I gave a half-hug to both twins, then Michael, but before heading out, he whispered to me at the door. "Befriend him, okay? He seems so goddamn uptight."

"We are friends," I said, irritated at what he was insinuating. "Why don't you try harder to get to know your teammates?"

He flinched, but it was too quick. He masked his face and ran his hand over his jaw. "You like him."

My face burned red, but his insinuation wasn't meant *that* way. "Yes, I do. He's a good guy, and with the shit he's been through...he needs his team."

"What happened?"

"Not my business to tell you." I nudged him toward the top step. "Go on. We'll hang out this weekend."

"Stay out of trouble."

“Never.”

He snorted before jogging down the stairs to meet up with the other two, and I went back inside to a now silent Jonah. His nose practically touched the book, and it took thirty long seconds of staring at him before he glanced up at me.

“I’m sorry if you’re angry with me, but you made me promise last night to remind you.”

“I’m not upset,” I said, the weird pang in my chest catching me off guard. His beautiful brown eyes were framed with long lashes, and they were so expressive right now—open and kind—and it startled me. “You seem in an okay mood.”

“Seeing you and your brother like that was refreshing. It makes me happy you two are close.”

That made me smile. “How was it before I got back?”

“Awkward.” Jonah gave me a half-smile and tapped his pen on the table. “We talked about the coach, the team, and the new guys. The twins asked me about my routine, and I talked about them getting drafted. It was...fine until we ran out of the hockey stuff.”

“Did you tell him about your dad?”

“No. Did you?” he fired back, the warmth in his eyes disappearing.

“Of course not. That’s between us.” The urge to squeeze his hand hit me again. “I won’t tell him a single thing you don’t want me to.”

He nodded and let out a long breath. “Please. This isn’t something I’d like shared.”

“I understand.”

He relaxed just as my phone went off, and my stomach flipped seeing the message.

Hey, it’s the handsome psychopath with two names.

Dammit. He was funny.

I grinned and bit my lip as I texted back.

Which one? I met three different people with that description today.

“What has you smiling like that?” Jonah asked, his face warm and his lips curving up a bit on the sides.

“Oh, this guy.” I put my phone face down and ignored the guilt forming in my gut. Jonah and I were friends and *nothing* more. I should talk about this guy to make sure we both knew where we were at. It would be healthy. “He asked for my number today at work, and he sent me something that made me

laugh.”

“Hmm,” Jonah said, his lips flattening but that was the only indication he heard me. “You like him?”

“Unsure.” I took a hesitant breath. “Is this weird?”

“No.” He looked at his textbook instead of me, and his shoulders seemed to go rigid. “If we live together for the year, it would be absurd to think you wouldn’t date.”

“Or you,” I said back, making sure this was a two-way street.

“Doubtful. I don’t date. Ever.” He still didn’t look at me and highlighted some text before writing it down on a notecard.

“Do you sleep around then?” I asked, damn well knowing this was getting into dangerous territory, fast.

“The few times I did that, I hated myself.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

He looked up at me again, and I could almost feel how tense he was. His jaw tightened, and his lips parted as he tilted his head to the side just a bit.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve done a few hook-ups after a party, and I felt worse. I like to see someone for a while rather than a one-night stand. Not knocking it by any means, just not for me.” I shrugged and didn’t feel the pull to respond to Zach at all, not while Jonah gave me all his attention. “Why did you hate yourself?”

“Felt gross, too dangerous. They were unnecessary distractions.” He wet his bottom lip and cleared his throat. “Well, you better text him back.”

“Right.” Disappointment weighed me down, which was stupid because Michael was *just* here. We couldn’t flirt or fool around. With a resigned sigh, I texted Zach a few times until he asked me about grabbing dinner that weekend.

I said yes. Jonah and I would *not* happen, and while I didn’t want to lead Zach on, I could do one date before coming to a decision. Knowing it was happening Friday night made everything more serious, more concrete.

It also guaranteed I wouldn’t do anything with my roommate.

JONAH

She went on a date.

She wore a skin-tight black tank-top and jeans and went to meet some guy at a restaurant, smelling like a floral arrangement and making the place seem too quiet in her absence. There was no pop music coming from her room or little bouts of her laughter at whatever YouTube video she was watching.

When did this happen? When did I start noticing *everything* about her?

I needed to not think about the fact she was gone for two hours already. What could they be doing at dinner for two whole hours? My stomach clenched with annoyance imagining her kissing this dude, even though I had no right.

No damn right.

“Shit,” I muttered to myself and turned on the TV to watch football. It wasn’t even in my top three favorite sports, but it was on. I tried paying attention as best I could, but my stomach wouldn’t settle down. Did this schmuck know how thoughtful she was? Ry had made me breakfast two more times over the past week and sat and ate with me as we talked about our day.

I hadn’t done that with anyone...ever.

Two hours and thirty minutes.

Something broke inside my brain as I stared mindlessly at the TV and tried not to think about her. This was exactly why I couldn’t do anything about my attraction to her. All this wasted time could’ve gone toward watching old games, working out, or heading to the rink and skating. Seconds away from being furious with myself, I froze when uneven footsteps came up

the stairs.

Without thinking, I turned off the TV and hid in my room with the door closed. She couldn't think I was out there waiting for her. Because that's exactly what I was doing. Waiting.

Her keys jingled as she unlocked the door and entered. Did she walk like she was happy? Was that a thing?

She set her keys on the hook, and her movement seemed to stop in front of my room for two seconds. My heart lodged in my throat. Jesus. I pulled the ends of my hair and felt a wave of disgust go through me. Her brother was a senior on the team. One with pull and the ability to ruin everything for me. I was juvenile and pathetic, acting like this because of lust.

That's all this was though. Lust.

A small cough carried through the door, and my heart froze. Was that... a cry? What the hell? I yanked open the door and found Ryann, her face twisted in pain as she sat on the couch. Her foot was pulled onto her lap, and she gripped it with a red face.

"Hey, what happened?" I asked.

"I think I twisted my ankle or something on the walk back. It's throbbing." She bit her lip and closed her eyes tight, groaning when she squeezed it. "Stupid shoes."

I glanced at the black shoes she wore. They were way too tall. "You should've taken them off."

"And be the girl walking back alone with shoes in my hand? No thank you." Her blue eyes finally met mine, and when she sucked in a breath at my bare chest, pleasure rolled through me. But her comment bothered me, and as I walked into the kitchen to grab some athletic tape I stored under the sink, I figured out why.

"Your date didn't walk you home?"

"No."

I tensed, half-hunched over as I rifled through the box of stuff I always took with me wherever I moved. Band-Aids and alcohol swabs covered the bottom of it, but I finally got the black tape. "He should've walked you home."

She swallowed hard as I approached her on the couch. I wasn't sure if the slight reddening of her cheeks was because of the pain or because of me. I knew which one I wanted to be true, even though nothing was going to happen between us.

I sat on the cushion next to her and lifted her jean-clad leg up so her foot rested on my thigh. “How long did you walk on it with it hurting?”

“Probably a mile.”

“You could’ve called me,” I barked out, annoyed that she hurt herself and this guy wasn’t there to assist her. I paused my taping and glared at her. “I would’ve helped you.”

“You don’t have a car, J.D.,” she fired back, her voice a little stronger. “What would I have said? Hey, can you *carry* me back home?”

“I would have.”

“Well, I don’t have your number.”

I froze. How had we not exchanged numbers? We were roommates. “Give me your phone,” I demanded, not caring that I sounded like a jerk. It was important for us to be able to call or text. She could’ve asked me to come get her. Besides, what if she got locked out of the place or hurt? “Please,” I added, hoping it sounded more sincere.

She slid her phone out of her pocket, and I entered in my number, sending a text to myself so I had hers. Knowing that was fixed made me feel a little better. “Call me next time.”

“I don’t plan on hurting myself again.”

“I would hope not.” I sighed and couldn’t stop staring at her. Her face was so pretty, and her expressive eyes and full lips invaded my thoughts when she was gone. Her brows drew together, and I focused on the task. Helping her with her injury.

I ripped the athletic tape so I had enough to wrap her small ankle, and I weaved it around, making sure it was tight enough to not hurt. “This should help for the next day or so. Can you try moving your foot?”

She wiggled it up and down, and the wince wasn’t as bad. “It feels sturdier.”

“Good. Here, stand up. Put some weight on it.” I set her foot on the ground, stood up myself, and held out a hand to her. She took it, and I pulled her up, not letting go when she shifted her weight back and forth. “Well?”

“Better, yes.”

“You need Advil. Hold on.” I waited until she sat again and got two pills from my bedroom. “This will help with the swelling.”

“Thank you.” She smiled for a second before pushing off the couch and twisting her face in determination.

“Uh, where are you going?”

“To get water.” She rolled her eyes and took a few steps toward the kitchen. Seeing her tough this out sent the weirdest sensation through my body. It was more than *lust*. I liked her toughness and grit. I liked *her*.

“Sit your ass down, Ry.” I moved without thinking—something I did around her too often. I put my hands on her hips, lifted her up, and plopped her on the couch. “I’ll get it for you.”

She blinked at me as I narrowed my eyes at her. Her lips parted for a second, those round full pillows teasing my thoughts all the damn time, but then she closed her mouth and nodded. “Thank you.”

With a reluctant sigh, I brought her a bottle of water and sat back on the couch, leaving enough space between us so I wouldn’t be tempted to touch her. She took the medicine and leaned against the cushions, closing her eyes for a second before she shifted her body to face mine. Those expressive blue eyes warmed as she studied me, and her lips curved into a smile that made me nervous.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” I muttered, feeling stupid and off-balance.

“You’re a real mother hen.”

My lips twitched in response, and her entire face softened. She needed to stop looking at me like that, all warm and gooey, before we did something colossally stupid. “I’m used to taping ankles. It’s no big deal.”

“You lifted me off the ground and practically threw me onto the couch. You’re worried about my little ankle. It’s cute.”

“It’s not cute,” I said, sounding as mature as a fifteen year old.

“Are you going to manhandle me or insist you help me out of my clothes if I say I need to change?”

My throat got tight, and I tried not to picture her undressing or *helping* her undress. I shook my head. “No. Go ahead.”

“Thanks, boss.” She stood, leaned over, and ruffled my hair like it was the most natural thing in the world, and I swore I felt her touch all the way to my toes. I remained as still as a statue when she let go of my hair and hobbled to her room. She left the door cracked, giving me a two-inch view into her bedroom, and it felt so wrong. Forbidden. *Hot*. Was she undressing for me? Or did she forget to close it?

God, I was sweating. My pulse raced, and my forehead was damp. Touching her foot wasn’t sexy, yet her skin had been soft and warm. I took a sip of her water just as she came out of her room in a tight Moo U shirt and

plaid shorts that left her legs on full display.

Holy shit.

Her hair was down and wavy, and she gave me such an easy smile when she came back to sit down next to me. “Happy to report my ankle feels so much better.”

“Good.” My voice came out husky and low, and there was no way I could relax with her sitting this close and smelling this good.

I needed to balance the scales, and the only way to get her to stop being all smug was to mention the guy. The date. The dinner she went on without me. It would also dim the roaring attraction I had to her. “So, uh, how was your date?”

“Honestly? Meh.” She shrugged.

“You were gone awhile for just a *meh* date.”

Shit. I closed my eyes as my face got really hot. Way too hot. That was a dead giveaway that I watched the clock, and when I snuck a glance at her, her goofy grin stretched even wider.

“How long were you gone, uh, anyways?”

“I think you know exactly how long I was at my date, Jonah.” She nudged me in the side with her uninjured foot. “Did you wait up?”

“No.” I ran a hand through my hair, not looking at her. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Wanna know a secret?”

This was a dangerous, *terrible* game to play, yet I nodded and watched her. She was pretty easy to read, but now, seeing her this close to me with those short shorts and tight shirt that did nothing to hide her pebbled nipples...god. I swallowed hard. “Sure.”

“I went out with him because of you.”

“Hmm, what now?”

“I figured if I went out on a date and tried to flirt or tease or kiss another guy, it would help me stop thinking about you.” She sighed and played with the end of her hair like she’d just talked about the weather, not told me words that almost pushed me over the edge.

“What do you want me to do about that?” I asked, the question that kept me up at night and left me unable to focus at the gym or at home, all the time now.

Her answering snort wasn’t helpful.

“Is this funny to you?” I asked, my control snapping.

“I mean, you look *pissed*. It’s not exactly giving me the right vibes.” She chewed on her bottom lip again, causing all the blood in my body to head south, fast.

“I *am* pissed. I can think of a million reasons why you shouldn’t say things like that to me.” Dammit, my voice got low again, and the mood shifted. The playful, teasing tone was gone and seeing Ryann’s chest move faster almost did me in.

“But I can’t recall a fucking single one right now.”

Her eyes got hazy and filled with heat. Her hand stilled from playing with her hair, and she shifted her weight on the couch so one leg crossed over the other. “You play on a team with my brother, we live together, and I promised Michael I wouldn’t ever cross a line with a teammate again. Those are a few though.”

“Right. *Those*.”

She arched one brow and leaned forward, her lips parting, and I scooted closer to her. Whatever she wanted to say took courage because she took a deep breath, pulled her shoulders back, and stared at me head on.

“Did you kiss your date?” I asked, attempting one last time to dim my fire.

She shook her head, and her gaze moved to my mouth, lingering there as her breath came out heavier, needier. “No.”

“Why?”

“You know why, Jonah,” she said, dragging out my name and licking her bottom lip.

I blinked and moved even closer to her. She tilted her head up and brought her fingers to my chin, cupping it. Her hands on me sent me over the edge, and my body shook with need to finally taste this girl. Even though I couldn’t have distractions, *not* kissing her had become the distraction. It would go away if I just succumbed to desire.

Sure, yeah.

“I think I know a solution for us,” she whispered, dragging her thumb over my lip.

“God, *what*? Anything, please,” I begged, swallowing hard and loud.

“Fooling around wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.”

“Fooling around?” I repeated, already imagining how she’d taste and feel beneath me. How her hair would fall over my chest. “How would this be a solution?”

“A way to release this sexual frustration we’re both feeling.” She licked her bottom lip, and I trailed the movement, my body taut with need. I’d jump over the entire couch to take that lip into my mouth if she asked me to.

And I wanted her to ask. *Really* badly.

“I don’t do relationships. Ever.” There, I said it. She could tell me no, and I’d listen.

A shadow crossed her face, but it was so quick, I convinced myself I made it up.

“Pretty sure we’re not talking about having a *relationship*, Jonah. If we sleep together, no one knows. Not the team, not Hannah, *not* Michael. Not a soul.”

Hooking up in secret. No drama. No team bullshit.

I gulped and nodded. “Until the season starts.”

“Should we add this to the rules?” She moved her gaze toward the fridge where she wrote my stupid rules. They seemed trivial now that we were talking about hooking up. I thought she was joking, but worry crept down my spine. This entire up and down, off-kilter feeling just solidified why I didn’t do this shit. Emotions were exhausting, and I didn’t have time to worry about her.

Yet.

I bolted up from the couch, stood a few feet away from her, and rubbed my palms in my eyes. “This is so messed up.”

“How’s that?”

“Neither one of us is happy about this.” I laughed, the unease lightening when she smiled with me. “I’ve never had to...sit down and talk this shit out before anything happened. It’s weird.”

“Yeah, this is a first for me, but I wouldn’t say I’m unhappy.” She leaned against the back of the couch. “I tend to get naked first, talk later.”

God. I swallowed hard again. “Is this something we could do? *Now?*”

The air crackled with electricity, and she traced a line on her thigh with her delicate pointer finger. It wasn’t a sexy move, yet the softness of her arm, the bright color on her nails, and the way she took a shaky breath made it erotic. “It’s Friday, Jonah.”

“I’ve seemed to forget how to breathe let alone remember the day of the week.”

She snapped her gaze to my mouth, her brows raising as a cocky smirk twisted her lips. “Is tonight your film night, your reviewing notes night, or

the hide in your room night?”

“Can it be the night I finally *fucking* kiss you?”

Shit. I went there. I crossed the line with my words, and I couldn’t take them back.

Heat flared across her face, her mouth parting and her cheeks reddening. The points of her nipples strained against her shirt, and my god, did the woman ever wear a bra? One of our phones went off, the sharp sound of the vibration making a loud buzz, but I didn’t care. They could wait.

“Aren’t you curious who it is?” she asked, her throaty voice increasing my need to touch her. Would it get deeper if I teased her? Licked her?

“Not even a little bit.”

My heart beat so fast my body shook, and when I took a deep breath, the same intoxicating floral scent filled my nose. I plopped down on the coffee table. “Come here, Ryann.”

She stared at me with parted lips. It felt like forever, but she got up from the couch and took a small step toward me. Her body was *insane*. I stared at her without worrying I took my perusal too far. I was so beyond that.

“God,” I said, dragging my gaze from her bare feet, up her legs to her tiny-ass shorts. The thin shirt hung off her but didn’t hide her curves, and I reached out, put my fingers through her waist band, and yanked her toward me. She yelped, but I settled her right between my thighs. “You can tell me to stop at any time, okay?” I said, trailing my fingertips up her calves and along the back of her thighs. She shuddered against me and placed her hands on my shoulders.

“Okay. You can too.”

“Oh, Ryann,” I said, laughing as I continued feeling up her torso, teasing the sides of her breasts and grazing her collarbone. “I appreciate you saying it, but I’ve been thinking about this, you, for *far* too long.”

“What do you think about?” she asked, her chest heaving.

I couldn’t stop touching her. Her pulse raced in her neck, and I placed my thumb over the spot, sucking in a breath when she gripped my wrist with her hand.

“You really wanna know?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, her voice growing deeper.

I waited until she met my eyes, her deep blues even darker with lust. “I think about your legs.” I gripped the back of them, letting my fingers slide right under the edge of her shorts. “Your smooth skin.”

I moved up under her T-shirt where I could finally feel her stomach. A groan escaped before I could stop it.

“*Fuck*,” I said, closing my eyes at how turned on I was. It had *never* been like this before, and the chemistry with her was equally terrifying and exhilarating. “You don’t wear bras in the morning.”

“I never do when I sleep.”

“Are you wearing one right now?”

She licked her lips and raised her brows. “Guess you’ll find out, huh?”

I lifted her onto my lap, her legs straddling me where she could damn well feel my reaction to her, and I cupped the back of her head, digging my fingers into her hair. “Kissing you will probably destroy me,” I whispered, before closing the distance between our mouths.

Jesus.

She ground against me and brought her hands around my neck. Ryann tilted my head back as she slid her tongue into my mouth. This wasn’t a soft or sweet kiss. This was *hotter*. Ryann kissed hard and fast, whimpering into my mouth when I bit down on her lip like she did to me all those days ago. I took it, sucked, and released with a loud pop.

Her expression turned desperate. Wild even. She ran her fingers through my hair and kissed me deeper, our tongues fighting for dominance. She tasted like mint and chocolate, and having her warm body pressed against mine short-circuited my brain.

We made out, taking turns teasing or nipping the other’s lips for what felt like days, before I remembered I had an insanely hot girl on my lap. I reached for her waist, sliding her shirt up a few inches to enjoy her bare skin. When she ended our kiss and dragged her mouth along my jawline, my hands shook. She nipped and bit below my ear, and I jerked from how good it felt.

“Your jaw shouldn’t be sexy, but my god,” she said, sounding like she ran a mile before this. “Why does your skin taste so good?”

I was going to black out from lust alone. I closed my eyes, held her tighter against my erection, and shuddered when she dragged her tongue from my neck to my shoulder and bit down. It stung, but the brief pain was worth it. Knowing she felt as wild as I did snapped the little restraint I had.

“Time to find out,” I said, determined and so damn needy.

“Find out what?” she asked, sitting up straight so I could see her face again. She was flushed, and her lips were red and swollen. My dick twitched. Her eyes heated, and she ground against my length. “Oh, you feel huge,

Jonah.”

She rolled her hips against me, and her face lit up. The image of her mouth slightly parted and lust bursting out of her would forever be etched in my mind.

“Can I touch you?”

“If you don’t, I’ll beg.” Her eyes flashed, and I slid my fingers under her shirt again, tickling the delicate skin beneath her ribs. When I let my palm graze the tip of her beaded nipple, she tensed and gasped.

“Oh, you’re definitely not wearing a bra.”

Her response was a wicked grin.

I traced one finger around the sensitive point, each circle making her whimper. Using my other hand, I did everything but touch them, wanting her to ask me for more. “Does this feel good?”

“Yes,” she said, panting. “Please, just...”

“Just what?”

“*Touch me.*”

I cupped each breast in my hands, groaning at the weight and fullness of them. They were perfect, and I squeezed them together, flicking my thumbs against her nipples. Ryann threw her head back in a moan. *Her breasts are sensitive.*

I let go, her cry of pleasure fueling my fire, and I took the hem of her shirt and lifted it off her. There was nothing in the way now, and *my god*. Her breasts were *fantastic*. Her dusky pink nipples were mouthwatering perfect, pointed and perky. I bent lower, taking one into my mouth and sucking it. She arched her back and gripped her fingers into my hair as I hummed against her.

I could taste her tits for hours and not get bored. I dragged my tongue from one to the other, not in any rush, and flicked against the point to see what she would do. She groaned and tightened her thighs around me.

“I’ve dreamed about what your tits looked forever.”

“Did you touch yourself when you pictured them?” she asked, her throaty voice making me look up. She stared down at me, a smile toying at her lips. “I’ve fantasized about you that way. How it would feel to have your hands on me. If you have the same intense focus on everything you do.”

“You t-touched yourself thinking about me?” I asked, my head spinning as every last drop of blood went to my dick. Knowing this girl, this bombshell, thought about me? My god.

“Yes.” She grinned, and I closed my eyes for a second. “Your turn to answer though.”

I placed two more sloppy kisses on each breast before standing up and carrying her to my room. “Does that turn you on, thinking about me jerking off to thoughts of you?”

“Why don’t you find out?”

RYANN

Jonah literally threw me onto his bed. He took off his shirt before joining me, and our chests were skin to skin. I shuddered at the weight of him, how good he felt on top of me, and when he bit down on my neck, I bucked.

“Oh, wow,” I murmured.

“Your skin is so fucking soft.” He licked a line from my ear all the way down to my left breast. He nipped at me, sucking my nipple into a hard point before he moved toward the edge of the bed so he was on his knees. His jaw was slack and his eyes heavy as he looked me up and down before stopping at my shorts. “I want to see you naked.”

I pushed myself up onto my elbows and raised a brow. “Ditto.”

His eyes heated, and he undid my button before sliding my shorts down my legs. He groaned, loud, when he stared at my black lace panties. His eyes fluttered, and that simple gesture made my chest feel funny.

“Ryann,” he said, moving one finger and placing it over my clit. He swirled it a few times and caused a frenzied moan to escape my body.

I forgot about my goal of wanting him naked. The pleasure of his teasing finger was too much. He swirled it again, the white hot zaps of pleasure spreading through my body. I was so close. So damn close.

“I will never be able to forget how you look right now, wearing these tiny panties and squirming on my bed from my touch. You’re a fucking vision, Ryann.”

That was the only warning I got before he slid the panties to the side and touched me, skin to skin. He slid one finger inside me in a slow stroke. Then he added another, and I fisted his sheets in my hands, needing more of him. More of everything.

“You’re so tight, damn,” he said, his voice strained and desperate. He knelt at the end of the bed, staring between my thighs as he increased his tempo with his fingers. “When I stroke myself, I imagine this. How warm you are, how your body moves right before you come. I can feel you tightening around me. It’s so hot, Ry.”

Every part of my body tuned into him, his touch, and the way he stared at me. My heart hammered in my chest, and each breath got heavier as he thrust his fingers in and out, his warm breath hitting my thighs.

Sweat beaded on my face as my muscles tensed. Release was so close. So damn close. I arched my back, begging. “*Please, Jonah.*”

He kept his pace of in and out, using his thumb to put the necessary pressure on my clit, and when he reached his free hand to pinch my nipple, I lost it. I slammed my eyes shut as the strongest, most intense orgasm I ever had ripped through me. My legs shook, my body trembled, and I screamed. Jonah never stopped touching me. Even after I caught my breath, he was positioned over me, claiming my mouth with his.

Strong confident strokes of his tongue made me forget why this was ever a bad idea. He rolled us over so I was on top of him, his chest moving as fast as mine, and I groaned into his mouth, needing to see him lose control.

He gripped my jaw with one hand, the pressure making him hotter with the frenzied look in his eyes. “I lied. Seeing you come from my hands is what I’ll think about now.”

I shuddered and dug my nails into his chest. “My turn.”

“Hmm?”

“You got an image for your spank bank. I get mine now.” I licked my lips and sat up, not caring that I was naked and he still wore shorts. His body was a work of art, and I traced the lines of his muscles, getting drunk from how he trembled at my touch. “Does this feel good?”

“Yes.”

I outlined his nipple, bending down to lick his sweat covered skin. He tasted salty, but it was hot. All of his strength was earned from devotion, and I dragged my hands over his pecs, his biceps, all while I bit down on his abs. “God, I’ve wanted to do this since I first saw them.”

“When did you see my stomach?”

“You raised your arms once and stretched.” I laughed and scooted down his legs so I could slip a finger into his shorts. He stilled when I teased the waistband. “One of the sexiest things about you, Jonah,” I said, stopping

when his eyes grew hotter. “Is your dedication to your body. It is divine.”

He shook when I slid his shorts off his legs. I quickly got up to remove his boxers, and soon enough, I finally got to see all of him—his impressive cock, his hard, strong thighs. Seeing him turned on like this made me feel high.

I wrapped my fingers along the length of him, pumping a few times before he bolted from the bed and picked me up, slamming my back against his bedroom wall. “Whoa,” I said before he kissed the hell out of me. This kiss was hard and hurt, but fuck, it was so good. He bit down, sucking my tongue to the point it stung, but I bit back. My legs wrapped around him, his bare cock rubbing between my thighs, and I wanted to feel him. All of him.

He had his own agenda though. He moved my arms above my head, holding them there as he stared at my mouth with a soundless *fuck* leaving his lips. “I need to be inside you.”

“I need you there too. Get a condom.” I squirmed, so wet and ready for him. I wanted to see him lose control.

He stilled and closed his eyes for a second before he reached over onto his bookshelf and grabbed a small box. He ripped open the foil packet with his teeth, tossed the wrapper onto the ground, and used his free hand to slide it on. The fire hadn’t dimmed in his eyes, but his words were soft. “You’re sure?”

I nodded.

“I need to hear you say it, Ry.”

“I’m sure, please,” I begged, arching my hips closer to him and that did it. He snapped.

He slid into me with the loudest, sexiest groan, and the back of my head slammed into the wall from the force. Oh, damn, he felt amazing. He was big and stretched me, but it was a good feeling. The best kind. He waited a beat, letting me adjust before he slowly started to move into me. He alternated between kissing me and thrusting, and after the initial sting went away, it morphed into absolute pleasure.

My body heated as he pounded into me, and his hold on my hands tightened as he went faster. He claimed my mouth again. This was a soul-snatching type of kiss, one that I felt all the way to my toes because my theory was correct.

Jonah approached *everything* with the same focus and intensity as he did with hockey.

“Fuck, Ryann,” he moaned into my mouth, releasing my hands and digging his fingers into my ass hard. “Your body...” he trailed off, burying his face into the crook of my neck. “I need more,” he said, before moving us from the wall to his bed.

He lifted one leg up so my knee was at his chest, and he continued to move in and out of me at a slow pace that made my legs quiver and my skin tingle. The position prevented us from kissing again, but his stare was more intense. His jaw tightened as he groaned, his grip on my leg almost too much. “You’re beautiful, my god.”

My heart raced at his words, and I arched my hips so it provided the right pressure. He looked down and used his free hand to hold me in that position, rolling his hips even slower. I bit my lip to prevent a scream.

“You coming again for me?” he asked, his grin wide and wild. “Do it. I want to feel what it’s like inside you.”

My eyes shuttered at his hot and filthy words. He was a dirty talker, and I *loved* it. He let go of my leg and touched my clit to give me the extra pressure, and I lost it. This orgasm didn’t have a slow build-up or anything. It hit me like a truck, quick and fast and explosive. I wasn’t sure how long it lasted, but he held me harder and moaned my name.

I forced my eyes open to watch him come undone, and holy shit, it was a sight I never wanted to forget. The sweat dripping down his temples, the slack jaw, the absolute pleasure radiating from his eyes.

Yeah, Jonah Daniels was insanely, without a doubt, the sexiest man I had ever been with.

“Wow,” he said, pulling out of me and panting. He rested his forehead against my stomach for a second before looking up. “That was...”

“Yeah. I know.” I smiled, my chest tightening at how fantastic it was. Ironical how the best sex of my life was with someone I shouldn’t be with. “Worth it.”

His lips curved into a grin, and the pang in my chest doubled in size. He took the condom off and tied it before disposing of it in the small trash can that sat against his wall. He returned to his bed to lie on his back and sighed. “This will be new for me.”

“Sex? I doubt that.”

He snorted and turned onto his side, resting his hand under his head as he studied my face. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been with the same person more than once, and I’ve never lived with them. Any hook-ups I had were

just that. Quick, meaningless. I could choose to not see them again.”

“Ah, and seeing me might make it weird.” I mirrored his position and narrowed my eyes. “But you’re so good at avoiding me if you try.”

He blushed and ran a hand over his face. “I guess I thought I could prevent *this* from happening. I didn’t hold out very long.”

“You did a really excellent job at it,” I teased, earning a small laugh from him. I pushed up onto my arms, groaning in the process, and stretched my hands over my head.

His eyes danced with amusement and curiosity as I slid my panties and shorts back on and left his room. My discarded shirt sat on the living room floor. I put it back on sans bra and got a tall glass of water. My body hummed, and my legs weren’t sturdy as I sat back down on the chair. We were great together. That was clear, but I had to be careful to not confuse chemistry with something more. Because I wasn’t *that* naïve.

This was a way to deal with the lust for each other without ruining anything.

The reason Michael got pissed at me was for getting involved with his teammate...was because of feelings. This wasn’t about that. Jonah and I could totally be friends who hooked up and kept emotions out of it.

I was one-hundred percent sure we could do it.

Jonah had too much on the line, and I would never risk my brother’s friendship. We were safe as long as we stayed in this feelings-free zone.

JONAH

Being around Ryann was a dangerous addiction that was totally going to be a problem. Not even a day after experiencing the way she kissed and how her body trembled at my touch, I couldn't focus at the gym. I grunted through another set of weights and thought about her hair.

It was long and beautiful and such a weird thing to obsess over. But seeing it on my bed, wild and in every direction...my stomach clenched. I wanted to see it again.

"J.D." Paxton approached the bench and gave me an approving nod. "You're working overtime today. You good?"

"Yeah," I said, my face burning with shame. I was thinking about Ryann, trying to push the desire for her down. Agreeing to sleep together for a few weeks was a terrible and brilliant idea—to get it all out of my system so I could focus on the season. Except no one could ever find out.

Definitely not Paxton.

"Something on your mind?" he asked, his brows coming together in concern. Speaking grew difficult again. It wasn't like I could unload on him about my thoughts on Ryann.

"Nope. Just getting ready to kick ass."

He nodded but didn't make any moves to advance onto another machine or chat with his brother. He studied me a beat, and a shy smile crossed his face. "I'm here if you ever need to talk. You don't always have to shoulder everything alone."

"Thanks," I gritted out, hating myself a little bit. Paxton was nice and subtle where Patrick was a charismatic playboy. They both dominated the ice, but Paxton was more my style, and I could imagine the look of revulsion on

his face if he knew what Ryann and I had done. My neck hurt, and I stopped the weights to grab a drink of water. His twin called his name, and when he left, relief spread through me.

It was different than my normal reprieve when a teammate stopped chatting with me. This had nothing to do with dumb small talk and everything to do with Ryann. *Get it together.* I rubbed my temples and jogged a few laps before my mind settled.

Ryann wouldn't tell anyone, and I certainly wouldn't. I had to trust that.

No one would find out, and my scholarship would be fine—as long as I played well. I nodded to myself the faster I ran, letting my breathing get heavier and my muscles burn. Sleeping with my roommate would help me focus, actually. The attraction would go away, and there wouldn't be these constant thoughts about her. Yes, this was a decent plan.

I slowed to a walk, content on enjoying Ryann for a little bit longer before every ounce of my attention went to the team. When her brother stood at the end of the track, my anxiety reared back up in a split-second.

“Yo, J.D., come on.” Michael's face was blank, and his hands were on his hips. Patrick and Paxton stood on either side of him, and my small breakfast threatened to come up. Why the hell were they staring at me? Did he look pissed?

They know. They know I slept with Ryann.

I was such a fucking idiot.

“Sure.” I cleared my throat and walked over to them, feeling like I was walking through molasses. “What's going on?”

“We're grilling out at the house with most of the team. That includes you.” He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. There was no way to get out of this. If the team was there, I needed to be.

“Right.”

He let go of me and moved around to a couple other guys from the team while I stood there, watching Patrick eye me.

He arched one brow, his expression more than curious where Paxton's was concerned. “Bad morning or what?”

“No. Not at all,” I said, my face heating as I thought about Ryann prancing around in her tiny shorts.

“You looked mad. Ain't gonna help you with the ladies if you're always walking around with a stick up your ass.”

“He might not be like you,” Paxton said, rolling his eyes. “There's more

to life than sleeping with women.”

“There are parties, too.” He flashed a grin and completely turned around to admire the two girls walking up to him. “Oh, hello.”

He flirted with them for a good few minutes before I felt someone tug on my sleeve. Patrick yanked me toward them and said my name.

“Hmm?”

“Paige and Rachel want to head to the house with us. Can you escort Rachel? Paige and I have things to discuss.”

He didn’t wait for a reply before taking off with Paige, leaving me, Rachel, and Paxton who didn’t even try to help. He abandoned me with a girl who looked way too happy to meet me.

“Uh, hi?” I said, awkwardness weighing me down. Did I tell her no? What was I supposed to do? Talk to her?

“Hey J.D. I’m a big fan of the team, and my friend has a huge crush on Patrick.” She twirled her hair in her finger and took a step closer to me. “If I’m honest, I’ve always had one on you too.”

“Oh.” My face flushed red, and I took a step back. I never handled blatant flirting well. It flustered me and caught me off-guard like now, and either way, one of us was walking around feeling stupid. “Uh, so you’re Rachel.”

“Yeah.” She giggled as Michael came around and saw Rachel. He winked at me and jutted his head.

“Let’s head out. Bring the girl.”

That was how I found myself walking from the gym to the hockey house with Rachel, who was talkative in a very different way than Ryann. She was nice and seemed to really like hockey, but when she ran her hand down my arm, it felt weird. Off. Not right.

Shit.

“What do you do for fun?” she asked once we were in the backyard of the hockey house. Lawn chairs sat around in a circle, and a bunch of guys from the team were there with as many girls. This wasn’t just a team get-together. This was an afternoon party disguised as a cookout. She said my name, and I forced a smile. *At least pretend to be polite to her.*

“Gym, watching tapes, that sorta thing.” I eyed my teammates getting too frisky with girls right in front of everyone, and my heart lodged into my throat when Ryann walked in wearing those sexy cut-off shorts and a hockey shirt.

What the hell is she doing here?

“Ry, hey.” Paxton greeted her with a hug, and she smiled up at him with all her teeth. I gripped the edge of the lawn chair tighter. She said something I couldn’t hear, and he laughed, causing her to smile even more.

What was so damn funny?

“I like to explore different movie theaters when I’m not volunteering or hanging out with friends,” Rachel said, making me feel even worse. I wasn’t interested in her like that. Patrick put me in this position, and when I glared at him, he was too busy with Paige to notice.

Asshole.

“Where do you volunteer?” I asked, glancing at her and trying to figure out how to end this conversation. What was the proper way to stop it? Did I tell her I wasn’t interested? Did I lie? What was the right move without hurting her feelings?

This was why I hated this shit. I was sweating, nervous, and feeling so unsure my head hurt, and staying home was familiar, easier. I gripped the edge of the chair and took a deep breath, hoping it would help the bubble of unease taking over my body.

“At an animal shelter. I want to be a vet and thought it’d be good to get some hands-on experience.” She looked at her lap and shrugged, and I exhaled before looking around to signal someone for help.

I didn’t mean to meet Ryann’s gaze. Her blue eyes flashed with surprise and something like joy when she saw me, but they shifted to the girl next to me, and my gut tightened. *It’s not what you think.*

She had to know I didn’t plan this. I never did relationships or flirting or any of this shit. Her face tightened for a second, but that was it. No hurt, just surprise. She broke our connection and moved toward her brother who was at the grill. He made her laugh, a sound that was slowly becoming one of my favorite things.

“Rachel,” I said, hating myself for even attempting this to placate a teammate. “I’m sorry, I don’t... I don’t want to upset you or lead you on. I... don’t do this.” I winced and wiped a hand over my face.

She smiled and reached over to squeeze my forearm. “You don’t need to be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous, well a little. I don’t date or have relationships, so I think I’m going to go say hi to a friend. You seem great. Nice, cute, uh... but I don’t flirt. Best of luck with everything.” I stood without looking at her face and shoved my hands into my pockets. That was brutal, and I had no idea

how people flirted or small-talked every weekend.

My brain hurt, and my heart beat too damn fast, and staying at this cookout was the last thing I wanted. But Ryann was here.

My roommate propped herself up onto the deck railing so her bare legs dangled down, and Lex was telling her a story about something when I approached them.

Lex grinned at me in surprise. "Hey, it's great you're here, J.D. Glad you came."

"Thanks," I said, meeting Ryann's amused expression over his shoulder. "This sort of thing happen a lot?"

"Nah, just once or twice before the season starts." He shrugged and winked at Ryann. "Gotta help Reiner on the grill. The dude thinks he can cook, but he burns something every time."

Ryann snorted at him as he departed the deck and that left me and my roommate, two feet apart. My heart beat fast in an entirely different way than moments before.

She smiled up at me, amusement dancing in her eyes. "It's great you're here, Jonah."

"I didn't mean to have that girl talk to me," I said, making her blink and sit up straighter. "Patrick didn't leave me a choice, and she walked here with me, and I just... I didn't even know what to do."

She licked her bottom lip for a second before laughing. I would've enjoyed it if it wasn't at my expense.

"What's so funny about this?"

"You." She scrunched her nose and leaned closer to me. "It's good you came with her."

"Wait. *What?*" Did that mean she would flirt and be with other guys? Did we need to talk about that or was I totally out of the loop?

"The team does this thing where they hang out, shoot the shit, and bring girls. It's bonding. It looks like you're trying." She waved as one of the other seniors said hi to her. It made me grit my teeth at how she knew *all* of them well.

How did I not notice her last year? She was hard to miss.

"You're not—" I paused, my throat dry and uncomfortable. My face flamed at what I had to say next. "Mad? At me?"

She pursed her lips but never got a chance to respond. Michael walked toward us with a plate of hot dogs. "Can you get the buns, Ry?"

“Sure thing.”

She waltzed inside, leaving her brother standing close to me with very hot tongs. He smirked as she came back, and there was no way he couldn't read my mind. How could I look natural after sleeping with my teammate's sister? I forced myself to relax my posture, and I counted the bricks stacked on the side of the yard. Every part of my body was taut, and sweat dripped down my temples.

“Thanks,” he said to her, grabbing the bag once she returned, and then he set everything on the table. “Time to eat, all!”

Various team members got up from their position, and a line formed for the food, but I didn't move. Ryann stood waiting and being near her felt too intimate right now. She still hadn't answered me about being mad, which made me overthink everything.

Did she expect us to be exclusive or no? It wouldn't be a problem for me, but it could be for her. The thought of seeing her go on dates or be with other dudes while we were in our arrangement sent a ball of hot jealousy through me. I needed to clarify that the first chance I got.

The moment didn't happen until after we ate and the seniors brought out coolers of beer. She joked around with everyone who walked by her, and each smile she handed out grated on me. She wasn't grinning at me like that, and I had to make sure I didn't ruin whatever we had. Rachel wasn't someone I was interested in, and Ryann needed to know that. Our friendship was too important.

Ryann got up from the chair and stretched her arms over her head for a minute before heading inside. I volunteered to get ice the next second. It was perfect.

She frowned at her phone for a second in the kitchen and shoved the device into her pocket.

I tapped on the wall before entering. “Hey.”

She startled and put a hand on her chest before grinning at me. “You scared me.”

“We need to talk,” I said, unsure what was coming over me. I sounded barbaric. “We didn't get to finish our conversation earlier.”

“Okay?” she said, frowning, and her brows drew together. “You good?”

Someone's laughter sounded right by the kitchen, and I took her elbow in my hand and dragged her into the hallway that led upstairs.

She leaned against the wall and looked up at me, concern swirling in her

eyes. “Jonah, what’s going on?”

“Are you upset with me?”

“No.” She tilted her head to the side. “I mean, were you going to bring her back to our place?”

“No. No.”

She bit her bottom lip, and heat entered her gaze. She reached up to my shirt and picked a piece of lint off me. The gesture was so innocent yet meaningful because she didn’t touch people she didn’t trust. “Is this why you looked so uptight out there?”

“Yes,” I said, admitting the truth. “I was afraid I ruined everything.”

“You didn’t.” She scrunched her nose again and shook her head with a small smile. “I think it’s safe if we agree to not hook up with anyone else while this goes on.”

Thank god.

I sighed in relief, not caring that months from now she could date someone else and aim all those stunning smiles and joy at them. I’d worry about *that* later.

“Agreed.” I took a step closer, wanting to be near her again. Her breathing hitched. She smelled like flowers and outside, and I wanted to feel her skin again. Maybe it was infatuation and it would fade after a week. It would certainly be easier if I wasn’t so drawn to her. Her hair covered her shoulder, and I reached out, about to brush it off when footsteps came out of nowhere.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” Patrick asked, his voice like a shot of Patron first thing in the morning—unwelcome and jarring. I jumped back, slamming my head into the wall. All the blood left my face.

“We had a roommate disagreement, and I didn’t want to hash this shit out in front of everyone,” Ryann fired back, not missing a beat. She had a slight blush on her neck, but that was the only clue.

“Oh, about what?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at me. He wasn’t an idiot. He saw how close I was to her, how I was leaning over to *touch* her.

How could I be so goddamn stupid?

“His rules. You saw that damn list,” Ryann said, the lie coming off her tongue so easily it almost made me nervous. She was talented and quick on her feet.

Patrick laughed, and his eyes lost the edge, letting me relax just a hair.

“What’s J.D. demanding now?”

“He thinks it’s fine to bring girls home, but I can’t bring friends over because of his hockey fame. Double standard.” She rolled her eyes and made a real scene about it. “I wanted to negotiate.”

“Oh, I like that. What are you betting?” Patrick asked, seeming quite content at staying right next to us. It was irritating as hell.

She chewed on her lips and narrowed her eyes at me. “We were mid-discussion when you interrupted.”

“You did look a little close.”

“You mean *intense*,” she said, her face not giving a damn thing away. I froze my expression.

Patrick nodded, and someone said his name from another room. He gave us a parting grin before taking off. My pulse pounded in my neck, and my head buzzed from the fact we almost got caught.

I opened my mouth to talk, but Ryann cut me off with a glare. “*Not here.*”

She was right. Shame consumed me, head to toe. If she wasn’t pissed at me before, she was now. I almost blew it.

She would never forgive me if I was the reason Michael found out. I needed to apologize, to do something so she wouldn’t look at me with fire in her eyes. But I didn’t get the chance. Ryann avoided me until she left an hour later.

She departed by flipping me her middle finger, causing her brother and the twins to laugh, and I counted down the seconds until I could leave.

RYANN

Patrick almost saw us.

And for what? Was he going to kiss me? There? At the damn hockey house?

I shook my head and clenched my fists at my sides on the walk back home. He had no business looking at me with heated eyes and hope on his face. His explanation about the girl was cute and made my insides feel all warm and gooey because he freaked out, but if we were both around any teammates, we had to act like roommates.

Strictly, roommates who bickered.

Flipping him off wasn't my best idea, but it did the job. Patrick laughed hard, and it would stifle any suspicion he had about why Jonah and I were talking alone in a hallway with his fingers an inch from my face.

I blew out a breath and walked faster, hoping to change into work clothes and head out before he got home. It wasn't that I didn't want to talk to him or see him, because I did, but the distance was needed.

It didn't take me long to put on black jeans, a gray T-shirt, and closed-toe shoes before pocketing my phone and making the walk toward the café. Hannah had a date tonight for the first time in years, and I volunteered to work from four until midnight. It would be a long shift, but it helped both of us. The extra cash from tips would ease my growing worry about money, and she could have a night out.

Plus, not seeing Jonah until tomorrow would be better for both of us. I wasn't entirely sure I could keep my hands off him when we were alone in the house.

The café only had a few patrons when I arrived, and Hannah greeted me

with a huge smile. “Ryann, you’re early.”

I rolled my eyes and clocked in with the card she gave me to track hours. “I want you to have time to get ready, have a glass of wine, and enjoy yourself. I’m so damn excited for you and want all the details of this date tomorrow.”

She smiled, and her entire face softened. “I’m so glad we’re friends. It’s been awhile since I’ve had someone happy for me, you know? My parents live too far away and are great, but my world has been my ex, Preston, and this café. I didn’t realize I was living in a bubble of despair.” She winced. “I love Preston. Hope that didn’t come across poorly.”

“I know what you meant,” I said, grabbing a towel and wiping down the counters since there wasn’t a line at the register. “I’m glad we’re friends too.”

“We haven’t checked in at all about your new place, the roommate, or you telling your brother you moved out of the dorms. I feel so bad.” She pushed her hair out of her face and stepped closer to me. “Is it going okay?”

“It’s... going,” I said, biting my lip to prevent a nervous giggle from escaping. It would be wonderful if I could tell Hannah everything—the friendship with J.D. and the worry about Michael. Plus, I was nervous about Michael leaving next year. I needed to have my shit in order, and I wasn’t sure I could do it. But this overworked, tired woman had a date, and she needed a night out. “We can talk, just not now. You deserve all the wine tonight, so go. Take a bath, shave your legs.”

She twisted her lips to the side before her shoulders relaxed. “Thank you, Ryann.”

I waved her off as she headed out, and I busied myself with all the tasks I could find. Cleaning the coffee machine, reorganizing the pastries in the pastry case, sweeping the foyer. Sitting still gave me time to think, and that meant my brain went to Jonah.

It was quiet—which unless it was finals week, Saturday nights meant only a few people hanging in the library working on stuff. It would’ve been me if I didn’t have this job, and I frowned. I should’ve brought a textbook. Hannah told me I could study if there wasn’t anything to do, and now I had hours before leaving.

I could text Jonah...

I pulled out my phone which already had two texts from him.

Jonah: Are you coming home soon?

Jonah: Please don’t avoid home if you’re mad at me. I can shut myself in

my room.

Ah, my roommate felt bad.

Good. He should, but I wasn't vindictive or cruel.

Ryann: I'm working all night—not avoiding home. I have a huge favor to ask you actually.

Jonah: Name it

Ryann: I'm stuck here until close, so probably midnight, and it is SLOW. Could you bring me my psych book?

Jonah: Midnight?

Ryann: Yes. We close at eleven, but it takes an hour to clean up sometimes.

Jonah: I'll head there now.

Great. I'd have a book to occupy the boring parts of this shift and could get some studying done while making money. It was a win-win for sure. A group of girls walked into the café in comfy clothes, all wearing glasses and large backpacks. The sight of them made me smile.

"Hey, we all need caffeine or what?"

They laughed. "Yes, just put it in my veins please," the shortest one said. "We're here all night for a group assignment. It's only the second week of school. Why do we have projects already?"

"I hear you. I have a ten page essay due Tuesday. What the hell?" I said, taking their orders and preparing ten different versions of coffee. Some wanted ice, black, sweet, topped with whipped cream, and one wanted tea. They all left a dollar tip which was great, and they took off toward the library. It was open twenty-four hours.

When I scanned the café to see if anyone needed a refill, I found Jonah sitting at a table watching me. My face heated at his gaze, and I raised my brows in greeting.

He had my book on the table, but also his laptop.

"Are you... staying here?" I asked, not making any moves to leave this side of the counter. There was something about him that made my brain forget my rules. It could be his soft brown hair or the long lashes, or the fact that I received a rare smile from him. Either way, the sight made my chest tighten and my fingers twitch to touch him.

"I have to study and figured here was as good as home." He ran a hand over his jaw, not breaking eye contact with me. "You said midnight, right?"

"Yes."

“I don’t want you walking home alone with cash.”

It thrilled me more than it should to hear him get protective over me. My chest got tight and warm as he said it, but I willed the giddiness away. He nodded toward the tip jar, and his brown eyes hardened. “Do you work this late often?”

“Not usually. It depends on what helps Hannah. The only times I can’t work are when I have classes, so I fill in during the times she needs me most.” I traced my finger over the countertop, giving me something to do to get rid of this nervous energy. “Thanks for bringing me my book. You don’t... have to stay here, you know?”

“I understand.” He shifted in the chair and seemed to bunker down, like he really wanted me to know he was staying. A professor-type guy approached the counter, and I quickly got him an iced tea and cookie before daring to leave the register. Jonah was the only patron in the café besides me.

We were alone.

I swallowed hard as I neared his table, and he stopped whatever he was doing and sucked in a breath when I sat across from him. His gaze dropped to my lips for a beat before he sat up straighter.

Why was our chemistry so strong? I shouldn’t be thinking about kissing him again while at work. What was wrong with me?

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice deep. Concern swirled in his eyes. “I-I don’t know what happened at the house. It won’t happen again though.”

I sighed and pressed my lips together, holding the psych book against my chest. “We have to be careful.”

“I know, I just...Patrick put me in an awkward position with that girl, and I was so worried about it upsetting you since we just...you know,” he said, blushing so red he matched the apples on the counter. “I hate going to parties because of that stuff. The small talk, the flirting because I play hockey. Talking to you is so much different.”

My entire body warmed at his compliment. “Jonah, I’m not upset about you having a conversation to another person. Girl or not, we’re not...” I stopped, trying to think of the best term for it. I got his worry though. I had no plans to flirt or date or show interest in another guy while we continued to succumb to our chemistry. “We’ll be honest with each other. If someone does come along, we tell the other and stop this.”

“That won’t happen with me,” he blurted, his voice getting louder. “I guarantee it.”

His insistence and confidence made me nervous because of how much I liked it.

“Even so, it’ll make us both feel better if we agree.”

“Agreed then.” He narrowed his eyes and scratched his chest with a free hand. “So, flipping me off was for fun? You’re not actually mad at me?”

I snorted. “Correct. Not sure if you saw Patrick’s reaction to it, but he laughed. It worked, or at least cast suspicions away for a bit.”

Jonah nodded, and his shoulders seemed less tense. “Good. That’s good.”

“Yeah, so knock it off with the heated looks in front of the guys, okay?” I said, kicking his shin under the table.

His eyes got wide. “Did you kick me?”

“Yes.” I laughed, enjoying the way lines appeared on the sides of his eyes as his lips curved up. “It got you to smile, so it was worth it.”

He shook his head and gave me a long, warm look, just as another group of students entered the café with excited chatter. I got up and went behind the counter to take their orders, glad for the break from Jonah. He was worried about me being mad, wanting to make sure I knew the girl wasn’t his idea. It was dangerous to enjoy his concern because that meant feelings were involved—which they couldn’t be.

We were friends who understood each other, who were attracted to each other and had too much to lose for it to be anything more. That was it.

This would be my first time closing up the café, and while I didn’t want to confirm Jonah’s worries about me walking home alone at midnight, I was really glad he was there with me.

“Sure you don’t need any help? I don’t mind.” He wore his backpack as I finished mopping.

“I’m almost done.” I moved back and forth a few more steps, making sure to clean up all the crumbs and grime that collected over the day before I wrung out the mop in the bucket. “Let me go dump this.”

I picked it up and disposed of the gross water outside before coming back in and placing everything in order. The cash from the register was stored in a safe inside locked cabinets, so I had to make sure the doors to the library were shut and secured.

“You look proud of yourself,” Jonah said, his voice softer than normal. I caught him staring at me with a half-smile, and it released a flurry of butterflies in my stomach.

“I am.” I beamed back at him. “This was my first time closing up, and it makes me feel like I can do this. I can support myself on my own and not have to go to my brother for anything.”

His brows came down in a hard line, like the mere mention of Michael snapped whatever warmth he had for me. “Why wouldn’t you think you could? You seem persistent and tough.”

“Thanks, J.D.,” I fired back, unsure why his question annoyed me.

“I meant that as a compliment.” He frowned harder and ran his fingers through his hair. “You got a new place and a job all without him, so I guess I don’t see why you doubt yourself.”

That made better sense. I nodded as I scooped up the tips I earned on top of the base pay and put the forty dollars into my pocket. I motioned Jonah to leave through the main entrance doors, and once we were both outside, I locked up and triple checked. “When my parents died, Michael took over my life for me for a bit. I was... a mess. Seventeen years old. Senior year of high school with no parents and having to live alone in a huge house for a few months to graduate...I refused to face reality. I didn’t pay attention to money or how to be an adult on my own. I grieved.”

“As you should’ve. I can’t even imagine how hard it was, or is.”

We walked side by side, our hands accidentally brushing every few steps, and the sounds of nighttime greeted us. The bugs, the subtle laughter of a party from a few blocks over, and the utter quiet that came with this time of day. I loved it. My parents always let us sit on the back porch once the sun went down, and watch the stars after a bad day. And the memory hit me right in the chest.

“I miss the little things the most. You know, when I was upset about something trivial like girl drama or a crush, my dad would let me stay up late and we’d sit in the backyard and stargaze. We’d never talk unless I wanted to, but that silence, that moment... those collected into a million moments, and I miss them so much it’s hard to breathe sometimes.”

Wow. The words flowed out of me, surprising me how good it felt to open up to him, to tell him all that. My heart beat fast at the confession, and instead of wanting to bolt, I wanted to keep going.

Jonah took my hand in his, wrapping his strong fingers around mine and

rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. It was gentle, sweet, and exactly what I needed. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

All those touches and shoulder squeezes made me cringe when people offered comfort, but this... this handholding felt like a warm blanket, and the feeling was addicting. I squeezed his hand back, and instead of letting go, he seemed to tighten his grip for the rest of the walk.

“Do you, uh...need help with finances?” he asked, right before we headed up the stairs to our front door. “I got pretty good at assisting my dad and can show you my spreadsheet or help you with one. I don’t know. Only if you want.”

My throat got tight again, and I nodded. “That’d be great, Jonah. Thank you.”

He looked at the ground for a second, and the streetlight put a soft glow on his handsome face. The strong jaw, the great cheekbones, the full lips that rarely curved up. My pulse raced knowing how those lips felt against mine, and it would be crazy to kiss him right now, outside. It was inappropriate... right?

He chewed on his bottom lip for a moment before he jutted his chin toward the stairs. “Come on, we can work on it tomorrow. You need to rest your foot after being on it for so long.”

He let go of my hand and placed his on my lower back, keeping it there the entire walk up the stairs. His heat spread through my shirt and onto my skin, and my emotions played a dangerous game.

The feelings-free zone was the safest, smartest route to take, but gentle touches from Jonah that had nothing to do with sex were slowly taking down each wall guarding my heart. It wasn’t complete destruction though, just a subtle removal of a piece here and there. I had to be careful.

We got inside our place, and despite how badly I wanted to kiss him, I needed more distance.

“Thank you for the walk home,” I said, walking straight toward my room as the day wore on me. I was tired.

“Let me know when you work late again. I can always study there and walk back with you.” He took off his shoes and placed them neatly on the doormat before staring at me. “Deal?”

“Yeah, sure.” I gulped and hated the shift in the air. I never got nervous around guys, not like this, and suddenly, I had no idea what to do or say. “Well, good night.”

“Good night, Ryann.” He gave me another half-smile before heading into his room and shutting the door. I should’ve been thankful that he made the decision to go to bed before I did because the *sweet* side of Jonah made my brain funny. I sighed and went to the fridge for a water when his door flew open.

“Do you want to hang out with me and my dad tomorrow?”

“Wait, what?”

“He wants to stop by, and we usually get pizza or something. He’s looking forward to meeting you, so I figured you could come with us.” He spoke too fast, and his eyes were intense again, like he was watching an old game and taking notes.

“Yeah, pizza sounds great.”

He gave me the biggest smile I’d ever seen. “He’s going to like you.”

Well shit. This wasn’t a feelings-free zone anymore.

JONAH

The smell of cooking woke me from a dream that involved Ryann's naked body. I yawned and adjusted myself in my shorts before getting out of bed and heading into the kitchen. Ryann wore tiny blue boxer shorts and a thin gray tank top—sans bra—and had a plate full of French toast and scrambled eggs on the counter.

Her hair was in two braids, and she swayed her hips back and forth as a pop song played on her phone. I stared as she danced and hummed way off-key.

She was so pretty, and I must've made a noise or something because she turned around and her lips parted in a perfect O shape. "Hey, morning."

"Hi," I said, moving to sit in the chair I always did. "Do you need help?"

"Nope. Almost done." She sucked in a breath and ran her gaze down my bare chest. "Well, you could help me by putting a shirt on."

"Nope," I said, back, my mouth almost watering when her nipples hardened into points. Her chest heaved as she wet her bottom lip, and the room seemed three times smaller than it was a second before. I couldn't remember why I went into my room last night instead of kissing her, and my body tightened with a frightening desperation.

She pushed her hair behind her ears and leaned against the counter, crossing her arms over her chest. Ryann studied me with a look that made my lower belly hum with excitement. "You seem hungry."

"I am."

"You should eat."

"I plan to," I said, swallowing so hard it hurt. She cleared her throat and grabbed two plates from the shelf before filling each one with three pieces of

French toast and scrambled eggs. Syrup sat in the middle of the table, and she took her time setting the dish in front of me.

"Thank you. This looks great."

She shrugged. "No big deal."

I took a bite and groaned at the sweetness of the syrup. She ate her breakfast too, and we fell into a comfortable silence. Our gazes met every few seconds. There were so many things I wanted to ask her, but none of them came out. A bit of syrup dripped on her lip, and she used her thumb to wipe it, putting her finger into her mouth.

Any chance at getting my morning wood to settle down evaporated, and my pulse pounded with need. I shoved the food into my mouth, barely swallowing before finishing my plate and waiting for her to stop eating.

She pushed her plate to the center of the table and put a hand on her stomach with a grin. "You ate that so fast, Jonah."

"Yeah. I'm motivated," I said, my voice huskier than intended.

"Oh," she said, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "For what?"

"Are you done eating?"

"Yes," she said narrowing her eyes as a slight blush crept up her neck. "You're giving me an *intense* look right now."

"What I'm feeling right now is *intense*."

She giggled, the light, magical sound making my chest hurt for a second. Ryann stood and picked up our plates. I trailed her every move as she rinsed the plates, water splattering her thin tank top, and she put each dish into the dishwasher.

"You should let me clean. You cooked."

"By all means," she said, scooting away from the sink and eyeing me as I got up, my bulge very obvious. Her gaze dropped to it for a beat, and her face lit up. Before I reached the sink though, she grabbed the nozzle and blasted me with water.

"What the hell?" I said, wincing at the temperature of the water, even though the cold didn't last long. Ryann licked her lips as she stared at my chest dripping with water.

"Damn. I thought that would cool you down, not fluster me."

"Are you flustered with me being wet?" I asked, taking a step closer to her. "I should return the favor, hmm?"

She almost panted, and I moved my hand closer to her, but instead of touching her, I got the nozzle and blasted her. She yelped and swatted at me.

When her hand connected with my chest, I gripped her waist and yanked her against me. Her body was wet and hot, and I cupped the back of her neck, forcing her to look up at me. Her plump wet lips parted, her blue eyes blazing with want, and I moved my hand under her shirt to place it on her bare stomach.

“I’ve been thinking about doing this with you since Friday night.”

“Yeah?” She ran her fingers over my chest, and a shudder went through my body from her touch. “Me too.”

She stood on her tippy toes and brought her lips just a hair from mine, her sweet breath hitting my face, and I closed the distance. She moaned against my mouth as I held her tighter against me before picking her up and placing her on the counter. Her thighs parted, and I grinned against her, sliding my tongue into her mouth and kissing her deep.

“Damn, Jonah,” she moaned, wrapping her legs around my waist as I used one hand to lift the hem of her shirt. Our movements were frantic and messy as we slid the shirt over her head and tossed it onto the floor. Her perky tits were right in front of my face, and I bent my head low and took one nipple into my mouth. She arched her back, and I swirled my tongue around the point, alternating between sucking hard and soft. Her sounds got desperate, and I switched to the other.

“Yes, that feels good.”

“Did you wear that shirt to tease me, Ry?” I lifted my head and met her eyes before flicking her nipple in a slow, drawn-out movement. She trembled and grabbed my face, digging her nails into my jaw before she kissed me, *hard*. She propelled off the counter, making me fall back a few steps. Her aggressive reaction got me hotter. I moved her to the couch, set her down, and knelt on the ground between her thighs. “God, you’re hot.”

She grinned and bit down on her swollen lip as I grabbed the waistband of her shorts and slid them down her long legs. She whimpered when I ran my nose along her thigh. She reached down and gripped my hair to the point it stung, but I wasn’t about to rush this. Her wet, *tight* body writhed beneath me, and I wanted it to last.

“Jonah, please,” she begged, arching her hips toward my mouth so her bare pussy was an inch from my lips. I flicked her swollen clit with my tongue once. She made an agitated sound from the back of her throat, and I looked up at her—her blue eyes were on fire.

“You like this, Ry?” I licked her then, slow and without hurry, and she

melted onto the cushion. Her eyes fluttered shut when I stroked her, trying out different rhythms until she let out the sexiest moan. That sound was like a shot of adrenaline, and I held her stomach down with my left hand while sliding two fingers into her with my other. When I curled up at the end, she slammed her head into the wall, and she bucked so hard I jerked back a few inches. “Oh, baby, I think you do.”

“Yes, I’m so close, *please*,” she begged again, her eyes half-opened with a crazed look on her face.

“What do you want?” I asked, speaking right against her. “I want you to say it.”

“Go *harder*.”

I grinned and waited for her to meet my gaze, then I increased the tempo with my fingers and tongue. Her thighs tightened around my head, her moans going deeper before she spasmed beneath me. It was fucking *hot* hearing her say my name with pleasure, and I didn’t stop stroking her clit with my tongue until she stilled.

“Holy shit.” She panted, sweat glistening along her midriff. I leaned forward, kissing up her lower stomach and teasing the little ring in her belly button. Her skin was salty, and I couldn’t get enough. “Jonah,” she said, the change of tone making me look up.

“Yeah?”

Her slack jaw and open expression caused my heart to stutter a moment before she pushed off the couch and switched our positions. “I need to feel you, *see* all of you.” She spoke fast, her face flushed and her full breasts jiggling around when she pulled my shorts and boxers right off my hips onto a pile on the floor.

Something dangerous and warm joined my bloodstream seeing her hands all over me with the same desperate look on her face. She wanted me *just* as much, and fuck if that wasn’t hot. She knelt before me, stroking my incredibly hard dick, and didn’t wait a second before taking me into her mouth. *Shit*. She sucked me deep and let out these tiny little hums that vibrated my whole body.

Her head bobbed as one hand ran up and down my abs, the other cupping my balls. The combination of her tongue, hands, and scent had me grasping for control. I leaned back onto the couch and closed my eyes.

Her mouth was so fucking warm, and the way she sucked... I gripped the cushions to either side of me, trying hard to hold on. She pulled on my balls a

little bit, and the sensation made me buck, sending me further into her mouth. I was about to apologize, but she groaned and went faster.

“Ry, stop.”

She paused, met my eyes, and took her time releasing me from her mouth. Seeing her lips wet and her eyes wide snapped the little control I had.

“Get on the couch,” I demanded before storming into my room and snatching a condom from my shelf. She waited on the couch, her face heated and her body ready for me.

I ripped open the rubber and slid it on. I marched toward her to run my hands down her smooth neck and over the sides of her breasts before slamming my mouth on hers. She tasted like me, and fuck, it was sexy. Last time, I took her against a wall, and I wanted this to be better, but I didn’t have time to think about it. She shoved me onto the couch and straddled me.

“*Fuck.*”

She grinned at me with a smug expression as she slid down onto my cock, her face pinching a bit as she adjusted to my size. She rocked her hips slowly, her forehead tight, and I tweaked both nipples with my pointer and thumb. She groaned, and I did it again, harder.

“Yes,” she said, starting to rock faster against me. “You feel so damn good, Jonah.”

I placed one hand on her hip and the other on her lower back to help us find a rhythm. It was insane how hot it was seeing her body move against mine, to watch her taking me in deep. The sight sent ripples of pleasure up and down my spine. Her movements were frantic, like she could barely hang on, and I reached in between us and swirled my thumb on her clit. Her breathing picked up as my gut tightened. She was close. I arched my hips, pushing even harder into her, and she trembled. Her nails dug into my shoulders as she came, her face going slack with her orgasm, and I captured her cries with my mouth.

Feeling her come on top of me was a living fantasy, and I dug my fingers into her ass, making her go faster. When she bit my neck, sucking the skin into her mouth, I lost it.

“Fuck, Ryann, god,” I moaned, the white hot pleasure making bright spots dance in my vision. The orgasm kept going to the point I couldn’t breathe.

When it stopped, she collapsed against me. Our chests stuck together with sweat, and her heart raced as hard as mine. My ears rang from the intensity of

the pleasure. I closed my eyes, ran a hand up and down her bare spine, and sighed with absolute, utter satisfaction.

“I’ll make French toast every morning if we get to do *that* again,” she said after a few minutes of silence. She sat up while I was still inside her, and she smiled at me. “Damn, Jonah. Damn.”

I grinned lazily at her, my chest filling with pride at how pleased she looked. Rosy cheeks, clear blue eyes, no worries or concerns on her face. There weren’t enough words to describe what I was feeling. I wasn’t even sure myself. Cupping her chin, I ran my thumb over her bottom lip.

Her face softened at the gesture for one second before she slid off me, her face twisting as she slid onto the ground.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” God, did I hurt her somehow?

“Oh, my ankle. Stepped on it weird.” She stood, completely naked, and pointed to her bruised foot.

Seeing her hurting caused a fire to erupt in me. That asshole should’ve walked her home. “Working yesterday didn’t help.”

“No.” She slid her panties and shorts back up, wincing as she walked toward the kitchen to grab her shirt. I threw my own shorts back on and discarded the condom. She needed more medicine and ice.

“Sit down. Let me get you ice again.”

“Thanks, but it’s okay. I need to get some homework done and come up with a budget for next month’s rent.”

My face heated. “I was going to offer that this morning, but I got distracted.”

She wiggled her brows at me. “You weren’t the only one.”

“Do you want to work on them together? The finances, I mean. Now?” I asked, suddenly feeling nervous. My tongue was between her legs moments ago, but this felt more personal.

“Sure.” She looked at the ground and moved one foot to rest on the other, making her stand like a flamingo. “I was going to shower then maybe we could go over stuff?”

I nodded too fast and too hard, attempting to play it cool. “Great. I’ll be out here.”

She disappeared into her room, and my focus was shit. I should be trying to get in a workout before my dad arrived, not thinking about seeing her smile again or helping her with money stuff. *But she’ll appreciate it.*

Yeah, she would. Knowing it meant a lot to her helped me rationalize not

going to the gym, and I busied myself by cleaning every surface I could until she came back out of her room. This wasn't a date. This was a friend helping out another friend—even if I thought about said friend naked a million times. It would be fine when the season started and this had to end. Hockey would take focus, and I'd have my fill of her. I ignored the way my chest seemed to tighten at the thought of this ending because it wasn't possible for this to ever be anything more.

RYANN

After seeing Jonah's color-coded spreadsheets filled with finances and formulas, I couldn't stop smiling. He tracked every penny and had cells auto-filling based on dollars spent. It tickled me to know he shared it with me.

Another side of J.D. the hockey star that I got to keep for myself.

"Does that make sense? You can use conditional formatting to color code based on what you spend. I like to put a limit per week on things besides essential, and it changes to orange if I go over it."

"This is detailed." I sighed and pulled a hangnail. This was out of my element, and it was humbling to know I sucked at budgeting. "I wrote stuff down on a piece of paper."

"That works for some people, but I like to think of it as a tool to reach your goal. My goal is to get through college without needing a loan or asking my dad for help. What's yours?"

My face burned with embarrassment. "To feel confident enough and prepared to stay here another two to three years alone without having my brother as a crutch."

"You don't have to share it with me, but take whatever your scholarship covers, what you have in savings, what you think you'll make at the café, and plan backwards." He smiled and nodded, like he thought I was capable of doing this without worry.

"Okay," I said, starting my own spreadsheet. I had a column for rent and utilities, for food, one for tuition covered by the scholarship, the small amount I got each month from my parents' will, how much I'd likely make a week at the café...and my temples started throbbing.

I loved challenges, but numbers and money stressed me out. Taking a

deep breath, I went through the steps Jonah showed me to color code the numbers. The kitchen chair he scooted closer made our thighs bump together, and it was oddly comforting to feel his heat right next to me.

Going on the conservative side, if I earned four hundred a month at the café, I'd be okay to have a little spending money for pizza or ice cream. I made a note to reach out to the housing office to see if I could skip paying for room and board.

Deep breath in, then out.

"What's stressing you?" Jonah asked, his brows coming together as he frowned at me. "Is it the formula?"

"No. Money turns me into a ball of anxiety. Michael and I had to figure out the funeral stuff, pay their debts, refinance the house, that sorta thing. It's like my brain shuts down when it comes to dollar signs." I cracked my knuckles and relaxed into my chair. "I need to make sure I let housing know I won't be returning next semester so I'm not charged. Not paying that will help."

"Make a list of things that are urgent right now, then a list for down the road. It's overwhelming to think about everything at once." He pulled up another tab and tilted his laptop toward me. "This is my monthly budget with the weekly breakdown where this one is per quarter, then semester, then year."

"Wow, Jonah." Our proximity made his clean and fresh laundry scent waft my way, and gratitude hit me. "Thanks for everything. Letting me live here, helping with this. I appreciate it."

He seemed taken aback. His eyes darkened, and he sat straighter in the chair. "Of course."

He gave me a long look before pointing at my screen. "Short list of priorities, then a larger one. I'm going to throw some laundry in, but I'll be back to check if you need help."

"Sounds good."

He tapped his fingers on the table twice before standing up and going to his room, coming out a few seconds later with a hamper. One side of his mouth quirked up before he went toward the in-unit washer and dryer by the front door, leaving me to my priorities and spreadsheet. It made sense for him to be this detailed with finances since he did everything in his life with precision.

Especially going down on you.

I cleared my throat and went back to my list. Short-term goals.

Rent, utilities, food. A little fun money for ice cream.

Long term—tuition and rent for the semester. Textbooks for next semester.

Okay, that wasn't so bad. I had the costs broken out in line items like Jonah's spreadsheet with the prices of everything. While my spreadsheet wasn't detailed or formatted like Jonah's, it was a good start.

Michael would be proud of me for taking action. He would feel even less pressure to stay around when his life was waiting for him. My chest tightened at the thought of him leaving, but I pushed it away. We needed this, both of us. For him to chase his dreams and me to find my own. It'd be hard, but we'd be okay. With a content sigh, I shut my laptop just as Jonah came back.

"You look happy."

"It was a great start today. I feel like I'm taking more control." I beamed up at him, and his face flushed as he stared back at me. "When is your dad coming?"

He froze and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Shit, he called." He headed to his room, and I admired the way the athletic shorts showcased his strong thighs. "Hey, yeah, park on the street and come on up if you wanna see the place." He paused, waited a beat, and laughed. "Yup. Bye."

"He's here?"

"The guy can't park to save his life. I'm going to go help him." He rolled his eyes. The affection he had for his dad practically flowed out of him. I really liked how much he loved and cared for his father. "He wants to meet my *female* roommate and Michael Reiner's sister, so just... prepare yourself."

"Will do." I fought a grin seeing him almost bounce with energy as he got his keys and shoes before he left out the front door. A weird pang formed in my chest thinking about his relationship with his dad. It wasn't jealousy, because that wasn't right. Longing. Wishful thinking. Sadness.

There would be no lunches with my parents or chances for them to meet my roommate. The regret at things that couldn't happen dampened my mood, but I plastered on a smile when their jovial voices carried up the stairs. They had a similar deep laugh, and the door flew open.

A middle-aged, tall skinny man with the same brown eyes and dark hair as Jonah smiled at me. "You must be Ryann."

"You must be Mr. Daniels," I said, getting up from the chair to shake his

hand. "Nice to meet you!"

"Oh no, the pleasure is all mine. Michael Reiner's sister. Crazy coincidence." His dad grinned and clapped his hands. "I've been a Moo U fan for years. About cried my eyes out when J here got in."

J. How cute. I smiled at my roommate and raised my brows. "I know my brother did."

"Anyway, Dad, want a quick tour?" Jonah said, his eyes dancing with amusement as he put a hand on his dad's shoulder. They were carbon copies of each other, his dad just older and with less muscle.

"I'm seeing the place from here." He marched further into the place and whistled at the kitchen. "Ah, your rules."

Jonah's ears turned red, and he shuffled his feet on the carpet. "Yeah, about that... I might've gotten a bit worked up at the beginning."

"A bit?" I said, raising my voice. "Try again."

His dad laughed and took the piece of paper off the fridge. "Jonah, this is a little much. No parties? No music? You gotta live a little, son."

Jonah clenched his jaw and met my gaze for a beat before snatching the sheet from his dad's hands. "We've adapted."

His dad looked at me. "Is that so, Ryann? Don't hold back now. Tell me the truth. Has this grump changed any of his rules?"

"He's adjusted a few." I met Jonah's gaze and winked. "Honestly though, most of the rules are okay with me. I'm not a huge partier, and it's not too bad being roommates."

His dad sighed and smiled real big before tapping the paper back onto the fridge. "I'm glad you two are friends. This guy worries about hockey too damn much, so it'll be good to have you keep him on his toes."

"Dad, come on." He ran a hand through his hair and let out a sigh of frustration.

"It's the truth. I swear, in high school he would schedule time for *fun* in thirty-minute increments." His dad moved into the living room and checked out the couch and laundry unit. "Do you not have any alcohol in here? Son, you need to make bad decisions in college, not after it. Haven't you seen the movies?"

"We're not twenty-one."

"Right, because no one drinks until it's legal." His dad winked and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. "I'm buying you beer before I leave. It's a must."

“No, no, you don’t have to. I don’t really drink.”

“Ryann, if I buy beer, will you make sure he gets tipsy once? Maybe snap a picture so I can see?”

“I can arrange it,” I said, grinning wide at my roommate. Seeing Jonah embarrassed only made his dad act goofier, and the pang I felt earlier changed to happiness. Jonah’s dad was so good for him, even if they had their own financial issues. “We did go to a party, and he kicked my ass at a drinking game.”

“Heyyo, that’s my boy!” He held out a high-five, and Jonah rolled his eyes before obliging his father. “Okay, I want pizza. That parlor still here?”

“Yeah. Let’s go,” Jonah said, a smiling toying on his lips. “I invited Ryann too, if that’s okay.”

“Son, please.” His dad looked at me with an exaggerated face. “You are obviously welcome. It’ll be my treat.”

“No, you visited me. I’ll pay.” Jonah used his *highly annoyed* tone, but his dad didn’t care. He waved him off and headed toward the door. “Dad, I mean it.”

“Pick your battles. This isn’t one of them. I’m buying my son and his roommate lunch. End of story.”

Jonah’s shoulders tensed, and I didn’t think before putting my hand on his arm and squeezing. He sucked in a breath and looked worried, but I shook my head at him.

“Not worth it,” I whispered and held up a finger. “Hold on a sec.”

The first week of school had a ton of flyers all over the campus, and the pizza parlor had great specials, so I tore through my backpack until I found the flyer. *Fifty percent off order*. I shoved it in my pocket and plastered on a grin. “I’m starved.”

The walk to the place was filled with his dad asking us both questions about our classes. He rarely mentioned hockey, and I felt like it was intentional, like his dad knew how obsessed Jonah was with the sport and wanted him to explore other things. Every time Jonah mentioned practice, his dad switched gears and changed the subject. He talked about the fall and the latest gossip on his Next Door app.

I found his dad’s endless optimism charming. Jonah obviously got the same energy from his dad, but he channeled all of his into a sport, while his dad went where the wind did. We arrived at the place and got seated into a booth when his dad excused himself to use the restroom. This was the

moment.

“Hey,” I said, hitting my knee against his. His dad insisted he get his own side of the booth, leaving Jonah and I sitting close. His clean scent and warmth weren’t unpleasant, and a brief, random image of us eating dinner together came from nowhere. Holding hands. Kissing. I shook it away from my mind but hated how much I liked it.

“Hmm?” he said, spreading his legs further so his thigh rested fully against mine. The worry lines around his eyes hadn’t lessened since his dad got here, and I could almost feel the stress radiating from him.

“We can use this.” I slid the ad toward him. “Give it to the waitress if you’re worried about him paying.”

“Am I that obvious?” he said, his voice strained. “He doesn’t have the money. He shouldn’t be doing this.”

“He wants to treat his son. Let him. You’re being a real grump about it, and it’ll be twenty bucks.”

His frown deepened. “I’m being a grump?”

“Yes, more so than usual. Relax. I would’ve thought after this morning, you’d be less of a... stick-up-the-ass.”

His eyes heated for a second before he let out a loud, barking laugh. “Damn it, Ry.”

Ry again. The nickname was personal and intimate, and before I could respond, his dad came back wearing a grin. “That was quite a cackle, J. Haven’t heard that in a while.”

“Ryann is just...she said I have a stick-up-the-ass attitude.”

“You do.” His dad hit the table and laughed. “She’s absolutely right.”

“Okay, no ganging up on me.” Jonah held up his hands in mock surrender, and my heart fluttered in my chest. I liked him. It was undeniable at this point.

“It’s so easy though,” I said, getting an approving nod from his dad.

The waitress showed up, and we ordered iced tea and were about to head to the buffet to cover our plates with ten different kinds of pizza, but before she walked away, Michael and two other guys on the team walked in. The bell above the door jingled at their entrance. My pulse raced at what this looked like.

Me in a booth with Jonah, meeting his dad. I froze.

It wasn’t like I could slide into the booth and hide. No, his dad would notice for sure. As Jonah lifted his gaze, he tensed too. Michael was looking

right at us with questions swirling in his eyes. He wasn't wearing his usual grin, and I cleared my throat, needing to come up with an explanation. I couldn't tell if his shoulders were tighter than normal or if the reason he had a fist at his side was because he wanted to punch Jonah or not. The tensing of his jaw made my stomach flip flop in a horrible way, and my tongue felt four sizes too big as he neared.

It's not what it looks like, I wanted to say, but wasn't it? Wasn't it exactly what I promised I wouldn't do?

He got a foot away from the table, his nostrils flaring like he wanted to yell, before Jonah's dad stood up and said, "Michael Reiner in the flesh. Big fan, man. Loved seeing you play the past three years."

Michael forced a tight smile and slowly dragged his gaze from Jonah and me toward his dad. "Thank you."

"I'm Jonah's dad. It's a real honor to meet you."

Michael shook his hand, but he didn't look happy. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, when Jonah's dad scooted over and waved the waitress back. "Join us, please. I insist."

Michael waited half a second, his left eye twitching as it always did when he was pissed, before nodding and moving into the booth. The other teammates joined us with extra chairs. That was how I found myself at a table with four guys on the team and Jonah's dad.

I wasn't the only one tense. Jonah turned into a statue when his dad started to order more pizzas, meaning Michael, Tate, Patrick, and Paxton were staying to eat with us.

This couldn't be good. I played with the straw wrapper and tore it to pieces when I felt Michael's stare hitting me. I glanced up and swallowed as he tilted his head to the side and jutted his chin toward Jonah, one brow arched. His expression was clear. *Why the fuck are you sitting so close to him?*

I shrugged as a bolt of guilt and annoyance had me find my bearings more. I would've joined Jonah and his dad with or without sleeping with my roommate, so I needed to stop acting guilty and play it cool. Michael didn't need to know how much I was sweating or how fast my pulse raced.

Patrick entertained the group with a story about hazing Jonah as a freshman, and Jonah's dad liked it too much. He slapped the table with his hand and returned the favor. He shared stories from Jonah's youth and made the guys howl. My roommate's ears turned red, and his smile was so

awkward it hurt to see.

But then the atmosphere changed. We got our plates of pizza, and Jonah relaxed as Michael ribbed him a bit about practice. Tate joked about a prank that happened in the locker room, and Jonah's smile loosened. My shy roommate was opening up to his teammates. I covered my mouth with my hand to stop myself from smiling. It was only when Michael caught my gaze that I sat up straighter and focused on the conversation.

His pointed stare told me enough. He knew something was going on.

"I gotta say, I'm real glad you two ended up as roommates," his dad said halfway through eating the pizza.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"You Reiners seem like great people. It makes me sleep easier knowing he has a good roommate and teammate on his side. I like knowing my son has people. That's all. When his mom pulled that crap—"

"Dad," Jonah warned, his voice low. The mood shifted again, and Michael's hand froze midair as he brought a bite to his mouth. His brows furrowed, and I knew my brother was desperate to hear the end of that sentence.

His dad blinked and turned bright red before clearing his throat. "I overstepped, forgive me. I meant... I'm happy you're happy. That's all."

Jonah took a long breath before nodding as the conversation moved toward more trivial things. Tate ribbed Paxton, and Patrick hit on the waitress, earning a pat on the back from Michael. The sight of them joking made me so happy for my brother, that he found the family he needed.

Once we finished the meal, I used Michael as an excuse to let the two of them visit. "Thank you so much for the meal, Mr. Daniels. It was nice meeting you."

He shook my hand and smiled at me with so much warmth, it made me miss my dad so damn much. "You too, Ryann. And Michael. Hopefully see you again soon!"

I slid out of the booth, avoiding both Jonah's stare and Michael's suspicious look. I could feel Jonah and Michael staring at me, and I hated it. Jonah had nothing to worry about if he was concerned I'd tell my brother, and Michael... he needed to chill, even though his suspicions were right.

"You guys wanna head to the house? I'm bored," Patrick said.

Michael shook his head and stared right at me when he said, "I need to talk to my sister."

Shit. This wasn't good.

Patrick, Paxton, and Tate took off, leaving me and my brother alone in the parking lot outside the restaurant. He asked the question I knew he would.

"Why were *you* there with them, and what *happened* with Jonah's mom?"

Don't lie. I swallowed and tried to look natural, play it cool. "His dad invited me to be nice, and it's not my business to tell you about his past, Michael."

"He's my teammate." He made his eyes bug out, like that would convince me to break my trust with Jonah.

I put my hands on my hips and stared him down. "Well, he's my friend, and I'm not going to ruin that. If he wanted to tell you, he would."

My brother's face tightened, and his eyes took on a dark haze, one that made me feel horrible because I deserved it. "Aren't you two getting chummy then?"

My heart raced at his insinuation, but I knew he was annoyed I wasn't sharing Jonah's story. There was no way he knew the *real* truth. The fact I broke my promise and could risk *everything* if he found out. "Look, I know you care about the team and want to bring everyone together, but he'll get there, eventually. You're a great leader, bro, continue being you. You can't force others to open up."

He ran a hand over his face and nodded a few times. "Sorry. You're right. I was being an ass. Hanging with his dad felt... weird."

"I know. I miss him and mom so much." My eyes stung enough that I faced the other way to hide it from him.

He put an arm around me and pulled me into a half-hug, the real reason for his snappiness coming through. "Let's go do something fun."

"Like bowling?"

"Exactly like bowling." He laughed, and I left with him, trying to shake off the combined feelings of guilt and grief. Would we still hang out like this if he ever found out what Jonah and I had done? Twice? Would he cut me out? Would he move away and not talk to me again?

I didn't want to know the answer.

JONAH

Coach Bart Keller was a hard ass and commanded us to be better. All the preseason anticipation seemed to implode at practice with only two weeks until the first game, and something was off. The air changed. Shots weren't made, goals weren't blocked, our passing was embarrassing, and Coach had another vein about ready to bulge from his existing vein. We'd been at it for an hour already, my blood pumping with adrenaline, but it wasn't a good practice.

"Two weeks. That's it. I can't help you get ready if you're going to play like this." He slammed his clipboard on the side of the rink and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We're done. Skate if you want, I don't care. Come back tomorrow and be ready, all of you. Patrick, Paxton, Michael, stay here."

Everyone's shoulders slumped as we made our way off the ice and into the locker room. Some of the freshmen wore looks of horror, and I almost smiled. It was normal to have an off day as a team. This wasn't the end of the world, but it did place a wedge of worry in my chest. What if fooling around with Ryann caused this in a sick twist of karma?

"J.D., there's a woman outside the locker room to see you," Lex said, his face serious and lacking his normal grin. "Said it's important."

"Okay, thanks." I put my equipment into my bag and threw on athletic shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt before wiping a towel over my face. On my way out, Patrick passed me, and he didn't wear his typical smirk like he was about to tell a joke. He was focused and looked pissed. He didn't acknowledge me, and a lump formed in the back of my throat.

There's no way they know about Ryann.

My breathing faltered as I waited for Michael to come out of Coach's

office, praying he'd give me a nod or a semblance of a greeting. I stood stiff as a steel rod and clutched the strap of my bag tighter. Paxton left, same serious face as his twin, and that meant the one alternate captain remained. *What is Coach saying?*

Michael came out after three minutes of torture, and when his gaze landed on me, he nodded in greeting. He hit my shoulder and said, "Wish we all had your focus, J.D."

Then he let go and kept walking.

My shaky sigh put everything back in place. The chemistry was fine. Coach probably wanted to talk to the leaders on the team to get everyone in line and it had nothing to do with me and Ryann.

Thank god.

With a new bounce in my step, I made my way out of the locker room, searching for some woman. Ryann wouldn't be who they meant, not with her brother here.

The weirdest thought intruded, the more inappropriate of thoughts.

What would it feel like to know she was waiting for me after a game? Seeing her wear my jersey and smile that toothy grin at me? I blinked, shoving the image away because that wasn't a possibility for us, ever. That seemed too *girlfriendly* when her last name tied her to Michael, so even if I bent the no-girlfriend rule... she was my teammate's sister.

"Jonah?" a soft, nervous voice pulled me to the right, and I froze. Absolutely paralyzed at the sight of my *mom*. Here. On campus.

My heart thudded so loud it was all I could hear. The distant chatter of my teammates faded away as my mom's face came into view. She looked older, tired, unhappy. Wrinkles formed on either side of her eyes, and her hair had a little more gray than the last time I saw her. Besides that, she was the same.

I couldn't fucking speak.

"I was hoping to talk to you for a moment," she said, swallowing loudly and taking a step toward me. "Please."

She wore a basic Burlington U shirt and jeans and had her hands clasped in front of her. This was the woman who left us, Dad and me, and used every nasty trick in the book to rob my dad of his money.

"No," I yelled, not caring that my voice echoed.

She flinched and took a shaky breath. "Please, Jonah. I can't tell you how sorry I am for—"

“I said no. I have nothing to say to you.” My left eye twitched, and a headache exploded around my temples from seeing her here.

“I want to talk to my son. I fucked up.” She sniffed, and tears fell down her face. The emotion should’ve bothered me, but it pissed me off even more. I wanted to punch a wall or run five miles without stopping. Do something to stop this onslaught of unwanted feelings making me go crazy.

“What are you referring to, exactly?” I stepped toward her with balled fists and forced myself to relax my hands. I wouldn’t hurt her, but my body seemed to be out of control with rage. “The fact you abandoned your only son and replaced him with his *best friend*? The fact you haven’t talked to me in two years? The fact you broke Dad’s heart and took him for every fucking penny he had? Which one are you talking about?”

Light footsteps came behind me, but I didn’t care to turn around. My mom’s eyes widened, and she placed a hand over her mouth, her shoulders shaking as she cried. I slammed my eyes shut. How dare she act like the victim? She did this.

“J.D.”

A hand came down on my shoulder, and I sliced my gaze to Michael. His tight expression told me he knew enough. “Do you need me to call security?”

He’s on my side. I almost relaxed but shook my head. “No. Not yet.”

“Want me to stick around?” he asked, his tone serious and low. His attention moved to my mom, and his jaw tightened. “I’ll hang back there. Let me know if you need help.”

My throat tightened, and I nodded. He now knew my mom thought I was replaceable. Awesome.

“Did you come here to embarrass me? Let everyone know how I’m not worth keeping as a son?” I asked once Michael was out of earshot. “You don’t get to pick when we talk.”

“W-when can w-we?” she asked, full-on sobbing now.

“I don’t know that we can.” That was the truth of it. “I’m not sure I can ever forgive you. Maybe what you did to me, telling me hockey ruined your life. It’s a lot, and not everyone likes it. But what you did to Dad?” I paused, shaking my head as my lip curled up in disgust. “That is unforgivable.”

“Your father and I had our own issues that you might never understand. But Jonah, my only regret is *hurting* you. My actions caused me to lose my son, and that’s something I will try to fix for the rest of my life. I love you.”

“Don’t come here again. Don’t call me. If I ever feel like you’re worth

my time, I have your number.”

I slung my bag back over my shoulder and marched out of the rink into the warm air. It didn't heat up my veins though. Seeing her in the flesh after two years unsettled me to the point I wasn't sure if I needed to throw up or get rip-roaring drunk.

Possibly both.

Ryann.

That's who I wanted to see, talk to, lose myself in. She'd know what to do or say, and I hurried home, desperate to see her. I was disappointed when the place was empty. No music, no laughter. Just the lingering smell of her lotion.

Jonah: Where are you?

Ryann: Hello to you too. At the library.

Shit. That's right. She told me she'd be there studying.

I ran a hand over my face, got a bottled water and my backpack, and walked the six blocks to the library as fast as I could. It should've worried me, my desperate need to tell her, but it didn't. I trusted her. I rushed into the double-doors, scanning the first floor for signs of her blonde hair. She sat at the table with three other people, and one guy had his arm on the back of her chair.

He said something that made her laugh, and she tilted her head back, cackled, and the guy leaned closer to her. She didn't recoil. She let him get in her space—an action very few people did, and something snapped inside me.

I marched over to the table, and her gaze moved to me before I got there. Her eyes widened in pleasant surprise, but the look shifted to concern just as fast.

“Jonah,” she said, moving from the table and standing. “What's wrong?”

I ignored the wide eyes from her tablemates and glared at her. “Hey, can we talk?”

“Yeah, okay. Be right back guys, sorry. Move onto the next chapter without me.” She chewed her bottom lip and frowned as I jutted my head to one of the empty conference rooms. They lined the south wall, and students could rent or use them if they were empty.

Thank god this one was vacant.

We got in, and I shut the door before she spun to face me. “What's going on, Jonah?”

I couldn't stop myself. I cupped the back of her head and slammed my

mouth onto hers. I needed her warmth, happiness, joy, reason. All of it. The shit with my mom messed me up so bad that my brain hurt, and I tilted her head back, needing her to give into the kiss.

“Please, Ry,” I begged, staring down at her confused blue eyes.

She hesitated for a second before reaching up and wrapping her arms around my shoulders to kiss me back. It wasn’t a messy, scorching hot kiss. This one was slow. Lots of strokes and teases and moans. I used my other hand to cup her ass and pull her tighter against me. All thoughts of that guy, my mom, and the team left my mind.

It was her.

We kissed for minutes, my hand roaming up and down her back and ass. She tasted like home and sweetness, and eventually I stopped and rested my forehead on hers. It would be cruel to use her to escape my demons, no matter how much I wanted her. “I don’t want to stop, but we *are* in a library.”

She panted as I did and cupped my face, forcing me to look at her. “Jonah, what happened? Something’s off, and while I could totally make out with you for hours, this isn’t normal.”

I sucked in a breath when she gave me a half-smile, her other hand running through my hair in such a gentle way. I slammed my eyes shut and sagged against her. “My mom showed up after practice today.”

Her face scrunched together, and she closed her eyes. “Oh god, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“What did you say to her? What did she say?”

“She wants me back in her life. I told her to get out, that I’d call her if I ever wanted to talk to her.” I gulped and tightened my grip on Ryann.

She nodded a few times. “What’s your gut telling you to do?”

“I don’t fucking know. I *needed* to see you.” I pushed away from her, ran a hand through my hair, and paced the small room. “Am I an asshole for what I said to her? She was crying and saying she loved me, but she put my *dad* through hell. How can I accept that?”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want.”

I faced the one small window the room had, unable to bring myself to look at my roommate. If there was judgement on her face, it’d break me. I already blamed myself for why my mom left, but if Ryann thought I was a total jerk, I’d sink even lower. “I can’t afford this type of distraction with the season happening in two fucking weeks.”

“I think *you* more than anyone can use this to fuel you. She left you and made you think it was somehow your fault when she’s a grown woman who fucked up. She doesn’t deserve your forgiveness, Jonah. Play your heart out, finish the season, *then* see if you’re ready to talk to her.”

There wasn’t pity in her voice or judgment. I looked over my shoulder and found her staring right at me, fire brewing in her eyes. Pressure in my chest grew to the point it was almost painful, and I dug my fingernails into the material of my shirt. “I feel lost.”

“I know what you mean.” She walked over to me again, wrapping her arms around my waist and laying her head on my chest, right over my pounding heart. She smelled like lavender and coffee, and I rested my chin on her head, wishing somehow nothing would change between us.

“I hate that she left you, screwed your dad over, and is putting you through this.”

“I’m sorry I’m complaining to you. I just...”

“Jonah, stop apologizing. When you care about someone, you’re always there for them. There is no *complaining* when you’re upset.” She looked up at me, long lashes fanning over her cheeks. I drank in the birthmark under her left eye and her expression showing a strength I wish I had. She continued, “Let me finish up this study group, and we can head home. We can talk if you want, drink the beer your dad left to get drunk, eat snacks, watch TV. Whatever you need.”

“What if I want to do something else?” I moved my hand to cup her ass. Her face turned red.

“We can definitely do that,” she said, laughing and standing on her tiptoes to kiss me again, just once. Then twice. “I need about an hour. Want to hang around and walk back together?”

She could ask me to wait all day and I would. But I said, “Sure.”

She kissed me a third time before walking away, and I wasn’t sure if it was the leftover emotions from seeing my mom or the way Ryann was always on my side, but her *just because* kisses confused me in a whole different way.

Those seemed like more than roommates with benefits. They seemed like caring, and the idea didn’t freak me the fuck out.

If anything, I liked it and wanted more of them. But as quick as the thought came, another one ran it over and popped the momentary bubble of happiness.

How the *fuck* was I going to survive when this was over?

RYANN

With only a week left until the season started, the last thing I wanted to do was put a damper on the numbered days with Jonah. Some things couldn't be stopped though, no matter how hard I tried.

It would've been our mom's fiftieth birthday. She always talked about wanting to go on a cruise, sing karaoke, or get a tattoo. Michael seemed to go overboard with the tattoo thing, since he had a sleeve of colorful designs, and I always wondered if the idea came from our mom's wish list.

I had to work the late shift again, giving Hannah another Saturday night free for date three, and there was homework and budgeting to do. Yet I didn't have the motivation to get out of bed. It was warm here, safe, and comfortable. I could cry and roll over and doze for a few minutes, just to repeat the process again.

My comforter smelled like clean laundry, and since I shaved my legs the night before, rubbing my skin against the material was a smooth, small slice of heaven. It wasn't until my phone buzzed on my nightstand that I realized the time.

Almost lunch.

Jonah: You okay?

Ryann: Yeah

His footsteps thudded outside my door, but the shadow remained for a minute. No knock came, but I knew he was there, so I forced myself up, running my hands over my eyes to try to refresh my puffy face. Some people could cry with dignity. I was not one of those people.

I threw on an old sweatshirt and padded to the door to find Jonah standing outside it, his mouth flat.

“Hey,” I said, feeling nervous for *no* reason. We’d had sex in almost every place in our place, yet this felt personal. “Happy Saturday.”

“What’s wrong? Why are your eyes red?” He reached out and cupped my chin gently, tilting my face in his direction. He sucked in a breath. “Ry, what happened?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, twisting out of his grip and moving into the kitchen. Everything felt heavy. My emotions, my feet, my arms, my eyelids. Eating something would give me enough sugar to gain motivation, so I put bread in the toaster and leaned against the counter, avoiding Jonah’s intense stare.

He must’ve showered because his hair was wet and part of his white shirt stuck to his chest. His strong shoulders and wide chest were so not fair. His jaw tightened, and he seemed to get taller when he stood straight. “Bullshit.”

“Hmm?” I said, raising my brows as he walked toward me with his lips pressed together.

“Tell me what happened. You’re sad.”

“Yes, Jonah, I am sad.” I swallowed, my breathing a little shaky. “I’m allowed to be sad without telling you why,” I snapped, regretting the harsh tone. Nothing was his fault.

The way my parents died, the fact we agreed to this thing until the season started because he couldn’t have distractions, and how I ignored our rule and caught feelings anyway. All of it was out of my control, and I slammed my eyes shut at what got me all worked up.

The date.

Jonah didn’t move a muscle or wince or snap back. His brown eyes softened, and he walked up to me and wrapped me in a hug. “Of course you can be sad. You don’t need to tell me why, but can I stay with you while you’re upset?”

Dammit. My eyes stung again, and this time, it was all him. I breathed in his clean scent and rubbed my face against his shirt as my pulse raced. This was more than friends. This embrace seemed to connect all my pieces together with his strength and understanding—which was terrifying.

Sleeping with my brother’s teammate was one thing, but having feelings for Jonah was *out of the question*.

He rubbed his large hands up and down my back, effectively making me melt against him. Standing like this in our kitchen with his arms around me, I felt safe and not alone. My words came out before I could filter or stop them, and it was *therapeutic*.

“My mom would’ve been fifty today. She wanted to do all these things and always talked about the big 5-0. Michael and I would’ve done something big to surprise her, like a party or matching tattoos. I don’t know,” I said, keeping my face pressed against his chest. “Life felt hard this morning, like each breath took twice as much effort and...I miss her. And my dad. They don’t know about all the stuff we’ve done and never will. I saw Preston with Hannah, and I know I’m young but...they’ll never meet their grandkids, and it sucks so much.”

Jonah cradled my face, and his grip tightened. He didn’t say anything, and for that, I was grateful. Talking about it—her—seemed to open a floodgate I’d locked up for months. “I go through waves of thinking I’m okay, that I can do this alone, that I’m fine, but then a memory hits me out of nowhere. A dream, a moment of *deja vu*, a date like today, and it’s like I’m seventeen, alone, and trying to figure out my life while saying goodbye to theirs.”

“Here, sit.” He lifted me off the ground and set me on one of the kitchen chairs. He kissed the top of my head, making my heart lodge in my throat. I wasn’t sure Jonah realized we’d both crossed the *no feelings* line we drew with permanent marker. It glared at me with neon lights, but I turned on my blinders. This handsome, gentle soul who was misinterpreted by so many was sweet with me and it had me feeling some type of way.

“What are you doing?” I asked, sniffing and using the sleeve of my shirt to wipe the tears from my face. Jonah frowned at whatever he stared at in the fridge and pointed a finger at me with a tight jaw when I stood up.

“No, I’m cooking for you. You stay right fucking there.”

My body flushed at the determination on his face, and I propped myself on the chair so I could wrap my arms around my knees. Jonah pulled out eggs, feta cheese, mushrooms, spinach and set everything on the counter with a loud clang. Every few seconds he’d look over at me and narrow his eyes before going back to his task of cooking for me. He was terrible at anything that wasn’t straight protein or from a package, yet he was trying to make me happy.

“Shit,” he muttered, bending down to pick up an egg that fell on the floor. He tossed the shell into the trash and cleaned it up with a paper towel. “No, you stay there.”

“Yes, sir.”

His eyes warmed, and he gave me his famous half-smile that made my

toes curl against the wood. My mind raced as he cooked. He cooked scrambled eggs and tossed in vegetables and cheese, using the wooden spoon to stir it. His throat bobbed, and his face kept twisting into different expressions, like he was talking to himself. It was about the cutest thing I'd seen.

He left the pan there and got my toast, putting on butter and jelly. Next, he poured me a cup of coffee and set it on the table, spilling a little. He grabbed a towel and wiped it up as the smell of the burning eggs caught my attention. A little smoke rose from the pan, and within seconds, the fire alarm started blaring.

"Shit!" He pushed the pan off the burner and ran into the living room, coming back with a cushion. He waved it around like a maniac as I got up and opened the front door. After a minute of shifting the air around, the alarm stopped, and a fit of giggles took over me.

It started small, a little laugh, but it turned into a full-out belly laugh at seeing Jonah's absolute horror and the disappointment on his face. His shoulders tensed, and he put his hands on his hips, watching me with worry.

"Jonah," I said between giggles, closing the front door and approaching the kitchen.

"*What* is so funny?" he snapped, his cheeks staining red as I moved my gaze toward the stove.

"I didn't know I needed to laugh, but this? Look at our kitchen. It's a mess. We set the fire alarm off, and our place smells like burnt eggs." I cackled again, and this time, the side of his mouth quirked up. "It's funny."

"I fucked up."

"You did, but it was cute."

He bit down on his lower lip as he eyed the kitchen, and after a minute, his shoulders shook with laughter. "Jesus, I was trying to be nice and take care of you and wow."

"The effort was there." I stepped closer to him, and his gaze sliced to mine, all soft and tender. His smile lingered for a beat before he furrowed his brows and cupped one side of my face with his palm.

"Go put clothes on."

"Uh, I'm dressed?" I looked down, but he clicked his tongue.

"I'm taking you to lunch and then we're hanging out."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Ry." He smiled again, full force, with his brown eyes lighting up in

determination. “We’re having fun today.”

“I can think of a few ways to have fun,” I said, wiggling my eyebrows because seeing him happy like this? Wanting to take care of me? It was too much. Keeping things physical was easier, but he shook his head. “Are you turning me down?”

“Absolutely not.” He sucked in a breath, and his gaze heated for a second. “But I think we both know that’s not what you need right now. Later, abso-fucking-lutely.”

Irritated that he was knocking down my lame attempt at protecting my heart, I fired back, “Oh, and what do you think I need right now?”

“To start, food.” He moved his hand to my stomach and patted it. “Then, we’re going to hang out. Do crazy shit.”

“Crazy shit?”

“Yup. Now go put *more* clothes on and be ready in ten minutes. Wear tennis shoes.” He spun me around, patted my ass, and nudged me in the direction of my room. Despite all of the lines we were crossing, I really liked this side of Jonah. The version that was taking care of me.

“We’re... at the gym?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” I looked over my shoulder. “No one is chasing me with a knife, so I’m not running.”

Jonah’s lips curved into a dangerous smile, one that had butterflies exploding in my lower belly because it was a look just for me. He didn’t flash that grin at anyone else. “You showed me what you do when you’re upset, so I’m showing you what I do.”

“You’re going to work out while I watch you?” I raised my brows. “I’m not opposed to that. Will you be shirtless?”

He ran a hand through his hair and looked sheepish, which was adorable, but he shook his head. “We’re going to play racquetball.”

He could’ve told me he practiced magic down by the river and could read tarot cards and that would’ve made more sense. “I don’t...do athletic things.”

“That’s fine. I don’t binge watch TV shows.” Challenge flared in his eyes. “Trust me.”

Well, when he said it like that, I nodded. “Okay, boss.”

He led us to a front desk where we had to show our student IDs, and he asked for a ball and two rackets to rent. The guy behind the counter stared at him with stars in his eyes before pointing down a hallway to the right. “Room three is open.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Good luck this season, J.D.,” the guy said, blushing and fumbling with the pen in his hand.

“Appreciate it,” my roommate said, the tips of his ears bright red as he put a hand on the small of my back and guided us away. His warm touch almost burned through my thin T-shirt. We rarely touched in public, and this felt downright scandalous. Michael was at the gym a lot.

So were the twins.

So was the team.

Yet... I couldn’t bring myself to swat his hand away. The comfort of his touch helped the sadness plaguing me today. The hallway had doors on either side with windows that led into rooms with fake wooden walls. Squeaks of someone’s shoes on the floor echoed from another room, followed by grunts and a loud whack.

“We’re going to be making those noises?” I asked, eyeing the room as he opened the door and handed me a racket. “I trust you, Jonah, I do, but I’m wary of your methods today.”

His answering grin was evil. He gripped the back of his shirt, took it off, and set it to the side with our phones and keys. I snapped my mouth shut to keep myself from drooling and swallowed, hard.

“Ready to play?” he asked.

“Maybe?” I said, my voice way too low and husky. He stretched his arms over his head, and I studied every ripple and tight muscle on his torso. It wasn’t even fair how toned he was. I used to consider myself a forearm girl. I loved strong forearms, but with Jonah... his chest and stomach and broad shoulders all leading down to a narrow waist made me forget my middle name.

“Ry, you’re ogling me.”

“You took your shirt off.”

“This room gets hot, so yeah.” He shrugged, but I didn’t miss his growing smirk. “Let’s warm up, hmm?”

“I’m already warm.”

“Ryann.” He narrowed his eyes, sucking in a quick breath before he pointed his racket at me. “I brought you here to distract you.”

“I’m distracted.” I took a step toward him, but he pretended to hit me with the racket.

“Stay on your side.”

I took another step and dragged my gaze down his body, taking my time admiring him. My body heated with need. “Yeah, super unfocused. Why are we here? Why are your shorts on?”

He grinned and rested a hand on my hip, digging his thumb into my skin for a second as he ran his gaze along my face and chest. “We can do *whatever* you want when we get back, but I think this will help you.”

“Being naked with you would serve just fine,” I said, ignoring the warmth and care on his face. He was trying to take care of me again, and it was too much. Sexual teasing and surface conversations were safer, but no matter how much I tried to bring the conversation back to that, he deterred it.

He ran his teeth over his bottom lip before he pushed me away. “I want you to hit this ball as hard as you can at the furthest wall. Right now.”

“Um, okay?”

He handed me the bright blue ball, and I tossed it into the air, swinging horribly and missing.

“Try again, you got it.”

I did, and the sound of it bouncing the wall vibrated through me. My muscles burned, and my heart raced. When it bounced back, I swung again. Then again. And again.

“This is great for agility and hand-eye coordination, but when I couldn’t handle what my mom did, I came in here and hit as hard as I could,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “I thought maybe you’d like it.”

Whack. Thud. Woosh. Sweat dripped down my temples, and I sucked in air at the constant movement. I swung as hard as I could, my poor biceps groaning in pain, but it felt wonderful.

The rage at how unfair life was flowed through me. The anger at losing my parents. The fear of not knowing the future. All of it combined into a hot mess of emotions, and I swung harder. I grunted as the thuds sounded like the game to our right.

“Fuck,” I yelled, not even letting Jonah get a turn. I whacked it over and over, and my heart thudded in my chest so damn hard I had to stop to catch my breath. I panted, put my hands on my knees, and gasped for air.

“Stand up. It’s easier to get oxygen to your lungs when you’re upright.” Jonah neared me, his brows furrowed together and his jaw tight. “Let me get you water, hold on.”

He disappeared from the room, leaving me with my sweat and thoughts, and I sat onto the floor, heaving as the adrenaline wore off. He was right. This did help, and the notion he’d pushed me outside of my routine made me almost smile.

It couldn’t fully form though. Michael and Lex were in the hallway, walking right past our window, my brother’s face stony and serious. Guilt ate at me. He would be suffering today too, and I didn’t reach out to him.

Lex said something, but Michael didn’t have his easy smile or goofy expression. His hard gaze swept over our room, but he didn’t see me. Relief flowed through me, followed by an aching guilt that almost made me throw up.

I didn’t call my brother on our mom’s birthday. I was sleeping with his teammate even though I promised him I wouldn’t, and I let my feelings get involved. Jesus. I rubbed my temples and kinda hoped the ground would swallow me up. I was the worst kind of human. When Jonah walked back into our room, his glistening chest on display, I almost cried again.

“Here, drink this, champ.” He gave me that half smile and sat on the ground next to me. “How you doing?”

“Confused.” That was the truth. It prevented me from spilling everything. I took a long drink of the water, the moisture feeling great on my throat since gasping for air and working out weren’t my normal thing.

“Well, thank god you’re good at making lists.” He nudged my shoulder with his, and a pang of sadness hit me hard.

We could never be a couple. Until that second I hadn’t realized...I wanted to be with him. Not in secret. Not just in our place where we were safe. Being with him would be...the best, but it could never happen. God, I wouldn’t be able to kiss him again once the season started. Would he bring other girls back to the apartment?

Fuck. I gripped the water harder as my mind raced through all the ways this would suck. We’d have to go back to being friends or *only* roommates who saw each other in passing.

Would he open up about his mom to someone else? Would they comfort him and be there for him when he needed a friend? My eyes stung, and my stomach heaved at the heartbreak of knowing we would never be together.

All of this...the hooking up, the secret, would only ever be that. A secret relationship with a ticking clock and a finish line. I wouldn't get to be with Jonah like I craved.

Not while my brother was on the team.

Next year then.

"Hey, you look like you're about to cry. Get up, let's play a game but maybe tone it down? You're going to be sore tomorrow. You went a little Rambo." He held out a hand, pulled me to my feet, and looked at me with so much tenderness I almost broke into pieces.

"Then after we can... you know?" I said, hating how needy I sounded. Our time was coming to an end, and I wanted to hold onto all of it as much as I could.

"Oh yeah. Definitely," he said, glancing over his left shoulder toward the window. Jonah paused, then lowered his mouth to mine. He nipped at my lip and wiggled his brows. "Let's make this game quick then."

JONAH

Three days later, I wasn't thinking about the season starting that Friday night like I normally would've. My room should've had notes and stats everywhere and my mind should've been laser-focused on being the absolute best. Instead, it was split into three directions.

Hockey. Ryann. My mom.

The last one messed with me the most because my anger and hate toward my mother hadn't lessened, nor had the thought of forgiving her crossed my mind. Still, seeing Ryann so upset didn't sit right with me. When dates came around that involved my mom, I got pissed, not sad.

Would that change if she were *gone*, gone?

The urge to text her hit me out of nowhere, and I cleared my throat and set my phone further away on our kitchen table. She left me and my dad and didn't deserve my time.

What if she dies?

The morbid thought caused an unrelenting throb in my chest that I couldn't talk to Ryann about. Not when she was still walking around with a little sadness on her face. She'd tell me to do what I needed, what I thought was right, and it wouldn't hurt to just... text my mother.

Jonah: I'm not ready to talk yet but...soon.

Mom: Okay, thank you. I'll be ready WHENEVER you are. I love you.

She responded in less than a minute, and I wiped my hands over my face, pushing my palms over my eyes before I released a long groan. The pressure in my chest lessened, and it felt like the right step.

I might never forgive or understand her actions, but that didn't mean I couldn't have a relationship with her. But it was done, and I could push that

thought to the back of my mind.

I had practice in an hour, so my one-track mind forced all thoughts of Ryann away and went into pregame mode. Coach wanted me on the first line which thrilled me to no end, but I had to deliver. Getting the spot meant one thing, stats meant another.

Playing the best and not getting injured were essential, and I stretched and decided to head to the rink early. The unsettled feeling was probably because of reaching out to my mom, and physical outlets always helped.

I clocked up, carried my bag, and made the walk toward the rink. It stood on the edge of campus, and my heart thudded with a different kind of excitement when I approached the doors. The rink was my home, the ice was my safe zone, and hockey was my way to attend college. I loved it and needed it like oxygen, and I couldn't recall a time that arriving at the rink and smelling the clean cold air didn't put me at ease.

This time, Michael Reiner stopped talking to another player the second I walked in, narrowed his eyes at me, and marched over with long strides. I froze, absolutely prepared to get punched in the face.

He had to know. Ryann must've told him. My stomach soured to the point I gripped my bag tighter and took slow breaths. His eyes were intense, but before he got right in front of me, he smiled.

Wait. What?

"I need to thank you, J.D." His face softened, and he blinked too much, almost like he was nervous.

"Why?"

"You took care of Ryann." He smiled, but it was the same half-smile Ryann wore the past few days. Not real or genuine. "Our mom's birthday is hard on both of us, but she and my mom had all these traditions and well... she told me what you did."

That we spent the afternoon naked?

I cleared my throat, and he put a hand on my shoulder. "You were there for her. I can't fucking tell you how much that means to me. I might've hated you rooming together, but fuck, I'm glad she has a friend."

Oh god.

The secret reared its head, and I wanted to sink into the ice and disappear. He looked so earnest and grateful that I nodded.

"Right, yeah," I said, sounding like an idiot. He had to know his words tore me up inside. It was a struggle, a fight to the death in my stomach. Did I

tell him? Did I confess?

Did I end it with Ryann?

No.

My heart lurched to the point it pressed against my ribcage, and my feet felt like a million pounds. I couldn't end it with her. I didn't want to. She was... *shit*.

"You good, man?" Michael asked, his brows coming together in concern. "You paled."

"Yeah, sorry." *Get it together*. "Nervous about Friday."

"Nah, don't be. We can take 'em." The senior hit my shoulder again and guided us toward the locker room. "You've been putting in work, J.D. You're ready. Your fundamentals are spot the fuck on, and your focus is insane. Some people are meant to play the game, and you're one of them. Remember that."

I nodded and got ready for practice, putting on my pads and jersey, then my skates. His words should've settled me. Michael was honest and would call out poor performance to the younger players. He didn't bullshit.

And yet... the guilt grew in my gut so bad I dropped my stick before heading onto the ice to warm up. This wouldn't do.

I either needed to get Ryann to tell him and convince her it was a good idea, or end it like we agreed.

Neither option was acceptable, yet I knew a decision loomed the closer we got to opening day.

Practice kicked my ass in the best way. My muscles were sore, but my focus was there. I was ready for Friday. The team played together like we'd been teammates for years. Passes were almost flawless, and excitement bubbled around us. We were all in this year—Michael's final year, the twins playing their heart out since this was their last year at the school since being drafted, and even Tate led with so much passion and drive—it motivated all of us.

We were going to go far. I felt it in my bones, and I needed to be a part of it.

I threw my dirty clothes into a hamper and treaded out into our living room just as Ryann walked in with her hair down, wearing a tight black shirt

and jeans and *fuck*, I wanted to pull her to me.

“Whoa, what did I do to earn this Jonah smile?” she said, winking before setting her keys down in our bowl.

It wasn’t even weird to think of *our* stuff anymore. We shared everything. Our groceries, our utensils, our towels. A pair of her shoes was still in my room from when we undressed each other in a hurry last weekend, and despite my insistence on keeping everything clean, a little bit of her chaos felt good.

Right.

“I had a great practice,” I said, moving toward her and picking up a strand of her hair. It was soft and always smelled so damn good. “You look nice,” I said, my voice getting a little deeper than I meant to.

“Thanks,” she said, biting her lip and narrowing her eyes. “You have this... energy about you right now. Is it pregame jitters?”

“Yes, but not jitters. I’m ready. Mentally and physically.” I moved my hand to caress her shoulder, rubbing her muscles a bit and cupping the side of her neck. Her soft skin made me want more, and when she shifted her weight to lean into me, my heart beat faster.

I was *into* her. Like, stupid into her. Her smiles, her joy, her sadness that hit her every once in a while. All of it.

“I’m really happy for you, Jonah. You put so much time into the sport. I have no doubt you’ll be excellent and kick ass this season.” Her voice sounded sad, and her blue eyes dulled a little, sending an alarm raging in my head.

We tell Michael or stop.

The unwelcome thought made every cell in my body tighten. Ryann moved closer to me and put her hands on my chest, her mouth curved up on one side. “I’ll be there cheering you on every game.”

“Yeah?” God, that sounded amazing. She could sit with my dad and—wait.

“Absolutely. I’m not going to wear your jersey number or anything, but I’ll scream my face off when you score goals.”

“I like the sound of it.”

She licked her lips and let out a long, sad sigh.

I pressed my mouth to hers, stopping her from whatever she was going to say. Hearing her try to end it would kill me. So, I took the mature route and kissed her.

She moaned into my mouth, bringing her hands into my hair and gently running her fingers through it as she parted her lips and gave me access. This kiss was no different than all the others, but it felt heavier. It felt like more. Her little pleased sounds got me heated, and it was insane to think I could ever leave this behind.

I pressed my hand into the small of her back so her chest touched mine, and her heart beat *fast*, faster than mine, sending a thrill through me. I tilted her neck back, kissed her deeper, and god, she tasted like coffee and chocolate and I never wanted to stop.

“Your mouth is perfect,” I said, picking her up and carrying her to her bedroom. She wrapped her legs around my waist, grinding against me, and my limbs almost shook with need.

“Jonah,” she said, her face open and filled with *love*? Her lips remained parted, her expression reflecting exactly what I was feeling inside, but nothing came out.

I set her on her bed carefully and kissed down her jawline, over her collarbone, and bit down. She moaned and placed her hands under my shirt, digging her nails into my stomach.

Her touch lit my goddamn soul on fire.

There was no way I could walk away from her. None.

I had to prove to her this could work, and that would start right now, showing her how amazing we were together. Because we were good enough to risk telling my teammate, a senior on the team. I had to get her to agree too... but what if she didn't? What if she wanted to end it like we planned? God, could I handle that?

Sharing our space together? Smelling her floral scent and hearing her laugh with someone else?

No. I couldn't.

Thinking about this being our last week together made my chest hurt, and I kissed her harder, needing her touch to reassure me. She had to be into this... I didn't know what I would do if she wasn't.

RYANN

My body seemed to hum with pleasure wherever Jonah put his lips. My neck tingled as he grazed the sensitive area with his teeth and tongue. He pulled the hem of my shirt up with his strong yet gentle fingers. I sucked in a breath when he cupped my breasts, tracing the outline of my nipples over the lacy fabric, and I squirmed with need.

“Mm,” he said. The syllable coming from him felt hotter than any compliment I’d received. From him, it meant more.

“Take it off,” I demanded, the inferno roaring through my body wanting everything faster, quicker, harder. My pulse pounded between my legs, and the firmness of his body weighed me down in the best way. “Please,” I begged.

“No,” he whispered, moving his mouth down to the center of my chest and biting my nipple over my clothes. “Slow, Ry. I want to go slow.”

My heart skipped a damn beat when he said that, and his brown eyes filled with warmth as he stared at me. His hard length digging into my thigh was the only sign he was even remotely as turned on as me.

He waited a beat, his gaze caressing my face with an entirely new expression. My hormones messed with my mind, because there was no way he was looking at me with *love*.

“You’re fucking perfect,” he said, sliding down my body and making no moves to remove my clothes. He touched and teased every part of my exposed skin. His tenderness caused my insides to feel warm and I wanted this to last. He traced his fingers up and down my arms, over the part of my stomach that showed when my shirt rode up, and he even teased the belly button ring there. “This drives me *insane*, by the way. This little ring.”

“Yeah?” I said, breathless and needy and terrified out of my mind. Would this be the last time we do this? Was his reason for going slow because the season started Friday, and this was it? Panic clawed its way past the aggressive urge to touch him, and my throat got tight. *This can’t be it.*

“You have no idea,” he said, bending down and flicking the ring with his tongue. He swirled his warm mouth around the ring so many times I lost count. My panties were absolutely destroyed, and we hadn’t even gotten past first base. “Mm,” he moaned again, moving over my shorts and to my thighs where he continued his slow caress all the way to my feet.

I writhed with need. Each stroke of his finger over the bottom of my foot, around my calf, or behind my knee sent a lightning bolt of desire straight to my core. My orgasm wouldn’t take long, and even now, it lingered in the background. “Jonah, I need...”

He slid a finger into my shorts, teasing the outside of my panties as he arched a brow. “What do you want?”

“For you to touch me.”

“I am.” His wicked grin sent a thrill through me when he slid the material to the side, only to let it snap back in place. “I like seeing you needy for me.”

“Damn it, Jonah.” I arched my hips up toward him, seconds away from bringing my own hand down there before he *finally* gripped the edge of my shirt and tugged it off me. I let out a shuddering breath when his gaze zeroed in on my bra.

He slid the strap off my shoulder, letting his fingers follow the movement until he repeated the process with the other. I gasped when he yanked the cups down. The cold air tickled my pebbled nipples, but the chill didn’t last long. He pinched each one, sending a spark of lust all the way to my toes. “You like this, huh?”

“God, yes,” I covered his hands with mine and made him squeeze me harder. His eyes lit up and his mouth became slack as we pleasured my breasts together. It was so damn hot.

He growled in protest when I let go, and he bent down, taking one nipple into his mouth and sucking it *hard*. So hard. It was wet and warm and drove me crazy with a frenzied need. He bit down and teased the tip to the point I cried out, but it only made him go slower.

“Jonah,” I begged again, yanking his shirt over his shoulders. He released his mouth on me for a second, removed his shirt, and blessed me with his impressive chest. I clawed at it, unable to fulfill this growing desire inside of

me. He finally broke.

I reveled in making the focused, intense Jonah Daniels struggle with control.

He undid my bra and buried his head between my breasts while I felt every curve of his back muscles, the fire inside me increasing. Every touch was a spark, and it was as electrifying as it was terrifying.

He had my whole body and heart, things I never planned to give away.

“Can’t get enough of you, Ryann,” he murmured against my skin as he trailed kisses down my torso and undid the button of my shorts. “It’s wild.”

“Me too,” I said, weakly, hating the falter in my voice that almost gave away my onslaught of emotions. This was more than hooking up. More than releasing attraction and enjoying a temporary thing.

It had shifted.

Jonah slid my shorts off my legs, then my panties, and he groaned with pleasure as he spread my legs wide and took one slow, torturous lick. He hummed into my most sensitive part, and I about flew off the bed from how good it felt.

“Jesus,” he said, flicking and sucking my pounding, swollen clit. This was scandalous, the way he pleasured me with just his mouth. His deep grunts made my toes curl into my bedsheets. He placed one large hand on my lower stomach and held me down as I arched from the intensity.

It was like pins and needles shooting down each limb as the orgasm was *right there*, seconds away from taking me under. I gripped his hair and pulled. It set him off. He swirled his tongue faster, dipping it low enough to enter me, and my god, it was so hot, I came, *hard*.

Lights flashed behind my closed eyes as my body went taut, every muscle tensed and primed. Pleasure zapped me from head to toe, leaving behind a heavy heartbeat and sweat covering my skin.

Jonah never stopped touching or kissing me as I caught my breath. We’d been together numerous times, naked, sweaty, and desperate, but this felt different.

Each kiss was like a weight on my chest.

I gripped his head and dragged his mouth back to mine, needing more of him. He groaned into my mouth, and each stroke of his tongue against mine helped me forget about the questions in my mind. His heart beat fast and his touch seemed just as needy.

We kissed, my taste on his mouth, until my body was worked back up to

pre-orgasm neediness. His skin glistened with sweat, and the scent of his soap tickled my nose. He always smelled so good, so clean, and I inhaled, enjoying how right it felt with him. This could be the last time I nuzzled him, the last time I felt his warm body next to me, the last time we kissed. Panic clawed down my throat, the sudden urge to cry unwelcome. I took a shaky breath and tried to *live in the moment*. Our time together ending soon made each touch more intense. I wanted to slow everything down and remember every detail of how Jonah left his mark on me.

He stopped kissing me dizzy, and his lips were wet and swollen when he looked down at me. "I need to be inside you."

I trembled at the emotion in his voice and helped him take off his shorts, then his boxers. He had a condom in his hands within a second. He put it on and gazed down at me but paused.

He opened his mouth, like he wanted to say something, but no sound came out. He took a shaky breath and slowly put his weight onto his knees and forearms, cradling the back of my head with one hand and kissing me as he thrust into me.

God, he felt *good*. Full. Right. Perfect.

He rocked into me, slowly, like there wasn't a desperate need for a release. I wrapped my legs around his waist and lifted my hips to take him deeper, making us both groan in response. Our sweaty chests rubbed together, and he kissed me harder.

He bit down on my bottom lip and pulled, making the kiss feel so good, even though it hurt. I gasped at the sensation. He took my hands and held them over my head, pinning them down as he rolled his hips in a hypnotic beat.

He was so fucking sexy.

The muscles in his arms rippled as he continued thrusting into me, his jaw tightening and sweat beading on his temples. I could only stare up at him in awe and *love*.

The emotion hit me hard, exploding through my mind like a blaring fire alarm in the middle of the night. The thought was unwelcome and made me tense.

Jonah noticed immediately and stopped. "Hey, what is it? Am I hurting you?" His brows furrowed together, and he let go of my hands, cupping my face and studying my body like the answer would be there. "Ryann, tell me."

"No, I'm okay," I said, doing everything I could to hide the truth. It

would be too much for him with the season starting in two days. “Better than fine.”

He didn’t look convinced. A line appeared between his brows, but I arched up and kissed him hard again, hoping to show him how fine I was.

He hesitated at first, but the longer we kissed and the more I ran my hands over him, gripping his ass, he melted into me and seemed to forget to go slow. He picked up his pace, grinding into me with confidence.

Nothing existed beyond our bodies coming together, our sweat mixing, and our panting breaths that filled the air. He slid out and rolled me onto my stomach, moving into me from behind as his weight rested on my back. He gripped my waist with one hand and moved his other underneath me so he could touch my clit. I shuddered at how good it felt, how good *he* felt.

“Fuck, Ry,” he said, his mouth close to my ear. He nipped my earlobe and went harder. He matched his thrusts with the way he swirled his finger around my clit, and the combination of his dick, his finger, and the way he licked down my neck caused me to clench around him.

“*Jonah*,” I moaned, hot pleasure starting at the base of my spine and rendering me speechless. It was too much and not enough. I clutched the sheet with my free hand and let the orgasm consume me. My legs shook, and I cried out as he thrust a final two times, his grip on my waist tightening as his thighs twitched.

“Fuck, Ry, *fuck*.” He stilled and let out a long breath as he rested on top of me for a full minute. The room smelled of sex and sweat, and my eyes stung with the weight of it all.

This felt different than any sex I’d ever had, and when Jonah kissed my spine before getting up, I felt that kiss right in my chest.

“Incredible,” he said, just above a whisper before disposing of the condom. I tilted my head on my pillow to watch him, my heart in my throat at how beautiful he was. He was gentle and kind and *mine*.

The last thought threw me off. I wasn’t the type to get possessive or jealous, but knowing this could be our last time... it amplified every emotion.

“You seem happy,” I said, hating the way my voice was clogged. I cleared my throat hoping that would help. This was it. I felt it in the way he stared at me, like his eyes were trying to tell me goodbye. It was a farewell to the bliss, to the temporary situation we agreed upon.

“I am.” He flashed a quick smile and sat on the edge of my bed, still naked. He ran his hand up and down my back, kneading the spot above my

ass before smacking it. “I need to shower. Want to join me?”

God yes.

“Oh, this could be fun.” I sat up and almost giggled when he gripped my sides and placed me in his lap. If our time was limited, I was going to spend every second enjoying his naked body.

He licked his bottom lip before kissing me again. This wasn’t a heated, foreplay type of kiss. It was slow and addicting. He held me tight against him again and let out a contented sigh before murmuring against my mouth, “Fuck, your lips are my favorite.”

I only hummed in response. If I said anything else, it would mess everything up, and I couldn’t take that risk. “Come on, hotshot, let’s get all wet and soapy.”

JONAH

By the time Friday rolled around, I woke up and Ryann was gone. Her flowery scent lingered in the air when I walked into the kitchen for breakfast, and her shoes, keys, and red sweatshirt weren't near the entrance. Disappointment hit me hard. I wanted to talk to her about us, about the deal. We sidestepped any sort of chatting the night before, and instead of crashing in my bed, Ryann snuck off to her room with the excuse she had to leave early.

What did that even mean? I knew her schedule—she knew mine. She didn't have work or class, so she had to be avoiding me. I ran my hand through my hair, trying to ignore the tightness in my chest and the uneasy feeling that I was missing something. *But what is it?*

Facts—we agreed to do this knowing I didn't have time for a relationship or any complications with the season. She didn't want her brother finding out because she didn't want to impact their relationship. All true, but things had shifted, and *not* being with Ryann would be too fucking hard.

We had to tell her brother so we could be together in a real relationship... if that made her happy. Yes. I nodded to myself, hopeful that we could figure it out. I threw some spinach, yogurt, blueberries, and protein powder into the blender and made a shake before sending her a text. It'd be better to talk before the game. That way I wouldn't be worrying about this after the puck dropped.

Jonah: You coming back at all today?

Ryann: Unsure. Caught up at the café.

Jonah: I thought Hannah opened?

Ryann: She needed me last minute.

Jonah: Okay. Well, will I see you before the game tonight?

Ryann: I don't know, but Jonah? Good luck. You're going to kick ass.

My heart hammered against my ribs. Maybe I wasn't good at this shit. Her text felt... like a goodbye. Good luck? That's what she said?

Jonah: What time do you get a break?

Ryann: I don't get one.

She was lying to me, she had to be. Determined to talk and figure this out, I finished my shake, showered, and got dressed. We didn't have to report to the rink until later that afternoon, and I had one class in the late morning. It would be perfect to study at the café and try to catch a moment of Ryann's time. I'd tell her everything and see where she was at.

The walk to the café was a little cooler as fall neared, and I slipped on my headphones. It was quiet on campus, barely seven thirty, and most students didn't even wake up until five minutes before their eight a.m. class. I liked the quad when it wasn't filled with tons of peers. There was something peaceful about it, and the quiet soothed my growing nerves about talking to Ryann. I arrived at the double doors, and the bell chimed as I entered. Hannah, the pretty owner, stood behind the counter with Ryann, and the two of them were chatting in high-pitched voices.

"I'm telling you," Hannah said, waving her hands in the air with a huge smile. "It feels so good to date a normal person."

"I'm so thrilled for you. You deserve all the good luck, vibes, thoughts, and sex." Ryann grinned, moved her gaze to mine, and as my lips twitched to match her grin, my girl's face fell.

Her smile disappeared from her face when she saw me, and my heart plummeted to the freshly mopped floor. *Why is she not happy?*

"Jonah, hi," she said, looking at the ground and blinking way too fast. Alarm bells went off, and I took a few steps closer to the counter. Hannah stared at me hard, and I nodded to her.

"Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Uh, I'm kinda busy." She fidgeted with a cleaning spray handle, and a slight redness crept up her neck.

"Ry," I tried again, my voice a little stronger than intended. "Please?"

She bit her lip and swallowed before meeting my gaze. Her blue eyes were pools of emotions, ones I couldn't get a read on, and she let out a long breath. "Now is *really* not a good time."

I looked around the empty room, making my eyes go wide at the lack of

people. Hannah stood off to the side, watching without a lick of shame, and my face heated at the attention. This was about Ryann so I focused on her. “Why? Why is this not okay?”

“I’m not ready.”

I snapped my attention back to her, and my breath caught in my throat. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not ready to talk, okay? Today is a big day for you, for Michael, for the team.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Please, Jonah. I’m trying to be mindful of you. I think... later. We should talk later.”

“After the game?”

“Yes. Or Sunday. Play your first two games. Then we can talk.” She pulled at the edge of her apron so hard her knuckles were white.

“Is this what you need? To wait?” I asked, *hating* the worried look on her face. Did my obsession with hockey make her feel this nervous? Did she think all these weeks together meant nothing to me? Did she not realize she’d become my best fucking friend?

She nodded and refused to look at me. She chewed the side of her lip as a pair of students walked in. She jutted her chin to me, signaling to move away. We’d talk Sunday, in forty-eight fucking hours. It didn’t sit right. I waited until the two ordered fancy drinks and went up to the counter again.

“We can talk Sunday, but we are *not* done. Fuck the reasons why it’s a bad idea.” I didn’t wait for a reply before storming out of the café, torn between feeling proud, terrified, and worried. I’d put her first. I told her. That was something I never thought I’d do. Yet she held the power over me, and... the look on her face said she wasn’t going to keep me around. If she felt like it was a choice between her brother or me...she wouldn’t pick me.

Fuck if that didn’t suck.

Game time.

The music pounded over the speakers and the sound of metal on ice sliced through the air. Our warm-up was filled with a nervous energy and adrenaline—a lethal combination. There wasn’t a competition of who wanted it more between our team and our opponents because we all did. It was a part of being an athlete.

But we won when it came to grit and determination. We dominated on the ice, and it was time we showed it. The first period flew by with a combination of Patrick scoring one goal with my assist and Josh Gruber blocking every attempt our opponent made. The cold air hit my face as I skated across the ice, and my soul came alive. I belonged here.

It was where I could focus and use every muscle I trained for. The mouthguard remained tight in my mouth as I bit down, taking in the scene. The guys sitting on the bench, our coach yelling with the clipboard.

This was home.

My blood pumped through my veins during the second period where they tied the game. One-one, and Colorado was playing more aggressively. They had possession more, and my muscles burned as I skated up and down the ice. Michael passed it to Paxton, then to Patrick, me, Patrick, then *goal*.

Fuck yes. Another assist. I pumped my fist into the air as we did a quick huddle to celebrate. Michael looked maniacal from the joy, and it was contagious.

“Let’s fucking go!” he shouted. He skated up to me and put his arm around my head, knocking his helmet against mine before moving onto the next guy. I laughed, shaking my head at his ability to make every person on the ice feel like part of the family.

He cheered every one of our teammates with the same energy, and for one hot second, my gaze shifted to the stands where Ryann sat wearing a Moo U sweatshirt and green hat. Her fists lifted in the air.

Her gaze met mine, and without thinking, I winked at her.

It can be like this. Her at the games, her brother as my teammate. They didn’t have to live in separate worlds when it felt so damn right to have both.

I didn’t get to think about it long as the second period ended and we approached the third. Our coach gave us the plan, wanting us to put more pressure on their defense, and we came out ready to go.

Twenty more shots on their goal, we had the puck in possession more than their offense, but it wasn’t enough. With five minutes left of the final period, we needed to score. My arms burned and my thighs clenched as I slammed into the wall to stop the puck. I passed it to Paxton, who weaved around our opponent before pulling his stick back, swinging, and smacking the puck in a quick line just to the right of the goalie. He scored. The buzzer blasted in the stadium, and god, the high from it was enough to fuel me for days. That one goal sent us over the edge and was enough. We won. We won.

our home opener, and fuck if it didn't feel good.

We celebrated with high-fives and bro hugs and a quick speech to be back the next day ready to go. I showered and got dressed fast, anxious to celebrate with Ryann. I didn't care if she wanted to wait. I felt high on a rush and wanted to lose myself with her. She'd be so happy we won. I knew it. I'd convince her to talk now, preferably naked or with a celebratory beer my dad insisted we had.

I exited the locker room intent on talking to her when my fucking mom appeared. She stood off to the side, and the sight of her knocked the wind out of me. She wore a Moo U shirt, and my dad was walking up the other side. *If he sees her...* I panicked and completely froze. He might think I invited her, or forgave her, or betrayed him, and I shook my head, seconds away from pointing my finger at her to get out of there when Ryann walked up with my dad.

It was a clash of emotions, a vortex of feelings, and my head spun so fast I wasn't sure I knew what to say.

"Great game, J.D." My dad walked up and gave me a huge hug, still unaware of my mom's presence. He patted my back and smiled over at Ryann. "Your roommate told me to come back here."

"Yeah," I choked out, unsure how to read the half-smile on Ryann's face. Was she thinking we could really have a go at this too? Or was it a pity smile, like she knew I wanted more but didn't know how to let me down? Fuck. I was quiet for too long and squeezed the back of my neck. "Uh, Dad... Mom's here."

He went rigid, took a step back, and paled.

"I didn't invite her," I said, desperate for him to understand. "I swear."

"I believe you, son." He cleared his throat, looked around, and went even more still when he saw her. My heart hurt, but Ryann came up to me and took my hand in hers. Her small palm pressed against mine, and she ran her thumb over my hand, almost like a silent *I'm here*. That little gesture grounded me. *Fuck it*.

I put my arm around her and pulled her to me.

She buried her face in my chest, her floral scent washing over me in a comforting hug, and I rested my chin on her head for one second. I needed her, as a friend, as something more. Her strength and wisdom and smiles—I wanted it all. I put both arms around her and closed my eyes, taking a deep breath to settle myself before dealing with my mom and dad. But when I

lifted my chin off her head, Michael walked out of the locker room, his eyes narrowing into angry slits.

“What the *fuck* is this?”

Ryann jerked out of my embrace like I caught fire. She put as much distance between us as she could, and I missed her warmth immediately. Her eyes went wide, and she said, “It’s not what it looks like.”

“It’s not?” Michael fired back, his icy glare zapping me into pieces. “So, my teammate didn’t have you in his fucking arms? I imagined that?”

“Michael, please, not here.” Ryann’s voice came out shaky and nervous, and I hated seeing her worried. Her brother would understand. This wasn’t some hook-up. *But does she know that?*

She had to know what she meant to me. I’d do anything for her.

“You promised, Ryann.” He gritted his teeth and looked so different from our charismatic leader. “You fucking promised.”

“It’s not... we’re not... it’s nothing, okay?” she said. Michael stormed down the entryway, and she chased after him. He didn’t look back, and neither did she. I was forgotten as Ryann went to fix the one relationship she could never ruin.

Nothing.

We were nothing.

That was what she said.

But that couldn’t be true. We were *something*.

Right?

My mom and dad were both here in the same space after two hellish years, and the girl who became my best friend left me and said we were nothing.

Fuck this.

RYANN

“Michael, wait. Wait up, please.” I ran to grab his elbow, but he jerked it out of my reach. “Stop being a goddamn asshole.”

“Me?” he snapped, anger in eyes so similar to Mom’s, only she never looked at me with this much hate. “I’m the asshole? You’re the one who broke our promise.”

“You think I meant to do this? To risk the only family I have left?” I fired back, my throat hoarse and my eyes prickling with tears. I couldn’t believe I said it was nothing. That wasn’t the truth at all. It just... happened. “I love him. I’m in love with him. This isn’t... look, we haven’t talked about it because it was just supposed to be a hook-up. It grew to more, and we haven’t talked about it yet.”

“Oh, is this supposed to help? My teammate banging my sister? God, I’m gonna throw up. I can’t believe you did this. I can’t even look at you.” He stormed off again, and a part of me broke.

My brother wouldn’t forgive me for something that happened in high school, and he knew how important it was for us to be close. But this... tears fell down my face, and I stopped chasing him. We were well into the quad now, and students lingered around us, either leaving the rink or heading to a party. God, we must seem pathetic. Me chasing him with tears down my face, the look of disgust on his.

“You can’t do this, Michael. You can’t push me away because I made a choice you don’t like. I am sorry he’s your teammate, but I didn’t mean to fall in love with him. He’s not going to mess with you. If anything, he’s terrified you’ll make his life hell, and he needs this scholarship.”

He stopped walking, his shoulders tensing hard. He turned, glared at me,

and put his hands on his hips. He didn't say anything, but he arched one brow, so I continued.

"Don't take this out on him. You want to hate me forever, fine, but I'm not going to beg. I love you and always will. It's just us. But Jonah..." My voice broke, thinking about what he was going through with both his parents. The fact I left him. God, the horrified look on his face when I said those words. "I need to go talk to him. You have no idea the shit he's been through, and he needs support. He needs friends, teammates to have his back."

Michael's gaze sharpened as he ran a hand through his hair, pulling on the ends like he was more than annoyed with me. "You told me you were *just* friends. You lied."

"Yeah, we are, but something else happened. He... I don't know. Gets me. We fit. We haven't talked about what it means yet because of the season and his fear of you sabotaging his scholarship. He must be terrified right now, thinking of the ways you'll ruin him."

Michael frowned and swallowed hard, shame filling his gaze as he looked at the ground. His shoulders slumped for a second before he said, "I'm not... I'm not that much of an asshole."

"Yeah, you can be." I wiped under my eyes as the tears from earlier dried.

"I hate this. I really do."

"I'm sorry."

Michael sucked in a breath and studied me for a few seconds before he shook his head. "If he hurts you, or you hurt him... it could fuck with *everything*. Your living situation, the team, hell, it's already coming between us. How is that worth it?"

His words held truth to them, but it didn't deter the manic need I had to talk to Jonah, to be with him. I'd dated and slept with other guys, but no feelings ever emerged like this. The pride I felt when I got him to smile or open up, the way he took care of me when he didn't realize it—god, I loved him. I couldn't believe it took me so long to realize it.

I sighed and waited for my brother to meet my eyes. "If it's worth the risk for him, for me, then you'll have to deal with it. And I think it is. I want to give this a real shot. We both deserve to be happy. You can't dictate that. But even if this doesn't work out, for whatever reason, I will *never* forgive you if you do anything to him. You are a leader on this team, and people follow you. I mean it, Michael," I said, stepping closer and pointing at his chest. "Nothing changes how you treat him on the team."

“Fuck, you must really love this guy.”

“I do. I didn’t know how much until right now, but I do.”

He ran a trembling hand over his face and took a long breath. His face was pinched with dislike, but he nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay,” I repeated. “So, are we good?”

“Yeah. Of course we’re fucking good, Ry.” He rolled his eyes, and just like that, Michael and I survived our first fight since our parents died. We weren’t hating each other, throwing things, or crying.

“I need you in my life, and I might make dumb decisions, but just... let me and be there.” I took another step toward him, and he pulled me into a hug.

“Love you, Ry. Even if I hate knowing you’re dating my fucking teammate.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t know if that’s true, but I’ll do my best.” He set me down, and a half-smile crossed his face. “Of all the teammates... I’ve never seen him look at a puck bunny twice.”

“He’s not into that.”

“Thank god, because we would be having a very different conversation if it was Patrick.”

I snorted, welcoming the release, and stretched my arms over my head. “I need to find Jonah now to clear this up.”

“You should, yeah.” My brother got his phone from his pocket and grinned. “If you two want to party, you know where I’ll be.”

I rolled my eyes and smiled as he walked away. A nervous onslaught of butterflies overtook me. *Jonah*. God, I hoped he was okay. I sent him a text asking where he was and waited a beat.

Then another.

No response.

I headed back to the rink since we only walked a few minutes from it, but he wasn’t there. No sign of his dad either.

Must be at home.

It was dark out and the journey wasn’t long, but I didn’t put headphones in because walking alone on campus always made me a little nervous. It was safe and there weren’t any incidents I knew about, but it caused me to be hyperaware of the sounds around me. My pulse rushed in my ears at the thought of what Jonah must be going through. His parents, me leaving him...

oh god. He had to be so upset.

I walked faster and bolted up the stairs to our place but was greeted with dark silence. No smell of equipment, no freshly showered Jonah anywhere. He wasn't back yet. I sighed and hated the twist in my gut.

Ryann: Hey, I'm back home and really need to know you're okay.

Nothing, again.

I rationalized all the things he could be doing. Maybe he went with his dad to help him through seeing his mom. Or maybe they were having a beer somewhere. The guys would party after winning...he could be at the hockey house.

A terrible, disgusting thought hit me. What if he was with another girl? He wouldn't do that though. He didn't like hook-ups, and we were exclusive *until the season started*.

Fuck, technically, we were done.

And he watched me run after Michael.

I had no idea why I said *we are nothing* to Michael after he caught us. My worst fear of my only family abandoning me had flashed before my eyes, and my body went into protection mode. I said whatever I needed to in hopes of stopping Michael from leaving. But at what cost?

I lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling, overwhelmed with all of the confusing emotions. The regret of refusing to talk to Jonah over the fear he would end it that morning... to the pride seeing him on the ice, to the worry about his family, to the fear that I ruined us by chasing after my brother.

In a last-ditch attempt, I sent him one more text.

Ryann: I really need to see you. Are you coming home?

It went unanswered, and I eventually fell asleep, only to wake up in a still empty place.

Jonah never came home.

His absence didn't mean he hooked up with someone, but the unanswered texts and the fact he still wasn't home—at noon—meant this was intentional. He chose to not respond or come back, and it hurt.

Even if he was pissed at me and wanted to end this, he owed me a conversation.

Ryann: You're acting like an asshole. If you want to be angry, come do it to my face. Stop being a fucking coward.

Jonah: Right, I'm the coward.

Ryann: Oh, glad you're alive.

I didn't care if I sounded immature or bitchy. I was worried. So worried I barely slept, and I had large bags under my eyes that made me look gaunt and all sorts of awful.

Ryann: Look, can we talk?

Jonah: You said yourself that we were nothing. What else is there to say?

Ryann: So that's it?

Jonah: I don't know what you want me to tell you. I'm turning off my phone. I need to focus.

I groaned in frustration and tossed my barely touched laptop to the side. *What else is there to say.* What did that even mean? I slammed my eyes shut as a wave of absolute desperation hit me. Was this him ending this for real? Did my chasing after Michael solidify to him that this was over, or did he plan on this being done the whole time? Fuck if I knew, but it hurt, bad, and I wanted to curl into a ball and cry. We were good together and brought out the best in each other. Earning a Jonah smile was the best gift in the world.

His laugh was the second best.

I rested my face against my hands and pressed my lips together tight to try and prevent myself from crying. Three deep breaths later, I got temporary control on the waterworks. What if he moved out without talking to me?

God, he wouldn't do that... right?

Of all the days I wished I had to work... this was one of them.

I could use the distraction. I needed to escape the place where Jonah wasn't coming back to and I'd be stuck thinking about all the what ifs.

Ryann: Want me to take a shift tonight? I need it.

Hannah: You sure? Isn't there a game?

The woman knew my obsession with the team and my brother. She definitely knew I had major feels for my roommate after he left the previous day. I confessed everything to her.

Ryann: Yes. my brother found out, and JD won't talk to me. I need to do something.

Hannah: Then come on in, girl. I could use you around five.

Perfect.

I'd missed one game since I came to the university, and it was because of

a study group that was required for grades. It sucked, but I managed to sneak highlights from my phone, and it felt weird not being there. But this was intentional.

It gave Jonah and Michael time to deal with themselves. My brother didn't have to worry about seeing me, and Jonah could continue avoiding me without concern while I could live in my personal hell of knowing Jonah and I were done.

I fell in love with the guy who couldn't risk us having a real relationship. *Great job, Ryann.* I could almost hear my parents laughing at me from above. Knowing I could escape my mind for a few hours that night, I finished the homework I had to do, showered, and got ready.

Working from five until close was exactly what I needed. I'd make money, avoid hockey and all the players, and try to figure out my plan. If Jonah and I were done... I ignored the pang in my chest and the tears threatening to fall...then I would have to figure out how to live with him.

Because seeing him every day with a broken heart would be impossible.

JONAH

My knee bounced as I sat on the bench in the locker room. I needed to play more than my lungs required oxygen. The ice was my safe space, my zone, and time seemed to stop altogether as I watched the clock. Hours went by three times slower, and I gripped the back of my neck to focus on the film in front of me.

Not Ryann.

Not the look on her face when Michael saw us.

Not the fact that her fucking brother hadn't looked at me once since he walked into the locker room.

Not the fact that my dad and mom had a *conversation* the night before, and I had no one to talk to about it.

It was hockey.

My one constant.

"Daniels," Patrick said, his voice harsher than normal. "Stop bouncing the whole goddamn bench."

"Sorry," I said, stilling my leg and lacing my skate. The air was tense, and I knew without a doubt it was because of Ryann and me.

Patrick didn't say anything back, and I was glad. This was going to be the real test—would they treat me differently on the ice and was it worth it?

Yes. I knew in my gut Ryann was, but she made it fucking clear we were *nothing*.

"Listen up," Coach Bart said, coming out of his office with a clipboard. "Colorado College is good. Better than good. We have to bring our A game, so here's what we're going to do..."

An hour later, we were on the ice, and it was brutal. Their forwards were

some of the best—two of them already drafted and waiting to finish their senior year, but the twins were even more talented.

It was all about finesse. Who passed better. Who followed through on their plays. Who had more endurance.

They did after the first period, and even though we were down by three, I didn't expect Michael to shove me against the wall the second we were in the locker room. He'd passed the puck to me a few times, and there was no difference in play, yet the fire in his eyes and the aggressive way he gripped my collar startled me.

"What the fuck did you do?" he roared, earning the attention of the twins. They stayed back and flanked him on either side.

This was a vision from my nightmares. Straight up. The captains turning on me. Pushing me out. My stomach hardened, and I could've thrown up.

"What are you talking about?" I croaked out.

"My sister doesn't miss my fucking games. She's not here. Why the fuck not?" He pushed against me harder and gritted his teeth.

"She's not at the game?" I repeated, like an idiot. I'd forced myself not to search for her in the stands. Thinking she was there calmed me, but I never confirmed it. His worry and anger reached into my chest and fisted my heart into a pulp. "Wait... why isn't she here?"

"I don't know, J.D. The only reason would be your dumb ass." He let go of me, hissed, and stomped a few feet down the hall. "Did you not work it out? Did you dump her because of the team? I'm not going to fuck up your future on the ice because my sister loves you. So if you ended it because of that... well, you're a fucking moron then."

He gave me a disgusted look, his lip curled up on one side, before marching further away into the locker room. The twins watched with mild amusement before joining him. They had no idea the turmoil and rush of emotions paralyzing me to that spot. His words were like hot flames branding my skin.

My sister loves you.

Ryann loves me.

She loves me.

The notion made me breathless. The happy, beautiful girl who carved her way into my goddamn soul loved me—and like a chickenshit, I'd avoided her.

It's nothing. The words she said to Michael sent me into a tizzy, but he

wouldn't have said that unless she told him, right?

"Reiner," I barked out, making him and a few other teammates look at me. "She told you that?"

He shook his head and pinched his nose. "I hate everything about this. Not getting involved even the slightest, dude."

That was unhelpful.

Our coach didn't give us any more time to talk, and he came in hot, screaming about ways we could tie the game and amp up our offense. Normally, I'd soak up every word and make plans in my head that I could enforce on the ice. Tonight was different.

Worry etched its way into my focus, and the longer I thought about it, the more my concern for Ryann grew. My text to her wasn't great. It was a cop-out because I was pissed at her. She tossed what we were aside when my life came to an explosion, but Michael's words... *she loves me* seemed to make all that disappear.

So where the fuck was she?

She wasn't scheduled to work tonight.

"J.D.!" our coach barked, and I blinked myself back into focus. "Are you even listening? Do you care that you're not making passes or finding gaps? Jesus."

"Yes, Coach, I'm listening." I leaned forward, embarrassed that I let my mind wander.

"Good. You and Patrick—you need to put more pressure on their defenders. That play we ran in practice this week was to prepare us against this team. Now do it." He went to the white board and drew a couple of lines to show the path he wanted, and I threw myself back into the game.

I'd do my part to help us win, and then I'd find Ryann.

That was the plan, and if I was good at anything, it was following through.

We won in a shoot-out by Patrick, and the win felt good, better than good. We were 2-0, and the guys were rowdy. The team would be celebrating and enjoying life well into the night, but my mind was set on one thing: Ryann.

I sent her a text the second I could, my fingers fumbling over the phone.

Jonah: Hey where are you? You okay?

Nothing.

I deserved it after I crashed with my dad and left all her texts unanswered. Self-annoyance was awful and unhelpful, but I wished I handled the previous night differently. Then my game would've been better, and I wouldn't have been looking in the stands every chance I got to see if she was there.

Was I too late?

Did I ruin it?

If she loved me... there was no way those feelings went away that fast. She could be pissed at me, but we would figure it out. We had to.

I showered in record time and had all my shit in my bag when Michael and I came face to face as we left the locker room. His jaw tightened, and he looked me up and down for a second before he shocked the hell out of me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Look, I love my sister more than anything, and if you're good to her, we will never have a problem *off* the ice. On the ice, you're my teammate, no matter what. I need you to know that. If I'm the reason Ry doesn't have a chance at... love," he said, his face twisting into a grimace. "I'll never forgive myself."

"I won't hurt her, ever."

He took a deep breath. "I do believe you. It's still fucking weird to imagine, but we'll figure it out. Just take care of her. Our circle is small, and it seems you're already in."

"I love her too." As soon as I said the words, my body sparked back to life. The truth of them, the severity of them, didn't send me into a downward spiral of self-doubt. Ryann wasn't like my ex, or former best friend, or my mom.

Loving her would make my life a million times better.

Michael nodded twice before looking toward the ceiling. "Figure your shit out with her. If she misses another game because of you, we won't be having this casual of a talk."

"Yes, sir."

He liked my answer. He grinned, let go of me, and headed toward the twins. This was the best scenario I could've imagined. Michael didn't have to like us being together, but we had his support, and I had his promise.

He led with dignity and passion, and I trusted him. He said nothing would change on the ice, and I believed it. The biggest thing holding me back from

being with Ryann was erased and that meant I had to find her ASAFP.

As soon as fucking possible.

My dad waited for me outside the locker room, and I gave him a huge hug before apologizing a million times. "I can't hang out. I have to find Ryann."

His answering smirk told me enough. "You get your head out of your ass?"

"Dad, you're supposed to be on my side."

"I am. And that means telling you when you're being an idiot. That girl loves you. I could see it the day I met her."

That stopped me. "Wait, really?"

"Yes. She watches you with an expression that makes me happy to see. Either you didn't realize it, or if you did, you were in denial. You two are made for each other. Enjoy it, kid."

"Maybe we can get pizza again soon?"

"Of course. Go fix this with Ryann and let me know how it goes." He took a breath and said, "Love you, J.D. No matter what."

"You too."

His words were in direct relation to the fact I told him I might talk to Mom. It wouldn't be often, but once every couple weeks. Just to see how she was doing. To tell her about my life. We could start slow and see what happened.

He supported me without blinking, and once she'd agreed to let me know before coming to games, I relaxed.

It gave me time to prepare to see her, and honestly? I wanted to talk to her with Ryann by my side.

Jonah: Where are you?

Jonah: Ry, please. I need to talk to you. It's fucking important. I'm so sorry.

No response.

If this was punishment, this sucked. But she wasn't petty and didn't play games. Did something happen? My stomach tightened with guilt at knowing I did the same thing to her and it was ten at night and if she wasn't home or at work... where would she be?

I checked the apartment before getting a little desperate. She had a few friends but rarely went out with them because like me, she was more introverted and hesitant to trust. *Fuck*. I loved her so much. I needed to feel

her against me and smell her and kiss her.

I about pulled my hair out of my scalp when my phone dinged.

Ryann: Hey, sorry. Phone was on silent. I'm at work.

Thank the goddamn lord.

I booked it out of the place, locking up and jogging down the stairs. I *ran* the six blocks to the café and sprinted inside. The damn bell chimed, and she looked at me over the counter, her eyes widening in surprise

“Jonah,” she said, her gaze sweeping across the café with a few students at a small table before landing on me again. “What are you—why are you out of breath? Did you win?”

I didn't even think. I ran toward the counter to the moveable shelf that she lifted to get behind the register and went through it to reach her. She dropped the bag of coffee in her hands, the grounds spilling everywhere, but I didn't give her the chance to pick it up. I closed the distance between us, needing her more than I knew how to express, and I gently cradled the back of her head before lowering my mouth to hers. She moved her arms around my waist, gripping me tight, and I felt like flying.

She tasted like coffee and chocolate, and when she relaxed against me, my heart almost burst with how right she felt. Her answering sigh calmed my nerves, and she nipped at my bottom lip as a sparkle entered her eyes.

“I'm sorry for not saying this sooner. I knew it but was trying to do the right thing, I think. I don't even know.” I kissed her forehead and held her tight against me. “We won tonight, and I didn't even care.”

“What?”

“You. I needed to find you, Ryann. I want to be with you *all* the time. Like a real couple,” I said, almost panting as I rested my forehead against hers. “You make my life so much better. You're my favorite human on the planet, and it's crazy we thought we could end this. God, I was an ass yesterday.”

“I was too,” she said, reaching up and cupping my chin. Her eyes swirled with love and heat, and my heart fluttered in my chest. She was with me. She wanted me too.

I swallowed hard at the overwhelming emotion raging through my body. I kept everyone at a distance because it was safer, but this beautiful, goofy woman snuck in, and instead of being terrified, I loved it. “Ryann,” I said, but she put her finger against my lips.

“No, let me say this please. I panicked when Michael saw us together and

accused me of doing exactly what I promised him I wouldn't. I said things that weren't true right when you needed me most. I'm sorry, Jonah." She looked at the ground and took a deep breath before meeting my eyes. "We are so much more than nothing, god. I keep replaying it in my head, all the ways it could've gone. I hope you forgive me."

"Of course I do." I covered her hands with mine, needing all the skin contact I could get. She was warm and sweet and home. "I love you, Ry. I'm sorry I didn't say it sooner. The second I knew it, I should've told you."

She blinked a few times and smiled ear to ear. "I love you too."

"Your brother told me you loved me," I said, moving my hand to her lower back and crushing her against my chest. "You weren't at the game, and it freaked us both out. He said it was my fault, and I had no idea what he was talking about."

"He what?"

"No, no." I paused, not wanting her to think he did anything out of line. "He told me I needed to get my shit in gear since his sister loved me. Neither one of us liked the fact you weren't there."

She shrugged. "I needed a break from it, honestly. I won't miss another game." She frowned and played with a button on my shirt, her voice a little breathless. "You never came home, Jonah."

"I crashed at my dad's, I swear." My voice got too high at the thought of her worrying. How could I possibly think of another human when she took up all of my thoughts and emotions?

She hummed against me and squeezed her arms tighter. God, I wanted to stay like this forever. "When you wanted to talk yesterday morning, I was so afraid you were going to end things, so I avoided it," she said, her face pressed into my chest.

"That's why you were so weird? I thought *you* were going to end it," I said, laughter escaping me. We'd both feared the same thing and acted stupid because of it. "I'm yours until you're done with me. I mean it."

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with love and her lips parted. I couldn't imagine not receiving her smiles and her teases, or not loving her. On missing out on those moments where she made food when I was sad or attempted to do a workout with me. I wanted it all.

She gave me a sly look, and a blush filled her cheeks. "I don't think you need to worry about that happening."

"Yeah?" My heart fucking soared, and I dropped a kiss to her mouth.

“Why’s that?”

She pursed her pretty lips and narrowed her eyes for a beat. “Because I don’t ever fall for people. I avoid feelings and getting too invested in people. Losing my parents almost destroyed me. You, my dear roommate, are in. You snuck past all my walls and self-protected guards. I fell *hard*, and I love you so much it kinda terrifies me.”

How did I get so damn lucky? I kissed her again, this time softer and with tongue. She kissed me right back until the bell rang. She jumped back, blushed *hard*, and smoothed down her apron before looking over my shoulder. Her panicked expression shifted to amusement, and I spun around, snorting at Michael standing in the café with his arms crossed.

“Good. Glad you both got your shit together.”

“Wow, you came here to make sure?” Ryann asked, her eyes tearing up. “Michael...”

“Nope.” He held up his hand. “Not a word. I wasn’t here. I don’t love this.” He shook his head back and forth but had a hint of a smile on his face. “I need to get drunk.”

He marched out without another look, and I picked Ryann up and set her on the counter. The last patron hadn’t looked up from their book, so I kissed her again, deeper. “When can you leave?”

“Another hour,” she groaned, placing her hands on my chest. “Want to wait around and walk back with me?”

“You couldn’t get me to leave.”

She grinned at me, the slight gap in her teeth on full display, and I was so consumed by her I almost floated to a table to wait.

I could have the girl, secure my scholarship, and not live in a bubble without joy. She taught me that. I had never been so goddamn glad of getting our names mixed up from the ad. I loved this girl and couldn’t think of a better person to have by my side in life. I just had to prove it to her every single day. And I would.

EPILOGUE

RYANN

“Jonah,” I moaned, arching my back as my *boyfriend* went down on me right on the kitchen counter. He spread my legs wide and flicked his tongue against my clit, hard. He was relentless and held my waist down so I couldn’t move.

We were having a holiday meal in less than an hour with his dad and my brother, and I made the mistake of daring him to be quick.

I should’ve known better.

Jonah relished challenges.

“Told you less than a few minutes,” he said, sucking my swollen clit into his mouth as he slid two fingers inside of me. “Are you counting?”

“N-no,” I whimpered, slamming my head back against the cupboards as he continued to stroke me with his wicked tongue. His hot breath and stubble tickled my inner thighs, and he swirled with the right amount of pressure to the point I was so *close*.

Then he stopped, looked up at me with wet lips and licked them. “Hmm, should I make you wait until everyone leaves before giving you what you want?”

“You bastard,” I said, grabbing his hair and shoving his face back between my thighs. He laughed and ran his fingers up and down my legs with a gentle touch that always made me tremble.

He was intense, a badass on the ice, but he was so sweet with me.

He cuddled with me, got better at making breakfast, and kissed me all the time for no reason. I loved him so much it scared me, but when his mouth was on my pussy, his warm tongue was all I could feel.

“I love getting you off,” he mumbled, sliding three fingers into me and

thrusting at the same rate he flicked my clit. “It’s my favorite sound, Ry. You falling apart because of me.”

I couldn’t speak. The orgasm was right there, just needing him to *oh*. Yes. I groaned as the pleasure shot from my core to each and every nerve of my body, my legs shaking at the power of it. He ate me up and didn’t stop as I bucked and thrashed against his face.

My cries made him hold me harder and flick faster.

“So fucking hot,” he said, kissing my folds one last time. His brown eyes lit up with heat and passion and *love*, and he bent over to kiss me right on the mouth. “Taste yourself?”

“Jonah,” I said, half forcing him away, half pulling him closer. “You devil.” I checked the clock. “They’ll be here soon.”

“Don’t care. Told you it’d be fast.”

“What are we gonna do about your raging boner right now?” I juted my chin to it and gripped him through his loose pants. It made me crazy when he wore them low on his trim hips, and seeing how hard he was for me got me hot again. “Should I make you wait until *later*?”

He barked out a laugh. I got onto my knees, pulling his pants down so his cock rested against his stomach, and I took him in my mouth. He groaned and held my head, guiding me to the pace he wanted. There was something so hot about making him lose control.

No one got to see Jonah Daniels like this, on the edge, barely hanging on. Just me.

“Christ, Ry. Yes.”

I took him deeper and faster, cupping his balls as I used my hand on the base of his shaft. We knew each other’s bodies so well I knew I could get him off fast. That’s what this was, wasn’t it? Us risking the timing of our family’s arrival?

His thighs became taut, and he tasted like sweat, but I continued sucking him off until he said my name. “Ry, I’m gonna--*fuck*.”

I didn’t stop.

His ragged breaths and jerky movements lasted almost a minute before he pulled out of my mouth and hauled me up into his arms. He gripped my ass and bit down on my collarbone. “I fucking love you.”

“You too,” I said, laughing and feeling drunk on him. He carried me from the kitchen and into my bathroom where he turned on the water and tossed me into the shower.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“Being mature. Get ready and *dressed*. I don’t trust myself in a shower with you. We have *twenty minutes* before they get here.” His expression was off, and it hit me.

The orgasms and teasing were a way to distract himself.

My boyfriend was nervous.

“Hey, it’s going to be great.” I moved toward him, cupping his face until he melted into me.

“It’s our first holiday with my dad and *your brother*. What if it’s awful?”

“We’re celebrating with all the people we love most. It won’t be awful, I promise.”

He relaxed, and a shy smile crossed his face, my favorite one. “You’re right.”

“I know.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Smug isn’t a good look on you.”

“Yes, it is,” I fired back. He smacked my ass and pointed his finger at me. “Are you scolding me? Why is this hot?”

He barked out a laugh, shook his head, and left my bathroom door. My heart was so damn happy, and for the first time since losing our parents, Christmas didn’t have the same depressing fog like it normally did. Even Hannah and Preston were going to come over for presents later that afternoon.

My family of two might be growing in a way we didn’t expect, but it brought me so much joy. And Jonah could worry about Michael all he wanted, but my brother liked him.

He even told me. Having our twosome turn into three... even four with Jonah’s dad, was the best thing I could’ve asked for. Our family was getting bigger, and I’d forgotten what it was like to be this happy again. I couldn’t wait to see what else Jonah and I got to experience in life, together.

T H E
E N D

Thank you for reading Holdout by Jacqueline Snowe. Did you know there’s a

bonus epilogue for Ryann and Jonah? [Click here to get it.](#)

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