

NEED YOU TO CHOOSE ME

ALEX AND OLIVE

LINDON U

B CELESTE

NEED YOU TO CHOOSE ME

Lindon U 5

B. CELESTE

OceanofPDF.com

© Copyright 2025 B. Celeste
EPUB Edition

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover Design:
Letitia Hasser at RBA Designs
Editing: KBM Editing

OceanofPDF.com

*To the real-life Olive –
This one is for you and because of you*

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)

[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)

[The Truth about Us](#)

[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)

[Where the Little Birds Go](#)

[Where the Little Birds Are](#)

[Into the Clear Water](#)

[Color Me Pretty](#)

[Tell Me When It's Over](#)

[Tell Me Why It's Wrong](#)

[Dare You to Hate Me](#)

[Beg You to Trust Me](#)

[Lose You to Find Me](#)

[Teach You to Love Me](#)

[Make You Miss Me](#)

[When It Rains](#)

[Wanted You More](#)

[Girl Going Nowhere](#)

[What's Left of Us](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Also by B. Celeste](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Author's Note & Trigger Warning](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt from Beg You to Trust Me](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

PLAYLIST

“Your Body is a Wonderland” – John Mayer

“Haunted” – Taylor Swift

“Better Man” – Little Big Town

“Late Thoughts” – Hanx

“Drunk Texts” – Kode

“Falling” – Harry Styles

“Beg For Your Love” – Kelsea Ballerini

“That’s So True” – Gracie Abrams

“Fingers Crossed” – Lauren Spencer Smith

“Nobody” – Selena Gomez

OceanofPDF.com

This book deals with sensitive topics such as bipolar disorder, depression, and self-harm

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

Olive

I FEEL THE pang in my heart before he cements my fear into words. I hear his even breathing, deep and contemplative with every lift and fall of his naked chest beside me. I feel the weight in the mattress dip as he shifts away from my hold, distant and angry at the changing atmosphere I created with my honesty.

The end crackles between us like a dying fire, yet I still feel the burn of the flames as cold frustration radiates from him. He swings his legs over the side of the bed and starts collecting the clothes we'd scattered in a hurried frenzy across his bedroom floor.

"I thought we had an agreement," Alex grumbles with his back turned to me, the taut muscles he's worked hard for stretching as he slips on his shirt.

When his tan skin is covered, I let out a tiny breath. "We did," I say quietly, grabbing the blanket and covering my torso as I sit up.

"Then why?" His tone is short as he grabs his boxers and slides them on next. When he stands and turns to me, there's an accusation on his pinched face.

As if this is *my* fault.

But it's his too.

I let go of the blanket, letting it pool around my waist. His icy blue eyes wander, flaring with the heat I already miss as he takes in my bare breasts. Only minutes ago he was doing ungodly things to them with his mouth and hands, and we were enjoying every second of one another's company. How did we get here?

His gaze sears into me as his nostrils flare open. I've never looked like any of the puck bunnies who chase him around. They're all glamorous and put together—petite, skinny, and every man's wet dreams. But Alex always looked at my curvy, size-eighteen body with the kind of lust that made me feel ten times more beautiful than any of those other girls. It didn't matter if

I had a face full of my favorite makeup or was wearing something frumpy that made me look tom boyish.

His attention was always on me.

Even now, those gorgeous ocean eyes fill with just as much heat as they do frustration—like a storm brewing into something far bigger.

I do that to him.

Me.

“Don’t pin this all on me, Alex. It takes two to wind up in this sort of situation. Feelings don’t blossom out of nothing.”

“*Situation*,” he scoffs, raking a hand through his dark brown hair that’s grown out over the last few months. He evades his eyes from my large assets pebbled from the cold temperature of the room. He gingerly walks over and grabs my clothes and tosses them onto the foot of the bed. “Get dressed.”

“Alex—”

“We agreed, Olive,” he cuts me off coolly, pinning me with a daggered look that makes me swallow the rest of my words. What could I do? Beg? Plead? I’m not that kind of girl.

I never will be. I have too much pride.

“We agreed. No attachments. No feelings. No—” His teeth grind, leaving his jaw ticking.

Jesus Christ. He can’t even say it.

“Love,” I finish for him, gathering my clothes and starting to dress myself. My jerky movements aren’t rushed, but the shake to my hands as I hook on my bra and pull the borrowed hoodie over my head don’t go unnoticed by the man shredding everything I’ve given him tonight.

A huge piece of my heart.

My trust.

The hope that I so foolishly felt.

Sure, we’d had an agreement. But I thought time had made us into... more. I’ve never said those three words to anybody other than my family and friends. I always thought when I finally said them aloud to a partner, it would be reciprocated. My heart twists not that I know just how wrong I was to assume.

He turns to give me privacy as I slip out of his bed as if we haven’t seen each other naked plenty of times before. We hadn’t necessarily said that we were exclusive, but he’d told me as long as we were seeing each other he

wouldn't touch another woman. He would hold me long after the orgasms had subsided, and finger-comb my hair until I'm lulled to sleep. He'd brush his lips against my head tenderly and murmur my name in contentment until sleep found him too. He never asked me to leave or walked out after the deed was done.

That means something. To him and me.

No attachments?

I call bullshit.

He's nothing but a scared little boy.

"This isn't just in my head," I tell him, refusing to let the quake that's stirring my heart rise up my throat. I need to stay strong so he knows he can't hurt me.

Even if he is.

He's fucking torturing me with his calculated nonchalance. Like this has all been some big joke to him. Like I'm just another way to pass the time in between games, practice, and classes. I know better than to think I'm only mild entertainment. He can pretend that he's too big for Lindon University and everybody here, but it's all a façade.

The amused sound he makes gives me pause as I glance up through my lashes in his direction. He's grabbing his keys from the top of his dresser and shaking his head at whatever thought crosses his mind. His hair has the just-had-sex look that's always made him ten times sexier to me. Especially when I'm the one who gives those dark locks their tousled look.

My fingers stop at the button of my jeans as he slowly looks over his shoulder at me and says, "I don't love you, Olive. It was never going to be that deep for me. Not with you."

Not with you.

For a moment, I leave my body.

The only thing grounding me back to reality are the tears that prickle the back of my eyes, burning the ducts as I blink rapidly to fight them off. My nose tickles with onslaught emotion, but I force myself to take a deep breath and nod like what he says makes sense.

Even though I'm worth it—the fight, the energy, the effort. He may be going to play in the NHL like he's always wanted, but I'll always be worth more than him. Because I have a big heart that's full of so much love. The kind he doesn't want.

Not with you.

As if he didn't already wedge a knife into my heart, he decides to twist the handle until the blade obliterates what little respect I have left for him with a single sentence. "So maybe it *was* all in your head."

Oxygen clings to my vocal cords as I stare at the soon-to-be drafted hockey player. The sexiest man I know. Certainly, the best one I've ever slept with.

Alexander O'Conner doesn't compare to any other man, and he never will. Not his looks. Not his skating ability on the ice and the strength he has to take down men twice his size to score a goal. Not that I'd ever tell my hockey-playing big brother that his teammate's personality has always shone brighter than any other human I've ever met. Alex's determination to make it pro one day burned even brighter, so much so sometimes it blinded me.

I've always respected how much work he put into turning his dreams into reality. I always wondered what motivated him because I knew, deep down, something was pushing him.

The problem with him, though?

He's also the biggest asshole ever.

Closed off. Unwilling to change. Never offering me more information than he needs to. Every time I think one of his barriers is down, I find another one. He's locked up tighter than Fort Knox.

I'm suddenly reminded why my older brother, Sebastian, warned me away from his teammate in the first place. "I should have listened to my brother when he told me not to go near you," I spit at him in anger.

I'm more angry at myself.

For putting myself in this position.

For falling in love with a man who's too scared to love back.

I tighten my fingers into my palm, feeling my fingernails dig into my skin until they leave crescent indentations.

"I'll drive you home," the gas-lighter tells me in that gruff tone, gripping the car keys as he walks toward the door.

I stare at him for a brief moment before making my decision, silently willing him to turn around.

Look at me, dammit!

But he doesn't.

Because if he did, I'd see that he's lying.

That he *does* care.

That this *is* something.

“Don’t bother,” I say, laughing coldly at myself. How stupid could I be thinking this was more? He was going away. That was his plan the whole time. I’d be stuck here, who knows how far from whatever team he was bound to be drafted to. There would be other girls and more opportunities. And I couldn’t do anything about it. “We both know you don’t want to, anyway. The last thing either of us needs is to be trapped in a fucking car together.”

He doesn’t argue with me.

Doesn’t stop me from walking out.

And doesn’t follow me into the night blanketed by midnight stars and a cool breeze to make sure I get back to the dorms okay.

In that moment, I tell myself I’m done with him for good.

Hopefully, this time I’ll listen.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

Olive

A HANDFUL OF greasy fries get tossed at the flatscreen as the referee's closed fists rotate in front of his chest signaling another penalty for charging.

"Oh, come on! Who the hell hired this asshole, the other team?" Tristian Badger, a senior on Lindon U's hockey team, bellows from the bar where he's watching the Rangers cream the Bruins.

He reaches for another fry to throw when the camera pans over to Bodhi Hoffman, the right winger on New York's team, skating over to the penalty box for a second time. "Hey," I warn, eyeing him. "We talked about this. If Judy sees you throwing food again, she said we'd have to ban you for the rest of the year."

Badger frowns as he lowers the fry back down to the basket. "I thought Judy loved me."

"Evidently, she loves not cleaning up after you more," I remark, grabbing him another Corona from the mini fridge behind the counter. "And I'm inclined to agree. Or do I have to remind you of the moldy tomatoes we found two weeks after you threw them when the Pats lost to the Giants?"

The guys sitting at the other end chuckle when Badger sits straighter in defense. "That game was fucking rigged, and you know it."

I pat his hand in mock sympathy. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, Badger baby. Now give me five dollars for the beer."

He grumbles under his breath but slaps a five-dollar bill into my open palm. Because he's annoying me, I put his change into my tip jar. And because he's smarter than to call me out on it, just sighs and relents.

Smiling to myself as I clean up the plates from the patrons who just left, I tuck them into the bin for Jeff, our dishwasher, to do next.

"You better be nice to me, Olive, or I won't tell you what I heard through the grapevine," he teases, taking a sip of his beer.

One of my eyebrows that took me way too long to shape perfectly this morning arches as I toss the rag over my shoulder. “And what could you possibly know that I’d be interested in?”

Half his lips kick up. “A little birdy told me that a certain NHL player is coming home to visit in the off season. Hint, it ain’t your brother.”

My body goes rigid, but my damn, traitorous heart starts drumming wildly in my chest over the news. Doesn’t it know that we’re supposed to be over the pompous, selfish hockey player by now? It’s been almost a year and a half. One whole year since Alexander O’Conner left Lindon, and me, for the big league.

Ears ringing, I force myself to swallow and try ignoring the buzz under my skin.

I feign an unphased smile when I finally give Badger another passive look. “I don’t know why that would matter. Alex means nothing to me.”

I just wish my stupid, stupid heart would get on board.

A thoughtful noise rises from Badger’s throat as he sets his drink down on the counter and picks up a fry. “I never said it was Alex,” he says knowingly, popping it into his mouth. His eyes go up to the screen where a toothpaste commercial plays. “I guess you don’t want to know that he was asking about you then.”

I blink, my nostrils flaring slightly as my heartbeat echoes in my eardrums.

Badger used to play on our college’s hockey team with Alex and my brother before they were drafted a year apart. Sebastian took him under his wing, making them friends. Sort of. Even Alex and him seemed to get along. I’m not surprised they keep in touch. But I am a little irritated, since Alex hasn’t sent me one message since moving. What did I expect, though? We didn’t part ways on good terms, and he was always above apologies.

Despite those bitter feelings, I tell him the same thing I keep telling myself, no matter how sour the lie tastes in my mouth. “I don’t care.”

Badger’s grin doesn’t waver. “If you insist.”

We make eye contact.

It’s me who breaks it first.

“I do insist.”

But I’m totally lying.

He hums, knowing damn well I am. “All right. Guess I won’t share that he hasn’t been seen with anybody either. But whatever. You don’t care...”

Teeth grinding, I grab the full bin of dirty dishes and take them to the back. When I'm a healthy distance away from Badger, I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

"You don't care," I whisper to myself.

I repeat that two more times.

When I crack open my eyes, our cook is looking at me. "You okay, Olive?" Jim asks.

My smile is immediate, albeit forced. I gesture toward the bin on the counter. "I'm good. Just bringing stuff back to be washed before the dinner rush comes."

"It's good to care," he says as I turn back toward the door leading out to the bar. "It means you're human. Ain't nothing wrong with that."

I glance at the fifty-something-year-old man I've worked with for about a year now. "It's a problem when you feel too many of the wrong things."

He offers me a sympathetic smile. "Wish I had some sage advice for you kid, but I don't."

"That's all right. I better get back out there."

Thankfully, Badger is gone when I get back out there.

CHAPTER TWO

Olive

TWO WEEKS AFTER my one-on-one with Badger at Fishtail, I'm standing in the friends and family suite at a Rangers game cheering on my big brother. At least, I'm trying to.

There's a Malibu Barbie lookalike in front of me spewing hateful criticism toward the plus size model on the Jumbotron who came here with Akira Mendel, center for New York Rangers.

"...no way they're serious. Look at her." Her sneer at the gorgeous woman makes my face twist with irritation. And it's not because I'm heavier than the person I have a total woman crush on in the club seats where, at the moment, I wish I could be instead.

I've never known what it's like to be a skinny woman and I'm okay with that. My thighs have separation anxiety from one another because of my deep-rooted love affair with anything covered in dark chocolate, my ass could probably be used as a weapon of mass destruction, and the E's attached to my chest could suffocate somebody under the right circumstances. They've almost suffocated *me* from time to time.

But it's my body—a body of a twenty-one-year-old woman who really loves carbs and Coca-Cola. Sue me.

Guys like Akira Mendel don't care about size anyway. It's about their personality, and it's obvious that he's in love with the internationally known model, Bailey Hennessey. Anybody can see it when they're together.

I had my own version of that once, tucked away in my pocket for only us to see. Except he never called it love, but it was *something*. Something big. Probably bigger than either of us which is why it imploded in our faces.

"Don't you think you're being a little harsh?" I question the latest puck bunny of my brother's teammate. When Sebastian invited me to his game at the Garden, I knew I'd be surrounded by people just like her. People with egos so large that they wouldn't even be able to fit on the giant Jumbotron

screen if they tried. But asking for a club seat was out of the question. Sebastian would never go for it because he thinks it's unsafe.

Barbie, whose name I couldn't care less about learning since she'll probably be replaced within a few weeks knowing Bodhi, turns to me with pinched lips. "I'm just speaking the truth. Guys like him don't go for girls like her."

A few of the other people in the suite look uncomfortable from the cool exchange between us, probably wondering why their obtuse friend would comment on a plus size woman when one is standing right beside her.

But I can count on one hand the number of times when I've felt bad about myself because of other people's opinions. It doesn't happen often, and it isn't happening now. "The national average for women's clothing sizes in the United States is sixteen. Bailey is hardly that. And so what if she was? That has nothing to do with her relationship with Akira, and it's none of your business where their relationship stands anyway. Worry about your own."

Her arms cross, pushing her fake boobs up until they nearly pop out of the low-cut top in the Rangers colors that she has to be freezing in. I can see why Bodhi likes them—I mean *her*.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I point toward the ice with my thumb. "I'm sure you know that Hoffman is hardly the committal type. Not like Akira is. If I were you, I'd be more worried if you have the capability of nailing Bodhi down to more than just the bed. I'm thinking not. After all, you're not Bailey Hennessey. You may be pretty, but your personality is hideous. Not even Hoffman is blinded enough by looks to want to settle down with somebody who enjoys tearing down others for fun. He's a brute, but he's got a big heart."

Her lips part in shock at my rash comment. Ironically, I'm almost certain the shade of red painted across them is called Two Faced by a celebrity trying to make it in the cosmetic industry. Bold in a demands-attention sort of way. Sultry with confidence, whether fake or not. It's fitting for her. I'd know. Makeup is my thing. Most people probably don't know that because I prefer leggings and jeans and oversized tops like the big jersey I'm in now. I'm a tom boy with an affinity for pretty things, but I know my shit when it comes to makeup.

Typically, I'd try bonding with people who obviously know a thing or two about it too. But not people like her.

Ugly on the inside.

Jealous.

Petty.

Pass.

I'm the exact opposite of this girl. My hair is a dirtier version of her blonde—so ashy it's almost brown. I've grown it out over the past few years, so the ends finally kiss my shoulders, but I still don't know the best way to style the natural waves that frizz more than I want them to. I have a round face to her narrow one, but I've got some killer lips that I'd wager to guess aren't fillers like hers are. They're all natural. My makeup gives me more cheekbone than I have, and my mascara offers me the kinds of lashes that always frame my round, minty eyes perfectly.

The girl in front of me is probably the type of person bogged down by traditional attractiveness. It's not totally her fault. Society likes the paint pictures of what women *should* look like, and the media runs with wildly unobtainable expectations where women should have flat stomachs, big butts, a nice rack, and accomplish that with no stretch marks or cellulite in sight. It's exhausting being us.

The difference is, I can accept that we're all pretty in our own ways. I'm as unique as my name, and I own that shit.

I give my back to everybody trapped in the tense room and focus on the game. The crowd breaks into loud boos when the Flyers score the winning goal, officially ending the Ranger's last game of the season.

"Damn," I breathe under my breath, dropping my shoulders at the anticipation of a victory drains from my limbs.

Sebastian is going to be in a bad mood.

I hear Barbie murmur, "Bitch," under her breath when then noise from the crowd dies down, but it slides right off me.

Takes one to know one.



AN ARM HOOKS around my shoulders, tugging me into the side of a warm, hard body that smells like fresh soap, leather, and wood. "Hey, O-Dawg."

Bodhi Hoffman.

I smile at the right-winger as he pecks my cheek before letting go. His long sandy blond hair goes to his shoulders, his bright blue eyes always have mischief dancing in them, and that tan skin covering bulging muscles graces his body year-round. The first time I saw him I thought he looked like a Californian version of Thor. “Hey, Hoffman.”

It’s rare I call any of my brother’s teammates by their first names. Maybe because the public doesn’t either. Whenever I hear Henderson featured on news clips, I instantly picture my big brother’s face. Sebastian will always be Seb to me, mostly because it’s all I could pronounce when I first started talking. But the rest of his fans know him as “Henderson”, “Bash”, or “The Rangers Best Defenseman in Years” which is a title he’s definitely earned in his short time with New York’s team.

Hoffman playfully bumps my shoulder as we look around the pizzeria that was rented out for the Rangers post-game celebration. “Sorry about Mel. She can be a lot.” I assume he means his puck bunny since the name doesn’t sound familiar. “Heard you tore her a new asshole. Sad I missed that.”

I snort unattractively as I glance at the shit eating grin on his face. “I wouldn’t go that far.” My eyes scan the room quickly. “Where is she, anyway? I didn’t see her come in.”

“As if I’d let her come when she was talking shit,” he scoffs, resting his arm back around my shoulders. I hook my arm around his tapered waist and squeeze once. “I told her it wouldn’t work if that’s how she was going to treat people. She was good in bed, but that’s about it. So, I guess it’s just you and me, little Henderson. What are we going to do about that?”

From somewhere behind us, I hear Sebastian grumble, “Hands off my sister, jackass.”

Hoffman winks at me playfully before throwing taunts at my brother. “What if she wants my hands on her? I’m here alone. She’s here alone. Seems like fate, Henderson. We’re both consenting adults, after all.”

Sebastian physically removes his teammate’s arm from me and pushes him away to take his spot by my side. “We all know your rep, Hoff. I told you to keep your hands and herpes to yourself. My sister isn’t going to be your next lay.”

I roll my eyes at his exhausted warning, hearing it far too many times by now. “Would you quit it? I’m not interested in any of your teammates. Your threats are pointless.”

Hoffman's palm flies to his chest. "You wound me. What's not to be interested in? Is there somebody else in your life vying for your attention? That can be the only reason you wouldn't want this."

He gestures toward his tall, muscular body, making me roll my eyes. He is hot, sure, but my eyes and mind have always been on somebody else.

Sebastian's attention quickly darts to me, no longer interested in the people scattered around the room that smells like marinara sauce and garlic. "Is there somebody? You've never said anything before."

As if I'd tell him. The only person in the last two years that I was on-again off-again with is the last choice on earth my brother would approve of for me. Not that Sebastian would approve of anybody. In his eyes, I'm still the four-year-old that followed him everywhere and demanded to hang out with him and his friends. I'd beg him to take me to the park and explain sports to me so I could follow along while he played whatever he was into at the time. Baseball. Basketball. And, of course, hockey. He excelled at whatever he set his mind to, but his passion was always displayed best on the ice.

Instead of indulging him in the details of my personal life, I decide to turn the conversation around until I know he'll drop it. "Are *you* seeing anyone? Considering I was able to raid your condom stash before heading to Lindon, I'm assuming you weren't using them for anything special."

Some of his team howls in laughter at my diss. But all Sebastian does is snicker. Despite him being overprotective, he never shies away from the safe sex talk with me. He knows he's hardly one to talk when it comes to having an active sex life. I may tease, but we both know he has no problems getting female attention. He's always told me to be safe and protect myself and left it at that.

"Whatever," he muses, nudging me toward the counter where one of the coaches has started helping an employee line up different trays of pizza. "Have you eaten yet?"

It doesn't matter whether he's a professional hockey player or that he makes a shit ton more money than anyone else I know. He's my brother first. My super annoying brother that I've always known and loved.

Which makes me feel a little bad that Alex O'Conner pops into my head despite my best efforts to push him far, far away.

My deep-rooted love for my family has always cemented Sebastian as my number one favorite athlete. But Alex...

Alex is a very close number two.

Still.

With a small frown at the thought of him, I murmur, "I could eat."

I don't tell Sebastian I'm sorry about the game because I know it won't do any good. I'm sure he's already going over everything he wished he'd done differently in his head right now as it is. Now is about salvaging the night in the company of good people, win or lose.

As we walk over to the pizza, he nudges my arm lightly with his elbow. "Hoff is a good guy, Liv. He'd give the shirt off the back to anybody who needed it, no questions asked. But he used to be a bit of a player and he's in a weird spot right now. I don't want to see anybody get hurt."

Seriously? "I already told you that I'm not inter—"

"I know, I know." He gives me a look, one of curiosity and calculation. "But I can't say the same thing about him. Just...be careful. Yeah?"

I wet my lips, surprised by his gentle tone as he glances over his shoulder at the right wing who's roughhousing with a few of their other teammates.

It's obviously not the first time he's told me to stay away from one of his teammates. The difference is, he's actually friends with this one.

"Do me a favor," Sebastian says to me after showing Mom and I where we'll be watching his game. "Think about Eli Manning."

I blink at the name of my potential future husband. Sorry, Abby McGrew, but your man was always meant to be mine. "Why?"

My big brother looks over to the ice where his teammates are warming up for the game against Johnson City. Some of their moves are downright pornographic, which I can totally get behind.

He steps in front of me to block my view. "If you're thinking what I think you are, then that's why. My teammates aren't dating material."

"Says who?"

"Says me." He shoots me a warning glare that tells me he's not playing around. "So think about Eli Manning. Okay?"

I nod to appease him, but I'm so not thinking about my long-time crush when I lock eyes with the boy who has O'Conner written on the back of his jersey.

"Olive?" Sebastian repeats when I don't answer right away.

It's hard to brush off the memory of the first time I saw Alex in action. But, eventually, I murmur, "Yeah, okay."

He nudges my arm with his elbow trying to lighten the mood. “Did you finally hear back from that paper you applied to intern for?”

Internally groaning because I know where this is going, I grab a slice of pepperoni pizza and slap it onto a plate. “They turned me down. There was someone more qualified.”

Sebastian’s face twists. “Qualified? It’s an internship, and not even a paid one. What do they want? Five years’ experience? Forget about them. Let me know where you want to go, and I can make it happen.”

That’s exactly why I didn’t want to bring it up to him to start with. I applied as Olive Rose Henderson, a regular everyday girl. Not Olive Rose Henderson, little sister to the Rangers’ hockey defenseman Sebastian Henderson.

So, I tell him the same thing I did the first time he offered to name drop for me. “Thank you, but I want to do this on my own.”

He watches me bite into my dinner. “There’s nothing wrong with getting help, you know.”

I stare down at my pizza. “I know, Seb.”

He harrumphs because he doesn’t believe me.

If it makes him feel better, I don’t either.

CHAPTER THREE

Olive

WHEN SEBASTIAN PLAYED hockey for Lindon University, he was a campus star. Everyone knew he was aiming for a position on any NHL team who would have him. He wasn't picky as to which one, though he wanted to stay on the east coast to be close to Mom and me. And as his two biggest fans, we knew without a doubt he'd get drafted.

He spent a lot of time in the weight room to get into peak physical shape and practically lived at the rink running drills to better the ones he wasn't as strong at. The people close to him knew he was going to be successful—that he was going to get everything he deserved out of life.

The money. The title. The attention.

All he wanted was to play the game. He said everything else was a bonus.

I'm proud of the boy three years my elder for not changing who he is simply because of the number of zeroes on his paycheck, or the endorsement offers he gets from big companies. When he told me he was going to be the new face of Nike, I think *I'd* been more excited about it than he was. Mostly because it's hard finding a good pair of sneakers when you're a five-foot-eleven woman with a size eleven shoe. I told him I wanted a pair of Nikes for Christmas the second he signed the contract with the multi-billion-dollar company.

One thing is for sure. I couldn't handle the type of spotlight that Sebastian has on him all the time. It's not as big as the ones shining on his seasoned teammates, but it's there. Watching. Waiting for him to screw up.

Me? I'd be plastered on every magazine and tabloid cover known to man because of my bad decisions. I'd be a PR nightmare. The bonus? I'd be a PR nightmare with a hell of a face card thanks to my makeup collection.

The truth is, though, I like my life. I don't have any big talents that could make me famous the way he is. I can't sing or dance. I suck at art. I have no musical skill, though after three months of piano lessons I probably

should have *some*. I was relatively decent at basketball in high school, but definitely didn't get any athletic scholarships for my time on the team. Out of the Henderson siblings, I'm simply...average.

I'm a junior studying communications at the same alma mater Sebastian graduated from two years ago, with no clue how to utilize the degree. He was reluctant when I told them that I'd made my choice to go to Lindon when I had three other options that accepted me as well. But I've always found something magical about the campus that drew me in the second I visited him.

And there was also Alexander O'Conner.

Of course, I hadn't made my decision solely based on a guy. Especially not one as confusing as Lindon's former left wing. When I first met him, I barely knew anything about him other than how hot he was and how much Sebastian absolutely hated his guts. It mostly had to do with their competition on the ice. As teammates, they dominated. As competitors? They battled it out for everybody's attention. The coaches, the scouts, you name it. Both were talented. Intense.

But only one could be the best.

The only saving grace for them was that Sebastian graduated first. If they'd been in the same year, I don't know if their paths would look the way they do now.

Maybe the cocky confidence that Alex had shouldn't have made him so alluring when I met him officially at a bonfire my freshman year, but I'm only so strong. When a guy looks like he could be the inspiration for a Greek Adonis sculpture, it's hard not to be enamored. Dickhead personality or not.

High, sharp cheekbones. Strong jaw. Piercing baby blues that look directly into your soul. How could anybody not immediately drop their panties when he shoots them his signature smirk?

And I did drop them.

Multiple times.

So many times that—

Wait. What the hell am I even supposed to be doing right now? And how did I get on the topic?

"You've got that look on your face," Skylar, my best friend since freshman year, says with a tiny smile. She props her chin on her hand, ignoring the book she's got sprawled open in front of her.

I play dumb. “What look?”

Her blue eyes roll.

They remind me of Alex’s.

God. Nope. Not going there.

“My brain went into uncharted territory,” I admit, opening a can of Coke and taking a sip of the fizzy goodness.

Sebastian should try getting a Coca-Cola endorsement next. I make a mental note to tell him that next time we talk. He’d get better sales than those polar bears ever did in the older commercials.

“Alex?” she guesses sympathetically.

I look down at the internship application to a local newspaper near my hometown in Vermont that I’ve been working on since we sat down in the library. “Badger said he’s coming home once the season is done. I don’t know for how long because I didn’t ask. Maybe just a weekend.”

The season is technically over since the Pittsburgh Penguins also lost their game that could have advanced them to the championships this year.

Skylar’s brows jump up. “No kidding? I would have thought he’d stay in Pennsylvania to be near his team.”

I thought the same, but apparently, I’m not that lucky. When he signed on with the Penguins, I figured he’d stay in the Keystone State to train harder than any other rookie who got signed on. He always worked like he had something to prove, and I can’t imagine he’d stop now that he’s exactly where he wants to be.

Tapping my pen against the table, I blow out a raspberry. “Badger wouldn’t have lied about that,” I tell her, almost sadly. It was easier to have distance between Alex and I—out of sight, out of mind. Mostly. I could forget about everything we’d done when he was five hundred miles away.

Skylar closes her book and pushes it off to the side. “Speaking of Badger...”

Groaning because I know where this is going, I fidget with my soda can. “Don’t go there.”

“He’s cute,” she presses anyway.

She’s not wrong. Badger is cute in a goofy boy-next-door way. He’s... softer than I normally go for. And soft isn’t bad. Unless it’s a tire. Or, I don’t know, a basketball. But that isn’t my type. Granted, my type usually breaks my heart, so you’d think I’d be willing to at least try something new.

“And I always thought you two had something going on,” Skylar adds. “Why else would he show up at Fishtail when you’re working?”

“Because we have really good chicken wings and homemade bleu cheese sauce?” I offer, grinning despite the exasperated look she gives me.

The bar is known for their wings and homemade sauces. People flock to it for them, especially on Tuesdays when everything is half priced. It’s a broke college kids’ wet dream.

“Plus,” I say, “it isn’t like Lindon has many other options if you want to drink.”

Lindon is a small town populated heavily by the university during the school year, and Main Street is the only one lined with businesses—cafes, sandwich shops, restaurants, and bars. Students congregate to them because there isn’t much else to do within fifty miles.

“There’s literally two other bars down the street,” she points out matter-of-factly.

“And one of them closed temporarily after the police raided it for serving underaged kids,” I remind her, sticking my thumb out. I raise my index to add, “And the other one is full of seedy bikers and criminals. Not exactly college kid friendly unless you have a death wish or really bad taste in men.”

She winces. “Okay, fair point. *But* Badger still flirts with you. And last time I was there, he ordered a burger, not wings.”

“He flirts with everyone,” I counter quickly, hoping to shut down this train of thought. It’s not a lie, either. He’s a flirty guy. Sometimes, I don’t even think he means to be. “Your boyfriend was a charmer too before he met you.”

A couple years ago, Daniel Bridges Junior was your typical flirty football player—a wide receiver for Lindon U’s football team. He was confident and quirky and good looking. But now he’s totally gone for my best friend.

It’s cute.

Sometimes so cute that I envy them.

I pride myself in being comfortable alone, but on the nights when all of my friends are busy with their boyfriends, I find myself just the tiniest bit sad.

Skylar shrugs, not letting me change the subject. “I know it may be weird because Alex and Badger were friends, but—”

“Sky,” I plead in a whiney voice. “Can we talk about anything else? Literally anything. Because I don’t want to discuss Badger or *any* of his friends or how they might...act around me.”

Her mouth wavers downward. “Why are you like that?”

The brows I spent a lot of time tweezing and lining to perfection with my new brow liner this morning furrow. “Like what?”

Pressing her lips together, she studies me for a second before stifling a sigh. “Like you’re allergic to labels or the possibility that Badger—” I shoot her a look that she brushes off. “—or *any* boy could like you. You know you’re amazing. It’s not shocking people can see it. I’ve never met another girl who can kick ass at video games, tell you the stats of a sports game, *and* teach you how to correctly apply eyeliner. You’re the whole package.”

My fingertips scratch the back of my hand as I squirm in my seat. Compliments aren’t really my thing. I love to give them but hate receiving them. But she isn’t wrong. Sebastian and his high school friends used to get pissed when I beat them at *Call of Duty* or correct them on football stats whenever they’d start talking about fantasy league or Super Bowl predictions. And I’ve taught Skylar everything I know about makeup application; how to find her perfect shade, what looks best with her blue eyes, and how to contour.

“Labels make me itchy,” I admit, rubbing my arm.

“But why?”

I go to answer but realize I don’t have one. Maybe I was just built this way. Or maybe it has something to do with my parents’ ugly divorce. I don’t let myself think about all the childhood trauma that came with coming from a broken household. For the most part, I had a good life growing up. I was lucky. Even though we didn’t have any contact with our extended family for reasons I’ll never really understand, Sebastian and I had a great childhood. We had love and support. That’s what mattered.

Eventually, I lift one of my shoulders. “I don’t know. After the Alex thing, I learned that people are distractions. And sometimes dealing with them is more work than they’re worth.”

After the night I walked to my dorm alone, she’d helped pick up the pieces one McDonalds meal and sappy eighties chick flick at a time. I think we might have missed a few, because there feels like a hole in my heart that hasn’t been the same since Alex.

But I don't think about that because it sends me down a path of what-ifs that I don't enjoy thinking about.

To lighten the mood, I bring up the other love of her life outside of her boyfriend. "The only label I don't get hives over is Auntie Olive. And I'm a little offended you didn't bring over the little chicken nugget for me to love on today."

Skylar's face twists as she grabs her boobs. "I know. I regret not bringing him because these things are *painful*. Although, Bentley is starting to teethe and that's not fun for my poor nipples."

Her son, Bentley Lucas, is one of the cutest kids I've ever seen and a perfect mixture of Skylar and DJ. With bright eyes, chubby cheeks, and blond hair, the kid is going to be a heartbreaker when he's older.

I glance unabashedly at her full D cups that give my boobs a run for my money. "They look amazing though."

"Says the girl with a chest Dolly Parton would approve of," she grumbles, massaging her chest and flinching. "I'm going to have to pump soon, or I might explode. I started leaking in American Lit yesterday in the *middle* of my final."

Sympathy has me wincing. "Oh no."

Skylar nods, still looking traumatized over the experience. "The professor told me I could go take care of it and come back to finish the exam. He looked uncomfortable."

"Does that mean he was staring at your tits?" I ask, sipping more of my soda. "I can't blame the guy. They're hard to miss these days. Hell, I think I've made more eye contact with them than I have you all morning."

An unattractive snort comes from her as she lowers her hands to examine them. "Danny definitely likes them more now. He's going to be crushed when they go away."

"You could always get a boob job," I suggest nonchalantly. "I could transfer some of mine to you. They're starting to kill my back."

She rolls her eyes, pushing her chair back. "I will be sure to keep that in mind, but I wouldn't hold your breath."

Blowing out a raspberry, I murmur, "Damn."

Grabbing her bag, she drapes it over her shoulder. "I'll be right back. Are you sticking around? I'm kind of hungry and would kill for a burger."

"I'll be here. Go milk the cows."

She makes a face at the reference. “You’re lucky I love you,” she grumbles, smacking my arm as she passes me.

I pull out my phone and read through the missed texts I’ve gotten while I wait for her to get back.

Mom: Are you still coming home this summer for break?

Dad: Did you make time to finally visit me? You haven’t met Candi

Big Brother: Mom and Dad are fighting again. Thought I’d give you a heads up

Frowning, I mumble, “Too late,” to Sebastian’s message. He’s lucky he has hockey as an excuse not to deal with the back-and-forth that comes with our parents. Whenever Dad wants us to visit, it never fits into Sebastian’s busy schedule, so the pressure gets put on me.

I love our father, even though he’s a little bit of a deadbeat. He always blames our mother whenever Seb or I can’t make visiting him work, like it’s her fault we don’t want to deal with his narcissistic ass. He cares more about whichever girlfriend he’s seeing than his own kids. And God forbid our mother moves on with her life without him inserting his unwanted two cents. It’s like he thinks he’s the only one allowed to be happy.

Then there’s his commentary over my health, mostly my weight, that never seems to fail whenever I make time for him. Most of the time, I let it slide off my shoulders. But there are moments when his words really sink in and grab ahold of my heart. And when that happens, I get pulled into a mindset that sinks me into the abyss of my consciousness that makes me wonder if I *am* good enough.

That’s a sucky place to be, especially when it’s your own father who puts the thoughts there.

I text my brother back first.

Me: I’ll go if you go

I don’t expect Sebastian to get back to me right away because I know he’s got meetings with his manager about what the off season looks like. Something about a team building trip with the guys and a new workout regimen to keep him in shape on top of a few different commercials he’s supposed to film before the season starts again in the fall. It’s weird knowing that the boy who used to pick his nose and try wiping it on me is in nationwide commercials now.

I thumb out a quick reply to the woman who I get my ashy hair and soft, minty eyes from.

Me: You'd miss me too much if I didn't

She would too. My mother and I have always been best friends. We'd get into small fights once in a while, but it was more like siblings bickering than anything substantial. I love her more than anything, and if I'm being honest, I'd miss *her* too much if I chose to stay in New York instead of going home to Vermont for part of the summer.

It's why most of the post-grad internships I'm applying to are close to home. She told me to expand my search instead of limiting myself, but I know she isn't a fan of being an empty nester.

I'm surprised when my phone pings, thinking it's already Sebastian getting back to me when I see an unknown number on my screen.

Unknown: I got a new number

Brows pinching, I try figuring out what area code it is. Sebastian sometimes has to change his numbers if the wrong people get hold of it. Like one-night stands that want to be more than that or the random media outlets who somehow get it for inside scoops. He's had to give me at least two different numbers for that exact reason since joining the Rangers.

Me: This must be a record for you, Seb. Three new numbers in one year. Which girl got your number this time?

Smirking at my reply, I watch as bubbles appear at the bottom of the screen.

Then my smile slips when I see the next message pop up.

Unknown: Not your brother

I blink, suddenly very confused. Before I can guess another name, like Hoffman even though I'm fairly certain I've never had Bodhi's number before, I get a follow-up text.

Unknown: It's Alex

Swallowing my heart that jumps into my throat, I stare at the message. I have to wipe my clammy palms on my jeans as my eyes swipe over the two words.

Because *Alex*? I've known a lot of people named Alex in my short twenty-one years, but only one of them ever had my number. It's been a long time since he used it.

As if he can read my mind from wherever he is right now, I get another message from the unfamiliar number.

Unknown: I know it's been a long time

I scoff. A long time? It's been months. More than a half a year. Hell, I'm pretty sure the last exchange we had was over *nine* months ago. The only thing he'd said was 'hi' and 'how are you' like I was supposed to be excited that he reached out at all.

My fingers hover over the keyboard of my phone, halting above the letters as I think about what to say. But what *is* there to say that hasn't been said already? Wouldn't I just be reentering the vicious cycle that comes with loving Alexander O'Conner?

By the time Skylar shows back up, I think I'm sweating with indecision and irritation.

"Whoa," she remarks, sitting down with a frown on her face. "Are you okay? Did you eat the surprise casserole at the dining hall again? You look like you did when you were glued to the toilet that one time."

She'd know because I had to call her to bring me toilet paper. Thank God we're friends, because she saw, and smelled, way more than she signed up for that day.

"No," I force myself to say, turning my screen off without replying to Alex.

He doesn't deserve a response.

It was never going to be love. Not with you.

Those words still have a chokehold on my heart since they fell out of those stupid full lips of his. Screw him. Seriously.

"My parents are arguing about my summer plans," I explain, hoping my voice sounds undisturbed.

Skylar reaches out and pats my hand. She doesn't know the details of my family dynamics, but she knows I'm not very close with my father compared to my mother and brother. "I'm sorry. Would lunch help? It's on

me. This mama needs some food, and I promised Danny I'd pick him up something since he's with Bentley today."

I lost my appetite when I saw Alex's text. Now my stomach is in knots instead of the butterflies that used to flutter there.

But if I tell her no or make some lame excuse about forgetting I had other plans, she'd know something is up. So I say, "I could go for a good burger."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

Alex

MY SKIN ITCHES as I sit in the waiting room for somebody to come get me. I absentmindedly stare at the TV hanging in the corner that's playing some daytime drama. It's a soap opera that I recognize from my childhood. Mom would tune into it every afternoon with a cup of tea and a TV dinner that I heated up for her in the microwave.

But as soon as I cram myself in the abnormally narrow chair, one of the receptionists changes it to ESPN with a wink in my direction.

Secretly, I'm grateful. Those afternoons in the living room brought back memories I really don't want to remember. I can practically smell the salty meatloaf that she would fling off her lap whenever one of her moods would strike. I'm pretty sure I still have a little white scar in the middle of my palm for dumbly trying to catch the steak knife that had been thrown too.

I'd caught it, all right.

And instead of going to the emergency room for stitches, I cleaned myself up using the first aid kit in the bathroom and superglued the skin back together using glue I'd found in the garage from when Dad lived at home. I never thought twice about the germs that could have been on the applicator when I dragged it across the deep slice. But hindsight and all that.

Peeling my gaze away from the mindless discussion that the anchors are having about some pro football player's relationship with a pop star, I pull my phone out to see if Olive decided to finally text me back. Her number is one of the few I memorized over the years, so it was the first I programmed into my new phone after my last one suffered an unfortunate accident that involved me possibly throwing it a little harder than I meant.

My eye twitches when I see my last message left on delivered. I know she had to have seen it because she was quick to assume I was Sebastian.

It's been over an hour.

Not wanting to sulk over a girl ghosting me, I look out the window at the clear blue sky. Barely any clouds are in sight. There's no breeze moving the tree limbs. When I walked into the hospital, it'd been a tolerable temperature that I knew was going to become unbearable thanks to the blazing late-spring sun.

"Alexander," someone calls, snapping my attention to a middle-aged woman wearing colorful scrubs. I slide my phone back into my pocket and head toward her warm smile.

She looks like she could be my mother's age. Maybe a little younger. Pamela, according to the nametag that's clipped to the pocket of her shirt, sticks her hand out. "It's nice to meet you. I'm the new head nurse here at Logan's and was assigned to your mother. We've spoken on the phone about her care and the goals you have for her here. Your mother talks fondly of you."

I feel the prickle of embarrassment against the back of my neck as I shake her hand once and drop it. "How is she?"

This is the third time I've been to Logan's Psychiatric Hospital; a new establishment on the outskirts of Philadelphia that already has a positive reputation based on the extensive research I did before gathering the nerve to call them.

Her smile grows. "Colleen has been adjusting well. Better than some people I've worked with. She's been telling everybody who will listen that you're coming to see her today. She was sad we wouldn't allow visitors last week, so today has been one she's looked forward to."

While I understand they need to stay true to the consequences of the patients who don't follow the rules here, I'm still angry I couldn't come see her last week when I'd moved my schedule around specifically to make the trip. No amount of sweet talking I did changed their minds.

She scans her badge and pulls the door open once it buzzes and unlocks. "You remember the rules from last time we spoke, right?"

Pressing my lips together, I nod again.

We make our way down a long hallway, but my eyes don't focus on anything because my brain is too wrapped around the woman who acted like I betrayed her the day I pulled up to the front entrance of the building. She threw a fit even though we'd talked about this extensively on our way here. I should have known she was going to fight me when I put the car into park. The conversation about her admission here had been too easy when

we'd had it back in Lindon, as if she hadn't believed me when I told her there was a spot for her to get treatment.

It triggered another episode that left her swinging her arms and shouting at the top of her lungs until two beefed up guys came jogging out of the building looking ready to intervene. I hadn't let them, despite somebody calling for security to get her under control.

Mom wasn't a criminal. She was sick.

Is sick.

Physical force and violence are never the answer, so I made them butt out until I could handle it. Handle *her*. I'd gotten down to eye level with the five-foot-one woman who birthed me and talked her into going inside after fifteen minutes of her begging me to take her home.

To her, home is in the middle of nowhere in upstate New York where there are few options for somebody like her getting real help. Part of my deal with Pittsburgh Penguins was getting connected with the top hospital system, so I could bring her with me to get the help she needs while being close by. Thanks to the advance I got after signing with the rising NHL team, I was able to pay for Logan's high-end care. They didn't have a spot open for her until my first year was over, so I hired the best nurses to check on her as much as they could back home before I got her here.

Logan's is still four and a half hours away from my apartment, but it was better than the seven and a half hours it would be if I left her behind for an at-home caretaker to deal with. From the daily reports I got, she fought the aids tooth and nail before. Two of them quit, one of them I had to fire, and the last one made it through the brutal manic episode my mother had suffered with for months. She'd just broken out of it and started sounding like herself again when Logan's called, and I came to get her.

One thing is certain; Mom needs me, and I'm not going to let her down. Not like Dad did. Not like her parents did when they cut her off after she got divorced. If they are as catholic as they said, they would have been there for their daughter; helped her through the hard times like families do. But they didn't, and neither did my father's side when shit got real. So, like always, it's up to me to be the person who fights for my mother.

And, dammit, that's what I'm doing.

As soon as we stop outside the visitor's lounge, I spot the woman I'm here to see through the narrow glass window in the door. She's where I get my brown hair and blue eyes, tan skin, and stubborn attitude from.

Everything else is my father's genetics. The shape of my nose, the squareness to my jaw, the distinct cheekbones, and my height. I suppose you could argue I also get my determination from him since he was hell-bent on making a better life for himself by divorcing Mom when I was twelve.

Their separation was fairly anticlimactic. No drama. Minimal fighting. They had split custody, and I was given the choice over who to live with. Had I wanted to go with Dad? Fuck yeah. He's the person I got my love of hockey from. We used to sit together and watch the Bruins kick ass every season. He's the one who bought me my first Bruin's jersey that started the collection of paraphernalia that hung on my bedroom wall growing up. I told him I was going to play for Boston's team one day, and he said he believed in me.

Deep down, though, I knew somebody needed to be around to take care of Mom. And if he was leaving, that meant I had to stay in case she had one of her many episodes that Dad decided he was too tired of dealing with.

I get it. Everybody has their breaking point, and he found his after fifteen years of marriage. I stopped being angry at him a long time ago for the responsibility placed on my shoulders. It's not like Mom or Dad ever expected me to be the man of the house, it was just what I knew needed to be done. And because I'd let go of the resentment I had toward him, I got to spend a lot of time with him during my visits at his house enjoying everything we did. Hiking. Going to the batting cages. Hockey practices with him cheering me on in the crowds. Watching sports games and rooting for our favorite teams.

If I stayed mad, I would've felt guilty for the rest of my life when we got the call about the car accident that took his and his wife's life. It was accidental and quick, but that didn't make the loss hurt any less. The only thing Mom and I can be grateful for is that he probably didn't feel a thing.

So, here I am. Twenty-four, playing for a hockey team that I never rooted for in my life. All so I could get my mother into the best care facility for her condition.

I didn't know anything about why she was the way she was growing up. I thought it was *me* who triggered her. She had her ups and downs that sometimes were hard to deal with, but she was rarely violent, and she always supported me through whatever I wanted to do even though I could tell she struggled. Her being diagnosed as bipolar didn't change how much I

wanted to help her. If anything, it made me work that much harder to gain her the resources we couldn't afford before.

Logan's opened up a world of possibilities for her through their extensive inpatient program, which is why I didn't mind writing them a big check for her stay. Working my ass off for her is the only way I can show that I love her—that I'm here no matter what.

If Mom could support me with a big smile on her face as we lived paycheck to paycheck, I could do this for her. Finally.

As soon as I walk into the room, Mom turns to me with a big smile spreading across her face. Her dark brown hair has patches of silver that remind me she's in her fifties. She looks as small as I remember—petite and...frail. But she's gained some weight back so her collarbones and cheeks aren't so distinctive, which means they've had better luck feeding her than I've managed over the years.

God only knows I could only do so much before threatening to take her in to get a feeding tube. I'm positive that isn't even legal, but the threat worked for a while. Even if it was one piece of toast or a few mouthfuls of soup, it was better than nothing.

She stands, opening her arms. "My boy."

I'm typically not a hugger, but I don't know how badly I need one until her skinny arms squeeze around my torso.

"I missed you," she says into my chest.

I close my eyes and fight back the heavy emotion that swarms my throat. "I've missed you too, Ma. It's good seeing you."

She pinches the side of my waist before pulling away with a frown. The movement makes wrinkles form at the corners of her mouth that match the lines crinkling the skin by her eyes.

"How much exercise are they making you do? There's hardly an ounce of fat on you. And you've bulked up."

My lips threaten to curl upward. "That'd be all the training we go through. It's part of the job. It was bound to happen."

She pats my stomach and pulls out her chair before sitting down. "Well, you need to eat more. You're too skinny. Remember the grilled cheese I used to make you? You loved them."

This time, I don't fight the smile. Because when was the last time my mother sounded like a mother?

“Yeah,” I murmur, easing into the chair as I think about the charred grilled cheeses she used to make me with canned tomato soup. The bread was almost always burnt to an inedible crisp, and the soup was watered down, but she tried.

And when she tried...well, there was no better feeling in the world. “I do remember.”

And I’m glad she does too.



PEOPLE PROBABLY THINK making the twenty-three-man roster for the Penguins, or any NHL team, would make you locked in. Confident. And that’s usually what I like to portray. Cool, calm, collected, with a mixture of cocky. Because not only did I get scouted, but I got drafted, signed a seven-figure contract, *and* made the tight cut for the season because Coach Pelfrey believes I can add something to his team. Normally, I don’t think twice about my ability on the ice.

When I’m out there, I’m in the zone. Focused. As soon as my blades touch the ice, it’s like I’m a different person. Nothing outside of the rink matters; only the scoreboard. I fixate on the best offensive play to get the puck to the goal, and I’m damn good at it.

Anything *outside* of the ice...

Well, that’s where my skillset wavers.

My palms sweat as I move the curtain back to check out the crowd of journalists gathering in the room that’s set up for our press conference.

I’ve had to do my fair share of post-game interviews but nothing as extensive as this. There have to be at least fifty or sixty people out there who want to know what comes next now that my first season is over. The usual junkets are half the size, so it’s less pressure when the cameras are pointed at you.

It makes me want to vomit.

Public speaking has always been one of my weaknesses. I barely scraped by in Lindon when it was a required course. The torture I went through every week to deliver a five-minute speech in front of fifteen kids was astronomical, and it barely feels like it prepared me for this.

“You’ll be fine,” Jesse Clarkson, the center and captain of the team, says from behind me, smacking my shoulder in comfort when he sees the panic on my face.

I let the curtain drop back down to block my view of the men and women seating themselves. “Did Coach say why I’m taking Moskins’ spot?”

Not everybody on the team even comes to these things, and Thomas Moskins, our right wing, knows what he’s doing better than I do. The rugged twenty-something-year-old may come off as a total dick whenever we’re on the ice or in the locker room, but he saves face when cameras and microphones are pointed in his direction. His charm wins the public over, which makes me wonder what they’d think of him if they knew the vulgar way he talked about them when the press *wasn’t* around.

Clarkson drops his hand. “His experience is why it’s your turn. We all have to be part of these once in a while. You’ve been getting a lot of airtime from the past few games you’ve played. Your name is spreading. People want to learn about number forty-three and what you’re about. Coach is giving you the chance to be heard before they take over the narrative. Because, trust me, they will. Maybe not right away, but eventually. The media likes to speculate about every aspect of our lives, but they have less to say when we set the record straight first. This is good exposure for your career all the way around, especially if you’re seeking endorsements. Companies don’t want to take risks on people who might create bad reputations in the media.”

My agent, Kyle, suggested that we start putting feelers out there to see what endorsers would be interested in me in the off season. Which would include a lot of potential ads, commercials, and who knows what else. But it’s money, and that’s one thing I could use more of now that I’m paying to help Mom *and* to keep the house we grew up in on top of my own expenses here. My apartment in Pittsburgh isn’t lavish like some of my teammate’s places, but it’s a roof over my head and food in my stomach. I’d rather stretch my dollars as much as I can, not invest it all in a temporary home.

“What if there are things I don’t want to talk about?” I ask him, thinking of my mother. “I know how some of these people work. They’re vultures. Doesn’t mean I owe them an explanation to every question.”

Clarkson’s eyebrows dart up. We don’t talk that often, so he’s probably wondering why I’m seeking his advice now. But it’s nothing personal. I’ve

always been private. I barely saw the friends I had at Lindon unless it was a frat event that I was required to be at or games with my teammates. A lot of people thought I was too stuck up to invest my time in them, but I just had too much other shit going on that took priority.

“You can choose not to comment,” he finally tells me. “But that might do you more harm than good. That’s how speculation starts.”

I can feel the hard rhythm of my heartbeat pounding in my chest as my ears ring, reminding me that I’m minutes away from getting in front of people who want nothing more than to take a deep dive into my life. Any chance I could pass these responsibilities off in the past, I did. Happily. But, apparently, Coach Pelfrey isn’t going to give me that opportunity today.

The only person who helped me get through the presentations at Lindon U is the same girl who hasn’t texted me back since I reached out three days ago. I needed one of her famous pep talks—the blunt ones that would make me laugh and distract me from why I’m a fucking mess to begin with.

I typed and deleted at least five different messages to Olive over the past few days. But I didn’t send any of them because I didn’t want to be the guy who begged for somebody’s attention. If she were any other girl, I wouldn’t need to.

But she’s not.

That’s why I’ve always liked her.

And now I’m here hoping my pit stains don’t seep through my button-down and suit jacket that I spent way too much money on when Kyle told me I’d need decent game-day and interview outfits. I can only imagine the viral photos that would hit the internet tomorrow if I was soaking through this custom Armani.

Clarkson takes a quick look past the curtain, lifting his hand to wave at somebody who must see him from the crowd. His smile is formal and polite. Not the type of friendly one he shoots most of the team when they’re bullshitting in the locker room. “The guys and I are going out after this. Belle’s Place. It’s this older style club. Think 1920’s. Exclusive. Quiet. We like to hang there to decompress after these. I’ll text you the address if you’re interested.”

My eyes snap to him, making him chuckle at my disbelief.

“We’re not as bad as you think,” he muses, lips curling higher into a half smirk. “I think most of the team just wanted to see what you’d do if they iced you out. No pun intended. You never really seemed that open to

hang out with any of us longer than you needed to, so the guys thought it'd be good to feel you out."

I've noticed the distance some of them went out of their way to put between us. At first, I thought I was being hazed as the new kid. After a while, I stopped noticing. I had enough on my plate. As much as I wanted to get along with my team, I wasn't going to put all of my energy into making friendship bracelets. "I didn't think any of you liked me. I started wondering whose ass I had to kiss to get an in."

"Definitely Miller." Smith Miller is our goalie—a fucking beast too. "Though, he prefers his dick sucked. It'll get you farther if you really want in on the inner circle," he answers casually.

Blinking slowly, I nod at the piece of information I hadn't known before. "Huh. I wouldn't have thought he was..."

Clarkson shrugs casually. "It's not necessarily a secret to a lot of people, but it's not spoken of either. There are plenty of players in the league that are out, but there's still a stigma surrounding certain sexual orientations in professional sports. Especially hockey. Miller prefers not making a spectacle of his love life."

"No shit," I murmur, shaking my head. Miller is on his way to being one of the best goalies in the league. This season alone, he's had over 1,300 saves.

Clarkson pulls me back into the conversation with his serious face. "Look, we have got a good team. Personal lives can get in the way, but when the season gets intense sometimes shit happens. Moskins has been married for over five years but has a girl he sees whenever we hit Seattle. Hell, he's probably got a girl in a lot of cities. He makes fucked up choices, but we're still friends. A lot of the guys will drink too much, do too many lines, or make too many headlines with affairs or God only knows what else. But that doesn't change the fact we're a team."

The Penguin's captain turns to me with a firm expression tightening his features, and the scar he got from his days with the Chicago Blackhawks that goes from his lower cheek up to the corner of his eyebrow twitches. "The more you hang out with us, the more secrets you'll learn. And that's what they'll stay. Some of them are the worst kept ones known to man. Even if we disagree with what the other guys are doing, we keep out of the business that isn't ours. Got it?"

Clicking my tongue at his unspoken warning, I nod once. "Got it, Cap."

“You’ve shut us out all season which is why we never really bothered trying harder to include you,” he tells me. “But it seems like you could use some friends. Some guidance. That means,” he adds pointedly, brows going up slightly, “that whatever you decide to do with your life will be safe with us as long as it isn’t illegal. And whatever secrets you don’t want the world to know will be under lock and key too. You have my word.”

His loyalty chips away at some of the protective barrier I built when I signed the contract with Pittsburgh. You never know what you’re going to get when you join a new team—if people will give you a chance; if they’ll like you, or if they’ll turn their backs without giving a shit about anything you do.

Teammates can still be competitors, not all of them will want to be your friends. At least, that’s what I’m used to. One of my biggest rivals for the past three years was Sebastian Henderson. I used to look up to him until I realized he was one of the people in my way of getting this opportunity.

He knew it too.

But, deep down, it was more than that. Sure, he stood between me and the NHL. He also stood between me and his little sister. The second he told me to stay away from her, it was a challenge I personally accepted. Maybe to be petty, to take something for myself since I didn’t know if I’d ever get this far in my career, or maybe because Olive could hold her own in a conversation. I don’t know. The only thing I *do* know is that I had no intention of listening to his warnings.

My eyes go back to the stands and lock on the curvy girl in a Henderson jersey. I saw her and Sebastian together earlier; felt her eyes on me when I was stretching. And then I heard her telling one of our coaches that we had a better chance at winning if we switched out our right wing and tried a different formation that focused more on the center’s agility. And she’s right. Our center is fucking fast, and our right wing has been losing his touch.

As if Henderson can sense who I’m staring at, he skates over and purposefully knocks into me with enough force that I nearly go down.

“Don’t even think about it, O’Conner. My little sister is off limits.”

His little sister. *Damn. “I’m not the one staring. Not my fault she has taste.”*

I swear he growls.

I grin. “I like a girl with substance.”

He gets in my face. "If you touch her, I will do everything in my power to fuck up your life. Do you understand me?"

All I do is laugh, because it's comical. After all, he doesn't know how fucked up my life already is. My eyes slowly find their way back to his sister when one of the guys breaks up our standoff. Even though it's impossible to be sure from all the way down here, I know she's staring directly at me.

The memory brings back a wave of nostalgia.

In our world, we don't get many chances to prove ourselves—it's eat or be eaten. Henderson made sure to put himself first so he could sign with the Rangers, and I'm sure he's still doing the same for headlines and endorsements. He wanted it all and had no intention of sharing anybody's attention.

So having Olive's...shit, it felt like I had everything. When it stopped being about fucking with Sebastian, and turned into me *liking* her eyes on me, I knew I was in trouble. Because even the slightest shift of focus meant losing what I've worked so hard for. I couldn't do that to Mom.

"I don't have any secrets," I tell the captain, forcing away the heaviness settling into my chest.

His head cocks as he studies me like he can see the lie lingering in the air between us before glancing back out the curtain. "We all have secrets, O'Conner. And today those reporters are going to ask you a lot of questions to try unveiling at least one of yours."

My throat bobs as I swallow the anxiety trying to rise back up it when I think of my visit with my mother.

Clarkson gets called away by one of the PR girls working for the team, patting my shoulder before he disappears with her down the hall.

Fuck.

It's only when I'm alone that I pull my phone out and listen to the phone ring after hitting the call button.

I almost don't think she's going to answer when I hear, "What do you want?"

It's not a warm greeting, not that I thought I'd get one. "I need a pep talk."

There's a moment of silence before, "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

Olive's voice is loud enough for one of the team managers to raise an eyebrow. I walk to the furthest corner of the room and lower my voice to try

being relatively quiet. “I know I don’t deserve one—”

“Damn straight,” Olive cuts me off.

“But I have a press conference in a matter of minutes,” I wince when the guy in the room with me holds up three fingers. “Three minutes, apparently. And I’m not sure if I want to barf or piss myself.”

“You could always do both,” she offers sweetly, and I can only imagine her batting those goddamn eyelashes that are always long, dark, and flirty while she says it.

Sighing, I tug at the collar of my shirt. “Look, I know you don’t owe me anything. We didn’t part on good terms, and that’s on me. I was...I *am* dealing with a lot of shit that I don’t want anyone getting dragged into. If there’s only one thing I’m allowed to ask of you, it’s this. You were always good at calming me down.”

You were good for me.

I choose not to say that, no matter how strong those words ring true.

I can hear her breathing as she contemplates what I’m asking of her. When the man across the room holds up two fingers, she finally sighs.

“You’re Alexander O’Conner,” she reminds me in that stern voice that offers no room for argument. “You were one of the two hundred and twenty-four people drafted out of *how many*? And let’s not forget that only forty-nine percent of players drafted even see time on the ice. You’ve already played twenty-eight games. Twenty-nine, if you count the one you were penalized for part of the last period.”

My chest swells hearing her admit she knows how many times I’ve put my skates to good use. I didn’t let myself wonder if she watched my games or not because I figured she would have erased me from her life completely. And I wouldn’t have blamed her for one damn second if she decided I wasn’t worth even the smallest memory.

“I don’t think you need your ego stroked, but those statistics mean you’re obviously doing something right,” she adds, her tone a little softer than before. “People want to see you out there because they know you can get results. In your world, that means something. Because there’s always somebody better who can replace you in a heartbeat. You’re not a rookie anymore. You’re in it now. You’re exactly where you want to be.”

I’m not sure why that pierces my heart like that steak knife sliced my skin when I was younger. Maybe because her words don’t just apply to sports. Sure, another player who’s faster could take my place.

But somebody could easily walk into her life and take the spot I held in her heart for a long ass time. And it shouldn't bother me that that's true. Because I was the one who severed our connection. I was the one who let her walk away.

It was never going to be that deep for me. Not with you.

All lies, but she didn't need to know that.

Just like she didn't need to know that I'd gotten into my car and followed her at a snail's pace to make sure she got back okay the night we parted ways. Or that I looked her up online a time or twenty to see what she was up to or if she'd started seeing anybody.

Every single time I saw one of the funny, dumb memes she shared or pictures she was tagged in by friends, I'd been relieved that there wasn't a guy in any of them.

And that made me a real dick.

My attention is drawn to the man holding up one finger and telling me to wrap it up.

As if Olive senses our time is up, she hefts a sigh. "The only thing you need to focus on is being yourself. That's what people want to see. I have no doubt you'll win them over. It's a trait I've always hated about you."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, hearing the hurt threaded around her words. "I'm—"

"Don't," she whispers, stopping the apology before it passes my lips. "I don't want to hear it. It makes it easier to hate you."

My throat bobs.

"And Alex?"

"Yeah?"

"Go fuck yourself" is her goodbye to me before ending the call.

I can't help but smile a little, because there was no hostility in her tone when she said it.

"O'Conner," the man says. "You're up."

I tuck the phone into my back pocket and roll my shoulders.

I'm Alexander O'Conner.

Not surprisingly, that does very little for me.

But hearing Olive say my name...

That carries me through.

CHAPTER FIVE

Olive

SMOOSHING THE CUTEST little plump cheeks in until I'm rewarded with a toothy smile, I nuzzle my nose into my favorite pseudo-nephew's stomach. He laughs, and the sound makes my chest all warm and fuzzy.

"You're so good with him," Skylar praises, propping her chin on her palm. "You'd make a great mom. And if they get your eyes, it'll be the prettiest baby I've ever seen next to Bentley."

Snorting at her comment brought on by four hours of sleep and lack of caffeine, I prop Bentley up on my thigh. "I'll make sure me and my imaginary boyfriend get right on that."

Her eyes roll as she wiggles her fingers at her son sitting happily in my lap. "I'm not saying it has to happen anytime soon. I'm simply pointing out that you're naturally maternal. Bent loves you."

I've never given any serious thought to having kids before. It's something I've been on the fence about my whole life. For a lot of reasons. The biggest of them being my lack of relationships where that train of thought is warranted. Alex was the closest I came to feeling like I'd found my person, but he refused to label it. Eventually, I had to accept that what I thought was love was just...misinterpreted infatuation.

Like, super misinterpreted.

I think about his phone call, dampening my good mood. He wanted a pep talk like we were friends, and I was stupid enough to indulge him because I recognized the slight tremor in his voice.

He needed me.

And being needed felt...good.

It felt like the best thing in the world.

But telling him to fuck off was up there too.

"I don't know if I want kids," I admit, bouncing Bentley on my leg. He looks up at me with those big round blue eyes and smiles. "I don't have anything against kids. But..." I shrug, not sure if I can explain it.

“Kids aren’t for everybody,” my best friend comments easily. “But we’re young, still. You might change your mind down the line, and that’s okay if you do. I definitely didn’t plan to have a child anytime soon.”

When she told me the news, I was shocked. Even though we’re twenty-one, it felt like she was announcing a teenage pregnancy. Like at any moment, MTV was going to show up with cameras and film her pregnancy and labor like they did on *16 and Pregnant*.

Ironically, I’d loved that show when I was a teenager. For someone who never cared that deeply about having children of her own, I tuned in every week to watch the trainwreck unfold. It was no different than *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* about a teen getting pregnant in high school. My mother started worrying that I’d be influenced to follow in their fictional footsteps, which I found odd. I didn’t exactly have boys knocking down my door, much less trying to get in my pants.

But whatever.

“What are you smiling at?” she asks me.

I didn’t realize I had been. “I was thinking about that God awful show about the girl who got pregnant by the bad boy drummer at band camp. It doesn’t matter. I’m glad you had Bentley.”

Her eyebrows dart up, but they neutralize when Bentley giggles and starts clapping his hands. She mimics him. “Danny and I are talking about where to move after I graduate.”

The news makes me look from Bentley to her. It makes sense. Her family lives in California and his lives in Massachusetts. When they found out they were pregnant, they started renting a house outside of Lindon that was only minutes away from the campus while she finished undergrad, and he finished his master’s program.

“He’s almost done with grad school, isn’t he?” I ask.

She nods. “I’ll be finishing my senior year when he’s done, so we need to get serious about what comes next. My parents want to be around their grandson, but so do his family.”

“Which is hard to do when they live on opposite coasts.”

Her frown wrinkles her lips. “I miss my family. And the sunshine.” Her sigh is heavy. “I *really* miss the sunshine. But Cali is so expensive. We’d have to live with my parents until we found something cheap. And it would take a long time to save up for that. Both of our families have offered to help, but we want to do it on our own.”

I don't envy her. "What does DJ think?"

She reaches for her son and holds him against her, pressing a kiss to his head. Her cheek rests against his. "His family is willing to move. But that seems like a lot to ask, even if they have the money."

That's sweet, though. "It's good that you have that option. I know you both want your families involved in Bentley's life."

She peppers more kisses on his chubby cheek and then settles him onto her hip. "We're lucky," she agrees. "Every time I think I have time to think about it, I realize we only have a year."

Now that finals are over, we're officially seniors. *Seniors*. "We're almost adults," I comment. "Like, out of college and need to get a job kind of adults."

And I'm nowhere near closer to figuring out what comes after I get my degree.

Her face scrunches. "That's scary."

"Says the chick with a baby."

She presses her hand against her son's ear. "I cried when I found out. They weren't happy tears at first. I love him so much and I wouldn't change a thing, obviously, but I was terrified. I felt like a—"

"Teen mom," we say simultaneously.

I knew we were friends for a reason. "I could be forty years old with a positive pregnancy test and still consider myself a teen mom," I admit. "I would call my mom crying asking what to do."

She giggles, dropping her hand. "For whatever it's worth, I think you'd make a great mom. *If* that's what you want. I'm never going to try convincing anybody one way or another. Kids are a lot of work. I'm really lucky I have Danny and our families to help out. But even then, I get worried about messing this kid up."

"You'll probably make mistakes, but that's what will make Bentley normal," I reassure her. My mother certainly wasn't perfect. And my father...well, I don't want to go there.

She smiles, nuzzling her nose against Bentley's head. "Anyway, are you still leaving tomorrow? I'm going to miss you."

"I'll only be gone for a few weeks. I promised Mom that I'd spend some time with her this summer. And my dad convinced me to pop by and visit him while I was in Vermont."

Although, I'm already dreading that. I know Sebastian will have to back out for some work-related thing, leaving me stuck with his comments about my weight instead of deflecting by talking up Sebastian's career. Out of the two of us, Dad is way more interested in my brother's life. It used to bother me, until I realized I could use it to my advantage.

"You don't talk about him much," she notes.

What is there to say? "He doesn't agree with how my mother has raised me. At least, with how she let me get so fat."

Skylar frowns. "Olive—"

"Look, I know I'm overweight. I've been that way my whole life. That's not a secret. When I played basketball, it wasn't so bad because I was active. But even then, my father would make comments about how important it was to lose weight and be healthy. Whenever I'd go to his house during our weekends with him, he'd monitor everything I ate and drank. And his girlfriend at the time would lock the food pantry after seven o'clock and put one of those timers on it so nobody could unlock it until eight the next morning."

A horrified expression takes over Skylar's face. "That's horrible. I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

Me too. But what's done is done. "Despite all the harsh things he's ever said about me, I still love myself. That's what's important. I have great tits and an amazing personality. And any man would be damn lucky to have me."

"Amen," she replies. Bentley starts getting fussy and Skylar sniffs the air. "Uh-oh. Did you poop? I really hope it's not another blowout. Danny almost puked the last time that happened. It would have sucked to clean up two messes."

I can totally see that.

Sliding off the chair, I stand. "On that note, I should probably go pack. I haven't done anything like I told my mom I did."

She gives me a hug. "Text me when you get to your mom's house so I know you made it. And let me know when you're coming home. I'll make Danny watch Bentley so we can have a girl's night."

"As if you won't check my location thirty times while I'm gone," I muse, unfazed by her overprotection.

It's kind of nice.

“You can always shoot me an SOS text while you’re with your dad,” she offers, rocking Bentley to soothe him. “I can call you with an emergency that requires your immediate attention here in Lindon. Maybe a blocked milk duct. Those things hurt like a bitch.”

I grab my purse and keys and give her a hug, pecking my nephew on the cheek. “I’ll keep that in mind. Love you.”

“Love you too! Let me know when you get back,” she calls after me.

On the short drive back to the dorms, I crank up John Mayer singing to me all about how my body is wonderland to drown out the other thoughts trying to push their way in. Unfortunately, the more I listen to one of my favorite artists sing about discovering every inch of porcelain skin, the more I think about how long it’s been since anybody has touched *my* skin. Which, granted, is a shade or two above porcelain. But still.

When he talks about getting lost in a sea of blankets and using his hands, it only reminds me of how badly I need to get laid. I’ve never been that sexual of a person until Alex sparked an appetite for intimacy. And he didn’t shy away from anything. He was insatiable and unapologetic. And while I think he used sex as an escape, it was an escape I was more than willing to give him when he used those skillful hands and full lips to do naughty things to my lady bits.

And...now I’m horny. Great.

Suddenly, John Mayer’s voice is filtered out as I think about that phone call. As much as I wish I hadn’t picked up, I did. And my heart did a silly little dance in my chest when I heard his husky voice as if he was trying to keep from people listening in.

Then again, he’d always sort of done that. It wasn’t like he’d ever hidden me. People knew we had a thing. A few of his friends even asked if I was ever going to come over to their frat house to hang out and watch the game or play video games with them. I never did, but it made me feel... seen. Like I was important enough to be tied to Alex.

I wasn’t dumb. I knew a lot of girls were.

When a guy looks the way Alex does, it attracts attention. A lot of female, and gay male, attention. But he never made me feel like there was competition when we were together. It was him and me. Puck bunnies didn’t seem to persuade him, and neither did my brother being, well, my brother.

Maybe my brother's off-limits warning made him more interested in getting in my pants. I'd thought about that once. Long after our tryst started. But I decided it didn't matter because I wanted the same thing. Fun. A distraction from classes and grades and life after college. He was the perfect person to get the job done.

So why the hell did my heart get so damn attached? "Stupid," I murmur, shaking my head as I turn into the parking lot next to my dorm building. "You were stupid for doing that," I scold myself, killing the lights and taking my keys out of the ignition.

Blowing out a breath, I lean against the seat and stare at the brick building I've called home for the last three years. I asked the housing department to stay in the same building instead of being moved, and with Lindon's lower enrollment numbers over the last couple of years, they were able to fulfill my request.

I'd miss Babcock Hall and all the dirty jokes that came with living at the top of the cock. But I was also looking forward to...more.

Whatever the hell more entailed. An internship somewhere new. Or maybe somewhere closer to home. A job that didn't make me scramble to pay bills or put food on the table would be nice. Not that there are many entry-level gigs that offer that kind of security.

The more I let myself think about what's to come, the more pressure builds on my chest. It suffocates me—taunting me with the reality that I need to figure out. I know the longer I stall, the harder it will be. But every time I start to take life after college seriously, that weight begins crushing my chest over the possibility of failure.

I'm not my brother—something I know my father thinks about more than I wish he did. I don't have a clear direction or talent or money. I don't know how to live up to his success or step out of his shadow. I've got no idea what to do with my life or the degree I've spent a lot of money to obtain besides trying to work for a newspaper or news station fetching coffee.

And that's scary. Really scary.

As I gather my belongings, my phone lights up the otherwise dark car and I see the number flash across the screen.

It says unknown because I refuse to save it in my contacts. And for a second time, I find myself reaching for it on instinct before stopping myself.

Because Alex is still buried deep, deep under my skin. I blame John Mayer and his smooth voice for making me feel some kind of way.

It's then and there, sitting in the darkness of my car, that I decide to make a pact with myself to stop being hung up on Alex O'Conner. To put myself first because I know he won't.

I dump my phone in my bag, watching as the screen goes black. It fills me with a small sense of satisfaction. A baby step in the right direction of detoxing from the boy who has lived in my mind rent free since the first time I saw him play hockey at Lindon's arena with my brother.

"You just need to get laid," I tell myself, walking toward the building and scanning my ID at the back entrance. "Or buy a vibrator."

I nod to myself at the thought.

"Definitely need a vibrator."

A group of giggles sound from my right, and I sheepishly smile at the girls walking to the door I'm entering.

One of them says, "Get it girl."

Another calls out, "Make sure it suctions!"

I don't know what that means, but something tells me it's life changing.

"Olive! I'm glad I caught you." Cierra, the head room advisor of Babcock says, jogging around the front welcome counter with a box in her hands. "This came in today. I'm not sure why it didn't get sent to the mail room, but it was addressed to you and your room number."

I blink, accepting the plain white box. I've been known to order a lot of things, but I don't know what this is. It's light. Makeup? I was contemplating ordering Selena Gomez's new press powder, but it was pricier than I wanted to spend. It wouldn't be the first time I sleep-shopped. I had to disable Amazon one-click when I'd wake up to notifications saying I ordered random things; like that laminating machine that was over two hundred dollars.

"Thanks," I say, examining the box for details. I don't recognize the company name or address.

"Next time, make sure it goes through the mail room," she calls out when I head toward the elevators. "I'll see you in the fall!"

There's a very few select students who stay over the summer with the stipulation that we provide our own meals since the dining hall is closed down. I'll be splitting my time between here and Vermont, but since I'm bartending at Fishtail to get some extra money, I need a place to stay.

Lindon has classes that last for part of the summer, which is the only reason they signed off on me sticking around.

Plus, I'm ninety-percent positive that Sebastian made some sort of donation to the athletic department, which has been hurting bad since the football coach scandal. Money tends to persuade anyone. It's the one time I'm not mad at him for helping me out.

When I get to my room, I open the package and stare at the box sitting in the middle of the tissue paper. Picking the note off of the vibrator, I gape at the handwritten letters scrawled across the torn scrap paper in black ink.

So we can both fuck ourselves.

Think about me.

#43

I gape at the note.

Forty-three.

Alex.

Setting the note down, I pick up the box and examine the extensive settings this thing has. Is he a mind reader?

"Touche, Alex," I murmur aloud, shaking my head at the unwarranted present.

I look at my phone sitting beside the box on the bed. He expects me to text him, which is exactly why I'm not going to.

And I'm *definitely* not going to use it.

Biting down on my lip, I tuck the note into my nightstand. Right next to the box that I most likely won't open.

Probably.



MY HANDS GRIP the steering wheel as the sports anchors talk about the hockey highlights from the previous week. I know I could easily flip it to something else, but apparently I like torturing myself. "The Penguins almost made a comeback after their brutal 1-5 loss against the Detroit Red Wings. It's too bad they slipped up on the final game. We could have seen Pittsburgh advance for the first time in years."

“If it hadn’t been for Ritchie Rodriguez getting hurt, they might have stood a better chance. I’m sure everybody was glad to see him back on the ice against Winnipeg.”

“It was a risky move on Pelfrey’s part putting O’Conner in considering the rookie’s performance during his game against Tampa Bay Lightning. Maybe if they kept Rodriguez in until the end, they would have stood a better chance at—”

I turn the radio off until I’m bathed in nothing but my tires against the empty stretch of road. “I should have made sure my damn AUX cord was in the car before I left campus,” I mutter to myself. This is what I get for half-ass packing at midnight and choosing to leave the rest of it for this morning. I slept past my alarm after snoozing it four times and then hastily got up an hour after I was supposed to.

I packed my clothes and other chargers, and *possibly* Alex’s gift, but not the damn AUX cord that would make this trip way more tolerable.

Blowing out a breath, I glance at the time and realize I have at least another hour and a half before I make it to my mom’s house outside of Burlington. I’ve already stopped to pee twice thanks to the giant cup of coffee I decided to buy at Dunkin before hitting the road. And I’d rather not say how many snacks I mindlessly consumed while jamming out to whatever Hot 100 song was blasting through my speakers. A few cars driving by probably heard my tone-deaf versions of Adele and Taylor Swift, but I was enjoying myself so I couldn’t care less about my less than stellar performance.

After another twenty miles, my bladder demands attention by doing some karate-kid shit in my gut. Only then do I pull into the closest gas station and take care of business. And just as I’m opening the driver’s side door to drop the plastic bag of savory goodies into the passenger seat, I see the deflating front tire.

“Are you kidding me?” I squat down and spot a nail sticking out of it. Standing up, I kick the useless piece of rubber and grab my phone. I already know that calling Mom is out of the question because she’s at her book club for at least two more hours. And since there’s usually a lot of wine involved with their colorful discussions about whatever smut they’re reading, I won’t be able to ask her to pick me up.

Which leaves my brother. I’d gotten a flat last year and never replaced the spare I’d changed it with like he’d told me to do countless of times.

He's not in Vermont right now, but I know he'll have somebody to call. His connections are vast compared to mine and usually work quicker because of what he does for a living. It's only these instances I like him tapping into his sports stardom for me to name drop himself for a quick service.

"What's wrong?" Sebastian asks as soon as he picks up. We haven't talked in a few weeks, which isn't abnormal. "You there? Or did you butt dial me again?"

"No, I'm here." I sigh heavily, already internally cringing when I see how low the tire has gotten. Between my low cell battery and lack of service bars, I know I need to just get it over with and tell him the issue. "I need help with something."

"Anything."

"I need you to...*callatowtruck*."

"Uh...what?"

I say it again just as quickly.

"Dude, slow the fuck down. What the hell are you saying?" He sounds tired, making me feel bad for taking up his time when he's probably been at practice for most of the morning.

"I have a flat tire, and I need a tow truck."

Silence.

I bite my inner cheek. "I don't have a spare..."

More silence.

My sigh comes next. "And I need your help calling somebody because I also didn't renew my Triple A like Mom told me to a million times." Each admission becomes quieter as I nudge the pavement with the toe of my Vans. They're the same bright orange as my backpack—a present from my mother last Christmas.

When my brother makes a noise, it's one of dragged-out exasperation. I sit down in the driver's seat and stare at my bag of snacks knowing what's going to come. "I thought you said you got a spare after I kept reminding you about getting it replaced."

"I lied."

He grumbles. "Why didn't you renew your Triple A? You travel back and forth from campus too much not to have that. It's important for this exact type of situation, Olive. You know...*emergencies*."

Another fact I already know. But it's not exactly like I'm stranded in the middle of nowhere. It's the middle of the day and I'm in a nicely paved

parking lot where there's food, water, and plumbing. It could have been worse.

"Technically, this isn't an emergency. And I didn't call you for a lecture." I try reeling in my irritation because I know he's coming from a good place. "I didn't have the money to renew anything or buy a new tire to put in the back. I thought I'd be fine until I scraped something together."

"Olive—"

"I know, I know. Textbooks were a little pricier than I thought they'd be this semester. My classes expected us to sell our organs to get the material they required. Who needs to spend three hundred dollars on a *used* hardback copy of Sports Journalism? It's ridiculous. I've been looking into some jobs around campus for when fall classes start since my hours at Fishtail get cut back. Reavers wants a new cashier. It probably wouldn't suck too bad, and I'd have a discount for meals."

"They don't pay shit, and working another job will eat up your time," he scolds. I vaguely remember one of his college buddies working there behind the counter at one point. He always gave me extra bacon on my BLTs. "Why didn't you say something? You know I'd give you money."

"I don't need any handouts."

"You take Mom's money."

He's right, I do. "That's because she's our mom. It's part of her job description to pass out money to her poor kids. Well, kid. Whatever." I can picture him rolling his eyes at that since he definitely doesn't need the financial help. He rarely ever did. He mowed lawns and worked on cars for people to build up his bank account when we both still lived at home. He'd rarely spend it, but when he did, it was usually on hockey gear. "Can you please just call somebody for me? I don't know anyone, and my phone is about to die."

My shoulders drop at the pathetic sound of my voice, but it must trigger something in Sebastian. "Fine. But we're talking about this later. I don't talk out of my ass for no reason, O. I'm looking out for you."

Lips twitching into a guilty frown, I nod despite him not being able to see it. "I know. And I love you for it even if I find it super annoying. Like really, *really* ann—"

"Do you want me to call for help or not?" he asks, snickering at me.

It's an empty threat. "You'd never leave me stranded. You love me too much."

“Or maybe I’d just hate the possibility of being charged with something if you get kidnapped and left in a ditch somewhere because I decided not to help you.”

My lips tug up at the corners. “The plus side to being heavy is that statistically it’d be harder to get kidnapped. More reason to eat all the sugar and bread.”

“Olive, I could bench press you.”

“That’s because you’re a freak. The average kidnapper probably doesn’t hit up a gym every day or play professional sports like you do. They would go for an easier target. Duh.”

“Whatever. I can’t see your location for some reason, so text me your address and I’ll handle it. No need to eat your weight in candy to ensure your safety.”

I open the bag of snacks beside me and pull out the small bag of Chex mix I bought. “Too late. Love you, big brother.”

After sending him my location, I peel open my snack and start scrolling through my phone once I find an old charger in my glove compartment. It’s frayed and probably doesn’t work that well, but it’s better than letting my cell die when somebody might need to get ahold of me.

And like always, I go to check the page of the one person I shouldn’t give a shit about. The one I swore I’d detox from.

But the thing about detoxing is that there’s always a chance of a few slipups along the way.

Alex’s face fills my screen. It’s a nice face. A heartbreaking one with hard lines and defined edges. He looks like Zac Efron’s little brother Dylan, and damn do those boys have good genes.

I know beneath the jersey Alex is sporting in his latest post is ridges of hard muscle that are droolworthy. If I were his agent, I’d get Calvin Klein on the phone and demand an underwear sponsorship to show off his thick thighs and six-pack. Well, four pack. He always complained about never being able to get those bottom two abs to pop out no matter how hard he ate right and trained. Nobody would care if they saw him in underwear, though.

Because I’m a masochist, I keep scrolling. Most of his posts look like pictures the team photographer took. Professional but impersonal. Like he was only putting them online because he was required to keep a social media presence.

Why would he send me a sex toy? That's the last thing I would have expected after telling him to go fuck himself. *Think about me.* What a cocky bastard. The problem is, I already do. I think about him whether I'm doing something dirty or not. And if he doesn't know it, he certainly wishes it.

When I decide I've had enough torture, I exit out of the app and debate deleting it altogether. But then I remember how much I love following my favorite makeup influencers and mindlessly scrolling on nights when I've got nothing better to do than watch makeup review videos and add expensive brands to my Christmas and birthday wish lists.

That's what I tell myself anyway.

It's better than the truth.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

Olive

AFTER FORTY-FIVE MINUTES of me stewing in my car and reassuring people I was getting my tire taken care of when they stopped to ask, a semi-familiar four-door pickup truck pulls in front of my car with a Rangers sticker on the window. Polished black paint. Jacked-up wheels. Tinted windows. When the front door opens, my eyebrows dart up at the person who steps out.

“O-Dawg!”

My jaw about drops as I peel myself out of the front seat and watch Bodhi Hoffman round the front of his ridiculous vehicle. He’s wearing sunglasses and a blue Yankees baseball cap that covers his blond hair. The basic disguise makes him blend in, but I still know who the broad-shouldered mountain of a man is.

“What are you doing here?”

He instantly wraps me up in a hug, squeezing me tightly until my ribs ache. Which is impressive considering the extra padding I have that protects me from those meaty muscles.

Whatever cologne he’s wearing caresses my senses in a way I shouldn’t like so much, so I’m glad when he pulls away to put space and fresh air between us. “Bash called me. I was in the area visiting family, so he knew I’d get here sooner than anyone else.”

I thought he’d call a professional, not one of his teammates. “Didn’t you have meetings today like Sebastian?” My brows pinch in confusion as I point toward the sad looking tire. “I just need somebody to help me with this. I don’t have a spare.”

Bodhi’s eyes go down to the problem that’s left me stranded here. “Your brother ordered a tow truck to come but they were going to be at least an hour and a half because of another call. Probably longer. He gave them your location and car info and where to send it to get it taken care of. Said something about it needing an oil change too. Come on.”

I blink as he walks over to the passenger side of his truck and opens the door for me. Sebastian knowing that I'm overdue for an oil change isn't surprising. Knowing him, he probably asked the garage to look everything else over while they had it in the shop too. He's done the same thing to Mom, although she's better at keeping up with her car's maintenance than I am.

"Come on, little Henderson," Bodhi urges, tipping his chin toward the cab. "I was promised good food and company in return for picking you up and taking you to your mom's place."

He's driving me home? Sebastian should never have asked him to do that. "That's over an hour away, Hoff. I'm sure you've got other things to do. You don't have to—"

"Christ, O," he grumbles impatiently, walking over and tossing me over his shoulder like I don't weigh what I do. I squeal as he turns us and walks over to the truck until he deposits me into passenger seat without so much as flinching. "I don't remember you arguing this much."

A shocked laugh bursts out of me for being manhandled by him. Did I mind? Hell no. Should I have? Yes. *Fake it 'til you make it.* "You didn't need to do that, you Neanderthal!"

He ignores me. "You got any snacks in your car, or do I need to go buy us some?"

I glance in the direction of my eight-year-old Toyota. "Depends on if you like beef jerky, chocolate, chips covered in artificial cheese dust, or salty cereal mix."

Minutes later, we're digging into the snacks I'd bought as he pulls onto the road. He's fiddling with the controls to switch the music until an older rock song starts playing that reminds me of Alex. It sours my mood instantly, so I tune out the Def Leppard lyrics and turn toward the driver of the truck.

"You're supposed to be in New York," I point out, frowning when his shoulders tense over the obvious statement. The Rangers are doing post-season meetings with the team and staff to gear up for the off season. They always do that before going on break. "Is everything okay?"

Bodhi isn't usually the quiet type, so when he doesn't answer right away I know something is up. "I'm dealing with some family stuff, so they told me I could catch up with them when I can."

His vague dismissal tells me not to push, so I leave it be, even though I'm nosey. The team is usually strict on their schedule, so whatever he has going on must be serious enough for them to give him some free passes on obligations. "I appreciate you picking me up. Although, you need better choices in music."

Without asking, I grab the phone plugged in and start searching for the song I want. He doesn't fight me when I change it. He simply arches a pale brow as he glances at me with a curious look when the instrumental of the new song starts.

"Who is this?"

I beam. "John Mayer. And if you say anything bad about him I'll grab the wheel and crash your truck into a ditch. Feel me?"

His light eyes widen a few seconds before the corners of his lips flick up. "You're fucked up. But I kind of dig it. It's hot."

I study him, noting the eased nature of his body as he sinks back into his seat. Whatever was stressing him out is no longer front and center on his mind, and I'm glad. I like the carefree, flirty version of him better than the somber one. "You think psychos are hot, huh?" I tease.

Sebastian's talk with me after their last home game comes to mind, but I force myself to brush it off. Flirting with Bodhi has always been harmless fun. And I'd rather see him this way than trapped in his head.

When his lips twitch higher, I know I've got him right where I want him. And even though I shouldn't, my mind conjures up the perfect way to cheer both of us up from whatever is plaguing each of our consciences.

Screw Alex and his vibrator.



BODHI LOOKS COMICALLY out of place in my mother's small floral kitchen. The floors are slanted and uneven, and anybody six-foot-four and above would be grazing their head on the ceiling; Bodhi being one of them. The curtains, dish towels, and washcloths are all the same dusty rose color—Mom's favorite. The cupboards and cabinets are all mix-matched shades of cream-colored wood, and the countertops are worn dark brown that need serious updating.

Sebastian offered to pay for an entire kitchen remodel, but our mother loves it as is even though some of the backsplash is chipped and discolored, a few cabinet handles keep falling off, and the dishwasher doesn't always work right. The only thing she agreed to let him buy her is a white fireclay sink that she's wanted for as long as I can remember.

"I can't believe you're still hungry," I comment, watching him slap the top piece of bread onto his turkey sandwich. He ate almost an entire bag of Doritos on the way here along with the beef jerky we shared.

He turns to me with a grin and then takes a large bite from the fresh sourdough bread Mom loves making. "I'm a growing boy," he remarks, chewing his food. "Plus, I'm used to eating at least five-thousand calories a day. Just don't tell my trainer about the nacho cheese chips. I promised I wouldn't eat processed shit."

I roll my eyes and grab my phone from the counter to let Mom, Skylar, and Sebastian know I'm home, then guide Bodhi into the living room to watch a movie with me since he's insistent he doesn't have anywhere to be for a while. It's not the first time he's been here. My brother had him over for Christmas last year when they struck up a fast friendship after Sebastian was drafted to the Rangers. Bodhi is from Burlington, not too far from the small town that Sebastian and I grew up in that has two stoplights, one mediocre gas station, and a lot of cow pastures.

"No Marvel this time," he tells me with a knowing look in his eye. Thanks to me, his entire team calls him Thor and usually hides random pictures of Chris Hemsworth where he can find them. In his locker. In his bag. Mixed with his gear. It's hilarious whenever I get pictures sent from Sebastian with images of the character hidden away. "I'm tempted to chop off my hair to get everybody off my back."

I gasp dramatically, reaching over and pinching a few loose strands of his blond locks between my fingers. "Don't you dare! Your hair is like Beyonce's legs."

He blinks at me.

"They're her best feature," I explain. "I think she even got them insured. Though, that could be a rumor. I wonder if you could do that with your—"

He smacks my hand away with an amused snort. "Not happening. I only keep my hair like this because I'm too damn lazy to get it cut."

A lot of pictures of him released by sports magazines consist of those bulging muscles in a tight T-shirt, and another piece of his bulging in some

extra tight briefs, with a sexy manbun atop his head. Not many guys can pull it off, but he can. “I think you look hot like that.”

One of his brow’s quirks as he gives me a subtle once over. “Yeah?”

I grin. “You know how attractive you are. Even with short hair, any straight woman or gay man would try getting with you. Plus, it’s not just your hair that makes you look like Thor. It’s the muscles. The eyes.”

Damn those eyes. If a girl isn’t careful they can get lost in that shade of blue. They’re far more vibrant than Alex’s—uniquely his own. I’ve often wondered if it was because Bodhi had less to hide. Alex’s eyes are always stormy, a mixture of gray and blue combined when he’s in a bad mood. Which is ninety percent of the time.

Bodhi leans back trying not to look cocky but fails when his lips twitch upward at the corners.

My phone buzzes, pulling my attention away from the cocky right winger.

Unknown: Have you used it yet?

Alex.

My lips twitch. He’s persistent, isn’t he?

Unknown: I’m sure you’re seeing these

Unknown: I know you hate me right now, but I bet that only makes you wetter when you touch yourself and picture me

Jesus. Why do those words make me squirm?

Because he’s not wrong.

Ugh.

“Boyfriend?” he teases.

Choosing to ignore Alex, I click my screen off and toss my phone onto the coffee table. But the damage is done. There’s an undeniable feeling between my legs that he caused.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I inform Bodhi.

I nudge him with my elbow playfully as he finishes off his sandwich, only to giggle when he starts elbowing me back. The little game back and forth has me losing my balance and laughing as I drop backward onto the couch cushions. Yanking on his arm to try catching myself, he topples over

until half his body is draped on top of mine and we're staring at one another.

I can feel everything. And I mean *everything*. Hard muscles and harder...other things.

Bodhi looks down at me curiously as my lips stretch into a wide smile and I move my fingers up to trace his jaw. "Something tells me this isn't the kind of entertainment my brother promised when he asked you to pick me up."

"Shit," he cusses, starting to push himself off me before I grab onto his forearm and shake my head.

"I didn't say I minded."

I know what the heat in his eyes means just like I know what the sudden twitch in his pants is from. He clears his throat, swiping his tongue across his bottom lip. "Olive..."

I swallow, only giving myself a few seconds before making a move on the bulky hockey star hovering over me. The second our lips brush, his body tenses. I pull back just far enough to give him the option to move away. To reject me.

But he doesn't.

And the truth is, I'm glad. Because I need this. Fun. Spontaneous. I need to feel something other than anger and confusion for once.

Screw Alex and his dirty texts.

Sighing, Bodhi murmurs, "This is a bad fucking idea."

I don't know who he's trying to convince.

Himself or me.

"We don't have to do anything," I say. I hope he doesn't take the out. I watch him with hooded eyes, biting into my bottom lip and waiting to see any hint of emotion that gives him away. I know he's attracted to me. He's a natural flirt, but I can see the way his eyes linger when I'm around. My brother wouldn't have warned me about him if he didn't sense the same thing.

Was I taking advantage of him by wanting this? Maybe. But I wasn't forcing him one way or another. He's said it before; we're two consenting adults.

His eyes flick over my face in contemplation. I don't know what he's trying to find. An excuse. A reason to say no. Whatever he's searching for he obviously doesn't find.

“Your brother is going to kill me.”

I brush the pad of my thumb along his bottom lip and say, “My brother won’t find out.”

I kiss him again, this time harder than before until he uses his lips to pry mine open and taste my tongue. A low groan rises from his throat, swallowed by the flick of my tongue along his teeth. I flatten my back along the length of the couch until his body settles between my parted thighs.

The make out session is hot and heavy as our hands explore each other, winding up under one another’s clothing until we’re writhing and capturing the breathy sounds that escape our lips from the strategic touches.

I moan with each flick of his fingers beneath the fabric of my panties.

He cusses at the stroke of my palm over his impressive length that’s hard and smooth.

I know we should move this to my room, but I’m too far gone after the drawn-out orgasm created by his thick, talented fingers to care about privacy. After I’m sated, I start yanking down his jeans enough to free his erection from the denim and help him lower my bottoms too.

Wrapping my palms around him again, he swears and drops his forehead against the arm of the couch beside my head. “I don’t have a condom.”

I freeze, chest deflating. “What?”

“I didn’t exactly anticipate this happening.”

I lick my lips, feeling his cock twitch in my palm that I experimentally squeeze. A garbled noise comes from him as he thrusts forward into my hand.

His lips trail to my neck. “We could get each other off again in other ways.”

We could. *God* we could.

But I need more. “I’m on the pill.”

Bodhi groans. “Don’t tell me that. That’s not a good idea. Trust me.”

“Just pull out to be safe,” I say.

“You’re going to be the end of me.”

I can’t help but snort, causing him to pick his head up and smirk at me. “Hopefully not until after we get to the good stuff. I’d be disappointed if this ended before it began. And it might be hard to explain to my mom why I’m trapped half naked under you with your dick inside me.”

He clenches his eyelids closed. “That mouth of yours...”

I peck his lips with mine, nipping the bottom one and drawing out another indiscernible noise from deep in his chest. "Maybe you'll find out how amazing this mouth is after you show me what your cock can do."

It doesn't take him long after that to make up his mind, kissing me as he guides himself to my entrance. Nudging my legs further apart with his knees, he positions himself at my core and pushes in. He's bigger than what I'm used to, making me wince slightly as he stretches me out.

"You good?" he asks quietly, stopping halfway in to let me adjust before moving again.

I nod, hooking an arm around his neck and a leg around his waist as best I can since my pants are still partially on. "It's been..." I stop myself from admitting it's been a while. "Just fuck me before I have to get the job done myself, Hoffman."

I have the technology now.

His eyes flash at the command before he happily obeys.

There's something both gentle and not about his hard, fast movements. The creak of the old couch is going to replay in my mind as he cradles my head and kisses me like he means it, even if we both know he doesn't.

I'll never be able to look at the piece of furniture the same again as my brother's teammate pumps into me, kneading my ass, my breasts, sucking my tongue, and whispering every dirty thought on his mind into my ear until I'm at the brink of a second orgasm.

"That's it. Take me."

"Jesus fucking Christ you feel so good."

"You're going to make me cum so hard."

He lifts my shirt up and rises enough to pop one of my E's free from the bra cup it's trapped in and tweak the hardened nipple with one hand while playing with my clit with his other. The swipe over the sensitive nerves sparks something in me that arches my back up.

"I can feel you coming," he groans as I clench him. He grabs my ass and lifts me enough to hit the perfect spot inside of me until his eyes start rolling back as his movements becomes jerky. Between his face, the sounds between us, and the whining furniture, it's too much.

I come, my body arching from the sensations coursing down my spine and spasming around him until he pulls out, lifts onto his knees, and spills onto my breasts and stomach. His hot cum marks me as much as his heated gaze does, making me flush at the mess. "Fuck," he groans, staring at the

mess he made as he strokes himself until every last drop is out. “I think my soul left my body for a second.”

We’re both catching our breaths when he lowers himself to kiss me one last time before peeling himself off me and grabbing a few tissues from the box resting on the coffee table.

He cleans me off, glancing up and asking, “So, who’s the guy?”

My eyes flick up to meet his, brows furrowing. “Who says there’s a guy?”

His smile is all-knowing. “You’ve never entertained the thought of doing this before, which tells me there’s somebody you’re either trying to get over or piss off. And I saw the text.”

The text. He saw that and still let me...?

I wet my lips. “You tell me your woes and I’ll tell you mine. Why aren’t you in New York?”

My bargain is met with silence.

Just like I knew it would be.

And the victorious feeling I *thought* I’d feel when we’re both clothed and choosing a movie sitting on opposite ends of the couch makes me wonder if I should have just used the damn vibrator instead.

Because your problems always find you in the end.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alex

BELLE'S PLACE is styled as a 1920's speakeasy. Dull music is muted as I follow Clarkson and the guys in, still dressed in my conference attire that doesn't feel as out of place as I thought it would be. The room is dimly lit, and the jazz music is getting louder as we're escorted by a blond woman in a short, sexier version of flapper-style garb to a set of stairs leading up to a private loft that's above a small stage area where an instrumental band is playing.

I glance over the railing to study the assortment of people responsible for the calming music before somebody smacks my back and brings my attention to the woman who seated us. Her expectant eyes and arched brows tell me she's collecting orders. "And for you?"

"Scotch on the rocks."

Her smile stretches as she turns with grace and struts toward the stairs with more than one set of eyes following each swiveled step.

"That's Belle," Moskins tells me, grinning in my direction once Belle disappears. Based on the way his eyes were glued to her ass, I'm assuming he may be involved with her as well. "She always personally ensures we're taken care of. When we come in she only has the best of the best come serve us."

Clarkson nods. "She knows why we come here and makes anybody who handles us understand that we want our presence kept on the downlow."

"You're forgetting the hottest part," George Berkley, our right defenseman, says from the corner of the booth. "She's a season passholder. Only misses a game if there's a serious emergency in her life. Nothing more loyal than a woman who's a true fan."

That gets collective noise of agreement from the guys, making me think of an entirely different woman than the one currently balancing a tray of drinks on her palm as she ascends the stairs again. The green-eyed girl who

dominates my thoughts hasn't texted me back once, but I know damn well she's seeing every message I send.

And I have a feeling she's reacting to them, which is why her pride is telling her to give me the cold shoulder. I know I'll break her down eventually.

I watch the band below us and think about the press conference. Because of Olive's pep talk, I'd survived it with minimal pauses. And the pictures I saw online made me look...confident. Natural. Not one pit stain in sight. Even Coach Pelfrey told me I looked like I belonged up there, and that hardass rarely doles out compliments.

For the most part, I was asked questions about my training, if I thought we had a better chance at the cup next season, how I was adjusting to life as a league player, and if any of my teammates offered me any good advice. Basic. Expected. But then other questions started arising. Questions about my family. About my friends. About my dating life. And it was obvious when I clammed up that there was a lot to be said about those things, which only made them more curious about the subject matter like sharks smelling blood.

Do you have a girl at home who's cheering you on? How is your family handling your success and time away from home? Do you keep in touch with any former teammates you played with at Lindon University?

The last one was almost laughable considering they name dropped Sebastian Henderson and the title he proclaimed as one of the New York Rangers best defenseman of the past decade. Is he good? Yeah. Better than good. I would never tell that to my teammates or to a room full of cameras. He doesn't need the ego stroke. I also didn't mention that I had a habit of fucking his little sister. Even if I had something against Henderson's stardom, I'd never do that to Olive.

Protecting my peace came first, so instead of answering all of their personal questions, I simply told them I had a good support system that's helped me acclimate to the team. Not entirely the truth, but also not a complete lie either.

Cracking my neck and sinking into my seat, I raise my glass to my lips and take a long sip of the scotch. The only time I glance over at the owner of the establishment is to dip my chin in appreciation when she winks at me and gives the guys their orders. Some of them ask for food, some of them

ask her out. She laughs it off like it's a common joke among the group, which it probably is.

There's a subtle blush to her cheeks when her eyes glance in Clarkson's direction, but it goes unnoticed by the man himself. He's oblivious and it tugs my lips up as he leans over and says something to Smith Miller about a few tactics he'd talked to Pelfrey about practicing when we come back for pre-season.

Only then does Belle snap out of whatever thought she's in and nods at something Berkley tells her, her professional face back in place as she turns to me. "Do you want anything to eat, Alex?"

My first name on her dark lips—some shade of sultry purple—startles me. I've seen Olive wear a similar shade when we went to a highlighter party together back in Lindon. I don't know what she put on her lips, but they glowed in the dark that night and made them more alluring than they already were to me.

It's rare that anybody uses my name other than my mother or Olive. If I'm not having 'O'Conner' shouted at me, it's usually 'forty-three', 'dickhead', or 'motherfucker'.

Ironically, most of those names are thrown in my direction by the same fiery green-eyed, dirty blond who my conscious keeps coming back to in silent taunt.

"Looks like he wants your number," Moskins snickers, reaching over and punching my shoulder as if we're buddy-buddy. He's never done anything to me, but I still have a feeling about the guy that makes me want to keep my distance.

I give a subtle glance in Clarkson's direction to see any type of reaction from the comment, but he's staring down at his phone as if he's not even here at all.

We all have secrets.

I wonder what his is.

"I'm good," I tell Belle, rolling my tight shoulders.

"On getting my number or some food?" Her response is playful, light. Something I'm not entirely used to. Casual has become a thing of the past when it comes to women because something always gets in the way. "Because we have a great chef here who knows how to utilize the kitchen."

"And you?" I ask, playing along with her banter.

Her tongue dips out and runs along her lower lip for a moment. "It's not the kitchen I'm good at utilizing. My skillset is elsewhere."

From the corner of my eye, I see Clarkson's jaw tick as he sets his phone down onto the table. When his attention lifts, it only lands on Belle for a few short seconds before shifting to me. "You going to order or not, O'Conner? I want my damn cheese fries."

Miller chuckles from beside him, and Moskins grins like he suspects the same thing I do based on the gruff question shot at me. I'm not offended. We all probably have territory we've claimed and would get mad at when someone else stepped on it.

"Maybe another time," I simply reply to the owner. "Might want to get our captain something before he goes Hulk on this place. Sounds like he's getting hangry."

Berkley coughs to hide his laugh, scratching his neck and darting his eyes toward the railing that looks out over the bottom floor of the club. I'm sure they all know whatever is going on between Clarkson and Belle, and I'm sure as hell not getting in the middle of it.

When she leaves, it takes a few long stretches of silence before Clarkson slides out of the booth and disappears down the stairs behind her. It doesn't take a genius to figure out where he's headed. Or, specifically, who he's heading to see.

Berkley lifts his drink and takes a sip before saying, "Belle is his stepsister."

My brows dart up my forehead at the unexpected piece of information. "Are they...close?"

Moskins chokes on whatever colorful concoction he ordered. "You could say that. None of us really know how close they are, though."

"Or how close they've gotten," Isaac Nelson, our other starting defense mutes from his side of the table.

"But," Moskins continues, "he's territorial over her. The situation is complicated. I'd steer clear. She likes to flirt with all of us. We mostly return the favor to see what Cap will do. Unfortunately, he normally grunts and stays silent."

"No fun," Berkley agrees.

I find myself smirking at their theatrics. My old team used to do that to each other when we were into people. Badger would hassle me over Olive more times than I could count. When I graduated, I wondered if he would

make a move the second I was gone. The thought makes my fingers twitch around my scotch glass.

“Well, you don’t have anything to worry about on my end,” I tell them.

“Got somebody taking up all your energy at home?” Miller asks, his curiosity drawing the attention of the others like they also want to know what my deal is.

I haven’t been seen with women when we’ve been leaving stadiums. Nobody has captured me escorting anybody in or out of my apartment building in the center of the city or the hotels we stay at when we’re traveling. I keep to myself as much as possible because I’ve got too much going for me to fuck up over of a mindless lay.

I guess I’m as much of a mystery to them as they are to me.

I lean back, draping an arm on the back of the booth. “Who says I only have one person taking up my energy, Smithy?”

It’s not untrue. Between Mom and Olive, I’ve got enough women in my life to keep me busy for a long while. They just take up my energy for very different reasons.

Miller’s head cocks, trying to gauge whether he believes me or not. Some of the guys smack me in amusement, others grin wryly like they enjoy the perks of our job as much as I’m implying I do. The women. The attention. It’s nice at times, I can’t deny that. But the easy sex isn’t high on my priority list like it seems to be for some of the others. Have I indulged? Yeah. At Lindon, the guys at the frat house said I should consider charging the girls that stayed the night in my room a fee since there were frequent visitors. That died down when Olive and I got involved because she proved to be more worth my while than any of those others combined. I could talk game with her, banter and get it dished back. She wasn’t like the others, and I liked it.

Way too much.

But now my time is better spent training, working out, and focusing on things beyond how to get off when I need relief. My hand does the trick just fine when I feel pent up.

For the rest of the night, I nurse my drink, order one more, and then cut myself off. I know what repercussions will happen if I don’t.

One other server comes upstairs while Belle is otherwise occupied, presumably with our captain after he disappeared, and she doesn’t hide the hungry look she gives more than one of us as she passes out food and drink

refills. Her tits are on full display in the deep cut of her tight dress and her lips are thick and painted with the type of invitation any of us would probably accept in a heartbeat if she made the first move. I sure as hell would if I decide to down another scotch.

Something feels off, though.

And whatever that inkling is rising in the pit of my stomach has me unsettled. "I think I'm going to head out," I tell the guys, tapping Berkley to move so I can slide out of the booth.

"You good?" he asks.

I lift a shoulder. "Beat. That's all."

Whether he buys it or not is beyond me. I slap his hand and wave a few of the guys off, heading down the stairs and toward the back exit that we came in earlier. The alleyway the door leads out is dark, with only a single small light lit as the door clicks closed behind me.

I pull out my phone when it vibrates in my pocket with the false hope that Olive's name will be displayed across the screen.

Instead, dread drops my stomach when I see Logan Hospital's number on it.

"Alex speaking," I answer, trying to even my tone. I know if the hospital is calling, it's probably not a good sign.

"Alex, it's Pam," the head nurse greets. Despite her calm voice, I know she's not calling to make small talk.

"Did something happen?"

She clears her throat. "There was an incident," she says softly. "Unfortunately, visiting hours this week will be cancelled for her until we can get her on the right medication. I'll let you know when you can come see her."

Closing my eyes, I pinch my nose. I'd cleared my schedule already, but what was I going to do? I knew Mom needed help, and me forcing my way in when she wasn't in the right state of mind wasn't going to get her anywhere.

"Okay."

"I'm sorry, Alex. We'll get it right, but it takes time. Some medications take months to figure out if it works or not. The last one we tried was too hard on her kidneys. We're close, though. I can feel it."

Teeth grinding, I murmur, "And the therapy sessions? Has she been talking?"

Her sigh is light. “Unfortunately, she’s still closed off during them. We’ve found that it helps when family comes with them. Perhaps the next time you come we can schedule you for that. Maybe she’ll speak more openly knowing someone is there who she trusts.”

I’m not the one who needs it, so it’s on the tip of my tongue to say no. But if it helps Mom... “I don’t know. Can I think about it?”

“Of course. I know none of this is easy.”

Wetting my lips, I nod to myself. “Just help her. Please.”

“We will,” she promises before I disconnect the call.

I don’t realize anybody is behind me until Clarkson bumps my arm. “You good?”

I stand a little taller, trying to feign nonchalance. But something tells me the captain can see right through it. And God only knows what he heard. “Better than ever. In fact, I think I might take some time off to visit old friends.”

Clarkson scratches the side of his cheek, above the long scar stretching across the right side of it. He got a blade to the face during his first year in the NHL that almost took out his eye. I always thought it made him look intimidating, but that’s not who he is at all.

He’s not a big talker, but he asks, “You sure everything is all right? I don’t know what that was about, but it sounded serious.”

I glance at my phone, which is white knuckled in my grip. “From what I saw in there, you might want to worry about yourself, Cap.”

It’s a dick thing to say, but I don’t want to spill my guts to him or anybody else.

Patting his shoulder, I walk out to the street where my car is parked along the curb.

Clarkson doesn’t try stopping me.



THE DILAPIDATED SINGLE-STORY ranch used to look picturesque once. But now the sky-blue siding is chipped and rotting, some of the black shutters have fallen off, and the flower boxes that used to hold colorful plants only have dirt, dead bugs, and fallen leaves in them.

Gripping my steering wheel one last time, I kill the car and get out. It's been a while since I've been here, and the last time certainly didn't add any happy memories when I tricked my mother into getting into the car with me to go to Logan's. But it was rare that there were good moments at this place anyway.

Using one of the spare keys on my chain, I unlock the door and cringe at the loud squeal of the hinges as I push it open. It smells musty despite hiring somebody to come do a thorough cleaning after Mom was admitted. I make a mental note to get somebody here to check on the place every so often. Maybe spray an air freshener inside every month.

I walk into the living room and fight the frown as my eyes settle on the faded reddish-orange stain on the carpet beside the coffee table.

"You need to eat something," I tell the woman whose been plastered to the couch for two days straight. Setting the bowl of tomato soup down onto the table, I say, "Come on, Mom. I made your favorite."

She eyes the bowl with a frown, then rolls onto her other side and pulls the blanket further up her body. "I'm not hungry."

I swipe my hand down my face and glance at the time on my watch. I'm going to be late for practice. Again. "You haven't eaten since yesterday morning, and you only ate half a piece of toast. You need to eat something else."

Suddenly, her hand darts out and smacks into the bowl of hot liquid, sending it flying off the table. I stare at the splattered mess on my shoes, jeans, and the floor knowing it's not going to clean easily. "I said I'm not fucking hungry! Why won't you listen to me? You and him never listen to me!" she yells, grabbing the tissue box and throwing that at me too.

I block my face with my hands so it doesn't hit me. "Mom, calm down. I'm just trying to look out for you. I know you're sad—"

"He's dead, Alexander! If he didn't leave us, he'd be alive right now. If he stayed—"

"Stop," I cut her off, feeling my throat thicken with emotion over Dad. "Just...stop."

Tears pool in her eyes. "I miss him."

I kneel down, using some of the tissues to try soaking up the mess. Quietly, I murmur, "I miss him too. But Dad wouldn't want to see you like this. You know that."

We're quiet as I try cleaning up the best I can while thinking about the penalty my coach is going to give me for being late. Last time, I had to make up the drills I missed and add three sets of reps to our normal workout routine on the ice. The time before that, I had to help clean the locker room, which was made of nightmares. Maybe if I were honest, he'd go easier on me. But that would mean opening up about my home life, and I have no intention of doing that. I'd take the consequences, no matter how much my body burned afterward.

By the time I'm done, I walk into the living room to see if she'll try eating a piece of bread. Anything. But she's sleeping soundly, and it's the only time she looks peaceful.

Disposing of the dirty dishes into the sink, I sigh at the bright stain on the carpet and decide there's nothing more I can do.

So, I leave her note about the food in the fridge and go to practice.

Coach Maher makes me skate fifty laps and threatens to sit me out during our next game.

Shaking off the memory, I walk over the soup stain in the beige carpet and head toward the kitchen. The ceiling has a large water stain on it, and I can hear the faint *drip, drip, drip* coming from the crawl space above.

"Great," I grumble, knowing I'll have to get someone to deal with that before it becomes a bigger problem. I don't know how old the roof is, but I know Mom has been told at least twice in the past five years that it needs to be redone. One of the neighbors helped me patch it a few times when small leaks happened around the chimney, but they were temporary fixes at best. It was only a matter of time before the beams would rot and loosen, creating a larger issue than the one staring at me in the face.

Heading toward my childhood bedroom, I stop at the door before it and hesitate to turn the knob. The door jamb is still damaged, stirring old feelings in the pit of my stomach from when I had to break into the room. But I don't want to think about that—the final straw that led us here.

There were a lot of moments inside this room that made it hard to enter. One time when I checked on Mom inside, it smelled like garbage and body odor, and she'd destroyed almost every piece of clothing she had in a rampage. She'd gotten fired from work because of her attitude and tardiness, causing her to go a week-long tangent of highs and lows that I could barely tolerate. At one point, I went to Dad's house. But I knew I couldn't stay because Mom needed me.

I wish I told him how bad it'd gotten.

He would have helped.

At least, he would have tried.

Letting go of the doorknob before I can open it, I back away and walk into my room. The old hockey posters on the wall range from the Boston Bruins to Tampa Bay Lightning—both signed by my favorite players on each team. There are signed baseballs in display cases on the shelf from the games my father took me to as a kid, memorabilia from annual vacations to Cape Cod and Long Island scattered on my desk, and old clothes in my dresser that stopped fitting me when I hit puberty.

Mom has gone on too many rampages to count, but she's never touched my room. Not even after I left to live at the frat house off campus. She'd call all the time to tell me she missed me, and on really bad days she threatened to sell all my stuff if I didn't come home, but she never did. Even at her worst, she remembered who she was and how much she loved me.

Swiping my hand over my dusty blue comforter set, I move the curtains out of the way and stare out the window. The backyard is as overgrown as the front, reminding me that I need to hire a landscaping company to keep up with it. If I were smart, I'd pull the push mower out of the back shed and do it myself while I have the time.

But this isn't where I plan on spending the night.

Grabbing my keys from the kitchen counter, I give one last spare look to the lackluster home I grew up in before locking the door behind me. It's the first time I can breathe since stepping inside, leaving the walls full of memories behind me.

Giving a fleeting wave to the neighbor across the street, I slide into my car and drive to the bar with an OPEN sign flickering in the window.

When I walk in, the owner looks at me with her brows so far up they almost disappear from her forehead. "Surprised to see you here, superstar."

I offer Judy an easy smile. "I have a little time to kill and wanted to check up on a few things."

"Things," she muses with a knowing grin. "Or people?"

I walk over to the bar where she's stacking glasses on the shelf. "Both," I reply.

Judy chuckles. "She's not here, honey."

"She's not working tonight?"

She stops what she's doing and leans on the bar. "Olive is visiting family for a few weeks. It's just me, Jeff, Kayleigh, and the temps I hired on for the summer."

Visiting family. I slowly nod. "In Vermont?"

Judy hums. "That is where her family lives," she remarks, going back to stacking. She glances over her shoulder. "You got family there, too, you need to check on?"

My lips twitch at the pointed question. "I just might."

Before she can respond, there's a familiar, "I thought that was you," coming from behind me before someone grabs my shoulder.

Tristain Badger grins, holding out his hand for me to clasp in greeting. "Hey, Badger."

"I thought you weren't coming until before pre-season?" he asks, taking the spot beside me.

I lift a shoulder. "Changed my mind. I've only got the weekend. Thought I'd pop in and see some people."

His eyes light up. "She ain't here."

I play dumb. "I don't know who you're talking about."

Judy laughs abruptly from behind the counter before she sets a bottle of Bud Light in front of me and my former teammate.

I spend the rest of the night catching up with Badger and getting hit on by college girls.

But they're not the ones I came here to see.

Snapping a photo of the bar, I send it to Olive without a caption.

Within minutes, I see bubbles appear at the bottom of the screen.

But she never texts me back.

I grin.

Because now I know she wants to.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Olive

MOM'S VERSION OF a "small" glass of wine would get me fired from Fishtail if I ever served anyone the same amount. Then again, the woman whose image is like a glimpse into the future whenever I look at her also used to give me and Sebastian alcohol underage.

"You've got that look," she accuses, bopping my nose with her finger like I'm a puppy as she walks around me to raid the fridge. I know exactly what she's grabbing, and smile to myself when she pulls out at least three different kinds of cheeses.

I grab the board she's going to get next and set it on the counter. "I don't have a look."

"Yes, you do," she argues. "It's in your eyes."

Damn. How does she always know when something is on my mind? It isn't like my eyes change colors. At least, I don't think they do.

Truthfully, I've been thinking about Alex. Because when am I not these days? He makes it hard to forget him when he sends those stupid texts. And his last one makes me wonder why he's in Lindon. Not only Lindon, but at the bar I work at when he almost never used to go there when he lived there. It makes no sense.

Mom grabs a knife and starts slicing the cheese, making my mouth water. "I was thinking about how you'd let Seb and I drink when we were teenagers," I lie. Sort of. She did. I'm pretty sure the first time I ever got drunk was at home.

With Mom. From cheap box wine that tasted more like juice than alcohol.

Mom pauses to look at me. "Well, you two were going to do it anyway. At least if I knew about it there could be some ground rules."

And that's why I love her. Well, one of the reasons. Going over to the pantry, I dig through the different shelves until I find the crackers. "Do we want Saltines or something fancier?"

“Like those awful wicker-tasting things you love so much?” she questions with disgust heavy in her tone.

Snorting, I bring out a sleeve of Saltines and a box of garden herb Triscuits. “I never make you eat them, do I?”

All she does is sigh as she focuses on the cheese, making sure each slice is precise. She’s mildly OCD like that. “Bad day at the office?” I ask when I stare at her glass of red wine. “Or are we celebrating something?”

She frowns at the glass I got her for Christmas that says, “it’s not drinking alone if your dog is home” before turning to me. Except, we don’t have a dog anymore. So...

“You’re home. That’s plenty reason to celebrate.”

As if she never sees me. “I’ve been home for three days,” I point out. “You just don’t remember the first one because your girlfriends got you super drunk at book club while discussing the deeper meaning of Jane Austen.”

She eyes me but doesn’t argue because she knows there wasn’t a Jane Austen book in sight at her little club meeting. Only wine and snacks.

“And,” I add, stealing a piece of sliced Monterey jack, “I come home every month to see you. It’s not like I went off to school and never came back or called. I’m pretty sure I talk to you more now that I go to college than when I lived here.”

It’s true. Not that I’m complaining. My mom has always been my best friend. Sebastian is a close second. Our family bond has been strong for years, and it seemed to only get stronger when we all went our separate ways.

Which makes me think about what’s going to happen when I graduate. It crossed my mind a time or two, but my conversation with Skylar reminded me I needed to start thinking about jobs and moving home.

And the more I think about how little I know what the next step is, that familiar weight tugs on my consciousness. It tries dragging me down, down, down into the deepest depths of my mind. Which is the last place I want to be. The second uncertainty finds me, it holds on like a hawk clenching onto its prey for dear life in its talons. Then the panic seeps in. I don’t want to go to that dark place where I have to force a smile and pretend I’m not freaking out about my future.

Mom puts away the blocks of cheese when she’s done with them and takes out the olives and pepperoni slices to add to her makeshift charcuterie

board. "I know, I know. But it's been three days, and I feel like you've barely told me anything. When I got home, you and Bodhi were so quiet. You're normally bickering about whatever is on TV or you're yelling at him for eating your food. It's like you're siblings."

I choke on the cheese.

"Oh, honey!" she drops what she's doing to get me a glass of water. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I wheeze, coughing up the food. "I just don't think of Bodhi as a sibling."

She passes me the glass and watches carefully as I sip the water. "I get it. It's hard to look at someone attractive that way. But ever since you met him, you've bantered just like you and Sebastian always have. I think it's cute."

Oh, God. That's just...really gross to think about considering Bodhi was all up in my business only days ago. "Can we change the subject to something less disturbing?"

Mom laughs, rubbing my shoulder. "I didn't realize that was going to strike a nerve. Did something happen between you two?"

My face grows hot, so I hide it behind the water cup. "Like what?" I ask, my words echoing into the glass and steaming the sides with my breath.

"I don't know. A fight?"

A fight. Sure. We could go with that. Because if I told her the truth, she'd probably never sit on her favorite couch again. Although, it's hideous. Getting rid of it might not be a bad idea. "No, I wouldn't say there was a fight. I suppose we just didn't feel super chatty about personal stuff that was happening in our lives when it was brought up."

That part isn't a lie. I may have been chasing a feeling to get my mind off of Alex, but it was clear Bodhi was doing the same. I still want to know why he wasn't at practice, and when I asked Sebastian after he called with updates on my car, he'd told me it was none of my business.

Which means he knows and isn't telling me. But I respect his loyalty to his friend, even if my curiosity has been thoroughly piqued.

Sibling. I shiver at the thought of Bodhi being a Henderson. No way.

The anticlimactic answer seems to disappoint the woman who's been my biggest supporter since birth. "Oh. Well, you can tell me about the happenings in your life. Any cute boys I should know about?"

I steal more cheese. “You know me. There’s always a line out the door of cute boys waiting to woo me.”

She pins me with a look. “If they were smart they would be.”

Before she can lecture me about self-worth and how beauty is within and all that jazz, I butt in. “I wanted to focus on school this year. There *might have been* a boy once. But that got a little complicated and I didn’t need the distraction.”

Mom stops what she’s doing and turns her full body to me. “Why didn’t you say anything when it happened? I knew something was up whenever you’d come home with that shine missing in your eyes, but you never wanted to talk about it.”

What is with her and my eyes? “It was just a silly boy. And what do you see in my eyes that gives me away so easily?”

“You love so deeply, but so cautiously,” she tells me, putting her hand on mine. “You’re just like me. And, sometimes, that worries me. I shut myself off from love a long time ago. But you’re so young. You don’t deserve to look at the world, at people, so cynically. You still have a light in your eyes, baby girl. When you’re hurt, you try so hard to pretend you’re not. But that light flickers the more you fight it.”

I don’t know why that settles so far into my chest, but it does. Swallowing, I shake my head. “He was just a boy, Mom. I still have plenty of light left.”

Well, maybe not a boy. A man. A professional hockey player. And Sebastian’s college nemesis and current rival. But whatever. Those were all minor details.

“I’ve had my fair share of heartbreak, and they can hurt,” she sympathizes. “I just want you to know I’m here for you if you ever want to talk.”

Is this going to become a mother-daughter *Gilmore Girls* moment? As much as I love that show, I hope not. I really, really hope not. “It sucked, but it’s done with. There isn’t anything left to talk about. Plus, it felt kind of nice being able to focus on classes. I made Media Advertising my bitch despite the professor lowkey hating me.”

She doesn’t scold me for the language I know she doesn’t like. I think she gave that pointless venture up when Sebastian started playing hockey and she heard the foul talk coming from his teammates. “Well, if you ever want to talk about it—”

"I'm good," I reassure her. "Promise."

Her eyes scan me for a moment before nodding, letting it go. "All right, sweetie. Do you want a glass of wine? I thought we could watch a movie together like we used to."

"*Pride and Prejudice* or the new *Emma* movie?" I ask with a quirked brow as she grabs a second wine glass from the cupboard.

Her smile stretches. "Well, *Emma* is the novel I was supposed to read for book club. So it wouldn't hurt to know what happens."

I snort. "You could, I don't know, *read* the book."

She shrugs, pouring me a glass of wine that definitely goes over the six-to-nine-ounce rule. But I don't complain. "I think I'll be just fine watching the movie. The only reason we chose Jane Austen is because the girls thought we were reading too much smut. Can you believe that? Anyway, you grab the wine, I've got the cheese board."

Another reason I love my mother.

The rest of the night, we don't talk about boys or heartbreak or what comes after graduation. We watch sappy romances based on nineteenth-century literature, drink wine, and eat our weight in cheese, crackers, and processed meats.

And it's one of the best nights I've had in a while.



A FEW DAYS later, I'm mentally beating my head against a wall as I talk to my brother on the phone. "You promised," I remind Sebastian, staring at the Bluetooth call that's been going on for eight and a half minutes as I drive down the highway. "I knew you were going to do this, and you said you wouldn't, but I *knew*."

He's backing out of the visit with dear old Dad. Again. "Something came up," he tells me vaguely. Just like I knew he would.

"You know what else is up? My *foot* up your butt," I grumble, clenching my fingers around the leather until my knuckles turn white.

"You don't have to go, you know. You're an adult," he points out. "Neither one of us is obligated to see him just because he's our dad. I don't know why you keep putting yourself through this when it never ends well."

I know he's got a point, but I'd feel like an ass if I was here and didn't see him. I'm always visiting Mom, but never Dad on my weekends home from school. Not that he ever asks to see me then.

Sebastian has never had an issue cutting people out of his life. But me? I'm a masochistic people pleaser; a Taylor Swift song waiting to be written. Well, come to think of it, there's probably a song already out about that. I'd have to relisten to her discography.

"I keep thinking each visit will be better," I admit to my big brother. "I mean, it can't be worse than when he was dating that wannabe Victoria Secret model, right?"

Vickki. Blah. Even her name makes me bitter.

Just because she was a double zero at thirty-five-years-old didn't mean I wanted to be. But she couldn't get that through her pea-sized brain.

"If you need backup, Bodhi is still with his family," he offers, making my fingers twitch along the wheel.

Bodhi posted something with the team a couple days ago. Sebastian had been tagged. It could have been an old photo. My brother told me that they have to post a certain number of times a year, and a lot of them fulfill that requirement with backdated images. "Is he here for the summer?"

"On and off" is all my brother says.

More vague answers. Cool.

"I can handle Dad," I tell him reluctantly. My voice comes out whinier than I mean it to. "I just wish you'd be here. You could distract him with all your success and make him proud to have fathered somebody making something of their lives, so he doesn't have to lecture me on proper diet and exercise and failing at mine."

"Dad can go fuck himself with that," he instantly replies, voice hard. "It isn't like he's the peak of physical health."

True, but I'd never say anything about it. "It's fine. I've gotten used to it."

He's quiet for a second. "You shouldn't have to be used to that shit. I'm sorry I can't make it today. I'm still planning on seeing Mom next week. Are you going to be there?"

I don't plan on going back to Lindon until mid-July when I promised Judy I'd be back to help at Fishtail. I always try picking up as many shifts as I can before the semester starts because I have to cut my hours back to

make time for classes and homework. “I’ll be here. But you better be extra nice to me since you’re feeding me to the lions.”

Okay, calling Dad a lion gives him way more credit than he deserves. But whatever. “You’ll be fine” is all he says, making me roll my eyes.

“Whatever, Sergeant Butt Face.” The name he used to call me when we were kids makes him snort, cracking a grin on my face.

When we disconnect I mentally prepare myself for the next handful of hours. I’ll be miserable, but at least I’ll fulfill my annual duty of seeing my father. He sends me cards and birthday texts every year, and usually a present consisting of a gift card or cash at Christmas but doesn’t make much of an effort outside of that.

One day.

Six hours max.

That’s all I need to get through.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

Olive

SIX HOURS WAS going by as slow as a sixty-second plank. Not that I ever do those. Obviously. I just hear they suck.

And being around my father sucks too.

It's been two hours.

Two very, very long hours. It started off okay. He came out as soon as I pulled into the driveway and gave me a hug that felt almost fatherly. It was...strange. But it didn't last.

Nope.

As soon as I walked inside holding the bottle of Coca-Cola that I bought at a gas station, it went downhill quickly. Mostly because Candi told me how bad soda was for me as if this was new news. The woman who barely looks my age is apparently unemployed after being fired from a club where she was a hostess. I don't know how one gets fired from hosting, but it doesn't seem like she's too upset about it or that eager to find something else.

"...ten teaspoons of sugar! That's an entire day's daily intake of sugar in *one* drink," Candi drones on. I thought we'd moved on from this, but here I am, drinking my brown-dyed sugar liquid and nod like I'm supposed to care. "The least you could do is switch to Coke Zero if you're going to continue living this way."

This way. Internally, I snort. If being slightly addicted to Coca-Cola is the worst thing I do, I think I'm doing okay. It could be heroin. "At least I'm not drinking the original recipe that had residual cocaine in it from the leaves they used," I offer with a smile on my face.

Candi blinks, trying to decipher my chipper tone. "Cocaine is a horrible drug. I used to have a friend who thought she could lose weight on it, but the exact opposite happened. She *gained* weight. At least twenty pounds."

I look between her and Dad, wondering if he'll step in. But who am I kidding? He won't. "I hear heroin does wonders for weight loss. You should

pass that along to her.”

“Olive,” Dad chides, as if *I’m* the one being unreasonable even though she’s the one who brought up her friends bad dieting habits.

“What? That’s what I’ve heard.”

Candi pats my father’s knee. “She’s right, Luke. It’s so sad to see how many people go to drugs.”

I roll my eyes and finish my drink.

“You know,” Candi says, turning to me. “I used to be a health coach.” *Here we go.* “And I could give you some pointers. Maybe help you lose some weight or learn how to eat right.”

I know how to eat right, I just choose not to get my daily intake of vegetables like I do my sugar. I don’t need anybody to give me a basic food list of things everybody knows they *should* be eating.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I tell her, knowing damn well I won’t take her up on it.

Dad clears his throat. “She’s helped me lose about fifteen pounds since we started seeing each other. It could really help you. I even go to the gym three times a week on top of that horrid cycling class she insisted I join her at.”

Standing, I force a smile before he tells me more about the exciting world of cycling. “I have to use the bathroom. Excuse me.”

On the way to the guest bathroom on the other side of the kitchen, I stop when I hear a door close outside. Peeking out the curtain covering the door, my brows shoot up when I see who’s walking up the front path.

Unlocking the deadbolt, I open the door and gape at the Chris Hemsworth lookalike. “Seb called you,” I say, still shocked when Bodhi stops a few inches in front of me. It’s the first time I’ve seen him since that day at my mother’s house.

“I would have been here sooner, but I was dealing with something,” he apologizes. He opens his arms. “You going to hug me, or what?”

I’ve seen his private parts.

Felt them too.

And he’s acting like nothing happened.

I don’t hate it. I step into him and feel his arms wrap around me, squeezing once like he always does. It doesn’t feel forced or uncomfortable, and I find myself smiling when I pull back. “You didn’t have to come. I told my brother I could handle things here.”

He drapes an arm over my shoulder and tugs me into his side. "I don't mind. Truthfully, I could use a little break from...things."

Ah. Things. "Things, huh?"

Before he replies, my father appears at the door. "Who is this, Olive?"

Candi pops up behind him. "Oh, hello. Olive, why haven't you invited your...friend in?"

Friend. Snort.

It's Bodhi who answers. "She wasn't expecting me," he explains, extending his hand out to my father. "I'm Bodhi Hoffman. I play hockey with Sebastian."

"Oh!" Candi chirps. "How wonderful. He isn't here, unfortunately."

My father's shoulders ease when he announces who he is. He shakes Bodhi's hand with an easy smile. "Hoffman. Yeah, I remember. I've seen you play. It's good to formally meet you."

"You too, sir."

Sir. Double snort.

Dad goes to Sebastian's games once in a while, but he's never been introduced to the team the way Mom and I have. I take pride in that.

Candi pulls on my father. "Luke, let Sebastian's friend come in. We were just about to eat lunch."

How quickly it went from my friend to Sebastian's.

Bodhi doesn't drop his arm. "I'm actually here to see Olive. But if you have soda and some food, I'll happily stick around."

This time, I actually snort aloud. Dad eyes me as if he knows I'm seconds away from making a comment. As we walk inside, I say, "Candi isn't a fan of soda. Apparently, it's bad for you."

Bodhi pats his stomach that I know for a fact is rock hard. There's not an ounce of body fat on the mammoth of a man still holding onto me. It's unfair. And hot. "Very few things in life are good for you. My kryptonite has always been Mountain Dew since I was a kid."

I swear Candi gasps. Literally gasps with her hand flying to her chest like she's clutching her invisible pearls. "Do you know how much sugar and caffeine is in that?"

Dad pats her arm, glancing apologetically at Bodhi. "Candi, let's not berate our guests about all of that."

"Yeah," I chime in sweetly, curling an arm around Bodhi's waist. "Wouldn't want anyone to think you're rude for commenting on their

dietary habits, huh Dad?"

His brown eyes shoot to me in warning, telling me to silently behave. My only response is to smile wider.

Candi doesn't stop though. "No, really, Luke. I did a science fair project in high school comparing sugar content in all the popular sodas. Mountain Dew had the highest sugar content, and don't get me started on the caffeine and chemicals. It's banned in certain countries for a reason."

"When was that project due, five years ago?" I inquire.

Bodhi's arm twitches around my shoulders. I pinch his waist making him squirm when my father sighs heavily. "Olive..."

My smile doesn't waver. "What? She looks so young. It's basically a compliment."

Candi perks up. "It's my skincare routine. The secret is beef tallow. Makes me look forever twenty-five."

She leads us into the living room with Dad following close behind.

Bodhi finally releases me, winking when we're told to take the two seats by each other at the end of the table. The food spread out looks... colorful. And healthy. Very healthy.

He must notice the same thing because he's examining the closest dish to him quietly.

"I hope you're hungry," Candi says. "I made my famous vegetable salad using everything I grew in the garden this year."

Bodhi looks impressed. Out of the two of us, he definitely eats more vegetables. You can't get abs like his without a lot of protein, lean meats, and greens. "My mom is big into gardening," he tells her. "Last year the sweetcorn shot up over six feet. Her backyard looked like a corn field."

Candi smiles. "That's amazing. We had a pest problem this year, so half of our garden was ruined. But I salvaged what I could."

My nose scrunches at the thought of there being little bugs on my plate.

Candi must realize what I'm thinking. "Oh, don't worry. I double checked everything before I brought them inside. You'll love this! I made eggplant lasagna too because your father said how much you love lasagna."

My mother makes the best meat lasagna I've ever had. It's traditional every Christmas that we make it together using her great-grandmother's famous recipe that has a lot of cheese, meats, and noodles. A far cry from the vegetarian option steaming in the casserole dish in front of me. "I've

never tried it with vegetables before,” I offer as she scoops some onto my plate.

I’m not unwilling to try it. At least Dad remembered how much I loved lasagna. It’s...something.

The beginning of the meal is fine, thanks to Bodhi. His presence takes the pressure off of me. My father asks him questions about how he got into hockey and how he likes playing for New York. Candi interjects with her own questions about dietary habits and the nutrition it must take to keep up with training all of the athletes do.

That’s when things turn on me.

“Maybe you can convince Olive to speak to a dietitian,” Candi suggests innocently, stabbing a tomato with her fork. “Luke has been trying for ages to get her to see somebody, but she insists she doesn’t need to. I don’t think it would hurt. I used to be a health coach before all that Ozempic stuff started becoming a trend. Exercise and healthy eating are what I preached. Oh.” Candi perks up and turns to me. “Your doctor would totally approve you for Ozempic. One of my friends tried getting it online but they said she didn’t qualify because of her low BMI. But you would!”

Heat creeps under the skin of my cheeks as I stare down at my half-eaten food. I’ll admit, the eggplant lasagna is good, even if I don’t think there should be vegetables in the dish. But now I’m not going to compliment her on it. Because seriously? What the fuck?

Bodhi’s body stiffens beside me, his fork halting halfway to his mouth before dropping loudly onto the ceramic. His voice is firm, the tone lowered in disbelief as it cuts through the thick tension in the room. “Excuse me?”

Dad clears his throat, wiping a napkin across his lips. “I’m sure she didn’t mean it how it sounded. Right, Candi?”

His girlfriend seems oblivious to the offensive comment, which tracks. Dad never liked dating women with brains. I think it would remind him too much of Mom. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with Ozempic. Half of Hollywood is using it, and most of them don’t even need it.”

Dad’s face flushes like he’s embarrassed for himself more than anyone else. Heaven forbid how he must think I feel.

Bodhi looks her dead in the eye. “That’s a pretty fucked up thing to say to someone,” he tells her matter-of-factly. His eyes roam over to my father. “And it’s even more fucked up that you’re sitting there letting your daughter be talked about that way without speaking up.”

He straightens. “Well—”

“Nah.” Bodhi cuts him off and tosses his napkin onto the plate of food. “I don’t think I want to hear what you have to say. Because something tells me it’s not going to be anything decent. You ready to go, Olive?”

I stare at the giant hand extended in front of me, blinking at his open palm. “Oh. Uh. Sure?”

I’m not sure why it comes out like a question because I’ve wanted to leave since I parked my car in the driveway.

He pulls me up, tugging me into his side. Then he turns to Candi and says, “The lasagna was mushy.”

Without another word, he guides us to the front door.

“Do you have everything?” he asks.

I nod absentmindedly, still a little mind blown over what just went down. Sure, Sebastian used to defend me whenever Dad acted up. But Bodhi didn’t need to do that. He doesn’t owe me anything.

When we stop by my car, I say, “That was...” I shake my head. Then I snort at his parting words. And my snort turns into a full-blown laugh. Like, the shoulder-shaking kind. “Bodhi,” I wheeze. “Her lasagna wasn’t mushy.”

He grins. “I know. But I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction. That shit was good. Almost sad to leave it behind.”

Oh God. “You’re the best. You really are. And if we were alone, I’d probably do some dirty shit to you to show my appreciation.”

His eyes light up. “I won’t say no to that.”

“Easy, Tiger. That was a one-time thing.”

Something flashes over his face. “One time, huh?”

Did he want it to be more? “I think that’s for the best, don’t you? You’re Sebastian’s friend. And I like you too much to use you.”

He scratches the side of his neck. “You’re probably right. Do you want to go get some ice cream? I know a place that will knock your tits off.”

I glance down at my chest before lifting my gaze. “That sounds painful.”

His lips stretch. “It’s worth it. Trust me.”

“I’ll follow you then,” I tell him, opening my car door.

He doesn’t go to his truck right away. “What they said in there was bullshit.”

I look at the ground. “I know.”

“That wasn’t fair to you.”

Again, I say, “I know.”

He nudges my foot with his. “I’m sorry. When Bash said your dad can be rough on you, I didn’t expect that.”

Why is *he* apologizing? “You’re not the one who should be sorry. But my dad...” I shrug. “He will never see that he should be. It is what it is.”

His lips twitch downward. “That isn’t how parents should treat their children.”

What can I say? I’m lucky like that.

“Take me to the ice cream, Hoffman,” I declare, sliding into the front seat. I smile up at him to show I’m fine.

And I am. Because I’ll be replaying the look on my father’s face when Bodhi told him off for the rest of the day. Maybe even the rest of the week.

It’s priceless.

The second I’m away from my father and his girlfriend my mood instantly lightens.

And Bodhi is right about the ice cream.

My tits will never be the same.



MOM UNLEASHES HELL on my father after I recount the happenings of my day, and I don’t feel bad about the heated phone call that doesn’t sound fun. It’s the least he deserves.

When I’m safely closed into my room, I pull out my cell and let Sebastian know I survived thanks to Bodhi.

Seb: How did it go?

Me: Like it always does

Me: Pretty sure Mom just offered to marry Dad again just so she can divorce him and take more of his stuff LOL

Me: But Bodhi helped. Thanks for the save

Seb: Sorry Dad is a dick

Seb: And that I couldn’t come

Me: You can grace him with your presence next time

Laying the phone on my stomach, I stare at the old posters on the wall across from the bed. It looks like the 2000s threw up in here thanks to the images of *My Chemical Romance* and *One Tree Hill* hanging there. I used to have an extensive CD collection of angsty music that I loved listening to growing up before CDs became extinct. Now the shelves are mostly empty, save a few books from old college classes that I don't know what to do with.

Nibbling my lip, I lift my phone and thumb out another message to the ones I've left unanswered for a while now.

Me: I haven't used your gift yet

Wetting my lips, I stare at the number that I still haven't saved. Clicking it, I edit the contact and bite down on my inner cheek as my fingers hover over the keyboard.

Bubbles appear at the bottom.

#43: That's a shame

Me: So Fishtail?

#43: I was in town

Me: That's a shame

#43: Why is that?

Me: Because I wasn't there

#43: Good thing you have a vibrator to think about me to tide you over

Me: In your dreams, O'Conner

#43: Only my dirtiest

There's a knock at my door before Mom pokes her head inside. "Can I come in?"

Sitting up on the bed, I turn my screen off and set my phone down. "Sure. Was Dad still alive by the time you were done with him?"

"He deserved everything I said to him."

"I think I heard you call him a 'bitch boy,'" I muse, stretching my legs out over the side of the bed to give her room to sit beside me. "And I'm positive I heard—"

“Like I said,” she cuts me off, “he deserved everything I called him. What I want to know is how *you’re* feeling?”

I already told her I was fine, but she doesn’t seem to believe me. “I’m okay. Really. Sure, I’m annoyed with him, but what’s new? He’ll never change. You’ve said that before too.”

Those minty eyes everyone says they’re jealous of dull with sadness. “I hate that for you, though. It makes me want to...” She thinks about it. “Well, I don’t know. It makes me want to do nothing legal, that’s for sure.”

I snort. “You’re too pretty for jail, Mom.”

She playfully nudges me. “It was lovely of Bodhi to swoop in for the rescue. I’m glad you two are friends.”

Despite knowing what he feels like inside of me, friends seem like the perfect way to describe what we are. “Me too. And I ate some of the best ice cream of my life after the shitstorm of a lunch. So it turned the day around.”

She pats my leg supportively. “I’m happy to hear that then.”

We fall into silence for a few seconds.

I glance down at my phone, but no new messages pop up.

“Mom?” I ask quietly.

“Yes, sweetie?”

I turn to her, trying to hold back my laugh. “Did you really call Dad a bitch boy?”

CHAPTER TEN

Olive

SEBASTIAN DOESN'T WALK through the door alone when he finally arrives at our mother's house. The petite raven-haired girl who follows close behind him silences the conversation Mom and I are having about what the best kind of cheese is to have with white wine.

My brother closes the door behind them, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder when he guides her further into the house. Her dark hair is a mixture of black, blue, and a hint of purple, and braided away from her face with a skill I can only hope to have some day. She looks nervous, her dark brown eyes darting between me, my mother, and Sebastian, before taking a tentative step closer to him.

I'll give her this; her makeup is flawless. If I didn't know my shit about foundation or contouring, I probably wouldn't even know she's wearing any. I've always wished I could pull the no-makeup makeup look off.

I've never seen Sebastian with anybody, especially not here. But if this is his girlfriend, she's cute.

And—"Oh my God," I say aloud when she shifts to her side revealing the bump on her stomach.

I know that bump. It's almost identical to what Skylar's was when she was carrying Bentley. It's not like mine, who clearly never says no to pasta. Or tacos. Or anything containing carbs, I guess. Nope. This girl is pregnant. Noticeably so.

Mom doesn't catch on until a few seconds later, her confused brows pinched together until her eyes see what I do. "Oh." Her eyes widen as they lock on Sebastian. "Honey...?"

He clears his throat. "Mom. Olive. This is Tori." His hand slides from her shoulder to her lower back and stays there. "My wife."

My eyes widen so much I think my eyeballs might fall out of my head. "Your what?"

"Wife," Mom repeats in shock.

Tori's face reddens as she offers a squeaky, "Hi," accompanied by a little finger wave.

Mom and I both look at her hand to see the small gold ring there with a not-so-small diamond in the middle. If that thing is real, my brother must have spent some serious money.

I didn't even know Sebastian was seeing anybody until now. But married? Like *legally*? "I don't know what to say," I admit, blinking as my brain rushes to process the information. "Are we being pranked? Are there cameras?"

Mom gets her shit together quickly. "Hi. Hello." She steps toward Tori and takes her hand with a wide smile. "It's very nice to meet you, Tori. I'm—wow. Sorry. I'm Claire. I'm just a little surprised."

That's a nice way of putting it.

Tori glances at Sebastian, using her elbow to nudge his ribcage. "I told him we shouldn't bring it up this way, but he said it was better to 'rip off the Band-Aid'. Not very romantic, but..." Her shoulders lift. "I'm sorry to spring this on you, Claire. And you must be Olive. Bash has told me so much about you."

Hopefully not all of it has been bad. "I've..." Do I lie? "Never heard anything about you. But I like your lashes. What mascara do you use?"

Sebastian glares at me. "Liv."

"What? I'm not going to lie."

Tori smiles at me. "Loreal Paris. Their panorama mascara is the best. I like your lipstick."

"Estee Lauder in starlit pink," I reply easily.

Mom clears her throat. "So..." She wets her lips and studies my brother and his girlfriend. Wife. Whatever.

They haven't addressed the biggest piece of news, which I'm struggling not to stare at. Even though I'm ninety-nine-point-nine percent positive that she's pregnant, I'm not saying a word until one of them confirms it. When I was little, I poked a stranger's belly in the supermarket and asked if there was a baby inside. There wasn't, and the woman had understandably been offended. Granted, I was four and didn't know any better. But Mom drilled it into my head from that day forward to never assume.

Mom gestures for them to come in. "Please sit down and make yourself at home. Olive and I were just about to put some snacks together. What kind

of—” She stops herself before asking Tori what kind of wine she wants. “—drink would you like? We have water, soda, coffee—”

“Wine,” I supply helpfully.

Mom clears her throat. If I were still standing next to her, she’d probably swat me. “Yes, we have plenty of that. Sebastian, do you want your usual black coffee?”

Once she serves them a black coffee and glass of cold water, we settle into the living room. I stare at the two of them before glancing at Mom, still in disbelief.

Nobody is saying anything.

Tori’s hand rests on the bump.

Sebastian keeps his hand locked around hers.

“I’m sorry,” I say, ignoring the full can of soda next to me. “Are we just going to ignore the fact that Sebastian just waltzed in here with a pregnant wife that we never met before or heard about? No offense, Tori. You seem cool and my brother usually isn’t a bad judge of character. Well...most of the time.”

He grumbles, tightening his hold on her.

“But seriously,” I press. “Mom got mad at me when I posted online that I aced my final without telling her first. This is like one hundred levels above that and she’s acting cool as a cucumber.”

Mom shoots me a look. “Firstly, you were stressing about that exam for weeks. You called me to vent about the course material at least four times a week leading up to it. I figured you’d at least tell me how you did when you worked yourself up about it for so long.”

Okay, point taken.

“Secondly,” she adds, eyeing me. “I’m trying to be reasonable. I’ll admit, this is a lot to take in. I mean, my baby boy is married. And I’m going to be a grandmother. Right?”

Her face lightens like that fully set in. I can tell she’s excited. Elated, is more like it. Those minty eyes shift toward Tori’s stomach.

“You are,” Tori confirms, brushing her bump.

Mom clears her throat, trying to sound stern despite the excitement in her eyes. “I would have liked to have more of a heads up about all of this, but what’s done is done. And I did *not* throw a fit when you posted about your final. I was just...disappointed.”

Even Sebastian rolls his eyes at that. “I was going to tell you about all of this sooner, but something would always come up,” he tells us. He doesn’t seem nervous at all. Had he freaked out or is he in denial? Or is he *excited*? I’ve never heard him talk about being a husband or dad before, which makes sense. It isn’t like that sort of conversation just pops up. All I ever heard him talk about is hockey. “And then I would get busy and decide to tell you the next time I saw you in person. Tori had her anatomy scan last weekend, which is why I couldn’t make it to Dad’s when you were there.”

Tori gives me a sheepish smile. “Sorry. I know you wanted him there.”

Mom pipes up. “Does that mean you know if it’s a boy or girl? Or are you keeping it a surprise? Back in my pregnancy days, we didn’t get told that stuff. We counted on the old wives’ tales to figure out what we were having. I couldn’t stop puking when I carried Olive, so I was sure it was a girl. And, well, here we are.”

Tori glances at her stomach. “It’s going to be a surprise. But Sebastian is positive it’s a boy. He keeps having dreams about having a son.”

Mom beams. “A boy. Oh, how wonderful.”

Am I the only sane person here? “This is still mind blowing to me.”

Mom frowns. “What? You like kids. Tell your brother that you’re happy for him.”

Sighing, I look at Sebastian. “I’m happy for you. *Both* of you. But now the pressure is on for me to get married and have a traditional wedding, so thanks for that.”

My brother snorts in amusement because he knows I’m right.

Mom hits me with a pillow. “Olive! I would never do that. It’s your life. Whether you elope, have a traditional wedding, or not get married at all, I won’t care. As long as you’re happy.”

She’ll be disappointed, though. I know she would. I look at my brother. “Are you at least going to do a reception with people? We both know Mom would want that even though she’s pretending to be reasonable right now.”

The woman I look like sighs.

Sebastian’s lips twitch. “We’ll see.”

Instead of letting that discussion go on further, Mom changes the subject. “Tori, tell us about yourself. Now that you’re part of the family, I’d love to get to know you.”

For the next hour, we learn all about my brother’s twenty-five-year-old wife. Unlike most of the girls he went for who seemed ditzy like the bimbos

our father dated, Tori is educated, witty, and sweet. She has a degree in sports journalism and was covering one of their games, did an interview with him, and apparently, the rest is history. Something tells me there's a lot they left out for the sake of our eyes and ears, and I appreciate that. Nobody asks how long they've known each other or how long they've even been married. I'm not sure Mom even wants to know the answer.

All she really cares about is if Sebastian is happy. And he seems like he is. He's calm and always has a hand on Tori's leg or finger or palm.

I find myself frowning after a while because I realize I miss that. Physical contact. The butterflies. When Alex and I watched movies, he would always touch me. It could be innocent, and my heart would still sing inside its cage like a damn bird. If we were walking around campus or bantering at parties, he would always find a way to brush our hands or hit me with those bedroom eyes that would do some funny things to my ovaries, even if there was no sex involved.

Ugh. I hate this. I hate being lonely. I hate feeling like I need somebody when I know I don't. It taunts me, scratching at my conscious. And worse. My heart.

Peeling my gaze away from my brother, I bite down on the inside of my cheek and realize the room is silent.

"Olive?" Mom says softly.

I blink. "Huh?"

"Tori asked if you would be interested in her putting a good word in at the company she works for," Sebastian says, his eyes piercing mine like he thinks he can intimidate me into saying yes to her help.

Well played, brother. But not well enough to change my mind. I look at Tori. "I appreciate the offer, but I'll figure it out on my own. I always do."

Mom touches my hand. "It's a sweet offer."

"It is," I agree. "But I'm not going to take it."

Sebastian sighs.

"I think it's admirable," Tori says.

I smile, but it disappears when Sebastian murmurs, "It's only admirable until she's working at Burger King flipping burgers instead of accepting anybody's help."

Mom stares at him. "Seb..."

"What? You know I'm right."

For both of our sakes, I hope he isn't.



IT'S THREE DAYS before I go back to Lindon when Bodhi walks into my room holding a bag of cheese puffs that I know for a fact is from our snack cupboard because of the sparkly chip clip still attached to the top.

"Hey, little Henderson," he greets, looking around my room while shoving his hand into the bag and shoveling the food into his mouth. I'll give him this, he doesn't make a mess. Not one piece hits the floor. Which is probably good because my bedroom carpet is off-white, and Mom almost lost her shit when I was fourteen and spilled my soda on it. She spent hours trying to get the stain out. Now the only thing left is the faded remnants of a mad woman at work.

"Making yourself at home?" I muse as he turns to the shelf that has some old DVDs I haven't watched in years.

With a mouthful of food, he says, "A big John Hughes fan, huh? I never got into his stuff. Like, what was the point of *Sixteen Candles*?"

I lower the phone I was aimlessly scrolling on to look at him. "Well, you're not a sixteen-year-old girl, so I don't imagine that movie would strike anything for you."

He shrugs casually. "Fair point, O-Dawg."

I'm grateful he doesn't feel weird around me. Sex tends to complicate things, which I never understood. I can name the number of times I've caught the feels where sex was involved, but it went beyond the physical thing. I mean, penises aren't that attractive. How could you fall in love with one? It has to be more—wit, charm, personality.

Bodhi scans the rest of my nostalgic setup, nodding like he's impressed by something. "No sports teams? Not even the Giants?"

My lifts twitch upward at the mention of my favorite football team. I told Sebastian he should have tried out for football and worked his way up to the NFL so I could meet Eli Manning. My phone screen has been the same photo of the two-time Super Bowl MVP award winner since I was sixteen. I have no shame. Retired or not, he's my favorite. I'd cry if I ever met him. Someday, if I ever get married, I'd probably still have him as my background. My future husband will just have to accept it.

It makes me think of the time I went to see Sebastian play. *Think about Eli Manning*. I still love the athlete, clearly, but I definitely struggled the

second Alex's icy eyes found mine.

"I used to have a poster of the Giants, but Sebastian tore it down when they won against the Patriots. He was a turd back then."

"Back then?" Bodhi jokes.

I snort. "Yeah, he can still be a shithead. You going to share those? If you're raiding our pantry, the least you can do is share the loot."

He walks over and holds out the bag for me to take some of the cheese-dusted yumminess.

"He was a turd for how he broke the news to us about his pregnant wife," I say, knowing damn well he knows about Tori.

And he confirms it. "It was better he tell you than some random media outlet like TMZ. I told him he was lucky that people respect Tori in the industry or else that shit would have been all over the tabloids."

So Tori's connections must be big if people were willing to dampen her relationship with a pro athlete. "Damn," I mumble, impressed. "She must be good at her job."

"She is," he confirms. "You should check out her work. I think you two will get along."

"Still, it would have been nice of him to ease us into the news. He never talked about being a husband or a dad before. And then BAM."

"Not looking forward to a niece or nephew?" he asks, plopping onto the bed and setting the cheese puffs between us.

I lean my back against the headboard. "It's not that. I mean, I've never been rah-rah kids. I don't love them, but I don't hate them, you know?"

Bodhi seems genuinely surprised by that. "I thought you liked kids. Your friend has one, right?"

He remembers me telling him that? It was in passing conversation not long after we met.

"Skylar," I confirm with an easy smile. "Like I said, it isn't that I dislike children. But they aren't for everyone. I'm not sure they're for me. I think it'd be better if I can spoil them and then give them back, you know?"

Something in his eyes dim. "Huh."

He's being weird. "I take it you're on team kids then?"

His finger comes up and scratches the column of his throat. "Yeah, you can say that. I've always liked children and they've always taken to me."

"Well, you *are* a big kid," I reason, elbowing him playfully. He doesn't elbow me back. He actually looks sort of sad. "Hey, there's nothing wrong

with that. Kids aren't for everybody, right? Like, I'm sure I *could* be a good Mom, but that doesn't mean I *want* to be. And you'd make a great dad because of how playful and unserious you are. I don't mean that as anything other than a compliment either."

His throat clears. "Thanks, Olive. I appreciate that."

I offended him, I just don't know how.

My attention is pulled to my phone screen lighting up with a message from #43. I grab it before Bodhi notices.

#43: I miss you

I gape at the message. Has someone kidnapped him? Stolen his cell?

Me: Did someone take your phone?

#43: Having a bad day. Is it so surprising that I'd reach out to you to make it better?

Well, yeah. Kind of.

"What's that expression for?" Bodhi questions, tugging my focus back to him as he eats more of his snack.

I swallow, glancing back down at Alex's message. "Seb said something to me once about you and your ex. Do you ever miss her?"

His eyes widen a fraction at the personal question. "Uh..." He hesitates before letting out a short sigh. "Sometimes I miss the good times we had. Life was different back then, though. Easier. I've never wanted to get back together with her. Not even when I had the chance."

"And you did? Have the chance, I mean."

His tongue slowly drags across his bottom lip before his shoulders slump. "She wanted to make things work, but I told her we weren't good for one another. And we weren't. We fought. We had different ideas for the future. She didn't like how much I was gone, and for good reason. But that wasn't enough for me to change my mind. I wanted somebody to support me, not make me feel bad for what I was doing for myself."

I nod along. "That makes sense."

"She passed away not long ago," he admits quietly, making my heart drop. "And I have to say, I miss her more now than I did back then. We have...history together. A lot of it."

"History is hard to forget," I agree, fiddling with my phone.

"Yeah," Bodhi murmurs.

I pick up my phone and type out one more message before turning the screen off and tucking it under my thigh.

Me: I miss you too

“So, who is he?” Bodhi asks knowingly.

I reach into the bag. “Who was *she*?” I counter.

Neither of us says a word.

He stares down at his lap for a minute before opening his mouth to say something when Sebastian appears at my doorway.

“What are you two doing?” my big brother asks.

My response comes easily. “Talking about your big ass head and how we hope the baby takes after Tori for her vagina’s sake.”

Bodhi chokes on his snack.

When he sees the snack on the bed, he eyes his teammate. “You shouldn’t eat that crap. We’ve got weigh in soon. Plus, my sister is territorial over her cheese puffs.”

I totally am. “Only when it comes to you touching them. You never liked these, but you’d eat them to piss me off.”

“They’re like eating cheese flavored air,” he counters, proving my point.

Bodhi chuckles. “That’s what makes them great.” He grabs a handful and shoves all of them into his mouth, making my brother sigh.

“No Tori?” I ask.

“She had to work. I told her I wanted to pop by and see if you wanted to go do something before you headed back.”

That’s nice of him. “Like egg Dad’s car?”

Bodhi perks up.

Sebastian eyes us. “No.”

“Party pooper,” I mutter under my breath.

“What about Dave and Buster’s?” Bodhi suggests. “I haven’t been in forever, and I used to kick ass at Mario Cart.”

I haven’t been to the giant arcade in a long time, and it *does* sound fun. “I’m down. You can watch me kick Seb’s ass at basketball. He loves it.”

My brother scowls. “You cheat.”

“You can’t cheat at that game!” I tell him for the millionth time in exasperation. “You just suck at it. It’s okay to admit you’re not perfect at everything.”

Bodhi laughs. “Now I have to see it.”

“It’s settled then,” I say happily, scooting off the bed. “We’re going to D&B and then getting fried pickles. Oh! And we should stop at that one place we used to, Seb. The weird bodega that always smells like fish.”

Bodhi gives me a funny look. “Why would you want to go there?”

It’s my brother who answers for me. “She’s been obsessed with their corndogs since she was little. She insists they’re—”

“—the best corndogs you’ll have in your life,” I finish for my brother. “Trust me, Hoffman. You’ve never had a wiener in your mouth until you’ve tried one of theirs.”

To his credit, he laughs at the comment.

Meanwhile, my brother grumbles out an unenthused, “Let’s go then.”

I check my phone one last time before following the Rangers players out the front door.

I miss you too.

#43: What are we going to do about it?

I don’t answer him.

Because I don’t know the answer.

Pretending just feels...safe.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alex

I DON'T KNOW whether to fire the middle-aged man who handles all of my deals or give him a raise for convincing me to come back to Pennsylvania rather than driving up to Vermont. The jury is still out as he slides over the paper from Gillette. "I already sent you the e-contract that I need you to sign online," Kyle tells me, not even looking up from his phone.

The man has so much gel in his hair that I'm concerned about how close he's standing next to the open flame that the kettle is on. There isn't one day since I met Kyle as a junior at Lindon University where he hasn't applied a copious amount of that shit in his hair, making me wonder if he has stock in it. He reached out after watching a few of my games and saw the same thing a lot of people did—potential.

Especially potential to make money.

When the kettle starts screaming, I push up from the stool and grab two mugs from the cupboard above the oven. "Milk and honey?" I ask, pouring the hot water over the tea packet.

He makes a thoughtful noise that I take as a yes. After preparing both of our drinks, I set his down in front of where his eyes are still plastered to his cell and sit back down in front of the printed contract. "Why Gillette?"

"Because people are always talking about your jawline," he answers plainly. "And if these online influencers can get a deal with the company and get featured in commercials, then so can a rising NHL player. It's a good fit."

I don't get online much, but I have seen the odd videos that have gone viral about my "sharp, masculine jawline" that women seem to deem lickable. It's flattering, I guess. Strange, but flattering.

My eyes scan the contract until it meets the number they're offering me. "Is this for *one* commercial?"

"Don't be ridiculous." He sounds offended as he lifts his eyes from his phone. "That's for a commercial they want to run during pre-season *and* an

online campaign. Which includes a photoshoot that we'll schedule as soon as you sign your name. It'll run for the next year."

I hate getting my picture taken, but I know that's par for the course. And the number staring back at me is a good ass number. A substantial one that could fix a roof. Maybe even replace the whole thing, which my childhood home desperately needs.

"See, this," he says, shaking his phone with a grin on his face, "this is what you need. A gimmick. Something to make people love you."

My brows pinch. "What are you—?"

He shows me his screen, halting my words. I stare at the picture of Bodhi Hoffman with his arm wrapped around Olive's waist. She's squished between him and her older brother in front of a line of claw machines. The image is posted to Hoffman's Instagram page and already has three-hundred thousand likes and an ungodly number of comments that range from sweet to fucking ugly.

"This is gold for Hoffman," my agent tells me, looking impressed. "He's only ever been photographed with models or bottle blondes that look like the only thing they eat are ice cubes."

He chuckles at his own joke, not seeing the lack of humor in my face. Has that gel gone to his head or has he always been a jackass?

"Maybe you need to—"

"No," I cut him off before he can finish that thought, shoving the phone back at him. "Absolutely fucking not. And Henderson's sister isn't a goddamn gimmick. Have some fucking respect, Kyle."

His eyebrows dart up his forehead. "Christ. I didn't mean to strike a chord. I forgot you went to school with them." I'm silently still shooting daggers at him. "Look, I meant no offense. All I'm saying is that this guy is all over the media right now. People are talking about him, and there's no such thing as bad press."

He might not have meant offense, but he didn't mean anything good by it either. "I'm not using anybody as a gimmick to gain followers. I don't do that bullshit."

My eyes go back to his phone, fighting the urge to twitch. Does Olive hang out with Hoffman often? I'm surprised Henderson would even allow the guy to touch his little sister. He's always been overprotective when it comes to her, not that I blame him. If I had a sibling, I'd be the same way.

Kyle shakes his head. "Fine. Let's just forget that I said anything. If you're good with that agreement, sign the papers and I'll move forward with the Gillette campaign. I may have even got something brewing with Celsius."

My nose scrunches. "I hate Celsius."

"Well, for the right amount of money you can pretend it's your favorite drink," he answers simply. "So sign the contract and we'll get the ball rolling on the next thing. You've got limited time before you have to start pre-season training, which means no sneaking off to God knows where. I need to know about it beforehand so it doesn't mess with the sponsorships I'm trying to land."

"What are you, my keeper?"

"No, but I'm the man who helps put money in your bank account," he points out, tucking his phone away. "And frankly, my friend, you could use it. This place isn't cheap, and neither is your mother's arrangements."

There's no arguing with him there, even if I hate him bringing up my mother. He's met her before, and while she was on her best behavior, he knows her history. I had to be open with him when we were doing contract negotiations. More money meant better treatment. I wasn't a greedy fucker for selfish reasons, and I think Kyle respected that.

"Fine," I begrudgingly relent. "I'll sign the contract when you leave. When can they transfer the money?"

I'm not hard up for cash, but it wouldn't hurt to pad my bank account a little. Especially with the list of shit I need to get fixed back in Lindon nagging me since I drove back to Pittsburgh.

Kyle checks his watch like he's got somewhere important to be. And he probably does. I'm not his only client. "I'll make sure they deposit it within the month. I should get going. Don't forget to sign that contract ASAP."

I wave him off and listen to the front door click closed behind him. My eyes go to his untouched tea, and I sigh to myself. Finishing off mine, I pull out my laptop and find the documents he sent me to apply my signature to.

There are a lot of things I should be doing. I need to get my workout in and check on Mom. If I were smart, I'd work on meal prep so I don't find myself DoorDashing like I have for the past week because I'm too lazy or too tired to cook.

But when the silence engulfs me, my mood darkens. And the feeling... yeah, it sucks. I blame Kyle's comment and that stupid fucking picture I

wish I hadn't seen. Because even if Olive isn't mine, she sure as hell feels it.

"Don't," I tell myself, pushing up and dumping out Kyle's drink. I stare as the liquid slowly disappears down the drain, my shoulders tensing when a strong sense of déjà vu hits me.

"What are you doing?" I yell at Mom as she rampages through the kitchen. There's food everywhere—on the floor, the counters, and the crevices in between.

She grabs more items from the fridge and starts tossing them. "I don't want to look at them anymore."

I catch the pitcher of lemonade I just made this morning, spilling some of it on myself but managing to avoid the glass shattering on the hardwood floor. "Mom, stop. We don't have enough money to buy more groceries right now."

"Is that all you care about?" she asks, eyes narrowed as she turns to me. "Do you care about me at all, Michael?"

Michael? Christ. "It's me, Mom. Alex. Not Dad. And you know I care. Can you please put down the yogurt?"

I watch as her eyes narrow a fraction more before she makes her next move. Unfortunately, I'm not quick enough. She throws the container of Greek yogurt onto the floor like she's spiking a damn football. The contents splatter everywhere. On her. On me. On the wood.

All I can do is stare at what she's done.

At the cereal that I'll no longer be able to have for breakfast before slipping out for school.

The fruit trampled that I can forget bringing with me for after practice.

The milk that she loves having at night with her tea.

And the yogurt that I'd just bought in hopes of making parfait, which is one of the few things I can get her to eat even on her bad days.

All gone; at least one hundred dollars of food wiped out. Fucking great.

That's when I notice the blood on her hand.

"Mom." I rush over and pick up her arm, examining the tiny cut that must have happened when she broke one of the containers with leftovers in it. There isn't a lot of blood, but I still walk her over to the sink and turn on the water.

"It's nothing, Michael," she insists, her voice lighter than before.

I don't bother correcting her this time. She doesn't fight me as I help her wash out the cut to make sure it's not deeper than it appears. The color in the sink is a mixture of red and brown from whatever she spilled on herself.

I ask, "What happened?"

Because something triggered this. I know it. She'd been fine when I went to school this morning. We had eggs and toast together at the table. She kissed my cheek and told me to have a good day. I'm not sure what occurred between then and now, not even twelve hours later.

Then, in a voice that sounds so broken I almost don't recognize it, she whispers, "It's our anniversary. You forgot."

Blinking away the memory, I watch as the dark amber color washes away with the running water in the sink basin.

Mom had moments where she thought I was Dad a lot in the beginning. I'm not sure why, and thankfully, that faded with time. But it's been hard. Him leaving is a betrayal that cut her deep. Deeper than I can heal, apparently.

Turning off the water, I clench my eyes closed and squeeze the bridge of my nose. "No," I murmur. I won't think about that.

She's getting help.

She's going to get better.

One day.

The second quiet settles into the space, the image of Olive with Bodhi Hoffman appears in the forefront of my mind.

I miss you too.

Evidently, not enough.

I spend the next hour and a half in the gym downstairs doing my absolute best to sweat it out of my thoughts for good.



THE CLOUDY GLAZE over my mother's eyes reminds me of the times she used to take NyQuil to help her sleep. When that stopped working, she'd take the leftover muscle relaxers my father had left behind from an old accident he'd gotten into. That supply quickly ended, and she depended on a mixture of melatonin and wine despite my protests over her combining the two.

Pam warned me that Mom was going to look a little off because she's still adjusting to the new medication. I'm not sure what I expected, but it isn't *this*.

Sliding the book of crossword puzzles over to her, I try ignoring how... empty she appears. "I brought you something. You used to love doing these. Remember? You'd even create your own version using the spelling words I got every week at school to help me learn them."

My mother's creativity helped me get through a lot of my classes. English isn't my strong suit. I hate reading, and I hate writing even more. At one point, my teacher called my parents in for a conference about the possibility of me having a reading disorder. Mom didn't believe it for a second and found different ways to help me get into the material. Because of her, I became a better student. By the time I hit middle school, I'd been in an advanced English class.

Her eyes drop to the polished cover. "I don't like these anymore. They're boring."

Lips twitching, I clear my throat. "Okay. Is there anything else you like to do? Pam said you do crafts. I can get you things from their approved list."

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say based on the way her eyes narrow. "They won't even let me use scissors, Alexander. I'm being treated like a child. I am your *mother*."

Her voice raises, making me eye the employee in the corner nervously. "I know you are. And I'm sorry you're upset about that. But you know why they won't let you have scissors."

I'm not going to point out the very blunt reason those privileges were taken away. The scars on her arm are faint, but still there.

She scoffs. "That was an accident."

Those are not accidental cuts, but I'm not about to argue with her and start something. "I found someone to fix the roof at home," I tell her to change the subject. "Mr. Moore suggested him."

Mom frowns. "When did you speak to Mr. Moore? He's a gossip. I don't like him."

Who *does* she like these days? "I saw him when I went to check on the house. Asked if he knew anyone who could do the job without breaking the bank. He told me he just got his redone a few years ago by the people he gave me a card to."

She leans back in the chair. “When your father left, he and that nosey wife of his were practically plastered to the window watching him load up his truck. It was embarrassing.”

I’d like to think she’s exaggerating, but I doubt it. We did have neighbors that liked to know everything that was going on. They were always outside at convenient times. I’m pretty sure Mr. Moore was raking his driveway at one point when my parents were getting into it over an ugly ass lamp that my mom didn’t want Dad to have.

She broke it a month later.

“Well, we only talked about roofing. And our place needs it, Ma. There’s a huge leak that’s damaging the kitchen ceiling. I’m afraid they’re going to tell me that there’s water damage that will need to get fixed, but it’s better than the ceiling caving in or mold growing.”

“We don’t have the money to fix the roof.”

My foot shakes under the table. “Yes, we do. I’ve got it covered. I just did a commercial shoot for Gillette. You know, the razor company? They paid me already. It’s plenty to cover a roof.”

Her mood shifts. “A commercial?” she asks.

I nod. “They’re going to start playing it at the end of summer. I’m sure you’ll see it. They also did some photos for an online ad campaign. Don’t get me started on what they made me do for that.”

There was makeup. Fucking *makeup*. I don’t give a shit who wears the stuff, but I didn’t want any on my face. I felt like I was somebody’s doll being dressed up.

Mom’s eyes soften. “Oh, Alex. That’s so fun. Did you hear that, Ed? My famous boy is going to be on television!”

I turn to see who she’s talking to. At the table over is an older man reading a newspaper. He waves her off, not seeming to care. Can’t say I blame the guy.

“I’m not famous,” I tell her quietly. “And it’s just a commercial. Not a TV show or anything. But it’s good for us. And my agent said he’s working on a few other sponsorships.”

“You’ve always worked so hard,” she praises, reaching out and brushing my hand. “So much like your daddy.”

It’s rare she mentions him without an insult thrown in, so I don’t complain. I also don’t pay any attention to it. I simply tuck it away in the back of my mind so she can’t take it back. “The captain of our team is

having people over to his place later this week. You should see it. It's massive. Three times the size as our home back in Lindon. I've only been there once before and couldn't believe the view."

The good mood she was in fades as quickly as it appeared. "I would be able to see it if you let me leave. But you're keeping me here like some sort of prisoner. Don't you miss me?"

My teeth grind. "You know I do. But I see you every chance I can, and we talk on the phone all the time. They give you great food and a lot of stuff to do. Trust me. This place is far from a prison."

Her arms cross. "You're just saying that to make yourself feel better for sticking me here. Admit it, Alex. The only reason I'm sitting here is because you don't want to be responsible for me anymore."

Ice coats my heart. "That's so far from the truth and you know it."

She won't look at me.

"Everything I do," I tell her slowly, "is because of you. I'm working my ass off to make sure you get the care you need. You're sick, Ma. They can help you better than I can. It's not permanent."

"I want to go home," she tells me, her voice quieter—more fragile. "This isn't my home, Alex."

It's hard to swallow when I see her eyes dull to a shade even dimmer than the last. "Have you talked during your therapy sessions? Maybe they could help you feel better. I can make time and come too, if that would help. But if you want to go home, you're going to need to put in the effort. Okay? Can you do that for me?"

She frowns. "But I don't like talking to these people. My business is none of theirs."

"It's their job," I remind her. "That's why they're here."

Her eyes remain on something at the opposite end of the room, evading me entirely. Fine. If that's how she wants to play, I'll play.

"I guess I'll do this crossword myself then." I grab it and open it to the first page, taking the pencil from the center of the table and tapping the chewed eraser against the paper. "Hmm. Number sixty-eight. Four across. Third letter is Y. Brighter times."

My eyes peek up at the woman doing her best to ignore me.

But I see it. The interest.

After a few silent minutes, she says, "Days."

I write it in. "Huh. It fits."

She finally turns to me. "Give me another."

We spend the next forty minutes going back and forth until the first puzzle is complete.

I don't bring up therapy again.

Neither does she.

She keeps the book.

Pam calls a few days later and says she hasn't put it down.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

Olive

BERLIN'S BUBBLE POPS loudly, pulling my attention from the snacks to her sprawled across my bed. She chews her nasty Hubba Bubba gum, which has to be flavorless at this point, and lowers her phone with her nose scrunched in disgust.

"These are honestly ridiculous," she says as she scrolls through the comments on Bodhi's photo, her bright lavender hair falling out of the bun she put it in when she got here. I don't know what he was thinking when he posted it, and I wish he would have asked me first, but what's done is done.

"They aren't going to get any better," I point out to the girl I met in class last year. She was outgoing and bubbly, and we bonded over books. She became part of my small circle at Lindon, alongside Skylar. We made our own little book club, buddy reading different titles together and discussing them over snacks and wine at one of our places. It's kind of nice. Especially because, unlike my mother, we actually *read* the books.

I saw the first few comments on Bodhi's post and refused to see the rest. They were all some iteration of the last, so I didn't see the need to waste time seeing strangers' opinions of me. Screw them.

My friend, who spends an awful lot of time in my dorm considering she has her own apartment off campus, sits up. "It's so stupid. Do these people have nothing better to do with their lives?"

Evidently not. "No. Now can you stop? I already asked Bodhi if he can turn the comments off. Apparently, it's not that simple."

Berlin blinks. "Ugh. Yes, it is. It's like a few clicks."

"Well, his agent disagrees." I rejoin her on the bed with a bag of white cheddar popcorn. "In the meantime, let's not doom scroll. I don't feel like reading about the 'charity work' Bodhi is being praised for just by touching me. It's like they think I'm diseased or something."

"Like when Princess Diana was praised for shaking hands with an AIDS patient," Berlin comments sympathetically.

I stare at her. “How do you even know that? That was before either of us were born.”

“I watch *The Crown*,” she answers, a silent “duh” tacked onto the end of the sentence. “I’m telling you, you’d love that show. Even Skylar has finally started watching it.”

They’ve tried getting me to watch it with them, but I was never that interested in the royal family. “I’ll stick to sports and K-dramas.”

Berlin scoffs. “You owe me at least one episode for making me watch *Bob’s Burgers* with you.”

“And now you love that show,” I point out. “I think you should be thanking me. You said yourself that you relate to Tina.”

She throws a piece of popcorn at my face and watches it bounce into my lap. “Who doesn’t relate to that awkward, butt-loving teenager? I also write spicy fan fiction. It’s a crossover plot about Harry Styles meeting Hermonie and falling in love.”

“Poor Ron,” I sympathize half-heartedly.

She shrugs. “In my world, he winds up with Lavender, so he’ll be fine.”

I’m about to burst her metaphorical bubble. And maybe her real one. “Doesn’t Lavender die in the series?”

“It’s *fiction*,” she quickly defends. “And if you want to be technical, people argue that she doesn’t die in the books. So, ha!”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever you say.” I get back to the main point of this conversation. “Anyway, Bodhi apologized for posting it and said he would get his agent to turn the comments off on the post, but his agent thinks this is a good thing.”

Berlin gapes. “Good for who?”

“Bodhi,” I reply with a shrug. It makes sense. I may be getting ripped apart, but he looks like a saint. It sucks, but it’s out of my control. “It’s the nature of the game. Don’t worry about it.”

Berlin, unfortunately, *is* worrying about it. “If I ever meet that asshole, I’m going to throat punch him with a sock full of frozen butter. Mark my words, Olive. He won’t see it coming.”

The city girl in her is shining through. “You may be able to get away with that in Brooklyn, but not here. And it’s not the end of the world.”

“It doesn’t make it right.”

Bodhi offered to fire his agent for me, but I told him not to be stupid. It was a sweet sentiment, but he needed him more than my pride does. And,

from a business perspective, I get where the guy is coming from. There's no such thing as bad press. Unless you're the person being torn up. But I'd like to think my pride is stronger than some keyboard warrior's unfiltered thoughts of me.

I check my phone and snort. "His ears must be ringing," I tell Berlin, showing her Bodhi's name pop up on my screen. He gave me his number when we were at Dave and Buster's so he could send me some of the photos. Sebastian didn't look happy about it.

When I swipe to answer, it's not me who speaks up first.

"Your agent is a chickenshit," Berlin announces loudly, popping another bubble with her gum.

There's a momentary pause. "Uh...who is that?" Bodhi asks.

"That's my friend Berlin," I explain, not bothering to apologize for her. It isn't like she's wrong. He is. "She's been reading all the lovely comments people have left on your picture."

I can practically feel his twinge from over the phone. "I'm sorry, little Henderson. I wasn't thinking. It was a good photo and—"

"And I already forgave you," I cut him off. "I promise I'm not mad, if that's what you're calling about. And if you're going to lecture me, Sebastian already told me not to look online. Once I saw what TMZ had written about you fulfilling my Make-A-Wish, I'd seen enough. They got that information from an "inside source" that I imagine has fake boobs and platinum blond hair."

Berlin nearly chokes on her gum. "They wrote *what*? That's horrible! And who is this bitch? I can probably take her. I used to live in the city. I was taught to fight when I was five."

I laugh. "I appreciate it, but it's fine. Put your shank away."

Bodhi butts back in. "Does she really have a shank?"

I say, "No," the same time Berlin says, "Yes."

Bodhi pauses for a brief moment. "My agent had that article taken down. If it was Melanie, I'll deal with it, but I don't think it was. I'm still shocked they even posted that bullshit to begin with."

I'm not. "It's TMZ" is my only remark of the gossip tabloid.

Before he can respond, Alex's name pops up on the screen with an incoming text message. And suddenly, I regret changing his contact name in my phone from #43.

"Ooooh. Who's Alex?" Berlin singsongs from over my shoulder.

“Berlin!” I hiss, holding my phone away.

Bodhi’s throat clears. “I’ll let you go. I just wanted to say I’m taking care of things, and that I’m sorry.”

He disconnects before I can reply, making me feel a tiny bit bad.

“What?” my friend asks innocently when I shoot her a look.

All I do is sigh.

Because I don’t even understand my guilt over Bodhi hearing Alex’s name. I don’t like him like that. But...I could. I guess. Maybe.

Except you miss Alex.

And that means something.

“So...” Berlin nudges my leg with hers once Alex’s name disappears from the screen. “I really want to know who Alex is.”

Skylar is the only one who knows about my on-again off-again tryst with the Pittsburgh player. It was because of her boyfriend that we were introduced to one another. That was long before Berlin entered my life. And retelling that tale, well, it’s the last thing I want to do.

“He’s the past,” I tell her.

Her eyebrows go up. “Does *he* know that?”

Is he calling because he needs another pep talk or is it an apology this time? If it is, would I forgive him? Forgiving him fully means making amends, and that would open my heart to the potential of another heartbreak. I don’t know if my heart can take another crack to it.

“Trust me,” I murmur, staring down at the popcorn I’d been in the mood for moments ago. Now it doesn’t seem appealing. “He made it very clear that he was never going to love me the way that I—”

I stop myself, the words scorching my throat and burning my chest as they settle in.

Berlin takes my hand. “Wow. Forget the agent. That sock full of frozen butter is better thrown at this guy.”

Unable to stop the snort from coming out of me, I squeeze her fingers in appreciation. “Berlin, I don’t think you’d be able to survive jail. But I love you for being willing to risk it.”

She blows me a kiss. “Anytime, babes.”

When I glance down at my phone, there’s a voicemail from Alex.

But I’m afraid if I listen to it, hear his voice again, that I’ll fall right back down the rabbit hole that I’ve been working to climb out of since walking away over a year ago.

So, I delete it instead.

And then Berlin and I go to Huden Dining Hall to get dinner and meet up with Skylar, DJ, and Bentley for a movie night in.



THE REST OF July passes relatively quickly, with a brutal record-setting heatwave on the very last day of the month reminding me why having big boobs is not fun. “I don’t know how Dolly does it,” I grumble, taking the keys out to my car and hitting the unlock button.

“Does what?” a voice asks from behind me, making me startle. I drop my keys, sending them flying across the hot pavement while my hand flies to my heart.

“Balls,” I hiss, staring wide-eyed at Alex. I blink a few times to make sure I’m not hallucinating. I haven’t had any caffeine yet, so the likelihood of that is high. “Alex?” I ask just to be sure.

He walks over and squats down to collect my keys, standing to full height merely inches from me. “Isn’t that what that old guy on *Supernatural* used to say?”

Old—“Bobby wasn’t old” is the first thing that comes to mind. “And I don’t even know how you remember that.”

One of his shoulders lifts as he extends my keys out to me, leaving them hanging from his fingertips. “We used to watch that show together all the time. You’re the one who got me into it.”

Am I really seeing him or is the heat making me hallucinate? Maybe it’s heat exhaustion. Or sun poisoning. I accidentally poked my eye with my mascara wand this morning. Could that be why I’m tortured with a mirage of a six-foot-two, two-hundred-and-ten-pound left wing?

Because that’s evil if it is.

“Olive?” he asks, jiggling my keys.

I snatch them from the mirage’s hand like he could take them away or vanish at any second. “I didn’t think you liked that show.”

“I could have done without the musical numbers but...” His words fade, and we fall into silence.

Alex is really here. In Lindon. In front of me.

Then it kicks in. “What are you doing here lurking outside my dorm building?”

He scratches the column of his throat. “I was in town dealing with a last-minute thing at my mom’s house. I heard you were staying here for the summer, so I figured it wouldn’t hurt to see if you were around. And you didn’t call me back. I left a message yesterday.”

How long has he been out here? And why does he look so damn good in a pair of jeans and T-shirt when I’ve got sweat coming from places I didn’t even know could sweat. “I’m heading out, actually.”

His eyes do a once-over at my workout leggings and tee with a faded Coca-Cola logo on it. I think I bought both from a vintage thrift shop with Skylar a year ago. “Date?”

Is this what he thinks I’d wear on a date? I’m not sure whether to be flattered or insulted. I’m barely even wearing makeup. “It’s nine o’clock in the morning,” I point out. “Who goes on dates this early?”

“Breakfast dates are a thing, Olive.” His lips slowly curl up at one side. “Especially if people stay the night. I seem to recall you enjoying the apple cider mimosas and cinnamon waffles from the diner during Sunday brunch.”

In my defense, it was their fall special that they only offered for a limited time. It wasn’t often that Alex and I went out, but when we did, I took full advantage. Especially when it came to mimosas. “I didn’t realize you considered those dates,” I admit with a loose shrug.

One of his eyebrows quirks up. “What else would I call it?”

Why would I assume it was anything? He’d always kept me at arm’s length, never labeling us. It seemed logical for me to not associate our breakfast outings as anything other than two people replenishing the calories we burned the night before.

I choose my words carefully, feeling those icy blues piercing my face. “I always thought of it more as post-coitus obligation.”

He blinks. “Did you really just call it coitus?”

“It’s more ladylike than fucking.”

His eyes flash, showing me the familiar glint that used to shine in them when his mind went to dirty places. “For the record,” he says, “I never felt obligated to take anybody out after I fucked them. And I didn’t. I’ve only ever *wanted* to take you out. *Only* you.”

Hearing the F word come from that mouth does annoying things to my lady bits, and I have to silently tell my ovaries—and other parts—to calm down. Because seriously? Why does he have to say that? And, more importantly, why does my stupid, stupid heart have to react?

“Oh” is the only intelligible thing I have to say. Because he really wants me to believe he’s never taken girls out to breakfast after hooking up? It’s hard to fathom.

I shake my head, not wanting to think more about it. “I should go. I’m meeting Skylar who—” I stop myself when I look at the message left by the person in question. “—just cancelled on me,” I murmur in disappointment. Shoulders slumping, I look up from my phone. “The baby is sick.”

He stands a little taller. “The baby?”

“Skylar and her boyfriend, DJ, have a son,” I explain. “Daniel Bridges Junior. He played on the football team. He’s the one who introduced us at the bonfire.”

A lightbulb goes off in his head. “Yeah, I know DJ. I didn’t know he had a kid. That’s...” He makes a thoughtful noise and doesn’t dwindle on the topic. “Go to breakfast with me.”

My lips part as if to answer, but the words stay lodged in my windpipe.

He slides a hand into his jeans pocket. “If you don’t have plans, I’m free. I’m sure I could convince Ann to make you a mimosa even though it’s not Sunday.”

Rubbing my lips together, I study him. He lets me watch him, his posture straight, his face genuine yet somehow unreadable. He wants to have breakfast together? *What is happening?*

“Ann retired. She said it was too much on her feet since she turned sixty-three.”

The older woman was my favorite waitress. She used to put extra whip cream on my waffles and extra champagne in my mimosa. The other women there aren’t bad, but they’re definitely stingy on their serving sizes.

Alex clicks his tongue thoughtfully, but it doesn’t deter him from trying again. “That’s unfortunate. I liked her. But I’m sure there are other people I could talk into slipping some champagne into some orange juice at the very least. You’re already up and ready. Get breakfast with me.”

Get breakfast with me. Why does that piss me off and make my heart do a little jig at the same time? That bitch can’t figure out what it wants. “I don’t know—”

“I know I fucked up. Let me take you out for apology waffles,” he cuts in, sincerity in his tone that almost comes off as a veiled plea.

It throws me off. Like, really off. “Apology waffles?”

He dips his chin, his eyes raking over me. They’re softer than they were before, warming me more than the sun was moments before. “Or eggs. Or pancakes. Just say yes. I...” He pauses, his tongue, which I know to be a very dangerous and skillful part of him, drags along his bottom lip before he releases a breath. “I missed you. Okay? I miss...” He gestures around us. “This.”

Lindon? “You’re a professional hockey player, Alex. How could you miss college in the middle of nowhere New York?”

A little scoff rises from his throat. “Trust me, it’s not hard to miss this. I’m sure you’ll understand soon enough. Life after this really slaps you in the face.”

If he expects me to feel sorry for him, I don’t. I heard rumors about what he made when he signed with the Penguins. It isn’t like he’s struggling. Not like most of us will right after graduating with our degrees and trying to make the most out of entry-level positions that barely pay rent.

Yet, it doesn’t make me want to tell him no. Because there’s something in those eyes that seems so masked and...pained. He’s always been good at hiding his emotions. Too good. But something in him has cracked enough where they’re starting to seep through.

Alex is showing me the bits and pieces I used to see. Before he left Lindon, and me, behind.

So, I readjust my bag and sigh a little extra heavy like agreeing is a burden. I don’t want him to know it’s not. “Fine. But you better convince somebody to put extra whip cream on my waffles. And we’re taking my car, so I don’t have to endure any of your crappy music.”

I turn to walk the rest of the way to my car when his words almost stop me in my tracks. “I downloaded two of John Mayer’s albums to have them in my playlist. The guys give me shit once in a while when they steal my earbuds and listen to what’s playing.”

He...*what?*

I open the driver’s side door and try to seem unfazed. “I’ll have to make you download Taylor Swift next. Then the guys will really give you a run for your money.”

His lips kick up on one side. “Who says I don’t already listen to her?”
he questions, stopping at the opposite side of the car and looking at me from
over the top. “Try me, Olive.”

My eyes narrow.
Then I slide inside.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alex

THE ORANGE JUICE halts halfway to my mouth when she says, “What was the name of her third studio album?”

Olive has been hounding me with Taylor Swift trivia for the past ten minutes. “*Speak Now*. I actually didn’t mind that one.”

Her eyes narrow skeptically. “Which songs did you like from it? And you can’t say the famous ones that everybody knows.”

That seems unfair, but I’ll play. “‘Haunted’ has a cool orchestral arrangement. I like the violins.”

Her head cocks like she didn’t anticipate the answer, but then she nods as if she’s impressed by it. “Okay.”

That’s all? “You’ve already asked me her lucky number, what her middle name is, what songs belonged to what album, and when her parents got divorced. Which, by the way, was not a fair question. Who makes a point to remember that sort of thing?”

“Swifties,” she answers instantly. “And it was 2012, not 2010. But they still travel with her, which is sweet. My parents can barely even be in the same state without finding ways to argue.”

I don’t know much about her family outside of her brother, but I know her parents are divorced. The less I knew, the less I felt obligated to share about myself. Realistically, I knew asking more questions would open myself up to getting the same treatment. And I didn’t want to be the dick who refused to give her answers.

I take a long sip of my juice and set the glass down, staring at it for a second before lifting my eyes to find hers already on me.

“You said you were at Lindon to check on your childhood home,” she says, leaving it open for me to comment on it.

I weigh my options, but this was my idea, so I don’t leave her hanging. “I hired a few people to fix the roof and a couple other things that needed to

be handled. It's an older house and I don't want my mom to live somewhere that's falling apart."

She smiles as she drags her mimosa over to her. "I think it's sweet that you're making sure your mom is taken care of."

All I do is shrug, toying with the napkin and ripping the edges into little pieces.

"Sebastian is like that," she adds, regaining my attention. "He makes sure me and our mom are good. Offers us money. Sometimes it's actually a little annoying."

"Why?"

She thinks about it. "We were raised to be independent. After my parents got divorced, it was a reminder of how important not depending on people was. They fought a lot about assets and finances and child support. Mom struggled for a long time when he left. She worked two jobs. Stopped taking night classes at the local college. I think Seb wants to make sure that neither one of us are in the position to struggle now that he can do something about it."

I can relate to her brother then. Some people blow through the money they get when they're in our positions. I've heard the guys on the team talk about the expensive cars they bought, or the trips they went on. One guy bought a fifty-thousand-dollar watch that he only wears for special events. Another flew him and a girl he wasn't even officially dating to Europe. They broke up as soon as they landed back in Philadelphia.

"I'm sorry that your mom had a hard time," I offer lightly.

Olive shrugs. "She got her realtor's license and is doing much better. I don't even think she accepts Sebastian's money. Although, he usually tucks it in random spots that she finds every few months. It makes her mad every single time."

The small smile curling her lips brightens her eyes as she sips her drink.

"Your family seems pretty close," I comment, thinking about all the times her brother warned me away from her when we played on Lindon's team together. At first, I thought it was funny. But when I got to know her, the flirting seemed less fun and more addicting. Not because of Sebastian, but because of Olive. Her personality. Her confidence. It was—*is*—attractive. "I used to want a sibling. My parents decided one was enough, which was probably for the better when they divorced."

She rests her elbow on the edge of the table and props her chin on the palm of her hand. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. You know Sebastian. He can be...intense. I love him, obviously, but he’s all business. Sometimes I wish he’d pull the stick out of his butt.”

I snort. I used to think the same thing when we played together. But I get it now. He was serious—no nonsense. It made him focused. It’s why he was one of the best on the team.

“He’s on my case about what comes after Lindon because I won’t accept his help,” she admits, blowing out a heavy breath. “I guess my mom and I are a lot alike that way.”

“You’re a comms major still, right?” She used to talk about her journalism classes all the time. Mostly to bitch about the professor.

She nods. “Yeah. I’ve been looking into different positions at newspapers around here and in Vermont since my focus is more on print media. Some are for internships; some are entry-level jobs that don’t pay much. I also looked into different online gigs, but those are few and far between since everybody wants to work remote these days.”

“And Sebastian has tried helping you find something?” I question.

“He has connections in the media now more than ever. Oh!” She perks up. “Between us, he’s having a baby. And he’s *married*. To a journalist, hence the extra push to help me. Which is nice, don’t get me wrong. But then I’d be handed a job instead of earning it. People would hate me.”

“Who gives a fuck what people think?”

She frowns. “I do.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“That’s easier said than done, Alex.”

We’re quiet for a second.

“So he’s married with a kid on the way, huh? Christ. What’s in the water around here?”

She lets go of a soft giggle. “I don’t know, but I don’t want to drink it.” Lifting her mimosa, she taps it against my orange juice. “Cheers.”

Chuckling, I lift my glass and drink some more as our waitress brings over two plates piled with food.

The silver-haired woman with more wrinkles than the shirt I took out of my overnight bag winks at me. “I made sure to put extra whip cream on the cinnamon waffles for your girl, just like you requested.”

Your girl. The two words echo in my ears and do some weird fuzzy shit to the back of my head. Clearing my throat, I murmur a quiet “thanks” and grab my fork and knife to start cutting into the eggs on my plate.

Olive is quiet, and I don’t bother looking up to gauge her reaction to the words that settled in my chest.

It’s a few minutes of thick silence with nothing but chatter from other tables filling the air around us. Staring at the sunny side up egg on my fork tongs, I loosen a sigh. “I’m surprised you asked me all of those questions about her music, but not which song makes me think of us.”

This time, I’m met with parted lips as she stares at me unblinking. “You...?” Her head shakes, those jewel-like eyes narrowing in confusion. “Why would I ask that? What makes you think *I* have a song for us?”

I lift a shoulder, bringing the eggs to my mouth. “That’s sort of her thing, right? She has songs for every phase of life. It’s why people like her. You said so yourself. Is it that farfetched to think out of all the songs you’ve listened to by her that one makes you think of us?”

Something in her eyes shifts as they move down to her plate of cinnamon waffles with *extra* whip cream. Her fork pokes at one of the cut pieces, contemplating her answer.

“I guess I never thought to waste my time thinking about us that way when you made it crystal clear that was pointless,” she answers, her lips twitching downward.

I can taste her lie like bitter citrus on my tongue that has nothing to do with the juice in my cup. But I let her think I believe it.

Because then I don’t have to tell her that I do have a song and can practically hear the violins playing in the background. She’s haunted me since the day I pushed her away and pretended it was for the best.

An apology is on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it. And right as I’m about to try breaking the silence, her phone goes off and her eyes immediately turn to the screen. A small smile tilts the corners of her mouth, making that fuzzy feeling dissolve.

When I see the name, I grind down on my teeth. “Hoffman?”

Her shoulders straighten. “How did you know? Wait. Did you see the photo?”

“Kind of hard not to,” I say dryly. “It was everywhere.”

The faintest hint of pink settles into her cheeks. “Don’t worry, I doubt anyone will film us together or post it anywhere. But if they did, you’d get

praise for all your *charity work*.”

A ball of hot anger rises from my chest. “Hey. Look at me.” When her head picks up, I lock eyes with her. “Those people are fucking assholes for even implying that bullshit. You feel me? And if you ask me, Hoffman was a goddamn coward for not making sure those comments were handled before they blew up. If I were in his shoes, I’d make sure anybody who claimed to be my fans knew I wasn’t going to tolerate that.”

Her eyes widen a fraction at my cool tone.

“You and I both know that you have ten times more self-confidence than any of those dickheads posting those asinine remarks. They’re lonely, jealous assholes with nothing better to focus on in their lives. I don’t want to see what any of them said impacting you. And the next time I see Hoffman on the ice, I won’t hesitate to tell him the same thing.”

All Olive does is blink slowly, unable to form a response. I don’t realize my grip on the fork is as tight as it is until I release it and see the harsh red indents in my skin from the edges of the handle.

Leaning back in the booth, I set it onto my plate and take a deep breath. “You’re the kind of girl that people should be damn proud to be in a photo with, Olive. I’ve always thought so.”

After a few minutes, she wets her lips and mimics my posture. “Normally, I’d be inclined to agree. But where’s all the photos we took together, Alex?”

I go to answer but stop myself.

Because we have none.

“You talk a big game,” she says. “But that’s all it’s ever been.”

“I didn’t know you wanted to take pictures,” I defend, forgetting about my food.

“You never acted like you wanted to.”

I drop my fork onto the plate. “There was a lot of things I *wanted* to do, Olive. Make no goddamn mistake about that. Sometimes, we don’t always get what we want. We don’t always get the *people* we want. That’s life.”

She stares at me. “Life sucks.”

Pressing my lips together, I lean back in my spot and stare at my food. “Yeah, it does.”

She scrapes her fork along the top of her waffles.

I break the silence with a question I almost don’t want an answer to. “I need to ask you something, and I want you to be real with me.”

Her eyes peek through the tops of her lashes.

When she doesn't say anything, I take the opportunity to rip the band-aid off. "Has anything happened between you and Hoffman?"

What she can't see as she gapes at me is my foot bouncing under the table. It's always done that when I'm nervous. My agent told me I needed to get a handle on it when I do press because the media picks up on that sort of shit.

"Do you really want the truth?" she asks, stilling my limb. My shoe is cemented to the ground as we have a stare-off. Because I know the answer before she can confirm it. "We slept together. Once."

I close my eyes, feeling the red-hot anger build from the very core of me. It spreads, burning my skin and boiling my blood.

"But you don't have any right to be mad at me, Alex," she points out, sensing my internal affliction. "We're not together. According to you, we never were. I slept with him because I was mad at you. And because he was there and willing."

Maybe it's fucked up, but I feel better hearing that. Because if she's that mad at me, it means she cares. "I'm not mad," I finally tell her.

She snorts in disbelief.

"I'm not," I growl, defensively. "But if Bodhi Fucking Hoffman was in front of me, I'd probably kick him in the nuts right now."

Olive rolls her eyes. "Why would you do that?"

Because you're mine, is the retort I have to swallow before it slips out.

"What exactly is it that you want, Alex?"

That's a long list that neither of us has the time for. "What do I want? For starters, I want you naked and writhing with a vibrator against your pussy until you come."

Her hand stills as her eyes peak up at me through the tops of her lashes. "That's very specific."

"It's the truth. Want me to go on?"

I notice the subtle bob of her throat as she swallows.

"Do you want me to give you every detail of how I'm going to get you back to campus, strip you out of those clothes, and bend you over the bed? Because I can. It's the scenario I've thought about while touching my cock most nights."

I don't miss the sharp exhale escape her lips. "You should get the check then," she whispers.

My dick instantly hardens, but I tell it to chill out. At least for now. “You should eat first. We can burn calories later.”

“Promises, promises, O’Conner.”

My mouth quirks up to the side. “Sweetheart, you haven’t seen anything yet.”



THE NINETY-SQUARE-FOOT DORM room doesn’t offer me a lot of space, but I make the most of it the second I lock the door behind us.

“Take your shirt off,” I tell her, closing the distance between us. Her cheeks redden as she draws her bottom lip into her mouth. “And tell me where your vibrator is.”

She stands taller, letting the tips of our shoes brush. “What makes you think I still have it?”

I grin, moving a strand of hair behind her ear and letting my thumb linger on her lobe. “We both know you still have it. How many times have you used it on yourself, hmm?”

Her eyes flash because she knows I know.

That she’s a liar.

That she’s used it.

That she thought about *me*.

“Take your shirt off, Olive,” I purr. “Now.”

Her painted pink lips rub together as her fingers lower to the hem of her shirt. “You could do it for me, you know.”

“I could,” I agree. “But I like to watch.”

She lifts her shirt over her head, revealing a bra that barely contains her breasts. It’s a great fucking sight.

“How long are you planning to watch before participating in the fun, O’Conner?” she asks in a sultry voice, dropping her shirt onto the floor beside us.

My eyes lower to her chest, my lips curling up as the pad of my thumb runs over her nipple. It reacts, pebbling almost instantly. “There she is,” I praise, cupping her breast. “Always so responsive.”

Olive puts her hand on mine, making me knead the soft flesh until my cock hardens. She steps into me, rolling her hips forward with a knowing smirk on her face. "Seems like I'm not the only one."

Chuckling, I dip my head to close the space between us. Before my lips graze her, they skirt around them and hover over her ear. "Tell me where the vibrator is."

I hear her swallow. She wants to be a brat right now, defiant. But it's all in vain. I wait.

Ten seconds.

Fifteen.

Before twenty rolls by, she lets out a shaky breath. "Nightstand."

Humming, I bend down and open the drawer to see my gift resting there. Out of its box. And next to it?

"Jackpot." Lifting the lube out, I toss it onto the bed. "I don't plan on needing that, but you never know."

Without hesitating, I flick my fingers over the hooks of her bra and let it fall onto the ground with her shirt. As soon as her boobs are exposed to the air, they pebble with goosebumps.

"What exactly could you use lube for if you're planning on not needing it?" she questions, unphased by the way I'm eye-fucking her tits.

"Turn around and find out," I muse.

Her eyes narrow. "If you want this ass, you're going to have to work for it. I'm not that easy."

My fingers flick and pinch her nipples until an uneven sound escapes her lips. "Trust me. I know that. But I love a challenge. Now turn around."

Interest flickers across her eyes, but she doesn't move fast enough. So, I turn her around, bend her over the side of the bed, grab the vibrator, and put it between her thighs.

"Hold this against your pussy, and don't stop until I tell you," I direct, turning it on.

She gasps when it starts, and the sounds she makes as it works her clit has my cock becoming so painful that I need to undo the button of my jeans and tug the zipper down.

"Good girl," I praise, peppering kisses down her shoulder. I push between her shoulder blades to press her chest and face into the mattress, muffling some of the sounds she makes as the wand works its magic.

Reaching around her, I tug down her leggings until they're around her ankles and kneel down to carefully take them off each foot. Then she's completely bare to me—mine for the taking.

And damn do I want to take.

And take.

And take.

But I'm a giver first.

Raking my hands up the backs of her thighs, they rest on her ass and squeeze. She sucks in a breath when I brush my nose against her supple skin before biting down on her fleshy cheek.

"Alex," she moans when I get closer to where she's wet for me. I can smell it—her need. Her desperation.

So, I won't make her wait.

My mouth covers her, working her with my tongue and fingers. Her legs start shaking, and I know the wand is doing its job and then some when her garbled noises join the incoherent talk.

I don't slow down or show any mercy.

I fuck her with my mouth with a purpose, and when she says, "It's too much," I know I'm only moments away from her breaking apart.

And the second I feel her spasming around my tongue, I don't hesitate to stand, shed my pants and the briefs underneath, and put my cock where my tongue was only moments before.

"God, I can still feel you coming," I groan as her pussy grips me. I thrust forward and pull out, teasing her with the tip. Then I lean over her, position one of her knees on the edge of the bed, and plow forward until she screams my name into the mattress.

"You better keep that vibrator on your pussy," I tell her, driving into her until the sound of her arousal and our slapping hips tightens my balls. "If I see you move that away, I'm going to start again. Do you understand me?"

She makes another incoherent sound.

"Do you understand me, Olive?" I repeat.

"Y-Yes," she finally answers.

I pause only to move her other leg on the bed so she's ass up in the air. The deeper angle makes me cuss under my breath. "Jesus. It feels like you're sucking me in. Your pussy is fucking made for me. Do you know that?"

When she doesn't make a noise, I reach forward and twist her hair around my fist to lift her head up. "I didn't hear you. Is your pussy made for me?"

"Oh God," she whispers.

"Not your God, baby girl."

But my pride sure as hell accepts the title.

"Tell me whose pussy this is," I goad.

Silence.

I stop fucking her but grind my hips into her until I bottom out. "You can pretend like this pussy isn't mine, but we both know it is. It's made for me. It always has been. I don't think I need you to confirm it, because I can *feel* it."

In a shaky voice, she says, "Alex."

"I know, sweetheart. I know."

She starts pulsing around me, tightening, clenching and vice gripping my cock until I can't hold back.

"Holy shit," I groan. "I need you to come. I need to feel you drown my cock. I need to feel what I do to you. Do it, Olive. Come for me."

Her back arches, giving me a deeper angle than I've ever felt before. The wand falls from her hands as she orgasms, her body shaking and giving me all the satisfaction I need.

And only when her body starts to settle do I pump into her one more time before pulling out and emptying myself onto her ass.

"One day," I tell her, dragging some of the cum between her ass cheeks and to the puckered hole, "you're going to feel this inside of you."

I let my finger graze her before sliding in only a fraction.

Olive breathes deeply for a minute as I withdraw my finger, grab her shirt from the floor, and use it to wipe her up.

When she turns to me, I can see something in her eyes. Not guilt, but... something.

"Olive?" I ask.

She looks at the clothes scattered on the floor.

"You should go," she murmurs.

Regret.

"Olive, come on—"

"No," she cuts me off. "No. You should go. We shouldn't have done that. I don't want to get my hopes up that someday will exist. It would hurt

too much to be disappointed again.”

Fuck.

Fuck.

Grabbing my clothes, I grip them tight in my hands. “I won’t hurt you again.”

“I don’t want you to promise me something you may not be able to keep.”

I swallow.

“I don’t regret this,” I tell her.

I wait for her to say it back.

When I think she won’t, she looks at me through those thick lashes and whispers, “I don’t either.”

But I don’t know if she’s lying or not.

Our silence is broken by the contractor calling me who’s working on the roof across town. Internally, I curse him out for the bad timing. “If I didn’t need to take this, we’d talk about whatever is going on in that stubborn head of yours. Because I’m not going to give this up. Not again.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alex

THE MODERN CONDO with marble tile floors, white walls, and a wall of glass windows overlooking the city wrecks of wealth and prestige, which I guess Jesse Clarkson is. He's been making seven figures since his time with Chicago, which was how many years ago now?

I heard him telling one of the other guys that he paid eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars for this place, almost one hundred thousand dollars less than the initial asking price. Almost a million dollars for a home that was made of more windows than regular walls.

I'm staring out at the impressive view when I hear someone come up behind me and tap me with something cold. When I turn, I see Belle standing there with a tumbler of what looks like scotch in her hands.

"Did your stepbrother ask you to cater his party?" I ask, accepting the drink.

The brunette smiles warmly. "Actually, I'm somewhat of a cohost." My eyebrows go up when her thumb jabs behind her at the long hall that has at least four different doors off shooting it. "I live in one of the guest bedrooms. It's just a bonus for him to have someone here who knows what his friends like to drink."

They live together? *Interesting*. "Bet it gets tiring dealing with his moody ass twenty-four-seven. Didn't get enough of that growing up together or...?"

The prying question makes humor dance along her face. "Our parents didn't get married until we were in our teens. It's a long story that I won't bore you with. But living together never really got old because he moved out when he was drafted only a short time after me and my mother came into the picture." Her shoulder lifts. "I owe him a lot. He... Well, that's not just my story to tell. Jesse is a good person. And he's different with me than he is with the guys, I imagine. He's still moody but...less."

For her sake, I hope so. “It’s a nice place,” I compliment, looking back out the window. The view in the living room is of the skyline. It’s not as pretty as New York’s view on top of the Empire State Building, but it’s not bad.

She sidles up beside me. “It’s even prettier at sunset, you’ll see. Speaking of, the guys are on the roof. Jesse is grilling some burgers and chicken. I’m sure Moskins is requesting hot dogs too if you want any. He usually eats at least one package on his own, especially the drunker he gets. And I made sure to bring plenty of beer, so the cooler up there is stocked.”

I saw a few people heading to the elevator when I got here, offering them stiff nods that they returned with little to no communication otherwise. Nelson accepted the ice I was told to bring and took it up with him with a smile that was a little more friendly than the others. I guess that’s what happens when you spend more time worrying about your mother than forging friendships with your team.

“Are you coming up or hiding down here?”

“If I wanted to hide, all I’d need to do is lock myself in my bedroom with my Kindle and a glass of wine. Frankly, I might do that when the alcohol starts flowing. I like the guys but some of them can be a little too much when they’re buzzed.”

I only know what a Kindle is because Olive used to bring hers to my place. We didn’t always hook up. On the nights we just hung out, she’d sit in read on her tiny device while I worked on homework or watched TV. It was kind of nice.

Domesticated.

Or as close as I got to that.

I’m sure Belle has seen the guys in their drunken forms more than I have, so I’ll take her word for it. “You’re just playing host then?”

She turns and looks at me. “Jesse was right. You’re very cynical. I’m friends with people here too, you know. What? Were you not hugged as a child or something?”

I take a slow sip of scotch. “I’m inclined to think I’m realistic, not cynical. And, yes, I was. Less so after my dad died in a car accident but...”

Her eyes widen comically large. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry, Alex. I shouldn’t have made that joke.”

Maybe it’s fucked up, but I laugh. “It was a while ago. Don’t worry about it. I’ve always been a bit of a glass half empty kind of guy. You and

your brother wouldn't be the first to notice."

"Stepbrother," she corrects, making the corners of my mouth twitch with the threat of a smile.

"Of course. My bad."

Belle looks away, nibbling her lip. "I used to have my own apartment. It wasn't great, but it was a roof over my head. I put everything I had into Belle's Place, did all the marketing, most of the bartending, and turned it into what it is today. But Jesse helped make it a success. Because of him, and the team, it's reputable. I sacrificed a lot to make my baby bloom. Then, one day, the building I lived in caught fire. Thankfully, there were no fatalities. Barely any injuries. A majority of us lost our stuff, though. And, like always, Jesse swooped in and saved the day. He'd been living in a smaller condo at the time, but insisted on moving me in. When he realized we'd need something bigger, he found this place because he said it reminded me of everything I love."

She looks around with a shimmer in her eyes that brightens her face. "He's always there for me and the people he cares about or believes in. When he sees something in someone, he doesn't let them slip away. And trust me, I've had a handful of times when I could have messed up everything. But he never let that happen."

If it were up to Olive, would she try self-sabotaging? I felt bad leaving the other day, and she hasn't responded to any of my messages or calls since. Is that going to stop me from working my way back into her life? No. Sounds like Clarkson is the same way, and he's got the girl.

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask.

She takes a deep breath. "Because Jesse believes in you. He tells me about everybody on the team, but from day one, he saw something in you that he related to. You may be cynical, but my stepbrother seems to think that works in your favor. It makes you focused on whatever it is you're cynical about. Or because of."

If that's her way of asking me the reason, it's subtle enough to impress me. But not enough to share. She already knows more about me than most. When was the last time I admitted my father was dead to anybody? Probably not since Olive.

"I'd hate for his belief to be misplaced," I tell her honestly, staring down at my drink.

Her hand touches my forearm only momentarily, causing my eyes to lift. “There’s that cynicism again.”

My lips kick up a little higher. “I guess it’s from all those missed hugs as a child.”

The captain’s sister groans. “I’m sor—”

“If you’re done flirting with Belle, you should join your team,” Clarkson cuts in, causing Belle’s hand to drop as we turn to him. Neither of us heard him walk over to us. The man is a damn ninja.

His eyes are looking at Belle. Not me.

I lift my cup. “She was just getting me a drink and telling me where you guys were. I brought the ice you texted me about. Somebody took it up already.”

Finally, the captain’s eyes find mine. “You want to help me bring a few things up? Belle brought some appetizers from the bar to help soak up the alcohol. And based on how many empty beer bottles are up there, we’re going to need them.”

I dip my chin and follow him to the kitchen. “Thanks for the drink, Belle,” I call out, not hearing a reply if there is one because Clarkson guides us into the biggest fucking kitchen I’ve seen in my life.

The appliances are big, white, and polished. The refrigerator is one of those big ass doors that looks like a cabinet for some sort of aesthetic purpose I’ll never understand. And I’m pretty sure all the cabinet counters are marble.

He goes over to the fridge and starts taking trays full of food out to set on the giant island. There are stools lining two sides, with a sink big enough for me to take a bath in on the edge of it. Above the nook are wine glasses hanging from an expensive piece of wood with lights strung around the chains that keep it elevated.

“Did Belle decorate this place or you?” I ask, studying the long table off to the side with at least eight more chairs surrounding it. Everything looks too expensive to touch. “This place seems massive for two people.”

He closes the fridge with his foot and looks from the assortment of finger food to me. “She did most of the decorating. I don’t have time for that.”

“I can’t imagine she does either, running a business and all,” I comment casually. It’s more of an observation than anything, but his eyes narrow at my tone. “For the record, I don’t have a thing for her.”

His cheek twitches as he grabs the tray full of something wrapped in bacon. “Good” is all he says, passing the tray to me. “You grab those two and I’ll get these.”

He doesn’t say he’s interested in Belle.

But he doesn’t *not* say it either.

I smile to myself on the ride up to the rooftop.

All Clarkson says is, “Wipe that smirk off your face. I’m not in the mood for anybody to give me shit today.”

“Just Belle?” I ask jokingly.

His sigh is heavy.

Shaking my head, I say, “I won’t say anything. Like you said, we all have secrets.”

I can feel him watching me as I get out of the elevator first. He takes us to a table where drinks are set up already and sets the appetizers down.

Somebody calls out my name.

Another person asks how I’ve been.

It turns into a decent night.

But hours in, I find my mind wandering to a minty-eyed girl who isn’t here and won’t return my calls.



IT’S THREE IN the morning when Clarkson and I dump Moskins into the spare bed. He makes an incoherent noise that sounds vaguely like a protest, but neither the captain nor I care.

“Thanks,” Clarkson says, closing the door behind the man who’s currently laying on his stomach and mumbling under his breath.

Everybody else started leaving when midnight came and went, leaving only a few people lingering. Moskins didn’t seem to notice the absence of people tapering off, and found some tequila from God knows where.

“No problem.” We find ourselves back in the kitchen, where empty trays and glasses and dishes are stacked on the countertops. “It seemed like a good night. Not that Moskins will remember that in the morning.”

A ghost smile tilts Clarkson’s face as he finishes the water he grabbed earlier, guzzling it and adding it to the dirty dishes. “That’s usually how

these things go. You never came to the get-together I did at the start of the season. He was ten times worse. Puked all over the living room carpet. And the guest bed.”

I make a face. “And you keep having him back?”

“He’s part of the team.”

That’s dedication. “One of my frat brothers didn’t know his limit when it came to Captain Morgan sophomore year. Or junior. Or senior.” I shake my head. “You’d think after getting his stomach pumped twice he’d stop. You would be wrong. We all were.”

Clarkson flinches. “Rough.”

I nod. “So...” It’s so quiet compared to what it was mere hours ago. “Did Belle leave?”

His features harden, making him look like an overprotective brother. Or a jealous boyfriend. I can guess which is more likely. “Thought you weren’t interested.”

“I’m just asking a question, Cap.” I lean against the counter and cross my arms over my chest. “She’s a nice girl.”

He’s silent.

“And she thinks the world of you,” I comment matter-of-factly, gauging his stoic reaction. “I’m sure that makes it hard for others to compete.”

Clarkson straightens to full height. “I don’t know what you’re trying to get at—”

“I’m not trying to get at anything. All I’m saying is that you’ve got a nice girl who seems like a decent person and appreciates who you are for the traits you have, not for the money in your bank account. I don’t know a lot, but I do know having quality support in your life makes or breaks people like us. We’ve got a lot of people who try taking advantage of what we can give them. Belle has her shit together already. That’s not always common.”

One of his eyebrows quirks up. “Speaking from personal experience?”

Wetting my lips, I find myself nodding. “I’ve got a girl back home in mind. Not that she knows half the shit that would lighten my load.”

The caution tightening his facial features eases, and interest takes over. “Why not?”

“Because...” My voice trails off, lost in a sea of excuses that I try using reasonably. “Because my life has been a mess for a long time, and I try not taking down everybody with the ship. If I sink, fine. At least it’s my own

doing. But there are innocent people I have no intention of dragging with me. She doesn't deserve that."

It's as honest as I've been with anyone. Maybe it's the liquor talking. Or maybe it's the weight I've been carrying around for years that has finally started feeling too damn heavy.

"Even Atlas struggled to carry the world on his shoulders" is his first remark, shrugging loosely. "I don't know what it is that you don't want this girl to know, but it'll crush you if you're not careful. You should let her be the one who chooses if she stays onboard or gets on a lifeboat before it's too late. Who knows. Maybe she'll help carry the weight. Or at the very least let you get on the door in the icy water."

"Wow," I muse dryly. "A Greek mythology reference *and* a *Titanic* one all in one night. I feel special."

Clarkson snickers. "I was a bit of a Greek mythology nerd growing up. Read about any book I could find whether it was fictional or not."

"And *Titanic*?"

He grins. "That's Belle's favorite movie."

Both of my eyebrows dart up. "That's a fucked-up movie to love. She has seen the ending, right?"

Clarkson snorts. "Trust me, she has. She used to force me to watch it with her from start to end. But we're getting off track. My point is that you need to let people decide whether they want to choose you and everything that comes with it. That means your problems too, man. Whatever they may be."

That's a lot easier said than done. "Look, I don't expect you to understand. Some people's shit is too much."

"Did you kill someone?"

"The fuck? No."

"Rape someone?"

My face goes slack. "Get out of here with that," I deadpan.

He holds his palms up. "Then I don't know what's so bad you'd risk losing someone you care about. I can see it in your eyes. You like her. If you're bringing her up to me, that tells me it's probably worth something. I told you before that this team is a family. We're loyal. Moskins is probably vomiting his brains out in my guest bedroom right now. Again. There's a lot of things we've done that probably make people question why they like us. Belle and I don't always get along, but she's still here. She's still—"

Clarkson stops himself. “Whatever it is that you’re holding back, it’s going to eat at you. If you need someone to talk to, I’m here. If you need a test subject before laying it all on your girl back home, so be it. It won’t change shit for us.”

Your girl. That’s what I want her to be, right?

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him about my mom, but it gets stuck there, hanging on for dear life. One day, I decide. One day I’ll let someone try pulling me back on board. But I want that person to be Olive. Not Clarkson.

“It’s late,” I say, checking my watch. “I should get getting.”

He watches me for a second before nodding once, not pushing me. “Don’t forget we’ve got team meetings starting next week.”

I make sure I have my phone and wallet before heading to the door. “I’ll be there.”

“And, O’Conner?” he calls out, stopping me as I turn the knob. “It’s human nature to be needed. We’re not meant to live this life alone. It’s why we have friends. Family. They’re here to lighten the load.”

“I wish I could agree, but for some of us, they’re the reasons we’re carrying so much.”

On the short trip back to my apartment, I realize that’s the first time I’ve ever *blamed* my mother for anything. I’ve always found excuses for her to get away with everything she has.

She’s sick.

She’s tried.

She needs help.

All of those are true.

But the admission makes my steps a little less heavy as I make the trek back. And that’s when I realize that maybe Clarkson was right.

When I get back to my apartment, I pull my phone out and text Olive.

Me: Take your time about us

Me: I’m not going anywhere

Me: But I’ll be here when you’re ready

I don’t expect a reply, but I needed her to know. Because my captain is right. We all need somebody.

And I need her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Olive

THE BOOK IN Berlin's hand flies across the room, almost smacking Skylar in the face before she narrowly dodges it by an inch. "That's bullshit! It can't end like that! Tell me I'm missing a few pages. Did I get a misprint? Did one of you bitches tear out a second epilogue to bask in my misery?"

Berlin's outrage makes Skylar and I laugh because we've both been there. "You didn't," I tell her sympathetically. "That's really how it ends."

Skylar nods along. "There isn't a second epilogue."

The purple-haired firecracker looks like she's been shot. "And you let me *read* it? Oh, that's evil. I could have used a warning."

Skylar walks over and gives her a hug. "That would have spoiled it. You needed to experience the pain like the rest of us."

Berlin sighs into Skylar's boobs before peeling herself away. "Although I do appreciate a good boob hug, it won't make me forget the pure agony I just experienced. I mean...*really*?"

Is it bad I'm giggling? "But that's how you know it's a good book. When an author manages to sucker punch you in the feels, they did something right."

"More like a sucker punch to the tit," Berlin grumbles, poking her chest. "Speaking of tits. How are yours feeling, Hot Mama? They're bigger than I remember."

Skylar frowns and looks down at herself. "I told Danny that too. He thinks they're smaller. I think they're swollen. Bentley is getting teeth, and he bit my nipple."

Berlin and I simultaneously flinch, and my nipples start to hurt out of pure sympathy. "That's rough," I tell my best friend.

She hums. "Enough about my boobs, though. We're kid free for a night. I want to gossip about boys and books and literally anything that isn't the color of baby vomit or the things that come out of Bentley's butt."

Berlin scrunches her nose. “Ew. Remind me to never have kids. I think one of my ovaries just shriveled and died.”

“Just one?” I question.

She shrugs. “The other is choosing to remain cautiously optimistic.”

Her theatrics make me laugh.

Skylar picks up the book and sets it on the corner of the coffee table that Berlin has covered in takeout containers. She sits down next to Berlin and nudges her leg with her knee. “What ever happened to that cute boy you were talking to? The lacrosse player?”

I turn to Berlin. “Lacrosse? I thought Jeremy played baseball.”

“Jeremy?” It’s Skylar’s turn to look confused at our friend. “I thought you were seeing Collyn with two-l’s-and-a-y.”

Now *I’m* not sure what’s going on. “Who is Collyn?”

“He’s a pitcher for the school’s team. And he was super clingy. Plus, who spells it C-O-L-L-Y-N? It annoyed me.”

Skylar and I share a look.

I offer a hesitant, “His parents? I mean, mine named me after food.”

Berlin waves it off. “Whatever. I’m not seeing either of them. But there’s a football player—”

I groan as Skylar perks up. “What is with you guys and football players?”

Berlin grins at me. “Is there a better sport we should be looking into?”

Skylar’s knowing eyes focus on me. “Is there?” she asks teasingly.

Sighing, I settle into the armchair across from them on the couch. “You both know I’m partial to hockey.”

“Partial,” Skylar snorts unattractively.

“Ooooooh. Does that mean there’s a player here you have your eye on? I’ll totally be your wing woman.”

I’m quiet while I feel the mom in the room staring at me. She probably assumes I’ve told Berlin about Alex, but I haven’t. By the time we met, Alex was gone, and I was attempting to detox. I didn’t see the reason.

Berlin’s eyebrows arch up in wait. “Am I missing something? Is it that guy who shows up at Fishtail during your shifts? Badger?”

My head drops back as Skylar laughs. “I told you it was obvious he liked you!”

Berlin claps. “So I’m right?”

I shake my head, shutting that down before she gets any ideas. “No, it’s not Badger. There isn’t anybody here who I’ve got my eye on.”

She frowns. “Nobody?”

Skylar clears her throat.

I eye her, then internally groan again. “There was somebody. His name is Alex.”

“Alex!” Berlin all but shrieks excitedly. “Is it the same one who was calling you the other day when you were on the phone with Bodhi Hotman.”

Her frustration that was targeted at Bodhi for not doing more to get the comments on his post shut down quickly went away when she saw his Instagram account. Specifically, the latest shirtless photo he, or his team, posted for some new underwear brand I’ve never heard of. I’ll admit, I drooled on myself a little. Just a little, though. Now, she refers to him as Hotman rather than Hoffman.

Classic Berlin.

Skylar’s eyes narrow at me. “Wait a second. He reached out to you? Since when? Why am I in the dark about this?”

Berlin waves her hand. “Uh, hello? I’ve clearly been in the dark for way longer. So spill the beans, Olive. What gives with this guy?”

God, if I only knew the answer to that. “I wish there was more to tell you, but there’s not. We spoke a few times since he graduated Lindon. I saw him once or twice in passing—”

“Where?” Berlin demands. “Details, woman! What does he do? Does he live local? And by ‘saw him’ does that mean you saw him naked or...?”

Skylar seems just as interested in that information. And maybe a little hurt I haven’t offered it sooner. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I frown. “I didn’t want you to be disappointed. You of all people saw what him leaving did to me.”

“It’s not him leaving that bothered me,” she corrects me softly. “It’s what he said to you. I may not be his biggest fan, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want updates. You care about him.”

Berlin looks even more lost. “Can one of you fill in the gaps? You and Alex dated, and he broke your heart? Is that the vibe I’m getting?”

Nibbling the inside of my cheek, I offer her a timid nod. “Basically. Although, dating may be a little more direct than what we were.”

Understanding has her nodding. “Got it. Fuck buddies. I definitely have a few of those in my back pocket. So what did he say to you before he left?”

I don’t want to relive that day. “It doesn’t matter now. We cleared the air when he called me earlier this summer. He needed some advice, and I gave it to him.”

Telling them about brunch would just contradict me and hurt Skylar more. But not telling them might hurt her ten times worse.

“What’s confusing?” Skylar asks.

How do I even put into words where my head is at when it’s at odds with my heart? “We had breakfast together when he was in town and some things were said. He acts like he’s genuinely sorry for how things ended.”

Berlin’s brows pinch. “Isn’t that a good thing? He doesn’t sound like a total dick.”

Wetting my bottom lip, I shake my head. “He isn’t. The problem is that it’s easier for me to hate him if I believe he is. Then he can’t hurt me.”

Both the girls look sympathetically at me.

I’ve been ignoring him so I can focus on school, and he hasn’t given up. If anything, I think it’s making him more determined. And I...like it? I don’t even know.

Skylar reaches out for me. “I know this has to be tough for you. I’m sorry, Olive.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I sort of did this to myself. And now I need to figure out how to handle it. Especially before the season officially starts.”

Berlin looks between Skylar and I. “The season? As in...hockey?” Something strikes her. Probably the games we’d watch together since meeting. Things would get heated. “Oh my God. He plays pro hockey.” I swear she gasps. “You’re totally talking about Alexander O’Conner, aren’t you? You dirty dog. I’m so proud of you. He’s hot!”

Skylar gives her a look. “Not the point, Berlin.”

She reigns in it. “Right. My bad.”

I’m not surprised she knows who I’m talking about. I always used to have something to do whenever Alex was brought up by the announcers or had more than a few minutes of screen time.

I shrug. “It’s whatever. When I figure out how to deal with it, you two will be the first to know. In the meantime, let’s figure out what our next

buddy read should be now that Berlin has caught up.”

The girl in question glares at us. “I swear to baby Jesus if you make me read another depressing ass book, I’m suing. I don’t know who, but I’ll do it.”

We all laugh, breaking the tension that was starting to grow in my shoulders. “Deal. We’ll let you be part of the decision process this time.”

“That’s all I ask.” She pauses. “And, for the record, I can tell that Alex means something to you. Go easy on him. Not for him, but for you.”

I can feel her and Skylar looking at me.

Shifting where I’m sitting, I tug a piece of lint off my shirt and stare at it. I don’t have the energy to make an excuse as to why I can’t do that.

Take your time about us.

I’m not going anywhere.

But I’ll be here when you’re ready.

I stared at those text messages all night, thinking of a hundred things to say before opting for nothing. Because words couldn’t do justice to what my heart is feeling.

Rubbing my lips together, I pick up my phone and aimlessly scroll. “We’ll see,” I tell my friends.



SEBASTIAN’S NAME POPS up on my screen halfway through my shift at Fishtail, earning me a sidelong look from Judy. “Take ten,” she tells me, serving a group of kids who came in half-hammered already. “But not a minute more. I’m already down one bartender from the stomach flu.”

I answer the phone as I head into the breakroom, taking a cup of fountain soda with me because the Coca-Cola kind is superior to the bottles. Unless it’s the glass bottles. I sell out the Dollar Store every time I see they have them stocked.

“Hey, big brother,” I greet. “Which would you rather; fountain Coke or the Coke you get in glass bottles?”

“Fountain,” he answers with no hesitation. “But it has to be the McDonald’s kind.”

I take a long sip of my drink. “Really?”

“Really. But that’s not why I’m calling.”

I plop down at the table covered in newspapers that it looks like somebody dissembled for the crossword puzzle. My money is on Jim. “Is everything okay? Did you get somebody else pregnant and marry them too?”

His sigh is heavy, telling me to shut up. “No, I didn’t. Christ. When are you going to let that go?”

“Never. So what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. I wanted to see if you had time to come to New York for a pre-season event. It’s a party with the team and their friends and families. Mom said she couldn’t make it, but I figured you’d be interested.”

I’m not surprised Mom wasn’t interested in that. She’ll go to home games if they’re close enough, but she’s not a big fan of afterparties. She told me she was too old for that, and me mentioning how one of Sebastian’s teammates likes older women didn’t seem to help any.

“When is it?” I ask, biting down on the plastic straw and absentmindedly scroll through my phone. “I’ll have to make sure I’m not on the schedule here, but I’ll come if I can.”

He tells me the date and time and goes on about other people who will be there. I know he’ll remind me at least five other times before the actual event, so I don’t pay that much attention. Especially when he starts talking about food allergies and dress attire. I mean, seriously? Since when does his team dress up for a party? I’ve seen them in suits on game day, or the rare times they go to charity events, but that’s it.

“...going with you?”

I realize I spaced out reading funny memes about dogs and didn’t hear his question. “What?”

“Is anyone going with you?” he repeats.

My brows pinch. “Who would go with me? You already said Mom didn’t want to. Am I required to have a plus one? Follow up, is it required to be human? Because there’s this stray dog who sometimes follows me and —”

“Absolutely not. Do you remember that mutt you snuck into the house when you were eleven? It had fleas and they got everywhere.”

I wince. Mom was not happy. “I thought she would let me keep it,” I murmur. She didn’t.

When she found it hiding under my bed after one day, the damage was done. Who knew fleas spread that quickly? I didn't. She needed to hire someone to come clean the carpets. And the rest of the house. I'd been grounded for weeks.

"Well don't get any ideas," he tells me firmly, his tone leaving little room for argument. "And I wasn't asking for me. Hoffman wanted to know. He said Coach told him everybody needed to submit who they were bringing by Friday so they'd have enough seating."

Bodhi wanted to know? "I didn't realize Hoffman was the coach's messenger."

My brother makes a noise. "Me neither. Is there something you want to tell me?"

Nibbling the inside of my cheek, I find myself slowly shaking my head. Unlike Alex, my brother doesn't need to know anything. "No. Nothing. And I have no plans on bringing somebody. So you can tell him to tell the coach that."

Sebastian is quiet for a long moment, making me uncomfortable. "There's something you should know about Bodhi, Olive."

Alarm rings in my ears, but I remain quiet because I don't trust my voice.

"He's got a kid."

I blink.

Think about those four words.

Then blink again.

"A kid. As in...?"

"A child," he says slowly. "A daughter. She's four. Spitting image of her mother, thank God."

I think the last bit is meant to lighten the mood, but it doesn't land. "Are we talking about the same Bodhi Hoffman? Like, you're friend? The right wing for the Rangers?"

He hums in confirmation.

Bodhi Hoffman is a *dad*?

Oh my God. "How do you guys keep getting away with this stuff without the media making it into a circus? Last week, I saw a news article about of the Canadian players walking out of the hospital and the headline was that he was having major surgery that was going to force him to retire. Then I saw *another* headline that said he was having an affair with a doctor

there. Do you really want to know what the truth was? He was having his annual physical. That was it. The media is known to make up the most ridiculous stuff. And, yet, two people I know personally have never been outed. How is that?"

His answer is simple. "Money."

Money. Of course. "You paid them off."

"I didn't necessarily need to, but Hoffman wanted his privacy. And privacy for his daughter and her mother."

Is it wrong that I'm suddenly mad because he was willing to protect his daughter and baby mama from the media but not me? I know he doesn't owe me anything, but I thought we were friends. I can understand wanting to leave your child out of the spotlight, but I didn't even know he'd gotten anybody pregnant. One picture with me, and the world explodes because Bodhi touched a fat woman. It makes my eye twitch.

"Why are you telling me this? It's obvious he didn't want me to know."

Sebastian doesn't answer right away. But when he does, my cheeks prickles with heat. "I'm telling you because we both know he wasn't asking for the coach. Like I said before, Olive. Bodhi is a good guy. But..."

Once again, he's warning me away from someone. "But you don't want us to get involved."

This time, he doesn't hesitate. "That's not it. Hoffman is one of the best people I know. I know I'm protective of you, but it's for a reason. He would be the type of person I *could* trust with you."

Confusion weighs on my shoulders. "Then what are you saying?"

His next words do something to my heart that I don't like. They crush it. "I don't want him to get hurt. And, I love you, sis, but I think you'd be one of the few people capable of doing that. And his head needs to be in a good place. Not just for the team. But for his little girl."

My brother doesn't want me to break his best friend's heart.

He thinks *I'm* the problem.

Hurt spreads throughout my chest.

I swallow. "Duly noted. I've got to get back to work. I'll talk to you later."

"Olive—"

I cut the call and stare at the screen.

The rest of my shift goes by painfully slow, and those words echo in my head more than I want to admit by the time I help Judy close.

Sitting in my car after we lock up, I glance at my phone for a few minutes before dialing it.

“Hello?” Alex sounds tired when he answers.

“I woke you up,” I realize apologetically. I look at the clock and wince at the time.

“It’s all right. You okay?”

“I just...” I pause, biting down on my bottom lip as I look into the dark night dimly lit by streetlights. “I don’t want to be the problem, Alex. I don’t want to feel the way I do. Confused. Conflicted. Unsure. I don’t want to be the issue that you use as an excuse.”

Unlike me, Alex doesn’t hesitate. His tone is much more alert, awake. “I gave you a reason to feel that way, Olive. That doesn’t make you the problem. It makes you smart. I’m just going to have to prove to you that I won’t hurt you again.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I don’t know,” he admits. “Grovel?”

At least he’s honest.

“I’ll let you get back to sleep.”

“I’m glad you called,” he tells me. “And I mean it. I’m going to do whatever it takes for you to believe me. Because you’re not the problem. You’re...everything good.”

I take a deep breath at those words suck into my chest. “Goodnight, Alex.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Olive

SKYLAR GIVES ME an impressed once-over through the phone screen as she bounces Bentley on her hip. “You look great. Love the boobs in that top.”

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, studying the way my chest looks in the black shirt with a V-neck that is deeper than it was on the mannequin. “Do you think it’s too much?”

It’s hard to figure out if something looks too sexual on me or if my boobs just make it seem that way. The struggle.

“No way,” my best friend promises. “Plus, you can’t tell me there aren’t going to be people there showing way more. That top will make you look like a nun in comparison.”

Snorting, I flatten my palm along the front. “I doubt that, but I appreciate you for trying.”

Skylar shrugs. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tagalong. Danny is visiting his grandma in the hospital. She fell trying to sneak back into the house after playing poker.”

From the stories I’ve heard about Grandma Meadow, that’s not surprising at all. “Hopefully she’s okay. Tell him I said hi.”

“She will be.” She sighs, pressing a chaste kiss to her son’s head. “You seem nervous. Are *you* okay?”

I have no reason not to be. I usually like these things. There’s free food and drinks and entertainment. Plus, I get to see Sebastian which doesn’t happen as often as I’d like now that he’s a fancy pants professional hockey player. And with him adding ‘father’ to that list, I’m sure it’ll be even less I get to spend time with him.

But I don’t want to go alone. And I was half tempted to ask Alex if he wanted to come, but I knew that wouldn’t go over well. Not with Sebastian or his team. I mean, bringing an enemy to a Rangers team event? Probably not the best idea.

“Seb and I haven’t spoken since he invited me to this,” I admit. It’s been a long week of wondering if I should even show up. The only thing he’s sent me since our conversation was the details of the event, including the hotel room he booked me at the venue since his place was being renovated. He didn’t ask if I was coming, he assumed I was. And if he wasn’t going to make a big deal out of what had been said, neither was I.

Mostly.

It still hurt, but I could keep that to myself.

“Are you fighting?”

Her question pulls me out of my head. “Not really. He told me something that was surprising about a friend and then basically told me to stay away from him.”

“From *him* or his friend?”

“His friend,” I elaborate. “Apparently, I’m too much for what said friend is going through. It made me feel...” What? Offended? Insulted? Guilty? Bad? All of those things. But more than that, it made me feel like something was wrong with me. “It doesn’t matter. I know he didn’t mean it in a bad way. He’s just looking out for his buddy. But it still sucked.”

Skylar is quiet for a second. “But what about you? He should be looking out for you too.”

Yeah, well... “Whatever. It’s making me a little uneasy about tonight, is all. I’ve met most of the team and I’ve been around a majority of the WAGS and staff. But part of me wished I’d stayed home with some lame excuse.”

“You can always make something up.”

“He knows I’m here already,” I mumble, sighing in defeat. I regret not turning off my location sharing with him. “I’ve got to suck it up and put my big girl panties on. It’ll be fun. They always have good food at these events. And drinks. Maybe I’ll even indulge on some wine since I don’t have to get an Uber.”

Skylar laughs. “Well, have fun. If you need me to get you out of there I can make a call. Call me tomorrow with all the details if you stay.”

After hanging up, I finish my makeup and give myself one last look in the vanity mirror before deciding it’s good enough. No matter what, tonight is going to be a good night.

I tell myself that three more times when the elevator dings at the ground floor where the event is happening in the ballroom.

And the first person to greet me when the doors open is none other than Bodhi Hoffman.

One of his hands slides into the front pocket of his dress slacks, which are screaming from his massive quads. Not to mention his muscles are threatening to rip the seams of the gray button-down, and his hair is gelled back into a tight bun without a piece out of place. He looks...damn.

But I don't tell him that.

"Did you buy your shirt at Baby Gap?" I ask instead, causing his lips to curl up at the corners in amusement.

When I step out, there's hesitation in my steps.

"Is that a dad joke?" he asks, making my eyebrows jump up. I hadn't even meant it that way. But—*Wait*.

"You know that I know?"

Bodhi dips his chin, the hand from his pocket lifting to swipe his clean-shaven jaw. "Your brother told me."

Slowly, I nod. "Did he say anything else?"

Based on the confusion on his face, I'd guess that's a no. "Should he have? That seems like enough of a bomb drop."

He's not wrong. "Yeah, that was...something." I shift on my feet. "Why didn't you say something? It makes sense now why you were being weird when we were talking about the kid thing."

We move aside when the elevator doors open and a new group of people step out. I can feel Bodhi's palm against the small of my back, the heat from him soaking into my skin. "I wouldn't say I was being 'weird'."

I roll my eyes, still feeling his touch. It's innocent, but it still burns on my back. Shifting, I step in front of him with a smile. "You were totally being weird. You know, I was just talking to—" I stop myself, internally wincing when I was about to let Alex's name drop. Clearing my throat, I let my smile grow. "I was just talking to a friend about how there must be something in the water because everybody is suddenly having kids."

"A friend, huh? A guy friend?"

I shrug, trying to seem casual.

"Now who's being weird?" he teases, nudging me with his elbow. He does it so softly I almost forget he's taken down men twice his size with the very same part of him. "Look, I didn't want to bring up Gemma because there's a lot I've been figuring out with her and her mother's family."

I perk up. "Her name is Gemma? That's really pretty, Bodhi."

He lifts one of those broad shoulders. "I wish I could take credit for it, but that was all her mother."

"And is her mother in the picture?" The question comes out before I'm smart enough to squash it. "Sorry. That's none of my business."

Bodhi wets his lips, looking at the people mingling near the ballroom entrance across the hall before sighing. "Her mother passed away, actually. Car accident. It's been almost a year."

"Oh." That's who he was talking about when we mentioned missing our exes. "I'm—"

"Don't. You don't need to apologize." He's quiet for a second as something passes over his eyes. "I wasn't on good terms with her when she died, but it was hard to hear. Because of Gemma. I want what's best for her, and her mother's side of the family hasn't made that very easy for me."

Sympathy wraps around my heart. I'm starting to see why Sebastian told me not to involve myself in this. It seems...difficult. "I won't tell you I'm sorry then, even if I am."

He chuckles lightly. "Thank you."

It's my turn to look around, filling the silence with a cursory glance of our surroundings. I recognize one of the coach's wives walking by, waving at one of the players who has a girl with big boobs latched onto his side.

Bodhi's voice lowers when he breaks the silence between us. "What if we mingled for an hour and ditched? I saw a restaurant down the street. Maybe we could talk there."

Talk there?

Why is my heart doing a funny dance inside my chest? "Talk as in...?"

Bodhi smiles. "We'd be just two people who enjoy each other's company talking about...whatever. I don't really want to be here anyway. Do you?"

I think about Sebastian's parting words and find myself frowning. Would he harass me for leaving with Bodhi? "I don't know."

"What don't you know? If you want to stay at the party or if you want to go out to dinner with me?"

"Both?" I offer weakly.

Understanding has him nodding once, his hand sliding back into his front pocket. "Tell you what. If you decide you've had enough mingling here, give me a signal. We can meet by the front door."

I contemplate. "What kind of signal?"

He flicks his nose. "What about that? You see it in movies all the time."

"Exactly," I point out. "Which means everybody will know we want to ditch. Or they'll think you're offering me cocaine. That's probably more likely. I've seen some of the girls you hang out with. I'm pretty sure the one before Barbie offered me coke while we were waiting for you guys to finish in the locker room."

He laughs, the sound boisterous enough to shake his shoulders. "Honestly, that wouldn't surprise me. She did like her nose candy."

"Come on, before Seb comes looking for us and finds us here."

He stares at me curiously, his eyes narrowed slightly. "Would that be such a bad thing?"

Rubbing my lips together, I manage to shake my head. "No. Not to me anyway. Let's go, hot shot. I'm sure your team is wondering where you are anyway."

He looks like he wants to say something but chooses not to. Then he smoothly puts my arm through his and guides us toward the room like he's my prom date escorting me to the big dance.

I never went to my prom.

When we walk through the open doorway, I realize how this might look to my brother. So, I causally slip my arm out from Bodhi's and offer him a small smile when his eyes find mind. "It's warm in here," I lie, flattening my palms down the front of my shirt.

I study the room and find Sebastian immediately. And he's already looking at Bodhi and I like he sensed us.

Clearing my throat, I step away from the right wing. "I'll text you if I want out. Deal?"

He watches me, his brows furrowing together at the center. "Deal, O-Dawg."

Palms clammy, I suddenly wish I'd sucked it up and asked Alex to come with me.



I'VE NEVER BEEN good at schmoozing, but I've always mastered pretending like I am. So I consider Bodhi's offer after spending two and a half hours

talking to people I couldn't care less about. Sebastian must sense something, though, because he's kept me close to his side since I walked over to him.

He gave me a hug, asked how the train ride down was, and then passed me a drink. Coca-Cola. Not wine. Unfortunately.

Once in a while, I see Bodhi's eyes wander in our direction while he talks to people. The very attractive redhead who was trying to get his attention didn't seem to like that very much, which made me laugh to myself.

"No Tori tonight?" I ask my brother as we walk over to the table full of finger food. There are sandwiches with the crust cut off, crackers with some sort of mush that resembles what Bentley spits up on his parents, and a tossed salad among the other picked-through snacks to tide people over before the entrees arrive at the tables.

Sebastian takes one of the mushy crackers and pops the whole thing into his mouth. "She wasn't feeling well and thought some one-on-one time would be good for us."

That's...nice of her. "How did you two meet anyway? I still can't believe you're married."

A small smile tilts his lips. "She was covering a game for an article she was assigned to. I believe the words she used to describe me were 'too big for his britches.'"

My eyebrows arch. "Really? Didn't Grandma used to say that about Dad?"

He doesn't seem offended by that. "She did, yeah. And, normally, I don't like anything that reminds me of the blood we share with him. But Tori is one of the first people I met who didn't try to kiss any of our asses. She wasn't sure she believed the hype surrounding me. It was...refreshing to be doubted."

I never would have thought he'd take something like that lightly. "You used to get offended when I'd tell you that you were too slow on your laps or not quick enough in your passes."

"It pushed me to do better," he replies. "She made me *want* to do better. If people are going to call me the best defenseman, then that's what I'm going to work to be. That's because of her."

"Now you're married with a kid. You clearly knocked the socks, and pants, right off her."

Sebastian's deadpan expression makes me crack a grin.

"Anyway, what's with all the fancy food? Half of this doesn't look edible."

He picks up another cracker and holds it out to me. "This is a brie and jam cracker. The other ones are cucumber and ricotta. Try one. You'll like it."

I'm not as sure, but I try it anyway. Mostly because I was too nervous to eat earlier, so I'm hungry. And if I don't put something in my stomach then very loud, embarrassing noises are going to start happening. "It's not horrible," I relent, wiping my hands off. "But they should put some pizza out or something because it doesn't look like anyone else is interested in it."

He chuckles. "Wait until they're hungry enough and this whole table will be wiped out by the time they bring out the actual dinner."

I look around the room, accidentally meeting Bodhi's eyes again. This time, there's an older couple talking to him. He looks bored. "When is dinner, exactly?" I ask my brother, who's watching a few of his teammates roughhouse off to the side.

"Not until seven."

I frown. That's still an hour from now.

When one of the boys almost knocks into a waitress holding a tray of drinks, Sebastian groans. "I need to go take care of that before they cause a scene. Coach told us if we weren't on our best behavior we'd pay through conditioning."

As someone who loathes exercising, that doesn't sound fun. "You go. I'll be fine. In fact, I may go get some fresh air. It's stuffy in here."

He's already walking toward his friends, calling out, "Keep your phone on you and don't go too far alone. This is New York City, not London."

I wave him off before pulling my phone out and sending off a text to the right wing across the room.

When Bodhi subtly checks his phone, he shoots me a grin. His hand reaches out and shakes the man's, then the woman's, before he dips his head and starts walking toward the exit.

I follow suit, trailing behind him and waving at a few people along the way.

When I see him standing by the front door, his grin is ten times bigger. "I'm fucking starving. Did you see the shit they wanted us to eat? I had two plates of salad. *Two*, little Henderson."

“The travesty,” I sympathize sarcastically, laughing when he tugs me into his front and squeezes me against the hard planes of his chest.

“Come on. I looked up the menu at that restaurant and they have edible food,” he tells me, looping our arms back together. “They even have chicken tenders.”

I look at him. “Now you’re speaking my language.” I think about it. “How do you even know I love them so much?”

He taps my nose affectionately before unlooping our arms and draping his massive one across my shoulders. “Your brother said you’d order chicken tenders everywhere you go, no matter if they were on the kid’s menu or the main one. And between you and me, I do the same thing.”

I snort. “You?”

“The real question is,” he poses, stopping at the crosswalk flashing red. “Are you a honey mustard or a ranch girl?”

My eyes light up. “Depends on the mood. Tonight...” I play out my contemplation, tapping my chin. “Tonight, I’m a honey mustard girly. But if you order ranch, don’t be shocked if I dip some of my chicken into it.”

He winks at me, and that wink...it has the power to do some pretty powerful stuff to my lady bits. Except, it doesn’t. Not that I’m going to tell him that. Because there’s only one person who really has an effect on me, and it’s not the DILF I’m walking beside.

Because me and kids...well, I don’t know how I feel about them. So, I tell my lady bits to calm down and focus on the chicken tenders we both order from the kid’s menu despite the look we get from the waiter. The conversation flows effortlessly like it always does when I’m around Bodhi, and I let myself forget about his other life.

The one where he’s got an adorable little girl named Gemma in it.

And when my brother calls me, I tell him I’m with a friend across the street and that I’ll let him know when I’m back. It takes less than ten seconds when we hang up before Bodhi’s phone starts buzzing with Sebastian’s name on it.

He doesn’t pick up, letting us stay in our little bubble for a little while longer.

“So...” Bodhi dips his chicken tender in my honey mustard. “Want to tell me about Alex?”

I stop chewing my fry for a second. “No. I don’t want to do that.”

He watches me before nodding once. “Maybe one day you will.”

I steal his ranch. “I wouldn’t hold your breath, Hoffman.”
All he does is chuckle, but the sound is off.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Alex

“O’CONNER!” COACH PELFREY yells, blowing his whistle as I push off the boards that I was slammed into during a basic drill. “What the hell was that? You were five seconds behind that play. You should have been able to pass that easily to Clarkson before Nelson and Moskins got to you.”

I clench my eyes closed and nod once gingerly. He’s right. I’ve executed that play plenty of times before, but I was too slow passing the puck to our captain.

One of the guys pushes me back into the boards with a laugh and skates off, making me grind my teeth down. When I see my reflection in the glass, I can’t help but remember a time not so long ago when Sebastian Henderson was the one pinning me there.

“What the fuck did I say?” Henderson growls from behind me, his arm pressing me against the boards.

Coach blows his whistle. “Henderson! Get off O’Conner before I bench your ass for the game. You can’t afford that right now.”

Henderson slams into me again before backing off. “Stay the fuck away from my sister, dickhead. I saw you talking to her earlier.”

I flash him a grin from over my shoulder. “Since when is talking illegal? I said hi in passing to be a gentleman. Is that so wrong?”

Just as he rushes for me again, someone grabs his arm. “He’s not worth it,” Able tells him.

Chuckling at our teammate, I taunt the overprotective big brother. “Yeah, Henderson. I’m not worth it. Don’t worry about me or your sister. You’ve got people to impress.”

Able sighs, shaking his head. “You’re really going to instigate when I’m trying to help you?”

When Sebastian shows his emotions so clearly, it’s impossible not to do. “He’s acting like I whipped my dick out in front of his sister.”

Henderson all but growls at me as someone else comes and pulls him away.

Able takes Sebastian's spot in front of me. "I don't know what is going on with you but leave his sister out of it."

I roll my eyes. "I said hi to her. That was it!"

As he skates away, I shake my head.

Now that they're both telling me not to, I'm even more tempted to cross the line he drew.

Because fuck Sebastian and everybody else who tells me I can't do something.

"Henderson," Pelfrey calls out again, snapping me back to reality. "Head in the game."

"Sorry, Coach," I call out, blowing out a frustrated breath.

I've been on edge since I woke up to a call from Logan's Hospital. The message didn't seem urgent, but I could tell it was something I needed to deal with before I came to practice. By the time I finally got ahold of my mother's nurse to hear about her latest outburst that nearly hurt one of the aides, I was already running late. Coach chewed me out, which only intensified my foul mood when I was told Mom's visitation privileges would be delayed by another two weeks.

Paul Berkley, one of the team's defense, silently pats my back and skates over to the others. He's one of the few players who doesn't seem to find me completely unimpressive. Maybe because he's not that much older than me—barely two years. The age gaps and experience differences between me and the rest of the players seem to make it harder to connect with them.

I know I can be an evasive asshole sometimes, but I usually find some common ground with the people I play with after this long. It was never difficult in Lindon, but it's damn near impossible to get more than a few bleak stares or raised eyebrows from a majority of the guys. Even after helping Moskins get his shit together after Clarkson's party, he's siding with the others who've decided to ice me out again this preseason. Do I suck that goddamn badly?

Rolling my tight shoulders, I skate over to where the others are. When Coach Pelfrey comes over, his eyes are hard as they meet mine. "I need all my guys to be on top of their game whether they're new or not. O'Conner, you're going to work drills with Clarkson for two hours after we're done

here until you can catch up. You clearly need the extra help if you can't execute a simple play like that. We don't need a repeat of the last game if we're going to make it to championships."

A few of the guys whistle under their breaths at the coach's sharp tone. He's right, though. I suck today. I'm tired as hell. Stressed. It's clearly distracting me.

I know without looking at our captain that Clarkson isn't keen on staying behind later than he needs to. I'm sure he's got better places to be than here with me. He's been kicking ass all day without even trying and could probably do each play Coach calls out in his sleep.

Clarkson hefts a sigh. "Got it, Coach."

"Got it," I murmur.

We do one more play, this time without me fucking it all up, before Coach dismisses the rest of the team to go about the rest of their days. Ice baths. Hot showers. Rest.

Berkley nudges me once in passing, and a few others—Smith Miller, and our other defensemen, Isaac Nelson—give terse nods as they disappear from the rink.

When it's just me and the captain, I tug off my helmet and slick back my sweaty hair. I'm due for a cut but I've been too busy to schedule it in. "Sorry you're stuck with me."

Clarkson hasn't been a very talkative guy lately, which means something must have gone down with Belle. I've learned by now that he clams up when they get into fights. Even the guys have commented on his bitchy mood whenever they get into it about something stupid.

He hasn't bad mouthed me or praised me today, so it's hard to read him. Usually, I can get him to grunt in acknowledgement or dip his head in greeting, but his facial expression has been stoic at best since he arrived at the arena. The most he's done is stifle a smile on the rare occasion one of us cracks a joke, and it's obvious he's not fully paying attention when he does react.

"It isn't a big deal. Working on a few of your weaker plays will help us in the long run," he finally says. "You need to build up your speed a little more. I can give you a cardio training routine that seems to work for some of the other guys. My trainer put it together for us for the off season to keep us in shape."

I go for a run almost every morning so long as the weather cooperates and spend a lot of time in the weight room at the gym located in the basement of my apartment complex. They have a nice private facility that's usually not too crowded and only available for residents' use. I'd be lying if I said I've cemented a routine. Lately, my mind has been elsewhere. Mom. Olive. It's making it harder to focus on what's in front of me.

"I never used to suck this bad," I feel the need to tell him. He saw me last season. I was decent. Definitely no expert on the ice, but better than this. God only knows what he thinks of my performance. During game days I'm usually hyper focused on one thing only. Winning. I know where to look, where not to, and how to drown out the noise and taunts from the opposing team and the fans that come to see us.

Practice prepping for the preseason games has been different. I've been slower than everybody else, messing up simple maneuvers, and I have nobody to blame but myself.

He lifts a shoulder. "None of us were necessarily top of our game when we were new." He must see the dejected look on my face when he adds, "For what it's worth, you're a good player. And I'm not the only one who thinks that. The guys may not act like it, but they don't mind you."

Them liking me seems a bit like a stretch, so I murmur, "I appreciate the lie."

A smile threatens to lift his lips. "Look, I'll let you in on a secret. When you've got shit on your mind, no matter how small, it's going to mess up your game. You can't go out on the ice with any type of stress on your shoulders. It's going to distract you and slow you down. I've seen your tapes with Coach before. I've seen it firsthand on the ice. You're good. You know it. I know it. Coach knows it. You're better than you're showing out here."

The truth grates on me. "I don't know how *not* to be stressed. This opportunity is huge." He has no idea what's riding on this, and it's on the tip of my tongue to tell him. But what will that do? Pity gets me nowhere. Practice will. And the harder he pushes me out here on the ice, the better I'll get. "We get one shot to make it."

Clarkson shakes his head. "That's not true. We have as many shots as we need to make it work. Look at me. I didn't start on the Penguins. I definitely never thought I'd come here to play when I got drafted. But just because it didn't work out in Chicago doesn't mean I haven't built

something good here. Our standings are a hell of a lot better than my old teams are right now, and I probably never would have made captain if I hadn't left. Sometimes shit happens and we have to make the best of it."

I nod absentmindedly, knowing there's a lot of truth in that. Any team could have asked me to be part of the minor league and work my way up when they thought I was ready. But I'd had big offers from the national teams instantly. They wanted me for a reason—knew I was ready for everything that would come.

"Coach is a hard ass but a good man. He's going to beat you up a little verbally, but it's for good reasons. He wouldn't have fought for you to be on this team otherwise."

I meet his eyes and see the genuine nature of the words spoken between us. "I needed that," I tell him quietly, shaking my head and glancing around the empty rink. "I don't want to mess up, Clarkson. I can't."

He nudges my chest. "Then gear up. Let's do a few drills and see what we can work with. But I meant what I said, O'Conner. Whatever or whoever is giving you that glazed look needs to be dealt with or you'll keep messing up. Your focus right now needs to be one hundred percent on hockey. Get me?"

A grim feeling weighs on my stomach. "But what about you?"

He stares at me.

"It's none of my business, but you've obviously got something on your mind today too."

Clarkson's head cocks. "You tell me yours and I'll tell you mine. Only one of us is playing shitty on the ice. It ain't me."

Touche.

Hours later, my body hurts more than it ever has before. I'll be feeling it all week even after I take the hottest damn shower of my life and icing every joint currently screaming at me, but Clarkson looks impressed with the effort I put in. He smacks the same shoulder that got slammed into the wall during our one on one, snickering at my wince when I roll it.

"See you Friday, man," he calls out after me, not bothering to look back. Beating me up a little helped ease whatever stress tensed his muscles, because he seems in better spirits. So, I'll call that a win. Even if it leaves me hobbling like an eighty-year-old rather than a kid fresh out of college.

I think about the money this career pays and remember why I'm putting myself through this physical torture.

More specifically, who I'm doing this for.
And I remind myself it's worth it.
Mom is worth it.
And, hopefully, Olive is too.



BELLE'S PLACE is quieter than the last time I came here with the guys. It's the middle of the week, and earlier in the day. I suspect once the sun goes down, the tables will be packed like they usually are with people looking for a good time.

When Clarkson asked me to meet him here, I'd been surprised. Practice had gone smoothly yesterday, so Coach Pelfrey didn't make either of us stay behind like he had days prior. I chalked this up to some sort of celebratory thing. Maybe the others had already gotten here.

But when I'm guided up to the private loft by some cute blond with flirty eyes and a minidress that is borderline indecent paired with those legs, it's only Clarkson I see in our usual booth.

"Captain," I greet, sliding in across from him. He's got an empty tumbler in front of him that his finger traces the lip of. "You good?"

I don't see him drink much. Not even at his own place. He'd nursed the same two beers all night until they had to be piss fucking warm. So when another one is placed in front of him, I study him cautiously.

"I feel like you and I aren't that different," he says, lifting the glass to his mouth and taking a long sip. "We both are so focused on the game that we tend to drown out the other noise. Maybe a little too well."

I lean back as the soda I ordered is placed on the table. "Something going on, Cap? Hasn't been lost on any of us that you've had a stick up your ass for the better part of the week."

He snorts, shaking his head. "You've never minced words, have you?"

"Depends on the situation, but no. I'd rather be blunt. Sometimes that bites me in the ass, but I find people respect you more for it."

He hums, staring into his drink. He releases the cup and lifts his gaze. "It's no surprise that I'm...protective of Belle."

My cheek twitches with an amused smile that I manage to douse before he can see it. “I may have noticed. So this is about her?”

“Have you ever had somebody test your will so badly that you’re at your breaking point?” he asks, the question making me blink as I soak it in. When I hesitate, he leans back in his spot. “I came to you because you don’t give me shit about her. And there’s something you’re holding back that makes me think you might relate.”

“How is that?”

“Nobody sees you with a girl or guy,” he points out. “You don’t talk about anybody from back home, besides your mystery girl. The people who are tight-lipped about that shit usually are for a reason. You told me there was someone, but you haven’t given me the details. You and I are alike.”

I pull my soda toward me and keep my fingers wrapped around the cool glass. “I have a lot of reasons to keep my mouth shut about back home. We’ve got a lot of press watching us these days. I like keeping my personal life personal.”

He nods. “I get that. But what if that hurts you in the long run?”

How can it hurt me more than it already has? “I don’t know what Belle is doing to piss you off, but if it’s bothering you that much than maybe she should be the one sitting here talking about things with you. You live together. No sense of making things awkward by not talking.”

He looks over the balcony at something below us. “I told her I was meeting someone here today.”

“Okay...?”

“A girl someone.”

I blink at his murmured admission. “Are you... trying to make her jealous?”

His eye twitches. “That’s what she’s been doing to me for the past goddamn month. Do you know how many men she’s brought over and paraded in front of me in my own home? She’s never been the type to do that. It’s driving me up a wall.”

Christ. I’m not trained for this kind of bromance. Nobody ever comes to me for advice because I keep them at arm’s length. “Look, I’m no expert on this, but games don’t get people anywhere. Wasn’t it you who just said that we couldn’t play on the top of our game if we were holding onto shit? We’re about to start a new season, so I’d squash this before we start

competing. Belle is important to you. Not even she would want you to jeopardize the game.”

He takes another sip of his drink, moving his jaw as he contemplates what I’m saying.

I can tell he’s fighting logic, so whatever Belle has been doing is obviously getting to him more than he’s letting on.

“The girl back home,” I begin, regaining his attention. “She’s the little sister of a former teammate. It started off casual. A mindless fling to pass the time for both of us. Her brother warned me away from her, but that didn’t stop either of us from pursuing things.”

Clarkson sets his drink down. “What happened?”

“A lot. I got drafted and moved.”

His eyes narrow. “It’s more than that.”

Perceptive fucker. “The casual part of the fling grew into more, and I couldn’t afford to have her in my life like that. I was leaving, so it made sense to break it off. She’s still in college. I’m here. It wouldn’t have worked.”

The captain shakes his head. “Sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself that. You don’t know any of that for sure.”

“I know that I said some pretty harsh things that I can tell still hurt her even after I’ve apologized. I suppose that’s my punishment to endure. Look, man. I have my reasons for doing what I did. But what’s yours? Belle seems like a nice girl. She’s successful. Attractive—Don’t give me that look. I’m pointing out the facts. I have eyes.”

He harrumphs but doesn’t say anything.

“So what if she’s your stepsister? It isn’t like you share any DNA. Do whatever is going to make you happy. Or at least do what makes you less of a pain in our asses. But take it from me. It’s never fun watching the person you care about move on with somebody else. So do something about it before this little game turns into something serious.”

I think about that picture of Olive and Bodhi. She didn’t say they were together, but didn’t tell me they *weren’t*. Just because she knows I’m in this doesn’t mean she is too.

The only thing I can hope for if they are involved is that he never lets another fucking person talk shit about her, or he’ll have to answer to me. I have no issue throwing hands if it means making sure she’s treated right. Even if that means letting her go to be happy with someone else.

Clarkson scrapes a palm over his jaw thoughtfully, his square shoulders easing until he finally sighs heavily. “So what’s holding you back?”

My thumb taps against the tabletop. “There’s another woman who I need to put first. She takes up what little time and energy I have that hockey doesn’t these days. Being in a relationship with me wouldn’t be easy, and I don’t think I can give anybody the part of me that they deserve.”

The way Clarkson looks at me makes my skin feel itchy, but then he dips his chin. “That’s admirable, O’Conner. But I stand by what I said before. You should let people choose whether they want to be part of your life. Don’t you want someone who will accept all of you regardless of the bad parts?”

That’s the dream, isn’t it? But dreams aren’t real. That’s why people wake up from them and have to decide if they’re really nightmares. “I could say the same for you.”

Just as he answers, Belle shows up at the top of the stairs and looks between us.

I slide out of the booth. “Thanks for the talk, man. Good luck.” I dip my head in greeting at Belle. “He’s all yours.”

Her eyes widen a fraction before they dart from me to her stepbrother. Even in the dim lighting, I can see the pink on her cheeks.

“Bye, Alex,” she says, her eyes glued to my captain.

I chuckle to myself and wonder how long it’ll take before they’re doing anything other than talking in that booth.

When I walk out of Belle’s Place, I pull my phone out and search for Olive’s name in my contacts. Just as I pull up our old text thread, pain radiates in my head and sends black dots coating my eyes until black is all I see.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Olive

THE THIRTY-POUND BOY attached to my hip feels more like fifty the longer I carry him. “I told you I’ve got it,” I reassure my best friend for the eighth time since showing up at her place.

DJ wraps an arm around Skylar’s waist and presses a chaste kiss against the crown of her skull. “She’s watched him before, babe. If you want to meet your parents, we should get going.”

I wave them off. “Go. I’ve got both your numbers, *and* your parents’ numbers, *and* your older sister’s number. Plus, I can dial 9-1-1 God forbid I need to. But Bentley and I will be fine. You said yourself that he’ll probably be napping most of the time anyway.”

Skylar frowns at her son, who’s already starting to nod off. “I know. I know. Okay, you’re right. We won’t be gone for long. We’re just looking at two places, and they’re not far from each other.”

She’s already told me that three times, but I go along with it like it’s new information. “Got it. But seriously don’t rush. I’m sure your family wants to spend time with you. Maybe go out to lunch after. House hunting seems stressful.”

DJ’s arm tugs her into his side. “Your mom did want to try that Indian restaurant, and you said you were in the mood for curry.”

I can tell Skylar is searching for any excuse to get out of going but comes up short. “We’ll see. Let’s see the houses first. I’ve already looked at the Zillow listings and did virtual tours of the properties, so—”

“Blondie,” DJ laughs, turning her to face him. He puts his hands on either side of her arms and looks like he’s about to give one hell of a pep talk. “I need you to take a deep breath. Today is supposed to be fun. We might be finding a new place to live. And your parents are going to look around the area too. We’ve wanted this since we found out about Bentley, remember?”

She nibbles her bottom lip before eventually nodding. “You’re right. I’m sorry. We just never leave him for very long. The other day, I went to the mailbox and got talking to the mail lady while he was napping and my anxiety almost peaked knowing he was inside alone. You’d think it’d get less stressful as they get older, but that’s not true at all.”

My mother said she used to be that way with Sebastian. With me, she’d learned how to calm down. Slightly. That’s either the blessing or curse of being the second born. “I’ll give you lots of updates if it’ll make you feel better. But he’s already falling asleep, he’s been fed and changed, and I know what to do if something comes up. But DJ is right. You’ve been planning this for a while, and real estate around here has been going fast. You need to go look at these houses and figure out if either of them would work for you. Not to be selfish, but I hope they do.”

Not that I know where I’m going after graduation. Back to Vermont? Maybe. I never liked the cold much, but I love my mother enough to suffer the winters. And it isn’t like Lindon is much better. There have been winters in the past here in New York that were worse than back home.

Skylar pulls her phone out. “It’s my mom. They’re probably wondering where we are. Okay. *Okay*. Let’s go before I change my mind.”

I wave them off as DJ all but drags her to the car, after kissing Bentley three different times. When it’s just me and my pseudo-nephew, I bounce him until his heavy eyelids begin to fall heavier and heavier closed. Skylar basically quizzed me on his schedule, so I know it like the back of my hand. She even watched me prepare his food, change his diaper, and put him in his crib for practice.

Knowing her, she’ll call me in twenty minutes checking in. Not that I blame her.

After Bentley is down for his nap, I quietly escape the little nursery with his baby monitor in my hand and head to the living room. The TV has been playing the news since I got here, which is too depressing to watch. So I find the remote stuffed between the cushions where DJ probably lost it and change it to ESPN.

With the hockey season starting soon, there’s a lot of talk about preseason games and who everyone thinks will make it to the championships. Thankfully, Sebastian’s team seems to be a top pick for a lot of people after how close they came last year. Alex’s team...not so much.

And because I'm not a total masochist, I change the channel just as Pittsburgh is mentioned by one of the anchors. Because I miss him, and I don't like that I miss him. I don't like any uncertainty. It's bad enough I've been scrambling for a post-grad plan. Adding Alex to the mix is making my anxiety worse. I don't want to make him a reason I choose where to go when I have no idea what it is he's waiting for from me.

A relationship? More casual sex? There's no definition, and too many questions. His future may be secured, but mine isn't. That's what I need to focus on.

For the next forty minutes, I watch a random documentary on Bernie Madoff and the Ponzi scheme he pulled off for decades. I'm almost impressed and about to click the next episode when Bentley's harsh cries echo in the monitor.

"What's wrong, buddy? Miss me already?" I ask, picking him up and noticing how red his face is. I frown, pressing the back of my hand to his forehead to see if he has a fever. He doesn't feel warm, but his cries are hardly the same ones I hear when he's hungry or needs to be changed. "Come on, Chicken Nugget. We can bond in the living room. It's never too early to learn about Ponzi schemes, right?"

I think about that for a second.

"Not that you should strive to be like Madoff," I tell him as if he can understand me. His crying doesn't stop, so it's likely he can't even hear me over them. Rocking him on my lap, I give him a pacifier which seems to help for all of ten seconds before he spits it out and cries louder. "Do you want one of your toys? I think I saw your stuffed turtle in the other room. You love Mr. Slow Poke. He looks just like Daddy's turtle. Sort of."

If DJ were here, he'd correct me on Shelldon being a tortoise, not a turtle. Then he'd tell me all the ways they're different. At this point, I only do it knowing that he'll react.

The second I pass Bentley the stuffed animal, he throws it onto the floor and wails at me.

My ears ring as I try figuring out what's the matter. He can't be hungry already, can he? He ate an hour and a half ago. I smell his diaper and, thankfully, don't smell anything foul. "Bentley, buddy, work with me here. I promised your mom that everything would be fine. Give me some sort of clue how I can make you feel better. A bottle? A snack? Mr. Slow Poke? Do you want to watch one of your weird kid shows? I know Bernie Madoff

probably isn't your top choice, but he's an interesting dude. Did you know he was basically scamming people since the sixties? That was a long time ago. You'll understand the concept of time when you're older."

It's obvious talking is the last thing Bentley wants to do, so I groan and hug him to me. He's not warm. He doesn't want his stuffy or pacifier. When I offer him some of his gross rice puff snacks that he usually devours, he eats two and then dumps the rest of the floor.

Closing my eyes, I count to three and then decide to make him a bottle.

But that doesn't seem to appease him either.

Not wanting to disturb Skylar, who would undoubtedly come home in a heartbeat if I told her Bentley won't stop crying, I opt to try my mother first.

"You've reached the voicemail of Claire Henderson. I can't come to the phone right now, but please leave a message and I'll get back to you promptly."

Dropping my head back, I hang-up before the beep and weigh my options. Today is the first time in a long time that Skylar and DJ have gone out and left Bentley behind. They deserve some time with their family without having to worry about their son.

So, I call the only other person I can think of.

"O-Dawg," Bodhi greets on the second ring. "What's—Is that a baby crying?"

"He won't stop, Bodhi. I've tried feeding him. Playing with him. Bouncing him. Soothing him. He didn't have an accident, and he won't eat. He's a little red, but I don't know what to do. Bernie Madoff isn't soothing him either!"

"Bernie Madoff? Didn't he die in prison not that long ago?" he questions.

"Not the point, Hoffman!"

"Okay, okay." Suddenly, I'm glad Bodhi has experience with kids. Because something tells me Google wouldn't be very helpful if I'd chosen to search for answers there. "How old is he? He might be teething. Or he could just have an upset stomach and might be gassy."

"He's got most of his teeth," I answer, checking his gums to be sure. "And I don't know what I'm supposed to do about gas. His mom burped him earlier."

“There’s a trick I learned on YouTube where you move his legs like they’re peddling a bike and then press them up toward his stomach. It usually will relieve any gas that might be making him bloated. Try that.”

At this point, I’ll try anything. “Okay, Bent. Let’s see if this helps.” I follow Bodhi’s instructions, but nothing happens. “Maybe I did it wrong. Let me look up a video.”

I watch it twice and try again.

Nothing.

“I think I broke the baby,” I surmise in defeat. “My best friend is never going to let me watch her kid again. They’re going to come back and ask what I did to the poor thing.”

Bodhi laughs. “I’m sure he’s fine. Wait. Do they leave him often? Or is this new?”

“They used to let people watch him when he was an infant, but this is the first time since he’s turned one that they’ve left him with me. He’s usually attached to one of their hips.”

“Ah.”

Ah? Ah, what? “What are you thinking?”

“Gemma was like that,” he tells me softly. “She had separation anxiety from her mother. But after the accident...” He’s quiet for a second. “After the accident, she wouldn’t stop crying and making a fuss at her grandparents’ house. She’d make herself sick from it. They helped her get past things by the time they let me into her life, so I didn’t see it firsthand, but they told me it was rough for a while.”

It makes sense. Skylar always says that he follows her around every chance he can. Her professors have let her take him to class as long as he behaves, which he usually does when he’s with her. On the days she can’t bring him, DJ stays with him at home since their schedules are different.

“This might sound weird but hold up a picture of his mom and dad to him. See if he reacts.”

I search the living room and find a framed photo of Skylar and DJ from the maternity shoot they did. They’re both beaming into the camera as DJ holds onto Skylar’s baby bump dressed in a cute white and yellow sundress in the middle of a field somewhere outside of Lindon.

When I show Bentley the photo of him, his cries soften.

“Oh my God,” I whisper in awe. He reaches out and holds onto the frame, staring at the picture before the tiniest smile appears on his face.

“Seriously, kid? You were acting like a demon possessed you all because you miss your parents?”

Bodhi starts laughing, and I wish he could see me scowl. “It’s not funny! I thought something was wrong. I promised my best friend that he’d be fine and almost as soon as she left he was a mess. I should have guessed it was this.”

He sobers up enough to reassure me. “You had no way of knowing. That’s the tough thing about kids when they’re that young. They can’t tell you what’s wrong. I’m glad it wasn’t worse.”

Bentley whacks the frame against the television remote and flips the channel, putting it back onto ESPN. Just as I’m about to answer Bodhi, my eyes widen at what the anchors are talking about on the news.

“Alexander O’Conner, a left wing for the Pittsburgh Penguins was assaulted last night outside of Belle’s Place in Pennsylvania,” she reports calmly to the camera. “A rep for O’Conner says he was discharged from the hospital early this morning with minor injuries that will require him to sit out for the remainder of the preseason games.”

“Oh my God.”

“Olive?”

“I...” I let out a breath. “I need to call him.”

“Call him?”

“I need to call Alex,” I say, forgetting I’m on the phone with Bodhi.

The man who helped me seconds ago is quiet momentarily. “Alex O’Conner?” he asks.

I swallow. “Yes.”

“Alex. As in your brother’s old teammate.” Realization strikes him. “He’s the one you’ve been texting. I knew he played with your brother at Lindon, but I didn’t know...” He didn’t know that I cared about him.

Closing my eyes, I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Please don’t say anything to my brother. He doesn’t know that Alex and I are involved. Were. I... I don’t know. The point is, he doesn’t know that I still...” Care. I can’t say it.

But I *do* still care. I’m mad that I give a shit. I’m angry that he’s always on the back of my mind even when he shouldn’t be. I hate that he’s willing to give me space and answer my calls and send me dirty texts and sex toys. And I hate even more that I let him keep doing those things.

“I don’t want Sebastian to know. If he’s allowed to keep secrets about who he’s with, so am I.”

Bentley is preoccupied drooling all over the corner of the frame of his parents that I’ll have to remember to clean before they get home, all while ESPN talks about the suspect who was caught and arrested after using Alex’s credit card at a convenience store for cigarettes and booze blocks away from where he assaulted him.

“This thing with you and O’Conner,” Bodhi begins. “Is it...serious?”

Wetting my lips, I stare down at the wiggly little boy sprawled on the couch cushions. “I don’t know, if I’m being honest. No? Maybe? There’s history there. You know what having history is like. It’s hard to forget that sometimes. You said you can relate because of Gemma’s mother.”

He clears his throat. “I did. Yeah.”

It doesn’t sound convincing to either of us. “So?”

Bodhi sighs. “I won’t say anything to your brother. But if this is going to be a thing, he’ll find out one way or another. And I have a feeling he won’t like that. I think it’d be better if you said something before it comes out another way.”

That’s logical, but I’m not sure I want to go there. Not yet. At least not until I figure out what there is to tell. Why bring something up to Sebastian if it’s in the past? If there’s nothing to talk about in the future? “Thank you, Bodhi. For helping with Bentley and...this.”

This. Whatever *this* is.

“I’ll see you later,” he says, disconnecting before I can.

I frown at the phone and internally sigh. Why do I feel bad for being honest with him? It’s better than lying. But that guilt quickly gets buried by the reminder of Alex’s situation when a paparazzi shot taken from outside the hospital appears on screen. There’s a bloody rag pressed against the back of Alex’s head as he’s ushered inside by two people. I recognize one as the captain of his team; Jesse Clarkson. I don’t know who the girl is on the right. But whoever she is, she’s pretty. Like, really pretty.

Cement settles into my gut, right next to a familiar green monster that pokes at my heart with one of its invisible talons until it deflates.

Instead of calling Alex, I stare at that picture a little longer before pulling his name up and sending him a simple text.

Nonchalant.

And definitely not something my brother needs to know.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Alex

WHEN I WAS fourteen, I got hurt during a high school hockey game. I'd wound up in the hospital with a minor concussion that took me off the ice for two weeks. Mom had been so worried she nearly fought one of the paramedics when they tried stopping her from getting into the ambulance with me.

The few days after the incident, she'd doted on me more than she ever had before. I always woke up to my favorite meals on the table or my favorite snacks and drinks being delivered to me like I was on my death bed.

What I didn't know was that she hadn't slept in days during that period. She seemed fine, minus the bags under her eyes. She was happy; laughing, smiling, and cracking jokes. Until the day we got a grocery delivery she'd ordered online that contained three hundred dollars' worth of my favorite fruit snacks, and two hundred dollars' worth of my go-to soda.

"This can't be for us, can it?" I ask, staring at the boxes stacked at our front door. "Maybe it was delivered to the wrong address."

"You don't like it? I got your favorite."

I stare between my mother and the boxes. The one on top is opened so we could see it. It's packed full of Welch's fruit snacks. Not just the original variety packs, but the assorted strawberry ones too. "You got this for me?"

I count the boxes in disbelief.

She holds my cheek and smiles at me, but there's a void in her eyes that makes me wonder if she's even here. "Of course. You're hurt. I need to take care of you when you're hurt. That's what mothers do."

"Mom..." I shake my head, turning toward the hundreds of fruit snacks here. "This is a lot of food. Maybe we should return some to get money back. I know the electric bill has gone up."

Her hand drops to her side. "You're not happy?"

I rub my sweaty palm against my jean clad thigh. "I am. These are my favorite, and I appreciate you thinking of me. But it's too much. We don't have the room."

She blinks slowly three times. "You don't love me."

What? "Of course I—"

"Nothing I do is ever good enough for you, Alexander. I did this for you, and you're yelling at me!"

"I'm not yell—"

"How dare you treat me this way, after everything I've done for you this week!" she bellows, backing into the house.

"Mom, come on. I'm just trying to be reasonable. There's no way I can eat all of these."

She grabs ahold of the door. "You're so ungrateful sometimes. I've only ever thought of you, and you throw it in my face."

She slams the door, and when the lock slides into place, I squeeze my eyes shut. The spare key is only good for the lock on the doorknob, not the deadbolt she just twisted.

Rubbing my jaw, I sit down on the front step and stare at the boxes encasing me like one of those old box forts I used to build as a child.

Blowing out a breath, I remember to be grateful for the window I keep unlocked in my bedroom to sneak back inside when she's calmed down.

Whenever that may be.

"I'll let her know," Pam tells me softly, reminding me I'm on the phone. "I'm sure she'll want you focusing on getting better. We all do."

"Thank you," I tell her, feeling the headache radiate in my skull.

The crinkling fruit snacks wrapper in my hand lets the old memory fade as I hang up the phone. I'm not fourteen anymore trying to figure out how to return hundreds of dollars of food I'll never be able to eat. I'm pretty sure it took me a week to get somebody to come pick them up to bring back.

I look from the empty wrapper to my phone screen again to make sure I'm not seeing things when the memory fades.

The doctor told me to limit screentime to help with the concussion recovery, which isn't that hard to do since I don't watch that much television. But my phone has always been my lifeline, and one of the reasons is staring me in the face.

Olive: Saw the news. Hope you're okay

Kyle said they were broadcasting the incident on the news, but I didn't think it would have reached her. And I definitely didn't think she'd reach out about it.

"What's the face for? Is your head hurting? Do you need more ibuprofen or ice?" Belle asks with worry thick in her voice.

She's been coddling me since Clarkson found me in the alleyway outside Belle's Place. He called his stepsister, and they rushed me to the hospital. I barely remember them picking me up and getting me into Belle's tiny ass Prius. What I do recall is the bits and pieces of my captain trying to get cameras out of our faces as we rushed into the emergency room and the horrible headache that echoed in my skull. I'm pretty sure I puked as Belle was filling out what information she could at the front desk.

Yet, here she is.

"I told you it's not your fault," I grumble, knowing she feels guilty over this. "It could have happened to anyone, anywhere."

The officers I talked to told me that they found the guy who attacked me tweaked out of his mind using my credit card. All the cash in my wallet was gone, but they recovered both of my cards and everything else important that was stashed away in there. Not before the douchebag managed to rack up almost a thousand dollars' worth of charges on my shit. I'm still trying to fight the company on getting that money back.

"But it happened at *my* establishment," she reminds me with a deep frown weighing on her lips. She takes the garbage from me and tosses it into the kitchen trash before returning. "I feel awful. I mean, I know there's a drug problem in the area, but we've never had that happen before. You could have died, Alex."

"I didn't," I point out. "It's not a big deal."

Except, it sort of is. I'm out for the remaining preseason games. Doctors' orders. It pisses me off that I've worked my ass off only to be benched, but there's nothing I can do about it besides try working out to stay in shape since I'm off the ice temporarily. It's not Belle's fault, so I don't want to show her the anger boiling under my skin or else she'll be an even bigger pain in my ass trying to make it up to me.

"You don't have to keep coming over and checking on me," I say next, leaning back on the couch and wincing when the back of my head hits the pillow Belle propped up for me. "Clarkson is going to assume something is up."

Belle's face turns red. "He knows I'm here. He even said it was a good idea in case you needed something."

He was at practice with the rest of the guys.

Where *I* should be.

That anger settles a little deeper in my chest.

Sighing, I look back down at my phone. "A couple pain pills wouldn't be a bad idea," I tell her, needing some space where she's not suffocating me.

She immediately jumps up. "I'll get you some water too."

Once she disappears into the kitchen, I thumb out a message.

Me: I'll survive

I send it and try to think of something else to say. Since when do I question what the fuck to text somebody? I'm like a middle school girl trying to figure out how to talk to her crush. It's pathetic.

Me: I'm out of practice for a few weeks. Doubt I'll start on game day

The thought makes me scowl, but I force it away when Belle shows up with two red pills in the palm of her hand and a glass of water. "Here. You need to ice your head too. And we should check to make sure—"

"Belle." I cut her off. "I'm good. Seriously. Don't you have a business to run? I'm sure they could use your help. If I need anything, I have your number now. But I'll be fine on my own."

She doesn't look like she believes me, but she relents. "Okay. If you're sure. But I mean it, Alex. If there's *anything* you need, use my number."

I won't, but I tell her I will to appease her.

"Ohh, who's Olive?" she asks, making my eyes snap back to my phone. She texted back already, and my eagerness clearly just gave me away. "I get it. You want time to talk to your friend. Fine. But try to get some rest today. The doctor said sleep is important, so don't sext for too long."

Christ. "I'm not—"

"It's none of my business," she says loudly, already collecting her things and heading to the door. I can hear her giggle, and I can only imagine what she's thinking. And I have a feeling she'll share with Clarkson now that they seem to be on speaking terms again.

When the door closes behind her, I settle into my spot.

Olive: I'm sorry. How are you feeling?

Me: Suffocated by a makeshift nurse

I realize after I send it that I probably shouldn't have, but it's too late.

Me: She's a teammate's sister

Me: It was her place where I got attacked

I groan to myself when I see that I'm digging myself into a hole.

Me: It was at her club I mean

Me: More like a restaurant actually. A bar

I pinch my eyes closed when I see the word vomit happening.

When my phone starts vibrating, I peel one eye open to see Olive's name flashing there.

The first thing she asks is, "Are you having a stroke? You're never that talkative through text. Or...ever."

I huff out a laugh. "I might be. It was a head injury."

"You're okay, though?"

"I'm as okay as I can be."

She blows out a long-winded breath. "That's...good. Yeah, good. I'm glad to hear that."

We fall silent.

I stare at the stain on my jeans as I conjure up something to say.

She beats me to it. "So you have a teammate's sister as a nurse, huh? You seem to be forming a pattern. I didn't think you had such a specific type."

I flinch. "It isn't like that with Belle. She's the captain's stepsister and she feels bad about what happened. That's it."

Olive doesn't say anything.

"Her and Clarkson have a thing that everybody seems to know but never really addresses."

Olive makes a noise. "Wait. So they're stepsiblings who...?" She grows quiet. "Wow. It's like the porn I used to watch."

I choke on the water I take a sip of, spraying it all over myself. "Christ. Warn a guy before you start talking about porn."

I can picture her rolling her eyes. “I’ll be sure to do that. But seriously, that’s...interesting. But whatever. People love who they love, I guess.”

Setting my cup down on the coffee table, I brush off the wet spots from my shirt. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Wetting my lips, I clear my throat. “So how have things been?”

“Better than they’ve been for you, I suppose.”

I crack a smile. “I’d imagine.” There’s another pause between us. “What about you, Olive? You got anybody *interesting* in your life?”

“I’ve got a lot of interesting people in my life,” she answers, knowing damn well that isn’t what I mean. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

She wants me to say it? “Do I need to drop names?”

“Do you?” she challenges.

“Shoot me straight and give an injured guy a break,” I all but plead. “Is there something going on with you and Bodhi Hoffman? A friend of a friend heard you and him went to the Rangers preseason party together in the city and left for a while. And we both know I saw the photo at Dave and Busters.”

Nelson’s cousin was one of the caterers at the event they attended. Apparently, she’s lived in the city for a couple of years and always gets gigs with sports teams because she knows how to be discreet. I’d heard her talking to the defenseman about Hoffman and Olive leaving together and coming back a few hours later. According to her, she thinks they’re “cute” together.

Anger bubbles under my skin.

I told her I wasn’t mad for her sleeping with him, but it makes me fucking angry thinking that it was more than once.

“A friend of a friend, huh?” she muses. “I didn’t think you cared that much.”

She’s mistaken. “I told you that I was willing to give you space, but that I didn’t want to mess this up. It’s just a question, so I know where you stand. One you haven’t answered.”

She sighs. “Bodhi and I are friends. In fact, he seemed upset with me when I cut our conversation short when I heard you’d been hurt. Is that enough for your ego, or do you need another stroke?”

My lips tilt up slowly at the corners in victory. “I’m always down for a good stroke, especially if you’re doing it.”

“Alex.”

“Olive.”

We’re quiet.

Then I say, “Come see me. I’m required to rest for another week before I can even go to practice. I’m not allowed to play anytime soon. I’ve got time to kill, and the silence is fucking killing me. And I’d rather you suffocate me than Belle. She’s nice, but she’s getting on my last nerves.”

She only pauses for a moment. “And I won’t?”

“You never have before.”

When her silence greets me, doubt creeps into my gut. Does she really not want to come? It’s the end of summer, but Lindon isn’t supposed to start classes for another couple of weeks.

When she speaks, there’s a heaviness in her voice. “I guess you forgot about that last night we spent together then.”

Dragging my tongue along the seam of my lips to wet them, I drop my head. “It shouldn’t have happened.”

“Doesn’t change that it did,” she points out.

She’s right. “I want to make it up to you.”

“How can you do that, though? What’s done is done. We can’t go back. You can’t fix the trust issues that night gave me.”

“Does it have to be done? You said yourself Bodhi and you are friends. Is there somebody else stopping you from at least entertaining this?”

“Yeah. Sebastian. Remember him?”

If she thinks her brother is going to stop me, she’s wrong. “You’re an adult. You can do what you want, Olive.”

I let her think about it. Because I mean it. I want her here. I want to be selfish and spend time with her. More than that, I want her to *want* to come. When the seconds tick by and she still hasn’t answered, anxiety slowly bubbles in the pit of my stomach.

But then she says, “I’ll have to get time off approved through Judy first. If she can’t find help, I won’t be able to. Not before classes start.”

She wants to though. She’s willing to try.

That means something.

“Okay.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “Okay. Just let me know. I can give you gas money. Whatever you need.”

She snorts. “I don’t want your money, Alex.”

I smile. “I know.”

That’s the best part.

“You know what I want?” I ask her.

“Probably something dirty.”

I grin. “That too. But, no. I just want you, Olive. Wish I’d been smart enough to hold onto that before.”

A subtle breath escapes her. “Alex...”

“Nah” I cut her off. “You don’t need to say anything. I just wanted you to know. You *needed* to know. Just think about it. If you and Hoffman aren’t a thing, this is me officially throwing my hat back into the ring. I’m not ashamed to admit I need you and your pep talks and your banter. But the ball is in your court now.”

There’s a pregnant pause. “Damn you,” she whispers. “Damn you, Alex.”

Then she hangs up the phone.



I’M GETTING OUT of the shower a few days later when I hear the doorbell. I’m careful to dry my hair off so I don’t open up the wound still healing on the back of my head. Wrapping the damp towel around my waist, I walk over to the door and look through the peephole.

“Holy shit.”

When I open it, I’m struck speechless. “What the hell are you doing here, Ma?”

The thin woman opens her arms. “Is that any way to greet the woman who birthed you? Why are you half naked? That’s no way to answer the door. I raised you better than that.”

I’m still shocked to see her when she nudges me aside and walks in. “How do you know where I live?” I ask slowly as she enters my apartment and looks around.

She doesn’t answer that. “Oh, Alex. It’s so bleak here. Where are the photos? The décor? It’s so...white. Do you remember all those fun signs we’d find at flea markets? You loved helping your daddy hang them up.”

I must be dreaming. Because Logan’s would have told me they released her, right? They would need some sort of permission or point person to pick

her up. There's no way she's here in front of me. "I'm hallucinating," I say aloud, rubbing my eyes.

But the hallucination laughs the same light laugh I've heard in the past when she wasn't spiraling. "No, silly boy. I had to see you. I heard them say you were hurt. And that awful Pam told me you weren't coming to visiting hours to see me while you recovered. How could I stay there when I knew my baby boy was somewhere in pain? I've always been there for you when you were hurt."

I...have no idea what to say.

"So you checked yourself out of Logan's?" I ask in disbelief, locking the door behind me. "I didn't even know you could do that."

She scoffs, turning to face me. "Of course not. If it were up to you, you'd have me locked in that stuffy place forever."

Stuffy? "Ma, they have a whole ass menu for each meal you get to choose from, a community center full of activities you can do, and a garden. That place is far from stuffy."

Especially for how much I pay for it.

She shrugs it off. "Are you going to show me around? I thought you'd be happy to see me, but you look miserable. Go put some pants on and give your mother a tour."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to think of what to do. Shoulders slumped, I guide her to the couch and sit her down. "Stay here. I'll go change and be right back."

She smiles at me, squeezing my arm. "I'll be right here."

I break records putting clothes on because I don't trust her out there alone. How did she get here? She has no money. No bags. No clothes. It's impossible for her to walk here. And I don't even understand how she got my address.

When I walk back to the living room, Mom isn't on the couch where I left her. Instead, I find her in the kitchen going through every cupboard and cabinet. "I told you to sit still."

"You have no food here. What do you eat?" she asks, opening the fridge and shaking her head. "It's no wonder you're so skinny. I want to make you a grilled cheese."

Those fucking grilled cheeses.

I'm still in awe she's here, standing in my kitchen and frowning at me. "I'm supposed to go grocery shopping tomorrow. I'm fine. Ma, I need to

know how you got here. Is there a taxi outside waiting to be paid? Uber?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she muses, rubbing my arm. "I asked someone for a ride. He was very sweet. We talked all about you."

She—"That's fucking dangerous! He could have been a serial killer. You could have been trafficked. Is he still out there?" I walk over to the window facing the street and look down.

"He was eighty years old, and his granddaughter was in the backseat. It was fine. He recently lost his wife, and this is the first time he saw his granddaughter in years. He was so nice."

I don't even know what to say right now.

She moves on like this is any other day. "How about we go out to eat? I could use some good coffee. I've been drinking sludge for months and I hate it."

I blink. "Ma..."

"What? Don't you want to go out with your poor momma? I haven't eaten all day. I need food before I get as skinny as you."

Christ. *Christ*. "Just give me a minute, okay?" I dig through one of the drawers she hasn't opened yet and pull out a granola bar. "Eat this to tide you over."

She accepts it with a frown. "This is just nuts and fruit. I don't like nuts. And the fruit is always dry."

"Well, it's all I have." I grab my phone and find the contact I need before dodging into my bedroom and closing the door.

When Pam picks up, I don't even let her greet me before speaking up. "Why didn't you tell me that my mother signed out of Logan's?" I ask the head nurse, my voice nothing but a harsh whisper. "And why the *hell* did she just show up at my apartment with nothing? She hitchhiked here, Pam. Like it's the goddam seventies."

She sighs. "We tried contacting you, but you didn't pick up. We thought it might have been because of your recent injury. I left you a voice message, but I couldn't hold her. That would be a wrongful imprisonment charge waiting to happen."

"You didn't—" I look at my voicemail and see the unopened message. How did I miss that? It's from early this morning. "I never saw it. I didn't even hear my phone ring."

I drop my head back and cuss.

“I’m sorry, Alex. I did try. You can drop her back off and we’ll readmit her. But you’re going to need to sign new forms that would prevent her from being able to do this.”

Why didn’t I sign them to start with? “Don’t you think we could have avoided this if you’d given me that form the first time around?”

Before she can reply, there’s a knock at the bedroom door before Mom pops her head in. “Is it time to go get food? This granola bar is horrible. Who are you on the phone with?”

Not wanting to start a fight, I lie. “It’s a friend, Ma. Think about what you’re in the mood for and I’ll take you. Okay? I’ll be out in a second.”

When she seems appeased, she closes the door behind her. “Pam, I can’t keep her here. She seems okay now, but I know there’s a chance that can turn quickly.”

“Look, call me when you’re on your way and I’ll make sure I’m at Logan’s. I’m sorry, Alex. I know this is the last thing you need.”

She’s damn straight. “I will.”

Hanging up, I make my way to the living room again when the doorbell goes off for a second time.

I glare at Mom. “Did you invite the old man and his granddaughter up too?”

She laughs like I’m ridiculous. “Of course not. Gianna had to get to ballet. She has a recital coming up. They invited me.”

I don’t bother squashing her dreams of going just yet. I walk to the door and open it without looking at the peep hole and gape at the person standing there.

“Surprise,” Olive says, wiggling her fingers.

There’s an overnight bag on the floor beside her.

I blink.

Blink again.

And say, “*Fuck.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Olive

CONSIDERING THIS VISIT was his idea, the last word I expect to come out of Alex's mouth is fuck. Fuck what? Fuck him? Holy fuck? Fuck I can't believe you're here? I know which one I'd like him to choose, but the sheer panic on his face is telling me I'm going to be sorely disappointed.

Maybe this is on me. Alex never liked surprises. I've always known that about him. "I thought you'd be happier to see me. But you look constipated. Or like someone kicked your grandma."

Potty talk isn't attractive, but is that what I'm here for? To be attractive? I'm not sure. I *did* pack my cute panties. The ones with a bow on the front and lace lining the sides. But it was a last-minute decision as I walked out the door. *Just in case.*

Because I drove all this way—all four and a half measly hours to see him. The traffic wasn't bad, the scenery left more to be desired, but I still did it while jamming to John Mayer the whole way. And he looks...not happy.

"Alex?" Now I'm frowning, and the choice I made that led me to this very spot weighs on me. Did I make a mistake? Did I somehow misunderstand what he wanted? It seemed pretty clear when he said he wanted me, but now I'm second guessing myself.

He quickly looks inside before stepping out into hall, leaving his door cracked behind him. "I wasn't expecting you. I figured a weekend would be easier for you."

I stare between him and the door and ask the question I don't want to. "Is there someone inside with you right now?"

He wets his lips, hesitating. "Yes. She was an unexpected guest. But it's not what it sounds like. I—"

"Alex?" a woman calls out, opening the door and looking at me. "Oh. Who is this?"

Maybe if I were any other woman, I'd start questioning what's going on. But there's two reasons why I don't. One of them is that I have no claim over the man in front of me. He can do whatever he wants, whether he tells me pretty words or not. Which means he can do whoever he wants too. I mean, I'm no saint. I'd like to think I'm reasonable enough to acknowledge that we've never agreed to be exclusive since knowing each other, no matter how sour it tastes in my mouth.

But the other reason, and arguably the biggest, is that this woman is undoubtedly related to Alex. Her eyes are the same unique shade as his. They're both a beautiful vibrant shade of blue that can only be described as out of a romance. They have the same brown hair, not quite dark but also not light; except hers is highlighted with gray streaks brought on by time. There's a softness to her features that aren't on his—an easygoingness that he somehow didn't inherit.

This is Alex's mother.

"Ma, I told you to stay inside," Alex says, confirming what I already know.

Ma. *Ma*. He's talked about her briefly before but never showed me photos. The only picture I've seen of his childhood is of him and his father at a Bruin's game when he was little. The jersey he'd been wearing was so big he drowned in it, but he had the biggest smile plastered on his face. I always thought he looked just like his dad from that one picture, but I can see his mother's features in him clear as day now.

"Hi," I say, sticking my hand out past Alex's rigid body. "I'm Olive. Sorry to drop by unannounced. I was surprising your son."

The woman beams as she takes my hand. "I love that! Alex, you never told me you have a girlfriend. She's a cutie. You don't hear names like that either. It makes you stand out."

I smile easily at her despite the label that she put on us. It's not that far off to assume, so I don't bother correcting her. I figure Alex can if he wants to, but he doesn't say a thing. He didn't correct the waitress when she called me 'his girl' either.

I tuck that information away to think about a different day. "It's nice to meet you..."

"Colleen," she says. "Come in. I don't know where my son's manners are, leaving you out in the hallway. Alex, get her bag."

The woman who looks like she belongs in a nineties fashion magazine has way more strength than I give her credit for. She pulls me inside with force that makes my eyes widen, leaving Alex to grab the small duffel full of clothes that I left on the floor.

“So, Olive, what do you do?” Colleen asks me, bringing me over to the couch and sitting us down.

I look over my shoulder at Alex, who is watching us carefully as he sets my bag on the floor inside. When I look back at his mother, I smile at her. “I’m a student, actually. At Lindon. I’m going to graduate in the spring.”

Colleen beams. “I can’t believe we haven’t met before. I used to come to some of Alex’s games. I’m sad he never introduced us.”

I don’t have the heart to tell her that I rarely stuck around to be introduced. It’s not totally Alex’s fault. I knew his mother was there once in a while, but I never pushed him to meet her. I didn’t think that was allowed in our agreement. Then again, falling in love wasn’t part of it either.

Alex clears his throat. “Ma...”

“Hush, Alex,” she chides, pulling my hand into her lap and patting it. “Oh! We were just about to go out to get some food. You should come with us so we can get to know each other.”

Alex sighs, and when I look over he’s pinching the bridge of his nose. I’m not sure if he hates the idea of going out together or the fact that his mother wants to get to know me. Or both.

“I’m not sure. I ate on the way here...” If you count gas station snacks and a large Coke from McDonalds. But whatever.

Colleen looks at Alex. “Convince her to come, honey. She came all this way to see you. We both did.”

Did he know his mother was coming to visit? Or was both of our appearances a surprise to him? I’m tempted to ask, but I swallow the words.

Chickenshit, the inner voice taunts me.

I shut it down.

“There’s a decent place around the block,” Alex relents, rubbing the back of his neck. “They have pretty good stuff. Nothing fancy. Chicken tenders,” he adds, looking toward me. “And good breakfast. No mimosas, though.”

My lips twitch upward.

“Perfect,” Colleen answers, standing up. She looks at me expectantly. “You’re coming, right? I would love to know more about what you’re

studying and how you and my son met. He doesn't talk much about himself these days. I worry about him."

"Mom," Alex grumbles. "Enough."

She shrugs it off, ignoring him. "He's a little upset because I showed up without telling him."

"That's not it," he cuts in, eyeing her. "I told you why I'm upset."

Colleen waves him off. "Pat was a perfect gentleman. He didn't want me to walk the whole way here. You should be thankful for good people like him."

Walk? I'm so confused.

Alex drops his head back. "The point is, it could have been anyone who picked you up. People don't hitchhike anymore unless they're on drugs or stranded."

Did Colleen *hitchhike* all the way from Lindon? That's scarily impressive.

Before I can ask her if that's true, she replies to Alex. "I was stranded. Or did you forget that you abandoned me there?"

Whoa. Discomfort settles into my stomach as I glance between them. "Maybe I should let you two talk."

Colleen wraps her arm around mine and tugs me into her side. "Nonsense, Olive. We're going to get food. I'm sure once Alex eats something he'll be less cranky. He was always like that when he was hungry, and it's no wonder. The only thing he has here is those disgusting nut bars and some milk that's probably spoiled."

"It's not spoiled," he defends. "I got it a few days ago."

Colleen pays him no attention. She gives me a quick once-over. "I can trust you to feed him though. I told him he's far too skinny. I don't like what they're doing to him."

Alex's face turns red. "Christ. Really?"

I'm not offended by it. "My mom used to say you can never trust a skinny chef."

Colleen nods. "Your mother sounds like a smart woman. Maybe we can plan a big group dinner sometime!"

Alex cusses under his breath. "Let's go before you start planning a wedding too. That's the last thing I need right now."

The comment makes me flinch, but I manage to hide it as well as I can. But not before Alex sees, frowning as soon as he realizes what he said.

As we head out the door, he pulls me aside and quietly says, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

I shrug off his touch. “We should go. Your mom seems hungry.”



THE FAMILY-OWNED RESTAURANT is small and filled with the scents of coffee, homemade sauce, and something sweet. We get a booth in the back dining hall, away from the other customers who stopped what they were doing to watch Alex as we walked in.

One thing he’s always had is a presence. At Lindon, everyone knew he was in the room. He was like Moses parting the Red Sea at parties. If a room was packed, they’d make room for him. Girls. Guys. It didn’t matter.

That clearly hasn’t changed. If anything, it’s heightened now that he’s on TV screens at bars and homes everywhere. Especially since his injury. The news has stopped talking about it to focus on how preseason is going for teams, but his assault made headlines worldwide.

“Communication seems like a broad area of study,” Colleen remarks, sipping her water. “Is there anything you want to focus on? My Alex always knew what his path would be, but he still managed to narrow down his focus to Sports Management.”

I knew that. He figured if an NHL career didn’t work out for him, he could try for the minors or apply for coaching or management positions somewhere. “I’m interested in Digital Journalism, but I’ve thought about Esports Journalism or even trying to get an in with magazines to do features. That requires internships, though, and most of those are unpaid.”

“I’m sure Alex could help you,” she says casually. “He speaks to reporters all the time. Right, honey? You have connections.”

I wince. “He doesn’t need to do that. I was raised to work hard for everything I get anyway. I’m not a fan of asking for help.”

“Plus, her brother is a player for the Rangers,” Alex points out, gripping his sweet tea that he hasn’t touched since he got it. “If she needs connections, he’ll have plenty.”

It feels like he’s handing me off to my brother, which rubs me the wrong way. “You’re not wrong,” I grit out, forcing a smile. “But, like I said, we

were raised to work our asses off for everything. I don't want his help. Or yours. I don't need it."

Well, that part isn't true. I definitely need help. But I'm too proud to ask for it. Too afraid to depend on other people to make something of myself.

"I know you don't," he says, this time his tone softer. "I didn't mean it to come off that way. I'm just saying you'd let Sebastian help you long before you ever let me. You're close."

It's hard to argue with him. Me and Sebastian have always been that way. And even when it pains me whenever my big brother gives me money or does things for my car or surprises me with gifts that I know cost a pretty penny, I'm grateful for him. We didn't have a lot growing up, so he wanted to make sure we wanted for nothing now.

"I think that's sweet," his mother chimes in. "It's important to be close to family. You never know what's going to happen to them."

Alex's shoulders tense. "Not here," he says quietly. "Olive doesn't need to hear it."

Hear what?

Colleen doesn't make me ask. "I miss your father every day. I know you do too. There's nothing wrong with talking about it, Alexander. My therapist told me instead of avoiding the hard topics, I should embrace them."

"So now you listen to your therapist?" he scoffs, shaking his head. "Funny. When I've told you that in the past, you haven't listened."

I can feel the tension rising between Alex and his mother, so I decide to cut it. "Not that this is the same, but my father and I aren't very close. I only see him once, maybe twice a year, and speak to him only a handful of times. The rest of my family is close, but we've never had that bond."

My father left me one message since I walked out of his house. It was a half-assed apology that felt forced at best, so I didn't bother calling him back to accept it. He's clueless when it comes to what he says or why it hurts, so it isn't like he meant it or cares if I forgive him or not.

"Not Alex," Colleen tells me, breaking me from my thoughts. "He spent so much time with his daddy, it was obvious who the favorite was. Scott would take him to games, practice, the batting cages. I swear the man was trying to buy his love."

"That isn't what he was doing," Alex disagrees. "He loved sports too. You know that. He was coaching Little League and the junior varsity team.

I never had favorites. He and I just had more in common.”

Colleen hums. “I’m surprised you didn’t want to live with him after the divorce. The judge let you decide.”

Alex closes his eyes, and I can tell this conversation is about to go downhill fast. “I didn’t choose him, though, did I?”

Colleen harrumphs like that’s still somehow not good enough. I hardly know the woman, but I can tell she isn’t being fair to Alex. “It’s never easy making that kind of decision,” I reason with her. “I may not be close with my father, but he’s still my dad. Half of his DNA runs through my veins. I’m sure Alex feels the same way. Picking between parents is hard when they both gave you life.”

He looks at me and mouths “thank you” before looking at his mother, who’s staring at the tabletop. “It is hard, Ma. I never wanted to have to choose. I love you both.”

“Everybody has a choice, Alexander.”

There’s the full name again.

“And you *loved* him. Past tense,” she murmurs. “He’s dead.”

“That doesn’t change the fact I love him.”

She’s quiet.

I clear my throat. “Family can be tough sometimes. Things happen that make us see people differently. But I’ve known Alex for a while, Mrs. O’Conner, and I know he doesn’t make his choices lightly. He’s a good person with a heart that he rarely shows people. And I can tell he’s shown you his time and time again. The rest of us can only be so lucky.”

When his mother looks at me, there’s a shine to her eyes. “My Alex has always been that way. So caring. *Too* caring. Even to people who don’t deserve it.”

My brows pinch.

She frowns, turning to Alex. “I’m sorry that I’m here, baby boy. I just missed you and was worried when Pam told me you’d gotten hurt. I want to be your mother for once. I wanted to care for you, not *be* taken care of.”

He shakes his head, wetting his lips. “I appreciate that you care. I do. You don’t need to apologize. But we do need to get you back. You know why, Ma. For me?”

Her eyes go down to her lap. “Fine.”

Alex lets out a long breath. “Thank you.”

I'm not sure what's happening, but it seems serious enough that I don't feel the need to talk.

When our food arrives at the table, the conversation doesn't flow as well. Colleen is quiet, barely hounding me with any questions. Alex doesn't try saying much, besides asking us how our food is. And, suddenly, I feel awkward for coming.

It isn't until an hour and a half later when we get back to Alex's apartment that he pulls me aside to talk. "I need to drive my mom somewhere, so I'll be gone for a few hours. You can stay here and watch TV or whatever you want to do."

He's leaving? "You're taking her back to Lindon? I can come with you."

"No," he says too quickly. He tugs on the collar of his T-shirt. "No, I'm not taking her to Lindon."

So where is she going? Their house is still in town. It's why he was there before, he'd said. I guess the hitchhiking thing makes more sense now if she came from somewhere closer, but she doesn't have a purse or anything with her.

"I can't come with you?" I question.

His eyes dim. "It's better if you stay here."

"Why?"

"Olive, come on." He sounds exasperated. Or tired. Maybe both? Rubbing the back of his neck, he drops his head back. "It's complicated, okay? I can try to explain when I get back."

What's new? "Everything about us seems to be complicated, Alex. So how about I save you the trouble of coming up with an excuse on your drive home to not tell me what's going on and let me see for myself?"

He's speechless, his lips parting and closing in shock. Maybe because he knows I'm right. He'll figure out some reason why he can't tell me the truth on his way back, and then we won't get anywhere.

"I came here to spend time with you," I remind him. "You told me you wanted me here. You told me you shouldn't have let go of what we had before. So let me be here for you."

His expression flickers. I don't know what the break is, but I'm grateful for it. He swallows, his throat bobbing as he looks toward the other room where his mother disappeared to use the bathroom. "I'll tell my mom that we're ready then."

He goes to move past me, but I stop him by grabbing his wrist. “Thank you. For giving me this. Whatever this is.”

It feels a lot like trust, and that’s something that hits deep.

His eyes go to my hand. “Just remember that she’s a good person, okay?”

I stare at him, confused by the remark.

But I say, “Okay,” like I understand.

Because I can tell he needs to hear that.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Olive

LOGAN'S PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL is a mixture of red brick, beige stonework, and windows. Lots of windows for natural sunlight. The roof is flat in most places, except for the angular section above the front entrance that makes it look more like a modern art museum than a mental institute.

That's probably for the better.

The outside is well kept with trimmed hedges and an assortment of flowers and bushes lining the front of the building. There are small trees that look a lot like my mother's favorite lavender ones back home planted every twenty feet up the road that leads directly to the front entrance.

When Alex puts the car into park in front of the sliding glass doors, he looks at me with a pleading look in his blue eyes. "Can you stay here for me? I won't be long. I've got some paperwork to fill out and I want to talk to Mom's head nurse."

Whatever is going on here is between him and his mother, so I nod. "I'll make sure nobody tows us."

He smiles, but it doesn't meet his eyes. Looking over his shoulder, he says, "Ready, Ma?"

"No." Sighing, she opens the door. "But I don't think I have a choice. Let's go. I'm sure my prison cell is waiting with a fresh lock."

Alex's jaw tics, but all he does is get out of the car and guide her inside the sliding glass doors until they disappear out of sight.

I lean back in my seat and pull my phone out from my pocket for the first time since getting to Pittsburgh. There are at least twenty messages waiting for me, mostly from my friends.

Skylar: Are you alive?

Skylar: You better be having the best sex of your life right now

Berlin: What if the sex incapacitated her?

Skylar: Are you okay????

Skylar: *If you don't stop you won't be able to walk tomorrow*

Berlin: *Best problem to have*

Skylar: *I am going to call the cops and do a wellness check on you if you don't answer me in two hours just in case you're in a sex coma*

Berlin: *Do you even have an address??*

Skylar: *We share our locations*

Berlin: *How am I just finding out about this? Do you not love me enough to share your locations with me?*

Skylar: *Your phone doesn't have that feature or we would include you*

Berlin: *I hate you both*

Skylar: *No you don't*

Skylar: *Olive, you have fifteen minutes before I call the cops*

That was ten minutes ago.

Me: *If you call the cops would you tell them you're worried I slipped into a sex induced coma and need assistance?*

Me: *Because idk if I would be embarrassed or proud if I had to face them with that*

Skylar: *FINALLY. Where have you been?*

Skylar: *Did you at least use protection?*

I roll my eyes. "She's such a mom," I muse to myself, cutting through some of the confusion that's been weighing me down since meeting Colleen.

Berlin: *Did you cum at least???*

Me: *Protection hasn't been necessary because there hasn't been sex*

Me: *This trip hasn't gone smoothly*

Berlin: *So no orgasm then?*

Skylar's name pops up on my phone. "Is everything okay?" she asks, her voice a whisper that probably means Bentley is napping.

“I’m fine. I met Alex’s mom. She was at his apartment when I got there.” I frown as I stare at the hospital. Alex doesn’t want anybody to know about this, so I don’t give my best friend the details I’m sure she wants. “She’s nice.”

That much is true.

“Oooh getting cock blocked by a parent sucks,” she says sympathetically. “Or whatever the female equivalent is.”

“Same thing. Either way, there has been no cock,” I answer easily. I’m not sure there will be, and I’m okay with that. We’ve never shied away from physical stuff. If he truly wants me, I guess we’ll see if we can do the other stuff. The talking. The seriousness. Then maybe the clothes can come off. “I should have told him I was coming. Or just not shown up. This was a dumb idea.”

“No, it wasn’t! It was spontaneous and sweet, if you ask me. You two have gone through a lot of stuff to get where you are, and I think it’s great he wanted you there with him. I’m sure his mom won’t be there the entire time, right?”

I study the building’s welcoming white letters spelling out the name of the hospital. There’s movement on the other side of the windows on the first floor—nurses moving down brightly lit halls. It looks colorful. Happy.

Taking a deep breath, I nod once. “Right.”

“Then enjoy yourself,” she tells me. “You deserve it, Olive. Really. Soon, classes are going to start and you two will both be busy with your lives. You might as well have fun while you can. What’s stopping you?”

I know she’s right. I didn’t drive all this way just to drive back. We’re going to talk. Then...well, I don’t know what happens after that. It’ll depend on how the conversation goes. What I do know is that I don’t feel like paying for a hotel or going all the way back to Lindon, so the very least he can offer me is his couch.

“Nothing,” I finally answer. “Nothing is stopping me. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Skylar’s voice is gentle. “Are you? I know you, Liv. You put on a brave face, but there’s an emptiness in your eyes sometimes. And that’s okay. But don’t self-sabotage something that has the potential to lead somewhere great just because you’re scared.”

Is that what she thinks Alex is for me? Something great? “I don’t self-sabotage. Alex made his decision the last time. He chose hockey.”

“And he regrets it,” she reminds me pointedly. The tone she gives me is like when my mother talks firmly to me. “He asked you to come there, Olive. He chose *you*.”

But for how long? It’s terrifying to think I could fall for him again only to wind up in the same place. “He hasn’t chosen yet. He just thinks he has.”

“Maybe you’re wrong,” she tells me. “Maybe all it will take is a little openness. Give him a chance, but more importantly, give yourself one. You don’t do things you don’t want to, so make the most of this.”

I look at my lap, picking at the seam of my jeans.

She takes my silence as hesitation. “I told Danny when we first met that I didn’t need anybody, and you know what he said?”

I squeeze my fingers together. “What?”

“He said everybody needs an ally in their life to stay sane,” she answers. “And he’s right. You’ll always have me and Berlin, but Alex could be that reinforcement too. Don’t exclude him yet.”

Alex could be everything I’ve ever wanted.

Or he could destroy me.

I’ve heard the people you love the most are the ones who are the scariest to trust. Because they’re the one who could destroy you the worst.

When I lift my head, I see Alex appear on the other side of the entrance door. “He’s coming back. I’ll talk to you later. Thank you for the advice, and for not siccing the cops of me.”

I quickly hang up and tuck my phone back into my pocket as Alex slides into the car. For a full minute, he doesn’t say a word. He just sits there, staring out the windshield with his fingers wrapped tightly around the steering wheel. The skin of his fingertips turns white as he twists his hand and lets out a long, deep breath.

Closing his eyes, he says, “She didn’t always struggle. There were... good times.”

I angle my body toward him, wanting to touch him but seeing the fragile paleness to his skin that makes me keep my hands to myself.

“She’s always had bouts of depression,” he explains quietly, staring at the hospital entrance. “I remember days when my father would take me out to the park and try getting her out of bed, but she refused. Then one day would turn to two that turned to three, and so on. That didn’t happen often, but it was at least two or three times a year. As time went on, she started

acting out more. Her episodes would last longer. She'd get mad easily, over the smallest things she never used to care about as much.

"One day, her and my dad got into it. I'm not even sure what, but probably something mundane. All I remember is that she started throwing things at him. The neighbors saw him rushing out the front door trying to block his face from getting hit. They called the police on her. He didn't want to press charges, but the officers convinced him it would be a good idea if anything like that happened again. And it did."

He takes a deep breath, that broad, muscular chest rising and falling with his deep exhale. "I'm not sure why he didn't call the cops the second time. I guess he knew that she wasn't acting like herself, but that it wasn't her fault. They got into it about a bill or something. I don't know. My dad shielded me from a lot back then because he didn't want me seeing her like that. But it became hard not to because she started acting like that more often. Not sleeping. Being overly energetic. Getting irritable. It was...a lot."

I frown. "That sounds hard."

He dips his chin. "It was. I was lucky that my dad tried his hardest to deal with it on his own. He eventually got to the point where he needed extra help, so instead of letting her get arrested, he got the police involved to take her to a psych evaluation. She fought it, at first, but she ended up agreeing to go when Dad pointed out it was impacting me too. And she loves me. She always has. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder shortly after."

I don't know much about that, but I've heard it isn't easy. This time, I do reach out. I rest my palm on his forearm, so he knows I'm here, even when he won't look at me.

His eyes drop to my hand, but not over to me to see the sympathy there. Because he doesn't want that. And no matter how hard it is to wipe it off my face, I try. For him.

"She was given medication, but that became a fight to get her to take. Sometimes she'd do it. Sometimes she wouldn't. After a while, Dad couldn't do it anymore. He was tired of fighting with her, tired of taking the brunt of it when he was trying to help. I think he always loved her, but not enough to stay. And..." He pauses, wetting his lips. "And I can't help but wonder if he'd still be alive if he had. Because he wouldn't have remarried or gotten in that car to go on vacation with his new family. He would be with us. Helping Mom. Helping me."

My fingers tighten around his arm. "You can't do that to yourself. What-ifs are a dangerous thing to get sucked into, Alex. Thinking about all the ways life could be different doesn't get us anywhere."

All he does is lift one of his shoulders. "It doesn't matter, I guess. Because he left. And he asked me to come with him. He tried convincing me it was for the best. But what would happen to Mom? He didn't want to deal with her, and he didn't want me to either. But somebody had to, so I stepped up. I did what I could."

This has been going on since I knew him? I would have never thought he was taking care of his mom and trying to make sure she was okay.

"I got her to take the medication and go to her appointments with the therapist," he says, leaning his head back against the seat. "For a little while. She was doing better. Her episodes were less frequent. Therapy seemed to help. It was...good. Things were good. Dad and I would go out to baseball games and hockey games. We'd practice together. I spent some time with him and his girlfriend, who was a really nice woman. Life felt normal for a little bit. He got remarried and moved on with his life, so I tried to do the same."

Alex shakes his head at something. "When I got into the frat at Lindon, one of the requirements was moving into the house. And it seemed like Mom was good on her own as long as she kept taking her meds, so I moved out. She seemed happy to me. Happy *for* me. She hadn't had an episode in a while, so I assumed things were going back to normal. But then we got the call about Dad and his wife, and things took a turn for the worse."

I fight the frown that tries weighing down my lips, choosing to stay quiet. No number of apologies or condolences can make him feel better or bring his father back, no matter how sorry I feel for him.

"The doctors think the trauma triggered her," he murmurs. "It makes sense. She loved him. Still does. Losing him was like losing the part of herself that was...normal."

"There's no such thing as normal," I tell him.

He finally looks at me. "Maybe there should be. Because then at least we'd have a baseline to get my mother back to it. She spiraled after his death. She almost missed his funeral because she wouldn't get out of bed. It's a miracle I got her to go. I know she would have regretted not attending. God only knows what she would have been like then. But after...it was bad, Olive. Real bad. And I couldn't tell anybody because she was my

responsibility. So, I dealt with her. When I was scouted, I got an agent who I knew could get me the best deal out there for *her*. Somewhere that would give me enough money to put her at the best psychiatric hospital there was before she completely destroyed herself. Somewhere that could monitor her and figure out the best medicines and therapies without causing more problems. That's why I signed with the Penguins."

He signed with a team for his *mother*? I'd always wondered why he chose Pittsburgh. He never talked about the team before. It was always Boston or New York. Those were his big dreams.

Now it makes sense.

My heart does a tap dance in its cage and swells so big that I think it might burst. "You're actually kind of amazing, aren't you?"

He blinks, brows crinkling. "For putting my mother in a mental institution?"

"For caring enough about her to get her the help she needs," I correct him. I can tell this hasn't been an easy decision for him, but it sounds like it was the right one. "My friend reminded me of something important about everybody needing an ally. Your mother has you, but who do you have? I wish I would have known sooner about this. I could have been there for you—been the person you needed."

His eyes go back to the windshield. "I didn't want you to look differently at me or my mother. She's sick, you know? Not everybody would get that."

"I would."

His eyes go back to me, confusion in them.

I squirm a little. "I deal with depression."

His eyes pin me to my seat, making me fidget again.

"It's not the same," I reason, "as what your mother is going through, but I understand not wanting people to see you differently. My mother used to be on medication for depression and she used to see a therapist. I deal with it too, but I've managed to cope with it without medicine. I went to therapy with her once or twice, but never on my own. I have good days and bad days. I can't say I've ever felt "normal", whatever that is. But most people wouldn't expect that from me because I look fine. I act happy. I make jokes. I usually have a smile on my face. The truth is, I'm not always like that. I struggle, and I don't always know the reason why."

He continues to study me silently.

“My point is that mental health is really hard to deal with sometimes. Whether it’s your own or somebody you care about. But we all go through it. I don’t think there’s a single person on this planet who’s happy all of the time. We all have battles. We all deal with emotions. I have depression, and it sucks. My mother has depression, and it sucks. Your mother is bipolar, and that sucks too. None of us are alone in that battle. The world is starting to become more aware of it, which can only help people like us.”

The intensity of his stare makes me a little uncomfortable. Does he know I’ve never admitted that to anybody? Not Bodhi. Not Berlin. Skylar barely knows about it. She’s seen me in one of my off moods where I had to shut out the world and feel my feels in the darkness of my room. She’d check on me, know I was okay, and then give me space. She can see the emptiness in my eyes when others can’t. But I never really opened up or tried to explain why I am the way I am.

I’m just...me.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks.

“For the same reason you didn’t tell me about what you’ve been through,” I admit. “But now we know, so now we don’t have to be alone. And that’s...I think that’s a good thing. We can be each other’s allies.”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “Yeah,” he agrees. “I think you might be right.”

He flips his hand so he’s able to interweave our fingers, rubbing the pad of his thumb along the back of my hand.

We sit like that for a while until we finally decide to leave.

Give yourself a chance, Skylar had told me.

This is me trying.



ALEX WALKS OUT of the gas station holding a plastic bag, waving at somebody who calls out “Go Penguins” in another car pumping gas beside us. When he slides into the driver’s seat, he reaches into the bag and pulls out a glass bottle of Coca-Cola, and a bag of dark chocolate-covered pretzels.

He passes them to me silently before pulling out a Dr. Pepper for himself and setting it into the cupholder in the center console.

“You remembered,” I say, scanning the bag.

He glances at me briefly before putting the car in drive and heading back onto the road. “You always mix pretzels with chocolate, but you prefer dark chocolate because milk and white are—”

“Too sweet,” we say at the same time.

I nod toward his Dr. Pepper and Cream Soda. “I see you found a way to get both of your favorite drinks in one. I don’t envy your taste buds right now.”

I hated cream soda as a kid and can’t stand Dr. Pepper either. I’ve never tried the combination, but it makes me cringe when I see him drink it.

“Not all of us can have exquisite taste,” he comments, shooting me the first grin he’s given me since I showed up at his door.

I move my head back and forth contemplatively. “That would explain my interest in you,” I say sarcastically, earning a chuckle from him.

The first hour and a half back to his apartment was quiet. I could tell he had a lot on his mind, so I let him simmer in whatever his thoughts were without cutting into them. Then, at the hour and forty-five-minute mark, he turned the radio on, handed me his phone, and told me to play whatever I wanted on the Bluetooth.

The thirty minutes following were less thick thanks to the Pop 100 hits cutting through the silence. As much as I wanted to blast one of my favorite artists, I figured he’d been through enough today. Secretly, I think he appreciated that.

I open the bag of pretzels and hold one out to him. “I know you don’t have a sweet tooth, but since you like black coffee you probably don’t mind bitter chocolate.”

His lips kick up into the smallest smile as he accepts it and chucks the whole thing into his mouth. “You’d be surprised to know that I occasionally put milk into my coffee these days.”

I gasp dramatically. “Rebel.”

He snorts.

We share the bag of pretzels until there’s none left, and banter back and forth about the fall of pop music thanks to autotune and cancel culture, until we enter Pittsburgh.

It isn’t until he stops in front of his apartment complex that he turns to me. “Go on a date with me.”

I stare at him, unblinking. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Dragging my tongue along my bottom lip, I fidget with the seatbelt across my waist. “We went out earlier.”

Alex’s brows go up. “Yeah. With my mother. I don’t usually like taking girls out to third wheel it with me and my mom.”

“That’s probably smart.”

“Just so we’re clear, I usually don’t let women meet my mom on the first date either,” he adds nonchalantly.

“Do you make them wait until the second?”

“At least the third,” he muses to play along with the lighthearted banter. He sobers. “But I’m being serious right now. Give me one reason why we shouldn’t go on have dinner.”

I think about it. “Because we just ate pretzels,” I say lamely.

“They sure as hell didn’t fill me up. Are you trying to tell me you can’t possibly eat another bite?”

My lips twitch. “Well...”

“It doesn’t have to be dinner,” he tells me before I can come up with another excuse. “We could grab drinks, unless that Coke put you past your daily liquid capacity.”

I eye him. “I just... Do you think it’s a good idea?”

“Why the hell wouldn’t it be?”

“Because we could be seen.”

He blinks slowly. “Are you trying to hide me, Olive? I feel like some sort of man candy that you’re ashamed of.”

He’s kidding, right? “Don’t be ridiculous. If anything, it’s the other way around.”

Now his eyes are narrowed in disapproval. “I don’t want to hear you say that shit. I’m the one asking you out on a very public date. You’re the one resisting.”

I sigh. “It’s not because of *you*. I was just all over social media because I was seen out with Bodhi, and we both know what those comments said. Can you imagine if another picture surfaced of me out with you? Everybody would think I’m some sort of puck bunny. I don’t feel like being called a whore again anytime soon.”

His face darkens. “You won’t be. I’ll make damn sure of it.”

Oh damn. He’s using that husky, serious voice that goes right to my lady bits. Not fair. “I appreciate that, but you don’t control what people post

online. The keyboard warriors always have something to say.”

“No, but I *can* control the narrative.” When he sees that I’m not backing down, he compromises. “I know a place that’s private. The guys go there all the time. It’s quiet. There’s a back entrance and a VIP section. Go out with me, Olive. Don’t let those assholes win. Do what you want to. Because I think you *want* to get dinner with me. I think you want to do a hell of a lot more.”

I don’t allow myself to blush. “What makes you so sure?”

His eyes spark. “Because you drove all this way to see me, and we both know it’s not just to make sure I’m resting. If anything, you’re probably going to help me do the exact opposite. Because you’ll be in my bed.”

Dear baby Jesus in a manger. Yep. Ovaries activated. “Maybe I plan on sleeping on the couch.”

He smirks. “Baby, we both know you’re not sleeping on the couch tonight.”

Goosebumps cover my arms.

And I don’t have the energy to deny any of it.

“One drink,” I relent. “And *maybe* an appetizer.”

“Dinner,” he negotiates, “and we split a bottle of wine. Your choice. Even that sweet white shit you love so much.”

Give yourself a chance.

My lips twitch upward. “It’s a date.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Alex

THE JAZZ BAND at Belle's Place is playing a melody of Miles Davis, which fills the space in the private loft where Olive and I are seated. There's a vanilla candle flickering on the table, cutting through the dim light of the room that she's looking around.

"This is where it happened," Olive says, breaking the silence as she meets my eyes.

"What?"

"The assault." She gestures toward my head, which I nearly forgot hurt. I guess there's something to the distraction method when it comes to chronic pain after all. "You stopped in the alley and looked like you saw a ghost."

Damn. I did do that, huh? "That night is still a little fuzzy. But, yes. Clarkson's stepsister owns this place. I'm sure you'll meet her. It's only a matter of time before she busts up here asking me why I'm out of bed."

I'm surprised she didn't greet us at the door. I know she told Jesus, one of the security guards, to let her know when one of the guys shows up so they can be let right in.

"I saw the photos of her," she says, fiddling with the straw wrapper of her soda because she didn't want wine. Something tells me it was when she saw the price of the bottle. "On the news, they were showing you walking into the hospital."

I remember the camera flashes, but not much else from the walk from Belle's car to inside the emergency room.

"She's cool" is all I say about her. As far as I'm concerned, that's all that needs to be said. "The guys and I have been here a few different times. What happened that night isn't common, if you're worried."

"I'm not," she promises. "But *you're* not? We both know you can't afford another injury. You've suffered concussions before at Lindon."

I did, and each one of them sucked. But I'm not going there right now because I know where this is headed. All athletes have to face the reality that we can only take so many hits before our careers are at jeopardy. Thankfully, I've only had three injuries, and they were all minor.

"Crime in this area really isn't common. What happened here was a freak thing. You don't have to worry about it happening again."

She bites down on her bottom lip that's painted pink. It's bright, and I'm fairly sure she's caught me staring at her mouth at least twice since she applied the color in the car. She chose that with intent, and it's working.

"I do, though," she admits with a shrug. "Worry. And trust me, I don't like it. It's easier to only think about yourself, but that's not always reality. I think you and I are more similar than we think. We both wish we could be more selfish than we are. That's probably why we've gotten along all these years."

I can think of a lot of reasons we've gotten along, but I've never wanted to admit it's because we're similar. I don't want her to be as cynical as I am, and if we're that alike, that's what it would make her—a girl who looks at life like it's a glass half empty. "If that's true, I feel bad for you."

She rolls her eyes. "You may have a lot going on in your life, but that doesn't make you broken. You just want people to think you are so they don't bother trying to break past the barriers you put up. Spoiler alert, Alex, you already let me in. I met your mom. You told me about your childhood. How many people know about that?"

I can't even try denying it because she's right.

"Do your teammates know about your mom?" she pries, wrapping those damn lips around her straw and taking a long sip. It brings me back to the times she'd wrap them around *me*.

Now I'm hard in my goddamn jeans.

I peel my eyes off her mouth and lift them to meet hers. "No."

I try mentally talking down my boner.

She quirks up a brow. "And why is that?"

"I didn't even tell my friends back home or the people I lived with for three years at the frat. Why would I tell anyone here?"

"I don't think you give people enough credit," she says softly. "But for what it's worth, I'm glad you told me. Even if it might have been by forceful coercion."

I huff out a laugh. I'm not going to tell her that a part of me feels relieved. I'm also not going to tell her that weight has lifted off my chest that's been there since I told the judge I'd stay with my mom when I was younger. I don't regret any of those things, and I can't go back and change them. But I never realized how much of it piled up until now.

We fall silent, as I try racking my mind for something to say.

"You like the wrong football team" is what I blurt out when nothing else comes to mind.

She stares at me. "What?"

"We've always had a lot in common, but we never liked the same teams. It used to drive me fucking crazy when you'd show up to my place wearing a Giants' jersey. And don't get me started on the Rangers shit. I was ready to peel them off you whether we were going to have sex or not."

The way she snorts at me is actually kind of cute. "As if the Patriots are any better. Even Tom Brady got tired of them. Without him and Gronk they were nothing."

We've had this argument before. "You're lucky we're here. If we were at my place, I'd make you pay for those fighting words."

Her eyes flare with heat. "That's because you don't have it in you to admit when you're wrong. It's okay. At least New England's team is grateful for your unwavering, albeit questionable, loyalty."

She's playing with fire now, and my dick only gets harder.

Before I can reply, Belle shows up at the top of the stairs like I knew she would. She all but bounces over, her outgoing personality practically popping the bubble of heated tension between me and the girl on the opposite side of the booth.

"Alex, I thought you were supposed to be resting," she chides, like I knew she would. She sticks out a hand toward Olive. "Hi, I'm Belle. This is my place. Hopefully you've taken it easy on Alex since the doctor told him *not* to drive or do any strenuous activity."

Olive eyes dart to me. "You're not supposed to drive?"

I sigh. "The doctor told me not to drive for forty-eight hours after the incident. It's been longer than that. Not that it's any of your business, *Belle*."

"I'm Olive," my date tells Belle, ignoring my tone altogether.

Belle beams. "Oh, I know. You're Sebastian Henderson's little sister. I looked you up."

Olive blinks.

I'm the one who asks the obvious question. "Why exactly did you look her up?"

Belle gives me an exasperated look, like I'm somehow dumb for asking. "Because I was curious. Plus, Olive is such a unique name. I figured there was no way that your Olive was different than the one I saw when that photo went viral with her brother and that hunk of a right wing. Don't tell Jesse I said that about Hoffman, though."

I grin. "Oh, I will."

She narrows her eyes at me. "Meanie. But whatever. I'm stating facts. Hoffman is attractive. Don't you agree?" Belle directs that question to Olive, not me.

Olive nods, not making eye contact with me while answering. "He's like a real-life Thor."

Belle grins. "Thor was always my favorite."

"I was always more of a Captain America kind of gal, but Thor is a close second."

I cut in, because I don't feel like spending my night debating on which superhero is hotter. "Is there a reason you're high jacking my date, or did you just come over to scold me for trying to live my life outside the confines of my apartment?"

Belle perks up, looking between me and Olive. "Date, huh?" She winks at Olive before refocusing on me. "I like her, so I approve. And while I'm glad you brought her here, there's a nice steakhouse down the road that you could spend some of your money at. Don't cheap out on your girl."

I glare at the implication. "We wanted privacy. What kind of business owner are you trying to turn away paying customers?"

Belle props her hands on her hips. "I always give you good discounts here because you and Jesse play together. I'm simply encouraging you to spend some money on her before she comes to her senses and runs for the hills once that dazzling personality of yours comes out."

Olive tries to hide a smile behind her glass.

But I see it.

"She's not a hooker, Belle, I don't need to buy her. And she's not exactly shackled to the table. If she wants to leave, she can. But I have a feeling she's not going to do that."

It's Olive who asks, "Why not?"

I meet her eyes. “You’ve had the choice to walk away long before now, but you’re still here.”

Belle makes a little noise as she claps her hands together.

Olive’s lips tilt up at the corners. “Even though you like the Patriots, I couldn’t walk away. I think some part of me knew that you needed me—needed a friend. And my best friend back home told me to give us a chance. Here I am doing that.”

Belle’s sigh is light, like she’s soaking this up with that lovey-dovey look she gets around Clarkson. It’s borderline nauseating. “You two are cute. But you’re in Pennsylvania now. It’s the Steelers or the Eagles. But I choose to forgive you regardless.”

My teammate’s stepsister remains standing there, peering at the two of us.

“Belle,” I tell her slowly.

“Yeah?”

“Go the hell away.”

“Oh. Right. My bad.” As she walks away, I hear her mumble, “The Pats?” in quiet disbelief.

Olive leans her arms on the edge of the table with a small smile on her face. “You never correct people when they call me yours.”

It’s not a question, but a statement.

“You don’t either,” I point out matter-of-factly.

Her smile grows, brightening her eyes. “I don’t.”

Like me, she doesn’t offer an explanation.

I guess neither one of us thinks that one is necessary.



I HOLD THE door open for Olive when we get to my apartment, letting my gaze dip down to scan over her ass as she walks inside. When she looks over her shoulder and catches me, there’s a grin on her face. “Like what you see?”

“Yes,” I say unabashedly.

She shakes her head, but I see that small smile curl her lips up as she sets her things down on the counter. “Thank you for dinner. Tell Belle the

food was really good.”

“There’s nothing to eat here, so we had limited options,” is my only reply.

I walk over to the couch and drop down, patting the spot beside me. “Do you still like 20/20 show? I’m pretty sure there are some on my DVR.”

She stares at me. “Who uses a DVR still?”

I eye her. “It’s part of my streaming plan. I can record shows. It’s how I watched *Supernatural* after you insisted on making me watch the first season.”

Granted, she never forced me to watch the other fourteen, but she’s nice enough not to point that out.

She joins me, not sitting too close or too far away. I study the area between us before grabbing her leg and pulling her over effortlessly to close the distance. I prop my arm on the back of the couch cushion behind her, then grab the remote with my free hand. I can feel her eyes on me as I turn the television on and settle in, leaving my arm where it is without a second thought.

“Uh, Alex?”

I hum.

“Are you...trying to cuddle?” Her confusion is amusing to me as I find the new episode of the true crime show to put on.

“I’m getting comfortable,” I tell her. “But you can call it whatever you want.”

She’s quiet, her eyes still burning holes into the side of my face when I meet them. “What’s going to happen when I leave?”

The heavy question has my brows shooting up. “What do you mean?”

“When I go back to Lindon,” she elaborates slowly. “You’re staying here. You’ll heal and play hockey. I’ll be in classes. We’ll see each other at my brother’s games, probably, but from across the ice.”

I study her carefully. “Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out. Except you’re forgetting something.”

“What?”

I shrug casually, letting my arm drape over her shoulders. “We’ll have bye weeks. You’ll have school vacations. Maybe we’ll even share some weekends off together.”

“Weekends,” she repeats slowly, like she’s trying to soak that in. “To do what?”

I look back at the television screen. "Cuddle."

I'm met with silence.

She doesn't move my arm or move away. If anything, she allows herself to settle into my side. Eventually, her head meets my shoulder, and I hear the softest exhale escape her lips.

Halfway through the show, her palm rests on my jean-clad leg. "Alex?"

I hum.

"Do you really want to try this?" she asks, her voice full of hesitation. Or is that fear? I've never considered her to be scared of anything. It's one of the many things I've secretly appreciated about her. "Whatever 'this' is?"

I turn her chin toward mine so she'll look me in the eyes. "How long are we going to skate around this? We've been doing it for years, and it's safe to say that we both want more than casual."

Her eyes flash, and her cheeks turn pink. "We never talked about that night, you know. Not really."

I know which night she's referring to. I've found it hard to *stop* thinking about it when I'm alone with nothing to drown out my thoughts. "I wasn't sure you'd want to."

She wets her lips. "I told you that I loved you, and you told me it would never be that for you. It's reasonable that I'd question things. That night stuck with me for a long time. I've let it go, but I haven't forgotten."

I've kicked myself countless times for saying that. And for what? I could have told her the truth. I could have let her decide if loving me was worth the mess that my life was made of. But, at the time, I didn't know if I was capable of the same love she'd offer me because I had too much else to focus on. Would she stay if she knew I couldn't promise her reciprocation? I wouldn't blame her if she walked away even if I admitted that I cared for her.

"I'm not going to sit here and pretend like I'm not an asshole for saying that to you," I answer honestly. "It was a dick move to get you to let me go before things got more serious than they already were. That's on me. Not you. It was never because of you."

Her eyes dip down to her lap. "I've never told anybody other than my family and friends that I loved them. That meant something to me. What happens if we get to that point again and you decide you're not there still?"

I don't know what to say to convince her to give me a chance. The only thing I can offer her is the truth. "I'm not saying this is going to be easy."

You'll need to be patient with me. I've never let myself have anything that I've wanted before."

She looks skeptical. "You have hockey. A stable career. Money. I'd say you have a lot."

"I can get traded at any time," I counter. "I could stay on the bench. Someone else can replace me in a second. My position in the NHL is expendable now more than ever. And if that goes away, so does the money."

Olive is quiet, rubbing her lips together.

"Look," I say with a sigh. "I've fucked up a lot when it comes to us. I know that. But you know the reason why I've held back. You've met my mother when nobody else has. You've heard the story. It's different experiencing it, and you might decide her episodes are too much in the future. But..."

When the words get lodged in my throat, I have to force them down with a swallow to take a deep breath. I look away, closing my eyes and exhaling roughly until I feel a hand on my face.

Olive moves my face toward hers the same way I did only moments ago. "But what, Alex?"

Wetting my dry lips, I feel my throat bob under the harsh swallow of air I collect before the admission I'd harbored for a long ass time. "I need somebody to give me a chance that I can't always give myself. I need... you."

Her eyes widen as if she's not expecting that. They soften, the orbs turning glassy as her thumb brushes my lower lip. "Weekends, then," she says, smiling gently at me.

I put my hand on top of hers. "Weekends."

We stare at one another for a moment before I dip down and press my mouth lightly against hers. It's supposed to be quick, chaste. Nothing that pressures her into something more. But her hand moves away from my face and toward my shoulder, curling her fingers around my collarbone and returning the kiss with more heat.

A subtle moan opens her mouth up to me, urging me to get a taste. But once my tongue enters her mouth, it's like a fire consumes us. Show forgotten, we get lost in each other's domineering back-and-forth. Suddenly, my shirt is being lifted, and discarded somewhere on the floor, followed quickly by hers. I make quick work to unclasp her bra until that joins the clothes scattered on the ground.

The pads of my thumbs brush against the pebbled buds, making her shudder and drop her head back. "Alex," she breathes.

I grin, knowing how sensitive her nipples are.

My mouth dips down and covers one while I play with the other, her chest arching forward as she releases a sharp breath. I graze my teeth and tongue along each breast while pinching and caressing the other until another drawn-out moan escapes her. Dick twitching at the sound, I repeat the movements until her breathing gets sharper.

Her hands lift to my head, her fingers threading in my hair and tugging me away. "I want more," she says, her mint eyes locking with mine. "Please."

I press another kiss against her head before my mouth dips down and travels south toward the hem of her leggings.

As I peel them down her legs, my mouth follows the path until my lips stop at just above her covered center.

"Alex," she chokes, putting her hands on my shoulders. "I need you."

I press a kiss against her panties and smile against her. "I'm getting there, baby. But I need you first, and it's been too goddamn long since I've done this."

I show her exactly what I mean once her panties are peeled away too, and my mouth is covering her. And despite her fingers returning to my hair, she doesn't try pushing me away. If anything, her legs spread wider as she gets closer to the brink, letting me have any part of her I want.

And damn do I fucking want her.

Her legs start closing around my head, her thighs shaking as I build her closer to the edge she wants to dive off of with each flick of my tongue. And I bring her there, listening to the sound she makes when she reaches her climax.

Lifting my head after her body is sated against the couch, I grin up at her. Her eyelids flutter as she looks down at me still perched between her legs, and I swear I can hear her heartbeat.

Sitting up, I help her reposition and redress.

"What about you?" she asks, when she realizes I'm not going to push for more.

I lift a shoulder. "We have all night. And I want to know if this chick really killed her husband and buried him under the fire pit or if she hired someone else to do it."

She blinks at me in disbelief.

I lift my arm and gesture for her to curl into me. It takes her a minute, but she does, seemingly stunned.

“Not everything about us has to be sex,” I tell her when I sense the confusion, the doubt. “I’m going to prove that to you.”

Slowly, she blinks. “Prove...?” Her voice fades as she shakes her head. “What are you doing, Alex?”

I sit back on the couch, tugging her closer to me. “I’m trying to be the person you deserve.”

For the longest time, I feel her eyes plastered on me. “Hypothetically, what if I want you to be the person I deserve while also getting fucked?”

That doesn’t help my dick calm down. It twitches to life. “Well, I’d hate for you to be disappointed by making you wait. Hypothetically, of course.”

A humming noise has her settling into my side, her hand trailing over my thigh and dangerously close to the bulge under the denim.

She knows what she’s doing.

“If you want it,” I tell her, capturing her wrist in my hand. “You’ll have to beg me for it.”

“I don’t beg.”

“For me,” I murmur, “you will.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Olive

I WAKE UP drunk on the orgasms that Alex gave me as soon as we crawled into bed. I swore to myself I wouldn't beg him for anything, but I've always been good at lying to myself. First he got me off with his hands, then his mouth, and only when I begged him, when I pleaded to feel him inside me, did he finally give me all of him. Because while I appreciate him being willing to wait for sex, I'm only so strong. It's like the second his scent wrapped around me, my pheromones were saying *game on, bitch*.

Now there's a strong arm hooked around my waist that I know before I even glance down to see the dark coarse hair covering the roped muscles and veins that would be any nurse's wet dream.

I go to move away when he tightens his hold. Then I'm tugged against a bare torso and hard erection poking at my backside. "Not yet. Early," he mumbles tiredly.

My eyes flick over to the alarm clock on the nightstand that's flashing red. "It's nine." I try moving his arm, but he rolls his hips forward until the tip of his cock nudges against me.

"Alex!" I say, giggling.

His nose nuzzles against the back of my neck before he brushes his lips under my ear, causing goosebumps to pimple my skin. I shiver when his tongue licks the sensitive spot of skin that always melts the barriers I try keeping up around him. "What?"

I go to tell him to stop, but then he slips a hand between us until his fingers are brushing where the head of his cock is teasing me. Words suddenly seem far away. Too far to argue as he begins playing with me until I'm squirming and letting out a soft moan.

The exhaustion that held onto my conscious is long gone as I squeeze his hand into place between my thighs. He tweaks and pinches and rolls his fingers against my bundle of nerves before he slowly begins easing his length inside me for yet another round.

Despite being sore, I lift my leg to give him better access. He thrusts forward until he's seated fully and lets out a long groan into the crook of my throat.

And then he starts moving.

Slow.

Hot.

Hard.

He grabs my thigh, my hip, my breast, anything he can get his hands on as he pumps into me from behind until we're both dotted with sweat. He pinches my nipple and swivels his hips until I'm burying my face into the pillow to swallow the noise that wants to escape.

His voice is hoarse when he says, "God, your pussy is so fucking wet for me."

He's always had that power over me. It's never been like that with other men, not that there have been many. I can honestly say most my early experiences were lackluster. With the exception of Bodhi, who I refuse to think about with another man's dick inside of me.

Alex makes my body come alive. I don't feel self-conscious or worry about what I look like in different positions—how my stomach hangs or what the cellulite on the backs of my thighs looks like if I'm bent over. He never makes me question that. He takes control, bringing me out of my head and into the very delicious reality he creates for us.

And damn am I glad he wasn't going to fight me on the 'no sex' thing until three dates. I might have combusted if I didn't feel him inside me before I had to drive back to Lindon for the fall semester.

I tilt my head back and lose myself to the way he fucks, listening to all his little praises; every, "*So good*" and "*Going to fuck you so hard*" and "*Squeeze my cock just like that*".

If there's one thing that Alex never shies away from, it's dirty talk. I never knew I had a praise kink until he called me a good girl for sucking his cock. I was done from there on out.

I'm close to climax number I don't know what when my phone rings.

I curse when I glance over at it briefly and see my brother's name on the screen. He doesn't call often, so it momentarily distracts me.

"Let it go to voicemail," Alex tells me, shifting upward and peppering kisses along my throat and shoulder.

I arch back into him as he takes me harder, hitting me deeper until tingles shoot down my spine. “I n-need to stop. It could be an emergency.”

“No,” he says, nipping my ear. “You’re going to be a good girl and keep taking my dick.”

I can feel the orgasm building higher and higher with every stroke of his bare cock, but that doesn’t stop me from trying to get him to pause to make sure Sebastian is okay. “Alex—”

His lips linger on my ear. “Fine, baby girl. You want to answer it? Answer it.”

My eyes bulge as I glance over my shoulder at him and see that he’s not going to stop. “Are you kidding me? You want me to answer my brother’s phone call while you’re fucking me?”

He nips at my earlobe again and lifts himself onto one arm, moving me to my stomach and dragging my bottom half up so my ass is arched in the air. The same second he enters me again, he reaches over and swipes the ANSWER button while whispering, “Yes,” in my ear. “That’s exactly what I want.”

I have to bite back the groan as Sebastian says, “Olive? You there?”

“Y-Yep.” I want to glare at Alex who doesn’t stop or slow down. He’s building me closer to the edge and the last thing I want to do is orgasm while my brother listens. I’m arguably the wettest I’ve ever been, and the noise is evident every time Alex’s cock slams back into me. “I should call you b-back though.”

“You okay? You sound weird. I need to talk to you about something.”

Alex buries his face into my back to suppress his low chuckle. He grinds into me, grinding his hips into me and hitting the right spot that has my eyes rolling back until they hurt. My back arches again as I bury my face into the sheets to stop the mewl that tries escaping my lips.

Alex wraps my hair around his fist and pulls until my head lifts from the mattress. “I’m g-good. But now isn’t the best time.”

There’s a pause. “Are you with somebody? You sound strange. Is this like a hostage situation? Do you need to order a pepperoni pizza or whatever the code is?”

Oh good lord. When Alex uses his hips to grind into me, it makes it even harder to keep composure. He’s evil. Pure evil. “I was just—” A sharp breath escapes me when the man behind me starts toying with my clit. Forget evil. He’s Satan. I’m having sex with the devil.

Reasonable words are beyond me at this point, which is why my filter decides that the next word that escapes my mouth makes perfect sense to say to my sibling. “—masturbating.”

“*What the fuck?* Christ, Olive, next time don’t pick up the phone.” My brother quickly disconnects, but not before I hear him gagging.

Alex lets out a burst of laughter, his movement briefly halting as he drops his forehead to my shoulder and wheezes. “Did you really just tell him that?”

I’ll feel embarrassed about it later, but right now I have one thing on my mind. “I panicked. Shut up and make me come, asshole.”

And he does just that until we’re both falling from the ultimate high, wrapped up in each other’s arms and legs with sweat-coated skin and erratic heartbeats.

Right before he finds his release, he pulls out and empties himself onto my back. “I don’t think you minded based on how tightly you squeezed my dick,” he muses victoriously as he pumps himself empty.

I shoot him a look and flip him off.

He ignores it, grabs a towel to wipe me off, then kisses my cheek, and says, “Get some more sleep. I kept you up late.”

I should tell him that what just happened was messed up, but I can’t. Because it was...hot. And that probably makes me messed up to admit, so I don’t say anything at all.

I’m already groggy, and happily sated, so I barely remember him leaving the room by the time sleep finds me again. But when I wake up an hour later and finally peel myself out of bed and change into clean clothes, I follow the sound of clinking pots and pans until I’m met with a shirtless Alex standing in front of the stove.

“I thought you didn’t have food?” I ask, getting his attention.

Walking over, I examine the plate of waffles sprinkled with cinnamon beside the assortment of fruit, juice and...champagne?

Then I realize what he’s doing.

“I went out and grabbed some groceries while you slept,” he explains nonchalantly, taking the next waffle out of the maker and setting it on the stack I’m staring at. “I even got you real maple syrup. Not the fake kind that you rant about.”

“It tastes like chemicals,” I say slowly.

There are eggs and bacon on other plates, and sausage links in the pan that resemble what he normally orders for breakfast. “You made all my favorites,” I note in awe. “Is this what I’m going to get every weekend that I visit you?”

He grins at me. “I wouldn’t hold your breath. Some of this might not even be edible.”

There’s not one piece of food in front of me that looks burnt or undercooked. “You secretly know how to cook.”

He takes the sausages out of the pan and moves the pan off the burner. “It’s not really a secret. I had to learn how to cook when I lived with my mom. She used to teach me some of her favorites before things got tough. My dad was good in the kitchen too.”

I pull out one of the stools and sit down. “I know how to make, like, three things without totally ruining them.”

“Anything good?”

I reach for a piece of strawberry that he cut up for the waffles. “I can make a great cup of coffee, a killer lasagna, and a phone call to the local pizzeria.”

Alex chuckles. “Lasagna, huh?”

“It’s my mom’s specialty.” I think back to the eggplant lasagna Dad’s girlfriend made. A heavy weight settles into my chest thinking about the wedge that day put between him and I. But he did that to himself, so I tell myself not to feel bad about it. “She taught me how to make it when I was little. Seb knows too.”

He makes a thoughtful noise. “I can’t say I’ve ever had much lasagna, but I’d be willing to give it a try.”

He starts plating our food, putting everything together exactly how it looks at the diners when I order it.

“You forgot the—” Before I can finish, he pulls the whipped cream out of the fridge and sprays it on top of my stack of cinnamon waffles with a smirk.

Then he pours me a drink that is far from a proportionate level of apple cider to champagne and slides it in front of me.

All I can do is stare between him and the food that looks droolworthy.

“What?” he asks.

I slowly shake my head. “Nobody has made me breakfast before.”

He’s quiet, causing me to look up at him.

His eyes are on mine. "I'm not always going to be the best at this, Olive. But I told you I want to try. So, I'll make you a deal. I'll make you breakfast as much as I can when we see each other."

I already like the sound of that.

"And what do I need to do in return?" My brain goes to very dirty places. Places that I wouldn't mind exploring outside of my conscious.

Alex leans forward, resting his arms on the counter so he's inches from my face. Just when I think he's about to tell me to do some of those delicious things to him that my mind is conjuring up, he says, "Make me your mom's famous lasagna at least once. Maybe put on a pot of coffee for us once in a while when we wake up in the morning."

One of my eyebrows goes up. "What about ordering DoorDash? I can't guarantee you'll like the lasagna, and I don't know any other dishes that I won't mess up."

He brushes a strand of hair behind my ear, and his light touch leaves a trail of fire in their wake. "I'm sure I'll like it just fine."

I don't know why those words give me goosebumps, but they do. Big ones that are hard to miss if you look at my arms. But whatever. "I think I can make that happen," I answer.

His knuckles graze my cheek before he stands up and gestures toward my food. "Good. Eat up. We've got a busy day ahead."

My brows pinch. "What are we doing?"

"You're coming with me to Lemieux."

He says it so casually I almost miss it. Almost. "Lemieux? As in, the sports complex? The one your team practices at?"

Alex loads up his plate and nods. "That's the one. I already told Clarkson I was swinging by. We won't see their whole practice because I'm not a masochist, but we'll see the end of it."

He's taking me to meet his team?

"Jesse Clarkson, as in your captain?"

"Yes."

"Belle's brother?"

"Stepbrother," he corrects, "but yes."

I wet my lips. "Why?"

"Because you love hockey," he simply says, cutting into his eggs.

Because I love hockey.

Damn.

Damn.

I think Alex O'Conner is trying to make me fall in love with him again.
Not that I ever really stopped.



I STOP AT the third case that takes up half the wall, staring in awe at the jerseys, team pictures, and trophies on display. "This is Sidney Crosby's jersey!" I exclaim excitedly, pointing at it as if Alex hasn't probably walked by it a million times already.

He's standing behind me looking into the case and nods. "That's what it says."

Why doesn't he sound excited? "Alex, he's like the Penguins' version of Tom Brady. He's the goat. Wasn't he the first overall draft pick for Pittsburgh in '05?"

He blinks. "How do you know that?"

"Because I love hockey," I remind him with a smirk. "And because I'm pretty sure I had a giant crush on him when I was little. Thought I'd marry that Canadian cutie." I sigh dramatically. "It was nice to dream. Too bad he moved on."

Alex rolls his eyes. "You're something else. Come on, unless you want to keep drooling over all that stuff. We've barely made it twenty feet into the building."

"It's your fault for bringing me here," I accuse him, feeling the tug of his hand against my arm. Looking down, I watch his fingers slide from my forearm to my palm, interlacing our fingers as he guides us down the hall.

Suddenly, I'm not thinking about the display cases at all. Or Sidney Crosby. *Sidney who?* It's like Eli Manning all over again when Alex is touching me.

"Next time, I'll make you stay in my apartment alone when I go out," he promises nonchalantly.

I grin. "You'd trust me in your apartment?"

He looks over at me. "Why wouldn't I? I've got nothing to hide. You already met my mother."

Maybe he's got a point. "Most guys wouldn't want girls snooping."

“You’re not most girls, Olive” is all he says.

It’s such a casual remark, but it means way more than that. “You better be careful with those words,” I warn him. “You’re getting mushy on me.”

Alex chuckles, squeezing my hand. “I’ve got no shame. You can have the passcode to my phone, too, if that’s what makes you happy.”

I don’t need his passcode. “That’s not what would make me happy. Relationships are about trust, right?”

He nods.

“Good. Glad we’re on the same page.”

We stop at a set of doors where we hear yelling on the other side of. There’s a whistle, followed by more yelling, and the signature sound of blades scraping on ice. It makes me beam as I try peeking through the window on the door to get a glimpse of what’s happening.

“Three, two, four, seven,” he says.

I blink, peeling my eyes away from the door slowly. “What?”

“That’s my passcode,” he says before opening the door and gesturing for me to go in.

I’m speechless for a moment longer before blinking and snapping out of it. The inside of the room is colder than the hallway, and it feels like home away from home. I’ve always preferred to be cold over hot, like I was built to love hockey. I even sleep with a fan all year round. My brother used to say that made me weird.

Alex guides us toward the rink where his teammates are scattered on the ice. They’re doing drills—a three-on-three corner drill by the looks of it. When we stop near the glass, only a few people seem to notice us.

One of them immediately starts walking over, and I know who it is before he even stops. “O’Conner,” Jesse Clarkson greets Alex. “Shouldn’t you be at home?”

“Shouldn’t you be on the ice?” Alex shoots back to his captain.

The captain doesn’t answer. He turns to me, holding out his hand. “Belle told me Alex had company.”

Company is a nice way of putting it. “I’m Olive Henderson.”

“Henderson,” he says, dipping his chin down in recognition. “Your brother is a hell of a player. I’ve been impressed since he signed on with the Rangers. Even though he blocked my winning shot last year at the Garden.”

I snicker. “Guess it wasn’t a winning shot then, was it?” I retort with a grin.

His lips pull up at the sides, stretching the scar I know he got playing against the Red Wings. "Tell him if he ever gets sick of the Rangers to come down here. I'm sure coach wouldn't mind a new add on."

As if Sebastian would ever do that. I nudge my elbow into Alex's side. "I'm sure Alex would love playing with him again. Huh?"

Alex's lips twitch downward. "It'd definitely bring up...memories."

It's not quite the reaction I'm expecting, so I lower my arm.

Alex doesn't seem to want to talk about his former teammate, because he changes the subject. "Are you guys ready to play Montreal? I heard the predictions about their advancement this season."

If his captain wonders why he's switching gears, he doesn't bring it up. So, I remain quiet as they talk amongst themselves.

Walking away from them to get a better view of the drill happening, I tune out the talk happening behind me and watch as the six players practice their passes.

I know two of them based on their numbers; seventeen and fifty-eight. Iassac Nelson and Thomas Moskins are fluid out there, just like they are during actual games.

For five minutes, I watch the two teams go back and forth as the coach makes the calls and directs them to switch up and approach from different positions. Most of it is smooth, like they've done hundreds of times before. But the newer players are obviously not as fast, one of second stringers almost getting a puck to a very sensitive place that I can only hope has a cup covering it.

"All right," Coach Pelfrey calls after blowing the whistle. "I've seen enough for today. Get your sorry asses off the ice and into the showers. I need you in good shape for our game on Friday."

Clarkson walks over to me with Alex following close behind. "I don't know if you're planning on staying for long, but we're going to Belle's Place for something to drink later if you two want to join. I already extended the invite to Alex. He said it's up to you. No pressure. Most of the guys will behave. The other ones you're welcome to throw drinks at. Something tells me you can hold your own."

I smile. "I've been told that before."

"With a brother like yours, I'm not shocked."

He nods once more before joining his team heading in the opposite direction to the locker rooms.

I turn to Alex. “Did you want to go? I can always stay at the apartment if you—”

“Why do you do that?” he cuts me off.

“Do what?”

“Act like I want to hide you?”

I wet my lips. “It’s not that I think you do. But they’re your teammates. And I don’t know if you’re close with any of them or want me around them. It wouldn’t hurt my feelings. Some people like separating their personal and professional lives. You said yourself they don’t really know much about you.”

Alex blinks slowly. “I brought you here,” he says pointedly. “Where my team is. I didn’t do that thinking they’d be gone, you know. Just because I don’t want them to know the details of my strenuous relationship with my mother doesn’t mean I don’t want them to know about you. Or us.”

“Sure...” I sigh. “I get that. But seeing them from a distance is very different than hanging out with them around a table. It’s personal.”

He doesn’t say anything for a long time. “If you’re not comfortable, we don’t have to go. But I don’t mind if we do. Hell, it might be easier with you there. I’m not any of their best friends. I get along fine with Clarkson, but that’s about it. You’ve always been more personable. It would make things easier for me.”

“That’s because I’m nice.”

“I’m nice,” he defends with a scowl.

I snort. Loudly. “Okay. Sure. You’re nice.”

“I am,” he insists. “I’m nice to you.”

I pat his cheek. “You are, and I really appreciate that. A lot, actually. But if you’re working with these guys, it’s probably a good idea to be nice to them too.”

He doesn’t tell me I’m right even though we both know I am. “Then let’s meet up with them. I’m sure you have people you want to talk to. I saw you staring at Nelson.”

I can’t help but grin. “His record the past three seasons is mind blowing. I’m kind of jealous you get to work with him. I’ll do my best not to fangirl, but no promises.”

He shakes his head in amusement. “Come on. We’ve got time to kill before we meet up with them. I didn’t just bring you here to meet them or drool over the trophy case.”

My brows pinch. "Then why did you bring me here?"

He slides a hand into his pocket. "You told me once you didn't know how to skate."

Oh. *Oh*. That was a long time ago. Before I told him I loved him. Before he left Lindon and got drafted. "Alex, I don't think that's a good idea. Sebastian tried to teach me when I was little. I'm horrible. Like, really bad."

"He gave up on you. I'm not going to."

That does something to my heart.

He actually wants to teach me to skate. "I'm going to be terrible," I warn him.

"Okay."

"I'll fall a lot."

"I'll get you some butt pads."

As if I don't have plenty of cushion already.

I don't speak that thought aloud.

"I'll probably take you down with me."

"Wouldn't be the first time someone has" is all he says, not having a worry on his face.

Damn. Does he have to be so calm? "You're making it hard to say no to you," I murmur, pouting a little.

He chuckles and holds out a hand. "Then say yes. You're here. I'm here. I reserved the space for an hour and a half. That's not a lot of time to teach you how to stand and balance and learn the right way to fall."

I frown. "Then what's the point?"

His fingers tighten around mine. "It just means that next time we'll be able to *actually* skate."

Next time.

I bite back a smile.

Because I like the idea of next time.

"You're kind of smooth when you want to be, aren't you?"

I see the smallest smile threaten to tilt his lips. "I don't know what you're talking about."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Alex

THE SHRIEKING GIGGLES that escape Olive as I pull her toward the exit make me smile. “Lift your leg. Balance. Step up. Good.”

Once she’s standing on solid ground, I carefully guide her to the bench and sit her down.

I kneel in front of her and start unlacing her skates. “I think you did well today,” I praise, pulling the first one off. “You only fell twice. That’s better than I expected for a first lesson.”

“Technically, I fell three times. You caught me. I don’t know how I didn’t take you down.” She watches me as I undo her other skate and peel it off, setting it beside me. “Sebastian tried teaching me, but he gave up. Not that I blame him. I’m bad.”

“You’re not,” I reassure. “I’ve seen bad skaters. Trust me. I used to teach kids how to skate when I was younger. It was decent money. *They* were bad. It just takes practice and consistency. And patience.”

“And you have that?” she asks.

I look up at her through my lashes. “I learned how to be patient,” I tell her quietly. “Because of my mom.”

A softness crosses her face. “Then I’m lucky to have you.”

That does some weird shit to my heart—like somebody is tapdancing on it before grabbing ahold of the organ and squeezing.

I brush it off. “When do you have to go back to Lindon?”

The change of subject makes her stare at me for a brief moment longer before she answers. “I should leave Sunday to get back in time to prepare for classes. I need to get the rest of my books from the store.”

So we have a few days.

“Is there anything you want to do while you’re here? There isn’t much to see in Pittsburgh, but we could probably make a trip to Philly. I know you like history. Can’t get much more historical than that place.”

Her eyes find mine, her brows arched like she's surprised by the suggestion. "I don't know who you are sometimes, but I like this version of you. He's a lot more carefree."

I'm not sure I'll ever be that, but I appreciate her optimism. "So is that a yes to Philly?"

"I went there when I was in sixth grade," she admits, nibbling her lip. "For safety patrol."

Safety— "You were one of the people who signed up for that?" There's a small grin on my face. At the school I attended, the safety patrol were the nerds who monitored the halls and helped teachers during end-of-day activities. We called them teachers' pets.

She playfully nudges my shoulders with her palms, barely moving me. "Don't judge. I can see that look in your eyes. Sebastian was one too. Everybody who does it gets to go to either Philadelphia or Washington DC. I thought it would be cool to go."

My lips twitch up. "Did you wear the orange belt and badge?"

She tries not to smile but fails. "Possibly."

I'm picturing a young version of her in a neon orange safety patrol belt with those dumb badges they used to give everybody to make them feel important. Everyone I knew who did it thought they had actual authority. "Did you yell at people about sitting on the bus when it's in motion?"

Her eyes narrow. "You're mocking me."

"I would never," I say seriously, setting the skates down beside me and grabbing her shoes. I make quick work putting them on her feet and tightening the laces. "It's cute. I never had any interest in doing that, but I was jealous when the field trip happened. Did you see the Liberty Bell?"

Her smile reappears. "Yes. And Independence Hall. And the Rocky statue, although I didn't really care about that. I never liked those movies."

"Don't say that too loudly here," I warn her.

She looks around the empty area. "I think I'll be fine."

I meet her eyes. "Yeah, you will be." Once her feet are covered, I carefully drop them to the floor and peer up at her. "On a scale from one to ten, how hard are you going to fangirl the boys tonight?"

Olive gives me a contemplative look, puckering her lips in thought. "Eight point five. On a scale from one to ten, how nervous are you to let me interact with them?"

"Zero."

“That’s not on the scale.”

“It’s still the truth.” I stand and take a seat beside her on the bench. “I’m more concerned about them not being dicks to you. Clarkson and I will try to keep them on their best behavior.”

She puts her hand on my leg. “He thinks I can handle my own.”

I lift a shoulder. “He’s right. Doesn’t mean I can’t be concerned about how people will treat you. It’s considered unethical to beat your teammates for saying stupid shit.”

Her tongue slowly drags across her lips. “Do you think they’ll say something?”

Yes. Thing is, I don’t know what. They goad anybody they think they can get a reaction from. “I’m sure your brother will come up as soon as they realize who he is. They’ve all played him.”

She slowly nods. “I don’t think that’s what you’re really concerned about. I’ve been dealing with conversations about my brother for years. So why are you worried?”

Can’t it be a compilation of things? “I don’t even get along with some of these guys. I don’t know how they’re going to act around you.”

She puts her hand on mine. “Then we’ll find out together. But I know a lot about your team. I can woo them with my facts. And if that doesn’t work, I can roast them. I’m good at that.”

I’m glad she’s confident, because knowing her and Moskins will be in the same room makes me uneasy. The guy has no filter and a lack of respect for most women. What if he says something that I can’t do anything about?

“Is it because of how I look?” she asks, snapping me out of my head. “Because I’m fat? I know I’m probably not most of their types, so I doubt it’s a jealousy thing.”

What the fuck? “I don’t ever want to hear you say that again,” I all but growl.

“What? That I’m fat?” My jaw grinds, making her roll her eyes. “Spoiler alert, Alex. I *am*. I’m not skinny. I’m nowhere near what my BMI says I should be. Although, in all fairness, I think that chart is bullshit to begin with. I’ve never been like the girls you or your teammates have been seen with. I like food. I hate exercising. Salad makes me gag. And Coca-Cola might actually be my soulmate. If it’s not that, it’s carbs. Specifically, bread; the fresh kind from the bakery. Or cheese, because I really love

cheese too. And I'm okay with that. I like who I am, but I'm not oblivious or blind or stupid. My body is the first thing people notice about me."

Anger boils my blood as I turn to her. "You want to know the first thing I noticed about you the day you came up to me at that bonfire?"

She goes to answer, but I don't let her.

"Your eyes. They're like no color I've seen before," I state, locking with them. "They're fucking hypnotic; like they can see right through me and the mask I put up. You want to know the second thing I noticed?"

She wets her lips. "What?"

I cup one of her breasts. "Your tits. It's pretty obvious I'm a boob man. I have no shame about them. And touching these, playing with these, are my favorite. So, yeah. I definitely noticed those."

Her throat bobs as my finger grazes the front of her breast until I can feel her nipple pebble under the pad of my thumb. "Somebody can walk in and see you fondling me."

"So let them. I think you'd like that based on how hard you came around my cock this morning."

Her face turns red, but she doesn't deny it.

"I need you to understand that not everybody sees what you think they do," I tell her, squeezing her boob before releasing her. "And if there weren't people on their way to clean the ice right now, I'd be stripping you down and fucking you right here and now until you got that into your stubborn head."

The choppy breath she releases tells me she's turned on. "I've spent my whole life being bullied over my weight, Alex. This isn't anything new to me. I'm not hurt by it. Not anymore."

"Baby," I say slowly, letting my hand drift downward to cup her between her legs. "Real men like having a little extra to hold onto. Feel me?"

Oh, she feels me all right.

But before she can say another word, the doors open and the Zamboni comes out to clean the ice off for the day.

Letting her go, I stand up. "I'm worried because I care about you," I say. "I'm worried because I don't want people to be assholes when you've already dealt with that more than you deserve in life. That's why."

I'm worried because Kyle reached out to me about a picture of me, Olive, and Mom at the diner that was circulating online. I told him to do

what he could do to kill it before the comments started getting out of hand. It was down in a matter of thirty minutes, which is exactly what Bodhi Fucking Hoffman should have done when he put her on blast like an idiot.

Since Olive opened up to be about dealing with depression, I've felt even more protective of her. I don't want anybody to make her feel less than the amazing person she is. No matter what. If that means ensuring that people online aren't being dickheads, or that my team treats her with the utmost respect, then I'm going to do it.

She trusted me with that information, and I'm going to do my damndest to be the person who deserves that trust.

Olive looks at the hand I extend out to her for a minute before accepting it and letting me pull her off the bench. "Thank you."

I brush my lips against her forehead. "You don't need to thank me, Olive."

Her palm squeezes mine as if to say, *I do, though.*



If I WERE a jealous man, I wouldn't like the way Olive is staring at Nelson. But I know the admiration in her eyes has more to do with his stats than the pretty boy's looks.

Pointing at her chin, I say, "You've got a little drool there."

She flips me off. "I do not. He's played over eight hundred games and scored almost three hundred goals. And fifty of those were game winning."

I didn't even know the exact numbers, but I'm not surprised she does. "His stats are impressive," I admit, guiding her toward the table. "He'll be in the top one hundred best defensemen of all time before he retires."

She nods. "No doubt." Her lips kick up mischievously. "Of course, he'll be after Sebastian."

I chuckle. "Of course," I appease her.

When we get to the booth, everybody quiets down. "Boys," I greet, keeping my hand on the small of Olive's back. I can tell she's buzzing with anticipation, which makes me smile to myself. "This is Olive. Olive, the boys."

"You not going to introduce us to your friend?" Moskins asks, grinning.

“Trust me, you don’t need to be introduced,” I inform him, gesturing for Miller to scoot in to make room for Olive and me.

She glances at the booth with her bottom lip between her top two teeth, then the rest of the guys briefly, before choosing to take the only seat left at the end of the table. She pays me no attention when I slide into the spot next to Miller, choosing to address Moskins instead. “You’re a right wing with a pretty impressive PPG over the past two seasons. I’ll give you that. What is it now? A one-point-one-nine?”

His brows go up, and that slick grin that he shoots women quirks up the corners of his mouth. I’m tempted to slap it off him. “Someone did their homework before coming here.”

Olive sits back in her chair. “I didn’t need to. And I wouldn’t get too high and mighty, those kind of stats wouldn’t even make you top five. Maybe the top ten.”

His eyes narrow. “You know someone better in the NHL right now?”

“Bodhi Hoffman has a one-point-four-eight points per game average over his last season alone,” she tells him matter-of-factly. “*He’s* in the top five.”

As much as I hate hearing Hoffman’s name, it’s humorous to see Moskins’ reaction.

“You do realize they’re saying I’m one of the best shots in the league, right?” he asks her defensively.

Olive shrugs like she doesn’t really care. She probably doesn’t, either. To her, stats are stats. “I think you’re a good player, so I’m not shocked they’re saying that.”

Clarkson smacks Moskin’s back. “You can’t have every woman fawning over you, dude. Sometimes you need to give your ego a break so other guys can get a chance.”

A few of the guys snicker.

He grumbles under his breath, finishing the rest of the beer in front of him. “Hoffman ain’t that impressive. More people talk about his looks than his slap shot.”

Olive appeases him. “You’re not wrong. He’s always been more of a wrist shot kind of guy.”

Miller snorts at the comeback.

Moskins clenches his glass. “You would know that intimate information, wouldn’t you?”

Clarkson clears his throat. "Enough."

Before the right wing can speak up, I say, "I don't want to hit anyone tonight, Moskins, so be careful what your next words are going to be."

Thankfully, he chooses to close his mouth.

Smart man.

Isacc Nelson chooses then to speak up. "Your brother is playing for the Rangers. Dude is killing it. We're hoping he gets traded."

"Then you'd be out of a job," Berkley points out, sipping his drink.

Nelson looks at Olive. "He wasn't always defense, was he?"

She shakes her head. "He started off as a left wing. He was good, but it wasn't where he excelled. For a few games, he even played forward. The coach tested him until they realized where he played best."

"He's a beast," Miller notes.

Olive beams like a proud sister. "I know."

Henderson played for Lindon before I did. When I joined on a season later, he'd been shuffled around until he took the defense position. It locked me into my spot as soon as they saw me on the ice. "He was always a hell of a player," I note, getting her attention.

It's not often I'm forthcoming with my compliments for the guy. I have nothing against him, but we were never friends. We were competitive from the start, which put a block between us even when we were aiming for the same victory. But we knew that getting attention from scouts was going to be tough, so we needed to play our best. That meant showing them what we had. Most times, a scout will only narrow in on one player. If we'd graduated the same year, maybe that's what would have happened. He would have gotten signed, and I would have gotten fucked.

"So what's *your* gimmick?" Moskins asks Olive, earning a sideways look from our captain. "What? It's just a question."

Olive doesn't hold back. "I don't think I have one. I'm not very athletic, but I know plenty about sports. Hockey and football are my favorites. One day, I'll probably write about them."

Clarkson asks, "Like a journalist?"

"Maybe." Someone sets glasses of water in front of Olive and I, so she smiles up at the waitress. "I'm starting my last year of college next week, so I'll be applying for more internships and jobs soon."

Miller shakes his head. "I don't miss school. I was shit at it."

Moskins snorts. "That's because reading is required."

Miller shoots him a look. "I can read, fucker. I'm just dyslexic. I got by."

"Barely," the right wing counters.

Olive ignores Moskins. "I've always been decent with academics. It's everything else I struggle with. Sebastian was never like that. He had a clear path ever since he was younger. But he's with someone now who does sports journalism, so maybe I'll pick her brain about it."

"Some NHL teams offer internships," Clarkson tells her. "I'm not sure if the Penguins still does after the last one who worked with us, but some of them hire on different people for their teams. I'm sure O'Conner could give you the number to our PR person to see if we could set you up with something."

Olive starts to shake her head, but I say, "I'll give her Stafford's number."

She looks at me. "We've talked about this. I don't need your help."

Yeah, but I know she won't ask her brother for help either. "It's an option. Nobody is going to force your hand either way. But if there's something you can use your degree for, why not take it?"

I can tell there's uncertainty in her eyes. I'm just not sure why. Is it the thought of being closer to me? Is it because this is new? I definitely don't offer opportunities like this to just anybody, but I'm willing to do a lot for her.

"It's a phone number," I tell her casually.

"It's not," she says quietly.

One of the guys breaks the moment up by asking Olive, "Who would you root for in a game between us and the Rangers?"

"Blood runs thick, man," Nelson tells Berkley. "She'd cheer on her bro. I know I would if I were in her shoes."

"But we've got a solid team," Miller points out, gesturing toward me. "And we've got O'Conner. Maybe she can do a split jersey like that one mom did whose sons went against each other in the Super Bowl."

Olive smirks at me. "What do you think?"

I lock eyes with her. "I think your brother would have a lot of questions if you showed up with half of your outfit in our colors."

Something in her eyes dims.

"I take it Henderson doesn't like knowing his sister is rooting for another team?" Miller guesses.

Olive is quiet.

“He doesn’t know?” Clarkson asks.

Moskins laughs. “That’s gold. He’s about to have one hell of a reality check then.”

I turn toward him. “She’ll tell him when she’s ready. It’s none of your goddamn business one way or another.”

He holds his hands up. “You two are in public. You really think people aren’t going to post about that? You’ve never been seen with anybody, and now you’re out and about parading her around. What do you think is going to happen?”

My jaw gets tight.

Olive puts a palm on my arm. “It’s not the end of the world.”

I don’t listen to her. “If you make it a point to get this out there, I’ll make your life hell, Moskins.”

Clarkson swipes a hand down his face. “We don’t need to throw threats around. Nobody here is going to say anything. Right, Moskins?”

Moskins stays silent.

“*Right?*” the captain repeats.

The right wing’s nostrils flare. “Fine.”

I don’t buy it for a second. “Everybody deserves to have their privacy. I’ve always thought that. I may not be any of your best friends, but we *are* a team. And Clarkson seems to think that means staying loyal to each other. That deserves some respect if nothing else.”

Moskins counters my point. “But she’s not part of the team. She’s got ties with one of our biggest competitors. We don’t have to trust her.”

“She’s not your competitor. She’s a person,” I state, feeling the tension grow thick in the lounge. “And she’s somebody I care about. If you knew anything about respecting women, you’d know that I’m not asking you for anything big.”

Clarkson cusses under his breath. “Let’s take a breather. We’re all good here.”

“Are we?” Moskins questions. “Because it sounds like he’s taking a dig at me.”

It’s Miller who chimes in. “You sort of started it, bro.”

He gets shot a daggered glare from Moskins before the person in question turns back to me. “I don’t get whatever this is, but I’ll play along if

you want to act like being part of this team means something to you. But that's all you're getting from me."

"Fine."

"Fine."

We're all silent.

Olive squirms in her seat, glancing between me and Moskins.

Nelson is the first one to break the silence. "I need a refill."

A few of the guys murmur in agreement.

I put my hand on Olive's leg under the table.

She puts her hand on top of mine.

We share a look.

But the dim remains in her eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Olive

SEEING A HALF-NAKED Alex lounging in nothing but a pair of boxers in his bed is a sight I never thought I'd see outside of my wildest fantasies. But here he is, laying on top of his made bed with...a crossword puzzle in his hand?

"I didn't know you liked those," I say as he scrawls the pen across the little boxes.

He sets it down on his chest. "They're my mom's favorite. I got used to doing them with her. You should see her in action. I get stumped by half of these things, but not her. Her doctor says brain teasers are good for her."

I peel the comforter back and crawl in, fidgeting with the hem of the top sheet. "Are you planning on visiting her soon?"

I'm not sure if I'm overstepping any lines by asking about her, but it seems logical. They talked on the phone yesterday, but the call seemed short. He wasn't in the best mood after he hung up.

He closes the pen into the book and puts it on his nightstand. "I'm going to see her next week. Pam, her head nurse, has been trying to get me to go to therapy with her."

A small smile meets my face. "I think that's a good idea."

"My father is one of her biggest triggers," Alex murmurs, sighing. He rubs his closed eyelids tiredly. "His death messed her up. I've learned to avoid talking about him, so she doesn't go down a dark place. Now she's finally listening to her counselor at Logan's and thinks it's a good idea to talk about him again."

"Embrace his memory," I note.

His chin dips down. "Exactly. If it helps her, I'm willing to try. She can't live at Logan's forever, so she needs to adjust to hard conversations. I need to learn how to help her do that since I'm all she has."

It makes me sad that her family hasn't tried harder to be there for them. "It's good that she has you. It sounds like your relationship is important to

her, especially since she showed up here to check on you.”

He harrumphs. “She shouldn’t have done that” is how he responds. Wetting his lips, he drops his guard. “But it felt kind of nice that she did. She felt like my mother.”

I smile. “That’s good, right?”

“Yeah. It is.”

We fall silent, my eyes focused on the sheets that I’m fidgeting with while his burn holes in the profile of my face. “What are you thinking?” he asks.

Wetting my lips, I lean back on the pillows stacked behind us. “Nothing about your mom,” I reassure. “I’m sorry that I upset Moskins today and made a scene. Sometimes I forget that people’s egos are a big part of them in this industry.”

“He needed to be knocked down a peg or two. You don’t need to apologize for that.”

“He was pretty mad.”

“Trust me, that’s his default,” he says easily. “Notice how none of the guys were shocked by it? We’re used to him lashing out. But it’s usually when he doesn’t get his way on the ice. He’s not used to women telling him he’s not the god he thinks he is.”

His teammates kept the conversation lighthearted after the tension with Moskins. Jess and Alex went back and forth about Alex’s return next week, and the training regimen that they would do together to get back into shape for the season officially starting. Moskins didn’t say anything else to me the rest of the night, and I’d felt bad for bantering with him. Sebastian used to say I’d come off a little too snobby when I joked around, and nobody here knows me well enough to tell the difference.

Whoops.

“They seemed nice. Quieter than I expected. Probably because I’m related to the enemy.”

Alex snickers. “Clarkson’s stepsister is a big Pats fan, as you know. If football and hockey played the same time of year, she’d ditch her Penguin’s all-access season pass to see New England’s team in a heartbeat. Even over Clarkson.”

“But they like Belle,” I point out, biting down on the inside of my cheek.

“They don’t know you yet,” he points out, his hand reaching out to take mine. “There’s a difference. Once they do...”

It’s sweet what he’s trying to do, but I’m a realist. “I understand where Moskins is coming from. He’s protective of his team. That’s admirable.”

Alex frowns. “He was being a dickhead.”

“It didn’t help that I was poking the bear.”

The man beside me sits up. “Don’t do that. Don’t justify him being an asswipe. He was being a shithead over simple facts, and that’s not cool.”

All I do is stare at the blankets because the intensity of his eyes is too much.

When I don’t say anything, he turns my head to him gently. “Nobody talks to Moskins that way. I’ve been here for over a year, and not one person had the balls to point out that he isn’t everything. Did you see the way Nelson tried to hide a smile when you said Hoffman had better stats? Or hear Clarkson’s chuckle? They thought it was funny.”

I hadn’t seen that, but I’m not sure it changes the reaction I got from the loudest person on the team. Since when have I cared that much about what people thought of me?

Since Alex was involved.

God.

Why am I being such a girl about this?

Because you are one, a voice reminds me in the back of my head.

When I finally look Alex in his eyes, I let out a long breath that eases some of the weight in my chest. “I want the people in your life to like me,” I admit, rubbing my lips together. “Even if that sounds dumb.”

He shakes his head. “That’s not dumb. And the team may be part of my life, but their opinions don’t matter. My mom likes you. And more importantly, *I* like you. Isn’t that what matters?”

Hearing those words makes my heart do a happy jig. “Yeah, it is.”

“Should I be concerned about your brother?”

His question makes me hesitate. “No. I’ll handle him when the time comes.”

I never called him back asking what he wanted to talk about the day Alex and I were busy in bed, but he texted me asking if I was coming to his next game since it was at home. I just assumed that was it. I haven’t had a chance to respond yet because I’ve been trying to enjoy my time with Alex while it lasts. And the thought of what comes after I leave...

Truthfully, it makes me nervous. Because I know I want to make things with Alex work, but I don't want to upset my brother. What will his reaction be when he finds out?

"When do you think you'll have that conversation?" Alex asks, breaking me from my internal concern.

His lips twitch at the corners when I shrug. "I think that's a conversation that's better to have in person. So whenever I see him next."

I'm not sure he likes that answer.

"Do you *want* him to know?"

I blink. "Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?"

Alex only shrugs, but I can tell there's weight piled on his shoulders.

"My only hesitation is because I don't like when people are upset with me," I promise him, squeezing his hand. "We both know he didn't want us involved back when you played with him. He's obviously not going to like that we went behind his back. He means a lot to me."

He looks at our hands. "I get that, but I don't want that to be a reason you don't give this a shot."

What? "Why wouldn't I do that?"

"Because I think you and I are similar than we think," he says casually. "We both struggle with processing how we feel sometimes. Maybe I'm just reflecting because I don't want you to push me away."

"Like you pushed *me* away?" I finish for him.

He doesn't deny it. "You're the first thing that's truly made me happy in a very long time. I don't want that to go away. I'm scared of what my life will be without you in it. You never know what could happen. And I've never let someone into my life that's had so much of an impact. You and I both care about our families, and maybe that's a good thing. But we also both tend to use them as excuses too. If I didn't let my mother's diagnoses affect me before, you and I would have been together this whole time."

My heart picks up speed, growing ten times the size until it threatens to burst. "You really think we would have been?"

"Yes."

His certainty tugs on my heartstrings. "You don't need to be afraid, Alex. But I get why you are. Because I am too."

His throat bobs as vulnerability shines in his eyes. "Okay."

I take his hand and squeeze it. "Okay."

His lashes flutter as he peeks at me through them. Who is this man? He's certainly not the person I knew back at Lindon. He's...more.

"My best friend used to ask why I never give people a chance," I tell him, settling into the mattress. "And I never had a good answer. I thought it was just who I was. To be cynical and distant. It isn't like I dislike myself. I think I'm great."

He snorts.

"It's true! I know I'm not perfect, but I have a lot of good qualities. I think part of it has to do with how I grew up. Seeing my parents' marriage dissolve and then my father go after people who didn't like me very much..." Sadness settles into my stomach. "I don't know. It makes me careful of who I let into my life. My mom was really hurt for a while. She barely dates now, and it's been a long time since the divorce. Sometimes, I don't know if I believe in love."

His brows furrow. "But you told me you loved me."

A fact that still hurts to think about considering the aftermath. "A life without love seems like such a sad existence. And if I can love my family and love my friends, then there has to be a romantic version of it. My mom and dad didn't work out, but that doesn't mean that will happen to me."

"Are you afraid it will?"

Rubbing my lips together, I rest my head down on the pillow and look up at him. "It sort of did once, when you let me walk away. And I'm working past that. I am. But that made me wonder what was really out there for me. *Who*."

"I hate that I made you feel that way."

I watch him and realize how much it actually upsets him that he hurt me. "I know. It's not just you. It's sort of hard not to question who you are and what you're worth when your own father has a lot to say about your looks. That adds up."

A dark look crosses his face. "No parent should make their child feel unworthy. Even on my mother's worst days, she never made me feel that way. Helpless, sure. But not that."

All I can do is swallow.

Because I can't defend my father. I used to try, until I realized it was pointless. He had his opinions about me that I couldn't change. To this day, I don't know if he believes them fully or if the women in his life help form those opinions of me for him. It's a tough call. The only thing that's true at

the end of the day is that my father may claim he loves me, but he has an awful way of showing it.

“One day, I’ll forgive him,” I murmur.

Maybe.

“It’s okay if you don’t,” he reassures. “If we only live once, shouldn’t we only keep people around if they’re going to make our lives better?”

Nibbling my inner cheek, I loosen a quiet breath. Because I know he’s got a point. But do I want to ice out my father completely? My parents are still alive. That should mean something.

“Strip.”

I gawk at him. “What?”

“Strip for me, baby girl.”

It’s hard to swallow. “Alex—”

He climbs out of bed and peels the blankets off of my body. “Do you remember what I told you earlier today about the things I first noticed about you?”

My throat bobs. “Yes.”

He climbs onto the bed on his knees, hovering over me. “Let me show you in detail what I notice about you. Take your shirt off.”

Nerves bubble under my skin. Why? I’ve been naked in front of him before. This is nothing new. It’s skin. Skin and...other things. Curves. Rolls. A blemish or two. But it’s nothing he hasn’t seen before.

So, I push past the nerves that threaten to tell him *no* and sit up. He watches with focus as I peel the shirt up over my head and deposit it on the floor, leaving me in a sports bra that I wear to bed because it’s more comfortable than letting my boobs hang out.

“Good girl. Now the bra.”

“Are you just going to watch or partake?”

His lips quirk up at the corners. “I’m enjoying the show a lot from here,” he tells me.

And I can see that.

He’s getting hard and my boobs aren’t even out yet.

I try taking off the bra with as much sexiness as I can, but it’s a sports bra. So God only knows how awkward it probably looks to him. If he thinks so, he doesn’t say. His eyes are too busy soaking in my bare breasts, pebbling my nipples with his keen attention.

He moves closer to me, reaching out to tweak one of them and earning a sharp gasp from my lips before I can suppress it. “These,” he says in appreciation, “are my favorite. I fucking love how they feel in my hands. And even better—”

His face dips down until his mouth is covering the opposite one. “I love the way they taste.”

I’m pretty sure I cuss.

Or praise God.

It’s an out of body experience as he flicks and pinches and sucks the sensitive nerves that have me clenching my thighs together.

“I love waking up in the morning with my hand on your tits,” he tells me, massaging them as his lips trail up to the nook of my neck. “I love falling asleep holding them too.”

When his mouth covers the other nipple, I definitely swear aloud. He chuckles, making the bud in his mouth vibrate which sends heat straight to my core. “Frankly, I love waking up to *you*.”

That four-letter word is going to get to me.

“Now take off your leggings,” he commands, nipping my breast one last time before pulling back.

I swallow. “My leggings?”

“You heard me. Take them off.”

I meet his eyes, which are dark with lust. They trail down to my hands as I slip them under the waistband of my bottoms and peel them down. He helps me when I arch up to get them past my butt, ripping them away from my feet and tossing them behind him.

He stares at my nakedness, completely out and open to him. There’s no hiding that I have a lot going on. I’ve got a stomach that’s bigger than I want it to be, and thighs that chafe in the summertime. Finding the perfect pair of jeans that fit me right everywhere is annoying, and usually, nearly impossible. It’s either too tight in the waist, weird around the butt, or lands at my shins instead of my ankles.

But it’s my body.

It’s gotten me through a lot. It has healed me after I broke my wrist playing basketball in middle school and healed after I got the swine flu in high school. It has grown with me as I got older; it changed through puberty and all the different phases in my life. It’s stretched and thinned and everything in between.

I have nothing to be ashamed of.

Nothing to hate.

I'm me.

Olive Henderson.

I'm overweight. Maybe even a little obese.

I have killer boobs.

A big butt.

And one hell of a personality.

"Get out of that pretty little head of yours," Alex tells me, crawling over to me like a lion hunting his prey. It's oddly...sexy.

He stops over me, hovering so we're inches apart. His hand slowly moves up my leg that, thankfully, I remembered to shave. The only good thing about not having anybody in your life is the lack of need for razors. It made wintertime much warmer.

His palm stops at the apex of my thigh. "You know something else I fucking love? Feeling these legs close around my head."

"Around your—"

The words get stuck in my throat when that devious smirk disappears when his mouth finds my center.

"Holy shit," I breathe out, feeling his tongue drag along me and tease me in ways that make the floodgates open.

He was always too good at that.

Way too good.

It made me want to find all the other women he did this too and punch them for getting to experience the pure bliss that his lips and tongue create.

"Alex," I gasp as he flicks my clit with his tongue and then sucks it between his lips.

That's what does it.

Without any warning, my body breaks into spasms that coat my eyes with little black dots. Sparks shoot down my legs as they close around him, earning me a welcome groan that I feel deep in my soul.

And in other parts.

When he pulls back, I'm still in another world.

"Yeah," I hear Alex say as I stare up at the ceiling. "I really love feeling them around my head."

He's going to end me.

"These legs are dangerous," he states.

I can't help but roll my eyes. "I think your mouth is what's dangerous."

He shakes his head, taking my hand and guiding it to his tented briefs. "Do you feel that?" he asks, pressing my palm further against his cock. "Do you feel what you're doing to me? How fucking attracted to you I am? Not just your body, Olive. Your mind. Your personality. How you sass me. How you're not afraid to tell me off when I'm wrong. I'm so hard it's painful. So do you get it now?"

I can't speak.

The words are crammed in my throat as need builds between my legs. I want him. Bad. And his hot, hard dick twitching in my palm only makes that tenfold.

"I need you inside me, Alex."

"Then watch me."

I blink, watching as he positions himself over me and slowly inches in. I'm still sensitive, so I gasp when he thrusts forward to seat himself fully.

"Your pussy was made for me," he says against my mouth. "It was molded for me. Do you feel how goddamn perfect this feels? How right it is?"

How am I supposed to talk when he moves his hips back and pumps forward? The rhythm is smooth and slow and sultry. And when the mattress starts squeaking with each thrust of our bodies, I swear it's music to my ears.

"Do you remember the first thing you ever said to me?" he asks, as if this is the perfect time for a stroll down memory lane. "You told me that I'd have better stats if I pulled my head out of my ass and actually passed the puck instead of trying to prove to the world that I was the best person on that team."

I don't remember that.

All I remember from the night of the bonfire was the way Alex's eyes sparkled with mischief and maybe a little alcohol, and how good his mouth was when we wound up making out in his car when he drove me back to my dorm.

He's not just a good kisser. He's the best.

No matter how many times Sebastian got between us when he still went to Landon, it never stopped me from finding Alex in the crowd. For some reason, he was always engraved in the back of my mind. We only gravitated toward each other more when Sebastian wasn't an obstacle anymore.

“Nobody has ever told me that before,” he says, his hips meeting mine as his fingers run through my hair. “Nobody has been *real* with me. They see the potential of what I can be, not the person I already am.”

The way his eyes pierce mine makes this feel like so much more than sex. It’s not a causal lay or simply physical.

And that...that scares me a little.

Because I can feel my heart grow. I can feel it beating a little faster. Alex has always had the ability to make me react. Sometimes in good ways, and sometimes in bad ones. I’m incapable of being rational whenever he’s nearby.

“Look at me Olive,” he says, when I start to look away when his gaze is too much.

I meet his eyes and feel *it*—an invisible string attaching us together. The same feeling I had when I was naked in his apartment in Lindon right before he graduated. I’d been buzzing from the emotions that had built over our time together until I couldn’t keep them in anymore.

But I don’t tell him I love him this time.

I don’t tell him that I ache for him.

Burn for him.

That I see a future together, no matter how it turns out.

Because there are still so many things I don’t know. Too many uncertainties that make me swallow the words, and inevitably, my heart.

“You are the one thing in my life that has always made me feel like being myself is enough,” he tells me, brushing his lips against one corner of my mouth, then the other. “You’ve made me feel like Alex O’Conner. The boy, not the hockey player. And if I have to remind you every day that you’re Olive Henderson, the girl, not Sebastian Henderson’s little sister, not the daughter of an asshole who doesn’t see what he fucking has in front of him, then I’ll do it. I’ll strip every piece of clothing off of you and show you how much I—”

He stops himself, burying his mouth into my neck and peppering kisses along my pulse.

He doesn’t need to tell me.

I know.

He knows I know.

And he knows I feel the same.

One day, those words will have to be spoken.

Maybe by then, neither of us will be too scared to speak them.

“Everything about you,” he concludes, “is what gets me by. Your pep talks. Your banter. Your honesty. Your brutal truths. All of it. Everything.”

The way he’s moving, the way he’s talking, is too much. It’s too intimate. Too...everything.

I can feel the orgasm building as he holds my attention, making sure I don’t look away. He’s close too. I see it in his eyes, in the way his lips form into a small O as his hips pick up.

We don’t fuck.

It’s not sloppy or fast or hard.

But we don’t call it what it is.

Alex cusses, claiming my mouth right before he lets go, and the sound of his drawn-out moan as he pulls out is what makes me come for a second time until my head is fuzzy, my body is buzzing, and my heart is at risk of exploding.

Right before we start drifting off with our hands interwoven, I hear his whisper, “You are everything I didn’t know I needed.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Olive

I'M IN THE middle of Hershey Park with a giant chocolate bar mascot staring at me when my phone starts blowing up. At first it's two messages, but that turns into four, which turns into eight. And then my social media notifications start multiplying like the bunnies that used to live in our backyard growing up.

"What the...?" When I open one of the apps, my face is the first thing I see. Well, not just mine. Mine and Alex's. Then I scroll down and see an image of me with the team walking into Belle's Place.

And the angles are...unforgiving.

I cringe at the double chin that somebody looks like they photoshopped to make my natural one look worse. Great. And is that...did they make me *bigger*? As if I needed help with that.

Then I see the comments, and I really wish I hadn't. Because they're gross. Worse than the first time.

Stix6969: Isn't this the same jersey chaser who was with Hoffman from the Rangers? She gets around fast

TaylorPMP91: They running train now??

PatYorks86: She clearly is eating them alive

AbroBro: They could do way better

I don't want to keep reading, so I force myself to turn my screen off and look around for Alex, who disappeared into the restroom a couple of minutes ago.

When my phone vibrates with Sebastian's name on the screen, I groan loudly. "Shit."

The Hershey bar staring at me puts its hand on its hips like it's scolding me for swearing.

“If you knew what was going on, you’d be cussing too, buddy,” I inform the person behind the costume.

Whoever it is shakes their head in disagreement. But I don’t have time to argue with a character whose job is to pretend to be a happy piece of chocolate.

“Hey, big brother,” I greet chipperly, turning away from the mascot and walking toward a bench off to the side. “How’s Tori and the baby?”

“Are you really going to pretend like you’re not with Alex O’Conner and his fucking team right now?” he asks dryly. “Really, Olive?”

I nibble my bottom lip. “I was being nice. People usually start phone conversations with greetings. You didn’t even say hi to me.”

“Hi. Now why the fuck are you with Alex?”

I make a face. “Well...” It should be an easy answer. *I’m with Alex*. Just say it.

Three.

Two.

One.

“I’m—”

“You better not be with the guy,” Sebastian says, cutting me off. “He’s bad news, Olive. I mean it. You don’t know him like I do. I’ve seen him lose his shit on people for no damn reason.”

Alex? “Isn’t that part of hockey? You’re all spontaneously abrasive. It’s what makes you good players.”

He cusses. “I saw him knock out Able Starr during my last season at Lindon. One punch and he was out cold in the locker room.”

I gape. Able was a brute of man compared to Alex. That seems almost impossible. “Are you sure we’re talking about the same Alex? Because you used to play with Alex Bordeau, that French-Canadian guy who transferred to Lindon. He was massive.”

I’m pretty sure he did steroids, but that’s neither here nor there.

“It was O’Conner,” my brother deadpans. “I don’t want to be an asshole, Olive. But his anger gets the better of him and he can snap when you least expect it. The guy can be quiet and reserved, but there’s a side of him I don’t want you around. I told you before to stay away from my teammates, especially him. Remember? You were supposed to remember Eli Manning.”

Is he serious? “So what? Was I supposed to only think about a famous athlete who I’ll never meet, much less be with? That’s unfair, and you know it. You might as well tell me you want me to stay single forever.”

He doesn’t tell me I’m right. “Cut whatever this is off with O’Conner.”

Wetting my lips, I study my surroundings to see if Alex has found where I’ve wandered off to. He’s talking to a group of guys who are holding out their phones for selfies with him.

“I love you, Seb, but you don’t know him the same way I do. I’m not saying I don’t believe you—” He scoffs at that. “—but I am saying that we know him differently.”

“So you *are* with him? You’re a thing or something?” he questions, obviously not pleased by the question.

I don’t want to lie to him. “We’re working on it. There’s a lot I’ve learned about him recently that I never knew before. You’d be surprised.”

He’s quiet.

Then, “How long has this been going on?”

I’m not in the mood to go over the details of my on-again off-again sex life with the person currently making his way over to me. “Does it matter? Look, I’m sorry if this upsets you. I don’t want it to. But I need to make my own decisions. And I’m choosing this for myself just like you chose your life with Tori. Okay?”

Sebastian makes a disgruntled noise. “If he touches you, if he *ever* hurts you, I’m going to end him. And then I’m going to bring him back to life to do it all over again.”

That’s...dark. And sweet? Jury is out on that one. “Got it. Well, great talk. Love you, Sebastian. ’Kay, bye.”

Alex stops in front of me with his brows pinched when I hang up right as my brother starts to say something else. “What did your brother want?”

“Do you ever check your phone? Because I’m sure you could find out if you logged onto literally any social media page. We’re currently viral on at least one of them.”

He blinks slowly before pulling his cell out and clicking a few buttons. When his jaw ticks and teeth grind, I know he sees what I do. “I’m going to kill him.”

Him? “Who?”

“Moskins.”

“Alex, look at those pictures.” God only knows which one he sees. The one where I look like a whale? Or the one where the human race can live between my chin folds? “He’s in some of them with us. I highly doubt he was the one who took them much less posted them.”

His nostrils flare with anger. “Did you read the comments?”

Duh. “Wouldn’t you?”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“What do you expect, Alex? Trust me, I didn’t read them all. After the train comment, I figured it was best to check out.”

His face gets red, and a vein pops out on his forehead. “They’re scumbags. Don’t listen to that bullshit.”

Easier said than done.

“Your brother saw it,” he states.

I nod. “Yep,” I pop the P. “And he’s not happy.” I rub my lips together, wondering if I should bring up what Sebastain said. But if I don’t, I know it’ll eat at me. “He said something to me that seemed...concerning.”

Alex lowers his phone. “Like what?”

I fidget with my hands. “He seems to think you’re violent and unpredictable. Apparently, you beat up Able Starr once.”

He blinks.

But he doesn’t deny it.

“*Did* you hit Able?”

His shoulders slacken with a heavy sigh. “I did, actually. But Able deserved it. I don’t just go around punching people, Olive. You should know that.”

“I *do*.” I swallow. “Look, Seb has always been protective of me. You know that. Our mom used to briefly see someone who put his hands on her, so I guess he’s...sensitive of things like that happening to me.”

Alex sits down beside me, holding my hand. “I would never hurt you. You know that, right?”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I know you wouldn’t, and I told my brother that. But he seems to think you flipped your switch out of nowhere. That worries him.”

The pad of his thumb caresses the back of my hand. “I understand that. If I were in his shoes, I’d feel the same way. But I promise you, Able was talking shit and didn’t stop when I told him to. So, yeah, I punched him. Harder than I probably should have. He went down and I got benched for a

couple of games. It was no big deal. Able even apologized to me. Did Sebastian tell you that?"

Quietly, I say, "No."

"Didn't think so." He scratches his jaw. "I'm not perfect. I'm far from it. But I'm not a violent guy. You never have to worry about something like that with me. I'm not my mother. I'm not going to mentally check out or act up."

I meet his eyes. "I know you're not like her."

We stare at one another for a moment longer before he dips his chin. "I'm going to deal with these pictures," he reassures me. "But let's not let it ruin this trip. We haven't even made our own Reese's cups like you wanted."

Even though I'm not in the mood to do that anymore, I know he's right. "Maybe we should make one and share it?" I suggest, knowing how big they are. The thought of pictures of me winding up online with a one-pound peanut butter cup hurts my stomach.

He tips my chin up. "If that's what you want, then sure. But if you're only doing it because of those dickwads online, then fuck them."

I swallow, feeling a little guilty for letting myself believe some of those awful things. But I'm human. Anybody would feel that way.

"Let's share one," I tell him quietly.

Something passes through his eyes.

But he simply nods and stands, offering his hand to me.

I don't take it.

"Olive," he says softly.

"I'm fine," I lie, feeling the heaviness of my conscious weigh me down. The claws of my inner demons sink into my mind and heart, trying to pull me down with it into the depths of God only knows where.

I don't want to go down that road—to get lost in the anxiety spiral that will undoubtedly lead to a depression that I'm not sure I can pull myself out of once I'm alone in Lindon.

"You're not," he tells me, brushing hair behind my ear. "And you're not alone. I'll make this better. I promise."

You're not alone.

My heart tugs in my chest as I force myself to swallow. We don't speak on the way to the factory where we have tickets to.

When we get there, he makes a dark chocolate stuffed Reese's with all of my favorite inclusions—even the marshmallows that he doesn't like.

For me.

He did it for me.

You're not alone.

No matter how hard my demons fight to drag me down, those words keep me afloat.



ONE OF THE many things I love about my friends is how polar opposite they are. Skylar is quiet, reserved. She doesn't like confrontation. But Berlin is the exact opposite.

"If I could put laxatives in each one of those morons' drinks, I would," she tells me. "And I'd force it down their throats."

"Geez," I hear Skylar say over Bentley's subtle noises. "Why does it sound like you've done that before?"

Berlin snorts. "I *may have* put laxatives in some cookies I made once. In my defense, the girl who ate them kept stealing my lunch at school. I needed to get payback. I didn't think she'd eat the entire bag of cookies."

My eyes widen. "Oh my God. What happened to her?"

"She shit her brains out and stopped taking my food," Berlin answers casually. "Easy peasy."

Everybody is silent for a solid minute.

It's Skylar who says, "Mental note. Never piss off Berlin."

"Agreed."

The girl in question laughs. "I'd never do that to you guys. She deserved it."

"Anyway," I butt back in, steering clear of Berlin's shady history. "I appreciate you guys calling, but I'm fine."

They're quiet only for a second.

Berlin says, "I don't buy it."

I frown.

Skylar sighs softly. "You don't always have to be okay, Olive. We're here for you if you want to vent. Those people were mean for no reason."

They were, but I can't change it. "If I dwell on it..." What good will that do? "I can't change people's opinions of me. They can think whatever they want. And, inevitably, post about it. It's freedom of speech."

"But isn't there such thing as defamation of character?" Berlin quips. "I'm pretty sure that's illegal. You could sue."

Sue who? The public? "I'm not suing anyone. And I'm pretty sure it doesn't work like that anyway."

"You're not a cop. You don't know the law," Berlin argues.

It doesn't make me think any differently. "I don't like what they're saying, but they're going to say worse things if I fire back. Alex is taking care of it."

He'd made a post online telling people to stop in much more colorful words that left little interpretation. I'm not sure what the results were because I refused to look.

"Where is Alex?" Skylar asks.

"At a team meeting," I say, curling deeper into the bed. The mattress called to me as soon as he left. He pressed a kiss against my temple and told me he'd be back in a few hours. I could have gone and explored the stadium or city, but I didn't want to.

Everything feels heavy, making the only thing I want to do is sleep. And I would be by now if the girls hadn't called me from Skylar's place since I ignored their slew of messages after social media deemed me some jersey chasing troll. I haven't even called my mom back after seeing her missed call and voicemail.

"He left you alone?" Berlin demands.

"I wanted to be left alone," I defend. "Look. I'm kind of tired. If it makes you feel any better, my mother left me a voicemail saying she'd "open a can of whoop ass" on the media. She was proud of herself."

"As she should be," Berlin muses.

Bentley wails, and Skylar's comforting coos try to shush him. "We'll let you go. But remember that it's okay not to be okay. We're human. Anybody in your shoes would be upset if they were being talked about like that. We both know that I didn't take well to people making comments about me around campus."

I felt so bad for her when her former roommate and so-called "friends" were spreading rumors about her our freshman year. It'd made her first year at Lindon hell. At least, it was *one* of the things that made it hell. I'm glad

we found each other when we did. I'm not sure either of us would have survived this long otherwise.

"We love you," Berlin adds, "and we want you to be happy."

Am I happy? I'm with the boy I can't stop thinking about, who's willing to go to war for me over internet warriors. But there's a piece of me that feels burdened by my brother's cold shoulder since his call yesterday. I hurt him, and I feel guilty.

"I am," I tell them anyway, hoping to believe it one day. "Maybe not this second, but I'm happy. And I *will* be okay. I come home on Sunday."

"Girls' night?" Skylar suggests.

"Ooooh! I'll bring wine!" Berlin squeals.

I want to tell them no.

That I want to be by myself when I get home.

But Alex's words ring in my head.

You're not alone.

Friends are important—more times than not, they're your real soulmates in life. Romantic partners can come and go, but friends...they're real. They stay for life.

So, I say, "Sure."

Because I don't want to be alone. No matter how much my mind wants me to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Alex

ABLE STARR WAS a two-hundred-and-twenty-eight-pound goalie for the Lindon U hockey team. His nickname used to be The Gentle Giant, because he normally had nothing bad to say about people. If anything, he was one of the mediators that broke up our dumb fights when they broke out.

Until one day, when Starr was running his mouth after a tough loss against the Cubs. It was a brutal game, and nobody was in a good mood when we piled back into the locker room after it was over.

“What crawled up your ass and died?” Starr asks, elbowing me as he walks by where I’m towel-drying my damp hair from the shower.

Did he not see us get creamed on the ice? “I think it’s pretty easy to tell what the problem is. Or did you forget the four shots you let slide past you today that caused the Cubs to fuck us?”

A few of the guys ‘ooooh’ from the other side of the locker room.

Starr straightens to full height. “I don’t seem to recall you stealing the puck from any of them either. Or did you conveniently forget that?”

I didn’t. And I won’t forget the rest of the damn night when I’m beating myself up over it.

“This isn’t our first loss. We’re still in the top three in our division,” he points out. “So I don’t know why you’re acting like a bipolar dick, but you sound fucking stupid.”

My nostrils flare as I grind my teeth. “The fuck did you just call me?”

Somebody clears their throat. “Uh, guys—”

We ignore them.

Starr says, “I called you bipolar. Do you need me to say it again? You act too good to talk to the rest of the season when we win, but you’re quick to point fingers when we get our asses handed to us. That’s not just on me, O’Conner. You’re just as much to blame for how the game went tonight. Maybe if you actually showed up to practice on time for once—”

My shoulders square. “Don’t fucking call me that. You don’t know shit, Starr.”

“What? Bipolar? Then stop acting like it.”

Grabbing ahold of his shirt in a death hold, I slam him against the lockers until a group of our teammates surround us. “I swear to God, Starr, if you don’t watch your mouth I’m going to hit you.”

He smirks, unphased by me or the guys trying to pull us apart. “Try me, Pretty Boy.”

Needless to say, I did. And maybe the punch was harder than I meant it to be, but he went out cold for at least ten seconds. So, yeah. I get why Sebastian told Olive about that. But it was provoked, which he either didn’t realize or didn’t give a shit about.

I’ve always been the bad guy in his eyes.

At least when it comes to his sister.

And that’s never bothered me until now, when I want to be the person her family wants her to be with.

Not the bad guy, but the good one.

Olive doesn’t need a hero—she’s her own. But if I can be the extra support she needs when her days are shitty or she just needs somebody, then I want to be there regardless of what her brother thinks of me.

“Here you go,” Tia, one of our PR reps, says, pulling me from the cyclone of thoughts in my head.

I look at the paper extended to me before taking it. “This has all the information on it?” I ask her, scanning the top of the form.

“Everything she’ll need to know is there. What she needs to fill out, what she needs to keep blank, and where to send it back to. If she has any questions, she can call me or Louis. Just make sure she knows that the deadline to submit her application is this November. We go through them over the winter for selection in the spring.”

My eyebrows go up. “Do you get a lot?”

Tia smiles. “It depends. When we have a winning year, more people tend to apply to be part of the experience. They get to travel with the team for at least half the games, which is cheaper than game tickets and lodging.”

Olive traveling with us sounds like a great idea to me, but I don’t voice that. I’m sure there are some sort of guidelines that say there’s no bunking with interns. When we travel to away games, we’re usually partnered up and told not to stray too far. The coaches usually put a curfew on us

knowing that drinking tended to happen on the nights we won, which led to more than one player nearly missing the plane or bus back home.

“Thanks, Tia. I appreciate it.”

Walking out of the building, I pull my phone out to see how her day with Belle is going. But before I can send the text, I see Clarkson walking over to me.

“O’Conner,” he greets, gesturing toward the office I just walked out of. “Did you get that internship paperwork for Olive?”

I flash him the paper in my hand. “We’ll see if she even wants to do it at this point.”

Understanding makes him dip his chin. “I talked to Moskins about the pictures. He didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“You’re sure?”

One nod. “The man can be a jackass. I get that. But he wouldn’t go that far. Believe it or not, he can appreciate privacy more than you know.”

What’s that supposed to mean? “I guess he can’t have multiple girlfriends and a wife without there being some sort of agreement to keep shit on the downlow.”

Clarkson’s lips twitch upward. “Yeah. Something like that.”

I lean back on the wall and stare up at the high ceiling. “I don’t see why people even care about what we do or who we date. We’re nothing special.”

“Speak for yourself,” Clarkson snickers. “I think I’m pretty damn awesome.”

I chuckle. “You sound like Olive. She’s always been confident about who she is. Seeing people tear her down...” My jaw ticks. She’s never let people get to her. At least, she pretends she doesn’t. But knowing her father has said shit must make it harder to ignore when other people join in. “Thanks for getting Belle to take her out. She needed it today. I think she’ll enjoy having some girl time for once. And if she sticks around, it’s good for her to have friends here too.”

“It’s never fun to see the people we care about get talked about that way,” he sympathizes. “You already made a post telling people to stop and respect your personal life. There’s not much else you can do.”

I wish there was, though. “I can tell it’s fucking with her. And her brother isn’t helping matters. He and I were never particularly close in college, so he’s not a fan of finding out we’re seeing each other.”

God only knows what her family thinks of me. I'm sure her brother told their mother some half-truth bull that isn't going to win me any favors with the woman I know Olive is close to.

"And this is how he found out?"

Apparently, my wince confirms it.

"Brutal."

I sigh. "Olive wanted to tell him in person."

"Well..." His words fade.

"What?"

He lifts his shoulders. "I hate to agree with Moskins, but you made it public with her. It was bound to come out eventually because people don't know anything about you. I told you before, man. The second they get their hands on any information it's going to blow up no matter how small it is."

And I'm just supposed to be okay with that because I signed up for this job? "I don't see anything about you online."

"That's because we have an understanding," he tells me as if I'm supposed to know what that means. "We've all got to give a little to get a little. If you want privacy, you've going to need to let them get to know you enough where they're willing to respect your space. If not, they'll always be searching for something."

What kind of expense would I be paying? "I don't want Olive, or anybody else in my life, to be front and center for all this bullshit. They claim to be fans, but I barely see anybody coming to her defense."

Clarkson is quiet for a second. "Has your agent said anything to you about doing some press?"

Kyle reached out to yell at me for not informing him that I was "involved" with somebody with connections to the Rangers. As if I'm sleeping with a fucking spy. Then he asked if that was why I got bent out of shape when he brought Olive up when she was seen with Hoffman.

I told him to fuck off.

Then I hung up on him.

He should have been on top of the latest pictures before Olive ever saw them.

"The only thing he wants to do is focus on sponsorships and the upcoming season."

"Word of advice? *He* works for *you*. Without you, he won't get paid. So make him worth your while. If it benefits him, I'm sure he'll do it. And if

you get the public on your side, they'll stop focusing on who you're dating and start focusing on how you're playing. Sponsors will pick shit up too if they see you present yourself a certain way."

"And how exactly am I supposed to act?"

He rolls his eyes. "Like yourself, O'Conner. Isn't that why Olive likes you? Sure as shit can't be that shiny personality."

I can't help but snort in amusement.

My eyes go down to the paper in my hand. It would be a good opportunity for Olive, but I don't know if she'll want to take it if it means being tied to me and the team if people are going to talk shit the whole time.

"If people are talking now, what are they going to say when they hear she got an internship with us? We both know women get attacked more online than men. They'll say it's because she's sleeping with me. Some people are going to say it's because she slept around with all of us."

"Their opinion doesn't matter, but if you want to change it then get your agent to set something up. A one on one with the people. Let them ask some questions but make your boundaries clear. That's what I did."

If only it were that easy. Then again, you don't see anyone talking about Clarkson and Belle's close relationship online. I guess a charming smile can go a long way. "Their opinion matters to her, even if she pretends it doesn't."

"I don't know her well," he admits, "but it seems like she's got a strong head on her shoulders. And if she doesn't get a spot with the Penguins, she probably will with New York's team. Then they'll say it's nepotism that got her there. Look, I'm not saying it's fair. But it's the name of the game sometimes. Life isn't always fair, but nothing we want comes easily anyway."

Damn if he isn't right. "If it were Belle in her shoes going through this, what would you do?"

Clarkson's eyes darken. "I'd tell the public to mind their own business and support Belle in whatever she wanted to do."

"Even if it puts her in front of the public for the vultures to pick apart? If she gets this internship, she'll be with the team a lot."

I can see the subtle tic of his jaw. "Would Olive stop you from playing hockey if it meant getting bad PR sometimes?"

The answer is easy. "No."

He gives me a pointed look.

I wet my lips. “Fair point.”

“Give her the form, O’Conner. Give her the opportunity before you take it away.”

My gaze drops back down. “I’m used to being the logical person who has no choice but to make the decisions, no matter how hard they are. I’ve been that way since I was younger. And I know this life isn’t for everybody. Some people in my life can’t handle the kind of attention that comes with knowing me.”

Clarkson is quiet, watching me.

“My mom...” I swallow the words for a minute and take a deep breath. “My mom is sick. She’s in Pennsylvania at a mental hospital, and I put her there. She doesn’t want to be there, but it’s what she needs. I know it is. I’m afraid of the day she’ll finally be okay enough to get out only to go down whatever dark rabbit hole that my life puts her in. I don’t want this—the media or the outsiders—to destroy her. I don’t want the press getting their hands on the story. She’s not a story to be told. She’s a person.”

His eyebrows arch. “I get that, man. And I’m sorry it’s been tough with your mom. That’s got to be hard. But Olive *isn’t* your mother. You don’t need to be the one who makes all the tough calls to protect her. All you can do is be there for her and set those boundaries with everybody outside of your relationship. You can’t stop living your life for others. Not even for your mother. Is this what you want to do? Hockey?”

“Hockey is the *only* thing I’ve been sure about my whole life.” My lips rub together. “And Olive.”

“You’ve worked your ass off to be here.” He grips my shoulder. “So don’t throw it away because of what *could* happen. There are a lot of people who are able to keep their personal lives private. As long as you’re open about wanting that, people will understand.”

He has a lot more faith in humanity than I do.

“Everybody needs to set limits with the press,” he says. “There’s nothing wrong with saying your family is off limits.”

“Won’t that make them more curious?”

“Sometimes, you have to have a little blind trust, O’Conner,” he tells me, clasp my shoulder.

I huff. “I don’t know if I have that in me.”

“Relationships are built on trust,” he points out. “Do you trust Olive?”

“Yes.”

“Everybody has the capability of hurting us, but that doesn’t mean they’re all going to. Let go of what’s holding you back. Open up a little. Draw the line. I think you’ll have better luck than you think.”

Public speaking is the last thing I want to do, especially if it brings more attention to the people I want out of the limelight. But maybe he’s right.

And I’m willing to do what I need to if it means protecting the women in my life that I love.

Love.

Christ.



THE SUIT JACKET feels a little looser than I remember, which is a reminder that I need to start hitting up the gym again and do Clarkson’s training exercises to bulk up before getting back on the ice. I button it and adjust the tie, frowning when I see how crooked it looks in the mirror reflection.

“You look nice,” Olive says from the bathroom doorway. “It’s not game day, though. Why are you so dressed up?”

I try to redo the tie, remembering how my old college coach did it when he showed me. “I had Kyle, my agent, set up a press conference.”

Olive walks in and stands in front of me, moving my hands away from the mint green tie that I bought a year ago because it reminded me of her eyes. Kyle told me I’d need nice clothes for press junkets, so I picked out three suits using the money I got, and five different ties. This one is my favorite.

“But you hate public speaking,” she notes softly, her fingers moving skillfully until my tie is straight and tucked into my jacket.

I flatten my hand down the front of it and look at her. “I hate what people are saying about you more.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re doing this for *me*?”

Is she really that surprised? “You can pretend like this isn’t impacting you, but I know it is. I can see it. The light in your eyes that’s always burned so damn bright has dimmed. I’m going to make sure people know that’s not okay with me.”

Her lips part, a gaping expression leaving her cute and speechless.

My hand moves to her face to graze her cheek with my knuckles. “You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to, but I could definitely use one of your famous pep talks before I sit down in front of the cameras.”

I see her throat bob with a thick swallow as she releases a long breath. “You know you don’t have to do this, right? We both know people are going to say whatever they want to.”

“We have a say in the narrative, though.” My thumb brushes her bottom lip. “And I have every intention of letting them know that I have a thing for the girl in those pictures who can outsmart any hockey fan with stat shots on players without googling a single thing. And if they have a problem with it, they’ll have to deal with me.”

A small smile tilts her lips. “I don’t think threatening them will do any good. If it did, one of my friends offered a particular skillset with laxatives.”

My brows go up. “That’s fucked up.”

She doesn’t disagree.

“Today is about letting people know what, and who, is important to me. That’s you. That’s the game. My team. My mother. If they want me to talk to them, then they need to show me some respect. If fans want to call themselves that, then they need to prove it. I hate getting in front of people and talking, but I’m willing to do it for you. We’re a team too, right?”

Those green eyes start to glisten. “We are.”

I lean my forehead against hers. “So will you come? Will you give me a pep talk so I don’t piss myself in front of a crowd?”

The lightest laugh escapes her. “You’re Alexander O’Conner. You’re talented. You’re caring. You can do anything life sends your way—more than any of those people know. You *love* more than anybody knows. You’re persistent and determined no matter what. But do you know what else you are?”

I feel her warm breath reflect off of my lips as my nose grazes hers. “What?”

“You’re mine.”

Two words.

Two. Goddamn. Words.

And my heart does the kind of shit people write books about.

“If I didn’t have to leave, we’d both be naked right now and I’d be buried inside of you,” I tell her, letting my lips hover above hers.

I can feel her smile against me. “You might want to calm down before you walk in front of a bunch of cameras sporting a giant boner.”

I chuckle. “That would be unfortunate.”

“They’d definitely stop talking about me,” she agrees, pressing hers lips against mine once before pulling away.

Brushing hair behind her ear, I give her one last look before I nod to myself. “I should get going soon. But I want to give you something first.”

Her brows furrow together when I dig through the papers collecting on my kitchen island before passing her the internship application. “It’s up to you what you want to do,” I begin, watching her read it over. “But if we’re really a team, then be part of mine. You already know your shit. The Penguins could utilize someone like you. And I...”

She looks up at me.

“Well, you won’t see me complain if you decide to apply,” I conclude, lifting a shoulder. “But if you decide to go somewhere else, or do something else, know I’ll support you there too.”

Her eyes dip back down to the paper.

“Just think about it,” I say, gesturing toward the door. “If you’re ready, we can head out.”

She stops me by the wrist, squeezing it once and locking eyes with mine. “This means more to me than you know, Alex.”

I glance down at our hands. “I get to claim you too, you know. I can’t be yours unless you’re mine.”

“So this is you claiming me?”

My lips curl up. “It’s one of the ways I plan to. The other involves a lot less clothing and a lot of cum.”

Her eyes flash. “Not fair.”

“Don’t you know?” I tease, pecking her cheek. “Life isn’t fair, baby.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Olive

WATCHING ALEX'S PRESS conference is nothing like watching him on the ice. The man who reeks of confidence when he's in uniform skating across the rink is nothing compared to the subdued version of him answering questions from the media right now. He doesn't look uncomfortable to the naked eye, but I see right through the façade. I always have.

He wants to jump out of his skin.

But he's doing it.

For me.

"Mr. O'Conner, what would you like to say about the recent photos that have surfaced of you and Sebastian Henderson's sister?"

My fingers curl into themselves as I watch Alex's shoulders square. "She has a name, you know. It's Olive. Olive Henderson. Which you all know, since I've seen more than one of your papers share some interpretation of the news fodder over the last two days."

The room is silent, not denying the accusation or apologizing for any of their part in spreading the news.

"What I choose to do with my life should be up to me and the person I'm with," he tells them firmly. "And us only. I understand we all have careers that we need to build, but I don't want my relationship or personal life to be at the expense of it."

I find myself smiling at his no-nonsense attitude.

"It's not often you have people who are willing to call off the dogs for you," someone says from behind me.

I'm surprised when I see Thomas Moskins leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed. He isn't looking at me, he's watching his teammate.

"I'm sure you have people who would be willing to do the same for you," I say. Although, I don't know that for sure. I can talk stats all day long, but I barely know anything personal about most of my favorite

players. The last I knew Moskins was married, though. That must mean he has someone.

He pushes off the frame and walks in, tucking his hands in his pockets. “You’d think so, but not all of us are that lucky.”

It’s hard to fight the frown, but I do. He doesn’t seem like the type of person who likes sympathy.

“Look, I was an ass the other day.” He scratches the back of his neck. “The cap and your boy tore into me over it. But I didn’t have anything to do with those photos.”

Poking the inside of my cheek with my tongue, I turn from Alex to Moskins. “I believe you. For the record, I didn’t mean to be a bitch. I get a little amped up when I’m talking about hockey. It’s sort of in my blood.”

Growing up watching Sebastian play makes me excited when I’m around other players, especially professional ones. But nobody likes hearing that they’re not as good as others, so I get why he was so defensive.

He studies me. “Ever since I was younger, I’ve always been the top of my game. I took pride in the praise I got from people; in being told I was the best. That changed when I came into the league.”

It’s competitive when you enter the NHL. They only want the best, which means you stop being number one like you were in your hometown. Sebastian experienced it too. “You should still take pride in the fact you got in. You said so yourself, you’re good. Not everybody who gets drafted can say that.”

There’s something passive in his dark eyes, like he doesn’t quite believe me. But how could he get so far in this career if he didn’t at least believe in himself at some point? Sure, some people’s cockiness is fake. Fake it ’til you make it and all that. But I don’t believe that’s him. “I’m sorry you don’t have the kind of support you deserve. Everybody should have someone in their life who cares.”

His lips press into a thin line as he dips his chin and glances at Alex. “Yeah, they should.”

Where is his wife? I know better than to pry, as much as I want to. “Did you come here to apologize? Because you didn’t need to.”

“I didn’t have anything better to do. Heard O’Conner was holding a press thing here, so I figured I’d stop by and see what it was about. And I figured you’d be here with him.”

There's something else, but I don't know what it is. And if I asked, I'm positive he wouldn't tell me the truth. "Does this mean we're good? No hard feelings?"

He studies me.

I stick my hand out in front of me, waiting for him to shake it.

It feels like forever by the time he extends his and firmly grasps mine. "We're good."

I smile at him. "Good. Because I'm pretty sure I'm going to apply to intern for the team, so I don't want to get on anybody's bad side if they choose me for the position."

"If you know as much as you say you do, they'd be dumb not to have you. You'd be an asset. The interns we've had in the past just try sleeping around with us. Most of them don't even know what a slapshot is."

I wince. "It couldn't have been that bad. They must have been qualified enough to get it."

He deadpans. "The last intern asked how many points was scored when the ball went into the goal."

At first, I think he's yanking my leg. Then I realize he's completely serious. "Oh."

He only nods grimly.

My attention is pulled away when I hear Alex say, "Thank you for your time and understanding." I watch him stand, scraping his chair back and walking off the makeshift stage set up for him.

When he sees me and Moskins, his shoulders draw back like he's ready for war.

Moskins must sense it too. "Chill, O'Conner. I'm offering your girl an olive branch. No pun intended."

I grin at the right wing.

Alex stops beside me, his hand going to my lower back as his shoulder brushes mine. "You okay?"

"More than," I promise him. "You were great out there. You didn't look nervous at all."

Moskins makes a thoughtful noise. "I hate public speaking too. Makes me get the nervous shits."

My brows go up at the information I probably could have lived without. "That's unfortunate."

Alex's head cocks. "I thought you lived for these things. You love attention."

"I like attention when it's on my terms," Moskins corrects. "There's a difference. You can't always control what people are going to bring up when you're talking to them. They'll do anything for a quick buck, and the stories aren't always accurate. Say one wrong thing, and they'll twist your words and make you look like an asshole."

I frown. I've never seen anything bad about him online, not that I've looked into him. "I'll make you a deal. If I get the internship, I'll be here when you do media interviews. Not just because it might be part of my job, but because everybody deserves to have someone in their corner cheering them on."

His eyes widen for a millisecond before narrowing. "Why would you do that for me?"

Alex makes a noise like he's wondering the same thing. Isn't it obvious though? "Sometimes we need someone to be there. Not because we need to be fixed or anything, but because we're human. We all need support once in a while. I've been told I give good pep talks."

Both boys look at me, so I just smile at them like it's the easiest thing in the world. And, right now, it is. Because I've been lucky enough to have a family who's always been in my corner. They've showered me with love and support. Even my brother, who questions my choices, will always be there. One day, he'll see that Alex is there too. He'll get over being mad at me and realize my choice isn't a bad one.

If I can spread some of that to people who need it more, then I'll do it.

"It's a deal then," Moskins tells me.

My smile spreads.

He looks at Alex. "You've got a good one, O'Conner. Make sure you don't fuck it up."

The man beside me gapes at his teammate. "I won't."

Moskins shifts on his feet, looking like he might want to say something else. He doesn't. Clearing his throat, he nods to himself and then walks out of the room.

"That was strange," Alex murmurs.

I shake my head. "I think there's more to him than you might think. You two are probably more similar than you know."

Under his breath, he mutters, "I hope not."

I elbow him. "Be nice. Not everybody has a good support system, and that's important. I don't think his marriage is a happy one."

Alex doesn't confirm or deny that. "I've never met his wife, and barely anybody talks about her."

Which tells me all I need to know. "I think that's sad, and exactly why Moskins could use some friends. And he apologized."

"He did? Huh."

I'm not going to force somebody to be friends with anyone they don't want to be, so I don't push it. "Do you want to celebrate your interview being over? We can go out to eat. My treat."

"You're not paying for a meal."

"Then it wouldn't be my treat."

"You're a pain in my ass."

"But I'm yours," I counter, poking his side.

His eyes lock with mine. "Damn straight."



I'M NOT SURE what time it is when I'm awoken by the gentlest strum of fingers against my core, playing me like an instrument until my limbs are on fire. Darkness still casts into the bedroom, leaving only a subtle light streaming in from an outside light post through the crack of the curtain, which tells me daybreak is still some time away.

The softest breath escapes my parted lips as my legs subconsciously open to grant his hand more access to the nerves he's toying with.

"There's my girl," he murmurs against my lips. "I love the sounds you make when I'm touching your pussy."

His words make my skin buzz.

"I want these off," he says of my leggings.

He doesn't give me time to strip them myself before his hand moves away from me to start peeling them off myself. I make a sound of disgruntlement at the lack of touch that makes him chuckle until I'm bare to him.

Then I feel him, hard and hot against me.

“If I touch you right now, I bet you’d be soaking wet for me,” he says against my shoulder, kissing it. “Would I be right?”

God. The husky tone of his voice definitely adds to what’s happening inside of me. I don’t have the words to tell him that before his hand slips between my legs and feels for himself.

He groans, his dick twitching against my butt as soon as he feels the dampness greeting him. “I fucking knew it.”

His teeth bite into my collarbone as two of his fingers enter me. My head tips back, giving him better access to my throat. He makes quick work nipping the crook of it, then swiping his tongue along my pulse as his fingers pump into me.

The sounds they make should embarrass me, but he seems to get harder from the slick noise that tells him what he does to me.

His scent.

His touch.

His everything.

“I’m going to miss you,” he says, retracting the digits and making me squirm. He doesn’t make me wait before his dick replaces his hand, thrusting into me in one go. “I’m going to miss you putting me into my place and telling off my teammates.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah, because that went over so well before.”

“He forgave you.”

I hum. “What else are you going to miss?”

“I’m going to miss the way you moan and squeeze my cock with your tight pussy. How you say my name when you’re coming around me.”

He lifts my leg and picks up the pace, grinding into me until I can feel him deeper. *God*, it’s almost unfair that this man knows what he’s doing. It’s torture in the best way, if waterboarding dicks is a form of it. Then I’d be guilty for how much I love it.

“I’m going to miss your warmth,” he says, hooking an arm around me. “And waking up to you.” His nose nestles into my hair as he takes a deep breath. “I’m going to miss the way you smell like me from using my soap. I’m going to miss you being here, being mine.”

He doesn’t stop. If anything, he goes harder. His free hand moves lower until it’s tweaking my nerves, pinching and pulling and rubbing them as his cock works me from within.

It’s too much.

His words.

His body.

His fingers.

I lose it.

“Alex,” I call out. “Oh, God. I’m—” My mouth opens as the hottest, purest orgasm racks through me, preventing me from finishing the sentence.

Not that I need to.

Alex can feel me breaking apart, jumping off the cliff to oblivion. The low sound he makes in the back of his throat drives him forward, following my lead and coming undone.

“Fuck,” he breathes, his sweaty forehead resting against my shoulder. “I forgot to pull out.”

Panic doesn’t seep through me because I’ve always been careful. “I’m on the pill,” I tell him, slowly catching my breath.

I roll over when he pulls out, watching as he stares at me.

“Okay,” he says quietly. “Good.”

I wet my lips. “I should go...” I gesture toward the bathroom across the hall.

He clears his throat. “Yeah. All right.”

It’s hard being sexy under the current circumstances, so I don’t bother trying. I get to the bathroom and wash up, redressing and finger combing my messy strands of hair before crawling under the blankets with him.

He’s quiet, his breathing calm as one of his fingers finds mine and wrapping around it.

“I can take the morning after pill if it makes you feel better,” I tell him to break the silence, and the tension I feel radiating from him.

Alex lets out a breath. “Only if you want to.”

I turn to him. “I don’t want kids, Alex. That’s something important that I think you should know. I don’t think I’m going to change my mind about it either.”

He turns his head to meet my eyes. His eyes study my face—my eyes, my mouth, then back up again. Even in the dim lighting, I can see his throat bob. “I don’t either. Maybe that makes me a shit person, but I just don’t see that life for me. I don’t have whatever gene makes people want to be a parent, and I don’t know if I’d be a good one to begin with.”

The finger wrapped around mine twitches.

I have no doubt he'd be a great father, just like I'd be a great Mom, but I understand where he's coming from. "I'll take a pill tomorrow. Just in case."

That finger squeezes mine.

I lean forward and press my lips against his, letting them linger for a second or two. "I..." I swallow the words that threaten to slip out. "I'm going to miss you too."

His nose rubs against mine. "Come to our first home game. I'll get you a ticket. I want you there."

I don't even have to think about it. "Consider it done."

His lips touch the tip of my nose.

We fall asleep holding pinkies.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Alex

THE CIRCLES UNDER my mother's eyes are barely noticeable today, and there's a soft smile where an empty curve of her lips used to be. "You look good," I compliment, sitting down on the couch across from her. "Real good, Ma."

I see a tiny light in her eyes that hasn't been there in some time. "I took a walk today to get fresh air with Evie and then I finished a crossword puzzle. Pam even helped me with it."

I don't know who Evie is, but I can't help but return her smile. And her getting along with Pam is a step in a positive direction. "It sounds like you've had a good day so far. Did you want me to get you more crosswords? I found one that's challenging. I've been working on it before bed, and it's stumping me."

"What about Olive? It's not nice to ignore your girlfriend when you're spending time together," she chides lightly.

Normally, that label would terrify me. But I like hearing it. And I like more that my mother is the one addressing her as mine.

"She went home yesterday." We spent the day together watching movies and talking about what life after she leaves will look like. She'll come to my first home game, and I'll come to Lindon during my first bye week. It won't be easy, but I told her it'll be worth it. Because *she's* worth it. "Classes start tomorrow for her, so she had to go back to Lindon."

She frowns. "When is she coming back to see you? Long distance relationships rarely last. I read statistics on it. It's even worse for pro athletes who date people early in their career."

I blink at her pessimism. "Gee. Thanks," I mumble. It isn't like she's an expert on relationships. She dated one person before Dad and nobody after him. "She's coming to our home game in a couple weeks."

She makes another thoughtful noise. "Is she going to come see me? I'd love to talk to her."

See her? *Here*? “Logan’s isn’t really a good place for her to be.”

My mother frowns. “But it is for me? This isn’t a prison, Alex.”

That’s ironic considering she’s referred to it as that for months. “You know it’s a good place for you. *Temporarily*. I talked to Pam, and she said you’re reacting well to the new medication. If that continues, we can plan on getting you out of here as long as there aren’t any more episodes. Then you’ll have time to spend with me and Olive in the future and get to know her better.”

The way her eyes scan my face makes me wonder what she’s thinking. Why am I nervous? I’ve never latched on to anybody’s opinions of me that deeply before. “You see a future with her, then?”

Rubbing my palms down my legs, I dip my head. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

“You guess,” she repeats. “Don’t be like your father, Alexander. You’re either in or you’re out. There isn’t an in-between when it comes to love.”

Her talking about Dad without sounding bitter still seems so foreign to me. “I know that.”

“Then remember it. Because there is no guessing in love. You listen to your heart, and you follow it. Understand?”

The woman in front of me sounds so normal, like we’re not sitting in a mental institution. Like she hasn’t fought me or her nurses or the security staff. Seeing her clear-headed is a rarity, so I know how important it is to soak it in while it lasts. “I understand.”

She nods once. “Good.”

There’s a knock on the door followed by a middle-aged man sticking his head in. “You must be Alex,” he greets, walking inside and shutting the door behind him. He holds his hand out to me when he stops by the couch. “I’m Dr. Rafner, one of the psychologists here. I was happy to hear that you’d be joining us on today’s session.”

Although therapy has never been high on my priority list, I know it’s important for my mother’s medical journey. Shaking his head firmly, I drop it down and watch as he sits across from us. “Pam told me it would be a good idea. I want to encourage whatever works for my mother’s health.”

My mother smiles. “If I’d known the counselor looked like Dr. Rafner, I would have agreed to come sooner.”

I internally wince. “Really, Ma?”

She laughs. “What? You know how much I loved watching *Grey’s Anatomy*. It’s like I’ve got my own McDreamy right in front of me. You

can't tell me he doesn't strike a similar resemblance."

Rafner looks almost identical to the neurosurgeon right down to the salt and pepper hair. "We're here to talk to the guy, not flirt with him."

Rafner chuckles. "He's right, Colleen. And since he's joining us today, I thought it might be a good idea to catch him up on where we left off. Do you want to fill him in on our last session and what we spoke about?"

My mother has flirty eyes as she looks at her doctor. It's creepy. And oddly endearing. Mostly because I've never seen her interested in much of anything. Peeling her focus away from him, she turns her body to me. "We talked about what led me to coming to Logan's."

"More specifically," Rafner presses gently.

Mom hesitates, fidgeting with her hands on her lap. "The episode that I had shortly before you brought me here."

My heart momentarily stops. We've never talked about that before. I've been too afraid to because she's never been in the right state of mind. All I knew when I found her that day in the corner of her bedroom was that something had to be done.

Mom scoots closer to me. "Alex, I didn't know what I was doing that day. I never took my diagnosis seriously until Pam and her team here got me to understand how damaging it could be. Not only to me, but to you. And I've never wanted to hurt you or cause any type of grief. Knowing that I have..."

It's hard to swallow as my gaze drops down to her arms where the scars are. "I thought I was going to lose you that day. I thought I *had*."

God. There'd been so much blood. I knew something was wrong when I saw the droplets on the floor by the door that led from the kitchen to her room. The door was locked, and it'd been so quiet. So fucking quiet.

I had no idea what I was going to find when I body slammed it open, damaging the frame. When I saw Mom curled up on the floor in the corner and holding her arm, the beige carpet under her was red.

It was hard to get that image out of my head. It was even harder for me to get her words out of my head. "*I can't keep doing this. I can't keep doing this, Alex. I can't keep doing this anymore.*"

I'd seen my mother in a lot of states, most of them low. When she was initially diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I'd done plenty of research to figure out what it'd meant. I knew she battled depression, but I never truly understood how low her mood could go. I'd fight with her about getting up,

about eating, about doing anything. But I never, *never*, knew she'd mentally given up.

"I'm so sorry I put you through that, baby boy," Mom whispers, touching my hand. "I barely remember what happened. I don't remember getting the knife or..."

She must feel my hand stiffen under her palm. "All I remember is you telling me that it would be okay. That you would get me help. Then the paramedics came and took me away. I begged them to let me go home, but they wouldn't."

The local hospital in Lindon put her on a psych hold. Suicide watch, they called it. Because the second the ER nurses saw the cut on her arm, they knew it was serious.

That was days before I was supposed to make my choice about who to play for. I'd always wanted to help her, to get her the best treatment and medicines. Therapy. Anything to make her happy. I had plenty of options to pick from.

But that day, when the doctors told me that her disorder had progressed and made her a danger to herself and others, I knew what I had to do. And that was to sign with the team who offered me the most money to give her what she needed before I lost her for good.

"You always wanted to play for the Bruins," Mom keeps going. "You and your father dreamed of that for years. And I feel like *I'm* responsible for taking that from you."

When her voice breaks, it's hard not to let it hit me like cement. "Mom, no. Come on."

"No" she cuts me off. "No. I won't let you convince me otherwise. I remember the three of us talking about the day we'd go to your games in Boston. It was all you wanted. And when I got sick, and your father left, I know those dreams shifted. But you always watched the Bruins; talked about what it would be like to play with Zdeno Chára. I know for a fact they scouted you. I know they were an option when you graduated from Lindon."

I close my eyes and feel her fingers curl around mine. When I found out that the Bruins were interested in me, I'd wanted nothing more than to say yes. For me. For Dad. Since I was kid, it was all I wanted.

But that's the thing. When it came down to making a decision, I had to accept that I wasn't a kid anymore. The dreams I had when I was eight or

thirteen or even eighteen weren't the same as when I turned twenty-two.

So, I turned down Boston.

I turned down one of the few things I wanted.

And I did it for the woman beside me.

"Alexander," Mom says quietly. "It kills me to know that I'm the reason you've sacrificed so much. I hate knowing that I'm the one who's held you back. Who made you grow up too quickly."

Cracking my eyes open, I force them to meet hers. The same color stares back at me, except her gaze is glossy with fresh tears. "You didn't hold me back, Ma. I play hockey. I signed with the NHL. Dad would still be proud."

She lets out a shaky breath as her hold tightens on me. "He would. He would be so, so proud of you. I know I am."

Dr. Rafner clears his throat. "Alex, your mother and I have discussed what life could look like outside of Logan's. Her treatment plan doesn't end for another few months, but if she's cleared by her team, then there's a real possibility she can leave."

It shouldn't make me nervous, but it does. Especially when it feels like there's something he isn't saying. "Okay. I mean, that's the point of this, isn't it? To help her get better so she can go back home?"

He nods. "It is. However, due to your mother's history, it's highly suggested that she has someone nearby to keep an eye on her after she leaves Logan's. Maybe not permanently, but just until she settles back into life."

Rubbing my lips together, I silently nod. I suspected she'd need to live with me, but I told myself not to think of the details until I needed to. She was in a bad place before Logan's; such a bad place that she thought about ending her life instead of fighting to get better. That isn't something to take lightly. "All right. I can get a bigger apartment. I can—"

"No."

I stop when I hear my mother's voice.

It's firm.

Settled. "Mom?"

"I will not be the reason that you hold yourself back," she tells me. "Alex, I know this is going to be a bumpy road. And I feel good. I really, really do. But I know that I struggle, and I refuse to let that impact your

career. You've done more than enough for me. It's time for you to live your life. The one you've worked hard for."

What is she saying? "We're family. We're all each other has."

"No, sweetie. That's not true." Her voice is gentle, more so than it's ever been before. "You have Olive now. And I won't take that from you."

I shake my head, trying to muster something to say. An argument. A justification. "What's going to happen to you if you won't move in with me? Do you need me to hire a nurse?" I turn to Rafner. "I've had people come to the house before. I know it's possible."

Rafner repositions in his spot. "In some cases, yes. And it wouldn't be impossible for that to be set up for your mother. But there are other options too."

Other options? "Like what?"

Mom takes over. "Pam and Dr. Rafner let me meet with a representative from a group who helps house people like me, who might not do well living on their own."

I blink slowly. "Like a retirement home or something?"

Her smile is small. "Similar to one, yes. But they would have everything I need. Someone to help track my medicine and moods and help me stay active. It's something I'm considering."

Instead of living with me? Who is this woman? "Are you sure you want that? Because you hated being here. Who's to say some group home would be any better? And where would it be? Here? In New York? What about the house in Lindon?"

"Alex," Rafner cuts in. "Those are all great questions, but let's take this one step at a time. Your mother is generally interested in making this happen. How about we look into the details, so you can be part of the process. Nothing has to be decided yet. We're taking baby steps."

Baby steps.

My mother is taking baby steps.

Her smile grows. "I want you to have the world. That's all your father and I ever wanted for you. It's at your fingertips. I'm going to make sure you get it. The way I should have this whole time."

It's hard to swallow past the lump in my throat. How long has it been since Mom truly tried to be a mother? I don't even know the answer to that.

"Okay, Ma." I let myself accept that. "If this is what you want, I'll back you. We do this together."

My mother's whole face brightens. "Make me a promise, Alexander."
I swallow. "Anything."

"Let me be part of your life with her," she says softly. "Visit me.
Together. One day."

Olive.

She's talking about Olive.

One day.

Damn do I love the sound of that.



MAYBE IT WAS the hope in my mother's words that settled into the depths of my mind and made me glide onto the ice with my head held high and nothing to prove. Or maybe it was Nelson and Moskins joking that my spot was about to be filled by a new rookie that lit a fire under my ass.

Either way, I'm on fire today.

Adrenaline courses through me as I slam Moskins into the boards and grin as I skate away from him as he cusses me out. It takes me no time at all to steal the puck from my teammate, using my stick to collide with the defense and make my quick getaway to the goal.

Three minutes and six seconds into the game, I score the first goal. The guys placed on my team yell across the ice, making Smithy's smile curl further down his lips.

"Better luck next time," I tell him unapologetically.

He shakes his head. "Save it for our actual game, O'Conner."

My grin grows. "Oh, trust me. I'll have plenty of emotions to channel then too."

Especially if I come face to face with Devin Parks, who always makes my life hell whenever our teams compete against each other. All because I accidentally knocked out his front tooth during a college game years ago. It happens.

He just never let it go.

Coach Pelfrey smirks when I skate back into formation when he blows the whistle. He adjusts his clipboard under his arm. "Nice work, O'Conner. Keep doing that and I'll make sure you're on the starting roster. Hear me?"

Something inside me perks up. “I hear you, Coach.”

The next forty minutes are spent doing drills, passing pucks, and going six-on-six. I score two more goals, get slammed into the boards as payback by Moskins, and take down Gentry by sweeping my stick against his, and getting his skates caught as I glide past him.

Clarkson watches from the center of the ice, his eyes piercing into me as I dominate the ice. He’s either going to chide me about not playing by the rules or congratulate me for getting the points.

By the time practice ends, I’m covered in sweat and want nothing more than to jump in the shower. The captain of the team slides up beside me as we get off the ice, bumping me with his shoulder. “You good?”

“Never better, Cap.”

He’s skeptical. “Try not to take anyone out during our game. If you play like you did today, we’d do better with you on the ice, not in the penalty box.”

“Gentry started it” is my only reply.

He eyes me, making my lips twitch up because he knows it’s bullshit. “If you want to see playtime, I suggest you try not letting any of them bait you. We actually have a chance at taking the first game if you have a repeat of today. There’s no way coach would let you sit it out.”

Pride has my shoulders squaring a little straighter. “That’s the goal.”

“So who are you doing it for?”

It’s not just for one person. But that isn’t what pops into my head. It’s a pair of green eyes—light, mint. And a pair of full lips that are usually painted pink. Olive is always there, in the back of my head, reminding me that she’s always been here.

We make our way to the locker room side by side behind the others. “I’m doing it for a lot of people.”

He makes a thoughtful noise. “Make sure some of those people are prepared for the game then. The first one of the season always gets a little chaotic. Especially since it’s against one of our biggest rivals.”

I don’t think I need to prepare Olive. If anything, I need to prepare the people for *her*. I’ve seen what she’s like at games. Whenever she’d attend college matches, I’d hear her voice above anybody else’s in the crowd. Usually telling us to destroy them. I can only imagine how she is at her brother’s games.

Clarkson smacks my chest and walks toward his locker on the opposite end of the room. As I strip out of my uniform, I stare down at my sweaty jersey, tracing the edges of my number before tossing it onto the bench.

If she's going to attract attention at the game, then she'll be wearing my name while doing it, so everybody knows who she's cheering for the most.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY

Olive

AFTER PROPERLY AVOIDING my mother and the millions of prying questions she has since the pictures leaked of Alex and me, I decided it was time to bite the bullet. A week seems like plenty of time to let someone cool off, right?

“You’ve been ghosting me,” Mom accuses as soon as she picks up.

I push open the door to the Anthropology Building and into the sunshine. “I’ve been busy.”

It’s a poor excuse, and one she definitely isn’t buying into. “I’ve texted you. How long does it take for a return text? Do you remember when that boy in high school stopped replying to you and you were sad for months?”

She has to bring up Jordan? “That was forever ago. And I was in *middle* school.”

Not that it makes much of a difference.

“And you were sad! Imagine how I felt when my own daughter did the same thing to me.”

Okay, now I feel bad. “I’m sorry, okay? But I knew you would hound me about Alex and the pictures and why I didn’t tell you. I wasn’t ready to talk.”

Mom is quiet for a long moment. “Okay. Are you ready to talk now? Because I have questions.”

Of course she does. “Alex and I are together” is the first answer I give her.

“Was he the boy from before?”

She’s perceptive. “Maybe.”

“Oh, Olive,” she says. “I knew you had a crush on him. It was obvious whenever we’d go to one of your brother’s games.”

What? “You knew?”

She nods. “Sebastian did too, honey. Why do you think he’d always find a way to get you away from him when he still played for Lindon? He didn’t

want you entertaining it.”

What a giant turd. “So you both knew,” I murmur to myself.

Mom hums sympathetically. “I didn’t know anything happened. But for you to be in Pennsylvania with him...”

Clearly, a lot happened that she didn’t know about. “He means something to me, Mom. And Sebastian won’t talk to me now because of it, which isn’t fair. I didn’t ignore him when he brought his *pregnant wife* home.”

“It’s hard for him,” she tells me, as if that’s supposed to make a difference. “You’re his little sister who he feels he needs to protect. I know you two are close, and that hasn’t changed. He just needs to get past this.”

What is there to get past? “Well tell him to get over it quicker because he’s being dumb. Now I don’t know if I should go to his game or not.”

“Of course you’re going,” she chides. “If there’s one thing I know about you two, it’s that you’re both stubborn to a fault. Whether you’re talking or not, you are still family who supports one another. So, you’ll go to his game and show that you’re cheering him on no matter the circumstances. The same as you would any other game.”

As I walk up the pathway leading to the entrance of Babcock Hall, I nibble on my lip. “I don’t like when he’s mad at me.”

“I don’t think he’s mad,” she replies. “I think he’s disappointed that you’re growing up and he can’t protect you anymore. Maybe he’s a little sad that he has to let somebody else take that role.”

Especially someone like Alex.

Doesn’t he know I’m not little anymore? “He doesn’t have to protect me. It doesn’t seem to matter what I say to get that through to him, either. It’s like when Dad left he felt like he had to take on that role.”

Mom makes a noise. “That’s my fault for not telling him otherwise. And it’s something I should have. Because you’re right, he did. But you know what? This is going to be perfect practice for him now that he’s going to be a father himself.”

She always finds way to my optimistic. “Can I ask you a question about Dad?”

There’s only a moment of hesitation. “Sure.”

“Did you forgive him for leaving?”

This time, the pause is longer. “I did. It took a while. But I don’t want to spend my life mad at somebody who isn’t worth my time. He gave me two

wonderful children, and that's enough to be grateful for."

I find myself nodding along.

"But, Olive," she adds, "that doesn't mean you have to forgive him just because he's your father. I know he's said some hurtful things. And, if it makes you feel any better, he's reached out to me asking if he should try making it up to you."

He has? "What did you say?"

"I told him that anybody who has you in their life is so lucky," she answers easily. "And if he wanted to apologize and make it up to you, it'd need to be genuine. I can't make him do anything, and it wouldn't be right if I did. If he wants to earn your trust, he'll have to figure it out on his own. Asking me just tells me that he isn't ready to pull his head out of his ass enough to see that."

I stare down at the grass before hefting a long sigh. "He hasn't reached out about making amends."

I'm not sure why that hurts so much. "Then that's on him. Like I said, you don't need to forgive him. You don't owe him anything. Focus on the people who make your life better. If that's Alex, then I'm happy for you. And your brother will be too. I promise."

I hope she's right. "Thanks, Mom."

"No more ghosting me," she says firmly.

I smile. "No more ghosting."

We hang up as I walk into my residence hall.

"Olive," my RA, Cierra, calls out, waving at me as I walk toward the elevators. "Hold up. You had another package arrive today."

Another package? Cierra comes out of the backroom with a white box with a yellow and black ribbon tied to the top. There's only one person I know who'd send me something with those colors on them, and a smile instantly appears on my face as I happily grab it from her. "Thanks, CiCi!"

As I walk toward the elevator, she calls out, "Tell that boy he needs to send things to your school address if he's going to keep giving you gifts!"

I guess there's no denying who it is since the photos came out. Since then, most of them have disappeared and the talk has died down.

Giddiness fills my chest as I pull my keys out to my room, tucking the box under my arm until I can set my things down on my unmade bed.

I'm careful not to ruin the ribbons as I untie them, setting them aside to open the box. When I see the jersey inside, my lips part in shock over the

name and number.

Then I see the note.

*Wear this to the game and make sure it's the only thing you wear in
my bed that night*

Biting my lip, I lift the jersey up and examine his last name stitched in white block lettering across the back. I can only imagine what Sebastian is going to say when *this* surfaces online like it's bound to. Before now, Henderson is the only name I've ever worn at games.

And I'd be dumb not to admit that Alex's post-game plans sound enticing. They *really* do. Because my vibrator doesn't quite match the kinds of things he does to me with his hands, and my vivid imagination doesn't nearly do his talent justice when I think about his mouth and cock between my legs.

The thought of wearing his jersey, his name, while staring down at his dark head of hair between my thighs is torture of the purest kind.

I pull my phone out, about to snap a photo of the present in the box when I have a different idea. Stripping out of my clothes, I slide the jersey on and stand in front of the full-length mirror attached to my standing armoire.

The picture I take is from the neck down, showcasing the jersey on me and nothing else. I've never taken a picture like this before, but the thought of Alex getting it...

Well, he deserves a little torture too.

His response is almost immediate.

Alex: Now let's see it off you

I grin, knowing what he means.

I slide the jersey off and let it drop to the floor, snapping a photo of the piled material by my feet and sending it to him.

Alex: Lift the camera to the mirror

Biting down on my bottom lip, I take a picture of my bare legs and send it to him.

Alex: If you keep this up, you're going to be in trouble when I see you. That's a promise, baby girl

Olive: I can get behind that promise

I get a photo in return.

“Damn,” I whisper to myself, staring at the tented shorts. There’s no mistaken that the picture excited him, and it gives me a little extra confidence.

Olive: I hope you're not at practice

Alex: We're reviewing game tapes

I giggle.

Olive: Hopefully it's dark

Alex: I'd hate for the team to think watching the Krakens does something to me

The snort comes before I can help it.

Olive: So I guess sending this wouldn't be a good idea?

Before I second guess myself, I send him a picture of my boobs. It’s faceless, with a focus on the area he definitely loves paying special attention to.

When it delivers, I don’t let myself regret it. What do I have to feel bad about? Nothing.

A minute goes by.

Nothing.

Thirty more seconds.

My heart speeds up as I quickly grab my clothes and start redressing. What if one of his teammates saw it? Would they know they’re mine? Well, probably. I’ve seen plenty of boobs in my day, mostly thanks to the creepy pictures that would come through on Sebastian’s phone. And porn. I’m not ashamed to admit it. Because of that, I know my boobs don’t look like most of the girls that Alex would probably be expected to be seen with.

Which means if one of his teammates did see them, they’d know they’re mine.

“Oh God,” I groan, sitting on the edge of my bed and biting down on my thumbnail.

Just as I type out another message to him, some panicked, half-ass apology or lame excuse, he’s calling me.

Swallowing, I swipe to answer. “Hi.”

Hi. Can I be any lamer?

“Touch yourself,” he says in a low voice.

My eyes pop open. “What?”

“I snuck out of the room and now I’m locked in the bathroom with my cock in my hand staring at your tits. Now I want you to touch yourself. Do it, Olive.”

Holy shit. “Seems unfair that you have a picture for reference,” I say breathlessly.

“Is that what you need, baby girl?” There’s humor melded into his husky tone, making me bite down on my bottom lip. “Look at your phone.”

Swallowing, I open our message thread and let out a shaky breath when I see the image of him taking up the screen.

I might orgasm just from looking at this.

Can dicks be beautiful? Because his is, especially the way his fingers can barely wrap around the girth of it in full. It reminds me of how full I always feel when it’s inside me. And the length...

Dear Baby Jesus in a Manger.

He doesn’t need to be here for me to be wet, which is a talent I’m sure his ego would love to know he has.

“Now,” he purrs through the phone, “get on your bed, open your legs, and play with that pretty pussy. I bet you’re soaking for me.”

My heart picks up as I listen to him, but I find myself doing exactly as he instructs. Laying back, I open my legs and let my hand wander between my thighs.

There’s no denying how wet I am. He’s always had an effect on me. Even when I barely knew him, it was like my body knew something before I did. That’s scary, no matter how good he’s made me feel.

How he *keeps* making me feel.

“Where are your fingers right now? Are they on your clit? Are they inside of you? Tell me what you’re doing.”

I close my eyes and let my fingers stroke me, feeling the softest breath escape my lips when I brush my clit. “You first.”

He chuckles. “I’m stroking my cock right now, squeezing it and watching my precum drip down me. You want to know what I’m thinking? I’m thinking about how I’d be keeping your legs spread open as I fuck you. It’d be slow, hard, and deep. You’d be fucking begging me to go faster, but I wouldn’t. I’d set the pace, listening to your moans. They’re my favorite sound.”

I absorb every word as I play with myself, letting two of my fingers enter me as I use my thumb to circle the sensitive nerves above. My free hand strums my hardened nipples, stirring that familiar feeling in my gut that tells me my body is well on its way to a delicious orgasm.

“Then what?” I ask.

“I’d turn you around and put you on your hands and knees,” he says, a groan in his tone making my ears ring. “Then I’d use one of my fingers to play with your ass. You’d love it. You’d be begging me to take you. And I think you’d want me to fuck you there.”

I swallow hard. “Someone is cocky.”

“Confident, sweetheart,” he corrects. “But you would let me touch you there, wouldn’t you?”

My breath is shaky as I picture it. “Yes.”

“Good girl. You’d feel so fucking good—so tight. You’d want me to fill you with my cum. I know you would.”

“Oh my God,” I moan, his words bringing me closer and closer to the edge. “Alex, I feel so good right now.”

“I know you do, baby. Imagine how you’re going to feel when my cock is in your pussy and my finger is in your ass. I’m going to get you a toy so you can get used to me there. You’ll be begging me to double penetrate you, stuffing you until you can’t take it.”

The image I get in my head detonates me before I can get my vibrator to finish off the job. I call out his name as the orgasm takes over, and the sound of my voice must do the same to him.

I hear, “Holy shit,” from his end of the phone before silence takes over.

Then it’s just our heavy breathing as we try catching our breaths.

“That was...” I take a deep breath.

“Yeah, baby. But it’ll be better next week.”

That’s a promise I’m looking forward to one hundred percent. “Thank you for the jersey.”

“Thank you for the orgasm,” he answers easily, warming my face as it splits into a smile. “There’s going to be at least three more waiting for you when you come see me. Bring the jersey.”

Oh, I’m *definitely* bringing it.



I GET AN odd sense of déjà vu walking up to Babcock Hall with my student ID at the ready to scan when something pulls my attention to the right. Hidden in the shade of the large oak tree beside the east side of the building is a looming figure wearing a Yankees baseball cap, sunglasses, and Lindon U sweatshirt.

“O-Dawg,” Bodhi greets as soon as I make eye contact with him.

I stop and stare, gaping at the man who looks so out of place. “What are you doing here?” And how do so many attractive men know where I live? It’s borderline weird. Well, maybe not weird. I’ve *definitely* had dreams like this before, and they never disappointed.

We meet halfway, giving me a chance to give him a onceover. “Is this...?” I pull on the price tag still attached to the red hoodie that looks a size too small on his torso. How did he not attract attention? His biceps are practically screaming to break out of this thing. “I see you’ve upped your disguise game. Although, I think you should have gotten a size up on the hoodie.”

Bodhi glances down at himself, smoothing his palm down the front of his body. “You’ve got to admit, the color is great on me.”

I roll my eyes as he lifts an arm to welcome me in a hug. I step into him, wrapping my arms around his waist and squeezing once. His arm envelopes me, pressing me into his hard front for a brief moment before letting go.

When he shifts on his feet, I realize something is off. Even behind the sunglasses, I can see that he’s nervous. “Do you want to get chicken tenders with me?”

I start to answer but find myself stopping. He wants to get chicken tenders with me? On a Thursday? In the middle of the day?

“Bodhi, are you okay? Not that I don’t like seeing you, but this seems...” Weird would probably be a rude way of putting it. “Random.

Aren't you supposed to be with the team getting ready for your game?"

He scratches the back of his head, where his hair is pulled back and hidden in his cap. I'll give him this—he doesn't look like himself. Now I'm starting to see why Chad Michael Murry's character didn't recognize Hilary Duff's in *A Cinderella Story*.

"We were given the day off because practice has been a little brutal. Our first game is—"

"Against Toronto," we say at the same time.

His lips kick up. "Yeah, I guess you would know that."

I readjust my bag over my shoulder. "It'd be easier to track if my brother wasn't giving me the silent treatment."

Bodhi slowly nods. "He's a little miffed about things still, but he'll get over it. You're a grown adult. He knows it, he just needs to be pissed for a while."

I'm choosing to believe that my mother is right. He'll be fine with Alex one day. "I wish he would see it that way sooner." Wait a second. "If he didn't send you, what is this about?"

He gestures toward the truck I didn't notice until now. "Come on. You've told me about the Birdseye Diner. I'm sure they have chicken tenders."

I don't know why an uneasy feeling settles into my stomach. "Are you dying?"

Bodhi snorts as we walk to his truck. "If I were dying, chicken tenders wouldn't be my last meal."

He takes my bag from my shoulder and opens the passenger side door. "Thanks. What would be your last meal be then? Steak?"

His lips twist. "I've never really thought about it. If they had to give me anything I wanted, probably something expensive. With gold truffle shavings on top for shits and giggles."

From inside the truck, I hear a young voice call out, "You're not supposed to say 'shit'."

I blink, turning from the massive mountain of man beside me to the small voice in the cab. "Uh, Bodhi? There's a kid in your truck."

He clears his throat. "That's Gemma."

Gemma. His daughter. "I kind of figured, since I doubted you kidnapped one on the side of the road."

He makes a thoughtful noise. "Climb in."

Is he really not going to tell me what's happening right now? "Bodhi—"

He sighs, tugging me away from the truck and dropping his voice. "Because of my game schedule, I had to switch up taking her from her grandparents. And I needed... I needed you to see this side of me."

What side? The fatherly side? "Why?"

"Can you get in? Please?" His voice softens, but the plea sounds desperate.

It's the only reason I get in. Bodhi mouths "thank you" as he sets my backpack by my feet and closes the door.

As he rounds the front of the truck, Gemma speaks up from the seat she's strapped to in the back. "Daddy said you go to school here. I think I want to go to school here too."

How old is she again? "You've got lots of time to decide. I wasn't sure where I wanted to go until I was seventeen."

"Whoa," she breathes in awe. "That's old."

Bodhi climbs in as she says that. "Careful, kid. I'm twice that age."

I'm sure her eyes are huge when she says, "That's *really* old."

Okay, that has me grinning. "Yeah, Bodhi. You should be in a museum."

He eyes me. "Hardy har har."

I buckle in. "So..." I rub my palms down my leg. What do I say to a kid? I'm not well versed since Bentley barely even says "dada" or "mama" yet. "How old are you, Gemma?"

"Four."

"She's almost five," Bodhi tells me. "Right, kiddo? When is your birthday?"

Gemma doesn't answer right away. "It's Christmas, but Grandma and Grandpa don't like celebrating it the same day. So we have cake and presents on the 26th."

That has to be rough. "My brother was supposed to be born on Christmas. But he held on until January. Our mom said he was born stubborn since he was over three weeks late."

Bodhi makes a gruff noise. "That had to be hard for her."

Clearly not hard enough because she still had me after. "It explains his personality," I muse. "I was born right on time. An angel."

The man beside me chuckles.

Then Gemma says, "My mommy is an angel."

That cuts the amusement off Bodhi's face. When I give him a sympathetic look, I can see his jaw working back and forth. "Yeah, she is," he confirms, his grip on the wheel tightening. "She's looking down on you, right?"

"Right. Grandma said she's always keeping an eye on me to make sure I'm good. Like Santa."

Her innocence is both sad and refreshing at the same time. What would I be like if I lost a parent? The thought makes my stomach hurt. My mom and I are close; it'd kill me if she weren't around. And my dad... Well, even if we aren't close, I don't want to see anything bad happen to him.

To prove her innocence, she changes the subject entirely. "I wonder what Santa will get me for Christmas this year because I've been super good. I hope it's a unicorn."

Bodhi's fingers ease from their white-knuckle grip on the wheel as we stop at the end of the campus driveway leading to the main road. He settles into his seat, releasing a long breath. "I don't know, kiddo. I guess we'll see what he's able to do for you."

He doesn't comment more on his ex.

The short drive to the diner is spent with Gemma telling us all about her birthday and Christmas wish list. I don't know what to say, but Bodhi "oohs" and "ahhs" every so often and comments in between her rambles about Barbie dolls and kitchen sets.

When he finds a spot to parallel park in outside of the diner, he cuts the engine and turns to me with a small smile. It's not as big as the one I'm used to seeing on his face, so I return it hoping it'll ease whatever is on his mind.

Gemma's mom maybe?

It's hard to tell.

A few minutes later, we're seated in a corner booth with menus spread out in front of me. But none of us are looking at them when we place an order for three sodas and three chicken tender baskets with fries.

I fiddle with the napkin at my place when Bodhi finally breaks the silence. "Gemma usually stays with her grandparents because of my job, but we've recently come to an agreement that splits the time more evenly."

I slowly nod, wondering why he's telling me this. "That's...good."

He shifts in his seat, glancing at his daughter who's coloring on the back of paper the waitress gave her with some crayons. "Since her mother's

passing, I've wanted to become more involved. It's been a difficult process, but being a dad is something I've always wanted to be. Besides hockey, it's the only other certainty I've had in life."

Sebastian is the same way. "I think that's sweet, Bodhi. Are you worried that hockey is going to mess with this?"

He lifts one of those broad shoulders. "It'll be an adjustment, but I know I'll make it work. I just need her grandparents to get on board."

All I do is nod along. What is there to say? I'm not sure what I can contribute to this conversation that would make a difference.

"I've always..." He sighs, looking at me with studying eyes. "I've always had a thing for you, but you didn't know. Did you?"

Ever so slowly, I blink.

He wets his lips, dipping his head. "I kind of figured."

"I thought you were always play flirting," I eventually say, tearing at the napkin in my lap. It's not discomfort I'm feeling, but it's close. "I figured it was innocent."

A thoughtful noise rises up his throat.

"Look," I say softly. "I think what you're doing is really sweet. It's going to make you such a great dad." I briefly glance at Gemma, who's in her own little world beside him. "But I don't know how I would fit into this. Being a mom has never been something I've wanted for myself. I wish it were, because you're a great guy."

He harrumphs. "If I didn't have her, what would you say to me?"

Would that matter? "But you do," I remind him, smiling. "And I can tell how much you love her and want to protect her. If it weren't her, it'd be a different child—a boy, a girl, I don't know. That wouldn't change how I feel about parenthood. Would it change for you?"

His nostrils flare before he rubs his jaw and sits back in his seat, resigned. "No, I suppose not."

I stop tearing apart the napkin, my smile remaining small and soft. "I didn't think so."

We're both quiet for a few minutes.

"So is it O'Conner then?" he asks, his cheek twitching like the thought makes him mad. At least he tries to contain it. Sebastian would be scowling if we had this conversation.

I sip my Coca-Cola. "I don't know if there's a magic "it". The idea that there's only one person for us out there is scary."

“But?” he presses.

I wet my lips. “But I think he comes pretty close. We have history. We have more than that, if I’m being honest. I’m trying to figure out what to do with it.”

The internship application is filled out and ready to be mailed, but I haven’t parted with it yet. I’d be dumb not to take the opportunity. I could use my degree by doing something I love. It could be a win-win.

But there’s always that what-if possibility that something could go wrong. The problem with obsessing over something like that, is that it takes away from the good. What is my alternative? I find some random job sitting behind a desk as a glorified secretary? That doesn’t sound nearly as fun as working public relations for a hockey team.

When I realize Bodhi is staring at me, I stifle a sigh. “Do you believe that everybody has one soulmate?”

His eyes scan my face before turning to his daughter. I watch his brows pinch as he studies her face, and I wonder if he sees her mother. “I used to,” he admits quietly, slowly turning back to me. “I’m not so sure these days.”

I guess that makes two of us then.

Before either of us can say anything else, his phone starts going off. He flinches when he reads the screen before turning it toward me.

Sebastian.

“Why is he calling you?”

“Probably because we share locations,” he admits, his cheeks turning a shade of pink I’ve never seen on him before. As if he needs to explain himself, he murmurs, “It happened after a night of celebrating our big win with tequila. I wandered out of the hotel and... You know what? It’s not that important.”

I’m definitely curious about what happened that required Sebastian to start tracking his location, but I don’t press him on it.

“Henderson,” he greets, pressing his phone against his ear and winking at me. “Uh-huh. I am. Yep. Did you know Birdseye Diner has Coke that tastes better than McDonald’s fountain drinks? I’m not even joking. I know how much you love those.”

My giggle is light as I settle into my seat.

He makes a thoughtful noise. “What makes you think she’s here? Maybe I’m in town on business.” He’s quiet for a second. “I could be

setting up a scholarship. I'm very generous like that. Even Gemma likes it here."

Gemma perks up. "I'm going to go to school here."

"Hear that?" Bodhi asks my brother chipperly. "There's nothing wrong with starting them early. Some kids were born into ivy league legacies. My friend Mitch's parents wanted him to go to Brown since he was pushed out of his mother's—"

My brother cuts him off before he can finish his sentence, which is probably for the better.

Bodhi holds the phone out to me. "He'd like to talk to you."

Eyebrows going up, I accept his phone. "So you won't answer my texts but you're willing to talk to me when you find out your friend is in town?"

Sebastian sighs. "Don't be like that. I have a right to be upset."

"Do you?" I question. "Because you seem to do whatever you want without anybody else's say, but we're still supportive. What, Seb? You don't want me to be with Alex and you don't want me to be with Bodhi either? Do you hear how ridiculous you sound?"

For a minute, he's silent. "I never told you who you could or couldn't be with."

"You warned me away from Bodhi because of what he had going on with Gemma," I remind him, causing Bodhi's eyebrows to jump up his forehead. He must not have known that. "And you weren't exactly waving around your pom-poms when you found out I was with Alex."

"I told you my reasoning—"

"No," I cut him off. "You told me what you *thought* you knew. But you don't know anything about Alex. You're so two-faced sometimes. You're allowed to get married to somebody we've never met and know absolutely nothing about, but the second I try to make something work with someone, it's not okay? I already have one unsupportive family member who makes me feel like I'm not worth anybody's time. I don't need a second one."

"Olive," he says softly. "I'm not like Dad. That isn't fair."

From where I'm sitting, it's not that different.

"You're not Dad period," I point out. "And I'm not a little girl you need to protect from the world. Drill that into your big, fat head."

Bodhi holds his hand out.

I don't warn my brother that I'm passing him over before dropping Bodhi's cell back into his palm. Our waitress comes back with our plates of

food as Bodhi's voice drops and a serious expression molds onto his face.

"Look, man. She's right. What she does isn't any of your concern, much less who she does it with."

I blink, ignoring the delicious smell of fried chicken goodness below me. Even the waitress seems interested, lingering for a moment longer than she should before finding her way back around the counter.

Bodhi listens intently to whatever bullshit my brother is spewing. "I did know about them. She told me not to say anything. What do you mean 'why'? She's a grown adult, Bash. And she wanted to be the one to tell you herself. It wasn't on me to do it for her."

I smile at him.

His eyes darken. "And I don't know what you told her about me or my business, but that wasn't your call to make. She and I are friends, not that you need to know the details of whatever it is we have. Let her be the one who chooses what she wants out of her life without butting into it."

He presses a button and sets his phone face-down on the table.

"Did you...?" I blink. "Did you just hang up on my brother?"

He dips his chin. "Yep. Dig in while it's still warm."

His tone sounds...off. "You're upset."

He wets his lips and he breaks apart Gemma's chicken tenders to let the steam out. "Wait until that cools a little before eating them, sweetheart," he tells her. When he turns back to me, his shoulders are stiff. "I didn't know he said anything about me to you, and that pisses me off."

I frown. "He was looking out for you."

"He didn't need to."

What can I say? "I relate to that. Seb cares. Sometimes too much. The conversation about you wasn't my favorite to have with him. He made me feel like I was going to hold you back somehow. But that doesn't have anything to do with my decision. And I appreciate you standing up for me to him. That means a lot."

He rubs his lips together as he picks up a fry and glares at it. "Was that why you were weird at the team event in New York?"

Limply, I shrug.

He cusses under his breath. "I knew it was something. I just didn't think your brother was involved."

I fidget with one of my chicken strips. "You standing up to my father and my brother is one of the sweetest things. But when the public came

after me over that picture..." It still hurts he didn't do anything. "That sucked, Bodhi. You had the opportunity to shut those people down or tell your agent off, and you didn't. But Alex did. He wasn't going to risk putting my name out there to be destroyed."

There's a difference between loving somebody in the dark and loving them in the light. Alex didn't hesitate to make things right when people came after me.

I have no doubt Bodhi would be an amazing partner. But he didn't defend me when I needed it. Being a father is only part of the problem. I'm not sure I can get over him staying quiet while people tore into me just because his agent told him to.

If there's one thing Alex has shown me, it's that love can be lethal. But lethal isn't always a bad thing.

He obviously sees that now. "I'm sorry, Olive. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I have no doubt in my mind that you're going to find somebody worth your time and energy one day," I tell him. "But that person isn't going to be me."

His smile is sad, barely curling his lips. "I think I already knew that. Wishful thinking and all..."

I'm quiet.

"I hope O'Conner is worth your time," he says, pulling my gaze up.

I think about the application.

About the fear of what-ifs.

But... "I think he is."

Later that day, I put the application in the mail and think about the opportunities that could come for me and my future.

Opportunities for myself, but also with Alex.

I hope O'Conner is worth your time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Olive

MY ADVISER'S OFFICE never used to seem so daunting whenever I'd come here for class scheduling or check-ins. The middle-aged man who I was assigned to for the last four years has always been nothing but laid back and supportive in whatever I've wanted to do. Like when I switched my minors three different times before eventually dropping it.

"I'm surprised *The Narnia* wasn't interested," Professor Merritt says with a frown, looking over the applications I sent in. He leans back in his chair, swiping at his stubbled jaw. "Someone with your grades and article portfolio should have captured their attention. But times are tough right now. I suppose people are downsizing."

The way he talked up *The Narina* made me think I was guaranteed to gain some interest from them. Especially since he worked there before coming to Lindon to teach in the comms department. He'd written me a glowing recommendation which gave me an advantage. It was the last internship on our list that I planned on applying to.

"It's always tough finding something right away," he tells me in encouragement. "We won't give up."

I grab my backpack and pull out the copy of my application to the Penguin's PR team. "There is one more that I applied to that wasn't on the list we created."

Hesitantly, I pass it to him.

He scans the page with raised eyebrows in surprise. "It's a good fit," he surmises casually. "You mentioned not wanting to touch hockey as a potential path."

Professor Merritt started right before Sebastian graduated. He never had him in any classes, but he knew who my brother was. Anyone who works here has heard about him being drafted. It's like that for any athlete who goes pro. Not that long ago it was Aiden Griffith from the football team

who was making local headlines when the Giants took him on as their new tight end. Another reason to love New York's team.

"I didn't want anybody to intervene," I explain, although he already knows this. "It'd be too easy if I asked my brother for his help. Then it would feel like a handout."

He lifts the paper I gave him. "This isn't for the Rangers."

A small smile curls my lips. "No, it isn't."

He laughs lightly to himself. "I don't think there's anything wrong with utilizing connections. It's no different than me trying to get you into *The Narnia*."

Except I'm not sleeping with him, so it's less for people to talk about if they did want to work with me. "That's a little different, professor. And I'm sure you know that."

Who doesn't? Since classes started, I've had people whisper and stare at me. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what they're talking about. Alex may have killed the horrible pictures and dumb tabloid fodder, but people here still talk a little too much about the viral moments I've had with two different hockey players.

Professor Merrett shrugs. "I've always been more of a baseball fan myself."

His casual remark has me smiling and leaning back into my seat. Because he doesn't care about how I know Alex or why I'm applying for this internship. It's refreshing.

"You've always done your best work when it focused on hockey. It's a passion of yours. So, I think it's great that you're finally accepting help," he adds, slipping the copy of the paper into the folder of applications we collected over the last year. "You've always been determined to do everything on your own since I've known you, but that doesn't mean you have to. Soon, you'll realize life can be hard. We need all the support we can get to handle it all."

I'm not sure if my family will be proud of me for accepting Alex's help, or if it'll be another reason for Sebastian to be mad. I guess time will tell. "I'm not even guaranteed to get this."

Although the feeling in my gut tells me I will. Not only because of Alex, but because I truly believe I can make a difference by being part of their team.

“Keep me updated on what you hear,” he tells me, closing the folder and sliding it into his filing cabinet. “Unless you need me, we won’t meet up until it’s time to submit your petition to graduate and how many tickets you’ll need for commencement in the spring.”

Goosebumps cover my arms. “It sounds so...final. We’re not even at midterms yet this semester.”

He offers me a sympathetic smile. “Time goes by quickly, especially when we least want it to. Enjoy life as it comes, Olive. That’s the best advice I can leave you with.”

It’s solid advice.

I zip my bag up and toss it over my shoulder after standing. “You *really* prefer baseball over hockey?”

All he does is grin.



IT’S BEEN AN hour since Berlin, Skylar, and I started studying at Berlin’s apartment together. But I don’t know how much studying we’ve actually done by the time we stopped snacking on the wild assortment of items we all brought with us. It’s either the sugar or something else making Skylar fidget across from me.

“Are you high?” I ask her, tapping my highlighter against my textbook. “You haven’t sat still since we got here.”

Berlin perks up from the notecards she’s been reading over. “If you’re high, you better share. I haven’t smoked in way too long. My mom told me I needed to ‘relax on the reefer’ before I fry my braincells. Total buzzkill.”

Skylar doesn’t look surprised by that at all. Then again, neither am I. Berlin is a free spirit. She’s admitted to trying mushrooms before, so smoking pot seems like an obvious indulgence for her. “I haven’t smoked pot before.”

Berlin’s eyes bulge. “Never?”

“Never,” she confirms.

“Me neither,” I pipe in, earning me an equal stare in disbelief. “It smells bad. Maybe if it was an edible I’d like it. Who doesn’t enjoy brownies?”

Skylar nods, pointing her pen at me. “True. They have lollipops too. I do love suckers.”

Berlin tries getting our attention back, dropping her cards onto the table. “How have I not been able to corrupt you in this field yet? I feel like I’ve failed.”

“Maybe it’s because we wouldn’t accept brownies from you after hearing your laxative story,” I quip.

Skylar hums. “I don’t think I can trust you offering me a cookie, much less a brownie.”

Berlin groans. “That was one time!”

I turn back to Skylar. “If you’re not high, why are you so fidgety? What aren’t you telling us?”

Berlin seems interested enough to let go of our previous conversation. “Yeah, you have been acting weird. Are you pregnant again? Because there have been studies that siblings get along better with small age gaps between them. I read about it in my child adolescence class.”

Sometimes I forget she’s studying to be a teacher. It’s both terrifying and perfect at the same time.

“I’m not pregnant.” She shoots Berlin a look.

“Then what?” I pry.

Her teeth bite down onto her lower lip. “It’s not official yet but...” She sets her pen down and sets her hands into her lap. “We bought a house.”

My eyes widen. She told me a month ago that they weren’t completely sold on any that they’ve seen. “What? When? Which one? That’s so exciting, Sky!”

“Isn’t that good news?” Berlin asks, her brows pinching when she sees Skylar’s expression. Why does my best friend look like she wants to cry?

Skylar nods slowly. “It is, but it’s scary. I don’t have a job yet, and I’m probably not going to be able to get one that contributes to the bills like Danny can. He’s getting his inheritance soon, and the number is... a lot. Like a lot, a lot. And his family and my family are making plans to move closer to us so they can be around Bentley.”

I reach out to her, seeing the glaze in her eyes that’s bound to spill over. “That’s *good*. You’ve been missing your family.”

“I know I have been. Dad is opening a financial advising business here like the one he has in California. He’s planning on running it locally and having his COO take over the one on the West Coast.” Her eyes water. “It

just seems like a fever dream, you know? I came to Lindon to get away from them and get out of my sister's shadows and now..."

"They're coming to support you," Berlin finishes for her. "I think that's sweet."

I squeeze her hand. "You okay?"

She wets her lips. "Yes. Sorry. I don't know why I'm so emotional. It isn't like they never loved me. It just feels full circle for them to come to me and support what I'm building here. I'm lucky."

A tear falls down her cheek that she quickly swipes away.

Berlin stares at her. "You sure you're not pregnant? You're not normally this emotional."

Skylar laugh-snorts. "God, I hope not."

We all laugh.

"At least you'll have DJ's inheritance to help fund your family," she reasons. "I need a sugar daddy with deep pockets. Especially a young one. Is that asking for too much?"

Both Skylar and I say, "Yes" at the same time.

Berlin abandons her cards again. "If now is the time we all make sappy confessions, I'd like Olive to go next since she's with a famous hockey player. And because my vagina is full of cobwebs from the lack of sex I'm getting, I require vivid details and descriptions."

I throw an empty candy wrapper at her head and watch it smack her temple. "You're such a freak."

"No," she corrects, "I'm single and horny. Get it right."

I grin. "You need a vibrator then. They get the job done well."

She thinks about it. "That would do. You'll have to give me some recommendations."

Skylar cuts in, turning the conversation away from battery-operated boyfriends. "Are you going to Alex's game this weekend? They're playing at their stadium, right?"

I nod, unable to stop smiling. "He got me a jersey with his name and number on it."

Both of their eyes soften.

Berlin sighs lightly. "He got you a jersey. That man is basically peeing on you, and I think that's hot."

Skylar and I stare at her.

“Not golden showers,” she says quickly. “I mean, to each their own. But the claiming his territory thing. It’s hot.”

We still stare.

She frowns, picking up her study cards and staring at them. “Shut up,” she mumbles. “I told you I’m single and horny.”

This time, Skylar and I share a look and giggle at her disgruntlement.

Skylar leans her elbow on the coffee table we’re surrounding and sighs. “Look at us. We’re moving on with our lives.”

“Some of you are,” Berlin chirps in feign irritation. “You bitches are ditching me. Rude.”

“Aww, we’ll miss you too,” I coo at her, playfully poking her cheek.

She swats my hand away, but I can see she’s fighting her own smile. “Stop. I need to be mad at you for at least another two minutes.”

I snort. “Okay, you do that.”

Skylar shakes her head from across the table and goes back to studying.

But she’s right.

Life is about to change, and change is scary.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I send off another text to my brother. He’s been avoiding me ever since finding out about Alex and it’s starting to get on my nerves.

Me: Even though you are being a giant butt to me right now, I still want to wish you good luck at your game tomorrow. Kick Toronto’s ass like I know you can

I know he won’t reply, but I don’t care. If life is going to change, it’s not going to be for the worse. Which means Sebastian will forgive me and I can be with Alex without feeling guilty.

Me: And tell Tori I said hi

Me: And when you’re done being mad at me for no reason, consider Olive as a girl’s name. She’ll be graced with good conversation starters then

I know he’ll at least roll his eyes at that.

He can act angry all he wants, but I know he’ll get over it soon enough. We’re Hendersons, and we’re stubborn. But we’re also lovers in the end.

Me: Love you dork face

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Alex

ADRENALINE PUMPS THROUGH my body as I check my phone for a fourth time since suiting up for the game. Coach gave me the green light on starting, and the person I wanted to tell the good news still hasn't responded back to my slew of texts.

"You good?" Clarkson asks.

I wave my phone. "Waiting to hear from Olive. She was supposed to be here by now."

The four texts I sent her have all gone unanswered. I figured it was because she was driving, but now I'm not sure.

Clarkson adjusts his jersey. "I'm sure traffic is just a bitch. The first game always gets a lot of people traveling to the stadium. The news was reporting a lot of delays last I heard."

But why wouldn't she text me back if she was stuck in traffic? "Yeah," I mutter, the feeling in my gut getting heavier as I settle onto the bench.

"All right, boys," Coach calls out, entering the locker room. "Are you ready to show the Krakens what we've got?"

A majority of the team cheers, but I can't gather the energy to say anything.

Me: Are you okay? You're still coming tonight right?

"O'Conner," Coach calls out. "Get your head in the game, son. Quit texting your mom or whatever piece of ass you're trying to make plans with. If you want something to celebrate later, we need you here with your team."

Teeth grinding, I grip the phone and swallow the cool retort that would probably get me into trouble if I spoke it aloud. I can't risk giving up my spot on the ice.

Clarkson pats my back when I stand to join the huddle. He always gives us pep talks before the games start, but they're not nearly as good as the

ones Olive delivers.

“We had a tough end to last season,” he begins, looking around the room. “But that’s not going to depict how we play today. It’s a new season. A new start. Tonight, we’re going to remind Canada’s team what we’ve got. Are you with me?”

An array of “fuck yeahs” and “damn straights” echo around the locker room.

I feel Clarkson’s eyes on me as I tune out the rest of his speech and follow the guys when they start spilling out of the locker room and toward the arena.

“Hey,” my captain says, pulling me aside. “I can see if Belle can get ahold of her. But we need you in the game tonight, man. And we need you to play like you did at practice. I know it’s probably asking for a lot, but...”

Swallowing, I forced myself to nod. “I need to know she’s okay. If she chose not to come...” Well, that was something I’d have to deal with later tonight. But something tells me it isn’t that at all. She said we’re a team. We agreed.

Teams don’t abandon each other.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” he reassures, but there’s something in his eyes that glints with a shadow of doubt. “I’ll try getting a message to Belle before we go out there, okay? But tonight is a chance to prove yourself. You’re not the Alex O’Conner of last season. You’re not a rookie. You’re a Penguin, and you’re here to stay.”

Here to stay.

I dip my chin. “All right.”

He smacks my back again before we wind up with the rest of the team. I don’t know what Clarkson says to one of the PAs, but she runs off after he gives her a quick order and a head nod in my direction.

Anxiety bubbles under my skin as the music starts playing for our introduction. The crowd gets louder, their anticipation not fueling me the way it used to.

I love hockey.

I love the adrenaline and the noise and the pain that comes with getting slammed into the boards or overworking your muscles trying to outskate your rivals. The buzz under my skin warms my body no matter how cold the arena feels once my skates hit the ice.

Today it feels different, though.

All of those feelings are there.

The adrenaline.

The warmth.

But in the back of my mind, I'm thinking of her. Wondering. Worrying. It consumes me.

Clarkson skates beside me. "Head in the game," he reminds me, eyeing me through his helmet.

Moskins skates on my other side. "Trust me. Whatever is on your mind can wait until after we stomp on these fuckers. Distractions aren't welcome on the ice," he tells me, skating away.

My jaw grinds, even though he's right.

I can't afford to be distracted.

When the game starts, we get into formation.

I crouch down, holding my stick and feeling the cool air hit my face. My fingertips clench the wrapped graphite as the whistle goes off.

I don't know what comes over me.

Maybe I get possessed, or maybe something snaps into place. But I remind myself how far I've come to get here, and how much I have to lose if I let it go away.

Distractions aren't welcome on the ice.

Those words echo in my head.

I intercept the puck and use my body to block defense from getting it back. I maneuver around him and pass it to Nelson before someone trips me and sends me flying across the ice stomach first. Ice chips fly up and spray me, fueling the rage that's been bubbling there for a long time.

Channel it.

I get up as the referee intervenes, calling a tripping penalty and sending the douchebag to the box for two minutes. It'll barely give us the upper hand, but I plan on taking full advantage.

Clarkson gestures to me and I show him I'm fine before we're back at it.

There are only a few minutes left in the quarter, and the pressure of the clock starts weighing on me.

Forty-five seconds.

Moskins sends the puck to Nelson, who gets blocked by the defense, but I manage to get the puck as they're sending it across the ice.

Twenty seconds.

Two big players come at me with speeds even *I'm* impressed by.
I bypass one and narrowly miss the other.
I still have the puck.

The goal approaches, and I can tell they're not going to have enough time to stop me.

I pivot away from the oncoming player and move the puck away from him before whipping it as hard as I can toward the net.

The goalie lunges to stop it.

But he misses.

When the buzzer goes off, we're 1-0.

And despite my teammates surrounding me, I look at the stands and search for the only pair of eyes I want on me.

But she's not there.

I feel nothing.

Not even when I score a second goal.

Or when Clarkson scores a third.

As the last quarter ends, it's a shutout.

4-0.

As we skate off the ice, I glance up at the friends and family section.

Olive never showed up.

Clarkson finds me staring at the crowd, skating over to me with a serious look cutting into his face. "Belle called. She's with Olive."

My eyes snap from him to the friends and family section where they *should* be.

"Hey." He grabs my arm, regaining my attention. "Belle said there was a car accident..."

Everything goes silent, save the hard and heavy *thump, thump, thump* beating in my chest. My heart echoes in my eardrums as I watch Clarkson's mouth move without hearing whatever words are coming out.

Suddenly, Moskins is in front of me.

Not only in front of me, shaking me.

"He's in shock," someone says.

"O'Conner." That's Moskins, but for someone standing so close to me, he sounds far away. "Don't take this personally or hold it against me."

I barely have time to blink before he's slapping me across the face, causing the drumming in my ears to become ringing.

Red hot anger boils under my skin as I snap out of the panic holding my body down.

“Whoa,” Clarkson says as I lunge at Moskins.

Moskins is holding his hands up. “You weren’t moving or answering us. You can hit me back later. In the meantime, let’s get you to the locker room and washed up.”

“But Olive—”

“Is okay,” Clarkson reassures. “Belle is with her.”

She’s okay.

She’s okay.

Something inside me cracks.

Because the last time there was a car accident, not everybody was fine. My father never came home, and neither did his wife. I saw them only one more time after that, and it was during their funerals. It was closed casket, but their wedding photo was on a stand between the two oak pieces of wood in the front of the room.

She’s okay.

I take a deep breath, easing the tightness in my chest that has slowly been suffocating me.

“There you go,” Moskins encourages. “Come on. We don’t want to make a scene. People are still watching.”

I let them guide me away from the people lingering in the crowd hoping to get our attention.

If anything happened to Olive, she’d never know how I felt. She never would have heard me tell her how much it scares me not to have her in this life.

I swallow hard.

She’d never know how much I love her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Olive

MY HEART IS still pumping wildly three and a half hours later. I don't think my hands have stopped shaking either. I'm normally all about a little adrenaline, but this shot of it doesn't feel nearly as good.

"It's going to be okay," Belle promises, rubbing my arm sympathetically as she pulls up to the stadium. "The good news is you're okay."

I'm okay.

I'm. Okay.

That's true. Even if my car isn't. The tow truck driver didn't seem to think it was a complete loss, but that's up to the insurance company to decide. "I'm okay," I repeat, but my voice feels distant—shakier than my fingers that I squeeze together in my lap.

Most of the drive to Pittsburgh went fine. It was in the last thirty minutes that things went sideways. The car that hit mine wasn't paying attention to the long line of backed-up traffic waiting to get off the exit. I think the cop said he'd been on his phone when he smacked into my poor, poor vehicle. And then mine bumped into the car in front of me, which created a domino effect that left at least four cars damaged.

But I *am* okay.

Just shaken.

And carless.

Which is going to make getting back to Lindon fun. Or expensive. I'm not sure which yet, but I don't have enough brain power to care.

"Hey," Belle says softly.

I realize the car is off and I'm staring off into oblivion through the windshield. "Sorry."

She shakes her head. "It's okay. Jesse said the guys are still inside. They won."

They won.

They won. And I wasn't there.

"I'm a terrible girlfriend," I groan, dropping my head onto the headrest. "It's his first game, and I didn't show up."

Belle eyes me. "That isn't your fault, babes. It's the asshole who couldn't wait to send his dick pick or whatever he was doing to some poor, unsuspecting woman."

That gets me to snort.

She takes the keys out of the ignition and opens her door. "Come on. He's going to want to see you, especially in that jersey."

I look down at myself.

I wore his jersey just like he requested. And I even bought new panties that were yellow to match his team colors. If he even wants to see them at this point.

If he's not mad. God, I hope he's not mad. I'm mad enough for the two of us. Because of that dickhead who hit me. Because I missed the game. Because my father texted me almost directly after it happened asking me to talk.

I'm just...mad.

The walk into the stadium and through the back halls is quiet. Belle knows exactly where to steer us like she's done this a million times. Which she probably had. Will that be me? If I get this internship, I'll definitely see behind-the-scenes stuff. But if I get that on top of staying in this relationship, I'll be as well versed as Belle.

Maybe.

I can hear the distant chatter and celebration as we round a corner that leads down a narrow hallway. "This is the back entrance to the locker room," she explains. "The other side has a lot more people gathered. Some media waiting for post-game interviews, but mostly significant others, friends, and family."

I nod as we stop by the doors and listen to a few guys howling like dogs from inside.

Belle rolls her eyes. "They're obviously excited about the win. I'm pretty sure the idiot howling is Moskins."

I let myself smile, but it feels forced. "I feel bad that I missed it."

She squeezes my shoulder. "There will be other games. If they play the way they did tonight, there may even be a Stanley Cup."

"That good?"

Her smile grows. "Oh yeah."

I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse because I didn't get to witness it myself.

She lets go of me and gestures toward the door, pushing it open and guiding me in. "Their dicks should be put away by now," she reassures me as we venture further into the room. There's a lot of steam from the showers and random equipment and dirty uniforms scattered on the tile floors.

And, like she said, pretty much everybody is dressed. With the exception of Moskins, who's shirtless as he towel dries his hair.

But I barely give him any attention when I see Alex sitting in the corner, fully clothed and staring at his phone. That is, until Belle and I walk in. As if he can sense me, he bolts to standing.

The same time I say, "I'm so sorry," he says, "Are you okay?"

Belle had called her stepbrother when she came to pick me up. I told her not to tell him much because I didn't want Alex to worry about me, but I can see that was a pointless venture.

"I'm all right," I say, even though he's checking me out from head to toe. Thankfully, the airbag didn't go off. But the seatbelt definitely hurt when it locked up on me, so I'd be shocked if there wasn't a mark tomorrow across my chest.

I don't even realize Belle disappears until Alex pulls me over to the bench he was just sitting on and sits me down. "I tried calling you, texting you."

Frowning, I lift my phone out of my back pocket with a long sigh. "I'm not quite sure what happened, but it broke."

The screen is cracked, and it hasn't turned on since Belle picked me up. The last message I saw was from my father. It's like fate bitch slapping me in the face. As if getting rear-ended isn't bad enough, let's add my absent father's texts to the mixture. The last one he sent was him asking why I was being "childish" and not answering his calls.

Yeah, he isn't getting any callbacks after that.

Alex's throat bobs as he puts his hand on my cheek and caresses my face. "I could have fucking *lost* you tonight."

Hearing his voice crack breaks my heart.

"I'm okay," I tell him, cupping my palm over his on my face. "It was a freak accident, and I'm so, so sorry that I missed the game. I wanted to be here, Alex. I really did."

His eyes are glassy as he studies my face, leaning back on his bent knees. The breath he releases is long and heavy. When he's quiet, it's the first time I notice the rest of the room is too.

Everybody is gone.

When I look from the empty space behind us back to Alex's expression, I can see something heavy in his gaze. "What is it?"

His Adam's apple bobs again. "I could have lost you tonight," he repeats. "And that fucking terrifies me, Olive. I've lost so many people in my life. My father. My..." I know he was going to say his mother, but he stops himself. "The thought of losing you too..."

I reach out. "I'm right here."

"Everybody has left me."

His faraway look makes me nervous, so I sink onto my knees in front of him and grab his face to force him to look at me.

"I'm. Right. Here." I say slowly, tugging on his lip with the pad of my thumb. "I know this is scary. I know you've been dealt a shitty hand in life, but I'm not going anywhere. This isn't going to be like those annoying third-act breakups I read about in books because the couple is too afraid to work past their shit. We're not going to be those people. Do you hear me?"

He blinks, which tells me I'm getting somewhere.

"I filled out my internship application and sent it in," I continue, nodding with a small smile. "I don't know if I'll get it, but if I do, you're sort of stuck with me. So stop acting like you want to push me away. I'm in this. Are you?"

I hear the softest exhale from him that has me smiling a little wider. He blinks again, this time, his eyes focusing on mine.

"There you are," I whisper. "You said yourself that this isn't going to be easy. But if it's going to work, we both need to put in the effort. I'm willing to do that, but you need to meet me halfway. Okay?"

Finally, *finally*, his head bobs.

Something in me shifts, a warmth spreading from my chest upwards. Happiness, I think. Hope, maybe? It's something I don't know if I've ever felt before.

"We're allies, remember? A team."

His eyes scan over me. "A team," he agrees.

I blink, tears threatening to spill from the ducts they pool in. It feels good to be part of a team—an intimate one like this. It's him and me,

despite the odds. Who would have thought we would get here after he all but tore my heart out?

“You know, I kept thinking something was wrong with me for a long time. Bodhi Hoffman admitted he had feelings for me the other day. Feelings I didn’t know he had. It should have been obvious, but I was blind to it because there’s only one person I could ever think about. You.”

Those blue eyes of his darken.

“In the back of my mind, I thought there was no way I shouldn’t have fallen for somebody who made me feel that loved. He’s the type of guy who could have given me everything if I truly wanted it. But I didn’t. Because I never felt the same way as I have with you. With anybody. Not even when I hated you—when I *wanted* to hate you. We fought and made up and got stuck in a cycle of what-ifs, but it never made me waver in how I felt. I liked when you took control. I liked when you wouldn’t give up, even when I told myself I wanted to move on. So *is* there something wrong with me?”

Alex’s eyes roam over my face. My right eye. My left eye. My nose. My wavering lips. He plucks the bottom one with the pad of his thumb and loosens a shaky sigh. “There isn’t anything wrong with liking how we do things. With liking it rough or fast or hard. There’s nothing wrong with taking control or making demands. You can feel cherished and loved in so many ways, Olive. If I’ve ever failed to make you feel that then...” He stops himself, his throat bobbing. “Not wanting to be with him doesn’t mean something is wrong with you. He’s just not your person. He doesn’t truly know what you want.”

“And you do?” I doubt.

His palm cups my face, his thumb caressing my cheek until I close my eyes and embrace the feeling. “I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry.

I melt into his hold, leaning my cheek against his palm and sucking in a breath when he says, “I’m sorry that I love how we fight. I love that we’re two forces to be reckoned with. I’m sorry that whatever love he could have offered you wasn’t enough. But I’m *never* going to be sorry for loving you more.”

I start to shake my head but stop when he presses his fingers against my parted lips. “I need you to choose me, Olive. I need it to be me that you pick fights with and love to hate. I need it to be me that you get irritated with and vent to your friends about. I need you to be by my side, cheering

me on, holding my hand while I deal with shit with my mom. I fucking need you to love me as much as I love you or it might actually kill me.”

I stare at him in disbelief, remembering what he said not that long ago that broke a piece of me. “You told me you’d never love me.”

“I lied.”

“You told me it was never going to be like that with us.”

“I couldn’t *let* it be then.”

“Then what changed?”

A pause. “Everything.”

We stare at one another.

Unblinking.

Barely breathing.

Chest to chest.

Hand to face.

I relish in his admission. In his proclamation. In the possibilities of what this could mean. But does that mean I trust that he won’t change his mind tomorrow? Can I truly believe that he’s not simply saying this because his emotions are haywire from the game?

There are so many questions and not enough answers for me to even process what he’s asking of me. “You’re not the only one who’s scared of losing somebody, Alex. I can’t have you checking out when things are tough.”

“I won’t.”

“You need to promise.”

He presses my hands into his face. “I promise. I swear to you, Olive, I’ll do everything I can to prove how much I love you. You’ll probably be sick of me over it.”

Somehow, I doubt that.

“I love you,” I whisper, sniffing back tears that want to leak out. “I love you, Alex. I’ve loved you for a long time. And I swear to God, if you ever break my heart I’m going to hire people to take you out so you never skate again.”

“How very Tonya Harding of you,” he muses.

I roll my eyes. “I mean it.”

His forehead leans against mine. “I have no doubt, baby. And I have a feeling there’s more than one man on the Rangers who would probably back you up in that promise.”

He's not wrong. "So we're doing this?"

"Baby, we've never stopped."

A lump forms in my throat. "Say it again."

He chuckles, his lips brushing mine. "Are you getting greedy?"

I kiss him back. "I don't take these things lightly. I need to make sure I heard you right."

I feel him smile against my mouth. "I love you, Olive Henderson. Even though your brother hates me. Even though you're probably going to cheer for the Rangers and the Giants. I love you despite how hard I tried not to. With you, it's impossible not to feel this way."

Yeah, I definitely like the sound of that.

"Holidays are going to be interesting," I remark, thinking of what Sebastian will say to him. Especially if one of their teams advances past the other.

His lips quirk up higher at the corners. "But I wouldn't miss it for the world. After all, we're allies. We're a team."

My heart swells.

Because I love the sound of that.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Alex

I'VE BEEN TO the training complex in New York before, but this is the first time I've been stuffed into a space outside the locker room. The empty office smells...nice. Floral, I think. Probably from the plug in on the wall. It's better than the body odor and sweat mixture I usually get in the locker room. There are minimal decorations and nothing on the desk, which tells me this is a spare room that they put people to meet in for privacy.

One they won't care about getting messed up in case said meeting goes wrong. Which today's...well, you never know.

When the door opens a few minutes later, I know who it is before even turning to look. "I thought they were pranking me when they said you were here," Sebastian grumbles, closing the door behind him and leaning against it.

Realizing he's not going to sit down, I stand up and face him. He hasn't changed at all since the first time I ever met him. He had the same kind of raw determination set in stone in his eyes that I did on the ice, and it's still present today. Not that I would ever admit it to him, but I looked up to him when I started playing for Lindon. I thought he could be an ally. That was before I understood the gravity of getting to the top.

Henderson and Olive don't share many characteristics other than a few basic ones. Their eyes aren't the same color, but their hair is. He's not much taller than her. Their skin tone isn't all that different either, but I know he tans easier because he always came back to college looking darker than he left in the spring. Olive was always the same shade above porcelain, which I always thought was hot. She didn't.

"You going to keep staring at me, Pretty Boy, or talk?" Henderson taunts.

It snaps me out of it and reminds me why I'm here. He's right. It's not to look at him. "You need to talk to your sister and stop being an asshole

about this situation. Your opinion means a lot to Olive and shutting her out is a coward move.”

He stands to full height. “What I do or don’t do is none of your business, O’Conner.”

I walk over to him, standing mere inches away from his tense body by the door. “Olive *is* my business now. I wouldn’t be spending the only day I have off the ice here with you if it weren’t important. But *she* is. And you throwing a temper tantrum isn’t getting us anywhere. If you have a problem, fine. But that’s with me. *Not* your sister. You icing her out is hurting her, and I don’t like to see her hurt.”

His eyes narrow. “Neither do I.”

“Funny,” I muse dryly, watching his eyes darken. “Because out of the two of us, only you are the one actually doing any damage.”

His nostrils flare in anger, but he doesn’t say anything.

I shake my head, not wanting to fight. I came here to make a point. Nothing else. “Look, I don’t expect you to understand the shit I’ve gone through. I’m not going to waste my time explaining it to you, because I highly doubt you care. But I’ve worked my ass off to be where I am. And I’d wager to guess I worked twice as hard as you to make the kind of moves I did to sign a contract with the Penguins. I’ve sacrificed more than you know to be here.”

“And you think I didn’t?” He scoffs, shaking his head. “Anybody in the league put the work in, O’Conner. That doesn’t make you special.”

He’s right. “It doesn’t. But from where I’m standing, you haven’t had to fight to make it to practice or get what you want. You haven’t had to pay the price for being late when you were dealing with consequences out of your control. You get what you want, when you want it. You got a girl, a wife, and a kid on the way.”

His lips twitch from the information that I know isn’t public yet.

“Relax. I have no interest spewing that to the media. I’m not exactly fans of them either,” I tell him. “The point is, I sacrificed something good with Olive to get here. I left her behind once. I’m not going to do that again just because you’re being a pussy about us being together.”

He looks away, grinding his teeth.

It doesn’t stop me from continuing. “You and I both have some things in common. We both love Olive, and we both would do anything for our families.”

Finally getting his attention, his eyes scan over my face. “You love my sister?”

“I have for a while. She was the only smart one to see it at the time. I was too stubborn; too focused on the game. But I’m not going to let anything, or *anyone*, hold me back now. I would prefer your support in this, but I don’t need it. I’m just aware enough to know that it would mean something to her if I had it.”

I don’t know what he’s thinking, but it’s probably nothing good. But I didn’t come all this way for nothing. If he wants to continue being a dick to his sister, then so be it. At least I tried. I can walk away knowing that. If Olive knew I was here, I’m sure she’d appreciate the attempt too.

After another tense minute or two, Sebastian’s shoulders loosen a fraction from their squared stance. “You actually came all this way to tell me that you love her?”

“Family means everything to your sister,” I explain nonchalantly. “I get what that’s like. Before her, my mother was all I had. It’s not fun when the people in our lives disappear. It hasn’t been easy for her. So, yeah. I drove here to tell you to pull your head out of your ass. For *her*. Because I love her. Because I want to do whatever it takes to make her happy.”

There’s caution in his eyes as he loosens a long sigh. “You’ve changed.”

What did he expect? “We all need to grow up eventually, Henderson. Sometimes, it doesn’t happen until we find the right people to make us *want* to.”

Something flashes across his face.

Understanding.

Henderson nods, swiping at his jaw. “Yeah, I get that. Trust me.” His brows pinch in contemplation before he drops his hand to his side and slides it into the pocket of his jeans.

We’re quiet for a second.

Then he says, “I want what’s best for her.”

“I do too.”

Rubbing his lips together, he dips his chin and holds his hand out to me. “Truce. For Olive.”

I don’t hesitate to take it. “Does that mean you’re going to call her?”

Sebastian rolls his eyes. “Yes, I’m going to call her. Look, I don’t know how I feel about this. I’ve always seen you one way, but she seems to think

I've got it wrong. So I'm not going to discourage her if it's what she wants. It's her life. Her decision."

Glad he finally gets it. "Exactly."

"But I will fucking *kill you* if you break her heart," he warns me, tightening his hold on my hand until one of my finger joints pops.

"I'd be offended if you didn't."

He lets go. "You stood up for her after those photos of you two leaked. That's the kind of person she needs in her life."

I'm still pissed at Hoffman for letting her get shit-talked in the comments of his post, and I hope Henderson gave him hell for it. "I'll never put her in the position to be ridiculed. Maybe you should tell your buddy that next time he tries to get the girl."

He huffs. "I'm starting to realize he never had her to begin with."

I can't help but smirk. "No. He didn't."

He leans against the door again, crossing one ankle over the other. "Is that all you had to say?"

I grab my phone from where I'd set it on the desk and slide it into my back pocket. "I said what I needed to. Maybe you can pass along a message to your father while you're at it."

His brows go up. "My dad?"

"He's been reaching out to Olive to apologize for how he's treated her," I tell him, which seems to be a surprise to him. I guess she didn't share that in her many unanswered messages to him. "But she isn't interested. At least not right now. He doesn't seem to understand that he needs to make up for all the times he let her down."

Sebastian slowly nods. "He's never been the smartest man."

I'm inclined to agree. "If you don't get him off her back, I'll find his address and show up to his place next. And something tells me he wouldn't like that too much."

"He *is* a Rangers fan."

"Man has poor taste," I offer easily.

Sebastian has the decency to chuckle. "I'll talk to him. It's overdue. I hoped Olive would shut him out a long time ago, but she always felt obligated to see him."

I can understand that. "We don't like the idea of losing family. But sometimes we need to prioritize peace above anything else. That's what I

hope to bring her. It's not going to be easy, but I'll be damned if I give up trying."

My biggest competitor since I joined the Lindon U hockey team sizes me up. "Olive has never truly needed anybody before. She either never let me help her or fought like hell when I did. But she told me about the internship in one of the messages she left. She *let you* help her."

That has my lips curling into an easy smile.

Because she did.

"She trusts you too," he adds quietly.

And those words...damn they do something to me.

He takes a deep breath and pushes off the door, grabbing the handle to leave. He pauses only for a second before saying, "Guess she's okay with needing you."

Then he walks out.

Leaving me realizing what a great feeling that is. Not only to be loved, but to be needed. To be trusted. To have someone to rely on instead of doing everything alone.

Olive *chose* me.

Olive chose *me*.

I smile down at the floor.

Olive. Chose. Me.

And I'll never stop choosing her.

EPILOGUE

Olive

THE FAMILIAR CHILL from the arena is a welcoming feeling that pebbles my arms as I scream at the top of my lungs alongside sixteen-thousand other fanatics. There are twelve seconds left in the final period, with a two-point lead in favor of the New York Rangers.

Ten.

Nine.

Eight.

The puck goes flying from Sebastian to Akira Mendall across the ice, right past the Bruins' defense.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

My brother maneuvers skillfully around the other defenseman and sees Bodhi open on the right.

Four seconds.

Sebastian sends the puck over to the right winger at three seconds, where Bodhi takes his shot.

Two.

One.

The puck flies past the goaltender and into the net, sending the crowd into a frenzy.

"They're moving on!" I scream at anybody who will listen, bouncing up and down before catapulting myself into Alex's arms.

He easily catches me, spinning me once before setting me carefully onto the ground.

For a split second, I forgot he was here.

At my brother's game.

Where the Rangers officially advanced to the Conference Finals.

I look up at Alex with a big smile on my face. He's already watching me with those blue eyes that still do something to my heart. "You know what this means right?" I ask him.

His hands go to my hips. "What?"

"You're going against each other in the finals," I say, as if he doesn't already know.

Sebastian against Alex.

Their rivalry continues.

His lips quick up. "So it would seem."

My palms rest on either side of his chest. "Aren't you going to ask who I'm cheering for?"

Alex shakes his head, squeezing his fingers into the fleshy part of my hips. "It doesn't matter. Because not only do you work for the team now, but at the end of the day, you're coming home with *me*."

The smile on my face grows instantly.

He pecks my forehead. "Plus, I know better than to assume you won't cheer for the Rangers even on the job," he muses against my skin. "If today is any indication, you'll be the loudest in the room."

Pride swells in my chest. "I always am."

He chuckles. The sound is low and mischievous, like the glint in his eyes is. "Oh, trust me, baby girl. I know that."

My cheeks heat at the dirty implication.

He reaches for his phone and hands it out to Murphy, Gemma's grandfather. Bodhi's daughter and both of her grandparents attended today's game to show their support. I'm not sure what's happening with them, but things seem good. At least from the outside looking in.

"Do you mind taking a picture of me and my girl?" Alex asks the older man, showing him what button to press on the camera app.

I look over at him when he hooks an arm around my waist. "A picture, huh?"

"I told you before that any guy would be lucky to be in a photo with you," he reminds me, tugging me closer into his side. "We control this narrative. You and me. It's what we decide to do with it that counts. I don't have to post it. It can just be for us."

A warm feeling wraps around my heart as Murphy tells us to get ready. He counts to three before pressing the button.

Alex presses his lips against the side of my head at the same time, and when we see the photo...

God.

My heart turns into mush.

Because we look so in love.

It's hard to look away.

"That kind of love," Murphy tells us with a smile on his aged face, "is the kind that lasts a lifetime."

Gemma runs over to him and hugs his leg. He puts a hand on her head and smiles down at his granddaughter. The love is plain as day on his face, lighting the whole thing up.

Just like how mine looks in the picture.

I look from Gemma to Alex. "Post it. I don't have anything to be ashamed of."

He presses another kiss against my head. "I don't either. Come on. We should go find your brother and congratulate him."

When his fingers thread through mine, it sends sparks throughout my whole body. The tingling sensation settles into my fingertips and toes the entire way to the locker room where friends and family gather to meet the players.

Tori is standing with Beckham, my nephew, and they're wearing matching Henderson jerseys like the one I'm in. Because she was working, she was with the media closer to the action. Go figure her debut in the headlines was much kinder than mine was with Alex. But whatever.

Alex has a point—we own the narrative.

Just like Tori owns hers.

When Sebastian walks out of the room, his eyes instantly gravitate toward his wife and son. Pecking them both on the heads, he says something quietly to them both before turning to see Alex and I holding hands off to the side.

He comes up and gives me a one-armed hug before shaking Alex's free hand. The grin on his face is the same cocky, victorious one he always has when his team wins. All he says to my boyfriend is, "Can't wait to beat your ass at the finals, O'Conner."

Alex squeezes my brother's hand. "The feeling is mutual, Henderson."

Tori and I share an amused smile.

That night, Alex posts our picture online.

His mother texts him from her new home on the outskirts of Philly saying she can't wait to see us next week.

My brother comments with the puke face emoji and gets five thousand likes within thirty minutes.

Our mother tells him to behave himself and gets ten thousand likes.

But, otherwise, we get nothing but love.

Did you enjoy Alex and Olive's story?

[Review it Here](#)

OceanofPDF.com

**Want to read more in the Lindon U world?
Here's an excerpt from Skylar and Danny's book!**

CHAPTER ONE

Skylar

BAD DECISIONS TASTE like rum, coke, and something metallic. A taste that reminds me of the time my older sisters dared me to see how many quarters I could fit into my mouth at once.

With fluttering eyelids and heavy limbs, I come to with a dry mouth and cloudy head, finding it hard to move in the soft sheets covering my chilled body. Sheets that don't feel as soft as the expensive certified organic cotton threads covering the twin mattress in my room.

The bed under my lead-like limbs feels too lumpy, nothing like the thick, foam pad covering the school-supplied mattress on my raised frame.

One of my sticky eyelids peels open in confusion, vision blurry but able to take in the unfamiliar setup of the room. It's bigger and colder than the double I share with my freshman roommate Rebecca, and the furniture is nothing like the stuff I have.

It takes a few seconds, but I quickly realize the reality of the situation. Bolting upright, I careen to the side when dizziness slams into me. The black sheet falls down my body, exposing the untied, wrinkled purple wrap shirt I borrowed from my friend Aliyah that's exposing the peach bra I'd slipped on underneath. I suck in a sharp breath when my eyes go to the empty spot beside me, then slowly to the side, where I see what's thrown onto the carpet.

Time stops.

Panic seeps into my ribcage.

I lift the sheet and shakily lower it once I see the naked skin it's covering, then glance back at the black leggings and panties in the middle of the floor. They're the only things I'd worn that were mine. The shirt, shoes, and new pushup bra were all from the girls I befriended who insisted I needed to dress up for the party they were dragging me to.

You'll have fun.

We won't let you out of our sight.

My recollection of the events beyond letting them play with my stubborn, black-dyed hair and telling me what makeup would look best on my tan skin is fuzzy.

Too fuzzy to put together how I got in a room I don't recognize with my pants off.

Doing a quick scan to double-check that I'm alone, I toss my legs over the side of the bed and wince at the ache between them. I bolt toward my clothing, worried someone will bust in. Tugging the panties up my legs, I stop when I glance down and see the small smears of blood on the inside of my thighs.

I stare.

Not breathing.

Not blinking.

Thud, thud, thud. The drumming between my head and heart is in sync, demanding my attention as I stare at the red smattering my skin.

A moment or two later, I force myself to finish getting changed with shaky hands.

Pressing an ear against the wooden door to see if I hear anyone outside of it, I quietly turn the knob and creep out of the room with my borrowed black heels tucked in my hands and my heart lodged in the back of my throat.

I cringe at each creak of the floorboards under my bare feet as I tiptoe down the narrow hallway toward the wooden staircase. I don't know what time it is because my phone is dead, but the sun is out and blinding me, making the headache throbbing inside my temples ten times worse.

As I creep down the steps and toward the front door, I notice that there's no remnants of a party left. No plastic cups lying around, no food on the carpet, no weird boozy smells that I vaguely remember from the night before. The bits I do recall consist of a packed house that made me feel claustrophobic, loud music that made it impossible to hear what my friends were saying as I followed them into the mass of bodies, and the scent of cheap beer.

I'm almost to the door when I freeze mid-step after hearing, "Who the hell are you?"

My body locks up from the deep voice behind me. I don't recognize it, not that that says much. I'm not familiar with most men around here since my small circle of peers is made up of my roommate Rebecca and a few other girls—Deanna and Aliyah—I met during orientation a month before.

Footsteps come from somewhere else, stopping close by. A second voice, less deep and more amused, says, "Huh. I thought everyone did their walks of shame already. Sorry, big man."

I make myself look over my shoulder, but I don't know why. I'm met with two different faces. One boyish and clearly amused, if the mischievous glint in his blue eyes is any indication, and the other full of...nothing. No emotion. Nothing readable. The shorter of the two—though not by much—grins at me before scoping out my body in a once-over that makes me want to make a break for it.

If I were smart, I wouldn't let them stare and leer. The shorter one cocks his head until his messy blond hair flops over his forehead and lips kick up. He elbows his friend, who looks massive and far less enthused of my presence in comparison.

Both are built like athletes. Strong. Broad. Like they could take down another person their size or larger if they wanted to. Deanna said the party was at the football house.

We won't let you out of our sight, is what Dee promised me.

How did I get separated from them?

"We didn't know anyone else was here," the taller, stoic-looking one tells me. His lips press into a firm line as he watches me, eyes narrowing. Accusatory.

I'm uncomfortable.

Hungover.

Confused.

It doesn't take much to figure out what exactly happened last night, and it makes me feel itchy. Dirty. My mouth feels dry as cotton and I just want to go back to the dorms and take a long, hot shower.

We won't let you out of our sight.

But where are they now?

I swallow, stuttering through the nerves rising up my throat. "I-I..."

Unable to form proper words, I shake my head and dart toward the door. I don't know where I'm going since it was dark out when we drove here, but I don't stop or look back either.

I walk fast, following the sidewalk and feeling the hot sun heating the pavement and burning my feet. I only get a few feet away before having to stop and empty the contents of my stomach into a bush.

When I stand up, I blink a few times to ward off the tears glazing my eyes, brush off my mouth with the back of my hand, and accept what happened last night.

I, Skylar Vivian Allen, lost my virginity at a party I didn't even want to go to. To a man I don't know. In a house I don't know.

Where my friends left me.

Freshman year at Lindon University is *not* off to a good start.

[Read Here Today](#)

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's hard to believe four years have passed since the first Lindon U book released. When I wrote *Dare You to Hate Me*, I had no intention of making it a five-book series. But when the readers requested more, it was a challenge I willingly took.

So, this book, and this whole series, is *for* you and *because* of you. I am beyond grateful for the years of dedication and patience you had while waiting for me to finally finish these stories.

And this book literally would not exist if it weren't for Olivia, aka my real-life Olive. Meeting you my freshman year of college changed my life for the better, and I am so thankful for our friendship. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I would not have survived that year without you by my side.

Forever grateful to all who stuck by me,
B

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste is a new adult and contemporary romance author who gives voices to raw, realistic characters with emotional storylines that tug on the heartstrings. She was born and raised in upstate New York, where she still resides with her four-legged feline sidekick, Oliver “Ollie” Queen. Her love for reading and writing began at an early age and only grew stronger after getting a BA in English and an MFA in English and creative writing. When she’s not writing, she’s working out, binge-watching reality game shows, and spending time with her friends and family.

Website:

authorbceleste.com

Facebook:

[AuthorBCeleste](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorBCeleste)

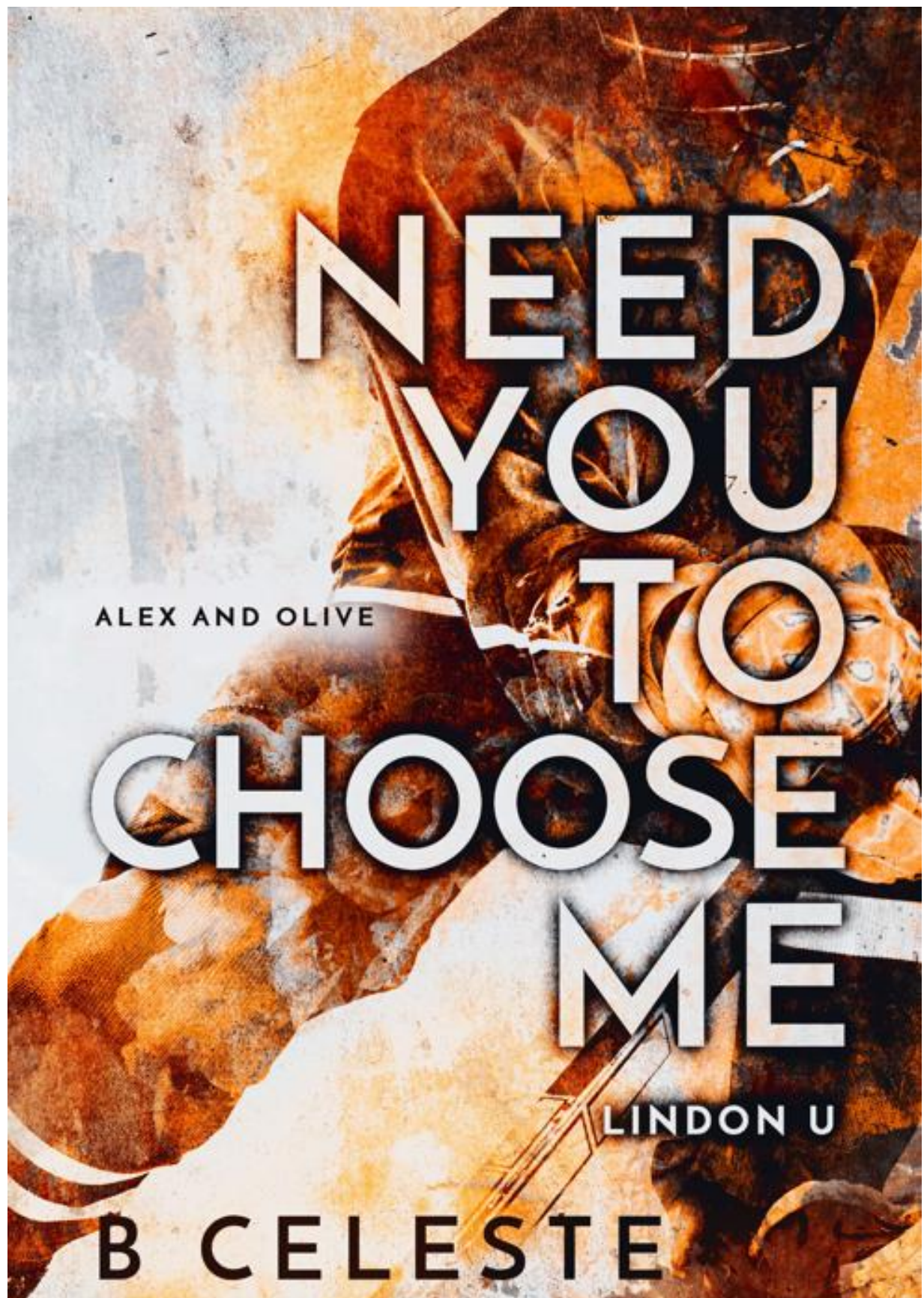
Instagram:

[@authorbceleste](https://www.instagram.com/authorbceleste)

TikTok:

[@authorbceleste](https://www.tiktok.com/@authorbceleste)

OceanofPDF.com



NEED YOU TO CHOOSE ME

ALEX AND OLIVE

LINDON U

B CELESTE

