



You Have My Heart

Author: *Meagan Pringle*

Category: Romance, Young Adult

Description: Welcome to MARSHTOWN CREEK. A small town in Ontario where new arrivals are a rarity. The arrival of SAWYER WHITLOCK shook up the town in more ways than she would have ever anticipated.

She captures the attention of everyone at MARSHTOWN HIGH, but not as much as the HART twins. ASHER and JOSHUA are the two most desirable guys in school and has everyone's heart, but Sawyer seems to have theirs.

Will she fall for the sweet and sensitive hockey star JOSHUA? Or will her heart soar for the brooding musician ASHER? They both have qualities that instantly draw her in, but only one has the ability to make her heart soar.

She has both their hearts, but who has hers?

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“We lie beneath the stars at night.”

The naked and famous, Young Blood

Sawyer

MY ENTIRE LIFE CHANGED IN A FEW WEEKS. The happiness I once knew had crumbled beneath my feet, sending me plummeting down the abyss of darkness. My previous life no longer existed. I had to leave it all behind. To start my junior year away from the only home I’ve ever known - a month into the school year.

Marshtown Creek, Ontario. My new home.

It was so small that I could barely find any articles on Google. It was a huge contrast to the big city life I’m accustomed to.

I looked out the window and watched raindrops race down the glass. The dark clouds made it seem like night instead of midday. I glanced to my left to find my older brother, Noah, passed out with his headphones. The music was so loud I could hear every word. His mouth was open, emitting subtle snores. I rolled my eyes and turned my attention back to the mundane view. The car hummed as we drove past the never-ending forest. The trees were like skyscrapers towering over the battered roads and branches extended like claws, reaching out to grab us.

“How much longer until we’re there?” I asked my mother.

It felt like we'd been driving forever.

"Not much longer." She glanced at me through the mirror. "You're going to love it."

I slouched in the seat and folded my arms.

"I doubt it."

It's not as if I had many friends when I was leaving back home, anyway. Noah was the one. Mr. Popular. I was a wallflower. He was the coveted rose. My recognition was due to him—Noah Whitlock's little sister.

He wasn't too bitter about the move. He was the star hockey player in our old school, and he was going to move to Ontario for college. It all just started earlier than planned. I reached for my copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, hoping to get sucked into the fantasy world where I could only hope of finding my own Mr. Darcy, but I could never relate to Elizabeth Bennet. I always felt more like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or *The Grinch* - undesirable. Love is a foreign concept for me. The closest I'd ever been to it was in the pages of books.

"We're here." My mom said just as I was about to start another chapter.

I closed my book and punched Noah in the arm. His eyes shot open, and his headphones fell off from his sudden movements.

"Was that necessary?" he asked, rubbing his arm.

"A little."

The sullen clouds dried out, leaving everything foggy and damp. I scrunched my nose as my Converse hit the wet driveway. I clutched my book to my chest like a shield as

I looked at the idyllic neighborhood. It thrived as people were everywhere. A group of kids bustled out of their home to greet their father with a hug.

“Heather!”

I turned at the sound of my mother’s name. A middle-aged woman with moppy brunette hair embraced my mother. She was a few inches shorter than my mom.

“Grace, it’s been too long.”

Grace Hart. My mother’s best friend from college. I met her once when I was four but hadn’t seen her since. Despite staying in contact, they rarely had the chance to meet up.

The woman turned to me with a glint in her eyes, embracing me.

“I cannot believe how much you’ve grown up.”

She turned to my brother and embraced him with equal enthusiasm. The corner of my lip rose.

“Where’s the boys?” My mother asked. “And Gracie?”

Mrs. Hart gasped as if she’d just remembered she had children.

“Boys!” she yelled. “Come and say hello.”

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I could hear them before I even saw them. The moment they exited their home, my jaw was unhinged. It was like a scene from Baywatch. Two outrageously attractive guys walked out as if they were in slow motion. A middle school-aged girl trailed behind them, not looking pleased to be following their lead.

Perhaps the slow motion was just in my head.

My mother mentioned they were twins, but I would have never guessed they were even brothers. The one had brown hair so dark, it almost looked black, whereas the other had sun-kissed locks. Once they got closer, I noted their contrasting eye colors. Both would fit on the cover of Vogue, despite their different appearances.

The hazel-eyed brother reached us first. His radiant smile lit his entire face up with joy. The other looked as if someone kicked his puppy. He'd rather be anywhere else.

"Joshua." My mother greeted the friendlier brother with a hug. "I could recognize those eyes anywhere."

My mother wasn't wrong. He seemed delighted by the sign of affection. She reached out to hug the other, but he recoiled.

"Hey." He said.

"Asher, be nice." His mother scolded.

"I said, hey."

Mrs. Hart grimaced. She placed her hands on the younger girl's shoulders.

"Hi, Gracie." My mom said. "You've grown up so much."

Noah, being Noah, extended his hand to the friendlier sibling.

"I'm Noah."

He shook my brother's hand.

"Noah is a hockey player, too." My mother said.

I guess it was her way of trying to help Noah make friends, as if he needed it.

"You're just in time for tryouts." Joshua said.

Asher scoffed, and our heads turned to him.

"Can I go back inside now?"

We were unsure of how to respond or act.

"Do you always have to be such a jerk?"

Maybe his brother did.

"Do you always have to be such a kiss-ass?"

It was like every episode of a reality show, except this drama was unscripted.

"Boys, not now." Their mother said.

The aggravated dirty blonde rolled his eyes and stormed back into his home, slamming the door behind him. His brother sighed, then turned to me with widened eyes, as if suddenly aware of my presence. He extended his hand to me.

“You must be Sawyer.”

I never knew brown eyes could be so enchanting, but he’d just proven me wrong. My face flushed at his intense gaze. I shook his hand.

“Nice to meet you.”

It shocked me that I could introduce myself without stuttering. I had little experience talking to boys who weren’t related to me.

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“Come inside for some snacks.” Mrs. Hart said. “We’ll help you unpack later.”

“I won’t argue with that.” My mom said.

Giggling like college students, they interlocked arms and whispered to each other. Joshua and Noah fell into conversation, leaving me trailing behind everyone into the home.

The smell of cinnamon and cocoa invaded my nostrils the second we walked in. It smelt like my mom’s homemade cookies. It was like an aroma of nostalgia. I stepped further into the home, only to collide with a figure turning the corner. I groaned at the impact. It felt like I’d walked into the wall.

“My bad.”

I glanced at the figure towering over me from underneath my lashes. Asher. He kept his eyes on the book, which was still held against my chest.

“Where are you going, Asher?” His mom asked.

“Out.”

His eyes moved to set on my face. He smirked as if he was a predator spotting his prey.

“See you around, Ms. Bennet.”

I froze as he brushed past me, slamming the door behind him. The wall paintings jiggled before settling again.

Mrs. Hart's shoulders slumped in defeat before she resumed her conversation with my mom. I looked out the window, watching him strut toward a beat-up Chevy truck. He seemed furious and, in a rush, he reversed so fast the tires squealed.

"Sawyer." I turned at the sound of my name. Joshua stood there, hand behind his head. "You want to join us?"

Before I could ask what he was talking about, Noah interjected.

"She's fine here."

I nodded my head, not wanting to argue, but Joshua beat me to it.

"No way. She can chill with us."

He wrapped his arm around my shoulder, and I could feel my cheeks burning. It was rare for guys to give me the time of day, especially guys as attractive as Joshua. He might just be nice because our moms are friends, but the delusional side of me was imagining it was because he likes me.

I think every guy likes me, only to be disappointed and humbled.

I let him lure me outside to find a makeshift field hockey setup. Joshua handed me a stick, but I declined. He shrugged and got ready to test out my brother's abilities. I slouched into the seat behind me and spent the rest of the afternoon watching them play.

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“Oh, my life is changing every day.”

Dreams, The Cranberries

Asher

I was sick of the happy family facade. My mom hadn't seen her college friend in years and suddenly they're best friends again? And to top it all off, we had to act like The Brady Bunch. I scoffed while taking a sharp right down the familiar street.

The infamous Marshtown Creek. This postcard-worthy view inspired the town's name. It was the only good thing the town offered.

I parked my truck just outside the clearing. The moment I stepped out, the vengeful wind greeted me. I pulled my coat tighter around my body and strutted through the man-made opening to the creek. It was an archway made of vines and flowers.

A jewel-blue stream babbled and bubbled through the forest. It sprung over the chalk rocks. A galaxy of dragonflies swarmed around everyone, not at all disturbed by the noise of screaming teenagers. They looked as if the stars had fallen, called by the siren songs. However, I was too angered to appreciate the mesmerizing scene. I needed a distraction.

“Asher!”

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There's my distraction.

Her auburn locks pirouetted behind her as she skipped toward me. Her arms curled around my neck as she pulled me down for a kiss. The kiss was incomprehensible. Mundane. Just like our relationship.

"Hey, Ava." I said once we pulled away.

Despite my lack of adoration for her, she brought a sense of comfort. The perks of knowing someone since childhood. Many timeless moments engraved her bold smile and emerald eyes.

"What took you so long?"

I ran my hand down my face with a sigh.

"Nothing important."

I tossed my arm around her shoulder and lured her to the lively bonfire right beside an abundance of alcohol placed on the rock table. I reached into my back pocket for my pack of cigarettes and brought a stick to my lips, but I hadn't lit it yet.

Ava handed me a drink. I clutched the nicotine stick between my fingers and took a heavy gulp. I never winced as the alcohol scorched my esophagus. Her eyes were on me the entire time, but I didn't acknowledge it. I took two more sips before placing it to the side to light my cigarette. I pulled the air into my lungs and exhaled.

“You’re here.” Collin, my best friend, said.

“I saw you this morning. Don’t tell me you missed me this much.”

He grinned at my joke.

“You know I can’t be apart from you for too long. I get withdrawals.”

I tossed my head back with a chuckle before inhaling another drag.

“Our new neighbours moved in today.”

Everyone’s heads turned to me. Marshtown rarely got new arrivals, so this was breaking news.

“What are they like?” Elsie, Ava’s best friend, asked.

“It’s just my mom’s best friend and her two kids,” I said. “Nothing special.”

Ava and Elsie shared a look, but I didn’t question it. I turned to Collin and extended my cigarette.

“You know I’m training.”

I rolled my eyes and shrugged before taking a large inhale. I kept the smoke in my lungs as I dropped the stick to the ground, kicking some sand over it. The fumes blocked my vision as I released it from my hold. I took a seat on the log near the bonfire to generate some warmth. Even with my jacket, the breeze was chilly. I watched as the flames danced, twisting from side to side like a graceful ballerina.

Ava sat beside me, clutching her drink in both hands. I extended my legs forward,

leaning against the trunk behind me, and folded my arms across my chest.

“It’s pretty cold.”

I hummed in response. I could tell she wanted me to give her my jacket, but I wasn’t about to catch hyperthermia because of her carelessness. She should have brought another jacket. She watched me like a hawk watching a small mammal.

“Here, you can have my jacket.”

Collin, forever the chivalrous hero, placed his Marshtown Manatee’s jacket over her shoulders. I scoffed and took another sip of whatever she concocted.

“Way to be a wonderful boyfriend, Asher.” Elsie said.

I ignored her comment and gave her a thumbs-up.

I can be a sarcastic bitch too, Elsie.

My phone hummed in my pocket, but I ignored it, knowing it was my mom demanding to know where I was. I downed the remnants of my drink and reached over to pour more. I grabbed the first bottle I could find. Bourbon. I shrugged and filled it halfway.

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“Go easy, Hart.”

I ignored Collin and chugged it back. Despite my watering eyes, I did it with ease. I raised my cup like I’d just won a trophy before tossing it to the ground.

“It’s time for me to get home.”

I stood up too fast and saw stars. I stumbled to the side, but Collin’s reflexes kicked in.

“You cannot be driving.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Ava, can you follow us home in my car and I’ll give you girls a lift after?”

“Sure.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I didn’t even drink that much.”

“You had four refills.” Collin said.

When did that happen?

Too intoxicated to argue, I allowed him to drag me to the passenger side of my truck.

I slouched against the seat and closed my eyes as a wave of nausea passed over me.

“Your dad is going to kill you.” Collin said with a chuckle.

The thought sent my stomach churning. Not only would I be in trouble for ditching the welcome party, but it was well past midnight and I had school in the morning. I leaned my head against the icy window and sighed in bliss. It was like an ice pack to my throbbing head.

I groaned as he swerved the car, causing me to hit my head against the glass.

“You did that on purpose.”

“I know.”

I was in an awful mood the entire ride home, but it soured even further the moment he drove up our street. However, my drunken mind only registered our location once he reached my driveway. I opened the door and fell to the ground, my shoulder took most of the impact.

“Seriously, Asher,” Collin said. “Get up.”

“I’m good here.”

He hoisted me with a huff, tossing my arm around his shoulder. The front door opened before we could reach it, and I braced myself for the confrontation.

“Thanks for bringing him home.”

I would have rather faced the wrath of my parents.

“No problem, he’s had quite a bit.”

“I’ll take it from here.”

My mind got hazy as they spoke for a moment. I barely registered him dragging my drunken butt up the stairs until my cold silk sheets enveloped me. My head lulled to the side. I closed my eyes as the room started spinning.

“I had to cover for you.”

I didn’t even have to open my eyes to know his arms were folded across his chest, expecting me to roll out a red carpet for him. Judgemental Josh.

“Don’t expect a thank you.”

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I draped my arm over my eyes, hoping to get some sleep.

“You’re an asshole.”

He was unbearable.

“If I had a dollar for every time I heard that.”

He tossed a pillowcase at my head, but I didn’t flinch. He scoffed at my lack of reaction before closing my door behind him. I wiggled further into the mattress and welcomed the sleep.

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3

“There’s something in the air, I sense it.”

I Can Feel It, The National Parks

Joshua

Salty droplets fell from my face like summer rain. My morning jog was longer than usual since I needed to blow off some steam. Asher was always the main reason for my anxiety.

Once I stepped onto the porch, I leaned forward with my hands on my knees and took

deep breaths. I wiped my forehead with the bottom of my shirt. My lungs were burning, but I always loved the feeling.

I waltzed to the kitchen in desperate need of something to quench my thirst, instead; I walked into a room of animosity. Asher was on one side of the counter with a freshly brewed cup of coffee in his hands, whilst my parents were glaring at him from the other end.

He took a large sip before placing his head in his hands. Their glares seemed to magnify his hangover. I hovered in the doorway, uncertain of what to do.

“There’s breakfast over there.” My mother said once she spotted me.

My dad directed his harshness towards me.

“Did you cover for your brother?”

Before I could think of a lie, Asher groaned.

“I told you, no one knew anything.” He said. “I went out on my accord.”

My dad glanced at me as if trying to sense if he was telling the truth or not, but I showed no emotion. He nodded before walking to Asher and holding out his hand. Asher raised his brow.

“Give me your car keys.”

He slammed his hands on the table.

“You have got to be kidding.”

“I’m not laughing.”

He turned his attention to Mom, but she didn’t falter. His shoulders dropped before he reached into his pockets, sliding the keys across the counter. The chair scraped against the tiles as he pushed it back before stomping out of the kitchen, muttering under his breath. I tried to remain inconspicuous as I poured a glass of apple juice.

“Josh, I need you to please show Sawyer and Noah around at school today.”

I nodded.

“Sure thing.”

She smiled before rubbing my cheek with her thumb.

“Thank you.”

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It was clear from the bags under her eyes she had been dealing with stress from Asher. He'd been acting out of character for months and it's put an immense strain on our parents, but trying to reason with him is like reasoning with a houseplant.

I walked upstairs to my bedroom, only to bump into him as he was exiting the bathroom.

“You’re stressing mom out.”

“They’re stressing me out.”

“Is it so difficult to care about anyone but yourself?”

He stopped in his tracks with a clenched jaw.

“There you go again.” He said. “Judgmental Josh. The perfect son.”

“Well, one of us had to step up after you started screwing up.”

He stepped closer to intimidate me, but I didn’t flinch.

“Are you calling me a screw-up?”

My corner lip twitched.

“Well, if the shoe fits.”

I stiffened as he charged at me. My head hit the wooden floor, but I pushed the pain to the back to dodge his blows. We rolled around like a hay ball, not stopping even when our mother yelled for us to break apart. I landed a few punches, which he returned with equal force.

“Knock it off.”

Our dad lifted his body from mine, holding him back. My stomach churned at the metallic taste on my tongue. I used the back of my hand to wipe the blood away, and I noticed that his lip was also split.

“I’ve had it with the fighting.”

Dad’s neck was as red as a lobster’s as he spoke. The veins were protruding along his neck. We’d have tons of moments like this, but I think we went too far this time.

“You’re both grounded.”

I gasped, but Asher couldn’t care less. He snuck out despite the threat from our parents. As much as he upset me, I would never snitch on him. If only my parents knew all the late-night climbing he did through his bedroom window.

“Whatever.” He said before storming into his room.

The paintings on the wall twitched from the impact, but the music screeching from his room drowned the vibrations out. My mother sighed before descending the stairs with my father. I cast my finger through my locks, gripping them at the roots. A nervous habit of mine.

Preparing for the day is more tedious than usual, but I managed. I entered my truck, only to find Asher in the passenger seat.

“What are you doing?”

“The fun police took my keys, remember?”

I wasn't in the mood for an argument, so I started the car up and backed out of the driveway. I spotted our new neighbours coming out of their home.

“Hey, Noah!” They turned at the sound of his name. “Need a ride?”

He jogged across the street with Sawyer ambling behind him.

“That would be great. My car hasn't arrived.” Noah said.

“Hop in.”

I noticed Sawyer hovered between getting in the car and walking away, as if she was unsure if the invitation included her.

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“Come on, Sawyer,” I said. “We’re all going to the same place.”

The tension drained from her at my words, pleased that she wouldn’t have to walk all the way there. She scooted in beside her brother. I attempted to put her at ease by offering a welcoming smile, but Asher’s gaze on her ruined it.

“Hello again, Ms. Bennet.”

She tugged a strand of oak locks behind her ear.

“It’s Sawyer.”

The intensity in her voice surprised me. It’s as if she was trying to show Asher that his attempts at intimidation failed. He seemed delighted by her response as his smile widened.

“Ms. Bennet suits you more.”

“You say it like you know me.”

His lip twitched.

“I think I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

“Then I guess I have one of you, too.”

His laugh was dry. He turned back around, and I copied his moves, sneaking a

glimpse of her in the rear-view mirror. She folded her arms across her chest and stared out the window.

Mine and Noah's voices filled the drive as we attempted to ease the tension by having a brief conversation, but neither of our siblings seemed to be in the mood.

Before I even turned off the ignition, Asher was bolting out of the door, becoming one with the sizeable crowd in the parking lot. I rolled my eyes at his overdramatic self.

"This place is smaller than I imagined." Noah said, sliding his backpack over his left shoulder.

I'd never pictured it to be small, but if you compared it to the schools in the cities, then this must look like an ant's nest.

"Welcome to Marstown High."

I extended my hands like a tour guide, gesturing to the rustic building. The walls were surprisingly sturdy despite carrying generations of students through their time.

Noah and Sawyer were looking at it as if they'd stumbled into an alternate universe.

"I like it." She said. "Not too many people."

I smiled at her words. She seemed to appreciate the break from crowded cities. She had a notebook clutched firmly against her chest.

"You should check out the library," I said. "I think you'll love it."

My words brought on a gentle, upturned smile.

“I’ll check it out.”

She reached into my car for her bag before flinging it over her shoulder.

“Need help to find your way?”

“I’ll manage.”

I watched in awe as she brushed past people to get through to the entrance. Noah patted my back.

“You can show me around.”

I nodded my head and glanced in the direction I last saw Sawyer, before motioning him to follow me.

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4

“When you fall, everyone stands.”

The All-American Rejects, Move Along

Sawyer

The hallways were vibrant and full of light, despite the stormy day. The narrow halls filled with people reminded me of the hustle and bustle of the city. I had to slide off my cardigan because of the increase in temperature. Bodies were abundant.

It wasn't difficult to find the office; it was one turn to the right. I walked inside and closed the door behind me, shutting out the ruckus in the hallways. I closed my eyes and welcomed the silence.

“Hi.”

Although the gentle voice didn't disrupt my calm, I opened my eyes to see a timid girl standing behind the office counter. She had to be a junior, just like me. Her wide, round face was strained by her wide smile.

“Hi.”

I approached the desk and placed my hand, palm down, on the counter.

“I’m -”

“Sawyer Whitlock.” I raised my brow in suspicion. Her almond-shaped eyes widened, showing me more of the chestnut color. “We don’t get any new kids, so you and your brother are already the hot new gossip.”

I dropped my head in my arms. So much for being inconspicuous. She slid my schedule to me. My saving grace was English first period and Art last.

“I’m in Ms. Beech’s class too.” She said, referring to the English teacher. “I can show you the way.”

I glanced over my shoulder into the bustling hallway. There was no way I could face the lion’s den on my own. I expressed my gratitude, saying it would be wonderful.

“I never got your name.”

“I’m Stella.”

She seemed sweet, showing me everything I needed to know as we walked down the hallways, but wow, she was a talker. She pointed out every classroom, giving me a critique of each teacher. The conversation shifted from the faculty to the student body.

“That’s Ava Lambert.”

She motioned to a girl that would have any modeling agency in the city fighting for her to be their next It Girl. She said something to the group of girls fawning around her, causing them all to laugh.

So, she was funny too.

“Stay off her radar,” Stella said. “Annoy her, and your reputation is over.”

I rolled my eyes and hoisted my bag higher on my shoulder.

“I don’t plan on it.” I said. “I’m an expert at being unnoticed.”

A familiar figure approached her, tossing his arm over her shoulder. She gazed at him with admiration, as if he held the power of the stars.

“And that’s-”

“Asher Hart,” I said before she could finish. “I’m familiar with him.”

She looked at me with disbelief, as if I had just confessed to being an alien visitor.

“How do you know him?”

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“Our moms are best friends.”

She placed her hands over her mouth as if she'd just reached the plot twist of a mystery novel.

“You have no idea how lucky you are.” She said. “You know the Hart brothers.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I don't know them.” I said. “It's not like we're friends.”

How long are these hallways?

I turned the corner, only to collide straight into Noah.

“Sorry, sis.” He said without a trace of sincerity.

“Learn to walk, Noah.”

“Someone's grumpy already.” He nudged Joshua.

“Are you finding your way around?” Joshua asked.

I nudged my thumb in Stella's direction.

“I have my very own tour guide.”

Josh waved, unaware of her identity.

“I’m Stella.”

He nodded and smiled.

“Pleasure meeting you, Stella.”

The ding of the bell disrupted our unpleasant interaction.

“See you at home.” I said to Noah before grabbing Stella’s wrist. “Let’s get going.”

I followed her to class 23B. There were fewer people than I had expected. Everyone appeared unhurried to arrive on time for class. I took a seat beside Stella in the middle row.

Laughter captured my attention as the pretty committee walked in. They reminded me of the Pink Ladies from Grease. I slouched in my seat to hide myself from their gaze, but it didn’t work. Ava’s eyes landed on me, and her nose scrunched as if she hated what she saw.

It’s like I never left home.

The middle-aged woman, whom I assumed to be Ms. Beech, strutted into the classroom. I’m not sure if her scowl was natural or if it’s because her face was pulled back from her tight hair bun. She seemed uninterested in anything other than the curriculum.

I appreciated the fact that she pretended I didn’t exist. There’s nothing worse than the awkward introduction, exposing me as the outlier. It would ruin my plans of surviving in this new town until I graduate. One drawback of living in a small town

was the limited hiding places.

As soon as the bell rang, Stella and I were both eager to leave. In my rush to leave the classroom before everyone else, I accidentally collided with someone.

This is not a good first day.

“My apologies, Ms. Bennet.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Sorry.” I tried to move past him, but he blocked me. “Please move, Asher.”

He raised his hands in surrender.

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“I just want to make sure you’re being cared for and not wandering.”

I nodded my head to the left, towards Stella.

“I’m good.”

His corner lip twitched.

“Very well, then.” He said. “Lovely to see you, Stella.”

Stella’s eyes widened as he brushed past. She followed his movement until he rounded the corner.

“He knows my name.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes before placing my hand on her shoulder.

“Let’s go,” I said. “I need help finding room 45E.”

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5

“Now I only let me down.”

Block Me Out, Gracie Abrams

Asher

I heard a tapping on the window before it became a pitter-patter. The clouds had moved over the school, changing the sky into a coal black. The rain doused the grass in water, making the lush green more prominent.

I placed my head in my hand as I looked toward the school entryway, wishing I was on my way home instead of trapped inside. This week has been draining, and it was only Tuesday. I battled to keep my eyes open as Mrs. Norbert droned on about living organisms.

“Are you paying attention, Mr. Hart?”

I could feel eyes on me, but I never removed my gaze from the window.

“Yes.”

“Please enlighten me on what I was discussing.”

“Some droning speech about living organisms.”

Snickers infiltrated the classroom, but I didn’t indulge them. The bell interrupted Mrs. Norbert’s imminent lecture.

“Mr. Hart, a word?”

I sighed. She waited until all the kids were out of the class before speaking.

“Your grades are slipping.”

She handed me a paper. Yesterday’s quiz.

“The big, red D gives it away.” I said, shoving the paper in my back pocket.

“This isn’t a joke, Asher.” She said. “It’s college acceptance time, and you used to be the prime candidate.”

My jaw clenched.

“That was a year ago,” I said. “Things changed.”

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“You’re ruining your chances of a bright future.”

I clenched my fists at my side as my stomach churned at the unwanted memory.

“It got ruined ages ago.”

I stormed out into the hallway, not apologizing to anyone I collided with. All I could see was red, and it was clouding my judgment. My impulsivity had always been my biggest flaw. It’s gotten me into a lot of trouble over the years.

The hallways were too silent, as if the desolate space was echoing my thoughts - amplifying them. I needed to escape.

I braced myself against the bitter cold as the wind attacked me the moment I exited the building. There was still an hour of school left, but it was only gym. My life wouldn’t spiral out of orbit for skipping one class.

I groaned as I looked for my truck in the parking lot, only to remember my parents repossessed it.

Guess I was walking.

I tucked my hands into my coat pocket, ignoring the brutal cold. The first snowfall was approaching and the weather here was unforgivable. Frigid air knocked away at my body warmth, but I preferred bracing the cold over being surrounded by people.

Exhaled air surrounded my face as if I’d just inhaled five cigarettes. A cloud of

smoke blocked my vision with each step. I didn't know where my legs were taking me. It's as if I were being navigated by the wind, but the uncertainty was thrilling. I paused at the sound of children screeching, lifting my head to find the source of the noise.

Marshtown Middle School.

A group of boys were running around trying to wrestle each other. The shorter of the four tripped over invisible air, swallowing a healthy amount of grass. I snorted.

"Mom and Dad are going to kill you."

Gracie stood with her arms folded across her chest. Her knotted forehead was a regular look for her, as well as her scrunched freckled nose. She always looked like she was frowning.

"They won't find out."

"What if I tell?"

"I know you won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

I bent my knees so that I could be at eye level with her.

"You know all my secrets, and you've never told on me before."

Her shoulders dropped in defeat as if she was trying to gain the upper hand. She failed.

Girlish giggles distracted us as our heads turned to a group I recognized as Gracie's friends. I'd often been the victim of having to escort them to playdates and sleepovers.

"My friends think you're cute." She said before fake gagging. "So disgusting."

I cackled before reaching over to mess up her hair. She swatted my hand away.

"See you later, bug."

I made sure she entered the bus with her friends before continuing my stroll. I rubbed my hands together to generate some warmth as I arrived at the front gates of the park. The naked trees received a bath of dew, and in a few short days, they would be covered in snow.

Daylight faded, and it was only when the streetlights illuminated, that I realized how late it had gotten. I reached for my phone to check the time, but it was dead. I'm about to face the same fate.

The porch light was on, making me a direct target, as if the purpose was to expose me to my late-night antics. I tried to enter the home stealthily, but all the lights were on. I was busted.

"So happy you could come home."

My dad stood with his arms at his sides as if he were a general in the military. My mother was a few feet behind him with her arms folded across her chest.

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“I would have been home sooner, but I had to walk, remember?”

I knew I shouldn't have said the words the moment they escaped my lips. My dad's forehead wrinkled up like a Sphinx cat.

“This isn't the time for jokes.” He said. “Get ready for bed. We will talk about this in the morning.”

“I look forward to it.”

I bolted up the stairs, skipping one at a time, before whistling down the hallway.

“I tried to cover for you, but Dad figured it out.”

Gracie's brittle voice was like a pin to my heart. It's as if she were afraid I was going to hate her for all of this. I sighed as she quivered under her doorway. I crouched down until we were at eye level.

“You did good, bug,” I said. “This was my mess, not yours.”

Duke, her miniature pinscher, whined from his place on her bed. I stood and nudged her into her room.

“Dad was furious.” She said, jumping onto her bed. “He even did that veiny thing with his neck.”

I chuckled. He always had a protruding vein on the right side of his neck whenever he

got mad.

“He’ll get over it.” I said, patting Duke’s head. “You need to get ready for bed, though.”

She rolled her eyes and reached out her hand. Our secret handshake. It’s a series of fist bumps and interlocked pinkies, but it’s something we’d done since she was little. Our way of saying I’ve got you.

“Night, bug.”

I leaned down to place a kiss on her forehead.

“Goodnight.”

I switched off her bedroom light and stumbled to mine. The exhaustion had washed over me like a tsunami. I succumbed to the darkness.

??

6

“Your subtleties, they strangle me.”

It Ends Tonight, The All-American Rejects

Joshua

The practice was gruelling. Despite the season being two months away, our coach insisted on daily after-school training sessions.

My legs burned, so I skated to the edge of the rink and took off my helmet. My hair was getting in my eyes. I brushed the stray hairs away before pouring water into my mouth from my bottle.

Noah breezed past me as he stole the puck from Kellan. He didn't seem fatigued in the slightest.

I'd convinced the coach to let him try out since he'd started the school year late. It took a lot of bargaining, but he got a shot and had our coach in awe of his skill. Me included.

I poured some water on my face to cool myself down. The cool air in the rink was doing nothing to minimize the hot flashes.

I paused, mid-drink, as Sawyer waltzed down the stairs. She had an unfamiliar book clutched against her chest. She gnawed on her lip as her eyes danced around the rink until they settled on me.

"Finally, a familiar face." She said once she was in earshot.

"Happy to help."

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I leaned over the barrier so that we could talk better.

“I’ve been trying to text Noah, but he’s not answering.”

“He’s practicing.”

Her eyes widened before falling into a squint.

“Of course he made the team.” She said with a sigh. “I’ll talk to him later.”

“You could stay.” I said before she could even move an inch. “Watch us practice.”

“Is that even allowed?”

No.

“Of course.” I said before leaning closer, as if I was about to reveal something confidential. “Make sure coach doesn’t notice.”

She giggled.

“He won’t even notice I’m here.”

I almost called it a day, but my urge to impress her was too strong. I placed my helmet back on and skated to Noah and Kellan.

“What’s my sister doing here?”

“She’s watching us practice.”

“Why?”

“I invited her.”

To distract him from his burning questions, I stole the puck from him and kicked my legs into the ice to launch an attack on Miles, our goalie. My cheer echoed throughout the rink as I raised my hands above my head in victory.

I looked over my shoulder to find Sawyer already looking at me, clapping her hands. I beamed with pride.

The rest of the practice was as adrenaline-filled as possible since I wanted to impress her. From the wide grin and excited applause, I think I succeeded.

She was already waiting for me at the barrier as I skated over. I tossed my helmet to the side and shook my unruly hair.

“You’re fantastic.”

“Thank you.” I said. “I have to be since I’m captain.”

I had to throw that in there.

“I can see why.”

My cheeks were sweltering. I cleared my throat and squared my shoulders.

“My friend Kellan is having a party Saturday night.” I said. “You’re welcome to come.”

She bit her lip, and I felt an unfamiliar feeling of anxiety wash over me. Had I been too forward?

“It sounds like fun.”

It’s as if she had taken the longest pause in history before delivering the verdict. I breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Great,” I said. “You can ride with me.”

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Her attention moved over my head. Noah was approaching.

“What’s going on?”

“I just invited Sawyer to the party on Saturday.”

Noah looked as if he might regurgitate his lunch.

“Why would you do that?”

I shrugged.

“She’s new here, too. It would be nice to introduce her to more people.”

“I’m not too comfortable with that.” Noah said. “Sawyer’s never been to a party.”

Her eyes were as wide as a hockey puck. As if the leak of information mortified her. I would be.

“We’ll both be there,” I said, trying to diffuse the tension. “She can hang out with me.”

It felt awkward talking about her, as if she wasn’t even there. Noah’s nostrils flared before his shoulders dropped.

“Whatever.” He said before sulking to the locker room.

Her glare was so intense it could set the building alight. I could just tell she was going to murder him later.

“So, Saturday?” I asked to regain her attention.

She shook her head as if waking up from a trance before smiling.

“Saturday sounds fun.”

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There was chaos the second I arrived home. Asher was blasting Blink-182 from his bedroom. It was so loud that it was giving Duke anxiety. His barks contrasted with the beat, making a grating noise in my ear.

I sought refuge in the kitchen, in dire need of a snack. The moment I opened our pantry, it was like the classic horror movie jump scare. Gracie was on the floor with a bag of Hickory Sticks in her hand. She had her cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk.

“What are you doing here?”

She replied, but her filled mouth muffled her words. I scrunched my brows, waiting for her to finish chewing.

“There’s too much noise out there.” She said. “Duke was in here with me, but then he ran out.”

I sighed and held my hand out for her. She grabbed it and I hoisted her up and out the door.

“Have you thought of asking Asher to turn it down?”

“I did.” she said with a roll of her eyes. “He never answered.”

I marched up the steps as if he could hear my stomps over his music. The door shook off the hinges from my impactful knock. Still no answer. I felt around for where he would leave his spare key above the door. I hadn't used it for months. He'd shown me a few years ago when we were still close. When we were still best friends.

I shook away the thought when my fingers brushed over the metal. I'm surprised he didn't move it. It slid easily into the lock, and I opened his door. The noise amplified as I stepped inside.

He was nowhere to be found.

I switched off the wireless speaker and searched the empty bedroom for any clue to his whereabouts. My eyes fell on the open window.

Typical.

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“He snuck out, didn’t he?”

I nodded my head before turning to Gracie.

“Forget about it,” I said. “Let’s go make a snack. Hickory Sticks will not hold us until dinner.”

Her grin cracked her face before she rushed down the stairs. She was so fast I’m surprised she didn’t face plant.

Before I locked Asher’s room, I surveyed it one last time. I put the key back where I got it and rushed to join Gracie.

I had to cover for him once again.

??

7

“Hello there, the Angel from my nightmare.”

I Miss You, blink-182

Sawyer

I’d always had the sense that I didn’t belong. Anywhere. I was never the pretty, confident girl that everyone fought to sit with during lunch. I was always the quirky

outsider. So, it's understandable why they never invited me to parties.

And now, I'm being invited by the most attractive guy I've ever seen. Is it a date? Or was he just asking me because he felt sorry for me? Noah had already made friends with the entire hockey team and climbed to the top of the social ladder in two weeks.

At least I have Stella.

I must have tried on every outfit in my wardrobe, but nothing seemed appealing to me. As the time to leave drew near, I resigned myself to wearing the sweater and jeans I already had on. Is that party appropriate?

Noah knocked on my open door. I looked at his reflection in the mirror.

"Josh is waiting for us."

I smoothed out the invisible wrinkles in my outfit before following Noah outside. He was leaning against his truck. His left hand was holding onto his right bicep as he glanced at his phone. He tucked it away and stood up straight as soon as he noticed us.

I observed how the veins traced down his arm to his hands. His black t-shirt had the words Marshstown Manatees on it, but I was more focused on how attractive he looked in it.

Just as I was about to start a conversation, Asher's head popped through the back door. A few strands of hair got stuck in his eyelashes, but he didn't move it.

"Ms. Bennet, is Mr. Darcy aware you're coming?"

He said it as if he was a character in the book. His head darted around, searching for

someone. I rolled my eyes.

“Funny.”

“Thanks, I thought so.” He scooted over and patted the seat beside him. “I saved you a seat. How about we braid each other’s hair while we’re at it?”

It seemed I wasn’t the only one annoyed by his patronizing attitude, because Josh stepped in.

“That’s enough, Asher.”

The dirty blonde folded his arms across his chest and slouched in the seat like an out-of-control toddler.

It was only when I entered the backseat that I understood why he was so snappy. The stench of alcohol invaded my nostrils, and he struggled to keep his eyes open.

“Is he drunk?” I asked once Josh got in.

“I found him like this in the backyard.” He said. “Mom and Dad are home, so I couldn’t leave him inside.”

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His head lolled to the side and his eyelids couldn't stay open any longer. Thinking he was dead; I held my breath until I saw his chest moving. I leaned over to flick his nose. He groaned and scratched it as if there was an itch.

“Is he going to be okay?”

Josh glanced at him through the rearview mirror.

“He won't be tomorrow.” He said. “Don't worry about him. This happens all the time.”

Asher slouched against his side of the door, using his hands as a pillow. I stayed as close to my side as I could, not wanting to get involved in his drunken escapades. His head was right next to the stereo, and he was unconcerned.

I glanced out the window as Noah and Joshua made conversation. I'd never been skilled at small talk.

A slight breeze invaded the car, leaving me shivering in my thin sweater. I should have been more prepared. In the short time I've been here, I'd noticed the nighttime cold could be brutal.

It got worse as we stepped out of the truck and fell victim to the angry wind. Josh and Noah appeared rushed to go inside.

“Are we just going to leave him?” I asked.

Joshua raised his brow. I motioned to his passed-out twin in the backseat. Realization hit his face as he jogged over and opened the door. Asher fell out with a thud.

He jumped up, as if someone had electrocuted him. He squinted, unsure of his location or how he ended up there.

Josh sighed and folded his arms across his chest.

“Hurry, Asher.” He said. “Let’s go inside.”

He slipped from his daze and followed them. Unsure of my next move, I followed behind. Intoxicated teenagers filled the house, both upstairs and downstairs. Just like I’d seen in the movies.

“Are you okay?” Josh asked.

I thought my poker face was strong. He must have noticed my apprehension.

“I’m fine.”

That he believed. He reached out to grab my wrist and directed me through the obstacle of partiers. Alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages cluttered the kitchen counter.

“What do you want?”

An abundance of choices confronted me, and I was unsure of what half of them even were. I reached for a can of Red Bull, opting to play it safe for the night. He reached for a few bottles and poured them into his red cup. It was an outrageous concoction.

A group of guys walked in and cheered as they noticed him and my brother. They

high-fived and patted each other on the back, not caring that they were spilling their drinks everywhere.

My forehead felt hot as my heartbeat increased. The room appeared to be overcrowded. I needed air.

It took some time to find the way out, but once I stepped onto the backyard patio, relief washed over me. I would rather brace for the cold than the stuffy indoors. I wrapped my arms around myself and tried to rub the goosebumps away.

My nose scrunched at the smell of nicotine. The wind was blowing it straight into my face. I followed the smoke trail. Asher sat on the patio wall, gazing at the sparkling sky. I don't think he noticed me. He had his gaze transfixed on an outlier star.

"It's rude to stare."

He may not have been looking, but he was aware of his surroundings.

"Sorry."

That was all I could muster.

He took a deep inhale before squishing his cigarette against the wall. He dropped it to the ground.

"Smoking kills." I said without thinking.

“So does hypothermia.”

I did not know why he'd said that until he motioned to my shivering body. I hadn't realized how cold I was until he pointed it out. My arms tightened around my waist. He sighed as if my presence was a major inconvenience to his life and slid his leather jacket down his arms before approaching me.

“Here.” he said, extending the jacket at arm's length.

I raised my brows.

“What?”

“Take my jacket.”

I didn't want to argue for a multitude of reasons.

“Thank you.” I said and slid the oversized jacket on.

“Don't mention it.” He said. “I mean that.”

I was about to question him about why he gave me the jacket if he was going to be rude about it, but someone cleared their throat. Joshua hovered under the doorway.

“I've been looking for you.”

His eyes fell onto the leather adorning my body, but he didn't make any comments.

“I needed some air.”

Asher scoffed.

“I’m going to get a drink.”

Joshua blocked him from getting inside.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Asher smirked.

“No, but I’m going to do it, anyway.”

I watched in disbelief as he strutted inside, hands tucked into his pockets, and whistled a tune. As if he didn’t have a care in the world.

??

8

“But the truth is I don’t want to know.”

Wherever You Are, 5 Seconds of Summer

Asher

What a start to a Monday. A call to the guidance counsellor. I sat in the uncomfortable plastic chairs waiting to be called in. I tapped my foot as I watched the clock on the wall move agonizingly slowly. Each movement of the arms was like a jolt to my patience.

“Asher.”

I looked into the familiar caramel eyes, enlarged by thick-rimmed glasses. I’d been here more than I’d like to admit.

“Ms. Kendall.” I said in greeting as I waltzed into her office. “What have I done this time?”

Normally, she would take delight in my quips, but she seemed tense.

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“We need to have a serious talk.”

She sat down behind her desk. I sat across from her.

“What’s going on?”

“Asher, your grades are dropping.”

My nose twitched. Not this again.

“I know.”

“You’re in your senior year, Asher.” She said. “You can’t afford to let your GPA slip now.”

I shrugged.

“It’s not like I’m going to college.”

Her eyes widened as if I’d just confessed to a murder.

“What happened to UBC?”

“I changed my mind.”

She sighed and took off her glasses before massaging her temples. She always did this when I was in her office.

“Asher, I understand last year was a lot for you, but-”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I grew weary of people mentioning it, longing to forget that time and move on. Unfortunately, this town served as a constant reminder.

“You can’t avoid it forever.”

“Watch me.” I said with more aggression than intended.

“Asher, please-”

“Are we done here?”

She nodded her head, and I motored out of there. Our interaction left a foul taste in my mouth. I needed a smoke.

The moment I stepped onto the football field; the expanse of manicured, vibrant green grass hit me. I hid under the bleachers. The designated smoking spot.

I brought the slender cylinder to my lips. The tip of the cigarette ignited, releasing an obscure, harsh scent that mingled with the morning air. I savoured the smoke filling my lungs.

“Are you planning on sharing?”

Ava approached me with her hands behind her back. Her hair flowed behind her as she skipped her way over. Confidence radiated with every step.

I offered her the cigarette, and she accepted.

“What’s with the pout?”

“I don’t pout.”

She drew the nicotine into her lungs.

“Sure, Asher.”

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I wasn't in the mood for her quips. My jaw clenched as a searing heat coursed through my body. A tempest of emotions crashed against my restraint.

"I'm not in the mood."

"You hardly are these days."

I narrowed my eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're not the same."

Another person to point that out.

"People change, Ava," I said. "It's called evolving."

She glanced at my wrist. Her focus fell on the argent line, contrasting with my natural tone. The scar ran deeper than just the surface. I pulled the sleeve of my jacket down.

The air grew heavy with unsaid words. Her uneasy eyes bounced everywhere but mine. I cleared my throat and ran my fingers through my hair.

"I think it's best if I leave."

She lowered her head, and I took that as my cue to leave.

??

I wiped the grease stains on my hands as I inspected the engine of my truck. The motored garage door was open, allowing the breeze to cool my overheated body down.

Tranquillity cocooned the neighbourhood, with the occasional rustling of leaves breaking the silence.

“You’ve been here for quite some time.”

My mom stood under the doorway that led into the house. Her tired eyes stared at me, yet the sparkle of wisdom never faded.

“Trying to keep myself busy,” I said. “Trying to stay out of trouble.”

She stood beside me as she leaned against my workstation, taking in the jumbled state of the vehicle.

“You always had a knack for fixing things.”

I folded one leg over the other as I leaned back against the cemented wall.

“It would calm me down.”

She placed her hand on my shoulder. She’d always been our fortress of solace.

“I’ve been worried about you.”

I couldn’t meet her eyes as remorse weighed on my shoulders and my gaze lingered on the engine of my truck.

I wanted to promise her I was okay, and that I wasn't carrying a loaded secret in my back pocket, but I couldn't lie to her. Not again.

"I appreciate that."

"The Whitlock's are coming for dinner tonight."

She must have sensed I wasn't in the mood for a heart-to-heart discussion. She squeezed my shoulder before retreating. I had to stop myself from pleading for her to stay.

Nothing I say or do could make up for what I'd done. What I'd been hiding.

??

9

“but all the boys, they crowd around.”

Walks Like Rihanna, The Wanted

Joshua

The dining room felt like a battlefield of unease. The only sound puncturing the tense air was the clinking of cutlery against plates. My mom and Ms. Whitlock were the only ones making conversation until their conversation stumbled. I ate another forkful of food to distract myself.

“So, Sawyer.” My mom said. “I heard you’re hoping to be a painter.”

“That’s the plan.” She said before blushing.

“She’d have to let people see it for that to happen.” Noah chimed in.

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

Ms. Whitlock cleared her throat.

“Can you both behave?”

My mom laughed that infectious laugh of hers. The one that made you laugh, too.

“I’m glad it’s not just my kids.”

My dad snorted.

“Some more than others.”

Asher dropped his fork. The outrageous clink it made didn’t crack the plate, which surprised me.

“Was that aimed at me?”

Their eyes narrowed as tension crackled in the air.

“If the shoe fits.”

My mom and Ms. Whitlock exchanged looks. I’m certain my mom had brought up the sudden tension between Asher and my father to her oldest friend, but now she’s witnessed it.

“Asher’s grades have been slipping lately.” My mom said.

He hit the palms of his hand on the table. Gracie jumped beside me.

“Let’s report it to the local news too, Mom.”

“Sawyer used to tutor back home.” Her mom said. “I’m sure she’d be so glad to help.”

She choked on her mashed potatoes.

“I would?”

Asher put his hand on his heart as he looked at Sawyer.

“You’d do that for me?” He said with artificial kindness. “You’re a sweetheart.”

“Asher, that’s enough.” Mom said.

“I couldn’t agree more.” He said, glaring at her.

His chair moved back with a screech. The floor bore the weight of his frustration as the resounding thuds of his stomping feet echoed his internal anger.

Noah’s eyes darted around, seeking shelter from the stifling silence.

“This dinner is delicious, Mrs. Hart.”

I placed my hand over my mouth to stifle my laughter, but my moving shoulders gave me away.

“Thank you, Noah.”

It’s safe to say dinner was over after the awkward interactions, so I gestured to Noah to follow me outside. I walked past Sawyer and placed my hand on her shoulder. I leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“Want to join us outside?”

She pressed her lips together in a tense grin.

“No, thank you.”

I led Noah to the makeshift basketball court we made out back. I dribbled the ball

before tossing it to him. He caught it with ease.

“You play?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“A little.”

We filled the next hour with rhythmic thumps as the ball danced back and forth, along with our trash-talking. Every time I would score, I would rub it in his face and vice versa.

A window opening caught our attention. We lifted our heads. Asher had already set his eyes on us. He put his finger to his lips, motioning for us to be quiet. Carefully, he descended the vines. He knew exactly where to position his feet and landed on the ground with catlike agility before running his hands down his jacket. He was a walking representation of arrogance as he strutted towards us, making us feel privileged to be in his presence. The way he carried himself was as if we owed him our admiration.

“Are any of you interested in attending a party?”

I folded my arms.

“It’s a Wednesday.”

“Thank you for the daily report.”

“We’re good, thanks.” Noah said.

Asher reached for the pack of cigarettes in his back pocket and placed one between

his lips.

“Suit yourselves.” He said and raised his chin. “See you later, little brother.”

My fists clenched at my sides. I hated it when he called me that. He loved testing my patience.

Ten minutes. That’s the age gap between us, but he made it seem like ten years.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Noah said. “Your brother is a jerk.”

I clenched my jaw as my eyes followed his retreating figure until he was out of sight.

“He never used to be.”

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Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:05 am

The dim moonlight trickled through the kitchen windows, casting enlarged shadows across the floor and countertops. The tiled floors were cool to the touch under my bare feet. I needed water.

An unexpected jolt coursed through my veins as a figure was sitting at the counter. There was a bowl of cereal in front of him. His spoon was halfway to his mouth when he paused at the sound of my gasp.

“You should have seen your face.”

I opened the refrigerator. The light beamed at him, allowing me to see his flushed face and half-opened eyes.

“When did you get home?”

“Ten minutes ago.”

I wasn’t surprised because his bedroom was next to mine, and as a light sleeper, he often woke me up in the early hours of the morning.

He stood up to put his bowl in the sink, but in his drunken stupor, his foot hooked on the leg of his chair. My instincts kicked in and I dove for the cereal bowl and let him fall to the floor with a thud. His body would make less of a noise than shattered glass. My decision was justified.

“Ow.” he said, rolling himself into a ball on the floor.

“Get up, Asher.”

“No.”

The fall did nothing to sober him up. I debated leaving him there, but despite our differences, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I lifted him and wrapped his arm around my shoulder.

His movements were unsteady, which worsened as we ascended the steps. It's as if the steps were as unpredictable as the waves in the ocean. Despite his entire body weight being shoved against my side, I powered through and got him into his room. I launched him onto the bed. The mattress bounced for a moment as if it were a trampoline before it steadied. He rolled onto his back and groaned.

“Thanks.”

“Too bad you won't remember this in the morning.” I said, backing away to his door.

“You never do.”

??

10

“I don't want just anyone to hold.”

Beautiful Soul, Jesse McCartney

Sawyer

The morning emerged from its frosty slumber. The sun pierced through the clouds, painting the sky in hues of rose and amber. I inhaled the crisp air before entering the

school library.

As I opened the door, the scent of aged paper enveloped me. My ears perked at the sound of hushed whispers and the turning of pages. I walked through the aisles of books, dragging my fingers along the aligned spines.

“I didn’t think you’d show up.”

I never noticed the slow huskiness in his voice until now. Every syllable he spoke was with purpose.

“I could say the same about you.”

I turned around. He was leaning against the shelf beside me with his hands tucked into his front pockets. His dirty blonde hair framed his piercing blue eyes. His chiseled features sculpted an air of confidence, as if he was aware of his natural beauty. The long-sleeved gray shirt clung to his silhouette like a second skin. Arrogance danced in his eyes as if he thought of something that amused him.

“You’re supposed to be checking out my essay.” He said. “Not me.”

I’d forgotten why I was here. The captivating literature distracted me.

“Hilarious.”

I approached the nearest table to hide my rosy cheeks. His mom asked me to help him out with an essay he was working on. I assumed she did it behind his back, so I never thought he’d show up.

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I placed his leather jacket on the table with rosy cheeks.

“Thanks for letting me borrow it.”

“Anytime, Ms. Bennet.”

Neither of us spoke as he dug around in his backpack before placing stapled pieces of paper on the table. His essay on *The Scarlett Letter*. As I read through it, I couldn't help but think someone else wrote it. It seemed impossible for someone who's failing to have written it, given how perfectly structured and well-written it was.

“Did you write this?”

His puzzled gaze searched for clarity.

“Of course I did,” He said. “I'm top of my class for a reason.”

“I thought your mom said you're failing.”

“I am, just not in English Lit.”

I gnawed on my bottom lip.

“You've lost me.”

He sighed.

“Look, I could tell you everything there is to know about molecular genetics or polynomials in depth.” He said. “I just choose not to.”

“Why?”

“None of that matters to me.”

I couldn’t fathom what he was trying to say. He could be valedictorian from what he’s telling me. Why would you choose not to?

“So, you care about English Lit?”

He nods. Our eyes met, acknowledging a shared significance.

“Tutoring you is pointless, then.”

“I would agree.” He said. “Although, aren’t I supposed to get a treat or something?”

“For what?”

“Well, my essay was phenomenal, wasn’t it?”

It seemed his confidence reached more than his personality and appearance, but found its way into his academic capabilities, too.

“It was,” I said. “But I told my mom I would tutor you.”

“Do you always do what your mom says?”

What is he on?

“I do.”

He slouched in his seat and folded his arms across his chest. His demeanor etched defiance.

“Come on, Ms. Bennet.” He said. “When was the last time you ever did something fun?”

Never. I would not admit that, though.

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“Indulge me,” I said. “What’s your idea of fun?”

His mouth’s curve churned my stomach, as if he was about to recruit me to the dark side.

“I have band practice in an hour.” He said. “Come and watch us play. Let your hair loose.”

“You’re in a band?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

Now that I think about it. I’m not.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll go, but your band better be good.”

The outstretched smile was clear he was happy I’d agreed.

“Trust me, you’re about to be our number one fan.”

??

I don’t know what I expected when Asher told me his buddy, Benjamin, had a makeshift studio in his garage. I thought I might see their equipment surrounded by toolboxes and bicycles tied to the ceiling, maybe even a lawn mower. However, the homemade studio exuded an electric charm. Soundproofed panels surrounded the room. It’s an acoustic heaven.

“You’re late.”

The guy appeared out of nowhere. I couldn’t see his face as his tousled dark blonde hair covered it. He pushed it back, allowing me to see the corner of his lips lifted in a mischievous smile. Ink peeked out from underneath the sleeve of his worn My Chemical Romance t-shirt, but I couldn’t make out what it was.

“Sawyer, meet Benjamin.”

His expressive eyes sparkled with liveliness. His smile was the kind that left a lasting impression.

“So, you’re Sawyer.” He said. “Pleasure to meet you.”

I extended my hand for a shake, but he pulled me into a welcoming embrace.

“Benjamin is a hugger.” Asher said. “Where’s the rest?”

“We’re here.”

I looked toward the voice and saw two more guys entering the room. The one who had spoken extended his arms as if he expected everyone to applaud his arrival. His features were a mix of boyish innocence and unfolding maturity. His buzz-cut hair framed his face with a sharp, minimalistic edge.

The other lingered near the door. His gaze remained fixed on the ground beneath him. His mop of untamed hair veiled his face, as if he was using it to hide under. Despite his reserved stance, his sapphire eyes glowed with a gentle kindness.

“That’s Liam.” Asher said, referring to the timid guy. “And that’s Sebastian.”

“You’re in luck, Sawyer,” Sebastian said. “You’re the first girl Asher’s invited to practice.”

Asher made a slashing motion across his neck. I caught it in the corner of my eye. Sebastian’s eyes widened.

“That was a joke,” Sebastian said. “He’s brought tons of girls here before.”

“Okay,” Asher said, shoving him to the instruments. “That’s enough talking for you.”

Benjamin situated himself behind the drum set and the rest followed suit. Asher reached for a neon blue guitar and strapped it over his shoulder. He strummed a few chords as if testing the sound before lifting his head.

“Take a seat,” he said, jutting his head to the tattered recliner behind me. “Enjoy the show.”

Sebastian started the song with an upbeat count-in before a pulsating melody enveloped the room. The trio joined him after a moment of solo playing. Their instrumental melody reached a climax, and Sebastian stepped forward to the microphone.

His voice floated through the air, and I became captivated by the eloquent melody. I fell into a hushed silence as my attention turned to Asher. His fingers were dancing across the strings. Liam amazed me the most, as the siren song had charmed his bashful demeanor.

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The last notes reverberated through the homemade studio. I applauded them as goosebumps littered my arms. They were sweaty and fatigued but couldn't wipe the exhilaration away as my reaction delighted them.

"I take it you enjoyed it?" Benjamin asked.

"I loved it."

"You should see us play this weekend." Liam said.

With adrenaline still coursing through his veins, he abandoned all restraint.

"Where?"

"At Elsie's birthday party."

Asher's posture stiffened at the mention of her name. His shoulders squared.

"I wasn't invited."

"So?" Sebastian asked. "You will be our plus one."

Benjamin and Liam nodded in agreement, but Asher remained stoic. I clutched the necklace around my neck, my grandmother's rose necklace, and twirled it around my finger.

"Sounds like fun."

I'd been desperate to make friends, and this seemed like the perfect method. However, unease was still lingering in the air.

??

11

“Would you lie with me and just forget the world?”

Chasing Cars, Snow Patrol

Asher

Frost-kissed tombstones, weathered by time, overtook the silent expanse. A graceful blanket of snow adorned them. The branches reached for the sky like skeleton hands, adding shadows of morbidity. The snow broke the heavy air crunching beneath my boots. A quilt of snowflakes layered my body. I tucked my icicled hands in my coat pocket as I stood before the familiar stone.

James Sullivan, a loving son and friend.

A storm of sadness brewed as a trail of crystals traced down the path of my cheeks. The shadows from the trees amplified the melancholy of our tragic reunion. As I exhaled an uneven breath, my heart felt anchored. Bouquets of fresh flowers adorned the grave, and I added my bunch to the array.

“I cannot believe it's been a year.”

My words hung in the air. I kneeled beside the gravestone and traced my fingers along the engraved lettering, wiping the white fleece away.

“Not much has changed, but it feels like everything is different.”

I paused, as if waiting for him to question me about it.

“Josh made captain.” I said. “Just like you said.”

I blinked to hold back the emotional storm.

“The band is getting better. Liam isn’t afraid to play in front of a crowd anymore.”

I spoke each word with a measure to maintain control.

“I wish you were here.” My voice quivered. “I’ve kept this secret for so long, and you’d know just what to say. What to do.”

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Footsteps approached, resonating through the quietude.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

His tone was a mix of confidence and uncertainty.

“What are you doing here?”

“It’s the anniversary.” Josh said. “I didn’t want you to be alone.”

With an audible exhale, I stood upright. The tension hung heavy with apparent discomfort.

“I’m fine.”

He scoffed.

“We’ve been hearing that for a year.”

My brows furrowed in growing frustration.

“Well, it’s the truth.”

“Asher-”

“I said I’m fine.”

It was a tense interaction. Each word turned the conversation into a battle of strained communication.

“He wouldn’t want you to blame yourself.”

“Well, it’s too bad that changes nothing.”

A sharp edge of frustration punctuated my words.

“You don’t have to be a jerk about it.” He said. “I just wanted to help.”

“You’re not helping!”

Emotions surged like a turbulent river. The air crackled with tension as his lips curled into a scowl.

“Get over yourself,” Joshua said. “You make everything about yourself, and the one time I agree with you, you get defensive.”

“I’m sorry that for once, this isn’t the Joshua Hart show.”

His nostrils flared.

“You think I came all the way here to make this about me?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

The veins on his forehead pulsed. His set jaw and narrowed eyes simmered in intensity.

“You think it’s easy being me?” He asked. “I will gladly trade places with you.”

“It must be so hard being the perfect son.” I said. “Poor you.”

Anger etched lines on his face.

“Maybe if you weren’t such a screwup, I wouldn’t have to work hard to be the better son.”

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An unrelenting fire blazed within me. The air crackled with the intensity of our outburst. As if this was some Western movie, we were ready to battle, clutching our hands at our sides.

“Admit it. You love being mommy and daddy’s favourite. You’ve always been a kiss-ass.”

“I’m done with this,” Joshua said. “Go get wasted with your bandmates like you always do.”

With a swift turn, he stormed off. I threaded my fingers through my hair and gripped at my roots. I turned to the gravestone.

“Maybe next year.”

??

The frosty night targeted the town. The air was sharp, and the moonlight paraded on the frost-kissed ground. It’s only when I approached our front door that yelling pierced the silence. My hand hovered above the handle. I thought about taking another walk. My parents would be too busy arguing to notice I’m gone. A typical weekend.

Gracie.

She would trap herself in her bedroom, clutching Duke to drown out the noise. I knocked on her door and waited for her call before sticking my head through the gap.

She was on the bed with her head on Duke's back.

"Grab a coat and Duke." I said. "We don't have time to waste."

She didn't argue. I motioned for her to be silent as I picked up the puppy and descended the stairs.

"Where are we going?" She asked the moment I closed the front door behind us.
"Wherever you want, bug."

Her eyes crinkled with genuine joy, warming me up despite the frost.

"Duke wants to build a snowman in the park."

"Did he tell you that?"

She narrowed her eyes. I raised my hands in defeat before motioning for her to keep up with me. I still had my car revoked, but the park wasn't far from our home.

The soft glow of the moonlight illuminated the white landscape. It glistened like diamonds. The crisp air brought a refreshing chill, as opposed to the stuffiness of home.

My back stiffened when a giant snowball lodged into it. Gracie's contagious laughter echoed into the night. I reached down and scooped a handful of snow before ducking behind the leafless oak tree.

She must have figured out what I was planning, because she began running in the opposite direction. She was in clear air. I took the shot.

My stomach ached from laughter as she fell onto a pile of snow. Duke went to check

up on her. She got back up and hurled another ball at me but missed. It set us off once again as we battled until we couldn't feel our fingertips anymore. I called a truce when my phone chimed for a text.

Are you with Gracie?

I rolled my eyes, certain Josh was asking to snitch on me.

It depends, who's asking?

His reply was instant.

Mom and Dad are about to send out a search party, so you better get home now.

I rolled my eyes and tucked my phone into my back pocket.

"Hey, bug," I said. "It's getting late."

Disappointment settled on her face like a heavy sigh. She lowered her gaze but didn't argue. She picked up Duke and wordlessly exited the park. I placed my arm around her shoulder. Our footsteps created a rhythmic cadence as neither of us spoke a word the entire journey home. Even Duke picked up on the tension. Josh was sitting on the porch steps with his head in his hands. He bolted upright as if he'd been waiting for us.

"Relax," I said, already knowing he was going to interrogate us. "We went to the park."

"Without telling Mom and Dad?"

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“They were a little preoccupied.”

He scoffed.

“Things are tense enough as is.” He said. “Did you need to add fuel to the fire?”

I took a threatening step closer, ready to tell him what a hypocrite he was, but Gracie’s words had us both frozen.

“Are Mom and Dad going to get a divorce?”

All the rage in our faces disappeared. We could deal with our grievances later. Gracie was our priority.

We kneeled to her height as she clutched Duke closer to her. The downturn of her lips was unsettling. Josh and I shared a glance.

“No, they’re not.”

“They might.”

We spoke at the same time. He glared at me, but I kept my gaze on Gracie.

“What Asher is trying to say-”

“What I’m trying to say is that no matter what happens, we’re always going to be here for you. You’re always going to have us.”

Tears glossed her eyes. I reached out to wipe them for her, but she recoiled.

“Until you’re both off to college.”

Her sharp tone took us aback, but even more by her angered walk into our home. Josh ran his hand down his face.

“Good job, Asher.” He said. “What a way to comfort her.”

The weight of regret pushed down on my shoulders, leaving me covered in a blanket of remorse. I kicked a lone pebble and listened to it clatter into the darkness. I always messed everything up.

??

12

“This could be the end of everything.”

Somewhere Only We Know, Keane

Josh

The hallways were alive with the symphony of hurried footsteps, and the air carried a sense of excitement, as it always does on a Friday. The cafeteria was just as lively, blended with the aroma of various foods.

I searched the crowded room for my friends, but my eyes fell on Sawyer’s table. My heart quickened and my palms felt sweaty. It’s something I’ve noticed happens whenever I’m near her or thinking of her.

I had it bad. I'd only known her for a month and I was already in deep, but I couldn't help but notice her eyes light up as she talked with her friend.

"What are you looking at?" Noah asked.

Just your sister.

"Our friends."

I looked in the opposite direction as Sawyer. Noah dragged me towards the table where Ava, Elsie, and Collin sat laughing at something Kellan said. He was sharing what we'd gotten up to during practice until he lost his footing on the ice and landed on his rear end.

"I asked Asher and his band to perform at my party tomorrow." Elsie said after Kellan's lengthy story.

“Great.” Ava said with a cracking smile.

Everyone seemed excited, except for me. It was bad enough having to live with him, but I’d always had to run in the same social circle as him. I shared every aspect of my life with him.

“You okay, Josh?” Noah asked.

No.

“I’m great.”

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The pulsating music mingled with the lively chatter of teenagers. Alcohol and other substances infused the air. I spotted my friends huddled together, sharing laughter as their voices rose above the music. Ava spotted me first and waved me over.

“We were thinking you weren’t coming.” Elsie said.

I shrugged. There was an unmistakable hesitancy as I debated hugging her, but I extended my arms.

“Happy Birthday.”

I greeted the rest of my friends, thanking Noah as he placed a drink in my hand.

“I could have given you a ride here.”

“Thanks, but I wasn’t home, anyway. Sawyer wasn’t invited, and I didn’t want my mom to force me to bring her.” He explained.

I nodded my head, but couldn’t help but feel disappointed. I hadn’t seen her for days and I never had the chance to ask her to join me. Although, this wouldn’t be the ideal environment to introduce her to my friends. Not Elsie’s birthday.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

He was glaring at someone over my shoulder. We all turned around to follow his line of vision. A subtle tension crept into the air as Sawyer entered the room with her friend. They both seemed apprehensive, but that wasn’t what made my blood boil. Asher whispered in her ear and then pointed in a different direction. A pang of jealousy took place in my chest.

“Noah, why is your sister here?” Ava asked. “With Asher?”

“I have no idea.” He said. “I’m going to find out.”

Without speaking, I trailed behind him, following him to the kitchen. The atmosphere shifted as I stood in the doorway, watching as Asher handed them both a drink with his infamous charismatic grin. The one that fooled everyone into thinking he was an angel. A gift to women.

“Sawyer,” Noah approached them. “What are you doing here?”

Her eyes cast downward as she avoided his gaze. She hesitated before speaking.

“Partying.”

“I can see that.” He said. “Why here?”

I was going to tell him not to be aggressive, but Asher beat me to it. Everyone’s hero.

“I invited her.” he said, straightening his posture. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Frustration marked their faces, neither willing to give in. The room was suffocating with intensity.

“I do,” Noah said. “I don’t like the idea of my little sister being exposed to this.”

Asher snorted.

“She’s sixteen, not six.”

Asher stepped forward, but Sawyer blocked him. My eyes fell to her hands on his chest.

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“Stop it, both of you.”

A knot tightened in my stomach as I battled with the conflicting feelings. Her eyes locked with mine as if she'd only just noticed my presence, but her hands never separated from my brother. I looked away.

“Let's go, Noah.”

I had to escape this scene and wash my eyes. The night hadn't even begun and I was already wishing it was over.

“Leaving so soon, baby bro?”

That dreaded nickname grated on my nerves. Even the way he said it. He spoke to me in the most patronizing tone he could muster. I pursed my lips and squared my shoulders before looking into his eyes.

“Your girlfriend is looking for you.”

I nodded my head toward Ava, standing with Elsie. They were chatting just outside the doorway. I felt sick satisfaction as his body stiffened before turning to Sawyer.

“You can hang out with us when he ditches you.” I muttered before stomping out of the room with Noah trailing. Take that, brother.

??

“You’re on my heart just like a tattoo.”

Tattoo, Jordin Sparks

Sawyer

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, stealing glances at Stella as I twirled my drink in my hand, avoiding eye contact with Asher. I’d been foolish, thinking he was inviting me here because he wanted to spend time with me, but I should have known better. Of course, a guy that looks like him would have a girlfriend.

“I’m going to see if the guys are here yet.” He mumbled before bolting out of the kitchen.

Our eyes followed him until he was out of sight.

“What just happened?” Stella asked, walking around the counter to stand beside me.

“I have no idea.”

A conflicted expression danced across my face as I replayed the confrontation in my mind. Siblings bicker. Noah and I fight daily, but this was something else. Their words were seeping into animosity and hatred.

“Sawyer!”

Sebastian’s cheerful tone echoed over the thumping music. I turned to find him walking towards us with outstretched arms. I groaned as he squeezed me in a hug, but I couldn’t help but hug back. He was like a human koala.

“Who is this?”

His eyes locked onto Stella. The corner of his lips raised in a subtle smirk. She was too oblivious to notice him checking her out.

“This is Stella.” I said after she took too long to answer. “Stella, this is Sebastian.”

I felt like a third wheel in their intense staring contest. Stella’s cheeks were as red as her candy apple sweater. I kept retreating until I was back in the sea of people.

My fingers played with the ends of my cardigan as I searched for a familiar face. I wanted to accept Josh’s offer to join him, but the surrounding group didn’t appear welcoming. Especially the hate-filled glare from Ava. We’d never even spoken, and she hates me. In just a month, I had more enemies than friends. I opted for a dark corner, hoping that Stella would join me soon. However, Benjamin became my saving grace.

“Please don’t tell me you were planning on spending the entire party in a dark corner.”

My smile didn’t reach my eyes.

“I was.” I admitted.

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I hated the look in his eyes. As if he was pitying me. Once again, I was the sad loner.

“Come help us set up.” He said. “We could use an extra hand since we can’t find Sebastian.”

I chuckled.

“He’s in the kitchen with my friend Stella.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Of course he is.” He muttered before motioning for me to follow him.

They were packing the instruments onto the makeshift stage. Liam nodded in acknowledgment before sorting the twisted strap on his bass. Asher avoided my gaze. He kept his focus on strumming a few chords, tuning his guitar with focused intensity. A subtle tension hung in the air as he dodged any attempts I made at eye contact.

“Sorry, I’m late.” Sebastian said, followed by a giddy-looking Stella.

I nudged her, and her face burned.

“We’re about to start.” Asher muttered before walking away to take his position.

Sebastian looked to us for answers, but none of us could explain his sudden behavior change. He shrugged and reached for his guitar and stood by the microphone.

“Hello, everyone.” The music from the stereo and the conversations hushed as the band took their places. “Happy Birthday, Elsie.”

Cheers filled the room, but I couldn’t tell who they were for. Benjamin established the rhythm as the room fell into darkness, with only a few lights shining on the stage. His voice soared, filling the air with raw emotion. Even more than he did during practice.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear as I kept stealing glances at Asher. He focused solely on his instrument, disregarding everything else in the room. A mix of nervousness and excitement coursed through my body. His gaze shifted and met mine. My stomach fluttered, a feeling I’d only experienced once. He smiled at me, but it faded as fast as it appeared. I jumped as a hand touched my arm.

“Are you having fun?” Josh yelled into my ear over the music.

I nodded my head as the beat flooded through my veins like a boost of adrenaline. He offered me an amiable smile, not moving from his spot beside me. I was unsure of what to say or do. I’d never had a guy approach me before. Our eyes met in fleeting glances, leaving my cheeks ablaze with nerves.

The song ended, and the roaring applause broke me out of my thoughts. Sebastian grinned, exchanging knowing glances with the rest of the band. As if they’d had a telepathic conversation, they dove into an encore, reigniting the adrenaline.

The pulsating energy faded as my hand brushed against Josh’s. It was subtle, but enough to make me shiver in humidity. Unspoken words charged the air between us.

“Want to get some fresh air?”

Unsure if my face betrayed me, but Josh intuited my desire for solitude. I agreed.

The porch creaked as we stepped out into the night sky. The gentle breeze cooled my burning face. We settled into the porch swing. I couldn't help but admire the starlit canvas above. No noise from inside could disrupt the peace.

"You know, I'm glad you moved here." Josh broke the silence.

"I'm glad I moved here too."

The tranquil night embraced our shared smiles.

"I've been wanting to ask you something."

I sat up straighter, waiting for his question. As he opened his mouth to speak, laughter and loud whispers interrupted the moment. Ava and Elsie stuck their heads through the doorway.

"Stop being a buzzkill and come and play Never Have I Ever with us."

Frustration flashed in his eyes, but he mustered a smile and stood up. He offered his hand to me, and I took it. A stampede of bulls filled my stomach. I felt sick.

As the group gathered in a circle, I fidgeted with the red cup Ava handed out. The prospect of revealing personal experiences made me uneasy, especially since I didn't have many experiences. With a hesitant smile, I glanced at Asher as he took a seat beside me. He held out his cup.

"What's this?" I asked.

“Just drink it.”

My nose scrunched at the foul odor before I took a sip. I placed my hand over my mouth to hold back a cough. It tasted awful.

“What was that?”

“Bourbon.” He said with a mischievous grin. “Now it will make drinking beer that much easier.”

Josh took a seat across from us, next to Noah. He diverted a hateful gaze towards Asher.

“I’ll start,” Ava said with a sly grin. “Never Have I Ever kissed someone while in a relationship.”

A few took inconspicuous sips, but my cup remained untouched, as I suspected it would throughout the game.

“Take a sip, Asher.” Elsie said, curling her upper lip.

“That’s not how the game works, Elsie.” He said. “I was never in a relationship.”

Ava’s pained expression almost evoked sympathy, but it swiftly turned into anger. And Ava directed her anger towards me.

“Why don’t you go next, Sawyer?” She asked. “You’ve been quiet.”

I felt intimidated by everyone's gaze. The air became thick with intensity.

"I'll go," Asher said, leaning forward. "Never Have I Ever been a self-absorbed bitch." A sickening grin widened. "Ava, Elsie, take a sip."

Tension crackled between Ava and Asher as lingering resentment and unresolved feelings floated in the air. We all exchanged uneasy glances as Ava and Asher caught us in their crossfire.

"I'm bored," Ava said. "Let's play Truth or Dare."

"Great idea." Elsie chimed in. "Sawyer, truth or dare?"

Asher leaned to whisper in my ear.

"You don't have to play. They're just being jerks."

A wave of irritation washed over me. I hated how everyone treated me like a child.

"Truth." I spoke before my brain could register a response.

They locked eyes, silently plotting my humiliation. I expected them to ask a ridiculous question, but it's as if they already knew the answer. They wanted everyone else to know.

"Is it true you've never been kissed?"

A wave of embarrassment washed over me, as enormous eyes fixed on me. I was tongue-tied as I fumbled with my words. The weight of everyone's attention was stifling.

“That’s not true.” Josh said, directing all eyes at him.

“How would you know?” Ava spoke as if she knew all the secrets of the universe.

“Because,” He shrugged. “I’ve kissed her.”

There were collective gasps, along with golf ball eyes. The dynamic of the room shifted.

“That better be a joke.” The bitterness in Noah was evident.

“It wouldn’t be very funny if it was.”

“You kissed my sister?”

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The aggression in Noah's voice filled the room. The tension escalated with every word. I had no idea what Josh was trying to accomplish, but I was grateful that he saved me from an unwanted confession.

"Leave him alone, Noah."

It seemed like the right thing to do. He defended me, so it wouldn't hurt to take some of the heat off him. However, the fiery look in Noah's eyes showed my words did more harm.

Asher stood up, shifting the attention to him. He clenched his jaw so hard I thought it might crack. Without a word, he marched out of the room. The room remained silent, followed by the slam of a door.

??

14

"You know, I'm such a fool for you."

Linger, The Cranberries

Asher

A tranquil layer of snow blanketed the neighbourhood. The soft glow of the streetlights casted a gentle illumination on the sidewalk. My breath formed misty clouds in the air as I took angered steps, which became muffled by the snow beneath

my feet. The cold air stung my cheeks, a deep contrast to the warmth of thoughts spiralling in my head. She kissed him. She kissed my brother, and I hated how much it upset me. I sped up my steps as if trying to escape my inner turmoil.

In the distance, the low hum of a vehicle grew louder until the unmistakable sound of an engine became apparent. The familiar black and blue van, covered from top to bottom in graffiti, pulled up beside me. The sliding doors opened, revealing the smiling faces of my friends and bandmates.

“Give us a smile.” Benjamin said with a chuckle.

“I don’t smile.”

“Hop in, buddy.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t stop the corner of my lip from twitching. They were relentless. Sum41 was playing in the background as I made myself comfortable in the seat beside Benjamin. Liam turned to look at us, while Sebastian looked at us through the mirror.

“What’s up with you?” Liam asked.

He was always timid in front of people, but when it was just the four of us, it all flew out the window.

“I just needed to get out of there.”

They raised their brows in sync as if they’d rehearsed it.

“So, it had nothing to do with the fact that your brother kissed the girl you like?” Sebastian asked.

My shoulders slumped. I hated how they knew me.

“Does it surprise you?” I asked. “Josh always gets what he wants.”

“Maybe if you let her know how you feel-” Liam said, but I cut him off.

“I’ll get over it.”

Benjamin snorted but said nothing. Sebastian, however, had a habit of saying what’s on his mind.

“We’ll pretend to believe you, for now.”

??

The atmosphere was tense as an uncomfortable silence settled over the table. The clinking of utensils was the only sound to be heard as we poked at our food. My mother’s awkward cough punctuated the strained atmosphere.

“Did Elsie have a wonderful birthday?”

My eyes glanced at Josh before looking at my plate again.

“Josh wouldn’t know.”

My mom ignored my snide remark.

“How was the performance?” She asked.

My face lit up with sheer joy at her remembering. I’d told her once Elsie asked us to perform, but I thought she’d forgotten about it.

“It was amazing.”

My father cleared his throat.

“So, you’re still wasting your time on that band stuff.”

A shadow of annoyance cast a veil over my smile.

“It’s not a waste of time if it makes you happy.”

He snorted as if I’d just uttered the most idiotic thing.

“This band thing will not get you into college.”

I knew I should have kept quiet, but my mouth never listened to my brain. A self-assured grin played upon my lips as my eyes glinted with a hint of arrogance.

“Good thing I’m not going to college.”

The clinking of cutlery ceased as the air became charged with tension. The silence was suffocating.

“That’s not funny.”

Dad’s face contorted with anger, his brows were drawn together in a menacing furrow. His narrowed eyes radiated a burning intensity.

“It wasn’t a joke.”

The colour of his cheeks deepened. Tension etched lines around his mouth.

“Asher, what’s going on?” My mother asked, searching my face for any hints.

She leaned forward to place her hand on top of mine.

“Nothing is going on,” I said. “I made a choice and I’m sticking with it.”

My dad’s entire demeanour radiated hostility.

“You’re making a mockery of this family.”

That set me off. My eyes narrowed into slits of refined animosity.

“That’s rich coming from you, Dad.”

His pupils dilated in understanding. The subtle parting of his lips was a sign that I had won the argument.

“What is he talking about?” My mother asked, turning to my father.

She tilted her head as her eyes seemed to be stuck in a maze of bewilderment. Josh and Gracie adorned similar expressions. Mom turned to me in hopes I would clarify.

“Please excuse me,” I muttered, pushing the chair back with a screech. “I’m done here.”

I stormed towards the door, slamming it shut so hard the porch floor vibrated beneath my feet. I strode across the yard, took a seat on the sidewalk, fumbled for the pack of cigarettes in my pocket and lit one with a frustrated sigh.

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The ember at the end glowed a dark red, like my inner frustration. The smoke curled into the night as I exhaled. A silhouette appeared in the shadows. Sawyer. The crunching of the snow beneath her footsteps did little to break the silence.

“Rough day?”

I exhaled a ring of smoke.

“Josh is busy right now.”

There was a subtle backward tilt of her head at my bitter reply. Her lips were a thin line of displeasure.

“I wasn’t looking for Josh.” She said. “I was sitting on my porch and saw you storming out of your house.” She explained. “Are you okay?”

“Would I be storming out of my house if I were?” I said with more displeasure than I intended.

“I was just asking.”

“Well, don’t.”

Her shoulders tensed as she took a defensive posture.

“Fine.” she said, with an edge to her voice. A hint of wounded pride. “Sorry that I cared. It won’t happen again.”

She left in a huff, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Rage blinded me, but it would be tomorrow's regret.

??

15

“Your lips look so familiar.”

First Time, ILLENIUM & Iann Dior

Joshua

The air was crisp as the sounds of skates slicing through the ice echoed in the rink. I geared up in my equipment before joining the rest of my team for warm-up drills. The blades carved smooth lines behind us as we skated from end to end. My legs felt like Jello once coach told us to take a break. I squatted onto the bench with a groan as my muscles pulled. I couldn't get my helmet off quickly enough.

“Who are you taking to the dance?”

Anxiety knotted in my gut. Our school hosted dances for fundraisers - this one was to refurbish the library. That's not what made me sweat.

How would I tell Noah I've been wanting to ask his sister?

I found myself in a silent battle between conflicting emotions. My thoughts were a restless storm of unease. My hands clammed up.

“I was thinking of asking...” I trailed off, chickening out. Noah and Kellan raised their brows. I sigh, knowing I'd have to rip the band-aid. “Sawyer.”

Shock reflected in their enlarged orbs.

“Sawyer, as in my sister?”

I nodded.

“I know it’s unexpected, but I like her.”

Noah leaned back as he tried to process the information.

“She’s never been to a dance before.”

This time, I’m the one to recoil. Is she not interested in dances? It’s the only logical explanation since it seemed absurd that she hadn’t been asked before. I would assume she had guys lining up for her back home.

“Why not?” Kellan asked.

“No one has asked her before.” Noah shrugged. “She’s not very outgoing.”

Coach called for us to get ready for the next round of drills. I grabbed my equipment before trailing behind them on the ice. Despite Noah’s displeasure, I wanted nothing more than to go to the dance with Sawyer. And I was going to make it memorable.

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There was a designated place for students to hang out during lunch hours. It was an open space at the heart of the campus. It served as a central hub, connecting all the buildings. The major attraction was the fountain, serving as a backdrop for the calming aura. It was a place to unwind. I knew I would find Sawyer there.

She was sitting on the weathered bench beside the fountain, engrossed in her book. It rested in her hands as her eyes moved across the pages. She would often tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear or bite her lip to hold back a smile as she delved into the world of fiction. The pages fluttered as a gentle breeze brushed through the area, but it didn’t disturb her.

“What are you looking at?”

I jumped at the sudden voice. A hint of a smirk played on Asher’s lips as his rebellious eyes fell on Sawyer. I scrunched my nose at the faint scent of cigarette smoke and cologne.

“When did you start smoking again?”

His smirk widened.

“Who said I stopped?” He had a firm gaze on Sawyer. “Are you stalking her or something?”

“What do you want, Asher?”

His mere presence cast a shadow over my vibrant aura. He always had that effect on me.

“I bet you one hundred bucks she would never go out with you.”

A moral crossroads unfolded. The opposing sides of right and wrong clashed like thunder in my mind. One part of my mind was telling me it was wrong to place a bet about another person, but the immoral side was telling me I was going to ask her out, anyway. Why not profit from it? The seductive whispers assured me I could use the money to take her out before the dance.

“You have a deal.” I said. “I was going to ask her out, anyway.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, a half-smirk plastered on his face. His gaze was piercing, as if he was trying to claim superiority. He extended his hand to seal the deal. My brain warned me, and told me I could still back out, but the innate desire to win against my brother was stronger. I clasped his hand in mine. He leaned in, invading my personal space to radiate dominance.

“Good luck, little bro.” He said. “You’re going to need it.”

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I took a deep breath as I stood outside the Whitlock's door. The air was stuffy with nervous energy as I raised my hand to knock, but I recoiled. I glanced down at my shoes and straightened out my jacket. My fist hovered.

Asher's face entered my mind with that arrogant grin that made me want to punch him. I could hear his voice mocking me. It was enough to give me the courage to knock. The seconds that followed felt like an eternity, but the door eventually creaked open.

"Hey, Josh." She said with a welcoming smile. "Noah isn't home."

"I know." I cleared my throat. "I wanted to give you this."

I extended a copy of *Gone with the Wind* to her. Her eyes lit up and a subtle smile graced her lips as she took the book.

"What's this for?"

"Don't open it until I'm gone." My face was flushed. "It will make sense, I promise."

I walked backward, hoping to escape the tense interaction, but tripped over a rock. I caught myself before I could fall. She bit her lip at my clumsiness.

"Let me know what the answer is," I called from her driveway's end. "I hope it's a yes."

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“Hurricanes can’t take away our love.”

Pyramid, Charice ft Iyaz

Sawyer

I wasted no time bursting into my room and diving for my bed. My heart raced with anticipation as I placed the book in front of me and flipped through the pages, trying to figure out what he’d done. I kept flipping until I opened the page to a folded-up note. I picked it up and found an underlined sentence in the book.

“Never pass up new experiences, Scarlett. They enrich the mind.”

I turned my attention to the note. His penmanship was surprisingly neat.

Sawyer,

Do you want to go to the dance with me? It’s going to be just like in your books, only better.

A warmth spread across my cheeks as a shy smile tugged at the corner of my lips. No one had ever asked me out to a dance. I twirled a strand of my hair as I reread the note. It’s as if I was living in a scene in a book. One I’d always dreamed of but never thought I’d get to experience. It’s not as if I had boys fighting over me back home. A gentle sigh escaped my lips as I flopped onto my back.

As I gazed out my frost-kissed window, I saw the outside world cloaked in a pristine

layer of snow. The snowflakes drifted downward in a delicate dance. I became lost in the tranquility.

??

Excitement filled the air as I stood in front of my full-length mirror. Various dress choices cluttered my bed. How did I prepare for the unknown? The closest I'd been to school dances were the ones I'd seen on television.

I surveyed the array of dresses; each held a possibility but no guarantee. My indecision and insecurity cost me an immense amount of time. The dance was in a few hours, and I was still waiting for Stella. As if she could sense I was thinking of her, she knocked on my door with the widest smile.

"This was on your doorstep when I arrived." She said, holding up a large box with a purple ribbon. "It has your name on it."

She peered over my shoulder as I unwrapped the anonymous gift. I placed my hands over my mouth as I unveiled the dress inside. The luxurious feel of the burgundy fabric was undeniable, and the bindings of books inspired the embroidery on the bodice. The skirt was flowing and voluminous. It was straight from a novel. Josh meant it when he promised me the best night.

"It's beautiful." I said, unable to take my eyes off it.

"Let's get ready." Stella jumped off the bed. "You don't want to make him wait."

The room was alive with excitement as we got ready. Our dresses, makeup, and accessories littered my bed. As Stella worked on the final touches to my hair, I snuck a peek at my phone. Almost time.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

She sighed.

“Don’t overthink it.” She said. “He likes you.”

“Or he’s just trying to be nice.”

She rolled her eyes.

“If he was trying to be nice, he would have given you a card and been done with it.” She argued. “Besides, you look beautiful.”

I stood up and straightened out my dress as I looked at myself in the mirror. The sad thing was, she could tell me a million times how beautiful I looked, but I’d never believe it. My mind overruled all of it.

“Sawyer, Josh is here.” My mother’s voice echoed from downstairs.

I took a deep breath. As I descended the stairs, I felt a mixture of excitement and nervousness fluttering in my stomach, knowing he was downstairs. My heels echoed against the stairs, alerting everyone of my arrival. Our eyes met and a smile played on his lips. He looked at me the way I’d always dreamed. As if he’d seen the sun after years in the dark.

“You look amazing.” He whispered in my ear as soon as I reached him at the bottom step.

My eyes sparkled as I admired the rich coal fabric that complimented his features and his frame.

“Thanks,” I said with flushed cheeks. “You look great.”

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He looked over my head as Stella hovered a few steps above.

“You look great, Stella.” He complimented her.

I grinned, knowing she would be too awestruck to thank him, but I appreciated the way he included her after I’d told him she didn’t have a date.

A knock on the door interrupted my mom as she urged us to stand for pictures. My mind raced with possibilities of who could be at the door, but Asher was the least likely.

“What are you doing here?” Josh asked as he curled an arm around my waist.

Asher’s silhouette exuded confidence as his charcoal-gray suit embraced his frame in all the right places. His cerulean eyes sparkled with an irrepressible mischief.

“I’m here to escort Ms. Stella to the dance.”

I think her heart stopped.

“What?”

The corner of Asher’s eyes crinkled as if her lack of words were amusing.

“Well, someone was too afraid to ask you out, but it seems they’re trying to make up for it.” He explained. “They’re waiting for you.”

A radiant smile illuminated Stella's features as she marched to Asher. Her eyes glittered with delight. He extended his arm out and she hooked hers around it. His eyes locked with mine, causing me to shiver. He smirked.

"Let's go."

Stella's eagerness rubbed off on us as we trailed behind her and out the door.

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Strands of fairy lights were draped from the ceilings, transforming the gymnasium into a kaleidoscope of colors. The vibrant energy bounced off the walls as the centered disco ball added a touch of sparkle to the lively atmosphere. Balloons hovered over our heads like colorful confetti waiting to rain down on us.

In the gymnasium's corner, Sebastian's eyes darted around, seeking Stella. His eyes lit up as he spotted her from across the room. It made my heart swell. I was beaming as I watched their interaction until Josh blocked my view. He extended his hand.

"Would you like to dance with me?"

"I'd love to." I accepted his invitation with enthusiasm.

??

17

"Cause everyone wants to feel like someone cares."

Gotta Be Somebody, Nickelback

Asher

I was nursing a cup of punch as my gaze focused on the mix of the swirling crowd. My heart sank as I watched Josh take Sawyer's hand, leading her into the crowd. Even from the outskirts of the dancefloor, I could see her radiant smile. I tried to maintain a stoic expression as I watched the pair twirl and sway to the music. The dance felt endless. I lifted the cup to my lips to mask my scowl. Each smile was like a jab to my heart. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the devastating sight of the girl I liked in the arms of my brother.

"You're torturing yourself," Benjamin said with his cup of punch in his hand. He took a sip of his drink and scrunched his face as if he'd drank an entire glass of lemon juice. "Someone spiked the punch again."

I took a large gulp.

"It was me." I said as I kept my gaze on the couple.

"Warn me next time."

Joshua's lips moved as he said something to Sawyer. She threw her head back and laughed. Suddenly he's a comedian.

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“Did you taste the spiked punch?” Liam questioned as he approached us.

“It was Asher,” Benjamin said. “He’s going through some stuff, it seems.”

“Next time, try something lighter than vodka.” Liam winced. “Some of us are lightweights.”

As the song ended, I turned my attention to my empty cup. I took a deep breath to compose myself.

“Why don’t you ask her to dance?”

I wanted to punch Benjamin for such an idiotic question. She hadn’t spoken to me since I was rude to her that night on the sidewalk. I tried to talk to her countless times, but she always evaded me.

And there’s the dare. My conscience reminded me. I’d dared my brother to ask out the girl I liked. I never thought he’d do it. This was all on me.

“I’m going home.” I said, placing my cup on the nearest table.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Liam placed his arm in front of me. “Dance with her.”

I clenched my fists, trying to control the tsunami of emotions. Lost in thought, my eyes followed their movements as they joined his friends at the table. She was here with Josh, not me, and it was hard to accept.

You'd only ruin her. Like you do everything.

The room felt suffocating as the weight of my thoughts pressed down on me. I ran my fingers through my hair as the internal battle intensified. There was a struggle to approach her and steal her from my brother versus the belief that I was unworthy of her affection.

I became intrigued as they returned to the dancefloor, drawing closer to each other more than before. They locked eyes in a way that made me feel uneasy. My pupils dilated as I watched Josh lean in, capturing Sawyer's lips in a tender kiss. The surrounding noise became distant as I grappled with a mix of heartache and disappointment. I turned away and fled the scene, ignoring the calls of my friends.

I marched into the misty parking lot, not stopping until I reached my truck – my mother's bargaining chip to get me to the dance. The cool metal of the door handle felt frosty against my hand as I locked myself inside and rested my forehead against the steering wheel, trying to steady my uneven breaths. I messed up. The truck felt suffocating, even with open windows. I self-sabotaged again.

I knew there was no going back. I was stuck in this truck, grappling with regret. Watching time on my dashboard, I hoped for redemption beyond reach.

??

A variety of colours attracted the students like moths to light. Vibrant posters adorned every inch of wall space in the hallways. A fundraiser. I've always hated them. It's too much school spirit for my liking. To make matters worse, it was a fundraiser for the hockey team.

Benjamin inspected one that had a collage of musical instruments around the borders. His shoulders stiffened.

“Since when are we performing at the fundraiser?”

What? Sebastian scratched the back of his neck as our eyes turned to him.

“Stella asked us to help, so I said yes.”

We all groaned and exchanged a mixture of apprehensive looks. I had no interest in the fundraiser, let alone the hockey team. Sebastian’s always had a habit of falling fast, and it’s not surprising that he buckled under the pressure.

“Fine,” Liam sighed. “I’m in.”

Of course he was. He had always been the people pleaser in our group. My jaw clenched as I stared resolutely ahead. Mine and Josh’s relationship had been strained for months and I couldn’t bring myself to help him out. Especially after the events at the dance. I hadn’t spoken to him, avoiding him whenever we’re both at home, but I heard through Gracie that Sawyer was his girlfriend now.

That’s the main reason I want nothing to do with this fundraiser.

“Hockey sucks, and so does the team.”

I froze in place as I caught sight of Sawyer at her locker, with Stella by her side. My palms grew clammy as they approached our group. Her eyes locked with mine with a combination of hesitation and longing.

“Hey.” she said to me.

It was the first I’d heard her voice in weeks.

“Hey.” My voice betrayed the nervousness I felt inside.

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“It was nice of you to volunteer for this fundraiser.” She said with a hint of a smile.
“It means a lot since Stella and I have been struggling to set it all up.”

Why did no one tell me Sawyer was planning it?

Benjamin was about to step in and open his big mouth, so I immediately placed my hand over it to shut him up.

“It’s our pleasure,” I said. “Anything to help the team.”

Her eyes sparkled with a mix of delight and surprise. I ignored my friends’ bewildered glances as if I’d sprouted a second head.

“I’ll text you later to give you some more details.”

Benjamin smacked me on my head. I winced and pressed my palm against the area.

“What was that for?”

They shook their heads in disbelief, their lips twitching as they fought to suppress a laugh.

“Suddenly, your school spirit is at an all-time high.” Liam remarked, shaking his head in mock disapproval.

“Shut up.”

I tried to play it cool, but the teasing heightened my embarrassment. I was usually reserved, but in this instance, I'd lost all control.

"We better meet up later for rehearsal," Sebastian said. "We only have a week."

As if the bell was listening in on our conversation, it rang, signalling for us to say our temporary goodbyes.

??

18

"I got a long term plan with short term fixes."

Story of Another Us, Five Seconds of Summer

Joshua

A sense of tranquillity washed over me as I stepped into the library. A contrast to the hustle and bustle of the hallways. Sunlight peered in through the windows, casting patterns of light and shadow across the rows of shelves. My footsteps echoed on the polished floors as I made my way deeper into the library in search of Sawyer. My eyes scanned the area until I spotted her in the far corner. Her focus was on her notebook.

With a soft smile, I made my way to her table. I pulled out the chair beside her and sat down. My eyes never left her face. She hadn't noticed my presence. I reach out to tuck the stray strand of hair behind her ear, marvelling at the softness of her skin. My touch must have alerted her back to reality, as a surprised smile etched her features.

"Hey," she said, her voice filled with warmth. "What are you doing here?"

“I came to whisk you away.” I placed my hand on top of hers to yank the pen held firm in her grip. “You need a break.”

“I still have so much to plan.”

I shook my head, grabbing the pen from her. She reached out for it, but I recoiled.

“Just a quick break.” I said, my expression gentle but firm.

She hesitated for a moment, torn between her desire to finish her planning and her craving for a break. She looked into my concerned eyes and closed her notebook with a weary sigh.

“Fine,” she said, as her corner lip twitched. “What do you have in mind?”

“Well, since you’re helping so much with the fundraiser, I thought I’d let you see what hockey is all about.”

She raised her left brow.

“I’ve never skated before.” She said. “I’m clumsy.”

My smile widened. This would be an experience I got to share with her.

“Well, there’s always a first for everything.”

??

The icy air bit at our cheeks as we stepped onto the slick surface of the rink. Her eyes lit up as she noticed no one else was on the ice. She was fearful of others seeing her fall. We sat on the bench to lace up our skates as she glanced at the ice with a mixture of excitement and apprehension in her eyes. Her fingers fumbled as she tried to lace them. I knelt in front of her with a reassuring smile.

“I struggled my first time, too.”

With skilled hands, I laced up her skates. I looked at her from under my lashes to find her gnawing on her bottom lip.

“We don’t have to skate if you’re not up for it.”

She shook her head.

“I want to.” She insisted. “I trust you not to let me make a fool of myself.”

I stood up and offered her my hand.

“I promise.”

She stepped on the ice like a fawn on wobbly legs. Her hands clutched onto the railings for support. I skated beside her, offering her words of encouragement.

“You’ve got this,” I said. “Just let go, I’ve got you.”

With a deep breath, she pushed herself from the railing, her skates unsteady beneath her. She stumbled, but I was there to catch her.

“You’re okay,” I whispered into her ear. “Just remain calm.”

With each step, she grew more confident. Her movements became more controlled as she found her balance. She laughed with joy as we picked up speed. Our laughter echoed through the vacant rink as we skated hand in hand. I pulled her closer, wrapping my arm around her in a tender embrace.

“Thank you for doing this with me,” I said. “I know it’s not your thing.”

She placed her hands on the sides of my cheeks.

“No need to thank me.” She said. “It’s nice to experience your world.”

With a soft smile, I leaned in close, my lips meeting hers in a gentle, lingering kiss. My stomach fluttered as her cherry-scented lip balm invaded my nostrils, a scent I never loved until Sawyer. Now it’s as if no other scent could compare.

A surge of warmth brushed over me, overwhelming me with contentment and joy. It had been a while since I’d allowed myself to feel this way, but I knew I’d found something special in Sawyer. She makes all my worries disappear. Almost.

My smile dropped as my mind drifted to the impending scholarship. My brows furrowed with worry, as my mind doubted every aspect. She reached out and placed her hands in mine, giving them a squeeze of encouragement.

“What’s going on?”

My hands fidgeted in hers.

“My dad told me some scouts are going to be at the charity game,” I said. “There’s this huge summer training camp where they only recruit the best to prepare them for the college season.”

She pursed her lips in thought.

“Are you afraid you won’t get it?”

Her hands rested on my arm as she gazed at me with concern in her eyes.

“I’m more afraid of disappointing my dad,” I admitted. “He made this all happen for me and I’m afraid of ruining it.”

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She brushed the stray hairs away from my eyes. Her touch was so gentle that I had to fight to keep my eyes open.

“You’re being too hard on yourself.” She said. “You’re an amazing player and you need to believe in yourself because I do.”

A sense of peace settled over me like a warm blanket, as I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders. Her words were the comfort I needed, offering me the safety I hadn’t had in a long time. I curled my arms around her, luring her into my warmth. I placed a gentle kiss on her forehead before placing my chin on her head.

“I needed to hear that.”

Her arms squeezed around my waist, causing a smile to slip from my lips.

“We support each other, remember?”

I sighed in bliss.

“No matter what.”

??

19

“But after one month, I started to move on.”

Remember that night?, Sara Kays

Sawyer

I skipped down the hallways in anticipation. Josh had texted me this morning with a promise that a surprise would await me after school today. He never disclosed the location, just promised to brighten my day. I had an ambivalent relationship with surprises. I'd always loved the uncertainty, but my patience always wore thin. With a wide smile plastered, I made my way to my locker, with the anticipation building with each passing moment. Especially when I saw Josh waiting for me.

"Hey," he said, his voice gentle with underlying regret. "Could we postpone the surprise? The team needs a bit more practice for the charity event."

My smile faltered.

"Really?"

He sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"I promise I will make it up to you." He said. "But I need more practice if I'm going to impress the scouts."

My disappointment was notable, but I mustered a smile, knowing that this meant everything to him. His entire future was riding on this.

"I understand."

"I'm sorry." he said, his voice overflowed with genuine regret. "I can tell the team I can't make it."

He reached into his pocket for his phone. I placed my hand on him to stop him.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said. “We can do it another time.”

His eyes swelled with gratitude as he tucked my hair behind my ears before cupping the back of my neck.

“You are the best girlfriend ever.” He said. “Have I ever told you that?”

“No.” I grinned. “It is nice to hear, though.”

My breath caught in my throat as I felt his lips brush against mine, sending a jolt of electricity to course through my veins. The bustle of the hallway faded into insignificance. My cheeks flushed with warmth as he pulled away, looking at me as if I were a precious gem. His phone beeped, tearing us from our romantic moment. He sighed as his eyes skimmed the text. He placed his phone back in his pocket and placed a kiss on my forehead.

“I’ll text you later.” He said before running off.

I watched him speed-walking until he rounded the corner before turning around to grab my books from my locker, only to collide with someone.

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“What’s the rush, Ms. Bennet?”

Asher leaned against my locker with a smirk playing on his lips. My eyes widened in surprise as I took a step back.

“I don’t want to be late for class.”

His smirk widened as he eyed me with amusement.

“Sounds boring to me.” He remarked. “I have a better offer. Ditch with me.”

My eyes widened in disbelief at his suggestion. I’d never skipped class before.

“Why would I do that?”

He chuckled as if he knew a secret I didn’t.

“Let’s just say I know a place that has a ton of rare books, and they’re having a sale.”

My mind raced with conflicting thoughts. I knew I should say no and keep my reputation as a diligent student intact, but he had me at books.

“I don’t want to get in trouble.”

He flashed me his signature charming grin as his eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Live a little, Ms. Bennet.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. “How

can you say no to books?”

I felt myself being drawn in. He was using Kryptonite against me. With a nervous smile, I nodded my head in agreement. My heart pounded with excitement and anticipation. He smiled, pleased by my answer.

“Let’s go, before the hallways clear out.”

As we slipped through the crowded hallways towards the parking lot, I couldn’t help but feel a rush of adrenaline course through my veins. We strolled through the car park, but the realization dawned on me.

“Asher, I thought your car got taken away. I heard your mom tell mine you only had it for the dance.”

He glanced at me over his shoulder and dangled a set of keys. Josh’s keys.

“If Josh didn’t want his car stolen, he shouldn’t have made it so easy for someone to take.”

I snorted at his absurd reply. As if this was Josh’s fault. He opened the passenger door for me, but I hesitated.

“I’m not helping you steal my boyfriend’s car.”

He rolled his eyes, but didn’t budge.

“Think of the books, Elizabeth.”

Will he ever move on from Pride and Prejudice references?

The books. My mind tried to convince me. Think of all the books. No angel was present on my shoulder.

“Fine.” I relented. “You’re taking the blame for this, though.”

He signaled for me to enter the car, a smile forming on his face.

“I was planning on it, anyway.” He said. “You made the right choice, Ms. Bennett.”

??

The winter landscape stretched out before us like a snow-covered wonderland. I gazed out the window, avoiding conversation, and having doubts. The snowfall grew heavier, covering the landscape in a soft, white veil. We arrived in the next town, and I felt the adrenaline of excitement coursing through my body as he pulled the car to a building.

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A charming cafe and a cozy boutique nestled on either side of the bookstore. As we stepped through the door, a bell dinged overhead. My eyes widened in wonder as I took in the abundance of rows of books lining the shelves.

“This place is incredible.” I breathed, my voice filled with awe as I reached out to trace my fingers along the spines.

His eyes sparkled in delight at my reaction.

“I knew you’d like it.”

We wandered through the aisles as we lost ourselves to the allure of fiction. My heart raced with excitement as I stumbled across some old favorites. My finger trailed over a worn spine of *Catcher in the Rye*. I picked it up and skimmed through the pages.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re like Holden Caulfield?”

He lifted his head from the book and directed a questioning gaze at me.

“You would be the first.” He said. “Although, I don’t know anyone that reads in our town.”

With anticipation, I placed the book back on the shelf, eager to delve deeper into its hidden wonders.

??

“Do you remember the time we fell in love?”

Fell In Love, Blink-182

Asher

I watched as she ran her fingers along the spines of the books, her brows furrowed in concentration as she scanned the titles. I wanted to say something to her, to bridge the gap between us. Things have been strained since I was rude to her, and I never apologized for it.

I struggled to come up with something witty to say, but my thoughts needed to be more cohesive. I had never possessed the gift of apologizing or expressing my feelings in words. However, she didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of my anger. It was best to bite the bullet and cast away my pride.

“So, the night I yelled at you,” I said, wanting to punch myself for the lack of tact. “I wanted to apologize.”

She clutched the book in her hand to her chest as she avoided any eye contact with me. Her weight shifted from foot to foot. She fidgeted with the hem of her sweater.

“We all have our moments.” She said. “I shouldn't have intervened.”

I shook my head.

“I appreciated your concern, even if I didn't show it.”

Her expression softened as a delicate smile graced her face.

“I understand, and I forgive you.” She said. “I’d like for us to be friends.”

I felt a pang of disappointment course through my veins at her words. Friends. I wanted so desperately to tell her I wanted something more, but I didn’t want to ruin what she had going on with my brother. She seemed happy. I forced myself to nod and smile, masking my true feelings.

“I’d love that.”

I watched as she returned to grabbing armfuls of books, joy radiating on her face. I doubted whether I’d be able to stick to our agreement, but for now, it would have to be enough.

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The radio, accompanied by the gentle hum of the engine, played my Blink-182, Spotify playlist. I kept stealing glances at Sawyer. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, but she kept a smile on her face despite the weariness in her eyes. She clutched her necklace in her hand, swinging it from side to side on her chain. I’d noticed she did it often, especially when she was deep in thought.

“I like your necklace.”

She jumped as if she’d forgotten she had company. She pulled the pendant into her view.

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“Thanks.” She said. “It was my grandmother’s. I never take it off.”

Her cheeks flushed as her eyes shone with happiness at the thought of her grandmother. I smiled. My gaze lingered on her for a moment longer before turning back to the road.

Tension cackled in the air once I pulled into the school parking lot. Joshua stood before us with a thunderous expression. He crossed his arms and clenched his jaw with poorly restrained rage.

“What is your problem, Asher?” He exclaimed once we exited the vehicle.

I couldn’t help but find humour in his anger, especially with the tiny vein bulging in his forehead.

“Look-”

“And you dragged Sawyer into this?” He interrupted me before I could muster an excuse. “You need to catch a grip. She ditched class, which is unlike her.”

“She’s not a child,” I said with a scoff. “Her decisions are her decisions.”

Josh reached over to grab her hand as he pulled her into his chest, as if trying to shield her from me. I rolled my eyes at his clear insecurity.

“Where were you, Sawyer?”

Great, now Noah's joined the party.

"Asher convinced her to skip class." Josh chimed in before anyone else could.

"Excuse me?" Noah's head whipped in my direction.

"Stop it." Sawyer said, as things escalated.

"What were you thinking?" Noah's tone was sharp and commanding. "With him?"

I tucked my hands in my front pockets.

"Now, that's just rude." I said, knowing my words would add fuel to the flames. "I'd like to think I'm enjoyable company."

"Now isn't the time for your quips, Asher," Josh reprimanded. "I was on the verge of calling the cops when I noticed my car was missing."

"Why didn't you?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Don't act like you forgot about the note you left in my locker."

I bit my lip and dropped my head so he wouldn't see me holding back laughter.

"I thought it would be rude to take your car without leaving a note." I said. "Sorry for having manners."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I couldn't help but find amusement in setting Noah and Josh off. As Josh's voice rose in frustration, I bit down on my lip to stifle another round of laughter. There was something comical about Josh's furrowed brow and tiny protruding vein. I reached into my back pocket for a cigarette and held it

between my lips. I would not light it just yet. Smoking in animosity has never been my style.

“Let’s go home, Sawyer.” Noah said, grabbing her wrist, but she yanked it out of his hold.

“No, stop treating me like a little kid.”

They wrestled back and forth like a tug of war until Josh stepped between them.

“I’ll take her home.” He said to Noah. “You need time to cool off.”

He ran his fingers through his hair and nodded. I watched in glee as he stormed off like a toddler experiencing a tantrum. Josh leaned down to whisper something into Sawyer’s ear. I only caught the end where he’s dragging her to his car.

“I had fun today, Ms. Bennet.” I called out with an arrogant grin. “Until next time.”

I felt proud as Josh’s shoulders stiffened, but even prouder as she looked at me over her shoulder with a beaming smile.

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After an intense practice session, the tense atmosphere shifted to lightheartedness. We abandoned our instruments and lounged around the practice area. Sebastian leaned back against the amplifier as he looked at me with a wide grin. I ignored him. He continued to stare until I broke.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Stella told me you and Sawyer spent some time together yesterday.”

I rolled my eyes at his desire for gossip. There’s a reason Gossip Girl had always been his favourite show. His words lured our pair of friends to join us with eager ears.

“We just went to some bookstore in the next town over.” I muttered, trying to play it cool.

“What did Josh have to say about that?” Liam asked.

I shrugged.

“He wasn’t pleased.”

“You can’t blame him.” Benjamin said. “I saw him freaking out after you stole his car.”

Laughter filled the garage as we joked around and caught up, despite having spoken

yesterday. I leaned further in the comfortable chair and took a sip of Red Bull before my phone buzzed in my pocket.

Collin. The caller ID read.

“You okay, Asher?” Liam asked, causing the room to fall into silence.

I clicked decline and tucked my phone in my pocket before mustering a smile.

“I’m fantastic.” I said, ignoring the insistent buzzing.

He’ll get the memo.

??

21

“I’m not a perfect person.”

The Reason, Hoobastank

Josh

The air between us was heavy with unspoken words, as the conflict hovered over us like a dark cloud. Sawyer did not attempt conversation as she gazed at the passing scenery. I stole a glance at her from the corner of my eye. My heart cracked at the sight of her downcast expression. The minutes ticked by in agonizing silence as we drove through the snow-covered roads. I knew I should say something to break the ice, but the words lingered on the tip of my tongue. My grip on the steering wheel tightened, as the silence was insufferable. I would not let my brother ruin my relationship with Sawyer.

“I’m not upset with you.”

I spared a glance in her direction before returning them to the road.

“You’re not?”

“No,” I said, my voice cracking with emotion. “This is typical Asher behaviour. I don’t want you to get dragged into his mess. He attracts too much trouble.”

Her eyes widened in surprise as they brewed with confusion.

“I went with.” She said. “He didn’t force me to do anything.”

I scoffed.

“Let me guess, he bribed you with something you have a weakness for?” I knew I had her when her eyes fell on her lap. “Classic Asher manipulation.”

She tucked her hair behind her ears.

“Can I ask you something?” She said, her voice soft as she turned to me.

I glanced at her in curiosity as we reached my driveway. I halted the car, but did not move, wanting to give her my full attention.

“Sure.”

“Why do neither of you get along?” She asked. “Noah and I fight, but not like this.”

My expression tensed. I was waiting for her to ask this question. I shifted in my seat, wondering how much information was appropriate to divulge.

“We used to be best friends.”

“So, what happened?”

I shrugged. If I had the answer, I would have given it to her.

“We grew apart and liked different things.”

I could see in her eyes she saw through my facade. She reached out and placed a hand over mine, her eyes overflowing with concern.

“That can’t be it.” She insisted.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath.

“Things changed last summer,” I said. “Asher went through a lot.”

“What happened?”

I hesitated.

“That’s his story to tell.”

I appreciated her not insisting on telling her.

“So, it started last summer?”

I nodded my head and twined my fingers through hers.

“His grades started slipping, and he quit the hockey team. Our dad was not impressed.”

She squeezed my hand with a gasp.

“Asher was on the hockey team?”

“He was the shining star.” I said, as the compliment left a foul taste in my mouth.

“Like he is with everything.”

“Is that why he and your dad butt heads?”

I took a deep inhalation of air.

“He used to worship our dad. He’d do anything to make him happy, but nothing

about Asher was the same anymore.”

Her eyes filled with sympathy.

“You are brothers.” She said. “It will all work out.”

I lifted our interlocked hands to my lips and placed a kiss on her knuckles.

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“Maybe, maybe not.” I said. “As long as I have you.”

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I slouched in my seat as I took a tentative sip of beer. As we unwound before the charity match tomorrow, we sat cramped in Collin’s dimly lit basement. The night shifted from innocent to more daring as Kellan insisted we sneak out and get some more beer. My heart skipped a beat at his suggestion, but the nagging voice in the back of my mind warned me of the risks.

“We should call it a night.”

They brushed off my words.

“I’m in.” Ava said, raising her hand.

Elsie, never one to think for herself, raised her hand.

“Me too.”

Kellan, Collin, and Noah turned to me with raised hands. I got caught up in the moment, not wanting to disappoint them, so I pushed aside my doubts and raised my hand. They cheered.

We walked to the convenience store under the cover of darkness and huddled together to think of a game plan.

“I heard they don’t card here.” Kellan said.

I hesitated. My mind raced with the potential risks, but I knew they would dismiss my concerns. I followed them through the sliding glass doors. My nerves were on edge as we scoured the shelves for alcoholic beverages. My breath hitched as we reached the refrigerated section in the back. We each selected a drink and approached the counter. My heart pounded with a mix of fear and excitement. However, our nerves betrayed us as our hands shook with anxiety. The middle-aged cashier eyed us, his brows furrowed with suspicion as he rang up our purchases.

“I’m going to need some ID.” He said, leaving no room for negotiation.

We exchanged panicked glances before Kellan bolted out of the store with us on his tail. We sprinted through the parking lot. Our desperate escape came crumbling down when Collin tripped over a discarded box and went crashing to the ground with a bone-jarring thud. A sharp cry fell from his lips as he clutched his wrist. We skidded to a halt and huddled around him.

“Are you okay?” Noah asked.

“I think I broke my wrist.” Collin said, his face contorted in agony.

I felt a surge of panic wash over me as I thought of what to do next. Kellan knelt to help him stand. I brushed my hand over my face and sighed.

We were screwed.

??

“Right now I feel invisible to you.”

Losing Grip, Avril Lavigne

Sawyer

I moved with purpose as I busied myself with the preparations for the fundraiser. The icy chill nipped at my cheeks, but I was too determined to make everything perfect to take notice. With Stella’s help and the decorating committee’s generosity, the rink became a lively activity center. We set up tables along the walls and decorated them with stacks of pamphlets promoting the cause. I couldn’t help but swell in pride at what we’d accomplished.

Asher’s band had arrived a few moments ago to set up for their opening performance, but I had yet to see Joshua. The air hummed with anticipation as the band members did their final tuning and preparations. The doors would open shortly. I watched with rapt attention as they messed around on stage.

Behind them, I watched Stella open the doors as our spectators and donors walked through. I rushed to the stage and called Asher’s name.

“Have you seen Josh?”

“Nope.” He strummed a few chords on his guitar before acknowledging me. “He’s looking at himself in a mirror somewhere.”

This is not the time for sibling bitterness.

“The game is in thirty minutes and we are missing three players, one of them being my brother.” I said, brewing with anger. “This is all a disaster.”

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I could feel myself falling into a panic as the stands filled with people. As the minutes ticked by, my worry mounted. I was about to give in to the panic until the familiar sound of the arena doors swinging open drew my attention. Relief flooded me as he jogged over with Kellan and Noah, their hockey gear slung over their shoulders.

“Sorry, we’re late.” Josh said, his cheeks flushed.

“No time for that.” I said, shoving them to their locker room. “Get ready.”

I didn’t notice the band had started playing because of my panic. They were halfway through their first song.

“Sawyer, I need to tell you something important.” Josh said, his voice tinged with regret.

I felt my heart skip as I saw the worry etched on his face.

“What’s going on?”

He took a deep breath.

“Collin broke his wrist last night.”

My heart sank at his words.

“What happened?” He seemed skeptical to say, but I needed answers. “Josh.”

“We were out late last night, and everyone thought it would be funny to buy some alcohol, but we got caught and made a run for it and Collin fell.” He explained without taking a breath.

My stomach twisted with a mixture of disappointment and concern. I had texted him multiple times last night thinking he was getting an early night’s sleep, but he was out with his friends the entire time. I wanted to rip him to shreds, but I resisted the urge.

“Is he okay?” I asked. He nodded. “We’ll have to cancel the fundraiser.”

“What?”

I rubbed my eyes with the palms of my hands until I saw stars.

“Josh, we’re down a player.” I said. “We can’t play without Collin and none of the reserves are here.”

“I’ll play.”

Josh’s jaw tightened and his nostrils flared as he gazed over my head. I froze at the familiar voice. I placed a hand on Josh’s clenched fists and turned to find Asher leaning against the wall with a smug smirk playing on his lips. He still had his guitar strapped to him, but he had moved it behind his torso. The rest of his bandmates looked at him as if he’d just announced he was an extraterrestrial. His eyes gleamed with delight as he took in his brother’s angered appearance.

“We’re fine.” Josh said.

“I wasn’t asking you.” Asher said, as his eyes fell on me. “I’ll play.”

If Josh had never told me about Asher’s history with the sport, I would have declined.

However, if he was as good as Josh said, then he was our only shot.

“Is anyone else’s mind blown right now?” Sebastian voiced what we were all thinking.

A self-satisfied smirk rested on Asher’s face as he watched Josh’s growing agitation.

“I’m sure my uniform still fits.” he said, throwing in a wink at his brother for good measure.

The tension crackled between them in the air. If there was any more heat between them, there wouldn’t be ice left to skate on.

“Thank you, Asher,” I said. “We could use your help.”

Josh opened his mouth to interject, but I placed my hand on his chest. Asher’s smirk widened as he lifted his guitar strap over his head and handed it to Liam. He approached us and placed his hand on Josh’s shoulder.

“Let’s get ready, little brother.” He said. “We don’t want to let the team down.”

Josh was fuming, but he followed without a word.

??

23

“I like me better when I’m with You.”

I Like Me Better, Lauv

Asher

I had my hockey gear set out before me as I laced my skates. I thought I’d forgotten how to do it, but it was like muscle memory. The surrounding team was in high spirits as they joked around, but I couldn’t shake off the knots in the pit of my stomach. It had been almost a year since I’d stepped foot on the ice after I’d sworn never to go anywhere near it again. The thought of breaking that promise put me in unease.

This is for Sawyer. I reminded myself. I wasn’t doing this for anyone but Sawyer. She’d put a lot of effort into this, and my brother and his vapid friends ruined it for her.

“I never thought I’d see Asher Hart on the ice again.”

Kellan’s voice pulled me from my probing thoughts. He had his shoulder pressed against the locker, grinning down at me as if I were a lost child.

“Don’t get used to it.” I said. “This is a one-time thing.”

“I had no idea you played hockey.” Noah piped in.

I reached for my stick and some tape to distract myself from the imploring gazes.

“I find bragging to be tasteless.” I said with a smirk.

“He quit.”

Josh’s words hung in the air like a dagger, stabbing at my pride. I glanced at him from under my lashes. Rage filled his eyes, but I didn’t let his words affect me.

“You call it quitting. I call it coming to my senses.”

He folded his arms across his chest.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I kept my focus on taping my stick, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of getting me worked up.

“It means that I stopped seeking Dad’s acceptance,” I said. “You should try it sometime. It’s invigorating.”

“You’re so full of yourself, Asher.”

Before the situation could escalate further, the team intervened. Noah stepped between us, blocking us from each other’s heated glare.

“Let’s just focus on the game.”

With a last glare over Noah’s shoulder, Josh begrudgingly stepped back. I stood up

and grabbed my stick. They all looked at me as if I was about to hit Josh over the head with it. It was tempting, but I put on my best smile. I could get my revenge on the ice.

“Let’s go, team.”

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In the heart of the crowded arena, Josh and I faced off on opposing teams. Our eyes locked in a fierce glare as we waited for the game to begin. Once it did, the noise of the crowd faded and all I could hear was the sound of blades slicing against the ice. The puck reached me, and I kept my eyes on it as I glided it across the ice. The opposing team closed in on me, but I remained calm. With a swift flick of the stick, I sent the puck soaring towards the net. It collided with a resounding thud. The crowd erupted into a deafening roar, but I ignored them and sent a wink Josh’s way.

Game on. I mouthed to him before joining my team in a huddle.

The first period was reaching its climax, but I wanted to end it with one more goal. Kellan handed me the puck and I pressed forward with unabated determination. I saw an opportunity and charged toward the net. Before I could raise my stick for a shot, Josh swooped in and stole the puck away before blasting it down the ice. With a powerful shot, he sent it past the goalie.

As the game wore on into the second period, the animosity between me and Joshua reached a boiling point. Each collision on the ice led to more frustration. Every time I had the puck, he would be there breathing down my neck. The third time he shoved me into the barricade, I snapped.

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“Do you want to fight, little brother?” I asked. “I can arrange that.”

“What’s the matter, Asher?” He asked. “Are you upset that I’m better at hockey than you?”

I scoffed at his transparent inferiority complex.

“Please, I haven’t played in over a year, and I still outshine you.” I said. “Even your girlfriend is cheering for me. I saved what you ruined, after all.”

Our eyes locked as our competitive spirits fuelled the flames of rivalry and hatred. He smirked before slamming into me and shoved me against the barrier. He skated away, but I followed him with fierce determination. In the middle of the ice, we met in a thunderous collision; the impact sending us backward. Gloves dropped as I charged for him. The crowd’s bellows reached a deafening crescendo as we delivered punches. Every blow was a testament to our year-long rivalry. Our teammates rushed in, attempting to separate us, but our determination to harm each other was too strong. Blood trickled from our split lips, and bruises were forming on my already battered skin. Once the team separated us, they escorted us to the penalty box, but the glass failed to separate us from our intense glares.

24

“Someday you will find me.”

Champagne Supernova, Oasis

Josh

The tension hung heavy in the living room as our dad stood in front of us with his hands behind his back and a stern expression. His disappointment was palpable. Concern drenched my face, while Asher's face etched with defiance.

"What is wrong with you two?" He asked, his voice a low rumble that echoed off the walls. "You couldn't get along for one game?"

I shifted under our dad's gaze, while Asher met it with a stubborn glare and a jaw set in arrogance. He pointed an accusatory finger in Asher's direction.

"You may have cost your brother a chance at a scholarship because of your selfish actions," Dad said, his voice rising with frustration. "There were scouts out there and you blew it for him."

Asher clenched his fists, his anger simmered beneath the surface.

"My bad." He said with indifference. "It's been a while since I disappointed you. I figured I needed to step up."

Dad's features contorted into a mask of rage. His skin took on a red hue, as if his blood was literally boiling.

"You never fail at that, Asher," Dad said, his words venomous. "It's the only thing you have yet to fail at."

Sweat beaded on Asher's forehead as his eyes shifted into dark pools of anger. His muscles twisted like a spring, ready to snap. Without warning, he stood up and swept Dad's paperwork off the desk with a violent swipe of his arm. His outburst hung in the air, suffocating me as if the room closed on us. He stomped out of the room with a

scream of frustration before slamming the door so hard that Mom's favourite vase fell to the floor and shattered into dust. Dad, not one to be outmatched, stormed out of the room and upstairs.

Sniffles echoed through the room. I turned and found Gracie in the doorway, her eyes wide with fear. I launched myself out of my seat and approached her, kneeling in front of her to wrap my arms around her quivering shoulders.

"It's okay," I said, my voice warm and reassuring. "It was just a misunderstanding."

I held her as she buried her face against my chest, her tears soaked into the black fabric of my shirt.

"They fight all the time." She said, her words muffled.

I placed a kiss on the top of her head and pulled her closer.

"They do."

I don't know what's been going on with Asher, but it's as if he'd morphed into a darker version of himself overnight. My twin had become nothing more than a stranger.

??

In the cozy corner of the cafe, I sat slumped over my coffee with my head in my hands. Sawyer sat across from me, her brows furrowed in concern as she reached over the table to grab my hand.

"What's going through your mind?" She asked, her voice filled with gentleness.

I let out a heavy sigh, my shoulders sagging under the pressure.

“The scholarship,” I said. “It’s as good as gone.”

She squeezed my hand.

“You don’t know that.” She said. “They’ve seen you play before, so why would one bad run knock your chances down?”

I managed a weak smile, knowing she was trying her best to cheer me up. My heart warmed by her attempts.

“I appreciate you.” I said, squeezing her hand. “I need this, though.”

Her gaze met mine with unwavering determination.

“One scholarship will not define your future.” She said, her voice filled with conviction. “You’re so talented. I know you’ll get tons of offers to play hockey.”

I felt a surge of gratitude wash over me. She was looking at me as if I were already a hockey star. Her unwavering belief in me would be enough to motivate me to keep on trying, despite any obstacles that may be in my way.

“How did I make it through anything before I met you?”

She smiled, her eyes sparkled with delight.

“Who knows?” She said with a shrug. “I’m not planning on leaving.”

I reached over the table to cup her face in my hands, brushing my thumb against her soft cheeks. We leaned in and shared a tender kiss. I pulled away, wary of us still

being in public.

“Let’s go home.” I suggested, knowing she’d want to spend the rest of her day doing homework.

She’d get anxious if she left it for the last minute. We grabbed our stuff before bracing ourselves against the cold. I couldn’t wait to get home and get warm.

??

We stepped out onto her driveway, bundled up in warm layers of clothing. Our breath formed clouds in the chilly air. With a mischievous grin, I scooped up a handful of snow. I sent it soaring through the air towards Sawyer. She dodged it just in time, her laughter ringing like church bells in the crisp winter air.

“You’ve started a war.”

She scooped up a handful to launch at me. We danced around the driveway, our movements graceful as we launched snowballs at each other with reckless abandon. Our laughter echoed through the air, along with the soft crunch of sand beneath our feet. With each throw, we grew closer. Once she was close enough, I picked her up before dropping her into the snow. I fell beside her. The exertion made our faces flush as we tried to catch our breath and melted snow soaked through our clothes. We gazed up at the sky, watching the snowflakes fall as our gloved hands intertwined. It’s as if my fears and concerns melted away into the ice. Sawyer had a way of making me feel better without even trying, and I couldn’t be more appreciative. She was the only sanity in my insane world.

25

“So take your gloves and get out.”

I Don't Love You, My Chemical Romance

Sawyer

The world awoke to a breathtaking winter morning as the first light of dawn painted the sky in hues of gray. A blanket of pristine snow draped everything in sight. Icicles sparkled like diamonds, adorning tree branches. The crisp air carried the faint scent of pine and wood smoke. I stepped out onto my driveway, waiting for Noah to hurry to school. My heart sank as I reached up to adjust my necklace, but the chain felt empty. Panic surged through my veins as I searched my pockets and around my feet, wondering where it could have fallen. In desperation, I dropped to my knees and sifted through the snow. I ignored the numbness in my fingers and dug deeper. It must have fallen off during our snow fight.

“Darling, what are you doing?” Josh called out, his voice tinged with concern.

Asher's footsteps trailed behind him. Tears stung my eyes as I looked up, my cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“My pendant fell off,” I said, my voice trembling with oncoming tears. “I think it fell in the snow yesterday.”

Joshua dropped to his knees without hesitation as his eyes scanned the area.

“Don't worry.” He placed his hand on my shoulder. “We'll find it, but we're going to be late if we don't leave now.”

I shook my head.

“It's important to me.”

“I know it is. As soon as school is over, we’ll come right back here and search everywhere.”

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I looked behind him to find Asher missing. He couldn't deal with my emotions and escaped when he could. Josh reached over to wipe the tears with the sleeve of his jacket.

“We’re going to find it.” He promised. “We won’t stop looking until we do.”

??

I needed to be alone. To gather my thoughts and lose myself in the art. I always found solace here amid all the chaos. With each brushstroke, I poured all my emotions out onto the canvas.

The natural light streaming through the windows bathed the classroom in a soft glow. It made the worries and stresses of the outside world fade into insignificance. I glided my brush across the canvas with skilled ease as my mind got lost in the swirl of vibrant colors.

However, the door shattered my peace when it creaked open, alerting me to the unwelcome presence of Ava and Elsie. I gripped my brush in my hold as they entered.

“Wow, never thought we’d get you alone. Josh is usually trailing like a lost puppy.” Ava said, her voice dripping with disdain as she strutted over.

My jaw clenched with indignation. They’d avoided me for months, so why decide to annoy me now?

“I’m busy right now,” I said. “Go braid each other’s hair or something. I need to finish this for class.”

Elsie scoffed and rolled her eyes in exaggerated disbelief.

“Why bother?” She asked. “You’re just wasting your time.”

My knuckles turned white. I’d already been having a bad day, and they were adding fuel to the flames.

“The only thing I’m wasting my time with is you.”

The smiles faded and anger replaced them as Ava reached forward for a brush. With a flick of her wrist, she launched a glob of paint onto my canvas. I gasped at my ruined painting.

“My bad.” She taunted, her voice dropping with contempt.

With a primal scream of rage, I launched myself at Ava. With a thud, we collapsed onto the floor and grappled together as we crashed against desks and easels. We knocked over paint, but we were more hellbent on bruising each other than the mess we were making.

Our struggle echoed through the room, along with Elsie’s, as she joined the fight. The noise must have drawn attention, as we soon had an audience, one of them being the principal.

“You three, stop right now!” His voice boomed with authority.

We reluctantly broke apart, our faces flushed and sweaty. His gaze swept over the scene before him, his face tightening in disappointment. He ushered the onlookers out

of the room before turning back to us. He folded his arms across his chest.

“My office. Now.”

I bit my lip and wiped the paint off my face with the back of my hand as I trailed behind Ava and Elsie with my head hung low. Being called to the principal’s office was a first for me, and the unknown filled me with dread.

??

26

“Let the rain fall down and wake my dreams.”

Come Clean, Hilary Duff

Asher

The winter air was like a knockout punch as I trudged through the freshly fallen snow, yet my heart pounded with determination. I couldn’t get the image of Sawyer’s tear-stricken face out of my mind. Her stress was palpable when she realized she had lost her pendant. I knew how much that locket meant to her. My phone vibrated in my back pocket. Benjamin.

Where are you? School started an hour ago.

I hurriedly replied.

I’m preoccupied at the moment. See you later.

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I scanned her driveway, my eyes squinting against the cold as I tried to determine where to look. I combed through the snow. My fingers were growing numb, but my resolve was unwavering. Each breath formed a cloud of mist in the frosty air. The pendant could be anywhere, and small enough to be lost in the abyss of snow. With each handful, my eyes scanned the ground for any signs of it. Another hour must have passed, and I was slowly losing hope.

Until a glint of silver caught my eye.

My heart knocked against my ribcage as I brushed away the snow like a dog digging for a bone. A surge of triumph burst through me as I plucked the pendant from the ice. I brushed the icicles away with my thumb before tucking it into my coat pocket. I'd spent hours in the bitter cold. I dug through piles of snow, but it was all worth it, knowing it would put a smile back on her face.

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I took my time getting to class. It was rare for the halls to be so peaceful, and I wanted to take advantage of it. I strutted with my hands tucked into my front pockets and hummed Adam's Song by Blink-182. I turned the corner and bumped into Mr. Lombard—the strictest teacher in school.

“This seems to be a habit for you, Mr. Hart.” He said as he glared at me over the rim of his glasses.

“I missed the bus.”

“If that’s the case, perhaps it would benefit you to wake up earlier.”

I shrugged.

“I promise I will try.” I said, but he didn’t fall for my empty promise.

“You can try harder in detention.” He said. “You’re familiar enough with it by now.”

“Yes, sir.” I said, trying not to make it obvious how little I cared.

Neither of us spoke. We awkwardly hovered in the hallway.

“Get to class.” He said, before walking past me to torment the next kid he bumped into.

“Asher.” I heard a whisper.

I looked around for the source of the noise before someone pulled me into the shadowy confines of an abandoned classroom.

“You won’t believe what happened.” Benjamin said with a hint of urgency.

“Hello to you too.”

“Whatever.” He said, brushing my sarcasm off. “It’s about Sawyer.”

My ears perked at the mention of her. Benjamin glanced around as if he was afraid someone was listening in.

“Sawyer and Ava got into a fight in the art classroom.”

My eyes widened in shock. Sawyer Whitlock?

“Hilarious, Ben.”

“I’m serious.” He said, tossing his hands up before dropping them. “I saw the whole thing.”

“Please tell me you got it on video.”

“Of course I did.” He said, excitement bubbling in his voice.

As he took out his phone to show me the video, I couldn’t help but smirk. It seemed I’d be having a new detention buddy.

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The detention door creaked open as I entered, and all eyes fell on me. I ignored them and confidently strutted inside. My gaze swept around the room for Sawyer. She sat at a desk near the front, her nose buried in a book, unaware of my arrival. I leaned against the desk beside her.

“Hey there, brawler.”

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She looked up, surprise flickering in her eyes. As if she'd forgotten where she was.

"Asher." She said with a deep sigh. "I've heard this is your usual hangout spot."

"It seems it's going to be yours, too."

She tried to suppress her grin, but I noticed it.

"This is a onetime only deal."

Ava launched herself in the seat beside me, wedging me in between their heated gazes.

"Neither of us would be here if she didn't attack me."

"Don't be so dramatic," Sawyer said, slamming her book shut. "You started it. I ended it."

The tension between them crackled like static electricity. I lounged back in the middle of my seat with a mischievous grin. It was like reality television.

Their argument was on the verge of escalation until Mr. Harris entered the room. The pair fell silent, shooting one last glare at each other before turning their attention to the front. The pendant burnt a hole in my pocket as I placed my hand over it. I debated on giving it to her now, but I didn't want to make a scene. I raised my hand.

"Mr. Harris, can I go to the bathroom?"

“It’s may.” He said with a sigh, not taking his gaze off the stack of papers in front of him.

“It’s October.” I said, not resisting an opportunity to upset him.

“Go to the bathroom, Mr. Hart, before I change my mind.”

The hallways were eerily quiet. A faint smirk appeared on my lips as I savoured the moment of solitude. The flickering fluorescent lights cast long shadows across the linoleum. I brushed a tousled strand of hair away from my eyes as I scanned the empty corridor.

Sawyer’s locker stood out to me. I hesitated whether to slip the pendant in her locker or to wait until after detention to give it to her.

“Shouldn’t you be in detention?” Josh asked, appearing out of nowhere.

“Shouldn’t you be waving your pom-poms around?”

He ignored my attempt at annoying him.

“What are you doing at Sawyer’s locker?”

“I was planning on vandalizing it, but you stopped me before I could.”

“Now isn’t the time for your sarcastic quips.” He said. “It might work on everyone else, but not me.”

I raised my hands in mock surrender before brushing my shoulder against his, wanting to strut away with the last word.

“You lost your chance.”

His words halted me in my spot.

“For what?”

“For her.”

My fists clenched at my sides as my composure slipped away.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You lost the girl, brother.” He said, his tone bitter and condescending. “For the first time, you weren’t the first choice.”

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I turned and stared at him with such intensity that I was surprised a hole wasn't forming. I straightened my spine and squared my shoulders, wanting to appear unbothered despite the inner turmoil.

"I'm not worried," I said. "I can wait."

"For what?"

"For her to realize I'm the better choice."

The atmosphere was tense as we squared off in the deserted hallway. Josh scoffed.

"You've never been the better choice, Asher." He said. "You've never been able to keep a steady relationship your entire life. You use girls like toys until you're done with them, and you'd just do the same to Sawyer."

Our gaze never wavered as the tension escalated.

"That's not true. Sawyer is different."

He chuckled without humour. His corner lip lifted as he scoffed in disbelief.

"You've said that about every girl that gives you the slightest bit of attention." He said. "Face it, Asher, you only hurt people."

His words hung heavy in the air, a stark reminder of the recent rift between us. I charged for him, but Liam stepped between us as if he were lurking in the shadows,

expecting this interaction.

“Asher, you need to step back,” Liam said, but I ignored him and tried to break from his hold. “You don’t want to do this.”

“Of course I do.”

He dug his feet into the ground and knocked me back.

“Josh, get out of here.”

The hostility in Liam’s voice surprised me. I’d never heard him speak like that to anyone before. He kept shoving me until we rounded the corner.

“Take deep breaths.”

I searched my pockets for a cigarette, but I wrapped my fingers around the stiff piece of silver. The pendant. I burst past Liam, ignoring his pleas for me to not do something stupid, and marched up to Joshua, standing at his locker. He turned to me with raised brows. I gripped his hand and shoved the pendant into his palm. Without a word, I headed for the exit. Who cared about detention?

“Was that the pendant?” Liam called, running until he was beside me. “The one you told me Sawyer lost?”

“It was.”

“You went to look for it?”

“I did.”

“Why did you give it to Joshua?”

I stopped with my palms flat against the exit door and turned to him with a scowl.

“Because,” I said, void of emotion. “He’s the better brother.”

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“You’re my Wonderwall.”

Wonderwall, Oasis

Joshua

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:05 am

I sat on the edge of the bench, Sawyer's necklace clasped in my hand. I furrowed my brow in deep concentration as I wrestled with a tough decision. Asher found it, but revealing the truth came with a set of complications. I brushed my fingers over the engraving as the weight of indecision bore down on me like a suffocating blanket.

She'd know he has feelings for her. My thought lingered in the air, a silent admission of the unspoken truth I'd been avoiding.

"Joshua, get back to practice." Coach said.

I reached for my bag and slipped the pendant into the side. This wasn't the time for inner turmoil. Focus, Joshua. We're a month away from our last season. Not to mention the scouts coming to watch us play.

The sound of my skates slicing through the ice filled the air as I zipped across the rink. I stole the puck from Kellan, laughing as he yelled at me. I ignored his calls of displeasure and skated with fluid and precise skill before launching the puck into the net.

I skated over to the bench to catch my breath, but I dug my skates into the ice as I noticed Sawyer was in front of me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "Did they finally let you out of detention?"

She flashed me a dazzling smile with a playful glint in her eyes.

"I had to see my favourite hockey player."

My expression softened, and a warmth spread through my chest at her words.

“Don’t let Noah hear that.”

She snorted.

“He’s not even in my top five.”

A quiet snicker escaped my lips. I reached out to take her hand in mine, intertwining our fingers.

“It’s an honour to be your favourite hockey player.”

She smiled. I took a deep breath and reached into my bag for her pendant. Her eyes glimmered in delight as I reached to fasten it to her chain.

“I can’t believe you found it. How?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

There was no point in dwelling on the details. I brought her knuckles to my lips and placed a chaste kiss on them before returning to the rink. The guys attempted to poke fun at my uncharacteristic behaviour, but I brushed them off and turned my head to deliver a wink at Sawyer before continuing practice.

??

A warm, inviting glow bathed the kitchen. The scent of a home-cooked meal lingered in the air. I sat at the table with Sawyer, my mom, and Gracie, sharing stories and laughter over dinner.

The front door swung open, and Asher stormed in. His expression was dark and brooding. His entrance cast a dark cloud over the light atmosphere.

“Is everything okay, sweetie?”

“Everything is peachy, mom.” He said dryly, rolling his eyes.

His gaze flickered between Sawyer and me.

“Why don’t you join us?” Mom asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“I’ve suddenly lost my appetite.” He said, his eyes flickered down to Sawyer. “Nice necklace.”

Tension thickened in the air, and I stood up, shooting him a warning glare. Urging him to drop the subject, I approached him.

“Take off your jacket and eat.” I said. “Mom put a lot of effort into this.”

He recoiled as I reached for his leather jacket.

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“You’re not dad.” He said. “And don’t touch my jacket.”

“As if you ever listen to him.”

I gripped his arm to yank it off. He fell back into the wall with a hiss. I removed his jacket. What’s he hiding? My eyes drifted to his arm.

“What’s on your arm?” I asked before I could register.

It would have been best to keep my mouth shut. Asher looked down at his arm, realizing that his fresh tattoo was visible. Mom’s eyes widened as she stood up from the table.

“Asher,” she gasped, getting a closer look. “When did you do this?”

“After detention.” He said, before slapping his forehead with a sigh.

“Why were you in detention?” Mom’s yell pierced my eardrum.

“You’re digging an even bigger hole for yourself.” Gracie said, before shoving a forkful of mashed potatoes in her mouth.

“I just wanted a tattoo, okay?”

I looked at his forearm as a tapestry of ink unfolded under the transparent seal. A sprawling tree, its roots twisting and turning, reached up his arm. The branches spread out like veins, surrounding themselves with letters. I leaned in for a closer

inspection. James.

“Asher -”

“Don’t start with me, Josh.”

Mom noticed the name too, freezing in her spot as she tried to process the revelation of his tattoo.

“I’m going to my room.” Asher said, leaving the storm of emotions behind.

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The pale glow of twilight bathed the porch. I stood at the railing, my gaze fixed on the distant horizon as I gathered my jumbled thoughts. Had I been so absorbed in my own issues that I never realized Asher was still struggling with the events of last summer?

“Mind if I join you?” Sawyer asked, her presence a welcoming interruption to the silence.

I looked at her over my shoulder, a faint smile touched my lips at the sight of her.

“Always.”

She stood beside me, her warmth a comforting presence in the bracing evening air. I could feel her gaze on me, as if she was trying to read my thoughts.

“What’s on your mind?”

I hesitated for a moment, grappling with the words.

“Just life, I guess.”

She reached out to take my hand in hers, as a silent gesture of support.

“You know I’m always here for you, right?”

My heart swelled with emotion as my gaze softened. She always made my heart soar. I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what I was about to say. The words escaped my tongue before I could stop them.

“I love you.”

Her breath caught in her throat at my confession. Time stood still as she processed my words. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment as I braced myself for the rejection, fearing I’d gotten ahead of myself.

“I’m sorry-”

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Before I could finish, she reached out to take my hand in hers.

“Don’t be.” She said. “I love you too.”

Relief washed over me; my heart soared with happiness.

“You do?”

She nodded; her eyes shone with affection.

“How could I not?”

My heart raced with anticipation as I closed the distance between us. My lips met hers in a soft kiss. It was gentle at first, a tender exploration of our newfound relationship stage. As the moments passed, our passion ignited as we conveyed our feelings, a silent vow of devotion. We pulled away, breathless and exhilarated. My eyes fell on the chain adorning her neck and the guilt hit me like a knockout punch. It weighed heavily on my heart.

“What’s wrong?”

My gaze flickered with uncertainty as I met her concerned eyes.

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing at all.”

She reached out to cup my cheeks, her touch gentle and reassuring.

“You know you can tell me anything.”

My heart ached with the guilt of the secret as it consumed me from within. I brushed her left cheek with my thumb.

“I know I can, but I just want to hold you and forget about everything.”

She stood on her tiptoes to capture my lips in another kiss. I hoped it would drown out the nagging voice of guilt in the back of my mind, but even as I lost myself in the moment, the shadow of my secret lingered, a silent reminder of something that could damage us both.

To lighten the mood, I brought up her birthday.

“Anything special you want to do for your big day?” I asked, my voice brimmed with enthusiasm.

However, she did not match my excitement. Her expression grew pensive as a hint of hesitation clouded her features.

“I don’t want to do anything.” She admitted.

My smile faltered, and my brows furrowed in confusion.

“Your birthday is special, though.” I protested. “It’s a chance to celebrate you.”

She sighed and cast her gaze downwards, her eyes filled with sadness.

“I’ve never celebrated my birthday.” She said. “I’ve never felt the need to.”

My heart sank at her words. I sighed and reached out to clasp her hands in mine.

“I understand. We don’t have to do anything extravagant.”

She smiled. Her eyes sparkled with gratitude as she squeezed my hand.

“Thank you.” She said, her voice filled with warmth. “I just want to spend the day with you.”

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“It’s Friday, I’m in love.”

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Friday I'm in love, The Cure

Sawyer

The morning light streamed in through the kitchen window. I sat at the table with a piping cup of coffee in my hand as I stared outside with a pensive look. My mom joined me in the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

“Have you thought about what you want to do for your birthday?” My mom asked as she cracked some eggs into the bowl.

“Not a party.”

I'd always hated celebrating my birthday. It stemmed from my fifth birthday when no one showed up. Not even my best friend. I vowed I would never have another birthday party again, and I've stuck to that vow ever since. I don't intend to break it.

My mom's smile faltered.

“I would have thought you'd want to do something now that you and Joshua are together.”

I shrunk back, not wanting to disappoint anyone.

“We could do something small. Just a few of us.” I said. It sounded a lot better than a party, and I would love to spend the day with Josh. “Only if Asher comes too.”

Despite his infuriating personality and mood swings, I appreciated Asher as a friend—someone that I could confide in about my fears, or discuss the latest books.

“You both seemed to have taken a liking to each other.” My mom said. “Grace said the tutoring sessions have been helping him a lot. His grades have improved significantly.”

My heart pounded in my chest as I struggled to keep a straight face. The weight of the guilt was bearing down on my shoulders. It had been so long since we’d studied. I hated lying to my mom.

“He’s been great.” I said, ignoring the pang in my chest.

I looked down at my coffee, as my guilt ruined the taste. There was only one thing I could do to get rid of it.

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The hallways seemed more crowded than usual as my gaze fluttered around in search of Asher. I stood on my tiptoes, but I could barely see over anyone’s shoulders. I waited for him at his locker, but that wasn’t a guarantee. He tended not to show up at school until lunch, which is why I was surprised to find him strutting towards me. A lopsided grin formed on his face as he leaned on the locker beside his.

“I knew you’d get sick of Mr. Darcy.”

I rolled my eyes at his playful jab, but turned my expression serious as I met his gaze.

“We need to get back to tutoring.” I said, folding my arms across my chest.

“If you wanted to spend more time with me, you just needed to ask.”

His grin fell, his expression changing from humorous to curious when he realized I wasn't finding the situation funny.

"I hate lying to my mom." I said. "I can't do it anymore."

His arrogant demeanor returned.

"I don't mind lying." He said. "It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

"Asher," I said with a sigh. "I'm serious."

"So am I."

I shook my head at his inability to be serious.

"Forget it."

I turned to get to my locker before class, but he wrapped his fingers around my wrist.

“Fine.” He said. “We can study today after school.”

I smiled, pleased that he’d come to his senses.

“Perfect. See you in the library after school.”

??

I sat at the table scattered with textbooks and notes, my brow furrowed in concentration as I thought of a challenging equation for Asher to solve. We’d been here for over an hour, and I had yet to ask him something he didn’t know the answer to. Asher, reluctant to be there, sat opposite me, his posture relaxed but attentive as he gave me his undivided attention.

“Did you do something different to your hair?” He asked, distracting me from the equation.

“No?”

He placed his pointer finger on his chin as if trying to play a game of spot the difference. His eyes widened as if he realized what it was.

“It’s your birthday tomorrow.”

My eyes widened in surprise. Who told him?

“How did you find out?”

“My mom.” He grinned, leaning further over the table, and looked around as if he was about to share a secret. “You don’t seem too excited about it.”

“It’s just another day.”

“Well, then you’re going to hate tomorrow.”

I’m the one to lean forward this time, my curiosity piqued by his statement.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He pressed his lips together; the corners twitching, as if struggling to contain his usual arrogant grin.

“I’ve already said too much.”

I tilted my head back as he rose from his seat, needing to know what he was implying. He faked a yawn and looked at the time on his phone.

“That was exhausting.” He said. “I’m done for the day.”

“Asher,” I said, rising from my seat. “Don’t avoid the question.”

He stood tall, with his chin held high, projecting an air of arrogance.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Elizabeth.” He said with a wink before strutting out of the library.

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“I have loved you all along.”

Far Away, Nickelback

Asher

The rhythmic beats of Simple Plan filled my room, with the bass thumping against the walls as I lay on my bed. Lost in the song, I didn't notice the heavy footsteps approaching until my door swung open and my father's head loomed in the doorway.

“Others are living in this house.”

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I could sense the disappointment in him. With a sigh, I braced myself for the unwanted confrontation.

“Gracie likes it.”

Dad stepped further into the room, like an army general expecting it for dust.

“Your sister likes anything you do.” He said. “I wish she’d pick a better role model.”

“As long as it isn’t you, I think she’ll turn out just fine.”

He glared at me in frustration. I hit a nerve.

“Have you thought of a college yet?”

“I told you I’m not going.” I retorted, the defiance creeping into my voice.

“Stop being stubborn. You’re only hurting yourself.” He lectured, his tone growing sterner with each word.

“Did you not, for one second, think you might be the reason?”

The tension in the room crackled as we glared at each other. It seemed neither of us would back down. The unspoken resentment I had toward him was bubbling to the surface.

“You’re blaming me?”

“Of course I am,” I said, scrunching my nose in disgust. “I can’t forget what happened.”

“You said you’d never mention it.”

“No, I said I’d never tell.”

He raised his finger, ready for another verbal attack, but Mom’s voice disturbed us.

“Tell what?”

Neither of us spoke. I looked away from my mother’s imploring gaze and to the window.

“Asher, what is going on?” My mom asked.

Her concerned voice broke through my reverie. I forced a smile, my heart heavy with a truth I couldn’t bring myself to share.

“It’s nothing serious.”

“Are you sure, sweetie?” She asked. “You seem flustered.”

The words were trapped inside my throat. There was no way I could open my mouth without causing destruction. With that thought in mind, I exited my room. My footsteps echoed as I stomped down the stairs two at a time. I couldn’t confront the truth, so I fled.

The cool, outside air offered little solace, as it felt like the force of it all weighed down on my chest. It was suffocating and relentless. I slipped into my truck, tightening my hands around the steering wheel as the engine roared to life beneath

me. My foot pressed against the pedal. The car lurched forward as I pulled out onto the peaceful street.

The miles unfolded before me, revealing a kaleidoscope of colours and shapes in the world outside. I could finally breathe, as each moment was a fleeting reprieve from my troubled thoughts. I glanced at my destination on the GPS. Five hours away. It was a lengthy drive, but worthwhile.

I pressed down on the accelerator, following the ribbon of asphalt ahead. As the hours slipped by, fatigue weighed down on me, but I pushed through, fuelled by the prospect of my destination.

After what felt like an eternity, I pulled into the parking lot of the bookstore. I dashed inside, my footsteps echoed against the polished floors as I made my way to the counter. A woman in her mid to late twenties welcomed me with a warm smile.

“May I help you?”

“I called for the Shakespeare sonnets book.”

Her eyes widened in realization.

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“Asher.” she said before ducking under the counter.

The rare copy seemed to shine in the soft glow of the bookstore’s lights. My fingers traced the embossed letters on the spine.

“I hope you enjoy it.” She said. “It’s an amazing collection.”

“It’s actually for a friend. It’s her birthday today.”

“She must be an important friend for you to drive all the way here.”

My lip twitched at the mention of Sawyer.

“She is.”

I handed her the money with a last goodbye before exiting the store. As I sat in my truck, I cradled the book in my arms. Excitement flooded my veins as I pictured the smile on her face. Perhaps this would be her best birthday ever.

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As I pulled into the familiar driveway, I nearly collapsed in exhaustion. However, the anticipation of Sawyer’s gift gave me the fuel to keep moving. With trembling hands, I clutched the book against my chest and dashed across the street to her house. With a steadying breath, I rapped my knuckles against the door. My heart sank as the door swung open. Josh stood with his arms folded across his chest. He regarded me with a raised eyebrow.

“What do you want?” he asked, with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity.

“Not to talk to you.”

I brushed past him and crossed the threshold, maintaining an unshaken confidence. Sawyer’s voice echoed from their living room.

“I told you to be at the party venue.” Josh hissed in my ear, glancing around to make sure Sawyer wasn’t in earshot.

“I changed my mind.”

I walked into the living room, beaming at the smile on her face when her eyes met mine. Without hesitation, I extended the gift bag to her. My heart soared with anticipation.

“Happy birthday, Sawyer.”

She accepted the gift with a grateful smile before digging into the bag like a kid on Christmas. I watched as she reached into the bag before revealing the book. There were tears in her widened eyes as she gaped at it as if it held the answers to the universe. We all stood in silence for a solid two minutes before she peered at me through her lashes.

“How did you get this?”

I shrugged, trying to play it off. I wasn’t about to reveal that I’d driven five hours there and back to get her something as simple as a book - especially not in front of Josh.

“I know someone.”

She threw her arms around me, taking me by surprise as we stumbled backward, but she didn't release her hold around my neck. I smirked at a fuming Josh over her head as I wrapped my arms around her waist. Even as we pulled away, the smile lingered on her lips as she gazed at the book the same way Gollum looked at The One Ring. I was so caught up in the desire to give her the gift that I didn't notice our mothers were sitting in the room, watching our exchange.

"Babe, we need to go." Josh said.

What a jerk. He always ruined the moment. I delivered a heated glare in his direction as if telepathically challenging him. His words set me back, but I would not let him destroy my confidence. He thinks he's the better man, but I'll show him why I'm better.

Game on, brother.

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30

"This Don't feel right without you."

Lonely, Machine Gun Kelly

Joshua

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As we stepped out of the car and made our way inside the building, I couldn't shake the feeling she already knew what I had planned. She mentioned she didn't want to make a big deal out of her birthday, but I wanted to make it special - especially since she'd never had a worthwhile birthday or party.

As the door swung open to reveal the colourfully decorated room, the smiling faces of friends and family stole the show. The balloons gravitated to the ceiling as a chorus of Happy Birthday erupted as I led her into the midst of the celebration.

I saw her face filled with joy and surprise, but noticed the unease in her eyes. Her response to the welcome was a weak smile, her eyes quickly scanning the room. I felt a pang of disappointment, but brushed it off as I was adamant about making tonight memorable.

I stood by her side, reaching out to take her hand in mine as we made our rounds, greeting everyone. She was timid about being around my friends, but I appreciated her attempts at being cordial with them.

With a heavy heart, I took her aside into the corner of the room. My shoulders dropped.

"I'm sorry." I said, my voice glazed with regret.

Her expression softened as she noticed the genuine sincerity on my face.

"It's okay."

“It’s not. You told me you didn’t want a party.” I said. “I just wanted you to have a special day.”

She placed a gentle hand on my arm.

“It’s okay.” She breathed; her words filled with forgiveness. “You had good intentions.”

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close in a tight embrace and not wanting to let go. She melted into me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Thank you for forgiving me.”

I pulled her even closer and placed my chin on her head. Eyes were peering at us from across the room. I gritted my teeth as I watched my brother’s longing gaze toward my girlfriend, but I refused to stand idly by and let him ruin our relationship.

I pulled back, looked into her eyes, and kissed her softly, a silent declaration to my brother that she was off-limits. We pulled away, both breathless. I returned my gaze to the corner Asher was lurking in. He left. I grinned in satisfaction before taking Sawyer’s hand and rejoining the party.

??

The moment I stood in Sawyer’s bedroom doorway, the scent of paint and creativity enveloped my nostrils. I watched as she lost herself in her world of passion, her focus unwavering as she brought her vision to life on the canvas.

I watched as her brush danced across the canvas with grace as the colours seemed to leap off it, reflecting the beauty of her talent with every brushstroke.

“You’re amazing.” I said, without thinking.

She looked away from the canvas. A smile spread across her face at the sight of me.

“Hey,” she said, her voice filled with warmth. “What are you doing here?”

I crossed the room to stand beside her, my eyes fixated on the picture taking shape.

“I wanted to see how your new art supplies are working.”

I bought them for her birthday. It was my way of trying to thank her for supporting my hockey woes and to show her I supported her artistic passions.

“They’re great.”

She bit her lip as something seemed to gnaw on her mind. Her brush hovered over the canvas as if she was unsure of continuing. Insecurity’s cloud caused doubt to creep in.

“What’s going on in that gorgeous head of yours?”

“I’m not too sure about this painting.” She stammered.

“I think it’s incredible.”

“You say that about all my paintings.”

“That’s because they’re all incredible.”

A flicker of happiness gleamed in her eyes. She smiled at me with gratitude. I cradled her hands in mine, drawing her closer to me. I brushed a stray lock from her face, smirking at the goosebumps on her skin that formed from my simple touch.

“You always know how to make me feel better.”

As the weight of her insecurities lifted, I reached for the shirt I tucked into my back pocket. My old hockey jersey - emblazoned with my name and my lucky number twenty-one.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something.” I said, revealing the jersey to her. “The first game is coming up, and I’d love it if you could wear my jersey. It’s kind of tradition in the team.”

A smile spread across her face as she nodded eagerly.

“Of course.” She said, her voice filled with joy. “It would be an honour.”

With a burst of adrenaline, I pulled her into my arms, holding her close as our lips met in a tender kiss. Game nerves haunted my thoughts, yet I brushed them away and concentrated on the present. No matter the outcome, I could get through it all with her beside me.

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“Nothing ever mattered to me more than this.”

Somebody To You, The Vamps

Sawyer

I stood before the easel, my gaze fixed on the blank canvas. My heart pounded with inspiration and determination as a million ideas ran through my head, but none stood out. This wouldn't be a regular painting, something that I would make for the fun of it. It was my ticket to the most prestigious internship at an art gallery in New York. Getting the internship was a guaranteed acceptance into any art school of my choice. Landing the opportunity would mean smooth sailing during my senior year.

With the hands of a surgeon, I dipped the brush into a palette of colors. I executed each stroke with precision. My mind raced with inspiration and creativity, but self-doubt overshadowed it. Was this up to par? Could it be better? It needed to be the best.

I poured my heart and soul into the painting as I channeled my thoughts and emotions into it. Each stroke of paint added depth and purpose to transform it into a masterpiece.

I spent hours on it, but I felt as if I'd barely scratched the surface. My head tilted to the side as I took it in. As if my hands had a mind of their own and took the lead. Two figures stood at opposite ends of a bridge, with vibrant and unique landscapes surrounding each of them, creating the impression of a painting cut in half. In the background, behind the figures, were two sunsets, each casting its hue over the bridge. One moon symbolized a golden warmth, the other a serene darkness. Despite the distance, there was a magnetic pull in the middle of the bridge, bringing this

unlikely pair to a crossroads.

“I’ve always loved watching you paint.”

I jumped at the sound of my mother’s voice.

“How long have you been there?”

“A minute.”

She stood in the doorway, her silhouette framed by the light from the hallway. Her movements were gentle and deliberate as she took a seat on the edge of my bed.

“I’m trying to make this as perfect as possible for the contest.”

I placed my brush on the table and turned to her. It was clear she wanted to talk. She only did this when she wanted to discuss something.

“I just wanted to catch up.” She said. “You’ve been busy.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” she said, placing her hand on mine. “I’m glad you have things going on.”

My corner lip twitched. She was referring to how much of a loner I was before we’d moved here. My paintings and books were the only companions I knew. Yet, as soon as I moved here, others drew me into their orbits.

“It is nice to have something of my own going on.” I admitted. “And not having to rely on Noah to go anywhere.”

She smiled before her eyes darted to my painting, and gazed at it as if she were a critic at a gallery.

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“It’s beautiful.” She said, not taking her eyes off it. “What’s the inspiration?”

I tilted my head, taking the full canvas in. It was as if someone else had painted it and I was trying to find the symbolism behind it.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It just kind of happened.”

She placed her chin in her hands and stared at me. Really stared at me. She had a look in her eyes, judging me for not figuring it out. She reached over and patted my hand before standing up. Her eyes set on the painting once more before she maneuvered to the doorway. She glanced at me over her shoulder to deliver her parting words.

“You’ll figure it out.”

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I had no idea hockey was such a big deal in this town. I stood at the edge of the bustling rink, my heart raced with anticipation as the spectators flocked to their seats like moths to light. The familiar scent of Josh’s cologne enveloped my nostrils. I felt a surge of pride as I glanced down at the gray and white fabric adorning my body.

The rink buzzed with excitement as my mom and Mrs. Hart joined Stella and me. Around us, fans waved banners and erupted into a frenzy as the players stepped onto the ice.

I watched Josh glide along the ice. He skated around trying to rile the crowd up, but I glimpsed him scanning the crowd. With a wide smile, I raised my hand and waved it

around, capturing his attention. I blew him a kiss. Even from across the rink, I could see his eyes light up as he spotted me. He raised his stick and pointed it in my direction with a wink before joining his teammates in a huddle.

“Hi, Asher.” Mrs. Hart’s voice broke me out of my stare.

I’d hardly turned my head to my right before he stole the vacant seat beside me. I could feel eyes on us and ripples of whispers, something that always seemed to follow Asher. He winked at me as we locked eyes, but I looked away and remained focused on the game. I could feel his smug grin burning into the side of my head. He leaned closer, his confidence radiating.

“Hey there, Ms. Bennet.”

I glanced at him with a polite but guarded smile.

“Are you ever going to give that nickname up?”

“I think it suits you.”

I turned away, pretending he wasn’t there. Undeterred, he leaned even closer. I could see his grin widening from the corner of my eye.

“Nice jersey.” He remarked, his tone laced with mischief.

“Thanks.”

The crowd applauded as Josh’s team scored. I clapped my hands, smiling as Josh’s eyes focused on me, beaming in excitement. But it was short-lived. Asher leaned in front of me, blocking my view of Josh. I scoffed as he wiggled his fingers at Josh in a condescending wave. I pushed Asher’s head away and shoved his hand down.

Asher chuckled, unaffected by my dismissal. His gaze lingered on me for a moment longer before he settled himself back in his seat.

This was going to be a long game.

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“All I think about is who is next to ya.”

Jessica, girlfriends

Asher

The sight of Josh’s lovesickness made me queasy, but Sawyer wearing his jersey was even worse. We hadn’t spoken since the first period, and the third had just begun. I fixed my gaze on the ice, but my head wasn’t even in the building. Sawyer was distracting me with her mere presence, but I vowed to seem unbothered. I folded my arms across my chest and sat brooding.

A gentle touch on my shoulder startled me. I turned to see Gracie standing with a wide grin. Before I could say anything, she wrapped her arms around my neck, squeezing me into a tight embrace. I couldn’t help but smile, wrapping my arms around her.

“Hey there, bug.” I said. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

“She wanted to watch Josh play.”

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His voice tore the smile from my face. My stomach sank as I glanced over at my father. I stood up, glaring at him with a clenched jaw.

“Gracie, sit down and I’ll get you something to eat.” I said, looking for any excuse to avoid being in his presence.

I slipped away from the stands; my footsteps were heavy with unresolved emotions. I was having a great day until he showed up and ruined it. He always had time for Josh’s games, but never for my performances. He has never bothered to come and watch us rehearse. I was in self-destruct mode and found myself in the dimly lit backstage area of the arena. I paced back and forth as I reached for my pack of cigarettes. With trembling hands, I pulled one out and placed it between my lips. The flick of the lighter echoed in the tense silence as I took a deep drag. I leaned against the wall, and smoke billowed around me, yet the calming effect of the nicotine did not extinguish my rage.

I observed the game’s chaotic scene on the ice, my mind consumed by anything other than the sport. Lost in my thoughts, I missed the game’s end and the players’ return to the locker room. Josh emerged; his face flushed from exertion.

“Why are you here?”

“Thought I’d stretch my legs.” I replied. “The game got boring halfway through the first period.”

“Real funny.”

I squashed my cigarette against the top of the trash before discarding it.

“Sawyer was wearing your jersey.”

“I know. I gave it to her.”

I folded my arms across my chest, attempting to appear unbothered.

“It’s almost like you’re trying to claim her.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Asher.” He said. “You know it’s tradition, or did you forget all the times Ava came sneaking out of your room the next morning in yours?”

My jaw almost snapped at how tight it got at the mention of my past. Talk about a low blow, brother. I can be just as petty.

I stepped forward and squared my shoulders before a sly smirk formed on my face.

“I think it’s great she’s wearing that jersey,” I said. “But, don’t forget, brother, she’s wearing my last name too.”

I hit a nerve. He rolled his eyes and opened his mouth for a childish retort until Dad’s voice echoed through the narrow hallway. Our heads turned to him.

“I thought I told you the scouts were here.”

It was as if I was invisible.

“I know, and I played my best.” Josh said.

“They’re still wary about you after the stunt you and your brother pulled.” He said, acknowledging my existence. “You should have done better than your best.”

I tried to bite my tongue, but it was impossible where my father was concerned.

“You’re overreacting.”

His forehead’s protruding vein would have been comical if not for me.

“Your college aspirations may have faded, but your brother’s hasn’t.”

“Did he tell you that?”

His expression hardened, but he didn’t react.

“Let’s go talk somewhere else, Josh.”

I shook my head in disbelief at my father’s pathetic display of parenting.

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Two sharply dressed individuals approached, their voices piquing my attention. Each of them held a clipboard. Could they be any more cliché? I took a deep breath before approaching them.

“Excuse me.” I said, drawing them out of their discussion. “I’m-”

“Asher Hart.” The tallest of the pair spoke. “We know who you are.”

“How?”

“We scouted you.” The other said. “It’s a shame about the injury. Your talents impressed us.”

“I couldn’t have cared less about hockey.” My eyes widened at the word vomit, but I attempted to turn it around. “Josh is the one with the passion.”

“That stunt you both pulled at the fundraiser did not leave a lasting impression.”

I swallowed hard.

“That was my fault.” I said, as they eyed me with skepticism. “Look, I’m trouble. There’s no other way to explain the guy I am, but Josh is a leader and he’s a damn talented hockey player. Are you going to let a talent slip through your fingers because of someone else’s slip-up?”

The scouts exchanged glances; their hardened expressions softened.

“I can’t change what happened,” I said. “But please don’t let my mistake cost my brother his future. Come to one more game and make your decision, then.”

There was a moment of silence as they considered before the shorter one nodded.

“We’ll take your words into consideration, Mr. Hart.”

As I watched them walk away, I sighed in relief. I got the cheese-covered pretzel Gracie wanted and went back to my mom. She always waited for Josh, and it appeared Ms. Whitlock and Sawyer joined her.

“I think I’m going to take Gracie home.” My mom said. “We’ll pick up dinner on the way.”

I nodded my head as they left with Sawyer’s mom. Leaving me alone with her. Elsie and Ava seized the chance to approach. Their gazes were sharp and serious, but they directed them toward Sawyer. Ava tilted her head, eyeing the jersey with a smirk on her lips. I could tell what she was thinking.

“Nice jersey.” She said, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

“Don’t start, Ava.” I warned.

Her eyes turned to me. The eyes that once captivated me now provoked fury.

“Does she not know?” Elsie questioned with a sickening grin, as if Sawyer wasn’t present.

“Know what?” Sawyer asked.

Elsie took a step closer, her eyes narrowing as she inspected the jersey. She smirked

triumphantly as her eyes met Sawyer's.

"It used to look better on me."

Ense chaos.

Sawyer's eyes widened, searching Elsie's face for a hint of deception, but she wouldn't find any.

"You dated Josh?" She choked out before facing me. "Is that true?"

I opened and closed my mouth, unable to fathom an explanation. She took my silence as an answer and marched out the double doors behind the pair of troublemakers. I glared at them and raised my arms. It's as if they were reenacting a scene of Mean Girls.

"I hope you're both happy with yourselves." I said, scrunching my nose in disgust before following Sawyer.

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“I cannot sleep, I cannot dream tonight.”

I Miss You, blink-182

Joshua

I sat on the edge of my bed, hunched over my phone. I scrolled through my messages with Sawyer, my face etched with concern. She hadn't responded to any of my texts yesterday or today. I waited for her after my game, but she never showed up. It was unlike her.

I glanced at the time on my screen before sending another text. The minutes seemed to drag on, each one making the silence more suffocating. With a sigh, I pocketed my phone and leaned against my pillows, staring at the drab ceiling. My brows furrowed as I tried to think back on our interaction before my game. What did I do wrong?

I rubbed my temples, frustration mounting with each unanswered thought. A faint buzz interrupted the silence. My heart leaped in my chest as I reached for my phone, but the excitement faded. It was only Kellan. I let it go to voicemail, not in the mood to talk to anyone but Sawyer.

“Are you going to come out of your room soon?” My mother asked, hovering in the doorway.

“No.”

She sighed, sitting down beside me. She reached out and placed her hand on my

shoulder, offering silent support.

“Want to talk about it?” she asked, her voice a soothing balm.

“Sawyer isn’t speaking to me.”

“Why?”

“I wish I knew. She hasn’t responded to any of my texts, and she never congratulated me after my game.”

She listened as I poured my heart out.

“Josh, sweetie.” She said. “She lives right across the street. Talk to her.”

I sprung out of bed, mentally facepalming for not having thought of it sooner. Without a second to waste, I stomped downstairs and out the front door. The snow fell around me, a serene backdrop to my inner turmoil. I stood before her front door, my heart heavy with determination. Knuckles clenched. I knocked. I could sense her presence, but the door remained closed.

“Please talk to me, Sawyer.” I pleaded, my voice carrying a hint of desperation. “Please tell me what I did.” Snow or not, I refused to leave until she spoke to me. “I’m not leaving until we work this out.”

She ignored me. I paced back and forth for a solid fifteen minutes until the door creaked open. My heart plummeted into my stomach at her tear-stricken face. I rushed to embrace her, but she put her hand out in front of me.

“When were you going to tell me you dated Elsie?” she asked, her eyes blazing with a mixture of frustration and betrayal.

My eyes widened, realizing why she'd been avoiding me.

"Who told you?"

She scoffed.

"That's what you're concerned about?"

I brushed my trembling fingers through my hair as I tried to find the words to say.

"I didn't think it mattered," I said. "It was a long time ago."

"How long?"

"We broke up before last summer." She shook her head, about to slam the door in my face, but I stopped her. "It means nothing."

"How can you say that?" She asked, her anger simmering. "Of course, it matters."

"It doesn't." I said. "She was my first love. It's not that big of a deal. Everyone has one."

It's as if a barrier appeared between us, but it did nothing to ease the tension. She wrapped her arms around herself.

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“First love matters.”

“They don’t.” I said. “To me, a first love is just a steppingstone.”

Her fists clenched as if she were resisting the urge to punch me.

“Then I guess you don’t matter.” She said, seething. “You’re just my steppingstone.”

Those were her last words before she slammed the door in my face, leaving me out in the cold.

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As I relived the interaction with Sawyer, my heart sank. An avalanche of resentment met my attempts to bridge the gap. My frustration bubbled beneath the surface, mingled with a sense of sadness as I longed to see her smile. Each passing moment of silence weighed heavily on my chest. I hated upsetting her, especially for something as meaningless as my relationship with Elsie. However, I should have told Sawyer, especially since I still had contact with my ex.

I put my foot in it when I commented on first love. The news that I was her first love was a blessing and a curse. It made me feel an indescribable wave of pleasant emotions, but it placed an unbearable weight on my shoulders. Noah told me she never dated, to his knowledge, which is perhaps why I was so adamant about keeping my past a secret.

“There’s smoke coming out of your head.”

It was him, wasn't it? With an injection of adrenaline, I launched off my bed toward him. Asher's eyes held shock, but he masked it well.

"Did you tell Sawyer about Elsie?"

He tilted his head to the right in mock confusion.

"Tell her what?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I was not in the mood for his infuriating mannerisms.

"Stop playing around, Asher."

"I didn't tell Sawyer anything." He said. "It was all Elsie."

"Elsie told her?"

"Shocking, right?" He asked. "Elsie never looks for drama."

His sarcasm was adding fuel to my inner flame.

"How do you know this?"

"I was there." He said, a sickening grin on his face. "It was like those reality show dramas Mom watches."

My legs felt unsteady. I sat on the edge of my bed with my head in my hands. I messed up. Could Sawyer move past this?

"She told me I'm her first love."

“She loves you?”

I nodded my head, not lifting it. My eyes were closed as I took a deep breath.

“She told me she loves me, and I went and kept that secret from her.” I said. “How am I going to get her to trust me again?”

Silence answered me. I expected that. He zoned out when he was disinterested, and this was one of those instances. However, I didn’t expect to be alone when I lifted my head.

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“If one of us dies, I hope I die first.”

Die first, Nessa Barrett

Sawyer

I sat against my pillows. My phone screen illuminated my face with each frustrated message I sent to Josh. He'd been spamming me with texts the entire evening, pleading for me to hear him out. I would but I just wanted to be upset. Being placed in a vulnerable position was unusual for me, and I wasn't sure how to handle it.

I read through his texts and sighed. The sound of rustling outside captured my attention. I froze, my heart pounding as a silhouette clumsily climbed through my window. It was like a scene from a bad horror movie. I reached over to turn on my light.

"Asher?" I gasped, my fear replaced with surprise.

I watched as he rose to his feet, his features coming into full focus. His expression was a mixture of sheepishness and concern.

"Hey, Ms. Bennett."

He didn't move, just hovered in the corner of my room with his hands behind his back.

"What are you doing here?"

He took a step closer. The moonlight filtering through the window cast a soft glow

over his features.

“Josh told me you’ve been avoiding him.” He explained. “I wanted to check on you.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair as I averted his gaze.

“Let’s just say I haven’t had the best week.”

He frowned, crossing the room to sit on the edge of my bed.

“You and Josh will figure it out.”

“It’s not just about Josh.” I admitted. “I applied for a competition at an art gallery, but I never even made it to the showcase round.”

“What’s the showcase round?”

“We needed to get our art displayed at the local galleries and have scouts judge it.” I said. “I approached the owner, but he refused. He said my art was mundane.”

He turned his head to the painting my mom saw.

“Is that it?”

I shook my head.

“This is a new one.”

He stood up and gazed at it. I stifled a laugh as he pinched his chin, as if he were a critic. He leaned further and squinted his eye.

“I think it’s incredible.” He said, turning to look at me.

“No offense, but I doubt you know anything about art.”

He chuckled.

“I don’t know a thing, but wouldn’t that make me the perfect judge?” He asked.

“Think about it. How many people who go to galleries know anything about it?”

Valid point.

“Fair enough.”

“I’m your target audience.” He said. “The layman.”

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“It doesn’t matter.” I said. “Unless you have an art gallery, my painting is staying right here.”

His mischievous grin was unmistakable even in the dim light. He ran his hands through his tousled locks.

“There’s something I want to show you.” he urged, extending his hand. “It might help you see things clearer.”

I hesitated, my mind racing with conflicting thoughts. However, the allure of his mysterious plan was far too enticing. With bated breath, I placed my hands in his, allowing him to lead me into the unknown.

A quiet solemnity shrouded the cemetery. I didn’t know what we were doing here, but Asher steered me through the graves as if he could walk to this place with his eyes closed. My gaze fixed on the rows of tombstones, and I resisted the urge to shiver. Why did he have to bring me here at night?

“It’s not too far.” He whispered.

I focused my eyes on the back of his head as he led me into the heart of the cemetery. The sound of our footsteps echoed against the silence as the snow crunched under our weight. We reached our destination as he stood in front of a tombstone. James Sullivan. My gaze fixed on the inscription etched into the marble.

“This is where I had to bury my best friend.”

My heart ached at the raw emotion in his voice. I didn't want to apologize. Everyone apologized as if it was their fault.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice barely audible.

His eyes glistened with unshed tears, but I didn't push him to talk. I stood gazing at the name of his late friend as he gathered his thoughts.

"Last year wasn't my best moment." He said. "I was going through some stuff that led me down a destructive path."

I shuffled closer to him.

"We went to a party in another town over that night to celebrate our championship win." He continued. "I had more to drink than I would care to admit."

I listened with rapt attention. My heart broke with every word.

"James insisted on taking me home, but I didn't want to leave yet." He said. "He convinced me it was time to go home."

He took a deep breath and tilted his head as if forcing the tears to run back.

"We'd driven for ten minutes before a truck came charging from the side." He sniffed. "The doctors told me he took most of the impact."

He tucked his hands into his front pockets and closed his eyes.

"I was supposed to be the designated driver that night." He said, through quivering breaths.

He looked down at the marble.

“It should be me in the ground.” His voice was a whisper as he stared into the distance.

My heart ached at the pain in his voice. My eyes brimmed with tears. I reached out to touch his arm, offering as much solace as I could.

“You can’t blame yourself,” I said, my voice filled with compassion and understanding. “We hear about these situations every day, but we never expect it to happen to us.”

He shook his head, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. It’s as if he was battling with the torrent of emotions threatening to consume him.

“One of the last things he told me was that I was wasting my life.” He said, choking on sorrow. “How I was doing everything to appease my dad.”

“Did you agree with him?”

“I did.” He said, his voice fading with the breeze.

“That’s why you quit hockey?”

He sighed and shrugged off his jacket. I watched as he rolled up his sleeve. My eyes followed his movements, curiosity flickering in their depths as I gazed at the long scar that ran along his left arm.

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“The glass from the window shattered and sliced a few veins.” He said. “The doctors got to me just in time, but they told me the nerve damage to my arm was so severe that I might never play again.”

I reached out a tentative hand to touch the scar. His breath caught in his throat as if he were reliving the tragedy.

“So that’s why you’re not playing.”

He shook his head.

“I made a full recovery.” He said. “But I took James’ words to heart and quit the team.”

“What did your dad say about it?”

He laughed.

“You’ve seen how strained we are.” He glanced at me. “He hated it, but I didn’t care. James told me to live my life, so I did.”

I smiled as my fingers traced the jagged edge of the scar.

“He’d be proud of you.”

“I hope so.” He whispered, focused on my movements.

“You’re living your life.” I said. “What’s not to be proud of?”

The silence between us was like a warm embrace, wrapping us in a cocoon of tranquility. It left a soft rhythm of our breath.

“You’re doing the same thing.” He said. “You’re living life scared.”

No one ever told me that before. The air hung heavy with apprehension as his words lingered in my mind. A knot formed in the pit of my stomach.

“What do you mean?” I asked, meeting his gaze, searching for understanding.

His expression softened. He hesitated for a moment before speaking.

“I don’t want to upset you.” He said, his voice tinged with regret. “You’re capable of incredible things, but you’re holding yourself back.”

“Holding myself back from what?”

“Your feelings for me.”

My breath caught in my throat at his words. A surge of unfamiliar emotions welled up inside of me as I struggled to digest his observation.

“What?”

It was all I could muster. My eyes were wide with disbelief. However, he refused to look away. His gaze burned into mine with an intensity that left me feeling vulnerable.

“The painting.” He said, taking a step forward. “I know nothing about art, but I could

tell what it was about.”

My heart pounded in my chest. The weight of his words pressed down on me. I was struggling to breathe. I wanted to bury it beneath layers of denial. However, it all made sense.

The painting, the two figures on the edge of the bridge - Josh and Asher. The figure in the middle was me and my inability to choose. Asher was the darkness and Joshua the light. How had I missed the symbolism behind my creation? It was as if my feelings had changed within a second.

“I have to go.” I whispered, my voice inaudible over the pounding of my heart.

Before he could respond, I turned and fled into the night. But no matter how fast I ran, Asher’s words rang in my ear like a haunting melody.

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“If you gave me back those years, I’d do it all better.”

Time Won’t Let Me Go, The Bravery

Asher

I screwed up. That’s all that was going through my mind since I woke up. I spent the entire night alone in the lit confines of my room. The weight of our interaction hung in the air like a morbid cloud. As I replayed it in my mind, I couldn’t help but think I’d made a colossal mistake. It may have cost me more than my friendship with Sawyer. I was impulsive, driven by a surge of emotion. One look from her and I melted.

I tried to convince myself that it was a fleeting moment of passion, that I was using her to get one up on my brother, but that was not the case. I love her. I love my brother’s girlfriend. Loving her was as unconscious an action as breathing.

There was a pang in my heart as I heard the muffled sounds of their voices coming from Josh’s bedroom. It was a blatant reminder of the rift I caused, mine and Sawyer’s relationship fracturing by the second. I couldn’t bear it any longer.

With quiet determination, I exited my bedroom. My footsteps were soft against the polished floorboards as I strutted to the front door. I stepped out into the cool night air. The darkness enveloped me like a cloak of solitude.

The moon cast its sheen of light over the quiet neighbourhood. I stood outside Sawyer’s bedroom. The plan going through my mind was daring, but I wouldn’t be

Asher Hart if I didn't take the risk. For the second time in less than forty-eight hours, I unlatched her window and slipped inside. My heart raced with adrenaline as I spotted her painting sitting on display on the easel. Without hesitation, I lifted it and cradled it in my arms like a newborn. I climbed out the window with determination.

I slipped back into the night with the painting tucked under my arm and jogged to my truck. The risks were running through my mind, especially potential jail time, but it would be worth it.

I stopped my truck in the parking lot of the local gallery. My heart hammered against my ribcage. As I surveyed my surroundings in search of security, the night fell into silent anticipation. My heartbeat echoed in my ears. As if fate would have it, someone had left one window ajar. With a swift motion, I pried the window open and slipped inside.

The air was cool and musty, as well as the aroma of drying paint. I glanced around and followed the sign exhibit. A dimly lit glow bathed the hall, and I approached the first painting I could find. I took it off the wall, signalling a heavy blare. The deafening alarm reverberated through the gallery. I placed it to the side and hung Sawyer's painting, hiding the other in a dark corner. There was no time to admire my handiwork as I bolted for the window, shimmying out of it, only to end up face-to-face with a security guard. The glow of his flashlight silhouetted his stern face.

"A little late to look at art, don't you think?" He asked. "What's your name?"

My mind raced for an answer.

"Joshua." I said, trying to maintain composure.

"Joshua who?"

“Joshua Hart.”

The security guard eyed me, looking at my empty hands. He searched for any trace of deception. The air was suffocating.

“I need to call this in.” The moment he moved his gaze away, I bolted.

I ignored his calls and slipped into my truck, not wasting a moment in starting the ignition. The tires screeched as I kicked it into drive. As I slipped into the night, I couldn’t shake the feeling of unease that lingered in the pit of my stomach. I’m in so much trouble.

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I would panic every time someone knocked on the door, fearing that the police were there waiting to dangle their handcuffs in my face and take me away. My fears came true three days later.

I was in the kitchen when my mother called for me. A cop and an unfamiliar, lanky guy stood in the doorway. He wore a well-tailored suit with classic patterns. He stood in the doorway with a poised and confident posture, but there was an underlying tension in his face.

“Asher,” my mom said. “Why am I being told your brother snuck into an art gallery the night he was home?”

I placed a puzzled expression on my face.

“Maybe he’s acting out?”

The officer cleared his throat. We turned our attention to him.

“This isn’t Joshua Hart?” He questioned.

“This is his twin brother, Asher.”

The officer folded his arms over his chest.

“He fits the description.”

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She turned to me, mouth agape. My heart cramped at the dash of disappointment in her eyes.

“You broke into this man’s gallery.” She said. “You better apologize this instant.”

I’d rather gauge my eyes out than apologize to the guy who called Sawyer’s art mundane, but I didn’t want to disappoint my mother any more than I already had.

“Sorry.” I said like a child that’s just been told they can’t have any ice cream.

He didn’t seem like he believed my apology was sincere.

“I won’t press any charges.” He said. “Only if that painting can stay on display.”

I had not expected that.

“It’s not my painting.”

He raised his brow.

“You snuck into my gallery to display someone else’s work?”

I nodded my head.

“That’s the short version of it.”

The officer and the gallery owner exchanged glances, and to my surprise, their

expression softened.

“I want to know the artist.”

I could feel my mother’s piercing gaze from the side, but I ignored it and faced the owner with a sigh. I closed my eyes, hoping that I hadn’t ruined Sawyer’s entire future.

“Her name is Sawyer Whitlock.”

His lips parted as his eyes opened wider than usual.

“Why did she not show me that painting?” He asked. “It captured everything.”

“I thought so too, hence why I snuck into your gallery.”

He straightened his posture, leaning forward as a smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

“I can appreciate someone willing to take risks.” He said before turning to the police officer. “I’m not interested in pressing charges.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as they spoke a few more words to my mom before they left. As I crept up the stairs, each creak of the wooden steps seemed to alert my mom of my escape.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Her words cut through the air like a knife.

I stopped dead in my tracks. My mind was running into overdrive as I tried to find a plausible explanation. However, her knowing gaze confirmed my efforts would be in vain.

“I’m sorry, mom.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed as if she’d been carrying Mount Everest on her shoulders for months.

“I need you to be honest with me.”

“Of course.”

“Are you in love with Sawyer?”

I was speechless. I felt caught between the urge to deny everything and the overwhelming need to confide in someone. My eyes drifted down to my shoes. I nodded. Her expression softened with sympathy, but there was underlying concern drifting in her eyes.

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“Sweetie,” she said. “You need to be careful. Love is beautiful, but it’s very complicated and someone could get hurt.”

“You mean Josh.”

“Not just Josh.” She insisted. “You and Sawyer, too. Think of the consequences.”

I knew she was right. The path ahead would be fraught with barriers and sacrifices. However, no matter how much my head warned me to push my feelings aside, my heart was telling me to win the girl.

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36

“And I’d give up forever to touch you.”

Iris, The Goo Goo Dolls

Joshua

The frost-kissed air nipped at my cheeks as I set out on my morning jog. The winter air was crisp and clear, and the rising sun cast a golden hue over the undisturbed town. I didn’t have a clear vision of where I was headed, but it felt like my legs took charge.

I jogged past the local bookstore, stopping as a thought came to mind. Valentine’s

Day was approaching, and I wanted to do something special for Sawyer. We made amends and the past few months together have been blissful. I wanted to show my appreciation for her.

She'd shown me countless videos of book bouquets and gave some not-so-subtle hints of how she'd always wanted one. Getting her that bouquet would convey the depth of my love and appreciation.

I stepped into the warmth of the bookstore's cozy interior. The aging scent of books wafted through my nostrils, the shelves lined with literary treasures that could keep Sawyer busy for hours. The bookseller greeted me with a warm smile as I approached the counter.

"Good morning," I said. "Do you make book bouquets?"

Her eyes lit up with interest as a knowing smile played at her lips.

"They're one of our most popular." She said, her voice tinged with excitement.

We discussed the details, and I chose each book that I knew held a special place in Sawyer's heart. I also placed a few notes on the front pages, hoping to make her smile whenever she opened them.

I left the bookstore with a sense of satisfaction. Her expression would be priceless.

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An uncharacteristic silence greeted me. Stepping inside, I noticed mail piled on the counter. A small envelope caught my eye. The familiar insignia emblazoned on the front.

With trembling hands, I reached for it and didn't waste a second opening it. My breath caught in my throat as I read the words. This cannot be real—an acceptance letter to the summer hockey program. I thought I'd ruined my chances with the scouts.

What changed their minds?

I stared at the letter, fearing that I read it wrong, but the word acceptance was in bold. The entire situation hit me with a wave of ambivalence. My desire for this scholarship diminished after meeting Sawyer.

Accepting this opportunity involved intense training and competition, resulting in my absence throughout the summer break. The very break I promised to spend with Sawyer before leaving for college. However, I'd made that promise when I thought my scholarship chances were fraught.

My going off to college has already put a damper on our relationship. Could we survive without one another? Was I willing to risk my scholarship? Was I willing to risk losing Sawyer? I looked down at the letter in my hands, knowing I couldn't ignore the pull of my lifelong dream. A dream I'd put everything into. I had a decision to make. A decision that could change the course of my future.

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The savoury aroma of dinner wafted through the room as my heart pounded with nervous anticipation. I had been waiting for the right moment to share with my family, and now was as good a time as any. It had been a while since we'd all been in the same room together.

“I have something I need to share with you all.”

The clinking of cutlery ceased as they granted me their full attention with curiosity.

“I got accepted into the summer program.”

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Silence filled the air as my words sank in. As realization dawned on their faces, my parents cheered. My dad was the loudest of all. Their excitement echoed off the walls.

“We’re so proud of you.” My mom said, her eyes beaming with pride.

My father stood up and clapped me on the back, a broad smile on his face.

“You worked hard for this.”

Gracie’s face was on the verge of cracking from the wide grin. I turned my attention to Asher. His eyes were downcast as he poked the broccoli with his fork, but I could have sworn I saw a subtle smile forming on the edge of his lip.

“Aren’t you going to say something to your brother?” Dad asked Asher.

Asher didn’t look up.

“Congratulations, I guess.”

Dad’s expression hardened. It was about to get heated.

“It wouldn’t kill you to put in some hard work like your brother.”

Asher looked up; his eyes flashed with anger.

“I hate hockey.” He said. “How many times do I have to say it?”

Their faces darkened in anger.

“It would have helped you with college.” He countered, his voice rising to match Asher’s.

“I already told you I’m not going!”

The tension at the table reached a boiling point, each dagger aimed at hurting the other. They did not speak, instead they glared at each other in a silent battle before Asher dropped his silverware and pushed his chair back. Neither of us spoke through the déjà vu moment. He slammed the door behind him, locking the tension in with us.

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37

“And it was all yellow.”

Yellow, Coldplay

Sawyer

I stirred from my slumber as the soft morning light filtered through the window. I’d forgotten to close my blinds last night. A sense of anticipation tugged at my heart. Today is the dreaded day. Valentine’s Day. It was expected that I’d never had a Valentine, but this year should be different. I had Josh.

A knock on my door startled me. I beckoned for the person outside to come in. My mother entered, holding a bouquet unlike any I’d ever seen. A book bouquet. My eyes widened in delight as I expected a bear or something cliché, but Joshua went above and beyond.

“That boy has it bad.” My mother said.

She placed it in my hands and winked at me before closing the door behind her to give me privacy. With trembling hands, my fingers traced the spines of books. I reached for the attached card, my heart soaring.

Each book reflects the love between us. I want to be the guy you read about.

Tears pricked at the corner of my eyes. This was my first Valentine’s with a boyfriend, and he was off to an amazing start. What a morning. I hugged the bouquet to my chest as my heart overflowed with happiness.

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As the soft glow of the fairy lights illuminated the interior of Ava’s house, I felt a sense of warmth rush over me. Couples swayed to the music, as the room was alive with laughter. Josh told me that Ava hosted a Valentine’s party at her house every year, but I wasn’t in the mood to be in the presence of her or Elsie. So, I plastered on a phony smile and allowed him to usher me into the living room to greet all his friends. He kept his arm around my waist and squeezed my waist, but I couldn’t help but feel something was amiss. I stood on my tiptoes to reach his ear.

“I’m going to get a drink.”

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I made my way to the refreshment counter and grabbed a can of Red Bull, but I didn't open it, just tapped the can with my nail as I collected my thoughts. Stella beckoned me over as she caught my eye. The stars of Marstown sat with her, excluding Asher.

"What's bothering you?" Stella questioned, never afraid to address the elephant in the room.

I sighed, and my gaze drifted to Joshua, noticing the hesitancy in his smile as he engaged with his friends.

"I'm not sure." I admitted. "Joshua seems... off. It's as if he wants to tell me something, but keeps backing out."

"Maybe he doesn't want to ruin the night." Benjamin chimed in.

I breathed, avoiding any fuss. When Joshua was ready to tell me, he would. Keeping that in mind, I leaned back and savored the moment with my friends. However, Asher interrupted the moment as he stumbled onto our table. His face was flushed. I rose from my seat, my eyes narrowed with concern.

"Careful, Asher."

His eyes blinked, his gaze unfocused, as he struggled to stay upright.

"My bad." He said with a lopsided grin.

With a firm but gentle hand, I guided him to my previously occupied seat. I handed

him my glass of water.

“Have some of this.”

He grabbed it out of my hand and downed it, before pulling a face as if he’d chugged pure lemon juice.

“This isn’t vodka.”

I rolled my eyes and urged him to drink more. His cheeks regained color, but his eyes remained glazed over. He leaned his head back against the chair and closed his eyes.

“Thanks for looking out for me.” He said, his words slurred but filled with sincerity.

I offered him a reassuring smile.

“Of course,” I said. “That’s what friends are for.”

“Friends.” He repeated, dropping his head to the side to look at me. “My brother is lucky to have you.”

A blush swept across my cheeks. My heart warmed at the unexpected compliment.

“We’re lucky to have each other.”

He scoffed.

“He’s not that great.”

“You seem to not want to give him any credit.”

“He gets enough of it from everyone else,” He mumbled. “Don’t want to get his head any bigger. It’s already off balance.”

I snorted and folded my arms across my chest.

“You’re not fooling anyone, you know.”

He turned to me with one eye open.

“What are you talking about?”

“This facade that you don’t give a damn about, Josh.” I said. “I know you have everyone else fooled, but not me.”

There was a shift in the atmosphere as Joshua approached us. His expression darkened as he saw us sitting together.

“Are you drunk again, Asher?”

Asher peered at his twin with hooded eyes and raised his hand, almost pinching his thumb and pointer finger together.

“Only a little.” He said. “Sawyer nursed me back to health.”

Before I could react, Joshua approached me in swift strides. He leaned down and placed his lips against mine in a passionate kiss. When he pulled away, our eyes locked with an intensity that made my heart race.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to steal my girl.” Joshua said to Asher, but kept his gaze on me. “It is Valentine’s Day, after all.”

Asher stood up and grabbed his patented leather jacket. His eyes flickered back and forth between us with pursed lips.

“I know when to take a hint.” He said before stumbling off.

“We shouldn’t leave him alone in that state.” I said, but Josh brushed it off.

“He does it all the time. He can take care of himself.”

He reached down to join our hands together, grinning like a kid on their birthday.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Put your coat on.” He said. “I have a surprise for you. I’ll be right back.”

I tugged my coat on and reached into my pocket for my gloves, halting as my fingers brushed against something delicate. That wasn’t in my pocket before. I came face-to-face with a beautifully crafted bracelet nestled in the palm of my hand.

I examined the bracelet, pondering how it ended up in my pocket. My gaze wandered, then found Asher by the wall. From a distance, his unreadable expression suddenly revealed a moment of clarity. The bracelet was from him.

My stomach clenched with a mixture of surprise and gratitude as I considered the depth of his thoughtfulness.

“Are you ready?”

Josh appeared from behind me, and I tucked the gift back into my pocket as warmth fluttered through my chest.

“I’m ready.” I said, turning around to face him.

He placed his hand on my lower back and steered me toward the exit. I stole a subtle glance over my shoulder, my eyes meeting Asher’s in a silent exchange of gratitude. He closed his left eye in a cheeky wink before I exited the party with his brother.

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38

“I used to be love drunk but now I’m hungover.”

Love Drunk, Boys Like Girls

Asher

It was safe to say I was drunk for a second time tonight. The alcohol flowed, and I reached my peak, caught in the whirlwind of revelry. As the music thumped, I lost myself in the alcohol-induced oblivion. However, I couldn't escape Ava's beady eyes. I accidentally made eye contact with her, and she took that as a sign to approach me. I leaned against the wall and groaned.

"Why have you been avoiding me?" She asked, her voice tinged with hurt and confusion.

I could feel the weight of my emotions pressing down on me. It's almost as if I'd kept too many emotions at bay, and the alcohol loosened my inhibitions. Before I could stop myself, the words spilled from my lips like a volcanic eruption.

"I know you were cheating on me." I confessed, my voice raw with pain and betrayal.

Her eyes widened in shock, and her jaw unhinged. She stuttered, most likely searching for an excuse, but the truth was impossible to deny.

"How did you find out?"

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I closed my eyes and licked my chapped lips.

“I saw the texts on his phone during practice.” I said. “You confirmed it when I found you in bed with him after the championship win.”

Silence descended upon us like a heavy blanket. The weight of my revelation hung in the air. All her defenses shattered at the harsh truth.

“Asher.” she said, her facade crumbling before my eyes. “I am so sorry. We didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t mean to.”

Her apology ignited a firestorm within me - a tempest of pent-up betrayal and anger had simmered beneath the surface for far too long.

“You didn’t hurt me.” I spat, my voice rising with indignation. “I didn’t care about you enough for you to hurt me.”

She recoiled from my outburst. Her eyes brimmed with crocodile tears.

“You don’t need to be so harsh.”

“And you didn’t need to cheat on me with my teammate. You and Collin deserve each other.”

Her gaze fell to the floor, her shoulders slumped from the weight of accusations and guilt. I couldn’t bear to look at her any longer, but as I walked away, a single sentence stopped me in my tracks.

“You’ll regret this.”

With a bitter laugh and a shake of my head, I started walking off, calling to her over my shoulder.

“I’ve only regretted dating you.”

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I sat with my chaotic friends amidst the vibrant energy of the party. Benjamin was telling us a story of something that happened during chemistry and how he’d almost set the lab on fire. We laughed at how he reenacted the scene for us, as if he wanted us to picture it with him. Our laughter echoed over the music as he reached the climax of his story. Out of the blue, Sebastian slammed his hand on the table as he read something on his phone.

“Guess what?” He asked us, his voice filled with excitement and pride. “We landed a gig for the summer!”

We exchanged stunned glances as the moment’s significance hung in the air like a promise of untold adventures. The dream we’d been trying to conquer for years. The dream that seemed unattainable when my entire world revolved around hockey. I’d spent years dreaming of this opportunity to where I’d convinced myself it would never come to fruition.

Cheers erupted from our table as we celebrated the newfound opportunity. We clapped each other on our backs as our wide and infectious smiles basked in the glow of our shared accomplishment. However, we had our celebration cut short by a nearby commotion—a commotion between Joshua and Sawyer.

“Is it true?” I heard her ask, too enraged to care they had an audience.

“Sawyer, please, not here.”

“Answer me.” She said. “Was it just a bet to you?”

I watched in disbelief as her words cut through the noise of the party like a knife. How did she find out? I launched out of my seat as Ava’s warning ran through my mind. Who told her?

I moved to intervene; my heart heavy with guilt as I got a closer look at her tear-stained cheeks.

“Sawyer, wait a moment.” I tried to reassure her; my voice tinged with urgency. “It’s not that serious.”

I knew I put my foot in it when the words left my lips.

“You knew?”

Josh turned to look at me with anger blazed in his eyes.

“Who do you think started the bet?”

The accusation hung heavy in the air. My mind raced to find the right words to defend myself, but I knew there was nothing I could say.

“I didn’t -” I began, but the words caught in my throat as I watched his fist colliding with my face.

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39

“As I Watch the Stars Align.”

Peasants, Houses

Joshua

I hit him. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, but I didn't regret it. I watched as he stumbled back and clutched his nose. The hushed murmurs of our audience swirled in the background, but I was too enraged to pay them any mind. The air crackled with anticipation as our gazes locked, each daring the other to make the next move.

In an explosion of fury, the tension boiled over, and he charged for me. Our fists struck like lightning, each struck a potent mix of frustration and anger. We grappled and wrestled as if we were in a WWE ring. Our bodies collided with a force that echoed across the room.

The partygoers had mixed reactions. Some whispered and gasped, while others egged us on with raucous cheers. Sawyer's pleas fell on deaf ears as we were beyond reason. Rage and adrenaline consumed us. Each of us was intent on inflicting harm on the other. Like a sudden gust of wind, our friends intervened, pulling us apart with determination. As Asher's friends dragged him back, the anger was clear in his eyes.

“You're a coward, Asher.” I said, my voice laced with fury.

He yanked his arm out of Benjamin's grip and wiped his split lip with the back of his hand, but more blood replaced it.

"Oh, save it, Joshua." He said. "You just can't handle I love her too."

His confession was like a thunderclap amid a storm. I'd always suspected, but he confirmed his feelings. In front of me. The crowd. In front of Sawyer. The realization crashed over me like a tidal wave.

"Admit it, brother." He continued. "You're not upset that I'm in love with her. You're upset because, deep down, you know she's in love with me, too."

Sawyer stood between us. Tears welled up in her eyes, tracing silent paths down her cheeks as her gaze flickered back and forth. With a choked sob, she turned and ran, fleeing from the chaos and turmoil.

As the gravity of the situation sunk in, my anger buckled under the weight of betrayal and heartache. Asher ran his fingers through his hair before gripping it, almost pulling it from the roots. He kicked a nearby chair, causing a group of girls to squeal as it landed in front of them. He stormed off with his friends shadowing him.

"You only dated my sister because of a bet?" Noah asked, his voice tight with emotion.

I turned to face him. He squared his shoulders as anger simmered on his face.

"Noah, it's not like-

Before I could utter another word, Noah's fist lashed out with inhuman speed, connecting with my jaw. The force sent me reeling backward. The world was spinning around me. I clutched my head as a dull throb of pain echoed through my

skull. Noah turned and walked away, leaving me to regain my bearings. I nursed my throbbing jaw as Noah left me alone amidst the chaos of the party. Ava and Elsie stood frozen a few feet away.

“I know you had something to do with it.” I said, delivering a hateful glare to the pair.

“Josh, I didn’t.” Elsie insisted.

I scoffed.

“It was all me,” Ava said with a smug grin, as if she was pleased with what she’d done. “Sawyer deserved to know the truth.”

“Don’t act like you did this for her.” I said. “Asher hurt you, so you hurt him back. It’s a vicious cycle between you both.”

She stepped forward with her arms folded across her chest.

“You know nothing about us.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “He wants nothing to do with you, and neither do I.”

Anger burned like wildfire in my veins as I stomped out of the house and into the bitter night.

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A heavy weight settled on my chest as I navigated the school hallways. My stomach sank, as it was a constant reminder of the rift that formed between myself and Sawyer. A bitter taste of regret soured my every thought as our argument lingered in my mind.

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It was obvious she was avoiding me. Her presence was a glaring absence from all her usual hangouts. I'd been trying to reach out to her for days, but it was as if she'd disappeared from the face of the Earth.

Which is why I found myself in this predicament. I'd been desperate to bridge the gap between us, and I found my back against the wall as I faced my only option. I needed to speak to Stella. With a sense of trepidation, I approached her.

"Hey." I said, my voice tentative as I addressed her. "I need your help."

She scoffed.

"You want me to help you after what you did to Sawyer?" She asked. "I thought the dumb jock thing was just a stereotype."

I ignored her anger and pressed on.

"Please," I pleaded. "I just need a chance to explain the situation to her. Ava blew it out of proportion."

Stella sighed, her resolve softening as she inspected my face for any dishonesty.

"Fine." She relented, her tone gentle. "I'll talk to her, but I'm not making any promises."

A sense of cautious hope stirred within me. I knew my issues with Sawyer wouldn't be a quick repair, but I was willing to wait it out. No matter how long it took.

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40

“Everything is blue.”

Colors, Halsey

Sawyer

I was alone in my bedroom. The weight of betrayal and heartache made me weak at the knees. The despair engulfed me, suffocating me. Joshua’s betrayal shattered my fragile illusion of trust. He’d fooled me into believing we were living in a fairytale, but he was not my Prince Charming. I’d allowed my naivety to shatter the walls I’d built up. Love only existed in the pages of books. The words echoed through my mind.

My mind reeled with the implications of his deceit. Thoughts pierced the heart like daggers. I’d fooled myself into believing I was living the life I’d read about. With Joshua, it was easy to forget I was living in reality.

And Asher had to add insult to injury. I was in two minds about him. There were moments when I believed he liked me, but I dismissed it as my delusion. Yet, his public declaration clarified that wasn’t the case.

I squeezed my head, attempting to empty my thoughts. It was all a bittersweet reminder of my tangled web of emotions.

As I felt myself sinking deeper into the abyss of despair, an email notification flashed on my screen. Internship. The subject line read. With trembling hands, I opened it. There, in black and white, was the news I never expected to receive. I got accepted

into the summer internship.

How was this possible?

A surge of emotion welled inside me - a mixture of shock, excitement, and fear.

It seemed too good to be true. How did I get accepted into an internship I never applied to? I looked closer at the email.

Patrick Lambard referred me. The same guy who told me my art was mundane. My doubts gnawed at me like vultures would a carcass. Despite my excitement, a voice in my mind whispered a mistake had been made.

There was just one thing I could do. I needed to see Patrick Lambard.

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With a sense of trepidation and uncertainty, I took hesitant steps into the gallery. I viewed the masterpieces displayed all around, envious of their creative visions. However, my breath caught in my throat as I noticed my painting exhibited. Pride and confusion overwhelmed me when I saw my work displayed for all to see.

“Ms. Whitlock.” Patrick Lambard said, merging from his studio. “Did you come to see it for yourself?”

My mouth opened and closed like a goldfish as I tried to fathom the right words. I wasn’t aware my painting was there. How had I not noticed it was missing? I took a deep breath, summoning every shred of courage before showing him my phone with the email.

“I think there was a mistake.” I explained. “I got the internship through your

referral.”

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He studied the email briefly before glancing at me with a knowing smile.

“There’s no mistake.” He said. “I referred you.”

I wanted to pinch myself. None of this seemed real.

“How?” I asked. “I never submitted that painting.”

“You didn’t, but someone did on your behalf.”

I felt a mixture of awe and disbelief. Who would do that?

“Do you know who?”

“Mr. Hart.” He said. “He was adamant you were perfect for the internship.”

Joshua.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I couldn’t contain the bubble of joy. Joshua vouched for me. He believed in me. He loved me.

I thanked Mr. Lombard before sprinting out of the gallery. A jubilant cry escaped my lips once I was alone, and I wiped away the tears of joy. I couldn’t believe Joshua did this for me. He recognized the importance of this internship to me and witnessed my frustration when it didn’t happen. Perhaps I had judged him too harshly. Why would he have done all of this if he didn’t love me?

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As I stepped through our front door, I saw Noah in the kitchen. However, as I got closer, I took in the scene before me. He had an ice pack pressed against his knuckles. There was tension etched on his face.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice filled with concern.

I hadn’t seen him since the party last night. For a moment, he hesitated, his eyes flickering with guilt and defiance.

“I punched your boyfriend.” He admitted, his voice filled with regret.

My heart skipped a beat, and my mind reeled with disbelief and confusion.

“Why?” I asked, my voice trembling with fear and anger.

He sighed and slumped over the counter as he pressed the ice pack harder against the split skin.

“Are you seriously going to ask me why?” He said, his shoulders slumped. “He treated you as if you were some kind of object.”

I felt conflicted because Noah defended me, but I was also surprised. He’d never played the protective older brother role before. He never needed to. With a heavy heart, I placed my hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

“Thank you.” I said. “For looking out for me.”

We didn’t speak after that, just stood in the kitchen as our shared burden weighed heavily on us. I wanted to tell him what Joshua had done for me, despite the earth-

shattering revelation of the bet. It's as if I wanted to eradicate his wrongdoings, all in the name of his selflessness. Deciding it was best to let Noah spew his anger, I headed for my room, but his voice beckoned me.

“What are you going to do about Asher?”

I bit my lip as my swirling thoughts made me feel lightheaded.

“I don't know.” I said, sighing in resignation. “I might pretend last night never happened.”

Noah frowned, his bushy brows furrowed in concern.

“It's not that simple.” he said, his voice gentle but insistent. “The guy publicly declared his love for you.”

The reality of the situation sank in with painful clarity. I'd been trying to push the memory down, but no matter how hard I tried, it floated to the surface. I knew ignoring the issue won't make it go away, but it was less terrifying than approaching the situation head-on.

This wasn't just a love triangle between two guys vying for my affection. They were brothers. Twins. How would I ever forgive myself if I got between them?

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I leaned against the counter and placed my forehead on the cold marble, sighing in relief as it cooled me down. The decision seemed simple, yet it could be my most complicated one yet.

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41

“Don’t you ask me if its love my dear.”

Say You Don’t Want It, One Night Only

Asher

The sun dipped low on the horizon. Summer was approaching and I couldn’t be more excited. I worked on my truck, trying to fix it up for our summer road trip. Grease slicked my hands as I tinkered beneath the hood. The clinking of metal was like a relaxing stimulus, my moment of solitude.

I had my earphones in as I set my playlist to shuffle mode. The calming melody of Oasis pirouetted in my ear. James’ favourite band.

The peace was short-lived, as Joshua stormed towards me and knocked my earphones to the ground.

“That was rude.” I said, as I wiped my hands on the rag that was hanging from my back pocket.

Josh's expression was unreadable, as if a storm of emotions was brewing beneath the surface.

"We need to talk." He said, his voice low and menacing.

"Talk about what?"

"I don't have time for your games, Asher."

"There's nothing to talk about, Joshua." I said, reaching into my pocket for a cigarette. "You know how I feel about her."

My words seemed to ignite a spark of rage. With hateful eyes, he lunged forward, his fists swinging as his dormant emotions erupted. Surprised, I staggered backwards, dropping my cigarette. It caused my anger to rise to the surface. Before I could blink, we were engaged in a vicious struggle, our fists collided in a flurry of violence. We grappled with each other on the front lawn.

"Stop it, both of you!"

Our altercation was short-lived as our mother pleaded for us to separate. However, it was my dad's voice that caused me to let go of Josh.

"What is your problem, Asher?"

I turned to my father, my eyes blazing with fury. I'd spent months being my father's punching bag. He'd had my entire life planned out for me, and the moment I defied him, he turned on me. Joshua was his golden boy, and I was the washed-up and unwanted spare. I was done making excuses for him. Done defending him.

"What's your problem, dad?" I asked, my voice laced with venom. "You judge me as

if you're not a washed-up father and husband."

The familial harmony had been cracked for a while and my accusation shattered it.

"Asher, don't say that to your father."

Her defending him was the end of the timer. I exploded.

"He cheated on you!" I said, the words escaped before I could stop them. "He's been cheating on you for months."

This wasn't how I wanted my mother to find out, but I'd been drowning in guilt. Choking on it. Everyone went silent, trying to register the betrayal that had festered beneath the surface of our family's facade. I gazed into my mother's eyes as I choked on the tears.

"I am so sorry, Mom." My voice was raw with pain and regret. "I wanted to tell you so many times, but I was so afraid of what would happen. I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she reached out to me, enveloping me in a comforting embrace.

"This is not your fault." She whispered to me.

I shook my head, my shoulders shaking with the weight of guilt.

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“It is.” I said. “I should have never kept this a secret.”

She leaned her head back and brushed my tears away with her thumbs.

“You did what you thought was right.”

Josh stepped in.

“Don’t protect him, Mom.” He said, his knuckles turned white. “He kept this from us the entire time.”

“Joshua-”

“No.” he said, interrupting our mother. “He knew dad was cheating and he let us all believe we were one happy family.”

His words struck like a physical blow to the gut. I expected anger, but the raw intensity of Josh’s accusation caught me off guard. I looked into the angered eyes of my father and brother, and the heartbroken ones of my mother and sister. It felt as if someone was squeezing my heart in their fist. I caused all this heartbreak. So, I did what I do best when things become too much to handle. I ran.

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My emotions were in turmoil. The weight of my family’s shattered trust was too much of a guilt trip for me to carry. My world crumbled, leading to my predicament. I balanced on the end of the vine as I tapped on the glass, yet it was barely audible

against my booming thoughts. I needed a reprieve from it all. As if by some miracle, the window slid open, revealing the shocked face of the person who had become my solace.

“Asher?” Sawyer whispered, her voice soft with concern as she squinted her eyes in the darkness. “What are you doing here?”

I struggled to find the words to convey the storm raging within me. My throat tightened with emotion.

“I needed somewhere to escape, and you were the only person I thought of.”

Without hesitation, she stepped back to make room for me to enter. My heart raced with a mixture of trepidation and anticipation as I stood in the familiar confines of her room. The air was heavy with unspoken tension. I hadn’t seen her since I’d confessed my feelings to her at Ava’s party. I wanted to bring it up. To tell her I’d meant it, but I couldn’t. My pride and fear of rejection were too overbearing.

“Do you love Josh?” I asked, uncertain of why it escaped my lips.

“Yes.”

The lack of hesitation made my heart cramp.

“Are you in love with him?” I had no idea why I asked. I didn’t want to know the answer. Especially if she was in love with my brother. “You shouldn’t be with him.”

I’d interrupted her before she could answer me. I was too fearful of the answer. My heart had endured enough trampling for the night.

“Why don’t you want me to date him?”

I wasn't sure if she was curious or clueless.

"He's not good enough for you. No one is."

"Not even you?"

"Especially me."

The weight of my feelings for her threatened to consume me. She pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes.

"Asher, what has been going on with you?" She asked. "Your confession at the party took me by surprise. Was that another one of your bets?"

I shook my head so fast I thought it would shoot off like a cannon.

"That bet was stupid." I said. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

She folded her arms across her chest.

"That doesn't make it right." She said. "It's as if our entire relationship had been a lie."

“It wasn’t. I promise you.”

She slouched to the edge of her bed and placed her head in her hands.

“Why should I believe you?”

I took a tentative step forward until I knelt in front of her. She lifted her head when she sensed my presence.

“This is all on me.” I said. “I made the bet, because I let jealousy get the best of me.”

“What were you jealous of?”

I hesitated, searching for the courage to confess my feelings.

“I was jealous because my brother has your heart.”

Before she could open her mouth, a sharp knock echoed through the room, scattering my mind like the leaves in the wind.

“Sawyer, can we please talk?”

I froze as the sound of my brother’s voice filtered through the closed door. It was as if he’d knocked me back into reality. With a heavy sigh, I turned to face her with regretful eyes.

“I’ll leave you both to talk.”

She nodded in understanding. As I made my way to her window, a sense of desire gnawed at me. I wanted her to tell Joshua to leave. To ask me to stay so that we could sort things out. I wanted her to choose me. But she didn't.

I slipped into the night, leaving behind the girl that I loved. My confession meant nothing. Her heart belonged to my brother.

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42

“I'll be yours and You're Mine.”

I'll Be Yours, Those Dancing Days

Joshua

I stood outside Sawyer's closed bedroom door. The flashbacks of her terrified face at the party still lingered. My heart was heavy with regret and longing as I knocked again.

To my relief, the door creaked open, but concern replaced it as I saw her tear-stricken face framed in the dim hallway light. Wordlessly, she stepped aside, allowing me to enter. Her expression remained guarded.

“I am so sorry.” I said, my words heavy with remorse. “This is all my fault. I never meant to hurt you, but I keep messing up.”

She listened in silence as I poured my heart out. I continued my ramblings.

“I love you, Sawyer.” I said. “That bet I made with Asher was a mistake, but I would

have never had the courage to ask you out if I didn't accept."

I reached over to place my hand on hers. She didn't pull away. It gave me the courage to slide my fingers through hers.

"When Ava told me about the bet, I didn't want to believe it." She said. "I trusted you."

My heart ached at the pain in her voice. The realization of what I'd done hit me like a punch in the gut.

"I am so sorry."

She sighed and gazed across her room, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I'd always dreamed of finding a guy like you." She said. "The closest thing to the love I read about in books."

I squeezed her hand.

“I want to be that for you.”

She didn’t move her gaze from her wall.

“I just want to be somebody to someone.”

I gripped her chin and forced her to look into my eyes, so she could see the sincerity behind my words.

“You’re everything to me.”

We were face to face. Our hearts were heavy with the weight of our recent hardships but buoyed by our silent declaration of love. As if our minds were one, we reached for each other.

Our lips met in a tender kiss, and the world seemed to fade away. The warmth of our embrace and the rhythm of our beating hearts encompassed us. It solidified that our love was stronger than any temporary strife.

The scholarship.

The thought jolted my brain like electricity. I pulled away.

“I got the scholarship.” I said, my voice tinged with regret as I met her gaze. “Today was the last day, so I accepted.”

Her eyes filled with sadness.

“I got the internship, thanks to you.”

I shook my head.

“You got it because you are incredibly talented.”

Her cheeks turned red.

“I guess that means we’re both leaving.”

The realization hung between us. A heavy silence punctuated by only the sound of our shared breaths. Despite our imminent departure, I felt a glimmer of hope. I was determined to make the most of our remaining time together.

“Will you be my date to prom?” I asked.

Her eyes widened in surprise, a flicker of hesitation crossed her features. She gazed at my face in search of insincerity before nodding. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“I’d love to.”

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As I stepped through the threshold of my home, a heavy sense of foreboding settled over me. The tension in the air was palpable as I took in the scene of my mother’s tear-stricken face. Sorrow and anger filled her eyes. My father stood nearby, surrounded by suitcases.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

“I kicked your father out.” My mother’s voice trembled as she spoke.

My heart sank, but it was inevitable. His gaze faltered under my scrutiny, a flicker of guilt crossed his features.

“Good.” I said. “You should have never let him back in.”

He didn’t speak. I watched as he gathered his stuff before strutting out the front door. Asher’s footsteps halted at the top step, which made my blood boil to a higher degree.

“You should leave too.” I said, my voice rising with anger. “You could have spared everyone the heartache ages ago.”

His expression crumbled under the weight of my words.

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“Joshua, that’s enough.” My mother said. “None of this is anyone’s fault but your father’s.”

I ignored her. My sense of betrayal was too great to ignore. With a heavy heart, I marched up the stairs until I was beside him.

“I’ll never forgive you for this.”

I shoved my shoulder into his and stormed into my bedroom, leaving behind the wreckage of my shattered family. As I disappeared into the dark confines of my room, the weight of my grief and anger consumed me. Nothing would be the same again.

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43

“I won’t forget the good times.”

Good Times, All Time Low

Sawyer

As we stepped through the doors of the prom venue, we discovered a grand hall bathed in an ethereal glow, with twinkling lights overhead that created a spellbinding aura around us. We had an otherworldly experience, as every inch of the room was adorned with features of the galaxy. Every step was like walking among the stars.

Amidst the whirlwind of excitement, I caught sight of a familiar face across the room. Stella stood with her arm interlinked with Sebastian's. I excused myself from Josh's side and approached the couple with a wide smile. Stella's eyes lit up as she noticed me approaching.

"I can't believe we're both here." She said, her voice filled with enthusiasm.

"Me neither." I said and looked at Sebastian. "Never thought I'd see you in a suit."

He smoothed his hands down the charcoal tweed suit.

"I can make anything work."

We fell into simple conversation as Joshua approached us with a twinkle in his eyes. He wrapped his arms around my waist from behind and placed his lips on my ear.

"You owe me a dance."

As the soft melody filled the air, I found myself enveloped in the warmth of his embrace. Our bodies swayed to the rhythm of Paramore's - The Only Exception. It felt as if we were dancing on air, lost in the moment of each other's love. I placed my head on his shoulder.

As I glanced around the room, my eyes fell upon a figure standing a few feet away - Asher. He watched us dance with a tinge of sadness in his expression. I felt a pang of guilt tug at my heartstrings now that I knew how he felt about me. Unable to ignore the ache in my chest, I pulled away from Joshua.

"I need some fresh air." I said, not waiting for a response.

The gentle breeze offered a warm respite from the liveliness of prom night. I leaned

against the porch railing and sighed as the weight of the evening festivities temporarily lifted from my shoulders.

Approaching footsteps disturbed my moment of solitude. I turned to come face-to-face with Asher, his expression fraught with emotion.

“Hey,” he said, his voice filled with nervousness as he met my gaze. “What are you doing out here?”

“I needed some air.”

I felt a sense of unease wash over me. His proximity sent a shiver down my spine. He took a step closer, his eyes searched mine with a depth of feeling I’d never seen before.

“I love you.” He confessed; his words hung heavy in the thick air. “I love you so much it hurts. But nothing hurts as much as watching you love my brother.”

My heart pounded in my chest at his declaration. I struggled to comprehend the magnitude of his words.

“You don’t mean that.”

He took a step further.

“You don’t know how I feel.”

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I couldn't help but feel an unfamiliar flutter in my stomach as he confidently strutted towards me in his perfectly tailored suit. It hugged his frame, accentuating every line and curve in the right places. My eyes traced the elegant lines of his jaw and the way his hair fell in disarray across his forehead. There was an undeniable pull he'd exerted over me, but I couldn't give in to the temptation.

"Asher, I'm with Joshua."

"Then stop being with Joshua." He said with a hint of impatience.

"It's not that simple."

"It is." He said. "I love you, and I'll abandon all my summer plans to be with you."

The world seemed to spin around me. He'd give up his tour?

"I won't let you sacrifice your summer for me."

He took another step further, the furthest he could move without bumping into me.

"Being with you isn't a sacrifice."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed. My eyes searched his for a sign of clarity, but I could only find raw emotion. The kind that defied all logic.

"You're what I want, but I think Josh is what I need. You're going to tour with the guys for the summer and who knows what will happen." I said. "Maybe the love of

your life is out there waiting for you.”

He gently reached out to take my hands in his and drew me closer. His gaze locked with mine in a silent pledge of sincerity and devotion. The air between us crackled with electricity, sending strikes to my heart.

“She’s not, because she’s standing right in front of me.”

“Asher, please don’t make this harder for me.”

He leaned close. The warmth of his breath tickled my face. With a gentle touch, he pressed his lips to my cheek and sent a rush of tingling through my veins. Our eyes locked, lost in the quiet intimacy of the moment.

“I’ll wait for you, Sawyer Whitlock. However long that takes.”

As he turned to walk away, my heart cried out to chase after him, to throw caution to the wind and go for what I wanted. I don’t know what I want. And so, with a heavy sigh, I remained rooted to my spot, my eyes followed his retreating figure as he disappeared back into the building.

I knew I had a decision to make. Either would have a tumultuous list of consequences, but I couldn’t keep stringing the Hart brothers around any longer. I needed to ignore my overthinking mind and allow my heart to lead me. You know who you want to be with - admit it. My brain told me. I reached into my clutch for my phone and composed two text messages - one to each brother. My finger hovered over the messages before I hit send. I’d made my choice. I just hope I made the right one.

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