



# I Can Be The One (Love You Moore #1)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Hes the hot, cocky hockey player Ive always had a thing for and now hes my fake boyfriend.

ALEXIS

Money has always been an issue, and if I want to stay enrolled, I need tuition money fast. The schools Cute Couples Contest can be my saving grace whichever couple is voted most swoon-worthy by Valentines Day is offered a tuition-free year. But my only option is the one person I hoped to steer clear of. Blake Taylor is rich, cocky, and flirting with me?

Ungodly tall and built like a house, Blake could keep me safe from the person stalking me. But with every touch and stolen glance I wonder if my heart needs protection, too.

BLAKE

As Brookside Us star hockey player I only want one thing: to make captain and look hot doing it. So when my current captain asks me for a favor in exchange for a good word to our coach, I dont have to think twice.

The favor? Fake dating his sister, Alexis—the girl Ive been crushing on for three years but whos never given me the time of day. This was supposed to be a simple quid-pro-quo, but the more time I spend with her the harder it gets not to fall for her completely. With only one shot at her heart and five months to do it, I have to prove to Alexis that I can be the one or risk losing her forever.

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Alexis

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a woman without money will be kicked out of college.

Which makes it highly unfortunate that my final pay stub is unceremoniously pressed into my aching hands, with my dream of becoming a teacher leaving the building at the same time as I do. Could I become a teacher without a degree? Perhaps. But much like Tinker Bell, I need external validation to live.

It's a short walk to the local café, but I need every minute to mull over my options. I can pick up waitressing, but then I would be reliant on tips, and most of the students here have too little to tip well. There is a TA position open, but only with the professor who hates my guts. And the rest? Well, every other pamphlet on the board classifies their openings as an internship, and we all know what that means.

Brownie this could be a good opportunity for you. How about this: you give us one chance to find you a fake boyfriend—just one—and if it doesn't click between the two of you, we drop it."

"Just one?" I ask. "And then we'll never speak of it again?"

"Never."

I scan his face. Levi might not be my identical twin like Alissa, but we look a lot

alike. Same high cheekbones, the slightly too large forehead, the same crooked nose, and silver-blue eyes that now held mine defiantly, waiting—no, daring me to argue. I don't.

Because as much as I hate the idea of it, it's the best option I have.

“Fine,” I say, and hope it sounds more confident than I feel. “But you better find me a winner.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 2

Blake

I let myself fall onto the wooden bench and pull my water bottle from the gym bag at my feet. To my left, Eric is still bitching about his latest girlfriend, as he has been doing since we stepped off the ice half an hour ago. It's getting harder and harder not to tell him she's too good for him. Maybe I'll slip her a note at the next game, tell her to dump his sorry ass and find someone better.

The door opens and I nod in greeting as our team captain, Levi Moore, walks past.

"And then she started getting all excited about that dumb radio thing, telling me how those dates sounded so cute and she could use the money for her family or whatever. But that girly shit would bomb my reputation for sure, so I shut it right down." Eric stretches his arms over his head, trying to exaggerate the bit of muscle he has, his pale skin still glinting from the shower.

"Hold up, so she told you she needed the money, and you just...decided not to help her?" I repeat slowly. I promised myself not to get involved, but once again my lack of impulse control decides otherwise. "Dude, if that were me, I'd have gone and signed us up on the spot. She's supposed to be your girl. "

Eric shoots me a look like I just stepped in shit. "Why do you care? You just hit 'em and leave."

Technically true—I do very much enjoy one-night stands. But I always make sure the

girls know what they're getting into. None of them have ever entered my dorm under the illusion that they'd see me again, and they don't care. So while I'm not well-versed in actual relationships, it doesn't matter. Because for the short time that those girls are with me, I'd do anything for them, and I treat them like it too. Something Eric clearly doesn't relate to.

Eric is the embodiment of the kind of masculinity my father wishes I had, the same kind he himself has. The kind I despise, as it is nothing short of toxic. That need to dominate and be aggressive, to crush your feelings to a pulp so you can appear like a real man, whatever that means. If he had any common sense he would see the flaws in himself and work on them instead of his reputation. Maybe then he'd be deserving of the girls he beds.

"Sure do," I say, pulling up my jeans and grabbing a shirt. "So you can tell Bella to come find me once she dumps your sorry ass, and I'll show her what respect looks like."

Eric's nostrils flare, the same look in his eyes as he gets when he prepares to slam someone into the boards. I brace myself for the attack but refuse to back down, holding his gaze as I watch him mull it over. He shakes his head and picks up his gym bag, walking out the door without another word.

"Are girls okay? Why do they willingly go near that guy?" my teammate and friend, Rafael, says with a shake of his head.

I crouch down to tie my shoelaces. "Beats me."

Eric might be a good hockey player, but off the ice, he is a complete and utter dick. I've never understood why girls flock to him the way they do, even if they rarely last more than a couple of weeks. Respect to them—I wouldn't make it five minutes.

Raf stares at his phone while he waits for me to finish up, probably hoping to go for a burger on the way home. It beats soggy leftovers any day. Maybe, if I'm really lucky, some of the cupcakes Levi's sister dropped off yesterday will still be there on that fancy plate by the time we get home.

Levi's voice echoes through the empty locker room. "Taylor, mind hanging back for a second?"

I motion for Raf to go on without me before walking over to where Levi stands on the other side.

Levi jerks his chin towards the benches. "Were you for real back there?"

Here it comes. The reckoning. As captain, Levi is strict on a few fronts: no drinking or parties during the game season, no infighting, and no outside drama on the ice. By calling out Eric I've squarely broken rule #2.

"Look, I know we're supposed to be good, but he gets on my last nerve when he's acting like that. Someone had to speak up," I say, and on instinct I cross my arms in self-defense.

"Not that. What you said about the contest," Levi says with a calmness that holds a sense of authority, a warning to straighten your back and listen. "Were you serious when you said you'd do it?"

In a single moment the nerves that built up inside of me fall away, and I laugh. "I don't know, probably. Why do you care, Moore? Are you looking for a date?"

Levi's expression doesn't change as he says, "Not me. My sister. She's not as lucky as you and I; she could really use the free tuition, or she might not graduate."

Screwed . Utterly, royally screwed. That is what I am. There is no way around it—if he is asking me to be her fake boyfriend...he might as well kill me on the spot.

I look at him for a long moment, weighing my words, trying to figure out which ones oppose the rapid beating of my heart. “Why would you need me for that? Isn’t your sister a lesbian?”

A flicker of recognition passes through his eyes. “You’re thinking of Alissa—and she’s bisexual. Lis got into some kind of fancy art program, so she doesn’t need any help. Alexis is an English major, though, so not much chance of a scholarship there.”

“Wait, you have two sisters?” I close my eyes, pretending to wonder why I hadn’t put that together before. “So that’s why the hair keeps changing. I figured she was just really into wigs or something.”

Levi laughs, which happens so little it takes a moment to get used to. “They’re identical twins, obviously. Alexis has long hair, Alissa’s is short and pink. Anyway, would you be interested? Scamming the school out of a couple of grand seems like something you’d enjoy.”

I shove his shoulder with a shake of my head. Fine, so I set a few small fires and misled various administrations a couple of times. What can I say? I like causing trouble. Harmless trouble. Levi is right, though; scamming this place out of a big lump of money without consequences sounds like a fucking dream.

But no one will believe I’ve settled down. For the past two years, I’ve built a solid reputation of being a one-time-fling and nothing more. Me trotting around the same girl for months with no side action? Well, I can name a long list of people who’d call bullshit. But that’s not what’s holding me back. No, the real reason is much, much worse.

I know damn well who Alexis Moore is. She has occupied my mind every day since I first heard her laugh right here on this ice. Better yet, I cannot count on my hands the times I have tried to make her laugh like that again, falling for her a little bit more every time she comes by our place. When life gives you sunshine as pure as her, you bask in it. And fuck if I'm not willing to be blinded by her light.

But there is no way this can end well, no way someone as pure as her could ever fall for me. So I lie. "I don't know, man. I mean, I'm sure Alexis is awesome and all, but a relationship isn't really my style."

"Fake relationship. Touch her and find out what happens." Levi holds up a finger, a stern look in his eyes. Though he's barely half an inch taller than me and one of my best friends, there is something about him that never allows me to fully relax, always wanting to impress him. "But if you choose to help out Alexis, I'll talk to Coach Tucker and do my best to make you captain when I leave."

I let out a low whistle. He's pulling out the big guns now, poking at the one thing he knows I want more than anything. Being captain would make me irresistible to the ladies, solidify my importance to the team, and maybe even earn my mother's approval. "You'd do that?"

"You've got the talent, man. But being captain is more than wearing the jersey. It's a whole lot of responsibility, hard work, and dedication, and from what I've seen these past few years you're not the type to stick with anything that doesn't impact you directly. Do this for Lex, show me you can invest in something bigger than yourself, and who knows? Maybe you'll wear this jersey next." Levi claps a hand to his chest, where a large C is splayed across the fabric.

He can get it done. There's no questioning it. He might not be rich enough to buy his way to importance, but he doesn't need to. Levi Moore commands a room on his own might, and I know for a fact that Coach Tucker values his opinion.



The objective is clear: pretend to be in love with the girl I've been crushing on hard for two years, get her that prize money and I'll be captain. It sounds simple enough, especially that first bit. But I know I'll fuck it up in no time at all. Still, when will I ever get another chance like this?

Slowly, before I can let myself chicken out by something as stupid as rational thought, I nod. "Set up a date. I'll be there."

A smile spreads on Levi's face, the one that leaves every girl on campus swooning in its wake. "You better not let me down, Taylor."

"Let me guess, you know where to find me?" Most of us on the hockey team share a house, so Levi's room is down the hall from mine.

"Sure do. But I'm not the one you should be worried about," Levi smirks. "Alissa did seven years of baseball—still has the bat, too."

A shudder runs down my spine at the thought of being at the receiving end of that bat. "If—and that's a big if—we end up doing this, I'll be a perfect gentleman. You have my word."

Levi scans my face, and for a moment I think he already regrets asking me. But then he dips his chin in acknowledgment and turns to get changed.

A clear dismissal.

I rush for the door before he can say anything to make this situation even worse, and as the door closes behind me I blow out a breath.

Holy shit .

What on earth did I just agree to?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 3

Alexis

The text came only a few days later.

Lis

We found you a boyfriend. Meet us at The Crossroads at 7. Wear something pretty.

I groan as I glare at it, then drag my eyes towards the closet. Wear something pretty . What does that even mean? I like all of my clothes, but taste is subjective. How am I supposed to guess what a stranger thinks is pretty? And if this is all fake, why does it even matter?

Whatever. We have to make it look real, I suppose.

I settle for a skin-tight white top that shows a sliver of skin at my navel and my best pair of black skinny jeans, topping it with a loose-knit cardigan for comfort. It's a pretty standard look for me, but no one bothered to mention a dress code and I don't want to overdress and give my date any wrong ideas.

Oh god.

I have a date.

With a stranger.

A stranger who, if this goes well, will pretend to be my beloved boyfriend for the next couple of months. A stranger who, if they carry any ill will, has the chance to humiliate me in front of the entire school by admitting our charade.

My veins fill with lead as I let myself fall backward onto the floral bedspread, my face hidden behind my palms. A nightmare—this is just a nightmare.

What if I just...didn't go? Stayed home. Locked myself in my room like a petulant child and researched getting a fake degree. Surely getting caught with one of those would be less embarrassing than getting caught with a fake boyfriend. At least with the degree, I was almost there.

No. I have to go, if only to keep from pissing off my siblings. They did promise to drop it if I didn't like the guy, so really, what do I have to lose?

A lot, I remind myself.

I shrug on my coat and take my purse off the hanger, still dragging my feet on leaving the safe haven of my dorm. How do people do this? Do they actually like going on dates? The endless line of strangers, hoping to be loved instead of hurt? I have to trust my sister thoroughly vetted whoever they decided on, but some things you don't know until they do them. And that makes it a whole lot worse.

It's just one date. One measly little dinner of pleasantries, and then we can drop this whole thing.

I lock the door behind me and head for the stairs, keeping my head low and eyes on the shadows. I've just reached the sidewalk when I see it: a flash of broad shoulders and black hair trimmed short.

My keys clutched like weapons between my shaking fingers I break into a sprint,

running as fast as these traitorous legs can take me. I feel my phone deep in my pocket, but there's no one to call. Alissa has a late class and will barely make it to the restaurant on time, and Levi? Levi still doesn't know.

And I can't tell him, because if I do, he'll take matters into his own hands and ruin his future. I adore my brother, but when it comes to family, he can get a bit hotheaded and overprotective. With him being so close to fulfilling his NHL dreams...it's best to keep him in the dark.

The streets are quiet as I speed through, every shadow a threat as I run towards the restaurant. A car comes up behind me and I push myself to go even faster, not caring that the sweat and rain are ruining my makeup and I'll be drenched by the time I get there. Because I won't be meeting anyone tonight. When I get there, I will call Alissa from the parking lot and ask her to drive me home.

I get so lost in my panic and thoughts that I don't register the car slowing down beside me until the driver honks, making me jump.

"Hey, do you need a ri—whoa, are you okay?"

I peer into the car, trying to put a face to the familiar voice. But the sun has gone down and the darkness is creeping in fast, making it hard to see.

"I'm fine!" I half-yell, embarrassingly out of breath, and wave a hand to brush them off. I turn on my heels to start running again before I can be dragged into this car and get myself killed.

"You're Levi's sister, right? Alexis?"

Slowly, I turn my head towards the car. If he knows my brother, it explains why his voice is so familiar. He's probably on the hockey team. But to point it out in the first

minute of talking? Those conversations rarely end well.

“Maybe,” I say. “Why do you need to know?”

In the dark, I can just make out his shrug. “I don’t. Just curious. Hop in, I’ll give you a ride.”

A strange feeling curls around my stomach and I step back, away from his reach. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

He could kidnap me, or lock me in the car and dump my body in the desert, or a myriad of different terrible things. So no, in this day and age, I know better than to get in some random guy’s beat-up car.

“Take a picture of my license plate and send it to your siblings. Better yet, call one of them and keep them on the line while we drive. I don’t mind, really.”

I glance around, cataloging every possible escape route in case things go south. “Why are you so insistent I get in your car? I don’t even know you.”

“Oh shit, you can’t see me, can you?” I hear the click of his seatbelt before the door opens, a tall and broad shadow draping himself over it. His hand moves to his pocket and for a moment I fear the worst, but within seconds a blinding light cuts through the dark—it’s just his phone. He points it at his face, bright blue eyes squinting against the light, brown curls framing his face. “It’s me, Blake. Your brother’s friend slash teammate slash housemate? We’ve hung out a couple of times.”

Right, that’s why his voice was so familiar. I see Blake every time I hang out at Levi’s dorm or get dragged to his games. I don’t know him very well, but he’s not a total stranger. I know Blake likes peanut puffs, beer, and random hookups. But he’s also respectful, occasionally hilarious, and, according to my brother, a good guy.

He is also, more often than not, the lead in my most private fantasies, and the first—and only—crush I've had since coming to Brookside.

I could keep running, ruin my outfit, and put myself in exactly the kind of danger I'm running away from. Or I can get in his car, call Alissa, and hope Blake isn't an ax murderer in his spare time.

My legs burn so much they're shaking and my chest has never felt tighter, making it hard to breathe.

"Okay," I say through gritted teeth. "Thank you, Blake."

"Anytime." He rounds the car before beckoning me to the other side and holding open the door for me, closing it gently after I've slid into the torn leather seat.

I call Alissa immediately.

I unbuckle my seatbelt the moment we pull into the parking lot.

"Thanks!" I say, the door already open and my feet hovering above the moving ground. "This was very kind. I'll make it up to you, get you some gas money or something."

I jump out and shut the door before he can answer, landing on swaying feet before rushing into the restaurant. Alissa and Levi are already seated with no fake boyfriend in sight, so I keep my head low as I make a beeline for the restroom. Thankfully, neither of my siblings spot me.

The Crossroads, a restaurant sitting right at the edge of town, is one of those places that isn't sure what it wants to be, so it becomes a bit of everything. You can get five-course dinners or order a burger to go. The walls are pristine white, but the wooden

slats that cover half the walls are navy blue. The pillars are covered in bamboo sticks, and the restroom is so void of personality it's a jarring contrast.

But the restroom door is solid and reassuring as I slump against it, trying to steady my breathing. Hudson isn't here, I remind myself. And if he is, my siblings will protect me.

It takes a few minutes and a stern talking to before I manage to convince myself I'm safe here. That there is no bogeyman hiding behind the door, no monster lurking in the shadows waiting to snatch me because I smiled at it once. I am in a public space, with plenty of people looking out for me. I'll be okay.

But only if I can pull my shit together.

Putting one foot in front of the other I drag myself to the small round mirror above the sink.

I try to fix my hair, the blond puffs having escaped their confinement, but end up putting it into a high ponytail when it doesn't cooperate. I wet a tissue to remove any lingering sweat from my body, and another to remove the bleeding mascara on my pale cheeks before reapplying a fresh coat. I'm not sure how long I've been in there, trying to mask the cracks in my armor, but when I come out I want to jump right back in.

Because sitting at the table, chatting comfortably with my siblings, is Blake Taylor.

Yes. That Blake Taylor.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Don't tell me you're my date, please. Anyone but you.



A lazy grin spreads on Blake's face as he leans back, one muscled arm draped lazily over the back of the only empty chair. My chair. "Take a wild guess, Sunshine."

"Fuck..." I whisper to myself. If anyone hears, they don't show it. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugs, and bright-blue eyes hold mine as he says, "I thought you knew. At least, I did until you jumped out of my still-moving car and made a break for it."

"You jumped out of a moving car?!" my siblings yell in unison, and I roll my eyes.

"Get that look off your faces, it wasn't going that fast."

Levi and Alissa look to Blake for confirmation, but he doesn't give them a glance as he keeps his eyes on me, tilting his face as he looks me up and down like he can still see the cracks in my armor.

His smile widens as he rises, pulling out my chair and motioning for me to sit. I tense as I comply, feeling every pair of eyes in the restaurant trained on me, and watch him like a hawk until he scoots his chair closer to the table.

Two waiters appear with plates balanced in their hands, and despite having yet to order anything they set one of them in front of me. The sight of the massive steak and fries pulls at my stomach and I look at my siblings, brow raised in silent question. They better be the ones paying for this; this meal costs about the same as my weekly budget.

"Get that look off your face," Levi says, echoing my earlier words. "Lis told me about your extreme budgeting. Dad will kill me if he sees you like this."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lie, my mouth filling with saliva at the

mere sight of all this food. It takes a tremendous amount of effort not to scarf it down in one go right this minute.

My brother shoots me a look that says he knows I'm lying, but thankfully doesn't dwell on it. Instead, he digs into his chicken and places his focus on Blake, talking about something related to hockey. Though, I can't be sure what, as any mention of the sport makes me tune out immediately.

Alissa's hand finds mine under the table, giving it a light squeeze. Even without saying it she knows what just happened, why I'm acting this way. As Hudson's former friend and with his future on the line, I can't bring myself to tell Levi what's been going on. But Alissa is my roommate, and as she often wakes up before I do to go to practice or the batting cage, there was no hiding the gifts and notes stuck to our door. She had to know; there was simply no way to hide it.

Besides, Alissa is my twin, my best friend. I need her love and support like I need air.

I'm halfway through my plate when I notice all eyes are on me.

"What?" I mumble, half a fry still sticking out of my mouth. I had of course completely forgotten this is technically a really weird date, and that I should probably eat like I've seen food before. But something about today makes all reason fly out the window.

Besides, I've seen my date do worse. Like the time he smeared barbecue sauce on his torso in a way that made it look like he had abs.

To my left, Blake is grinning, but Levi just shakes his head. "You truly have the manners of a desert rat."

Oddly specific.

“I was just asking about your major,” Blake says calmly. “You strike me as someone creative, but too fearful to pursue that...is it English?”

Levi or Alissa must have told him, or he looked me up because no one is this good at guessing. And while I’ve chatted about classes with Levi at the house before, I highly doubt any of them remember my name, let alone pay attention to what I say or do. There’s no way he knew it without being clued in.

Or maybe I’m just that obvious. “You Googled me before this date, didn’t you?”

“So I was right?” Blake’s face erupts into a dazzling, slightly cocky smile. It’s a curse, really, that it only makes him more handsome. If it didn’t, I might have found an excuse to drop this plan altogether.

It was a lot easier to ignore Blake when he was just my brother’s teammate. But now that he’s my date and potential fake boyfriend, I have no choice but to pay attention to every part of him. Like the way his scruff is just the perfect length to be sexy or the way he has put more effort into the way he’s dressed tonight than he usually does.

There’s no backward cap, no hoodie or sweatpants in sight. Instead, there are dress shoes, normal black pants and a navy button-up with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. Blake catches me staring at them—I have a thing for muscled arms, let me be—and I quickly take a sip of water to play it off.

“Yes, you were right. What about you?”

“History. Not sure what I’ll do with this degree, but there’s no rush to figure it out.” He must see my confusion in my face, as he leans in with a laugh to say, “It’s one of the perks of being a trust-fund asshole: complete and total freedom.”

The brutal honesty and self-awareness in his answer puts me at ease. A lot can be said

about Blake, but it is clear he is trying his hardest to make this work. “Must be nice.”

“Oh, it is. Which is why, if you want to, say, borrow the money—no interest of course—you can, and you don’t have to play alone with these Panem et circenses .”

Oh, he’s a history major for sure. Only a nerd would phrase it like that.

“That’s a kind offer, truly, but I can’t accept it.”

My siblings cover their eyes in unison, shielding themselves from the train wreck of my decision-making. “I cannot be in your debt. I’d much rather drop out of school than be in anyone’s debt. So if this isn’t something you can go through with I fully understand, and I won’t take it personally. But I can’t take your money.”

Blake holds my gaze for a long moment, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips. Taking his glass off the table, he winks. “Oh, I do love a challenge.”

“Taylor,” Levi says in a warning tone.

Blake laughs. “I meant the competition, of course.”

His eyes slid to mine, smirk still in place, and for a second I swear I see him wink again, making it clear he wasn’t talking about the competition at all.

So the great Blake Taylor wants to get into my pants. Not a revelation I expected from today. Still, I take it as a compliment. He can have any girl he wants, whenever he wants, and yet if only for a moment he set his sights on me. He won’t get me, of course, but it is nice to feel desired just the same.

It also doesn’t hurt that Blake is built like a damn house. If anyone can keep me safe, or even give me the illusion of safety, it’s him. And in the end that might be more

important than any of this.

So at the end of the night, when my siblings are long gone and the servers are itching for us to leave, I ask him, “What do you think? Are you ready to fall in love with me?”

“I am yours, Alexis. And yours alone.” Blake smiles, and I silently curse my traitorous heart for skipping a beat.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 4

Blake

I am so fucked .

I flirted with her in no uncertain terms and told her I was hers and hers alone. She might think it was a joke, spoken in jest to match her question. But I know it was no such thing.

It was the god-honest truth.

And when Levi figures this out, I'll be in big trouble. He will kick my ass for sure, might even kick me off the team. I say when instead of if because he is bound to find out. Alexis is on her way to enter us into the contest right now, meaning we will be joined at the hip until February. And me and pretty ladies? I'm not as smooth as people think. Especially not with her.

It's only a matter of time before I do something stupid.

Like tell her how much I adore the little mole under her left eye or the way she scrunches her nose when she laughs. Or admit to the way she can look at me with those big eyes and put me at ease in an instant, quieting the thoughts racing through my mind.

Would I have agreed to this charade had it been anyone else? Sure. The chance to commit fraud and get away with it is too good to pass up. But the fact that it's Alexis

who I get to call mine just feels so damn right.

I can feel Levi's stare from the other side of the ice, watching my every move. I bet he's already regretting having asked me for the job, thinking I only agreed so I have a shot at getting into his sister's pants. My comments at dinner probably didn't help with that, either, though it was worth it to see Alexis's smile.

A strangled sound rips from my throat as a puck hits my spine and for a moment I struggle to breathe, a flash of pain burning firm in the place where my lungs should be.

"Taylor!" Levi shouts as he skates closer. I focus on the sound, letting it ground me in the moment, slowly pulling me back to earth. "Get your head out of your ass and play. Do you want us to lose?"

"Sure do. I love seeing you cry like a little bitch-baby."

His hand claps my shoulder, and though he says nothing I know what he's asking. Are you okay? I simply nod and watch as he skates off again, trying to steal the puck from the opposing team. Lucky for me, this is a practice match, so nothing's lost by my distraction.

When I finally pull my shit together we're too far behind to save the game and lose spectacularly. I keep my head down as we make our way to the locker room. It's my fault we lost, and we all know it. I let my personal crap interfere with the one thing I am actually good at. No matter what, I cannot let the same thing happen at the first game of the season on Friday.

I can't let Coach Tucker—or the guys, really—think that I don't take hockey seriously. That would kill any chance I have at becoming captain, effectively taking away the only thing I know I want for my future.

Besides, I might be set for life, but most of these guys are not nearly as lucky. They need their hockey scholarships to finish their degrees, or to get them into a draft. I can't be responsible for ruining someone's future like that. Sure, I'm a rebel, a handsome rogue. But I'm not a wrecker.

I hit the showers, avoiding any of the regular locker-room banter, going through the motions so I can get out fast.

Behind me, Raf and Eric are arguing about something. Usually, I'd step in to back up my best friend, but today I'm just not in the mood. I have no doubt that Eric will use my performance today against me, and honestly? This time, it might break me.

Yeah, I might seem cool and unbothered. Cocky, even. But I do care. I care too much sometimes. Not that it matters; no one cares about me as much as I do about them.

I make it out of the practice facility in record time, so I allow myself a few minutes of wallowing in the safety of my car. I should check my phone for any updates on extra credit work or new assignments, especially since my grades have been slipping recently. But the moment I turn it on, I stop dead in my tracks.

Because I have seven texts, all from Alexis.

Alexis

Hey. It's me. Alexis

You know, girlfriend. Light of your life, that kind of thing

Anyway, I'm just texting so you have my number if you need me.

This questionnaire is surprisingly deep. I don't know any of these things about you.



Do you have middle names?

When is your birthday?

When did you first fall in love with me? Probably when I jumped out of your car because I thought you were an ax murderer, right?

I laugh at the last one. What a story that would make. Kids, the moment I knew your mother was the one was when she jumped out of my still-moving car because she thought I was a killer.

Kind of sad that I've heard worse.

For a moment I debate calling her with the answers, get it over with. But then again someone might overhear and blow our cover, and really, why would I pass up any excuse to see her?

Stay put, Sunshine. I'm on my way.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 5

Alexis

I check my phone again. Blake still hasn't answered.

A few feet away from me, two girls I recognize from being on the cheer squad whisper amongst themselves, shooting me sideways glances when they think I can't see. I had to say both our names out loud when requesting the sign-up forms, and these girls clearly could not believe the Blake Taylor would ever settle for me.

To which I can only say, me neither.

"Excuse me? Hi," I say to the energetic girl manning the stand—I think her name is Paris. "Would it be okay if I take these and get them back to you later? I have to go to class."

"Of course!" she beams, and for a task so dull her smile must be fake. "Just make sure you have them turned in by tomorrow at noon."

"Thank you."

I press the forms between the pages of a textbook and stuff the book inside my backpack, practically sprinting away from those girls and their hurtful whispers. I may not have heard every word, but I heard enough.

The Media a hug, a touch. But Blake keeps a firm foot away, his hands tensing at his

side. I'm not sure if that makes things better.

"No, I'm—you intervened in time."

He points to my wrist. "Can I?"

I lift it and can barely keep from flinching as he gently holds my hand, inspecting the wrist like he's a doctor. "Doesn't look broken, but you can expect some serious bruising—we should probably ice it right away. I don't think we need to go to the emergency room, but you and Alissa should keep an eye on it, make sure it doesn't get worse."

"You know a lot about injuries," I say quietly.

"Yeah, I get hurt a lot on the ice, so it's good to know when something's just a bruise or something more serious. I was also a rowdy kid, climbing things I shouldn't climb, exploring places I should have stayed far away from." He places my hand against my chest, right over my heart. "Keep it there, it'll help the swelling. Come on, I'll walk you home."

We walk in silence along the cobble-stoned paths, past the Arts building and through the quiet streets just beyond. Winter is fast approaching; the trees have lost their bright orange leaves, which lay rotting on the ground, and the wind cuts through the layers under my coat. It's those things I focus on as we make our way to the run-down dormitories. The silence between us isn't heavy, or uncomfortable, like most silences are. Though I can feel the question on Blake's mind right up until he asks it.

"Has he done this before? Bothering you like this?"

His voice is quiet, almost unsure. Like he's afraid I will fall apart if he speaks any louder. To be fair, I probably look like it.

“This is the first time he’s laid hands on me since it began,” I say. “But there were letters, and weeks where he’d follow me every day and I couldn’t leave my dorm. Gifts he’d leave outside my door. I’ve tried to make it stop, but according to the school board there’s never enough reason to step in. The police gave him a restraining order, but he ignores it, and it doesn’t get enforced.”

“That’s...horrifying.” Blake’s brows knit in thought. “Send me your schedule. I’ll walk with you to and from class so that son of a bitch can’t come anywhere near you again.”

I shake my head. “You’re very sweet, but you have a life, too. Other things to do and prioritize.”

“There is nothing that matters more than this,” Blake says, his tone so decisive it leaves me no room to question it. “You’re my girlfriend now, Alexis. It’s my job to make you feel safe.”

I shoot him a look. “We both know that title means nothing.”

“It means something to me.” He stops walking to look at me, his expression dead serious. It’s a side of Blake I haven’t seen before, and it gives me a pause. “I mean it, Alexis. As long as we’re together, I will do everything I can to keep you safe and happy. If that means I have to keep watch outside your door or walk you places, so be it.” The corner of his mouth curls a little. “Though, I’m sure I could protect you even better if I keep watch from your bed.”

The wink he follows it up with lets me know it’s a lighthearted joke, meant only to make me smile. And for a moment it does.

“You must really want to be captain, if you’re willing to do all this.”

Conflict passes through his gaze. “I do. But this isn’t about that. I like you, and we’re going to spend months joined at the hip pretending to be a couple. I want us to be—I don’t know, good. Like you at least don’t resent spending time with me.”

A small laugh ripples from my chest. “Blake Taylor, are you saying you want to be my friend?”

“If I get to be so lucky,” he says. “Now let’s hurry up and get to your dorm before you can use my balls to ice your wrist.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 6

#### Blake

Alexis's dorm is her safe space.

I know this, because the moment I close the door behind her, she silently falls apart until only the ghost of her is left. She sits on a fluffy pink couch, knees pulled up to her chin, arms pale with how tight she holds herself. The TV is on, but I can tell she isn't watching.

Still. Unmoving. Unreachable.

I sit a few feet away, not wanting to leave her alone like this but also knowing my presence might be making things worse. I tried to ask her earlier, but she didn't respond. Not to that, or the questions I read off the forms. Luckily she already filled out her part, so I let her be while I answer every tedious question listed.

"I think your tea is ready," I say. "What flavor do you like?"

Slowly, her eyes move to meet mine, but she doesn't say a word. That's okay. They must have something in that tiny gray kitchen resembling tea. It takes some sleuthing, but in the last cabinet I try I find a little box of tea bags. I'm about to take out the strawberry flavor when I hear the smallest sound behind me.

"Cherry."

“Excellent choice.” I trade in the strawberry for a cherry-flavored bag and make a mental note of the brand so I can stock up on them. “Do you want something sweet to pair it with? Sugar, honey, a pastry?”

Silence. I glance over my shoulder to find her curled up in a pink-dotted blanket, wincing as she flexes the fingers on her injured hand.

I raise a brow. Maybe I was wrong—maybe it’s broken after all. “Hey, you okay?”

She barely nods, so I don’t believe her. I pour some honey into her tea and carefully bring her the mug, placing it on the glass coffee table. I hover around, not sure where to go or what to do next.

I’ve never seen Alexis be loud or extroverted, but even I know this isn’t how she usually is. Maybe it’s time to call Levi or Alissa. They will know what to do, right?

And while they care for Alexis, I’ll make sure that son of a bitch pays for what he’s done. Yeah, that sounds good. Usually, I don’t like to show my anger anywhere else but on the ice, but Hudson has it coming. Big time . It might ruin my career, but I don’t care. It’ll be worth it. She is worth it.

But right now, I have to make sure Alexis is okay.

“You like books?” I ask, pointing towards the row of bookshelves pushed against the back wall. The green wallpaper is peeling, the paint chipped; even the air smells of mold. This truly is a poor excuse for a dorm. Maybe I can convince her to let me pull some strings, get her and Alissa a better place to live.

Alexis merely nods in response, but it’s a welcome first step. “Would you like me to bring you one? Or I can read you one. One you’ve never read, guaranteed.”

Her face turns to look at me. That caught her interest.

“It’s by a very obscure author. A quiet kind of genius really, written in the late zero’s. You’re going to love it. It’s called Crooked Crown by a guy named Blake Taylor.”

Alexis blinks, and it’s like her eyes gain color. “You...wrote a book?”

“School assignment,” I laugh. “It’s very, very bad, but hopefully it’ll make you feel better.”

She sits a little straighter, creating room on the couch, and I let myself fall right into it before handing her her tea.

And so begins the great reading of Crooked Crown , complete with terrible accents and dramatic reenactments. It’s somehow even worse than I remember it to be, but it brings a smile to her face, and that’s all that matters. I’m just glad I kept the PDF.

By the end I can barely hide my embarrassment, my cheeks burning and my face pressed into my hands as I force myself to continue. And that’s when I hear it.

A laugh. The laugh.

My eyes shoot to hers at the sound, never wanting to hear anything else. She looks at me, no doubt seeing my expression, and promptly laughs again.

“What did the penguin do to end up in the dungeon?”

“Nothing. Well, aside from the murders. But the penguin switched bodies with the king, so it’s the king who is in the dungeon in penguin form.” I smile at the quizzical look on her face. “Can you believe I got a passing grade on this? Just barely, but still.”



“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but that was oddly compelling.” Her brows knit together in thought, the sight needlessly adorable. “I mean, if you switch some things around and rework it, this could be a great children’s book. Why aren’t you doing something with this?”

I’m no novelist, and definitely not a literary genius. Hell, most days I’m barely a person. So what if I write poems sometimes, or a few short stories or bits of a longer story? That doesn’t make me a writer. My crap isn’t good enough for that.

Still, I can’t keep the smile off my face. Today, October 15th is the first time Alexis Moore has ever complimented me. It’s a rush I haven’t felt before, a tingly kind of feeling in the pit of my stomach. “I don’t think writing is the path for me.”

Alexis tugs at the blanket, pulling it tighter around herself. “So what is your path?”

Shit. I was hoping she wouldn’t go there. My mind wanders to all the times our housekeeper slash my mother figure, Maria, asked me that question, and the little smile she gave when I admitted I didn’t know.

You will, in time. And it will be so obvious you’ll wonder why you didn’t see it before, she always said. I always thought it was bullshit, meant to soothe an anxious child. But when Alexis meets my gaze, I’m not so sure.

“Right now? To keep you safe and look hot doing it.” I wink, but this time, that adorable blush I chase is nowhere to be found.

“Blake,” she says sternly.

I fake a wince. “Oops, I’m sorry, Sunshine. Tragic backstory cannot be unlocked until you’ve reached Level One Girlfriend.”

“Fake girlfriend,” Alexis mumbles as she rests her head against the back of the couch.

“Semantics.”

“Fine. How do I reach level One Girlfriend?”

I tap my chin with a finger. “You can come to my game on Friday. Then we can do that cliché romance movie thing where I score and then point to you in the crowd so everyone knows you’re mine.”

“That sounds radical,” she says, her voice small again. “You know, if you do that, there’s no going back for you.”

“Are you having second thoughts? Because my offer of just giving you the money still stands.”

“No, no—it’s just...I don’t want you to regret this.” Her face is unreadable, but there’s a sadness in her voice I would recognize from miles away. The sound of it tugs at something I’d long buried, and I feel my walls crumble fast.

“Hey,” I gently place my hand on her lower leg, slow enough that she could easily swat it away. She doesn’t. “I made you a promise, and I’m not breaking it for anything.”

“Why not?” Alexis meets my gaze, and the sight of those silver-blue eyes glossy with tears is my undoing.

I don’t have an answer. In theory, I could make captain without Levi’s help, and though scamming the school out of a couple of grand is a great joy, it’s not like I need it to breathe. So why did I agree?

With a start, I realize it's because I want to do this. For Levi, who aside from Raf is the closest thing I have to a friend. But more so for Alexis.

Sweet, clever Alexis, who despite me being everything she should despise is constantly checking on me, if I'm sure about doing this with her. Who, even without knowing me, somehow feels responsible for my happiness and is willing to sacrifice herself to guard it. Who is one of two people who actually believe in me and what I can do, with no strings attached.

A strange feeling rushes through me as I study the pattern of freckles on her cheekbones and nose, the way their warm color offsets her eyes.

God, how pathetic. Up until a week ago she probably didn't even know my name, and my attraction to her was kept in a locked safe far from reality. How is it that a girl this quiet can be so enchanting?

I used to think it was the fact that she didn't seem to care much about me or the guys, or that she never really responded to the flirtations thrown her way. That it was the challenge I was after, not her specifically. But now...

Now I know better.

"Because you're my girl now," I say. "And I know that it's technically a fake title and that you think it means nothing. But it means something to me."

Alexis releases a breath, her head slightly tilted as she takes in every inch of my face. I move my arm to lean on the headrest as I hold her gaze, but her eyes flit away to the empty space at my side.

A flutter passes through my chest as she crawls forward to curl up into my side. For a moment I'm breathless, the move so unexpected it leaves me frozen in fear of

upsetting her. But then I push that fear aside and pull her into my chest, my lips brushing the top of her head.

My voice is barely audible, but the words are more for me, anyway. "I've got you."

I'm not sure how long we stay like that, her body curled into my side, the TV the only thing breaking our comfortable silence. But I never want it to end.

Which is why, when Alissa slams the front door shut and Alexis jolts, I want to curse the former for ruining a perfect moment.

"That's by far the least exciting form of foreplay I have ever seen." Alissa throws her coat onto the back of a chair, shaking her head. "Really, guys. What if someone looked through the window? They'd think you were just friends."

"We are, though," I say, and though Alexis stays quiet she does something even worse: she retreats into the corner, far away from me and the arms that miss her already. I sigh.

"I'll let you two talk," I tell her quietly. "Text me if you need anything, okay?"

I wait for her to nod before rising and crossing to the door, pausing at Alissa's side for only a moment. "She hurt her wrist. Keep an eye on it, will you?"

Alissa stares at her sister for a moment, her pink-tipped hair grazing her shoulder as she looks back at me, her expression telling me she knows exactly how it happened. "I will."

"Thanks," I say, and as my gaze slides back to Alexis I can see the faintest blush on her cheeks. "Good night."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 7

Alexis

A loud rapping on the door interrupts my unbroken loop of Taylor Swift songs.

Swallowing against the fear rising in my throat, I reach for my phone to call Alissa as a witness. My fingers just graze the cold glass of the screen when I hear, “Lex, it’s me. Open up.”

I slack a sigh of relief. Blake.

When I open the door he’s leaning against the frame, his arms crossed over his toned chest, making him seem even broader. His curly brown hair is still wet from his post-game shower, the faint scent of his eucalyptus shower gel lingering in the air around him. “You weren’t at the game.”

The words are simple, an easy fact that cannot be disputed. But his tone? His tone is almost hurt, like he had actually been looking forward to having me there. But that’s silly; there’s barely a moment to chit-chat during those games, so me being there or not makes no difference.

“Very observant.”

He shoots me a look that says don’t test me. “Girlfriends go to their boyfriend’s games. I scored and wanted to point at you in the crowd, but you weren’t there. You should have been there.”

I shrug. “I had a ton of work to do, and the cold of the ice rink makes me flare up. Besides, Alissa was there, wasn’t she?”

Blake lets out an exasperated chuckle. “Sending your identical twin to go in your place doesn’t count. I’m not kissing your sister.”

“You’re not kissing anyone, period,” I say, my brain locking on the possibility at once, imagining the way his lips would feel on mine. The thought alone sends a shiver of longing through me, and I can feel my cheeks starting to tinge pink.

Pull yourself together, Moore.

Blake laughs. “We’re supposed to be dating. Of course there will be kissing.”

Somehow, I hadn’t thought of that. Who in their right mind believes a couple to be in love if there’s no kissing? No physical touch, no intimate gestures. When I agreed to this...farce, I did so for the money and the possibility of getting Hudson to leave me alone—which, so far, has been working. I had been so caught up in that I hadn’t considered what it meant to be convincing; the fact that I had to surrender myself, at least in some part, to Blake. That I would have to let him touch me and kiss me whenever he saw fit, and I had to do the same with him.

Fucked. I am so utterly, completely fucked.

And not even in a fun way.

“Sure, but, like, on the cheek.” I spin on my heels, diving into the kitchen to keep Blake from seeing my panic. A moment passes before I hear him follow, gently closing the front door behind us.

“Is there a reason why the mere thought of kissing me makes you break out in hives?”

Blake perches on the side of a chair, staring pointedly at my hands. I look down and promptly drop them; I didn't notice I was scratching.

"It's not you." I turn my back towards him, busying myself with getting us both something to drink, my breathing unsteady as flashes of Hudson flood my mind faster and faster until all I can hear is a sharp ring.

A hand closes around mine, and the ringing stops.

I turn to find Blake standing behind me, his eyes filled with a sadness I can't quite place. "It's him, isn't it?"

There's no use in hiding it. "Yes. He was the last...I mean, I sort of haven't..."

It's all so stupid, I know. Blake is so vastly different from Hudson. Blake doesn't yell, or make sudden movements. Everything he does seems well thought-out, at least when it comes to me. Hudson could never be like him if he tried. But while my mind knows this, my brain has yet to catch up.

"I'm not him," Blake says gently, softly, as if he's still trying to calm me down. "We won't touch until you want us to, and you can always tell me to fuck off. But I will never hurt you. Being with me... it shouldn't be something to fear."

His eyes are like a steady mountain brook, calm and blue, and I cling to the shards of peace I feel when I meet his gaze. "What should it be like, then?"

"Easy." Blake's fingers glide across my cheek, sliding a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "Safe. Good. You can be you, and I'll be me. No pretending, no lies."

I hold his gaze, the feeling of his palm on my cheek warm and comforting. "What if I can never touch you? If we never kiss?"

“Then you’d be the first,” he says, and though there’s a small smile on his face I can hear the sadness in his voice. “But I don’t need to touch you to prove you’re mine.”

I blink. “But you just said?—”

“What I said doesn’t matter. We will find other ways to convince them. Your comfort comes first, always.” Blake looks conflicted for a moment, but before I can say anything he adds, “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for whatever happened to you. You deserve to be treasured without fearing affection.”

A smile pulls at my lips. “So you’re treasuring me now?”

“Like a goddamn pirate treasures his booty,” Blake smirks, leaning in to add, “And this particular booty is very cute.”

A laugh ripples from my throat, easing my nerves and relaxing my muscles. I turn my face away to hide the blush creeping into my cheeks—it was just a joke; there is no reason to think he meant anything with it.

“Next game, I’ll be there.”

“You better,” Blake says and walks to where he’d stashed his gym bag at the door. “Or I would have gotten you this for nothing.”

He pulls a messily-wrapped package from the big side pocket and hands it to me. From the sight, there is no doubt in my mind that he wrapped it himself, and a fuzzy feeling spreads inside my chest at the thought. It means he thought of me when I wasn’t even around, and he went out of his way to buy and wrap something for me.

And I’ve been avoiding him all week like a jerk.



It takes some peeling, but I eventually get enough tape loose to unwrap the paper, revealing a gold-and-black hockey jersey with his last name and the number nineteen displayed proudly on the fabric.

“You want me to wear your number?” I glance up at him, trying to figure out the depth of the gift. I know girlfriends wear their boyfriend’s number, and it would be weird if I showed up without his. But to be presented with his jersey makes it all too real.

Blake laughs. “Of course I do.”

“Thank you.” I press the jersey against my body. It’s too big, but that’s a good thing. It will retain more heat that way, which will hopefully keep out most of the cold in the arena. I’m sure he only got this size because he didn’t know mine, but it works out in my favor.

“Oh, don’t thank me just yet,” Blake says with a mischievous grin. “Tomorrow, I’m picking you up for Miller’s party.”

Miller, or Jaxton Miller, is our school’s quarterback. Every single year he throws a party that can be heard across town, and the drama of which keeps the school paper occupied for weeks. It is, by all accounts, my personal brand of hell.

I shake my head with vigor, but the sight only makes him laugh.

“Come on, you owe me. Besides, no girlfriend would let her boyfriend go to a party like that by himself. Not going would kill our ranking before this thing has even started.” Blake leans against the counter, all hard muscle and smug smiles. Damn him. He knows the contest is my Achilles heel.

“Okay, fine. I’ll go.” I sigh. “But that’s that. No more owing each other.”

“Not so fast. I’m not sure you’ve considered the vast possibilities of me owing you .” He winks, and I bite my tongue to keep myself in check as a thousand ideas spring to mind. Most of them involve us in as little clothing as possible, and they are definitely not worth speaking. I can only hope he doesn’t notice my cheeks darkening a shade.

I straighten my spine, trying to copy the confidence my sister carries herself with. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Mmhm,” Blake affirms. My breath catches as his fingers brush the outline of my jaw, his eyes flitting to my lips for just a moment. “Whatever you want, you’ll get. You just gotta say the words.”

“A trip to Iceland? A puppy? One of those bookshelves that’s secretly a door to a very private room?” I raise my brow in challenge as my finger drags slowly down his chest. It’s clear he was talking about sex, not monetary favors, but it’s too much fun to mess with him to take any of it seriously.

Blake, as if seeing right through me, merely smiles, and the sight of it stirs something deep within me. “I’m not sure you’ve got the room in this dorm for a secret door, but the other two are very doable. Just tell me where and when.”

“Alluring,” I say. “But you’d have to owe me first, right?”

“Right.” His eyes lock on my lips again, and I feel my resolve disappear at a break-neck pace. I suck in a breath as my heart thunders in my chest, his lips drawing me in like a magnet.

Fuck it. What’s the harm, anyway? It’s not like we have a shot at winning this thing. Maybe having sex with Blake is just what I need: a chance to make new, positive sexual memories.

Slowly, I lean in until I can feel his breath on my skin, my lips almost brushing his. His palm goes up to caress my cheek, but he doesn't close the gap.

"I should go," he whispers. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I try not to let my disappointment show as I watch him take up his gym bag, cold rushing in wherever we touched.

Miller's party might not be an official part of the contest, but it'll be so packed with people that it can break our believability before we've even begun. After tomorrow, everyone will know about us, and the real challenge will begin.

So far, Blake has talked a good game about me being his girl and him wanting me, but when he had the chance to kiss me just now he didn't take it. He must be having second thoughts. I'm sure he wasn't planning on being chained to someone with this much baggage.

"Do you still want to do this, Blake?" I ask. "Because after tomorrow, there is no way back."

His shoulders sag, and for a moment I think he'll call it off. But then a sleepy smile crosses his lips and he says, "I'll pick you up at eight."

With a final glance he walks out the door, leaving me more confused than ever.

### Chapter 8

Blake

You stupid, dumb-ass prick of a man.

I almost kissed her. I'd just told her she could trust me, that I wouldn't do anything she does not want me to. That she is the one who sets the pace. And not five minutes later I'm dreaming about tasting her, wondering how she'd look bent over that pink monstrosity she calls a couch.

In the end, right before I left, I think she may have wanted me to kiss her...but is that something she wants, or did I make her think she does? I haven't exactly shied away from touching her, or telling her she matters to me. That could have messed with her head, made her want things she would never want on her own.

After all, when it comes to girls, I'm only good for one thing: to be a quick hookup. I'm like the human version of those tiny purses actresses bring on red carpets—a fashion accessory to be paraded around, but serve no purpose.

To be used, but barely liked. Certainly not loved.

Never loved.

I throw back another shot.

“You know those won't help you feel better, right?” A sweet female voice whispers

in my ear, her fingertip traveling down my spine. “But I can.”

I cast her a sideways glance, though I can barely see her face in this dark and dingy bar. I can’t believe I let myself get dragged here. Even the bar stools are sticky. “No, thanks. I’m quite taken.”

“I heard a rumor, but wasn’t sure it was true. I don’t see her, though,” she says, and like she’s not laying it on thick enough she sticks out her chest to show off her cleavage. “I won’t tell her if you won’t. It will be our little secret.”

At least the rumor mill is working in our favor.

With a sigh, I turn to face the girl. She’s wearing a dress that is a good two inches too short, the lace of her bra peeking out on the top. Even just the fact that she chose to wear an outfit like that to a place like this, with its stained wallpaper and sticky cracked tile floor, says enough about her intentions for the night. It’s almost sad, really. “I’m not a cheater. You won’t convince me, but I’m sure any of my teammates would be delighted to keep you company tonight. You should try your luck with them.”

I rise to my feet. I’m done with this place. When I agreed with the guys to come here I did so to celebrate our win and take my mind off Alexis. But while they’re at the pool table honoring Levi’s one-drink rule, I’m sneaking drinks at the bar with no one but her taking up my thoughts.

“You should have taken her up on that offer, Taylor. As someone who’s fucked Alexis before, I can tell you it’s not worth it. Better to bed this one—or any other girl—instead.”

My gaze shoots up to the other side of the bar, where the sight of Hudson’s self-satisfied smirk makes my blood boil.

He ruined her life. He terrifies her.

And now he's badmouthing her?

It takes three strides for me to reach him. Three strides for the color to drain from his face as he realizes his mistake. My knuckles are itching to punch him, to hold him down until he wets himself in fear. But I don't want to give Alexis any reason to be afraid of me.

Levi and Raf are behind me in a second, their hands on my shoulders to keep me from punching him. I have no intention to.

"Maybe not to you, but she and I have no problems at all," I say in a voice that doesn't sound like mine. "That being said, talk about Alexis one more time, and I'll make you wish you'd never learned to speak at all. Understood?"

He's backing up now, his muscles taut with fear as he crashes into stools and chairs. Hudson's always been a coward, even when he was still on the team. Never went into the attack, barely did any defense. The day they kicked him off the team was glorious, especially because it made room for Raf to come in and secure our victory. Now I just wish I'd slammed him into the boards a few more times.

"I said, understood?"

He gives the saddest, most pathetic little nod in history, his whole body shaking like a leaf. "You're insane, you know that? Both of you are. You deserve each other."

"Finally, something we agree on," I say, and because I'm already being an alpha jock incarnate, I pretend to jump him just to watch him squirm. It sends him right out the door.

Good fucking riddance.

“What the hell was that about?” Levi asks. “How does he even know Alexis, let alone about the two of you?”

I pause, keeping my back turned to him so he can't see my surprise. Alexis hasn't told him, then, about the situation with Hudson. Does that mean she's been keeping it a secret, living in that fear all alone? No, Alissa knows. Her eyes said as much when she caught us on the couch and I told her about Alexis's wrist. Still, to keep that kind of thing all to yourself...

“I don't know, man,” I say slowly. “But I don't trust him for a second. If you see him around, make sure he doesn't go near Alexis. Just to be safe.”

“You and Alexis, huh?” Raf grins. “I can't believe you finally made a move on her without telling me. We're supposed to be best friends, man.”

Hearing Raf say we're friends sparks a warm feeling in my chest, though the puzzled look on Levi's face at the word finally reminds me I have to play into the ruse, not the truth.

“It just sort of happened,” I shrug. “We're taking it slow, though. You haven't missed much.”

Raf jabs me in the chest with a laugh. “Yeah, right. You can play innocent all you want, Taylor, but you know I'm going to get the truth out of you at some point.”

With one last glance at the door I let Levi bring me back to the group, trying to steady myself enough that I can pretend I'm just playing my part.

My teammates, not even trying to hide the fact they got another round in Levi's

absence, cheer as we approach.

“What was that about?” Eric asks, jerking his chin towards the bar, and Raf claps my shoulder.

“Blake’s got himself a girlfriend,” he sings in a teasing tone, and to my horror everyone but a scowling Levi joins in the chorus as he sings, “Blake and Alexis sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g.”

“Alright, alright. Settle down.” I roll my eyes like I’m in on the joke, though really, I am the joke.

Because I am obsessed with a girl who loves to remind me that what we have is fake. A girl so lovely and kind that I’m drawn to her like a moth to a flame. A girl for whom I’d destroy myself to be close to her.

It defies all logic, the way she is worth every risk. Every inconvenience. She might have only known my name for a few weeks, but it’s longer than I deserve. She will never love me, and I don’t even care.

Because Alexis Moore is the sun in my universe, and I only want to be in her orbit.



### Chapter 9

Alexis

At exactly eight p.m., Blake texts to say he's out front.

I drag my feet, of course. I can feel the flare-up of pain looming over me from a mile away, and crowded places are my definition of hell. There is also the issue of our near-kiss hanging between us, a thing we haven't spoken about since it happened. But I promised I would go with him if only to keep us in the game. So after the third honk, I force myself to leave my safe cocoon and face him.

"Hey," I say as I slide into the passenger seat. "Thanks for picking me up."

Blake twists in his seat to face me, his eyes dragging over me as his gaze slightly darkens. "Always. You look cute tonight, Sunshine."

"Cute?" I smirk. I put on my sluttiest outfit, though I suppose that's still tame compared to other girl's day clothes. A tight-fitting white dress that shows a lot—truly, a lot—of cleavage, heels that will make me regret having legs by the end of the night, and lightly patterned tights. Sure, most of it is covered by a long, knit cardigan, but still. Cute is not the word I would use.

"Would you prefer another adjective?" Blake raises a brow. "Ravishing, perhaps?"

I laugh. "You can use whatever words you want."

“About that,” Blake twists even further in his seat until he’s fully facing me, a position that cannot possibly be comfortable for someone his size. “Can you give me a rundown of things you’re okay with? Like, can I hold your hand, touch your arm? Maybe kiss your cheek if it gets to it?”

I take a moment to process his question, the words leaving his lips at quite the speed as if he’d been afraid to ask.

“You are supposed to be my boyfriend,” I say. “You can touch me wherever you want, call me whatever you want, as long as you warn me before you do something big.”

“I just—” Blake looks away for a moment, the conflict showing on his face. “I don’t want anything I do to cause you panic or fear because it makes you think of...him.”

Is that why he refused to kiss me last night? I can see the logic. Of course I do. And I can’t sit here and pretend such a thing hasn’t happened before; it’s what stopped me from dating in the first place. But I never told him that.

I take Blake’s hand, lacing our fingers together as one. His eyes dart up to meet mine and for a second my breath catches.

“You’re not him,” I say, not just for him but for me. “I promise I will tell you if something like that happens, but you can’t let the fear of it dictate your actions. And I can’t, either. It won’t always be smooth sailing, but...but we need to make this look real, no matter the cost.”

“Are you sure about this?” Blake asks, and the tenderness in his voice is so unlike anything I’m used to that my heart flutters at the sound. “It’s not too late. We can forget the whole thing right here and now.”

I shake my head. “Yes, I’m sure. I’m not taking your money. Maybe I need to look at this as something of a trial run, a fake relationship to prepare me for the real thing, you know? Get me ready to date again. And since you’re doing that for me, I want you to know that as long as you keep it way down on the down low, you’re welcome to sleep with whoever you wish.”

Blake holds my gaze with a scoff. “I haven’t cheated once in my life, and I’m not about to start now.”

“It’s not cheating.” I laugh. “You’re only mine during the day. Who you spend your nights with is none of my business.”

“No.”

I raise a brow. “No?”

“No,” Blake says again, even more firmly this time. “You said it yourself, we need to sell this relationship to win. And if you’re looking at what we’re doing as a trial run, then I’m going to give you the full experience. So no, I won’t be sleeping with anyone. And some nights, the two of us will have sleepovers so my teammates don’t get suspicious. You take the bed, I’ll take the floor.”

A muscle tenses in his jaw, those bright blue eyes dark and flighty as they hold mine. There is no convincing him of his plan, that much is clear. “You have thought a lot about this.”

“You have no idea.” He wipes a hand over his face, his eyes pressed closed for a moment before they fall back on me.

There is something in the look on his face that makes my heart flutter, and I bite my lip before I can do something stupid like trying to kiss him again. “Look, you

obviously know what you're doing, and I don't. Like, at all. So you take the lead, and I'll follow. And if you cross a line, I'll kick you in the nuts, and that will be that."

Blake's expression softens as he looks at me, his hand still in mine, his thumb tracing slow circles on my skin. "Sounds like a fair deal. Let's fall in love, Sunshine."

When we step into the house, a few buttons on Blake's shirt are undone and my hair is slightly disheveled.

I wish it happened naturally, but alas. It was a last-minute idea Blake had to kick-start the rumor mill, and judging by the looks of the drunk kids outside, it's already working.

"I'm going to put my arm around your waist," Blake whispers in my ear, and his fingers gently stroke along the width of my back before settling on my hip. In one fast movement he pulls me flush against him, my palm landing on the hard planes of his chest as I try to keep my balance.

Even without looking I know all eyes are on us. The quiet, rarely-seen sister of the captain of the hockey team, getting touchy and dirty with one of the hottest athletes on campus? Yeah, I would not believe it either.

"You okay?" Blake asks under his breath, and as my heart leaps from my chest I raise myself onto my toes and press a kiss to his jaw.

Blake stills beneath my lips and for a moment I think I've done something wrong, but as I pull away I find him smiling almost shyly, a hint of color on his cheeks.

"You are just full of surprises, aren't you?" he muses, and as a stray beam of light from a mirrorball catches his face I notice the bright purple lipstick staining his jaw.

“I think I left a mark,” I laugh. “Here, let me...”

I move my fingers to wipe off the lipstick but his hand closes over mine before I get the chance.

“Leave it,” Blake says. “Let them know I’m yours.”

And I want to ignore it, pretend they didn’t. But the words make my heart flutter just the same.

Miller’s party is held in the football team’s joint housing, an old Victorian building with a wraparound porch and turret. In its prime it must have been a gorgeous statement of opulence, but after a decade of housing rowdy college boys it is a far cry from beautiful. Most of the wallpaper has been scratched off, there is a mirrorball in the grand foyer and the hardwood floors are in desperate need of varnishing. I shudder at the thought of what the rest of the house must be like.

Though this isn’t an official part of the Cute Couples contest, a small crew armed with cameras and microphones has assembled to capture the scene. Blake was right, then, when he said not going would kill our ranking before the contest started. Whatever misconceptions I had about tonight, about easing into the ruse, I have to leave at the door. Because the presence of cameras means the game is on. It’s all or nothing from here on out.

I try not to dwell on it too much as Blake leads me through every room, shielding me from spilled drinks and clumsy guys built like skyscrapers. And while many jealous gazes are shot my way, I let them bounce right off me.

Though I stick to the shadows, Blake puts me right in the spotlight. From a silly dance in the living room to a friendly game of beer pong where he twirls me around with each shot, Blake knows exactly how to draw attention our way and keep it there.

I enjoy seeing him like this—happy, free in a way I can never quite find myself to be. That realization alone is enough for me to retreat into my shell, and as Blake’s winning streak continues, I excuse myself to cleanse my nostrils of the scent of cheap beer.

The bass from the music booms through the house like an earthquake, and the darkness paired with the crowds makes it hard to see where I’m going. I push through the bodies, following the soft breeze that sometimes rears its head, signaling an open door or window nearby. It’s only a matter of finding it.

“Alexis!”

I turn to find Levi lounging on a worn-out leather chair, my sister sitting on the ground at his feet. They are in what I assume to be a former den, the books on the bookshelves replaced by team photos and trophies. There is an untouched game of chess at the coffee table and a guy I don’t recognize scribbles on a large sheet of paper while others guess letters and take shots when they’re correct.

So, hangman with booze. The creativity of college students knows no bounds.

“Hey, guys. Having fun?”

“Oh yeah, I’m having an absolute blast . If you’re here to take me home, don’t bother. Levi has already taken it upon himself to make sure I don’t have a drop of alcohol.” My sister rolls her eyes in annoyance, though I can see the anxiety in her eyes.

“Well, yeah. You can’t exactly go into your driving test drunk, can you? Not twice, anyway.” I give her a pointed look, but my sister just shrugs.

“I thought it might make a difference.”

“And it did. You didn’t just fail, you were banned from the place,” Levi smirks. Alissa glares at him without a word. She’s been failing her driving tests for years, and even if she somehow passes the next one, I won’t be a passenger in her car without a gun to my head.

“Really, why are you here, though?” Alissa looks me up and down, no doubt spotting the dress I stole from her closet. We’re practically the same person, anyway, so what’s a little theft between sisters?

I open my mouth but before I can say a word a familiar voice bellows through the room, drowning out even the loudest music. “There’s my better half!”

Blake’s arms snake around my waist and he burrows his face in the crook of my neck. Am I dreaming, or are those kisses he’s pressing to my throat?

If I’m dreaming, never wake me up.

From the ground, Alissa is shaking her head with a knowing grin, but Levi doesn’t share her laughter. He looks almost angry as he takes us in, and that’s enough for me to tug at Blake’s sleeve to get him to stop.

The smell of beer on his breath almost takes me out, but it’s what’s behind him that makes my stomach tighten with dread. I grab Blake’s arm, pulling it tighter around me like a shield so Hudson can’t see me, can’t hurt me.

Blake vowed to protect me, but he did so sober. I have no idea what drunk Blake thinks or what he would do, or how much of this is even real. I have to trust that he will keep his word.

“Hey babe,” I say. “Winning streak over?”

A big, goofy grin spreads across Blake's cheeks as he shouts a little too loudly, "Never. With you in my arms, I'm a winner every damn day."

Even while drunk, Blake knows just what to say, even if the words are corny as hell. I know I shouldn't, but I laugh so hard at the sheer ridiculousness of it that tears crowd my eyes and I gasp for air.

"C'mere," Blake mumbles. His body engulfs me like a weighted blanket and then I'm lifted into the air, his hands firm on my ribcage as he spins us in place. My laughter is audible even over the loudest song of the night and I wonder what is happening to me, why my smiles and laughs appear so easily when it comes to him.

In my peripheral vision I see Hudson shaking his head, his face unreadable. But it's the camera crew behind him, their lenses pointed straight at us, that makes my heart hammer in my throat.

Guess we're doing this.

I cup Blake's face in my hands, still spinning as I bring my lips down to his skin. My lips barely brush his before traveling up to kiss his forehead—fine, I chickened out on kissing him. But couples kiss in other places, right?

Blake stops our spinning at once. His bright blue eyes are filled with wonder as he looks at me. He lowers me gently, inch by inch until my feet touch the ground, and as his fingers brush my cheek I can only hope he's about to show me what a real kiss looks like. I lean forward, my heart leaping from my chest as he?—

Dashes away. And he dared to jest about the thought of kissing him giving me a rash.

Before I can stop him he has disappeared into the crowd, emerging moments later on the original hardwood stairs. I don't waste a second before going after him.



The door closes just as I reach the pitch-dark landing and I push through the couples searching for a discreet place to have some fun, knocking on the door moments later.

“Go away.” Blake’s voice sounds strangled; not surprising, since he made the rather stupid decision to start spinning with that much to drink. No wonder it’s all coming back up again. “You don’t want to see this.”

I roll my eyes. Like I’ve never seen anyone throw up before. Hell, once you’ve had someone else’s vomit cover you, the whole thing loses its gross factor.

“I’m coming in.”

The weak light streaming in through the hallway banister illuminates his damp face as he shrieks away from the light, trying to hide himself from my sight. I slip into the small room, closing the door behind me and fidgeting with the lights. For a reason I don’t know but am grateful for, there’s a dim setting.

“Oh, honey.”

No one can hear us, but this isn’t about them. It’s about Blake, retching his guts out, still trying to shield me from the sight. My fingers trace circles on his back out of instinct—it’s something my mother likes to do, and I guess the habit has passed down to me.

Blake groans. An awful, guttural sound filled with suffering, and I start humming if only to make him less self-conscious about the noise he’s making. I’m not known to hold a tune, and it’s a far cry from the original, but in the end my cover of Here Comes The Sun seems to calm him a little.

“Keep going, please .”

I drag my fingers along his spine until I'm met with his soft brown curls, focusing on that instead of the aching in my knee from the hard tile. "Any requests? I suggest you stay far away from Celine Dion, lest you want to feel even worse."

He barely has time to shake his head, but I don't need an answer. I caught a glimpse of his playlists on the drive here, and they had enough in common for me to know exactly what he likes. And so, as softly as I can get away with while still being audible, I start singing I'm On Fire. If good ol' Bruce can't make him feel better, nothing will.

Normally I would never, ever sing in public, but Blake is in no shape to make fun of me. And if he tries? Well, let's just say I know the lyrics to My Heart Will Go On by heart.

Blake slumps against the wall and without a word his trembling hand finds my thigh for comfort. I stare at it in wonder. His hand, massive compared to mine, makes me look tiny despite being 5'11". Stranger still, he touched me without thinking, and I didn't feel a hint of fear. In fact, it feels almost natural to be touched by Blake and to touch him in return.

It's a good thing. It means we are comfortable with each other, at a deeper level. Like good friends. That will make it so much easier to trick everyone into thinking we're in love.

"That should not have worked." Blake lifts the hem of his navy blue shirt to wipe his face with a groan, though he makes no effort to hover above the toilet bowl. Progress. I wet a few sheets of toilet paper in place of a cloth and settle back down beside him, gently cleaning the sweat off his skin.

"You're right, it shouldn't have. Not even a little. But it did."

He rests his head against the cold tile with a smile and closes his eyes. In this moment of reprieve, I search my purse for the anti-nausea pills I know are hidden in there somewhere and stuff them into his palm.

“Take these, they’ll make you feel better. There’s no glass for water, but maybe if you?—”

Before I can finish my sentence he’s tossed the pills into his mouth and swallowed. I shudder at the sight, almost feeling the dryness of those pills going down my throat. “You raw-dog your pills? You’re such a weirdo.”

“You’re the one who followed me into the bathroom. You can’t judge a person for what they do here. It’s in the constitution.” His strong arms snake around my waist, pulling me closer before resting his forehead against my temple, his breath tickling my ear.

“You’re so soft.” He brushes his lips against my skin. “Always so fucking soft. Drives me insane.”

I laugh—drunk people say the strangest things. “It’s a peach-scented body lotion. Got it at a two-for-one sale.”

His breath tickles my skin as he sniffs his way to my throat, the tickling sensation making me laugh again. “Smells like god-damn heaven. Can I eat it?”

“Nope.”

“Can I eat you?” His face is barely an inch from mine, the look in his eyes revealing his every thought. His gaze flits to my lips, and if I’m lucky he won’t notice the wildfire on my cheeks.

“You—what?”

Blake brushes a loose lock from my face, allowing me to see the lust in his gaze when he says, “I’ve been dying to taste you since the moment I first saw you years ago. I can make you feel so fucking good, Alexis. You just have to let me.”

The low tone of his voice sends a wave of longing to the lowest part of my belly and I bite my lip to keep myself in check. I might be unable to bring myself to orgasm, but I have no doubt in my mind that Blake can get me there. I doubt it would even take any effort on his part; I’ve burned for him in secret for so long that seeing him naked might be my undoing, though I’d never deny myself the chance to be touched by him.

But this isn’t sober Blake talking. Sober Blake doesn’t even want to kiss me, let alone fuck me. If there’s one thing I know for sure is that drunk Blake is lying his cute butt off.

“Is that so?” I ask. “Because I’m thinking you’re full of it. Drunk Blake is saying things sober Blake doesn’t think about.”

A low chuckle leaves his throat, his lips brushing against my neck with an intoxicating gentleness. “Oh, trust me, Sunshine. I think about you plenty.”

He kisses my neck. “In bed.”

“In the kitchen.” His tongue traces an agonizing pattern over the curl of my ear. Another kiss, on my temple this time, his voice but a whisper in my ear. “In the shower.”

Heat explodes in my veins, my body aflame with a hunger I’ve rarely felt. I gasp as his lips find my collarbone, his tongue deliciously close to my sensitive nipples, but come to my senses before his lips reach mine.

“Blake,” I whisper as I gently push him off me. “Stop. You’re drunk.”

Something changes in his gaze as he blinks, his eyes taking on a peacefulness I don’t often see. His hand finds mine, our fingers laced together as he leans his head on my shoulder. “Thank you, Alexis.”

I press a kiss on the back of his palm. I might never be able to kiss Blake or sleep with him, no matter how badly I may want to. But Blake doesn’t seem to care about any of that—he treats me the same as before he found out, still flirting and testing my boundaries in the way only he can.

And so, as my siblings half-carry Blake back to the car and he glances over his shoulder at me, all I can do is smile.

Because in some way, however small and short-lived, we had a moment no one can take away.

### Chapter 10

Blake

This is not my dorm.

The pillowcase is too soft, not to mention it smells heavenly like Alexis's signature pomegranate shampoo. There is no stomping of inconsiderate feet on the stairs, but a sweet voice humming some Taylor Swift song, the sound nearly luring me back to sleep.

Instead, I force my eyes to open.

I'm in Alexis's living room, sprawled out like a starfish on that horrendous pink couch. A broad beam of sunlight drifts through a crack in the curtains to fall onto the cracked kitchen floor, illuminating her hair like it was spun gold.

Her pajamas are old and saggy, the shirt barely grazing her hip bones, the pink-spotted pants sagging down to reveal the slightest hint of her underwear. I force myself to look away before this has a chance to turn things more awkward. I told her I would never force anything on her, and that she could trust me. If I'm lying here with a massive hard-on while staring straight at her, it would go against everything I've been trying to do.

I'm not afraid to admit that Alexis Moore is mind bogglingly attractive to me, nor am I afraid to tell her that. But there is a time and a place for everything, and when it comes to the physical stuff, she sets the pace. So I turn, making a show of stretching

and yawning so I don't startle her when she turns around and finds me awake.

She glances over her shoulder with a smile that wakes me in an instant. "On a scale of one through ten, how do you feel?"

"Gotta be at least a seven, now that I see you." I shoot her a wink, and god does it feel good. Sure, my head is killing me and there's a fifty-fifty chance I'll throw up, but Alexis being the first thing I see when I wake adds at least six points. Maybe seven, if she smiles at me again.

"You're so weird," she says, and though her back is turned towards me I can hear the smile in her voice. "Do you remember anything from last night?"

A crease forms between my eyebrows as I sit up, my hand flying to my forehead as if it could take away the sharp pain. I have no proof, but I swear I hear her laugh at me.

I hope she does it again.

Last night was a haze of cheap beer and spinning rooms. I remember getting a little carried away in beer pong, a few puck bunnies fighting for my attention, and Alexis kissing my forehead after I spun her around.

But I also remember an angel sitting with me while I puked my guts out, showing me real, no-strings-attached affection for what may very well be the first time in my life. Between her calming touch and terrible yet endearing singing voice, last night still goes down as one of the best I've had in years.

Which is why I'm sure I did something stupid.

"Bits and pieces," I wipe a hand across my face. Only now do I notice the glass of water and ibuprofen sitting on the coffee table. An angel.

“Hmm,” Alexis leans against the kitchen counter, her slender fingers curled around a mug. “What about the part where you said you wanted to eat me out?”

I almost choke on my water. “I did what?”

“Oh, yes. Then I said you were full of it, and you were like—” She drops her voice to mimic mine, bringing a smile to my face despite the horror. “— trust me, Sunshine, I think about you plenty . And then you tried to kiss me a bunch.”

Fuck . I did do that. In a spur of alcohol-induced stupidity, I shed all common sense and came on to her. The strange thing is that neither then nor now does she seem to mind. If she did, she wouldn’t be joking about it, right? My heart skips a beat at the thought. Maybe I have a shot with her after all.

I rise, approaching in long, slow strides, my heart pounding louder than my head until there’s only a single step between us. “Maybe if you show me where I kissed you, it’ll jog my memory?”

Alexis smiles, and by god does the sight of it tug at my heart. I watch breathless as she draws in closer, her hand reaching out to touch my chest, that golden hair tickling my nose. Pomegranate shampoo curls around my nostrils and I close my eyes as her breath tickles my ear, the laugh rolling from her lips filling me with air. “I told you you were full of shit.”

My hand moves to the small of her back, inching her against me. “No, I’m not. The things I want to do to you...”

It is pure torture, having her this close, and yet it’s all I have ever wanted. Her skin, warm beneath my fingertips, calls to the part of me that swore off relationships in my teens to declare him an idiot. Her ass is tantalizingly within reach, but not mine to touch. Yet . But it’s her eyes, big and almost blue in the morning light, that hold me



hostage.

“What’s stopping you?” Her voice is barely louder than a whisper, but I hear every word she says—and doesn’t say. “Why not push me against the wall and take me?”

The mental image of me doing exactly that flashes before my eyes and I can’t help but grin. “Your brother would kill me if I did.”

Her fingers travel along the hard planes of my chest, her eyes following the movement with surprising interest. Selfishly, I hope she feels the hard muscle underneath. That she imagines what my chest would look like bare, how it would feel pressed up against hers. That it turns her on the way she turns me on.

“I thought you weren’t afraid of anyone?”

“I’m not. But I am afraid of fucking this up,” I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, my hand lingering on her cheek, savoring the feeling of having her in my arms. Mine. “If I hurt you, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

I hold her gaze. What I wouldn’t give to kiss her right now, hard and frenzied and wanting, and show her exactly how I feel about her. Better yet, hoist her up onto the counter to make her feel it, just like she’s asking of me now, and make her come again and again with my name on those pretty lips.

All air leaves my lungs as her eyes move to my lips. “Who says I’m going to get hurt? I know what this is. I know that it’s over as soon as we’ve won.”

And it is a stupid, stupid move, but I’m a stupid boy. I lean in even closer, our foreheads pressed together, my eyes on hers so she can see exactly how serious I am as I whisper, “Sunshine, when I get my way with you, neither of us will want this to stop.”

### Chapter 11

Alexis

If someone asked me what the epitome of romance was, you would never find me saying dance.

Books and movies do a great job of romanticizing the shit out of it, with grand ballrooms, beautiful dresses and stares filled with longing and desire. But out here in the real world, dancing means cramped studios, buckets of sweat, and too many people in your personal space.

Which is why, when I heard that our first official date for the contest was a salsa class, I wanted to fake an illness at once.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that Blake had to drag me into the car.

He had to drop by the house first to change, and though I've been at their place dozens of times over the years this time felt different. Not just because Rafael kept a shit-eating grin on his face when we walked in or because they kept telling me where Blake's room was and that I shouldn't be afraid to go with him. But because seeing me and Blake together seems to have shifted his teammates' idea of me. No longer am I Levi's quiet sister, easy to forget, boring to flirt with. Now, I'm Blake's girlfriend. Off-limits. Kind of cool, in her own way. Or she must be if Blake's willing to put up with her.

We almost kissed this morning— again —and like the other night we kind of brushed

over it and went on with our day, though the tension is still there simmering underneath every little touch, every stolen glance. And there have been a lot of those.

Now here we are, in a ballet studio across town, with massive windows on one side and a wall of mirrors on the other. The film crew is larger than I expected, with massive cameras and boom mics scattered across the cramped studio, while we and two dozen other couples are packed like sardines on the dance floor.

How wonderful.

At least I have Blake here with me, whose absentminded touches are strangely comforting. Though after this morning, it's hard to know where we stand. He hinted at wanting something more, and though I'd be hard-pressed to admit it out loud the thought has crossed my mind, too. But I can't think about that now.

Not when I have to stay focused on not stepping on anyone's toes. Literally.

The girl who took our sign-ups, Paris, skips to the front of the room after our warm-up and takes her place standing on a chair. She's even smaller than my mother, with glossy blond hair and bold makeup that I'm sure makes her stand out in every room. "Hello everyone! You might have noticed our new friends—it's because we have been keeping a little secret from you guys. We have partnered with a local television channel to broadcast this competition! Isn't that exciting?"

It's clear Paris expected us to be elated, but no one cheers. In fact, it's groans and protests that dominate the room. No one signed up to be on actual television.

Our reaction flusters Paris, as she stammers. "Well, we like it, anyway. Nevertheless, this fun opportunity comes with some rule changes, so listen up!"

Another girl, slightly taller and with big, round glasses, joins Paris on a chair and

clutches a list. Her voice is softer, slightly shaking, as if it takes everything in her might to get the words out. “Each week, two couples will be eligible for elimination, voted on by our viewers. Any proof of fraudulent behavior means instant disqualification. Voting is possible only through our website and ends one week after each date, with the eliminated couples being sought out on campus for a final interview. And we’re on TV now, so let’s keep things PG!”

I roll my eyes, though I feel a knot form in my stomach. This stupid announcement has raised the stakes tenfold.

We can’t falter, not for a moment.

It helps a little that we’re not the only fakes in the room. A few rows down are two of Alissa’s friends, who I know don’t play for the other’s team, and to the other side of the room there’s a couple who can’t even look at each other. If we’re more believable than them, we might survive the first round at least.

Only now do I notice the crew has changed. There’s the students, sure, but they hover around the new cameramen, hoping to pick up a thing or two. The new guys are older, more burly, and almost uncaring as they dart around the room to pick up shots of us. Years of reality TV has taught me that those who get the most airtime often win the competition, so whatever we do, we have to be interesting enough to catch their attention.

Paris and her friend have left to join the others to the side, with our instructors taking their place. They can’t be older than forty, with muscles to rival even Blake’s. Dancing is no joke. They jump right into it, and though I try to copy their moves I fail miserably. Damn those mirrors. Now I’m going to look like an idiot!

Blake catches my eye and smiles, leaning in until his breath tickles my ear. “Remember, we’re madly in love, so you can touch everything your heart desires.”

There is an emphasis on the word everything that is hard to miss, and the knowing smile on his face sends a shiver of yearning down my spine. My cheeks burn as I give him a playful shove, and I try to ignore my heart skipping a beat at the touch of his toned chest. “Don’t make promises you don’t intend to keep, Taylor.”

A crease forms between Blake’s brows as he scans my face. “Is this about earlier?”

“It might be.”

His fingers travel up to the base of my spine and in one smooth movement he pulls me against him, his body rock hard against mine as he searches my eyes.

“If you’re worried I don’t find you attractive, you’re wasting your energy.” His hand closes over mine, gently gliding it over his chest until it rests over his heart. “Can you feel my heart, Alexis? Do you feel it beating?”

I nod.

“I didn’t. Not until I saw you all those years ago, when you laughed at me for the first time. I’m not sure what it is we have, but I know that I’ve never felt like this before. So I’m not going to kiss you or sleep with you, no matter how badly I want to. Not until you are one hundred percent sure, and you feel completely safe and adored by me.”

Blake’s heart hammers underneath my palm, and though I’m waiting for him to take it all back I know he won’t. He isn’t lying. I know that. But I can’t make sense of it, either.

“Are you saying I brought the great Blake Taylor to his knees?” I arch a brow, hoping he hears the quiet teasing in my voice.

His lips tug into a smirk. “You can have me on my knees whenever you want. When the time is right.”

“Well, aren’t you a gentleman?”

“Do you have to sound so disappointed?” Blake says. His hand glides down my thigh, lifting it to his hip before dipping me backward, our bodies pressed close for a few glorious moments.

“That depends. Do I have a reason to be disappointed? Or are you saving me from a let-down?”

A thunderous laugh rips from Blake’s chest and I shriek as the floor falls from beneath my feet, his hands holding firm onto my ribcage. His face is dangerously close to my core, and I can’t help but think about forcing his hand by throwing my leg over his shoulder and scooting closer until he forgets all about his adorably sweet hangups.

Through the mirror, I can see all the eyes in the room turn to us. Blake doesn’t put me down.

“What are you doing?” I whisper. “Put me down.”

“No. You’re in air jail until you apologize for wounding my ego. Besides, if you’re so afraid of being let down, you better get used to being up there,” Blake says calmly, and it’s hard to miss the self-satisfaction in his voice.

Bastard. Smug, kindhearted bastard.

“Fine. You can’t keep this up, anyway. At some point I’ll get too heavy to lift and you’ll have to put me down.” Finally all that extra padding has a purpose. I knew

those extra snacks were worth it.

“Not happening. I work out six days a week, Sunshine. You weigh nothing to me.” I shriek as he maneuvers me down and slings me over his shoulder.

I hit his back with balled fists, though my laughter sabotages my tone as I say, “Put me down!”

“Never.” His hand presses into my ass to keep me in place. Am I dreaming, or did he just kiss my hip?

The cameras are on the two of us. I can see them all around. So as Blake carries me to the other side of the studio, away from the gazes of our competition and the class we knew I’d hate, I wait until I’m sure there’s a camera on me and squeeze Blake’s butt.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 12

Blake

It's a good thing hockey is a violent sport, because I've got a lot of pent-up frustration to work out.

Mostly at myself, for not being able to focus when I need to and thus barely getting a passing grade for a topic I know by heart, and for still not having called the only mother figure I've ever had so we can catch up.

There's also the anger at my mother. She texted me this morning, the first I've heard from her in months. She was never much of a maternal figure, but I don't think I'm wrong for wishing she cared about me enough to warrant a text longer than Hockey good?

Finally, and perhaps most pressingly, there is the sexual frustration of pretending to date the hottest woman on the planet and not being able to touch her. When she squeezed my ass in that salsa class I felt it through my entire body, like a fiery bliss I'd never felt before. Even now, as she sits in the first row with Alissa, bundled up from head to toe in Brookside University merch and my jersey— fuck , that jersey is my undoing—it's taking everything I have not to take her into a broom closet and prove I'm hers. It's mortifying, the effect she has on me without even trying.

Her feet are propped up against the boards, a textbook clutched in her gloved hands. I know she's here for my benefit only; she would much rather be in her dorm, nice and warm and away from the crowd. I hadn't asked her to come, either, having decided to



give her some space after our recent flirtations almost turned into something more. She just came, jersey and all, a cute little sign at her feet that says G o Blakey-bear!

Yeah. I'm never living that one down.

Brookside's colors are black and gold, which is a good thing, as by the end of the second period, I'm practically dripping blood.

The moment the buzzer goes I skate over to where Alexis and Alissa sit near the sin bin and put my hands against the plexiglass, waiting for her to do the same.

"Oh my god, Blake!" she gasps. "Are you okay? Shouldn't you be with a doctor? Do we need to take you to a hospital?"

Oh, right. Sometimes I forget what we must look like to people who don't follow the sport, all that blood and sweat and violence. What can I say? I like to play rough.

I shoot her a wink. "No worries, Sunshine. Most of this blood isn't even mine."

Her face relaxes only slightly, allowing me to really take her in. Alexis looks pale, those big eyes red with fatigue, her hands shaking ever so slightly—she's exhausted. She shouldn't be here. She should be at home, in bed, getting the rest she needs. Why isn't she telling me to fuck off and leaving? Why does she stay when it only causes her harm?

Alexis angles her head, shaking me from my thoughts. "Promise?"

"I promise." I press a kiss to her palm through the glass, missing her warmth. My body aches with abuse and all I want is to feel her in my arms, to get even a whisper of a kiss from those soft lips. But those things aren't mine to wish for. Not really. "Why don't you go home and get some sleep? I'll text you when I get home to prove

I'm in one piece."

Despite her exhaustion, a mischievous smile creeps onto Alexis' lips. "No way. Not until you score the winning goal and dedicate it to me."

I grin at her as Levi grabs me by the collar to pull me back to where the team has gathered, butterflies wreaking havoc in my stomach. She might not be truly mine, but I don't care. Because she's just given me permission to claim her, mark her as mine.

And so, as Levi pulls me further and further away from her, I press my fingers together to form a heart meant just for her.

Now all I need is to score and seal the deal. Challenge accepted.

### Chapter 13

Alexis

The arena was cold and loud, making it impossible to fall asleep right away despite my exhaustion. To help wind down, I press play on one of my favorite shows and put on a face mask while I wait for my tea. Lottie, my best friend aside from Alissa, isn't picking up her phone. Which sucks, as I haven't talked to her in a few weeks due to our conflicting schedules. I just text her to call me when she can.

A click, a flash, and the bubbling noise stops. Embers dance over the counter top, jumping from the electric kettle. I rush to pull the plug from the socket, but most of the damage has already been done. Shit. That's on me for buying a cheap one, I guess, but even the cheap one I could barely afford; I definitely can't replace it right now. Guess there will be no cherry tea in my future.

I'm halfway through an episode of Reign when my phone dings twice. I wave it off, figuring it's spam, but when I unlock my phone to check the time a very shirtless Blake fills my screen.

I bite my lip as I stare at it, taking in all that muscle and bulging veins, right down to the very sculpted V line way down lo—wait, is he even wearing pants?

Blake

Proof I'm unharmed.

Unharmd? You're covered in bruises!

Semantics.

Btw you should set that picture as your lock screen.

You know, for the contest.

Yeah, right. You just want me to stare at your abs all day, don't you?

I did get them just for you.

Might be nice to appreciate them every once in a while, Sunshine.

Why don't you come over here and make me?

Say the word and I'll come running.

My gaze drifts back to his photo and I curse him under my breath as I feel the warmth rush through my lower belly. Blake Taylor knows exactly how to get me riled up, that's for sure. I bet he wants me to touch myself to his image, imagine him here with me until I can't help but call him to join me.

Two can play that game, though. If he gets off on the thought of me all hot and bothered, I'll kill his boner.

Alexis sent a limited-viewing photo

I hope you like pink, sparkly face masks, Taylor.

Blake took a screenshot.

Thanks for the new lock screen, Sunshine. You look adorable3

WAIT NO

DON'T

DELETE THAT

Come over and make me.

You'd like that, wouldn't you?

You have no idea.

You're killing me here, Alexis.

Then perish ;)

Goodnight, Blakey-bear

Sweet dreams, Sunshine.

I throw my phone on the textbook at the foot of the bed before screaming into my pillow. This was supposed to be easy. A simple ruse to get me some money and make him captain. All this teasing, the way he turns me on...none of it is part of the deal.

He's my brother's friend, a great hockey player. He should be staying as far away from me as possible, with a cheerleader or two hanging off those muscled biceps. What's he doing talking to me this way, like I'm worth his time?

Snatching my phone from where it lays on the textbook I burrow into the covers,

staring at his last text. Three little words, completely innocent and void of substantial weight, yet they light my body aflame in a cozy warmth.

Blake isn't mine. I know that. But as I slip away into sleep, I still imagine him next to me, those strong arms protecting me against the night. And I feel less alone.

### Chapter 14

Alexis

Stupid Blake, leaving me all hot and bothered like that. Of course the fucker dominated my sleep, causing me to wake up hornier than I've ever been. Does it help that I did put that photo of him as my lock screen? Absolutely fucking not.

I bet he slept like a baby, the full eight hours and then some.

You know what? Fuck it. It's not like he's gonna find out, and maybe it'll help me keep myself in check. It's sure to help with my pain, relaxing the muscles that are always tense, so really it's a win-win. I let my fingers stray down to my sensitive spot, getting myself worked up enough to shed nearly all my clothes in search of a deeper pleasure, striking up a rhythm that might?—

The door swings open with a bang .

A shriek leaves my lips and I hike the blanket over my bare chest. Blake's eyes widen as he stops in his tracks, a grin spreading across his face. "Enjoying yourself, Sunshine?"

"What are you doing here?" I say, and it almost comes out as a yell.

He leans against the doorway, his gaze slowly traveling down the outline of my body. "Alissa told me to wake you and that the door was open. I was going to see if you wanted to hang out before our date, but now I'm simply enjoying the view. Please,

don't let me stop you."

"You're such a perv, Taylor." I throw my head back with a sigh as I sit up straighter, trying to hide my flushed chest. Does he know it's him that got me all hot and bothered? "Besides, the show is over. It wouldn't even have a satisfying ending, if you catch my drift."

He arches a brow. "Edging kink? Hot ."

I don't mean to, but the absurdity of this situation makes me laugh. "I wish. It's just—never mind. You don't care."

"I do," he says quietly. "I do care, Alexis. Tell me?"

I bite my lip. Am I really about to tell Blake Taylor about my sexual troubles? I bet if I do, he'll never let it go. But the stories about him...they make it clear he knows how to get the job done. And I desperately need help.

"I can't come," I say, the words tumbling from my lips before I can let myself chicken out. "Whenever I touch myself I feel good, but I never really make it to the finale. I've never..."

Blake leans forward ever so slightly, a puzzled look on his face. "You've never had an orgasm? Not even with a partner?"

Heat rushes to my cheeks as I wish for the ground to open up and swallow me whole. "There's never been a partner. Not aside from..."

"Oh." A moment passes in deathly, excruciating silence, the only sound the quiet hum of electricity in the walls. "Do you want to?"



I meet Blake's gaze, and the cold determination in those gorgeous blue eyes sends a wave of anticipation through my lower belly. He steps forward at my nod, slow enough that I can stop him at any moment, until he's right at my side.

"Do you trust me?" he asks, and with a start, I realize that I barely have to think about it. Not only that I trust he can get me off—though, that too. No doubt about that. No, the surprise lies in the realization that Blake is the only guy aside from my family whom I've allowed to even touch me in almost a year, and he is the only one I trust to give me a safe and positive sexual experience.

So without a shadow of a doubt, I say, "I do."

"Good." His palm straddles my inner thigh through the sheet, and though I trust him my muscles stiffen. His fingers travel up to my cheek, pulling me into a slow and gentle kiss. "Just relax. It's only me."

I rake my fingers through his hair as he deepens the kiss, focusing on his scent and the surprising gentleness in his touch as his fingers travel down to tease my clit over the layers of fabric.

After it all went down I never believed I could handle being touched like this again, with even a kiss being too big a mountain to climb. But now, with Blake, it seems like that mountain is nothing but a small bump. Kissing Blake is like a fresh layer of snow that makes the world go quiet, like all the noise and pain that plagues me 24/7 just melts away.

He pulls away, and I immediately miss the quiet reassurance of his lips on mine.

"Not quite how I imagined our first kiss, but I'm not complaining." He grins, his lips brushing mine once more before traveling to my ear, our cheeks pressed together as his breath tickles my ear. "Tell me what you want."

“Please make me come,” I breathe. “Make me one of the girls on your roster, Blake. Make me yours .”

His eyes are dark with lust as he slowly lowers the sheet off my body, his fingers brushing my skin as I’m exposed to him bare. He pauses, taking in every inch of my skin, his signature grin fading as awe takes its place, leaving him uttering curses under his breath.

Something about that look gives me the confidence to spread my legs a little wider and lift my chest to put my breasts on full display. His tongue juts out to lick his lips as his knuckles trace the sides of my hips, reaching the soft of my belly with a slight tickle that makes me laugh.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous, Alexis,” Blake says. “Are you sure about this? It’s not too late to back out.”

I nod, bunching his shirt in my fist and pulling him closer. He gets the hint with a chuckle, his lips finding my neck within seconds, leaving a trail down to the hollow of my throat.

My fingers stray down again, finding their place in the warmth of my folds. A heaviness settles over them and at once they’re pulled away, making me whimper with the loss.

“Not yet,” Blake says between kisses. “Need to get you nice and ready first.”

His hands find my breasts, palming them and rolling my nipples between his thumb and index fingers. A moan escapes my lips and he smirks at the sound, continuing the torture until I’m aching and begging for his cock, my body writhing underneath his touch. He lifts his hand and brings it down fast, slapping my sensitive skin. I gasp, moaning with pleasure.

He does it again, urged on by my moaning, but as I open my legs wider he steps away, rounding the bed to sit on the chair by the closet.

Blake rolls up the sleeves of his maroon shirt, the veins on his muscular arms visible even from the bed. God, he's too handsome for his own good. "Touch yourself for me."

I prop myself up on my elbows to look at him, my breasts jiggling with the movement, feeling pleased when the sight has him biting his lip. "I thought you were going to help me?"

"I'm not touching you until those pretty panties are soaked all the way through." He leans back in his chair, one hand stroking the ever-growing bulge in his pants. I shiver at the sight of it, imagining the feel of his cock inside of me. The thought alone has my fingers stray down my stomach and across the fabric of my panties, dragging a slow finger through my folds. Blake watches my fingers like a hawk, every pinch, every circling motion urged on by his darkening gaze. Can he tell that I'm turned on by him alone? That the thought of his body, his mere presence, makes me more aroused than I'd ever been?

Blake groans as the fabric gets wetter and wetter, soft moans leaving my lips. I increase my speed, hoping to find that sweet release. It doesn't come.

A strangled sound leaves my lips and I move my hips to face him, opening my legs wider as I whimper, "Please."

He rises, walking over in long strides and halting at the foot of the bed, pulling my legs so I'm closer to the edge.

"Look at you, all nice and wet for me," he says, his voice deeper than I've ever heard it. The way his cock strains against his zipper has to be painful, yet he only has eyes

for one thing, licking his lips like he has a craving only my body can satisfy.

“Blake,” I growl in warning. If I wanted teasing, I wouldn’t have asked for his help.

A hungry smile flashes on his face as he digs his fingers into my hips and pulls me right to the edge of the bed, leaning over me to suck on the sensitive skin at my nape. I breathe out any anxiety I have left as his lips work my skin, though my body tenses at the feel of his fingers spreading my folds.

“Don’t think about anything other than my touch,” Blake whispers. “Let your body take control.”

He circles my clit with his thumb. “You’ve made quite a mess for me, Sunshine. Lucky for us, I am very good at cleaning.”

He removes his hand from my folds, hooking his thumbs under the sides of my panties before yanking it down my legs. My breath hitches as the cold air hits my soaked pussy. Blake drops to his knees, his hands gently moving across my inner thighs while he bites his lip.

I reach out my hand, touching his cheek. Surprise passes through his gaze as he looks at it, like he hadn’t expected the gesture at all.

His fingers travel up my thighs to dig into my hips, inching me even closer to his mouth.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he mutters, holding my gaze. His eyes are filled with warmth, and though lust swirls thick in his gaze I know he won’t betray me.

Slowly, I guide his head down.

I fist his hair as his tongue circles my clit, my hips pushing into his face in hopes of more contact. More, more, more. The word echoes through my mind as Blake works my clit, earning the legends girls spread about him and more.

I throw back my head as his finger enters me, lazily pumping in and out until I beg for more.

“Look at my good girl, craving my fingers,” Blake says, his face shining with my slick. “If I knew this was on the agenda for today, I would’ve brought some toys for you to play with.”

“Like a vibrator?” I say, and the thought sends another shiver through my body. I’ve fantasized a lot about wearing a vibrator in public, being dependent on the whims of another—it’s a big turn-on for me.

“Vibrators, dildos. Anything you want.” He presses his lips to my inner thigh, sucking and kissing a trail up to my throbbing core. He’s gotten me closer than I’ve ever been, and I find myself restless, itching to grab him by the hair and guide him back to where he belongs. But a part of me enjoys the anguish, the quiet teasing of his touch anywhere but where I want it.

Maybe I do have an edging kink after all.

I whimper as I move my hips to get his mouth back on my clit but his fingers dig into my ass, holding me in place.

“So impatient,” Blake says with a shake of his head, that hungry smile only growing. “You said to make you mine, so I’m marking you accordingly. Every time you see these marks, I want you to think of me.”

I moan as his teeth graze my sensitive skin, following the agonizing path he’d set out

on. Only when he finally returns to my core, he presses a slow, sucking kiss to my clit before starting anew on the other side.

I groan in frustration, the need starting to ache, and finally I can't take it anymore. I grip his face with both hands and guide it to my folds, thrusting my clit into his mouth. His fingers dig deeper into my ass, his teeth raking over my sensitive bud in retaliation. I scream, and as I clasp my hand over my mouth I find myself glad we're home alone.

"Come on, beautiful. Let the neighbors learn my name."

He teases my hole for a second longer before entering with two fingers, drawing a gasp from my lips. I rake my fingers through his soft brown curls, letting myself get lost in the expert movement of his tongue and the thrilling sensations of his experienced fingers. I moan as my back arches in pleasure and my toes curl, urging him to go even faster until I finally clench around his fingers in a wave of unparalleled pleasure, a sea of stars blocking the world from view.

I came. Finally, after years of attempts and irritation, I'd done it. And with someone. Someone who, judging by the tightness of his pants, was extremely turned on by my body.

Blake works me through my orgasm, and as it weans, he doesn't slow.

I moan in a pleasure that's even more intense than before. "Blake, I—"

He groans, cutting me off. His voice strained and low, he says, "All these years of waiting, I want you to come again. I know you've got it in you."

He spreads my legs, which are pressed against his head in the wake of my orgasm, and as his fingers curl inside me the pleasure builds quickly, barreling me towards my

second orgasm.

I scream as I come undone, my hands in his hair, his name on my lips. He extracts his fingers, my body immediately feeling the loss, and cold rushes in as he lifts himself off my throbbing clit.

“It’s hard to tear yourself off a good meal,” he whispers in my ear. “And my gorgeous girl, you’re the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted.”

I laugh, still high on pleasure, and press a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, for your help.”

“I’m always happy to show you a good time,” Blake winks, and I roll my eyes, making him laugh.

“Want me to take care of this for you?” I palm the bulge threatening to burst from his jeans, earning a pained groan.

“Better not. It’s taking everything in my power not to fuck you as-is.”

I lick my lips. “Why hold back?”

“Your real, positive first time should be more special than a random afternoon-fuck. You deserve better.” He presses a kiss to the top of my sweaty forehead. “Go clean up. We have to leave soon.”

The front door slams shut, and I can only hope Blake is decent.

I can’t believe I did this . Blake is my brother’s friend, my fake boyfriend. I set out to have a quiet year, but I couldn’t have made a bigger mess if I tried.

The strange part is that I don't regret it. Not even a little. Sure, this might complicate my relationship with Blake, but it also might not. We've always had this thing between us, a spark I desperately tried to ignore despite his attempts to talk to me all those years. And when we agreed to do this...I think this was a long time coming.

Besides, he not only got me off—twice—but he made me feel safe and desired and didn't downplay his arousal. Sure, he declined a quick fuck, but his reasoning was so sweet I can't be mad at him for it. In fact, it only underscored the fact that I can trust him, that he isn't like Hudson.

So I can choose to let it go, pretend this encounter didn't light a fire for something more. Or I can take a leap and open myself up to him completely.

I'm not ready for a big talk, though, so I decide to embrace Blake's signature language: flirting.

I step into the living room wearing the tightest sports leggings known to man along with a sports bra, and a long, knit sweater clutched in my hand. Blake's eyes are on me the moment I open my bedroom door, and they follow me as I cross to where he's sitting on the couch. I put my phone on the coffee table, putting a little arch in my back and sticking out my ass so he has no choice but to look at it, though I know he would have done so anyway.

"You are killing me. What are you trying to do, seduce me for real?" Blake's voice is low and raspy, and I don't need to see his face to know what's going through his mind. Satisfied, I straighten my back to look at him.

"You like them? They're push up," I say, running a hand over my ass. "But I think what's really helping is the fact that I'm not wearing anything underneath."

A pained groan leaves Blake's lips and he hides his face in his hands, the effect of my



outfit starting to show in his jeans. “You are impossible .”

“And such a liar, too. I can see the outline of your underwear clear as day,” Alissa laughs from the dining table, a pile of textbooks and notebooks spread out in front of her.

I smirk as Blake’s eyes shoot up at me . “You little minx, getting me all worked up for nothing!”

“That sounds like a you problem,” I laugh, and put on my sweater. “Come on, we better hurry if we want to get to the aquarium on time.”

I dodge my sister’s suspicious look as I breeze to the door to grab my coat and handbag, relieved to find Blake carrying my phone.

His eyes rake over my body once more, the hunger in his gaze growing, and I smile.

Let the games begin.

### Chapter 15

Blake

The taste of her on my tongue is driving me wild.

I try to play it cool, act like nothing happened between us, but all I want to do is get my hands on her and keep everyone else away. It doesn't help that she's wearing those leggings, or the fact she knows damn well the effect she has on me.

Because Alexis is acting differently, too. More confident, playful, flirty. She no longer stills at my touch but seeks it out. Even her smile is different—calmer, more present. Like I've managed to smash those walls she hides behind and she finally trusts me to see her.

Which makes it all that more important that I don't fuck it up now.

The aquarium is crawling with cameras and boom mics. The crew is nice enough, though they don't talk much—they are here on a job, after all, and this whole thing is supposed to be about us. I wish they all went away. My mind is still reeling from this morning's events, my only anchor to this world the feeling of Alexis's hand in mine. The last thing I need is for the cameras to complicate things more, especially now that we are on such a delicate crossroads.

Alexis trusted me with her body, which I know couldn't have been easy. But while the taste and feel of her is almost addictive, it's her heart I'm after. Would she give me a chance, if I asked? Or have I fucked up any chance of that when I invited other

girls into my bed?

I'm not a relationship guy, my reputation makes that clear. But that's mostly because relationships are built on trust and emotional intimacy, and I've never really learned how to establish that. Yet this...this beautiful, delicate thing we have together feels so damn close. If Alexis could look into my mind, would she even stay? Or would she run and abandon me like everyone else?

Even now, as she's leaning against my chest staring at the fish and there's a dozen cameras around, I feel the urge to ask her where we stand. If I'm deluded to think there might be something between us. If she could ever see herself fall for someone like me. Questions that are decidedly unfit for a couple madly in love. But the silence is fueling my spiral, and I need her voice to calm me down.

"Did you know fish can drown?" I ask as we sit down on one of the benches in the shark tunnel. We underestimated the size of the aquarium, so we've been taking frequent breaks to keep Alexis from flaring up. I still don't know what that means, but I get the feeling this isn't the time to ask.

Alexis looks at me quizzically. "You're kidding?"

"Not at all. If there's not enough oxygen in the water, they drown just like a human would. Weird to think about, isn't it?" I ask, and pass her one of the sandwiches I'd packed for us.

When I asked Levi about her favorite kind of sandwich, he acted like I was asking for nuclear launch codes or something. I knew he was going to be weird about Alexis and me hanging out—he's her older brother, after all—but I hadn't expected him to freak out over tiny stuff like her favorite lunch foods. When he set us up, he warned me to behave, but had he expected I wouldn't give a fuck at all? That I wouldn't check with her siblings on how I can improve her day?

Sure, I can step back and see how we are veering off from the fake part of our agreement, and I do admit my reputation precedes me. I guess I just hoped he knew me better than that.

A smile pulls at Alexis's lips. "I think the weirdest part is that you know that."

"I know a lot of fun, useless facts," I say. "Like how the oldest fish hook ever found is over forty-two thousand years old, or how koi can live for hundreds of years."

"You're such a nerd," Alexis laughs, but unlike anyone who has ever called me that, she says it with such clear and undeniable affection that it spreads a warmth through my body, a sensation so rare it takes me a moment to place it.

A ray of light catches her eye, the soft blue light bringing out the pure silver in them. Her freckles are more noticeable now, like a tiny constellation on her cheeks. I've always believed she was a universe wrapped in skin; I guess this is the proof I've been searching for.

She catches me staring at her but I hold her gaze, refusing to back down. I want—no, I need her to know exactly how beautiful she is.

"You're missing the fish," she whispers with a laugh. Fuck, I love that laugh. "You're a surprisingly good actor, though. That weird look in your eyes is very convincing."

With cameras this close, we should not be saying any of this. I glance around to find them focused on other couples—a small relief, but too close for comfort nonetheless.

The words are out before I can stop them. "Who says I'm acting?"

"You don't even know me." Her eyes snake up to meet mine, giving me that pointed look I find strangely addicting.

“Don’t I?” I raise a brow. “I know that your favorite movie is *The Proposal* , your favorite show is *Reign* . You love the *Hunger Games* books and have been debating joining the archery team because of Katniss. You’re secretly afraid of thunder, and one day you want to go to Iceland to see the northern lights.”

“How do you know that?” she demands, not even trying to pretend I didn’t get everything right. She’s straightened her spine, her face close to mine, those silver eyes spitting fire. I’ve never seen Alexis angry before, but I shouldn’t be surprised that it kind of turns me on.

“You’ve done an admirable job of blending into the background, Alexis. But I’ve always seen you.” My fingers brush her cheek, pushing a stray lock of hair from her beautiful face. “You’re the one who wasn’t paying attention.”

“Who says I wasn’t?” she says, and now it’s my turn to sit up straighter, my eyebrows raised to urge her on. “I know you love those sticky peanut puffs from the gas station. I know you like it when the leaves turn brown and crispy so they crunch when you step on them. You love to sit outside and watch the lightning, like an idiot, and you wanted to go to a Springsteen concert for your birthday but you didn’t want to go alone. You?—”

I crash my lips into hers, swallowing her words. I’m tired of thinking, of wondering what if . This morning, Alexis showed me how much she trusts me, and I can only hope I proved to her that she can. I savor the feeling of her lips on mine, waiting for the kick to the nuts that says I’ve gone too far. It doesn’t come.

Her fingers slide across my jaw as she deepens the kiss, the rest of the world falling to dust.

When Alexis kisses me it’s like a fog clears in my brain, allowing me to think clearly for the first time in my life. Which is stupid, as I can never make a rational decision

when it comes to her. Still, my thoughts don't race, my muscles ease and I can finally just be. Like electricity to an old, creaky radio, I need her to function.

She pulls away far too soon for my liking, but I'm not pushing my luck.

Alexis is still breathless when she says, "That was silly."

"Was it?" I hold her gaze, my arms wrapped loosely around her waist. I might not be able to kiss her again, but I'm sure as hell not letting her go. "Because I think this has been a long time coming."

"You just want to get into my pants again." Her eyes linger on my lips like she's considering kissing me again. I hope she does. "You'll be gone the moment you succeed."

I shake my head. Hooking my finger under her chin, I pull her gaze into my own. "You still don't get it, do you?"

"Not even a little." Her voice is hardly louder than a whisper, and I can barely hear it over the erratic beating of my heart. "You don't want to be with me, Blake...I'm damaged goods. I can never be who you want me to be; who I want me to be. It would be much easier to pretend this never happened."

Who cares about easy? It's the difficult things in life that are worth it the most. I want her, no matter how messed up she is. I'm messed up, too. In different ways, but maybe even more so than she is. We can be messed up together, like the Bonnie and Clyde of Brookside U.

I run my thumb along her cheekbone, taking in every emotion that plays across those eyes. "You're right. That would be easier."

And yet I kiss her again, gentle and promising.

I'm not going anywhere.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 16

Blake

The library isn't my typical hangout, but when my girl is there, I'll happily join her.

I find Alexis in the back of the crumbling old building, in a dark corner hidden by bookshelves on all sides. She doesn't look up when I approach her, but I can just make out the redness in her eyes from crying, her hair wild and falling in bunches from a weak bun.

The sight of her like this sends a twinge of pain through my heart.

"Good morning, Sunshine," I say, placing a warm to-go cup of cherry tea and a snack on the desk. "A girl came up to me at the café just to tell me she voted for us. Isn't that wild? I didn't expect people to take this contest seriously, but there's a certain buzz going around for it."

Alexis barely glances at me before reaching into her bag and pulling out a baby-blue penguin, the delicate crochet stitches and almost invisible flaws proving she made it herself.

Made it for me .

"A penguin?"

"From your story. You like them, don't you?" she asks, and for the first time she



looks at me, allowing me to see the full extent of her chaos.

Tears have created a rim of mascara around her eyes, transforming Alexis into the cutest panda I've ever seen. Her eyelids are heavy with sleep, and the spark in her eye has dimmed. Shit.

I've seen her like this enough times to know what's going on. This is usually when Levi drags her kicking and screaming into our living room and forces her to play video games with us until she calms down enough to smile again. There's a bit of tension in the house I don't want her to be part of, so I have to find something to the same effect.

"You gave me a gift, I gave you one. Now we're even."

I take the penguin from her hand, our fingers brushing for only a moment before she pulls away. The wool is warm and soft against my skin, though it is the thought of Alexis spending her precious time and energy on making it that comforts me the most. This wasn't a quick buy at the Dollar Store to silence her need to be even or a random gesture of thanks. She listened to my silly story about a blood-thirsty penguin and remembered I must like them, then put care in making and accessorizing it, going as far as to give it tiny skates and a copy of my jersey.

"This is just incredible. Thank you. Truly." I lean my butt against the table and reach out to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. "Are you okay, though? What's going on? Come on, tell me."

She shakes her head, fresh tears brimming in her silver-blue eyes. "I'm fine, Blake. You can go. I just need to get my shit together and?—"

"Stop." I know she hates it when people cut her off, but this time, I don't feel bad. Better she's angry at me than herself. "You are doing amazing . I've seen you read

that course book cover to cover three times now—you know everything that could possibly be on that exam, I promise.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t. I need to keep going until I can recite it so I can get an A and keep my grades up and show everyone that I’m not a total fuckin’ screw up.”

“You have to stop putting that kind of pressure on yourself. It’s not the end of the world to get a lower grade every once in a while. I know things are stressful and uncertain right now, and that throwing yourself into studying feels safe and comforting to you. But it’s getting unhealthy, and I can’t let you go on like this.” I take her collection of books and paper and stuff it into her backpack before hoisting it over my shoulder. “Come. You need a day off.”

Her eyes meet mine, damp with tears, and for a moment she just stares. “Where are we going?”

I take her hand, her fingers lacing perfectly into mine like it was made for me to hold. “An adventure.”

“You know you have to tell me where we’re going at some point, right? Otherwise, it’s just kidnapping,” Alexis says, and I breathe a sigh of relief at the fact that her voice no longer sounds so frail.

We’ve been in my car for forty-five minutes, her playlist on my speakers, my hand on her thigh. She hasn’t said much, nor did I expect otherwise. She’s fixed her hair and makeup, though I can see in her eyes that the storm inside her mind rages on. I’m just glad she agreed to come.

“You’re past twenty. This is an abduction.” The GPS lady tells me to go left at the next exit, as if I don’t know the route to my own house. “And if you must know, Miss Moore, we are headed towards the monstrosity that is my childhood home.”

She feigns a dramatic gasp. “Blake Taylor, are you taking me home for the holidays? Should I expect a ring?”

A smirk pulls at my lips. “Like I’d ever propose to you in such a dull and meaningless setting.”

The manor might scream money, but my mother’s style has always leaned more tacky than elegant. Alexis deserves better than that. Like a sprawling estate with gardens filled with roses and more libraries than one could ever need, a place straight out of a Jane Austen novel.

“It’s only dull if you make it so, Blakey-bear,” She laughs. “Though I suppose it’s sweet you think so highly of me. Tell me, Blake, do you think about proposing to me often?”

“Only once, and I plan to do it right.” I shoot her a wink, and I just catch her blushing smile before she looks away.

The highway makes way for quiet suburban roads which turn into the dull gated community of my youth. When we pull into the driveway I’m surprised the gate is wide open—my mother would never leave it open for anyone, even me. Worse still, there are no cars anywhere, nor lights on in the house, despite the darkness of winter. Something is wrong—I’m just not sure what.

I take Alexis’ hand as she gets out of the car, not only because I want to, but so I can try and keep her safe if anyone’s hiding inside. We go around the back, where the grass is higher than I’ve ever seen it and the dirty smudges on the windows only add to the dread curling in my stomach. How long has this place gone without seeing a soul? And why haven’t I heard a peep about it?

“Get behind me,” I say, and reach out my arm to stop Alexis from potentially

ignoring me. I'm not sure if anyone is inside, but if trouble arises I'd rather they have to go through me.

Thankfully, she doesn't challenge it. When we step into the house, the checkered tile under our feet dusty and covered in glass from a broken window pane, she is right on my heels but makes no move to wander off alone.

"Maria?" I call. Silence . "Mom? Anyone?"

I don't expect my mother to be around; she's usually hiding out someplace warm this time of year. But this place is never, ever empty, the silence unnerves me like no other.

"Does it always look like...this?" Alexis asks quietly, and I tighten my grip on her hand.

"Never. Something isn't right." My mother is probably off on a cruise or business trip or holiday, but she has a half dozen staff members who keep this place looking like a damn palace. If they left...well, I wouldn't blame them. No doubt my mother took things a step too far, even for her. But those people practically raised me. They wouldn't quit without saying goodbye to me. "Let's just grab what we came for and go."

I lead her up the stairs and down the hall to the dreary beige horror that is my childhood bedroom. Color is my mother's mortal enemy, so the entire house is practically all white. Beige, believe it or not, was pushing it. Thankfully, it's been left virtually untouched since the day I left for college, so I know just where to find it.

The oldest shoe box in my closet, hidden in the back of the top shelf. Mice have gnawed some holes in the sides, but it seems they left the content untouched. I take the satin pouch from its hiding place and stuff it into my coat pocket where it's safe.

“Do you hear that?”

I jump at the sound of Alexis’ voice. I’d been too distracted digging through my past that I hadn’t noticed her slipping away from my collection of trophies and knick-knacks to stand right behind me. I pause, listening intently, but I don’t hear a thing.

“If you want to go explore the house you can just ask, Sunshine. You don’t have to pull the horror movie excuse.”

Alexis rolls her eyes. “I’m not making an excuse, nor am I making it up—I still hear it. It’s this high pitch, like...like the whining of a dog, almost.”

A dog. The word stops me right in my tracks. She cannot possibly have left him here...though, with my mother, I shouldn’t be surprised.

Alexis takes my hand and drags me into the hallway before stopping to look around.

“It’s muffled,” she says. “Like something is blocking the sound. But it’s also kind of everywhere?”

“The ventilation shafts,” I say slowly, and Alexis nods like that’s exactly what she meant. “The blocking, could that be a door?”

She shrugs. It doesn’t matter, anyway. If he’s here, there’s only one place he could have gone—I know exactly where he is.

Once we’re back in the grand foyer, we take the shortcut through the lounge to end up in the kitchen, the old doors creaking and heavy even for me. No wonder he can’t get out—I can barely get through them myself.

The kitchen is a battlefield of flour, sugar, and heaps of unidentifiable foods sprawled

out over every surface. Some of it is rotting, molding, or otherwise disgusting, and breathing in the stench almost makes me retch. But it's the door to the basement that catches my eye. Fallen off its hinges, hanging on by a single screw, positioned in such a way it can't be moved aside.

And that's when I hear him.

A weak, pain-filled whine, begging anyone to listen and help. My poor boy.

"Lucky!" I tear the door off the frame and glance down the steep steps, but it's too dark to see a thing. As if she can read my mind, Alexis holds up her phone with the flashlight turned on, illuminating the stairs. I kiss her cheek in thanks.

It's clear she's not leaving my side, so as I make my way down the narrow steps I hold her hand to keep her from losing her balance. Her hand, warm and reassuring in mine, is the only thing keeping me from freaking out as my home becomes more unrecognizable with every step.

Our feet touch solid ground again and Alexis drags the light from her flashlight across the room. In the far corner, behind a barrel of whatever, I spot a familiar wagging tail.

"Lucky? Come, boy, come here." I pat my thighs, but he doesn't budge.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Before I can stop her Alexis is by his side, crouching by the barrel. For a moment, I'm afraid it's not Lucky but some wild animal that will bite her if she gets too close. But then the tail-wagging intensifies, and slowly I see my dog scramble to his feet.

"He's hurt," Alexis says and shines the light at his paw, which hovers over the

concrete floor, a bad gash along the hip stained with mostly dried blood. “It looks bad, Blake. He really needs a vet. There’s no way he can walk up those stairs; that’s probably how he got stuck here in the first place.”

“I’ll carry him.” I swallow against the lump in my throat to keep from crying as my guilt bubbles to the surface. I should have come sooner to check on him, I should have called someone or done anything to make sure he was well and taken care of. Stupid! “Upstairs—in the lower cabinet next to the door there should be a bag of kibble. Can you get it?”

“Meet you at the car?” she asks, already headed for the stairs. I nod.

“Be careful, please, or your brother will kill me.”

She’s already disappeared into the kitchen upstairs, but her laugh echoes through the empty room.

“Mommy is laughing at me, do you hear that Lucky?” he digs his snout into my hands at once, whimpering and pressing himself against me until he confuses even himself. “I’m gonna lift you now, but I’ll be very careful, okay?”

I move as slowly as I can muster, trying not to startle him. It takes a few tries before I can hold him comfortably while holding the flashlight so I can see, but when I do I make a beeline for the stairs and take them two at a time. The kitchen is empty and I find Alexis waiting by the car as promised, the back door open and her scarf laid out over the backseat like a blanket. Something in her hand glints in the weak sunlight and as we draw closer I recognize it as being Lucky’s water bowl.

“The food is in the trunk, but I figured water has a higher priority.” She steps aside so I can lay Lucky in the back seat. “I couldn’t find a leash or anything, though. Do you want me to sit in the back with him?”

“No,” I say as I shut the door. “I need you with me.”

A soft smile creeps onto her lips as she lays her hand on my shoulders, rising onto her toes to kiss my damp cheek. “Always.”



### Chapter 17

Alexis

It's well past midnight when we arrive back on campus.

The vet worked on Lucky for a while, giving fluids and treating injuries. He didn't need to stay overnight, thankfully, but between the leg wound and bruised spine only time will tell if he'll recover in full.

Meanwhile, I forced Blake to eat something, which was funny as it's usually the other way around. It took some coaching on my part; a few empty promises of a striptease, light threats to his life, the usual. But I knew he would do the same for me, so I had to make it work.

The hockey team's house is dark save for a few scattered lights, and for a moment I'm convinced we can sneak Lucky in unnoticed. But moments are fleeting, chased by the imminence of another. And when I find Levi's face on the other side of the front door, I know we're fucked.

"You know, when Lis and I set the two of you up to do this thing we did it because it seemed you already got along. And it's great that you're hitting it off, but this isn't okay, Alexis. Staying out until midnight without telling any of us where you are? What were you thinking?" Levi crosses his arms over his chest, much like our dad does when he's angry. Has he forgotten that he's not my parent? That we're barely a year apart and he has no right to scold me?

“Are you done?” I sigh. “Something came up that couldn’t wait. And last I checked, I don’t need your permission for anything.”

Levi’s eyes grow to the size of saucers, his head shaking with a fervor. I don’t hear his footsteps, but I know Blake must be coming up behind me with a very sleepy Lucky in his arms.

“Nope. Nuh-uh. Bring it somewhere else.”

I roll my eyes and push my brother out of the doorway so we can get out of the freezing cold. “There is nowhere else, Levi, or trust me we’d be there.”

“I don’t like what you’re insinuating.”

“You started it.”

I hold his gaze, trying to distract him enough that he doesn’t notice Blake slipping away to stash Lucky in his room. As Blake’s bedroom door closes up the stairs, I slack a small sigh of relief. Tiny victories.

Levi glances at the landing, then back at me. Only now do I register the dark circles underneath his eyes, like he’s been having a lot of sleepless nights. Did he stay up to yell at Blake tonight, or is his presence downstairs just a coincidence?

“What’s going on between you two, Alexis? Really.” Levi’s voice is softer now, though its intensity makes the hallway even smaller. “Not too long ago you jumped out of a moving car to avoid him, and now you’re going on dog-rescue trips and staying out until midnight? What changed?”

We kissed. He made me come. Not in that order.

“I got to know him,” I say. “And I like the way he makes me feel. Wanted, adored. Safe.”

Levi gives an almost unnoticeable shake of his head, his voice soft like he doesn’t want to be overheard saying, “Lex, I’ve known that guy for three years now. Blake is not a relationship kind of guy. I just...I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I hold his gaze. There is a certain coldness between us now, a distance wedged by my relationship with Blake. If he didn’t like him, why did Levi choose Blake to act as my boyfriend instead of someone else? Levi’s a popular guy; there are many people in his contacts he could have chosen instead. And yet, he didn’t. So why is it bad that we’re getting closer, if I’m aware that it’s a temporary thing? Or is it the fact that I’m starting to carve out a life for myself that’s the issue?

I step forward, letting my hand fall on his shoulder and the ratty old band shirt that covers it—a gift from Lottie when he first left. “I know what this is, Levi. I know he’ll be long gone when spring rolls around. But knowing something is finite doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy it in the moment, right?”

Levi looks at me for a moment, his gaze filled with worry and doubts. Even so, he nods. He knows better than to try and change my mind.

“I’ll be okay, I promise. It’s not your job to protect me, you know.” I squeeze his hand. “I love you. Goodnight.”

“Love you, too.”

I flee up the stairs before he can stop me, not wasting a second to think about what I’m doing until Blake’s bedroom door closes behind me.

I’m not sure what I expected Blake Taylor’s grown-up bedroom to look like, but it

sure as hell wasn't this...normal. The walls are painted in shades of blue to look like mountains, the color extending all the way to the ceiling. There's a dresser to my left, and a desk to my right. A soft rug lays in the middle of the room to help retain the heat, because even here the cold has free reign. Overall, his room exudes warmth and comfort—a far cry from the dull room he had as a kid.

Blake's lounging on the bed with Lucky, having tossed his bloodstained clothes in favor of a navy blue shirt and black sweatpants.

"There's some clothes on the dresser for you to sleep in," he says quietly. "Or I can drive you home if you like?"

My heart flutters at the silent promise of spending the night in his arms, warm and safe. "The clothes are good, thanks. I'll be right back."

I grab the bundle of clothes before ducking into the hall and disappearing into the shared bathroom, checking the lock three times before changing at lightning speed. The clothes are a breath of fresh air to my tight muscles—they're soft and smell like Blake, and warm enough that I could fall asleep on the north pole if I needed to.

Would he notice if I took them? Probably not, right?

I blow out a breath, pushing away the lump of nerves clawing at my throat. Blake is my friend, maybe even more. He has proven time and time again that he's a gentle soul, and that I can trust him. Sharing a bed with him isn't the big scary thing my brain says it is. It might even be nice. And if something is amiss, my brother is just down the hall. He would delight in kicking Blake's ass.

But I won't need to call for Levi at all. When I walk back into the room, Blake is creating a sad little makeshift bed on the floor, the covers on the bed thrown back so I can climb right in.

“I don’t have anything soft for Lucky to lay on aside from the bed. Would you mind sharing with him?”

“Of course not,” I say as I make my way to the bed. Call it bravery, or stupidity, but when I pass him my longing gets the better of me and I pinch Blake’s shoulder. “Come on, you’re in the bed as well. It’s too cold for chivalry.”

He raises a brow, the conflict clear on his face as he starts, “Are you?—”

“Yes. But no funny business, clear?”

Slow as if giving me time to change my mind, Blake picks up his pillow and blanket before crossing to the other side of the bed. “Wouldn’t dream of it. Not with our kid in the room.”

He jerks his chin towards Lucky, who despite his sleep-drunken state cannot stop wagging his tail. The mattress moves to accommodate Blake’s toned body, and for a split-second panic claws at my chest. I meet his gaze as he lounges against the pillow, and for a moment I think I made a mistake by staying here.

Blake raises his brow in silent question. You okay?

With a nod, I let go of my panic. If there is anyone in this world I trust as much as I do my siblings, it’s Blake.

His arm leans over my pillow like an unspoken invitation to cuddle up against his side. A smile spreads on my lips at the sight of him like this, so cozy, vulnerable. And tonight, he’s all mine. I scoot closer until I’m wrapped in his arms, his heart beating beneath my ear like a lullaby.

“Goodnight, Alexis,” Blake whispers, and as his lips brush the top of my head I drift

off into a peaceful sleep.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 18

Blake

Golden light drifts in through the window, outlining Alexis's sleeping form like an angel.

She's wearing my clothes, bundled up against the cold, sleeping soundly in my arms. Alone in my room with nothing to prove and no one to convince, she chose to stay.

She trusted me enough to stay.

My brave, gorgeous ray of sunshine.

Mine.

She stirs, those gorgeous silver-blue eyes fluttering open to meet mine. I can't help but smile.

"What are you grinning at, weirdo?"

I know that I shouldn't push my luck, and that just having her here with me is a miracle I could only have prayed for. But right now, at this moment, I give up all pretense.

"I just can't believe I'm lucky enough to wake up next to you," I murmur. "How are you feeling?"

Alexis scrunches her nose. “Sore.”

“Did you have fun while I slept, Sunshine?”

Alexis rolls her eyes, and the sight fuels me more than coffee ever could. “No, I’ll leave that task to you. You’re decent enough at it.”

My thoughts must show on my face as she starts to laugh, bringing out the smallest dimple in her cheek. I prop myself up on one arm, running my thumb along her lower lip. “That sounds awfully tempting. If I didn’t know better I’d think it a proposition.”

“Well, I am in your bed.” Alexis’s soft fingers run along the stubble on my jaw, her eyes mapping out every inch of my face. My breath catches and I freeze at her touch as if the slightest movement will scare her off. But this tiny bit of contact is enough to set me alight, and I lose my fear to her fire.

“That you are.” I press a kiss to her palm before it travels down my throat, settling right over my heart. I hope she can feel it skip a beat at her smile.

I’d told her she would set the pace, but shit if that choice isn’t haunting me now. If I hadn’t, I would be closer, so much closer to that pretty mouth until my tongue is fully?—

My thoughts wash away as her lips crash into mine, soft and warm and steady. Her slender fingers snake around my neck to pull me into her, keeping me nice and close. As if I’d ever break away willingly.

Kissing Alexis Moore is a fucking dream. Even half-awake and with morning breath galore, this is the best kiss I’ve ever had. For the first time in my life, I don’t have a great flood of thoughts—or thoughts at all. She has quieted the demons in my mind and managed the impossible: she got me to focus.



Sure, my focus is on her. How she tastes and feels. How I can make it so she never stops kissing me. But still, it must be some sort of progress.

“You should tell me to stop,” she manages between kisses. I laugh.

“Never.”

When we finally break apart, all I can do is stare at her. This wonderful, quiet, angelic wrecking ball of a woman who laughed her way into my life and refused to ease her grip on my heart. It’s strange how one person can change your sense of self. I never believed love to be real. I mean, if my own mother couldn’t be bothered to love me, why would anyone else? But when I’m with Alexis...I think it might be.

“Why are you sore?” I ask. “Talk to me.”

Her gaze falls and she shakes her head like she’s about to blow me off. “Oh, it’s nothing.”

There you go.

“I have a chronic illness called Fibromyalgia, which basically means my body is nuking itself for no reason, and the cold is making it flare up—or making it worse, as healthy people might say. In short, it gives me full-body pain, completely drains me of energy, and a myriad of other things I won’t bore you with.”

“You never bore me. You couldn’t.” I run my thumb along her cheekbone. “If you don’t feel like talking about it, that’s fine too. But maybe you can send me a link so I can read up on it?”

She pauses for a moment, her eyes wide with surprise as she nods. A small smile plays her lips as she settles back into her pillow, looking almost relieved. I wasn’t

wrong, then, when I figured she expected me to blow her off. How many people have done that to her? Ignored her struggles like they don't matter, made no effort to understand what it's like being in her shoes?

She's looking at me, expecting me to say something. But there is nothing I can say to right that wrong. "I'll whip us up some breakfast. You stay put and look pretty."

"Well, if you insist, " Alexis says, burying herself deeper in the pile of blankets. I have no sooner left the bed when Lucky crawls up to take my place, curling up against her chest with his snout pressed against her nose, begging for cuddles. I linger in the doorway for a moment, drinking in the moment before it's gone.

The house is quiet, so I curse under my breath when I see my teammates lounging in the kitchen. Guess my secret sleepover is about to become public. I should not be surprised they have gathered here; Levi is very strict about us not going out during the game season, so there are no hangovers to keep them rotting in bed.

"There he is! Finally ended that dry spell, huh, Taylor?" Eric smirks. Dick.

I push past him to get to the fridge. Hopefully these pigs left some food for the rest of us. "You're the only one who has those. Must be your dazzling personality."

"Didn't I hear Alexis's voice last night? Where is she? I want to thank her for making me a birthday cake." Raf says from his perch on the island. He glances past a scowling Levi into the hallway, trying to catch a glimpse of my girl. Not that he will.

I'm hoping I can convince her to stay up there and relax for as long as possible, maybe even blow off that cooking class the contest is forcing on us. I reckon we can have a lot more fun right here.

Raf's words do give me a pause, though. Between Alexis and the contest and all the

added hockey practices I completely forgot about his birthday coming up. Idiot! I need to find something to give him, something that shows I care about him even if I'm forgetful. I just have to figure out what.

Would he accept it if I bought him a car? It certainly would make going home easier for him, letting him skip the bus and train rides I know he hates. I don't think it would go over well, though. What about a city trip? He could take Nico to Paris, maybe. I'll have to think about it some more later.

About the gift, that is. Not Raf and Nico in Paris.

There's some pancake mix left, so I whip up a few waffles with a glass of fresh orange juice and a hot cherry tea on the side. It's far from flashy, but it's made with love nonetheless.

"She's curled up in my bed where she belongs," I say, and the wince on Levi's face only spurs me on. "She's sore from last night—a bit hard to walk."

"Watch it, Taylor. That's my sister you're talking about."

I can tell by the tone of Levi's voice that I'm walking a dangerous line, but even he has to see I'm stuck in an impossible situation here. These guys don't know about our deal, not even Raf. They all think me and Alexis are actually together, which would make it suspicious if I didn't allude to having sex with her at least once. Especially because riffing Levi is one of my favorite hobbies.

"Has anyone seen the syrup?" I ask. Raf gives a low whistle and punts the bottle straight at my head. "Thanks, man."

Levi shakes his head as he watches me shove the breakfast onto a makeshift tray. "Alexis doesn't like syrup on waffles."

“Oh, I know. The waffles are her breakfast. The syrup is part of mine.” I wink at Raf as a low Oh! goes through the kitchen. Levi looks like he might be sick.

As a hockey player, I have never been graceful, so it takes considerable effort to keep the tray—fine, it’s an old pizza box—straight enough not to spill a thing. Still, I make it a point to stop briefly at Levi’s side. “Might be best not to think about it.”

I hurry up the stairs before he can retaliate.

Despite my best efforts, Alexis insisted we go to the cooking class.

I tried everything short of barricading the door, but if I did she’d probably climb out the window just to prove a point. My girl is stubborn like that.

It’s not all bad, though. Alexis is a skilled baker and I found her a stool to perch on while she watches me knead the pizza dough. She tries to hide it, be discreet, but I catch her staring at my arms enough that it makes me regret hiding them under a sweatshirt. I flex them just the same.

Alexis busies herself with roasting tomatoes for the sauce while I try to copy our instructor’s moves for shaping the dough in the air. I can catch the blob of dough before it has a chance to fly off, though thankfully no one saw it. Aside from the cameras.

The cameraman closest to us—Noah, his name tag says—seems to have taken a liking to Alexis and me. He kept close by at the aquarium, and today he hasn’t been more than a few paces away from us at any time. It seems the crew is unchanging, as they are all familiar faces. Though it seems there are more of them now that there are less of us.

They weren’t kidding when they said they would vote two couples off after every

date. With two dates behind us four couples are gone, drastically improving our odds of winning. There's no time to slow down, of course, but it's nice to know people believe in us just the same.

"Remind me to find a boarding place for Lucky for next weekend." I rummage through the mess underneath our workstation to find something to blend our sauce with and set it on the bench before grabbing the rest of our ingredients. Cooking is kind of fun.

"No need. I'll look after him."

I raise a brow. "How can you take care of him if you're in Vermont with me? It's not like we can sneak him into the hotel. We couldn't even sneak him into the house without getting caught."

"Yeah, I'm not sure me coming on your trip is a good idea," Alexis says quietly. "It's probably best if I hang back."

I slide my arms around her waist and pull her close, minimizing the odds of someone—like Noah—overhearing as I say, "You have to go. All the guys' partners are going. Don't you think it will look suspicious if you are the only one who isn't there?"

"Yes, it probably will." Alexis doesn't look up from the cutting board, the herbs sliced so thinly it's impossible to make them out. "But going on trips isn't that easy when you're with me. I can't just do things on the fly; they need to be planned out with structured breaks for resting on bad days. And even then it's a fifty-fifty shot of my body giving up and me ruining the whole trip." Alexis draws a shaky breath and instinctively I hold her tighter, letting her know that I'm here. "With this much on the line...I don't want to be the reason you're too distracted to win."

There's a camera on us now, I just know it. I run my thumb along the length of her cheekbone, cataloging every freckle. "You should know by now that I will be thinking of you whether you are there or not. The only difference is if you're with me, I'll get to dedicate every goal to my gorgeous ray of sunshine, and you get to enjoy seeing me fall on my ass."

"That does sound enticing," Alexis teases.

"So you'll come? Pretty please?" I put on my best impression of sad puppy eyes. "I promise I'll get you anything you need to be comfortable. I just...I want you there with me."

Alexis stares at me for a moment, her conflict clear in the way she furrows her brows and does that lip-biting thing she knows drives me wild. But I know the answer the moment her expression softens.

"Okay, I'll come. You got yourself a date."

"Thank you, Alexis. This really means a lot to me." I press a long, gentle kiss on her forehead. She's coming. And she called it a date!

I've kissed her, tasted her, and woken up with her in my arms. But we haven't talked about any of it. What it means, what we want it to mean. At Miller's party Alexis told me that she would follow my lead; is that what she's been doing all this time? Pretending for the cameras? My heart twinges at the thought. If she's been pretending this whole time...

I might just be crushed beyond repair.

No. She can't be pretending—at least not fully. Alexis is many things, but she is never cruel.

“Oh, it’s not a favor,” she says matter-of-factly. “It’s going to cost you. Not sure what yet, but I’ll think of something.”

I slide my hands down her spine, not stopping until they’re only a hair above her ass, her front pressed flush against mine. “You know I’ll make it worth your while, don’t you, Sunshine?”

She raises a brow in challenge. “You will. Now be a good boy and kiss me—we’re on camera.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

Chapter 19

Blake

Me

Dinner tonight?

Sunshine

Not tonight. I can't move.

Bad pain day?

You have no idea.

I'd like to be alone for a bit, if that's okay.

Just until I feel less like death.

Absolutely.

Text me if you need anything?

\*Kiss face emoji\*

After our cooking class, I didn't see Alexis for days.



My training schedule nearly tripled for the big game in Vermont, and as she was stuck in bed being the cutest corpse alive, there wasn't much room left for romance. We did our best, though. She FaceTimed me whenever she felt a little better, and I brought her flowers and take-out after practice so we could eat together in her room.

Besides, it's hard to mourn those days when her face is the first thing I see when I wake.

She's up already, fussing about in tight leggings and a hoodie she stole from my closet, one of my beanies pulled warmly over her head. She's all packed, as am I. We dropped Lucky off at the boarding place last night, so all there is to do is leave.

Well, that, and trying not to lure her back to bed.

I roll onto my back and watch as she moves through the room like a lost little bird. I want to speak up, ask what she's looking for, but I'm afraid I'll startle her.

As I get out of bed I make sure to step on the creaky floorboard by the nightstand so she knows I'm up. If she hears it, she doesn't show it.

My fingers find her hips before meeting at her belly button, my head resting in the crook of her neck. "What's wrong? Restless? Anxious? If it's the latter, I know a way of calming you down..."

I leave a trail of kisses down her neck, stopping at her collarbone. Her hand flies up to hold me in place, her breathing steadying at once.

I make light of it now, for her benefit, but during my deep dive into her illness the other night I came across a list detailing more than two hundred symptoms.

Two. Hundred. Plus .

Alexis is a goddamn fighter. Us guys whine and moan when we're thrown into the boards too hard, but at least our pain fades within days, if not sooner. Alexis has to live with her body attacking itself every single day without complaint, and has to figure out how to live her life alongside it. And the fact that she has to shoulder it all alone, with no one who really, truly knows what she is going through...

Shit . The thought alone forms a lump in my throat.

"Just nervous, I guess," she says and waves a hand to blow me off. As if that would work on me. "It'll pass."

I press another kiss down her neck, ending right on her shoulder as she stills underneath my touch. "Talk to me. Why are you nervous?"

"It's just—I want this weekend to be about you and the guys," she says. "So what if something makes me flare up again and I become catatonic and can't go out with you? I don't want to be the one who's dragging you down."

"You won't drag me down. You couldn't even if you tried."

Softly, she shakes her head. "You don't know that, Blake."

"Yes, I do." I hook my finger under her chin, gently turning her face so I can look into those enchanting eyes I adore, my heart aching as I notice them glazed with tears. "I can promise you with my head and my heart that I'm just as happy laying in bed watching bad TV with you as I am going out with the guys. I'm yours, Sunshine. Even if you're too exhausted to walk, and I have to carry you to the bathroom. Even if you're in so much pain that you can't help but become snippy and difficult. You don't have to deal with this alone anymore. I've got you, and I'm not letting you go."

The small lamp on my desk highlights the tears threatening to spill onto her cheeks. I

hold her gaze for as long as she'll let me, those big eyes searching my face for the answer to a question I don't know.

"Levi told me you're not a relationship kind of guy," she says, and as she blinks a single tear escapes her lid to roll down her cheek. "What changed?"

"I'm going to kick his ass for telling you that, but he's right." A flutter passes through my chest, hopeful and longing just for her. "I'm not a relationship kind of guy. But you, Alexis Moore, are my only exception."

### Chapter 20

Alexis

In the end, the bus ride to Vermont wasn't half bad.

Then again I spent most of it curled up at Blake's side, fast asleep, and even in my dreams his words echoed. You, Alexis Moore, are my only exception.

Each time I hear it in my mind, my heart glows like wildfire.

It doesn't help that Blake makes me sleep better than any medication I've tried. Unlike the pills and syrups and teas, he doesn't just suppress my anxiety but eases it until it's barely noticeable. It is a terrifying thing, to be so dependent on him, but what I told Levi that night wasn't a lie. If this ends when the contest is over, I will accept it with grace. Blake and I made a deal, and we owe each other nothing more than those terms.

So when I find Levi staring at us with that conflicted look on his face, I shoot him a smile. I can't make him stop worrying about me—he is my brother, after all—but I can make sure he has no reason to.

The arena is only a few blocks away from the hotel, leaving us with plenty of time to kill before the guys have to go prepare. Blake suggests staying in our room for a bit and going for a walk later, but I know he's suggesting that for my benefit alone. Away games are great for boosting team morale, and strengthening bonds between them so they work better as a team. I can't let Blake miss out on any of that,

especially now that he and Levi are rocky at best. So I surprise everyone by suggesting we go for an early dinner instead.

We walk over as a group, Blake's arm around my shoulders, his breath tickling my skin as he whispers sweet nothings into my ear. He insists on paying for dinner like always, though this time I don't fight him on it. The restaurant they chose is out of my price range, anyway.

Levi, as one of the few players without a partner, chooses to sit at the head of our table.

Being captain of a winning hockey team, he can get any girl he wants, but his solitude is a choice rather than resignation. There is only one girl in this world worthy of my brother's heart, and she is across the state in the sleepy village we grew up in.

Lottie got accepted into Brookside at the same time as Alissa and me, but she had to stay behind to care for her ailing dad. She's been my best friend—aside from my womb-mate—since we were little, and that didn't change when she and my brother started dating in our teens. She is the only person who can draw the worry from his mind, often without even trying to, and that doesn't change no matter how long they've been apart.

But I know Lottie's secret, and when we see her next, things may not be the same.

My heart flutters as Blake's hand finds mine underneath the table, his thumb tracing lazy circles on the back of my palm as he laughs at something Raf says. I try to pay attention to their conversation, but it's about hockey and I don't understand the rules even a little bit, so I mostly end up staring at Blake, imagining all the things I'd like him to do to me once we're alone. He glances at me, his grin widening as he winks, like he knows exactly what I'm thinking about.

If only.

You would think growing up with two sport-obsessed siblings would create a third, but any attempt at learning about it leaves me bored and irritated. If I had to guess, I would say it's a mentality kind of thing; day-to-day life is so exhausting to me that sports are downright impossible. Blocking out engaging with it in any way might be my brain's way of protecting me from feeling left out more than I already do.

How ironic, then, that I'm dating one of the school's star hockey players.

Wait, shit. Fake dating.

It's a little better once they're on the ice. Blake looks incredibly sexy in his gear and he knows it, lifting the hem of his jersey at every opportunity where he knows I can see. He spotted me in the crowd seconds after they hit the ice, and his gaze never strayed as he did his elaborate and highly suggestive warm up. The sight alone was enough to make me blush, every vein in my body set alight in anticipation. I swore I saw him grin at the sight.

As the game unfolds I study his movements, relying on the knowledge of Raf's boyfriend, Nico, to figure out the plays. He also tells me that, while effective, Blake's actions on the ice are generally frowned upon and his sitting in that box thing is because he's out on a penalty, and not just him looking after his energy like I assumed.

His eyes find mine as he waits out his time, a soft smile playing his lips. There is a look in his eyes that is hard to pin down yet leaves butterflies swarming inside of me, spreading a kind of itch I know deep down only he can scratch.

The other partners stare at me like I've grown a second head when I burst out in laughter at the sight of Blake falling on his ass. I'm worried sick about him being in

there, let it be known, but this fall was so dramatic that I know he's okay without him telling me. It's their loss, really; him sliding across the ice on his butt is objectively the funniest thing I've ever seen. I hope someone turns it into a meme.

I pull Blake's beanie further over my ears and tug at my mittens, the biting cold tearing through my many layers no matter what I do. Another reason to hate hockey: chronic pain flare-ups are almost guaranteed with every game or practice I go to.

Nico jabs me in the side and points to Blake just in time to see him score, and like a 00's romcom, he points right at me while blowing a kiss. I laugh and pretend to catch it as if it were a tangible thing, my cheeks bursting with color as I notice myself on the big screen. To round out the cliché I press my hands together in a heart shape and mouth I love you, and relief washes over me as the screen goes back to showing the players.

"You two are so cute. I've never seen a man this smitten," Nico says. "Not with a woman, anyway."

"You think he's smitten?" I look out onto the ice to find his eyes on me again, a smile playing on his lips before his gaze is pulled back to the puck. My heart flutters at the thought.

"Oh, I have no doubt," Nico says. "He's not even trying to hide it, either—he's gone soft. Did you know he gave Raf a trip to Paris for his birthday?"

I shake my head no.

"Blake said that when love is real, it should be celebrated, and he wanted us to have something truly special. Who does that? Who just gives their friend a trip to Europe and downplays how big that is?"

“He does,” I say. It makes sense; this is the one thing he could give Rafael that the latter couldn’t pass down to his family, something he’s forced to use himself. Smart thinking on Blake’s part. “Blake doesn’t care about money. If he likes you, he’d buy you the world without a second thought.”

Nico laughs. “He really likes you, so what did he buy you?”

“Nothing. I don’t want his money.” I look away, dodging the questioning look on Nico’s face as I whisper, “I just want him.”

Is this what life with Blake would be like? Going to hockey games, cheering him on, freezing my butt off? I could get used to it, I admit. His teammates are nice—well, most of them—and so are their partners. Nico is great company in the dull moments, and Blake plays with such passion even I enjoy watching him play. But then what?

As a teacher, I can’t follow him from state to state once he’s in the NHL, and I can’t ask him to give up his dreams for me. Being with me comes with enough compromises as it is. I’m sure he’d encourage me to stay home, and say that I don’t have to work if it’s a drain on my health, but I’m not giving my dreams up either.

What am I even doing, thinking about these things? I don’t even know if anything Blake and I share is real, and here I am, dreaming of a future with him. I can’t help it, though; it just feels so right. The fact that Alexis Taylor has a nice ring to it doesn’t help, either.

I’d be lucky, so incredibly lucky, to have Blake to call mine—for real, that is.

Though I know, deep down, nothing about this is fake for me.

It’s late at night when we get back to the hotel, the both of us quiet and aching.



“I’m going to take a hot shower, try to thaw out a bit.” I toss my coat and purse onto the bed, running a hand through my hair with a sigh. Even standing right next to the steaming radiator, I still feel as cold as the Arctic.

Blake lets himself fall onto the bed, yanking his boots off one by one. “Need any help? I’m very good at showers.”

The lowest part of my belly aches at the thought. I bet that shower would really warm me up. Still, there is another contest date planned for tomorrow, and I should probably reserve what little energy I have for that.

“You’re welcome to join me, Blakey-bear, but I barely have enough fumes left to get through a shower, let alone anything fun.”

“Fair enough. Today was a lot. Go ahead, Sunshine. I’ll be here if you need me.” Blake shoots me the softest smile, full of fatigue and emotions I don’t allow myself to acknowledge.

“I’ll be right out.”

I don’t bother searching for my pajamas, snatching only a set of fresh underwear from my bag. Blake has seen me naked before; I doubt he minds seeing me in my underwear.

In the bathroom I peel off every layer, from the hat to the leggings and underwear, and before long the scalding hot stream of water washes over me. The relief is almost immediate, the stiffness in my muscles easing with every moment, though it does little for the pain.

A knock sounds from the door, and I don’t think twice.

“Come in.”

The door opens and I don't turn away. The water hits my spine at just the right angle; it would be a shame to lose that bit of happiness. Blake stares for a moment, his eyes wide as they glide along every inch and curve like he has never seen me naked before. It's kind of sweet.

I hate to break his stare, but he's letting all the precious warmth out of the room. I motion for him to close the door and he blinks, shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts as he obliges.

“I've got your jammies, figured it'd be best to bundle up before getting out of here. You know, to lock in that post-shower warmth.” Blake places a stack of clothes on the bathroom countertop before leaning against it, the muscle straining against the thin fabric of his white shirt. He's staring again, though it's far from an uncomfortable one. It's almost appreciative, awestruck. And wholly one-sided.

“You know, if you're going to stay you might as well join me.”

He raises a brow, conflict clear on his face. “You sure?”

“It's only weird if you make it weird.”

Like it's happening in slow motion Blake steps closer, throwing his shirt into a corner to reveal his sculpted torso. He drops his joggers, revealing he wasn't wearing anything underneath, leaving him naked and tantalizingly close.

I let my eyes feast on his body the way he did mine. I take in every toned muscle, every groove and bump, how his thighs could crush a skull and the way the veins on his arms lie just above the rest. Blake's body seems tailor-made for me, with every inch of him screaming at me to climb him like a tree.

And I will. Just not tonight.

I take his hand, leading him closer until he's in the wall-less shower cabin with me, and crash my lips into his.

Blake's hands land on my bare hips but never stray, though the evidence of how badly he wants to presses against my stomach. One jump into his arms would be enough to feel him inside of me, and for a moment I imagine doing it. Imagine him pressing me into the wall and filling me up so deliciously that I'd want for nothing until I screamed his name over and over.

I feel myself getting wet at the mere thought of it, though I meant what I said earlier. I'm too exhausted for that tonight.

"You never cease to amaze me, Alexis," Blake grins like an idiot, and it's so infectious I can't stop myself from smiling, either. Being in Blake's orbit, looking into his eyes—it eases the weight of the world on my shoulders. I never knew how heavy a burden it was until he kissed me and I felt it all crashing down around us, allowing me to finally breathe.

Blake tries to pull me in again but I stop him, my eyes trained on the collection of scars and bruises. Some have faded to nothing but a faint line, while others look relatively new. And the bruising... "Are these all from playing hockey?"

I've seen Levi without a shirt countless times, but he doesn't have anywhere near as many scars as Blake does.

"No," Blake says. "I mean, most are. But the others...I wasn't always the lovable rogue you know me as. There is a lot of shit I'm hiding from everyone—even you."

I run a finger along a long, jagged scar on his left peck. "Tell me?"

Conflict battles in his gaze before his hand closes on mine, a shaky breath leaving his lips.

“That one I got during a visitation with my dad when he got drunk and came at me with a knife. Apparently I’m too sensitive for a guy, and it pissed him off,” Blake says. He moves my hand to his side. “That one I got during a boxing match that spilled out of the ring. He and his buddies waited outside, I barely got away.”

Our hands dip lower, almost low enough to touch his rock-hard length before he stops with a chuckle. “This one’s less exciting—appendectomy.”

“Shit, Blake.” I blink against the burning in my eyes, trying to keep the tears at bay. Is this why he was so insistent on walking me to and from class every day? Because he was afraid Hudson would eventually bring a weapon?

Blake’s finger lifts my chin, forcing my gaze away from his scars. His eyes are a storm in the ocean, wild and violent. But there’s a strength in them that takes my breath away, a defiant kind of gentleness only I get to see.

“I don’t like talking about this stuff, who I was before. I was lost, Sunshine. So fucking lost until I heard you laugh that day.” He shakes his head. “Do you know why I call you Sunshine, Alexis? It’s because from that moment on I saw a way out. A way to live, not just survive. A way out of the shit hole I found myself in and take back the control I’d lost. You are the ray of light I needed to obliterate the darkness that consumed me for twenty-one years, and I have spent every single day since then trying to become the man that’s deserving of you.”

I cup his jaw in the palm of my hand, stroking the scruff with my thumb. The other hand lays flush against his heart, the steady beating calm and reassuring. “I’m not a saint, nor a goddess. You don’t have to change who you are to deserve me; every version of you is enough. You told me that being with you is supposed to be easy,

that I can be me and you be you—it's time you listen to your own words. You are deserving, Blake. More than you'll ever know."

Blake leans in to kiss me and this time I don't stop him. Not just because kissing him is like sliding into a hot bath during a bad pain day, but because it feels like he needs this; like the feeling of my lips on his are grounding him somehow. So I let go of any thought and sink into him, letting him use me in any way he needs.

Eventually, he releases me with a long, tender kiss on the forehead. "We should probably turn off the water."

"Yeah, I don't have any energy left to wash my hair anyway." I move to turn off the water but Blake catches my hand and pulls me down until my butt connects with his rock-hard thigh—a welcome perch after all this standing.

His fingers dig into my skull, massaging the skin before covering it with pomegranate shampoo. The sensation of his clever fingers in my hair is enough for a moan to leave my lips, making him chuckle.

"Is that enough to turn you on these days, Sunshine?" he says, the self-satisfaction clear in his voice. "I'm thinking the next time we shower together, I'll make you sit just like this and edge yourself on my thigh until you're a whimpering mess, and then I'll take you nice and slow against the wall until you're begging me to come like the good girl you are."

"You won't have the self-control, Blakey-bear," I say, and like intended the nickname makes him roll his eyes at once.

"Is that so?"

I lean back until my spine connects with his chest and his jaw is within kissing

distance. “It’s like you said—when you take me, neither of us will want it to stop.”

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

### Chapter 21

Blake

We make it back to campus just in time to throw some things into a bag and head out for the contest's stargazing date.

The tents are set up in a wide half-moon, with plenty of space in between tents to give the illusion of privacy. I say illusion because while the tents seem sturdy they are in no way soundproof. Any attempt at touching Alexis—which I want to, so badly, especially after last night—would have to be soundless, which goes decidedly against my need to hear her scream my name again.

I grab our bags from the trunk and dodge Alexis's attempts at taking hers off me. "I've got it, Sunshine."

"I can do it myself, really?—"

I shoot her a look that says drop it, and she knows better than to finish her sentence. She tries to hide them, all those labored breaths and winces, but anyone paying even a little attention to her can see she's in pain.

It's my fault. I was the one who begged her to go to the game with me, and for purely selfish reasons, too. We might not have won if she hadn't been there, but at least she wouldn't have extra pain to deal with. The jersey, beanie, mittens and even my coat weren't enough to keep her warm, and now I'm making her pay for my selfishness.

Stupid bastard.

One of the people in those god-awful Brookside U Communications shirts does a headcount. I guess we were the last to arrive, as she gives a sharp whistle that hurts my ears and motions for us to gather around.

She starts by reminding us about the cameras pointed at us always— can't forget this is a marketing ploy! —and then rambles on about the activities they've set up, but I'm not listening, because Alexis just wrapped her arms around my chest and laid her head on my shoulder, her body all cuddled up into my side. She's cold as always, but warmth spreads through my body in every place we collide, and a battalion of dragonflies swarm my stomach as I get thrown by her.

My love. My Sunshine. My Alexis.

"Sounds fun," Alexis mutters. Sleep drips like syrup from her lips, and her eyes stay closed like she's doing a little nap.

I shake my head with a smile. "Yeah, we're not doing that. Or anything else, until you've gotten some sleep."

I wasn't listening, so I have no idea what she was referring to, but it doesn't matter. She can barely keep her eyes open, and I'm not about to go full Weekend at Bernie's on her.

She starts to protest, but I feel her body relax beneath my grip to the point I'm convinced my arms are the only thing keeping her upright. One of my favorite members of the crew, Noah, peeks out from behind the camera before lifting his eyebrow in question, jerking his chin towards a slightly drooling Alexis. I nod and give a thumbs up. While the rest of the group peels off to do whatever, I swoop my girl off her exhausted feet and carry her to our tent, tucking her in before setting up



shop at its mouth.

I figure she'd be out for a few minutes, maybe an hour tops. Eventually someone comes to check on her again, and it takes some time to convince them that yes, she really is just that tired but she'll be up in no time. By the time Alexis's adorably groggy face peeks out through the tent flaps, dinner time has come and gone.

"Blake, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

I don't take my eyes off the pages. "Reading. I got bored and took one of your books. Don't worry—I'll return it undamaged."

"Not that, you weirdo. You didn't wake me! We've missed all the activities!" Alexis hisses like it's important somehow. It's not.

"Those were the physical activities, and not the ones we're good at," I say, and can't help but smile as I notice her glare. "And we weren't going to do those anyway. You're right on time for trivia, though, and stargazing after that."

"Oh." She considers for a moment, the anger and panic already fading from her face. "So we still have a shot."

"No harm done."

She nods slowly. "Is there any food left?"

I grin, and as I meet her gaze I'm awarded with a smile that tugs at something deep inside my chest.

Though we haven't said it, something has shifted between us, pushing us far away from the place we started. The Alexis I met that night would never have trusted me to

watch over her as she slept, and would have ran when I showed her every messed up part of me. But not anymore. This version of her is bolder, more trusting, with a flirtatious streak that brings me to my knees.

I showed her my scars, bared my soul, and she didn't even flinch at my darkness, enveloping me in her light so it no longer felt as heavy. I'm too much of a coward to ask her what it means, if she feels the same way I feel about her. But I know that what I feel for her isn't going away—it's only getting stronger.

Last night, Alexis told me she wasn't a saint, nor a goddess, but fuck do I disagree. I'd build a temple in her name, pray to her alone. I'd sacrifice myself at her altar just to show her the depths of my worship and lay my life in her hands. My mind and body are mere tools for her ritual, to aid her in that sweet gentle sin.

Where I'm chaos and oblivion, she is light and creation, a summation of all that is good in this world. And when she presses her lips against mine, soft and warm and promising, I know I'm nothing if I'm not hers.

“Let's go look.”

Surprisingly, we won at trivia by a landslide.

Alexis, it turns out, knows a lot more about celebrity gossip than I expected, and she didn't get a single literature question wrong. That's not unexpected; my girl reads a lot. No, the surprising part is that she looked strangely turned on by my knowledge of history, especially the more obscure topics. I file that little tidbit away for later.

Noah's camera stayed on us the entire time, much to the dismay of our fellow competitors, who didn't bother to hide their contempt. I get the feeling some of them have caught up to our little ruse, but now that we don't know what's going on ourselves, they have too little proof to rat us out. Good . If they tried, they'd have to

get through me first.

We're lying on one of those itchy picnic blankets that are made from real wool and smell like they've been in the university's attic for at least thirty years, the ground frozen solid underneath our bodies as we gaze up at the stars. Alexis, to my delight, is sprawled out on top of me, her leg hooked around mine with her ear pressed to my heart.

I hope she remembers it only beats for her.

"Do you ever think about what comes next?" she asks quietly. "After graduation, I mean."

The topic of the future has never been my favorite, the what-ifs stronger than my plans could ever be. I breathe in the scent of her, knowing the silent reassurance of having her near is enough to calm me down. "Sometimes. A lot, lately. I don't have a concrete plan yet, not like you and Levi do. But I know I'll be okay wherever I end up, as long as I've got you with me."

"You don't think you'll get into the NHL?"

"I'm not sure hockey is my endgame." I draw another deep breath, waiting for her to say something. I've never told anyone this before, nor have they asked. But leave it to Alexis to draw out my secrets like water from a well. "I always thought it was; I spent most of my life on the ice, so it's a logical next step. But ever since we went on our little road trip I've been mulling over everything I thought to be true, and I'm realizing I might not even love hockey that much in the first place. I loved the fact that it bought my mother's attention."

Alexis moves to look at me, those brilliant silver-blue eyes shining in the moonlight. "So what do you love?"

You. Only you.

My heart flutters at the thought, though I know it's true. I would give up everything I have for her, everything I ever wanted and more. It's her I want, her I need. Nothing else even comes close.

"This," I whisper. "Having you in my arms, feeling your breath on my skin. Knowing I will only ever be yours. It's heaven and it's torture and it is terrifying, but it's real."

Alexis sits up a little straighter until we are face to face. "You love me?"

"Is that bad?" Every scrap of air is ripped from my lungs and my mouth feels dry as a bone as I study her face. I've done it now; I've fucked up this perfect thing—the one perfect thing I have.

Slowly, she shakes her head. "No. I think I..."

Her voice trails off into the wind, but I don't mind one bit. I brush a stray lock of hair from her face to reveal her blush, and the sight of it makes me smile. "Don't feel pressured to say it, Sunshine. I won't be scared off so easily. Your pace, remember?"

Something shifts in her gaze, her irises growing dark and intense with wanting. Her fingers glide teasingly down my chest, following every ridge and plane through my sweatshirt. I know what she's up to the moment she glances around the campsite, looking for strays. The others went to bed more than an hour ago, leaving not a single camera behind.

I'm already rock hard by the time she climbs on top of me, my cock so dangerously close to her core. I know the feeling must be turning her on as well as she bites her lip, the sight so vulgar it makes me twitch against my zipper with a groan.

Her gaze shifts to my lips and before I know it I'm tasting her, too wrapped up in the moment to care about the open air and our peers being able to see us, about my insecurities and what-ifs.

Right here, right now, Alexis Moore is all I can breathe.

I kiss her hard enough I fear I might leave a bruise, but that fear is swiftly replaced by hunger as she rakes her teeth over my lower lip. Fuck.

What little brain I have left short-circuits as she does it again, her hips grinding against mine like she's begging for release. She tears herself off my lips and I have to keep myself from pulling her back in again, already missing her warmth and those little moans.

"Shit, Blake. You're big," Alexis breathes as she drags herself along my length. She saw it last night in the shower, I know she did. She made a whole show of looking at it as payback for the way I look at her. Still, it's different to feel it, I suppose.

Like the way I know exactly how she tastes, but have yet to feel her take me.

"You can take me, Sunshine. I promise." The words are nothing but a strangled groan; she's edging me so beautifully that I can hardly manage anything else. My hands grip her waist, holding her in place while I tilt my hips for better contact, those eyes ever-widening. My fingers dip below her waistband to edge her further only to make a tempting discovery. "No underwear? Fuck. You're killing me."

She bats her eyelashes so innocently I almost feel bad for the unspeakable thoughts racing through my mind. "I must have forgotten them. Oops?"

That blush creeps back in, her confidence waning. I grin at her shyness, wondering how she could ever doubt I want to worship every piece of her.

No problem. I plan to show her again and again until she learns.

### Chapter 22

Alexis

A warm and fuzzy feeling courses through my veins as I feel the effect I have on Blake first-hand.

He's rock hard underneath my touch, turned on beyond what I thought was humanly possible. And I thrive on it. I love seeing him like this, all hot and bothered and slightly possessive. All because of me. And that along with his confession?

Whatever walls I had left turned to ash.

I leave a trail of kisses down his throat, reducing the mountain of a man beneath me to a puddle. It doesn't take long for me to lose what little self-control I have and gently bite his shoulder, a shiver passing through the lowest part of my belly as he twitches against me. Blake mutters obscenities under his breath and I look up, wondering if I'd done something wrong.

Blake merely grins. "Do it again."

I happily comply. His fingers dig deep into my hips and I hope they leave a mark for me to look at and remember this moment. Because at this moment I am not the hockey captain's sister or the boring sick girl who never wants to go out. I am so much more than that.

I am Alexis Noelle Moore, and I am enough.

Enough to be desired, to love. Enough to take up space on this earth and claim it as my own. Enough, just the way I am.

A low growl rips from Blake's throat—guttural and needy. "If you keep this up we're going to be in big trouble."

"Promise?" I bite my lip for the sole reason of turning him on more. It works, too.

"Promise. Any more of this teasing and I'd have to haul your cute butt off this blanket and into that tent, and then I would have no choice but to make you pay for this torture by taking you nice and slow until you're begging me to come."

It's another tease, but it's so much more. It's a veiled question of are you sure? A quiet tell me what you want. And that only makes me want him more.

"Sounds like a you problem." I graze my teeth over his lower lip.

Blake grunts, and it's filled with such lust I've never heard anything as beautiful. "You forget these tents aren't soundproof. And when you come on my cock, Sunshine, you will be screaming my name loud enough for everyone to know you're mine."

"You're right, that does sound problematic." My voice is barely a whisper now, but I know he can hear every word when I say, "Let's do it anyway."

Blake doesn't have to be told twice. He's got us flipped in an instant, and within seconds I am hauled up into the air and cradled into his warm chest as he crosses the field in long strides. One word is all it would take for him to turn around, to carry me back to that blanket and the sweet nothings under the stars.

I stay far away from that word—I want every bit of him.



The moment my spine touches the air mattress in our tent I pull him down with me, unwilling to be apart for another second. He breaks away for only a moment, his hands pressing into the mattress on either side of my head, those gorgeous blue eyes piercing mine with a gentleness that makes me swoon. “Are you sure about this, Alexis?”

“I want you, Blake. All of you. So take me like I’m one of the girls on your roster—make me yours .”

It’s what I said when he first touched me, when he told me my first positive time should be more special than a random afternoon fuck. It can’t get more special than this, I think.

I pull him down for another kiss, and this time he doesn’t pull away. We peel off our coats in a frenzied tangle of limbs and as he tosses his sweatshirt to the side I pull his shirt off after it, letting my fingers roam free over the sculpted planes of his chest.

Fine. Maybe my tongue too.

There might also be some bite marks.

Blake grabs a hold of my wrists and pins them gently above my head before pausing, raising his brow in silent question. Is that okay?

I nibble my lip as I nod, sticking out my chest to urge him on. He holds my wrists with one hand, the other creeping slowly under the hem of the oversized sweatshirt I stole from his closet, and his gaze darkens as he notices there is absolutely nothing underneath.

As if forgetting his plan of taking me slow, he pulls the sweatshirt over my head and onto the heap of discarded clothes before running those heavenly calloused fingers

along my sides.

“Mine,” he breathes. Not in possessiveness—well, that too—but in overwhelming awe. It’s so sweet I laugh, a sound that’s instantly silenced when his lips crash against mine.

Distracted by my lips he doesn’t notice me undoing his buttons until I’m trying to tug down his jeans, eager to feel him inside of me.

“Patience,” he warns, but I can tell he is just as desperate as I am. Our taunting is less effective now, and we’re a tangled mess of limbs as we try to steal the last remaining clothes off the other. Even so, as soon as we’re rid of those pesky things he gently pushes me onto my back again, taking his sweet time cataloging every inch of me into his mind. His cock twitches with need and is dripping with pre-cum, but as I reach out for it he catches my wrist and pins it back above my head.

“Not tonight,” he says with a soft kiss on my forehead. “I’ll have my fun, I promise. Tonight is all about you.”

“It’s—” His lips crash into mine, shutting me up as his free hand starts a tantalizingly slow journey down my stomach. When he finally reaches my folds his fingers come out dripping with slick, my core throbbing in anticipation.

“So wet already. Guess you got yourself pretty worked up teasing me, huh?”

I move my hips into his touch, needing that sweet, sweet pressure he knows how to give so well. He lowers down to align his lips with my core, softly blowing air to the sensitive skin on my thighs. It’s torture, absolute torture, to lie naked with the hottest guy on earth and not have him inside of me—hell, he’s barely even touching me at all.

“Blake, I swear...”

He laughs at my glaring, his lips brushing the top of my folds in apology.

“I think I liked you better when you were biting me,” he winks, and I shoot him a look that says don’t tempt me.

But I don’t get to say the words out loud, because as soon as he sees my expression he swirls his tongue around my sensitive bud, my back arching as a ripple of pleasure shoots through me.

His hand splays out over the lower part of my stomach to keep me in place as he works my clit, as if I’d dare move away from his tongue and that sweet, sweet release that’s already building. I run my fingers through his brown curls and push him further down as the cusp nears and I plummet over the edge of pleasure. I’m vaguely aware of my sounds and volume, but I can’t bring myself to care.

Not now.

Not when I feel Blake align himself with me, his hard cock teasing my folds until it’s coated in my slick, part of the condom wrapper still balanced between his teeth. He spreads my legs further apart, hauling one of his shoulders before cupping my jaw in his hand.

“It’s only me, all right?” he says in the gentlest voice I have ever heard. “Just breathe and focus on my touch.”

He waits for me to nod before kissing me, ever so gently, his thumb drawing lazy hearts on my sensitive clit as he pushes inside of me. He goes slow, pausing every few seconds to let me adjust until he’s all the way in.

Blake's a big guy, I knew that going into this. But to know it and to feel it are two completely different things. He stretches me out so carefully, so enticingly, that I can't help but grow impatient. More. More. More.

"Look how well you're taking my cock, Sunshine," Blake says as he nips at my ear. "Still with me?"

I kiss him in lieu of an answer, making him groan.

"You need to say the words, Alexis."

"Yes," I breathe. "I'm okay. Keep going, please."

His lips move to my neck. "That's my girl."

Lazy thrusts fill my mind as I adjust to the sensations and before long I'm begging him to pick up the pace, being met with a wicked grin as he happily complies.

His lips whisper affections in my ear, and I zero in on the softness in his voice to push away the dark thoughts and memories that try and steal my bliss. Blake isn't Hudson. After tonight, Blake won't stalk or threaten me just for having had sex with him. Blake loves me, and I...I love him.

That is the thought I cling to as my climax builds, letting it carry me to the star-filled finish.

He's close, so close, and his thrusts gain force as we barrel toward the grand finale. His lips find mine, hard and warm and wanting, keeping me from crying out as I come. I clench around him, the sensation so delicious it makes me want another, and it's enough to send Blake over the edge with me. He mutters profanities as he finishes with a growl and slow, full thrusts before slumping down beside me.

We're breathless and sweating, but when I meet his gaze, he has the cutest, goofiest smile. "It's unfair how you can still be this gorgeous while spent. Have you ever considered giving the rest of us a chance?"

"Never. You need the competition to keep your ego in check," I smile, and kiss him again.

Blake rises, grabbing the pack of damp washing cloths from my bag—a tip provided by Alissa—before cleaning me up, peppering my body with kisses and compliments until his heart feels like an extension of mine and our cheeks are sore from smiling.

And when we're both clean and clothed and I'm too sleepy to keep my eyes open a moment longer, he curls up beside me and pulls me into his chest so I can hear his heart, letting it lull me to sleep.

In the fog between awake and asleep, I hear Blake's voice, soft and gentle.

"You are more than just a girl on my roster, Alexis," it says. "You're the girl."

### Chapter 23

Blake

Last night was a fucking dream.

It must have been. There is no way an angel like Alexis would want me like that, would ever moan so beautifully with my name on her lips and my cock buried deep inside of her. And yet she's here, snuggled up against my chest. The most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

“What are you staring at, weirdo? Do I have something on my face?” Alexis rubs her eyes with the base of her palm, trying to hide that cute little yawn I adore. Between the Vermont trip and yesterday, I've run her ragged, and I'm willing to bet good money that once I drop her off at her dorm she will sleep for a day straight.

“Seven layers of skin, roughly one-hundred-and-three freckles, and a smile as addicting as air,” I muse. “But nothing that doesn't belong there, no.”

Alexis raises a brow. “You counted my freckles?”

“I have to do something while you're hogging the blankets and I'm freezing my ass off, don't I?” I brush my lips against her velvet skin just to feel her, to have tangible proof this is real.

A soft laugh echoes through the tent, igniting a surge of flutters in my chest. I'll never get tired of that laugh. “You're built like a furnace, anyway. You don't need

blankets.”

I give a shrug that admits she’s right, but before I can say the words a trumpet plays some god-awful tune right outside our tent.

“I think that means we have to get out there,” Alexis says.

She’s right, though I don’t move. I never want to get out of this tent, out of this terrible, uncomfortable bed. I never want to let go of her. What if I will never get the chance to hold her again?

Alexis has already given me so much more than she owed. But if these past few months have taught me anything, it’s that I never want to be apart from her again. Going back to being friends, it would kill me. Having kissed her, felt her, loved her...Alexis Moore is the woman, the one who eclipses the whole of her gender.

I don’t want to spend another day where I’m not hers, where she’s not mine.

Rolling her eyes like she can read my mind, Alexis wriggles from my grip. I mourn the loss of her at once, and she makes it to the mouth of the tent before I can drag her back into my chest. The weak winter sun illuminates her face in a golden hue, accentuating the blush on her cheeks into a deep crimson.

I haven’t said anything suggestive yet, so there is only one thing that could bring out that adorable look: the sudden realization that an entire field of people heard her scream out my name last night.

Have they gathered into a judgy, gossiping mass? Are they staring at her like she’s lesser somehow?

Not on my watch.

I dive forward to follow Alexis out of the tent and in one smooth movement I sweep her off her feet, holding her with ease as I kiss her cheek. Surprise crosses Alexis's pretty face and she laughs, though whether that's the surprise or the nerves, I'm not sure.

"Too sore to walk," I say to our neighbors with a wink, and a laugh ripples from my chest as Alexis swats at my shoulder. I see the camera pointed straight at us, though, and know this visual could earn us a lot of votes.

Besides, there is no way they didn't hear us last night—best to own up to it. Alexis will forgive me for being an ass once she doesn't have to worry about tuition. I hope.

The stares of our competition follow us all the way across the field, making Alexis shrink under their weight. By the time we reach the picnic blanket from last night, a small breakfast waiting to be devoured, her face is buried in my neck to drown them out.

"Don't give them the satisfaction of seeing you cower, Sunshine." My lips brush against her hair, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of her head. "You outshine them all, and they know it. They don't stand a chance in hell of winning this. You and I...we're the only thing that matters now."

I gently set her down so her back is facing those fuckers. Maybe that way it's easier for her to forget them. Sitting opposite her, it sure makes it easier for me to stare them down.

"He's going to kill us."

I turn a bread roll over in my hands. If they were warm once, it doesn't feel like it.  
"Who is?"



“Levi,” Alexis says, her voice louder now. “There is no way this won’t spread around the school, and he’ll inevitably find out.” She rubs her eyes again, and for a moment I’m worried she’s about to cry. But her voice is steady when she says, “What a mess, huh?”

A knot forms in my stomach. “Do you regret it?”

“NO! No, don’t even think that, Blake.” Alexis leans forward to give me a reassuring kiss. “It’s just...Levi and Alissa set us up, but ever since things started to change between us...I don’t know, things are kind of weird right now.”

I pause, staring at the roll in my hands. I hadn’t even considered what effect me loving her for real would have on her relationship with them. Perhaps I should have gotten ahead of this thing before it could hurt her. “I’m sorry. I know how much your family means to you.”

“You mean just as much,” she says softly, and something in her voice makes me meet her gaze. “You’re mine, right?”

I nod, breathing out the last of my nerves as I look into her steadfast gaze. “Yours, always forever.”

### Chapter 24

Alexis

The cold December wind howls against our window, and I'm a little obsessed with it.

I'm finally caught up on schoolwork and decorating for Christmas, and with the change in weather bringing me a soreness like no other, I feel no guilt when I drop down on the couch with a book I've been itching to read and a hot cup of cherry tea. A new electric kettle mysteriously showed up on the counter after I broke the old one, with no one fessing up to it. Blake is currently my biggest suspect, though his poker face is immaculate.

Between classes and the contest and little detours with Blake, I'm exhausted. I have never left my dorm as much as I have these past few months, and I hadn't realized how badly I needed a quiet afternoon all to myself until now.

That does not mean I don't miss him, though. I do. Quite a lot. If he were here, his arms wrapped around my waist, his voice smooth as velvet whispering sweet nothings in my ear...this day would be perfect. The kind of moment you would find in a snow globe, to be preserved and cherished forever.

A high-pitched scream erupts from Alissa's room and within seconds she is leaping for the couch, her phone clutched in her hand.

"Lex! Lex look!" Alissa shoves her phone in my face, almost hitting me in the nose. I take it from her hand to avoid further injury.

The brightness is set to what feels like the surface of the sun, but it's hard to miss what she's excited about. It's an article detailing a paid internship with a teaching program in Scotland, with all travel expenses paid. The deadline to apply is tonight—I know, because Blake sent me the article last week.

“I saw that. Looks pretty cool.”

“You have to apply. It's Scotland! Rolling hills, sheep, wind-swept cliffs. It's so romantic,” Alissa sighs dreamily. “Besides, remember how obsessed you used to be with *Reign* ? You'd be able to visit the castle!”

I do remember that phase. Mostly because I never grew out of it. I tried to watch it with Blake when we were in Vermont, but I made the mistake of letting him point out everything historically inaccurate as part of the bargain. Turns out the only accurate thing about that show is that she was Queen of Scotland. “It's also very cold and rainy, and thus terrible for my pain levels. Not to mention it's an entire ocean away from you guys and Blake.”

“It's just a few months, Lex, and Levi will be gone with the NHL by then anyway. As for the other jock—how, exactly, does Blake factor into this?”

I shoot her a look. “You know how he factors in.”

“No, I don't. I know he's admitted he loves you, finally. I know that these past few years he's asked about you more times than I have patience for. But I haven't heard a peep from you about any of it.” Her blond curls shift as she angles her head, the pink tips already fading. “Don't get me wrong, I've seen the heart eyes and stolen glances. I noticed you're smiling again, more often and easily than you have in months. Clearly he's affecting you in some way, even if you're not sure how. And yet not a word.”

I pull my knees into my chest. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to talk to me like you used to,” Alissa says quietly. “We used to be best friends, Lex. And now it feels like we barely even talk anymore.”

That is true. I’ve barely been home, let alone by myself. And this isn’t the kind of thing you discuss over text or the phone; feelings are best discussed over tea while munching on freshly baked cookies. I’m not denying that I have neglected my twin and Levi, because I have. But not without reason.

After twenty-one years I finally have something to call mine. Something not related to my health or school or my siblings. Just...mine.

Sure, I might have gotten a bit carried away with this whole thing. But I refuse to feel bad for wanting to spend time with Blake, who has taken the time and patience to figure me out and learned to love me the way so very few people do. He is the warmth of spring after years of harsh winter, slowly coaxing me back to life.

“You’re right,” I admit. “I have been pulling away from you and Levi for a while now. Not because of you, but because I cannot figure out how to act around the two of you with Blake there.”

Alissa takes my hand with a squeeze, urging me on.

“You chose Blake because he was easy to convince, just hoping we would get along. But the truth is, I’ve been trying not to notice him for the past three years, since the first time he ever made me laugh. Because I knew that if I did, I would fall for him just as hard as I have.”

“You love him,” Alissa says, and I nod.

“A few weeks ago Levi told me that being with Blake was only going to hurt me, and though I tried to change his mind he’s refusing to let go of that belief. You, me, Levi—we’ve always been a single unit, and trying to balance that with what I have with Blake...it’s too much. I can’t figure it out.”

Alissa leans back, quiet for a long moment as she looks at me. “I love you, you know that right? But you have got to stop thinking so much, Alexis. Or you’ll never be happy.”

I fight the urge to hide my face in my hands, opting to sit on them instead as I grit out, “Gee, Lis. Thanks.”

My sister rolls her eyes, and it’s like I’m looking into a slightly older mirror. “To live your life to the fullest and truly be happy, you have to learn to be selfish. In the end, you don’t get points for keeping everyone but yourself happy; you will die just like everyone else, and that’ll be that. So screw Levi—hell, screw me. If we weren’t here but back home or in another state or whatever, would you still be reluctant and vaguely standoffish? Or would you proudly wear his number and make out in the hallways between classes?”

My sister has a point. I might have been working hard to leave Hudson in the past, but in doing so I have neglected to scold the part of me that cares too much what other people think of me, allowing her voice to grow. I will never be able to be fully present with Blake if I care about what others might think, what they might say. And that’s not fair. Not to me, but certainly not to Blake, who has quite literally turned his life upside down to accommodate me.

“Probably not the making out part. We tend to get carried away, not very PG.” I grin at the disgusted look on her face. Like she hasn’t told me worse. “But I do see your point. Blake and I deserve to have a real shot at making this work, without me sabotaging it to please everyone else. It is time for selfish Alexis to emerge and claim

her happiness as selfish Alissa has done before her.”

“Really, bitch? Selfish Alissa?” She throws a pillow straight at my head but I manage to duck just in time. No regrets. “You’re right, though. Selfish Alissa is here to stay. And she has company coming, so I’m kicking you out for the night. Thanks for the girl talk.”

She jumps up from the couch and makes her way back to her room, her bright pink fur-lined slippers clacking against the floorboards.

“I hate you.”

She throws up a heart sign above her head before slamming the door shut. “Go to him.”

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

Chapter 25

Blake

Sunshine

Can I crash at your place tonight?

Alissa kicked me out so she could bone in peace

Me

How considerate of her

And yes. I must warn you, though.

Cuddles are required.

What a tragedy...

We do what we must.

See you at home \*Kissy face emoji\*

I respect the hell out of Coach Tucker, but this might be the dumbest thing he has ever done.

We have no official games until after winter break, so when he got a call and took off a week early for personal reasons, he left us in charge of the junior team's training.

I was looking forward to this, eager to teach them all I know to help them get to the next level, but it's clear that me and Raf are the only ones willing to do this. Even Levi, usually a stickler for rules and professionalism, is goofing around more than he's actually playing. Either way, I don't feel bad about taking a break from it all.

Falling onto the bench in the sin bin, I tear off my helmet and slick back my hair with the sweat off my forehead. The ice is crowded with rowdy players, each one less motivated than the one before. But among them, one voice shouts louder than all, and he weaves through the crowd until both teams are on opposite sides. Raf is done trying to teach, it seems, and is settling for a friendly game instead. Smart.

It'll get their energy out, and in the process of playing against us they might pick up a trick or two. More importantly, it will reduce the risk of injuries by getting too many pucks to the head from playing helmet darts.

It's kind of inspiring to see Raf like this. Locked into the game, surveying the field for weak links, taking players aside to give notes so they won't feel ridiculed. I shouldn't be surprised, of course. Rafael is like a slightly younger version of Levi, all laser-focused with an unhealthy work ethic. To them, hockey is like breathing; it's the one thing they need to feel alive.

I used to feel like that, when my mind was on the NHL and I had nothing else to care about. But that was before I saw the game for what it really was to me: a tool to win my mother's attention, a desperate plea for her love.

I poured everything I had into the sport, foregoing friends and crushes and everything else kids are supposed to have, just to catch a glimpse of what a real mother would do. But she wasn't there. Never was. Only at important games did she show up, and



when I scored a winning goal I might see her crack a smile before she left again. It's so fucking sad to look back on. What a shitty way to raise your kid.

Being so young, I didn't fully realize the depths of her neglect. I loved her so much that I did everything she wanted without question, no matter how much I hated it. The only rebellion I ever showed was bringing Lucky home senior year, which is probably why she hates him. She didn't want me to love anyone but her.

Sucks to be her. She will never know what she's missing out on. With Lucky, with Alexis. With me.

The worst part might be how her parenting is still affecting me. I latch on to anyone offering even a sliver of warmth, believing they're my friend when they're not. Eric, Levi, half the guys on the team. Not Raf, though; he is the one true friend I have, if only because he's assured me he is without prompting.

Even the girls I took to my bed were nothing more than sexy placeholders, ways to feel the approval I've never been given, lapping up the scraps of love thrown my way. But lying next to them the nights were just as cold and lonely, like the warmth could never quite reach me.

That isn't to say it was all bad back then. Most of the staff stuck around for the majority of my childhood, and our housekeeper, Maria, practically raised me to the point of me calling her Mom for a while. I've been dropping the ball on calling her these past few months, I admit. Out of shame, mostly; I know I'm not the man she knows I can be, the man she raised me to become. I'm getting closer to being him, I know I am. But is it enough?

I should call her, make sure she's okay. Tell her how much I miss her. Then again, any hint of disappointment from her would crush me. Either way, she has a family, kids of her own. I should probably wait until after Christmas.

They are already putting those damn trees up across campus, the radio blasting Christmas songs at full volume. Right now, most of the students are preparing to go back home and spend the holidays with their families. But for me, Christmas means a big, empty house and frozen pizza. No fanfare, no gifts, no warmth. Just me, myself and I, and Lucky. That's something, I guess, though I have no doubt it will be just as depressing as any other year.

More, even, as I won't be seeing Alexis for two weeks. You know you're down bad when the thought of something so small makes you want to cry.

I jump as Raf bangs his fists against the plexiglass barrier between us. "Get off your lazy ass, Taylor. You gonna help us beat them or what?"

I rise, and with a smirk I dive in for the attack.

### Chapter 26

Alexis

When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold.

Not surprising, seeing as it's been absolutely freezing these past few weeks, and the old buildings on campus are poorly insulated. But when you're expecting the warm embrace of your lover, it's a disappointing way of waking nonetheless.

I drag myself out of bed, snatching Blake's hoodie off the floor to keep warm as I roam the halls looking for him. The top floors are mostly bedrooms, and the bathroom is empty, so I know he's in the kitchen even before I hear his voice.

Neither he nor Rafael spots me as they sit at the table in the corner, the beat-up wood dwarfed by their size. I'm about to greet them when I hear the latter say my name, and I duck behind the wall to listen in. What can I say? I'm nosy. People never say what they think of you to your face, after all. And on the off chance that Blake is playing me...I'd rather I know.

"Are you bringing Alexis home for Christmas?"

"There's nothing left for me to go home to," Blake says with an indifferent tone. How he can be so cavalier about a statement so sad is beyond me. "I'd ask her to go on a trip with me so I'm not alone in this place, but she and her family are big on Christmas traditions. I'm not making her choose between them and me, you know—especially not with Levi between us."

Oh. That's actually really sweet.

"Wait, so you're not going with her, either? Not even for a quick visit?" asks Rafael. "I figured you'd be leaving here together one way or the other, seeing as you're basically joined at the hip these days."

"If only I were that lucky," Blake says, and a warm feeling spreads through my chest at the sound. In all my planning I hadn't considered coming home with me was something he'd want; my other relationships never got this far. I guess Blake's not the only one new to this relationship thing. "But she hasn't asked me to go, and I won't pressure her."

Rafael scoffs. "Why wait for her to ask? Take matters into your own hands, show initiative. Chicks love that, right?"

"Alexis is not a chick, " Blake says, and there is a territorial kind of protectiveness in his voice that leaves me weak in the knees. "And there are things about her that are on a need-to-know basis. I promised her she would be the one who sets the pace, and I will honor that promise. But shit if I'm not dreading being apart from her for two weeks."

I'm not sure what I thought he was going to say about me, but this I did not see coming. Blake wants to come home with me for Christmas. Home, where we have nothing to prove to anyone. Where we can just be.

My dad is a sports guy, so he and Blake would get along fine. Mom is probably knitting him a scarf as we speak, expecting me to bring it back for him. They can be intense and overbearing, but they are good, loving people, so far off from what Blake has told me about his mother and the father who ghosted both of them. If he came with me, would it be overwhelming? Or would it be healing for him in a way I could never truly understand?

Footsteps echo off the top of the stairs and I know my cover is about to be blown to bits, so I fake a yawn and a stretch as I stumble into the kitchen with a half-hearted morning, boys .

Blake perks up the moment I step into sight, though he says nothing as I scavenge the kitchen for some plain toast and an apple. Even with my back turned towards the table I can feel their eyes trained on me, the tension in the air like a weighted blanket, as if they know I heard everything they said.

They very well could—I'm not exactly light on my feet.

I've just closed the refrigerator door when Eric and Levi slump against the island like they're experiencing a hangover from hell. There might not be a game this weekend, but Levi is usually very strict about his no drinking during the game season rule. Something must be off if he's making an exception.

"They sent out an email about changing the date activity for today," Blake says as I slide into his lap to munch on my toast. For a house with this many people, there is a serious lack of seats available. I'm not complaining, though, and from what I can feel beneath me, neither is Blake. "Apparently the ice on the pond is now thick enough to be safe, so they want to go ice-skating. As if this whole thing wasn't cliché enough."

His arm curls around my stomach for no other reason but to touch me and I lean back into his warm chest, savoring the feeling of having him close. I can feel Levi's glare like a burn on my skin, but I force myself to ignore it. "Look at it this way: I can't skate to save my life, so you'll have an excuse to touch me whenever you want."

"Is that a promise, Alexis?" Blake winks.

From the island, my brother groans like he's going to be sick, which makes Eric break out into a fit of laughter. "Trust me, Cap, they've done far worse. At least out

in the open they'll be forced to keep their clothes on, unlike that camping trip. Eh, Taylor?"

He laughs like he just made the most hilarious joke anyone's ever heard, but no one else thinks it's funny. Levi's spine has gone ram-rod straight, and Blake's muscles go taut underneath me—not in the fun way—as if he's waiting to be punched in the face. Rafael rises slightly, ready to catch Levi before he can get to us, anger radiating off his warm brown skin. He's not scared to stand up to my brother, then; that's good. Great, even. I'm glad Blake has someone willing to literally fight for him, protect him like he protects everyone else.

"Right! Haha!" I say sweetly. "Kind of like you and Mandy Trekker when you got caught in the greenhouses. Remind me, was that before or after Levi dumped her? Before, right?"

Yeah. I've been sitting on that one for a while.

Eric's eyes are big as saucers as they shoot to me and then back at Levi. To my brother's credit, he doesn't immediately deck him. Still, the look on his face must be terrifying, because Eric makes a break for it until the front door closes with a bang.

Levi places both hands on the counter, refusing to look at either of us as he manages, "Is what he said true?"

"Yes," Blake says flatly, taking my hand underneath the table. "But if you're going to be a baby about it, leave Alexis out of it. I came onto her."

Not true—very, very not true. Well, not entirely, anyway. Blake has been flirty and suggestive since the start, but that's just who he is. He's always kept it at a comfortable, take-it-or-leave-it level. It wasn't until I reciprocated that things got real between us. The first time he ate me out? Well, a case could be made for either of us.

But our first time having sex? That was me all the way.

Even from behind I can see the muscle twitch in Levi's jaw. "Lex, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Alissa's words ring through my mind. To live your life to the fullest and truly be happy, you have to learn to be selfish.

"Nope, not when you're like this. I have a date to get ready for." I rise, Blake's hand clutched in mine as I lead him towards the stairs. I know some kind of talk is in our future—it's inevitable, and exactly what I was trying to avoid this whole time. But I plan to put it off for as long as I can, and I definitely don't plan on having it while he's in such a childish mood.

"Taylor?" Levi says in the same tone, but Blake just shrugs.

"Sorry man, I can't." And as if he can't stop himself from irking my brother more, a shit-eating grin spreads on his face. "I have to get Alexis ready for our date."

I sit on a bench at the edge of the frozen pond, trying to work up the courage to join the others on the ice.

The others shoot me dirty looks, like they think I'm too stuck-up to join in on the second-to-last date of the contest. In truth, I'm just too much of a coward to get onto the ice.

Blake is skating around, stomping his feet along the edges to prove the ice is sturdy enough to hold us all. He looks so handsome bundled up in his big coat and scarf. I might even say cute, but that word feels wrong when used on someone built like a house. Cute is what you call a kitten or a puppy or two otters holding hands. A tall, jacked hockey player? Smokin' Hot comes closer.

“The ice is rock-solid, I promise.” Blake halts at my feet, extending both hands to help me up.

I hesitate. “What if I fall and bring you down with me? What if either of us breaks something? Your coach would kill me if I took out his star player.”

“Please. Like I would ever let you fall,” Blake says. He takes my hands, holding them tight while he skates backward, forcing me onto the ice. I press my eyes shut, preparing for the plunge into the ice-cold water. It doesn’t come.

I raise a brow, forcing myself to look at him as I question, “Never? Not even fall in love?”

The ice cracks and wheezes beneath my skates, but it doesn’t break. Still, I try not to look at it, hoping that as long as I can’t see it I can pretend we’re on solid ground.

Blake pulls me closer, closing the gap between our bodies until I’m pressed flush against his chest. “Falling implies pain. When it comes to you, I prefer a controlled descent.”

I place my palm on the hard planes of his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart even through his coat. “A controlled descent? Controlled by who?”

“You. Always you.”

With a laugh I grab a fistful of his scarf and pull it down, bringing his face closer to mine.

“Well you better be prepared to catch me, Blake, ‘cause I’m already falling,” I breathe with a smile, and brush my lips against his until the frustration gets the better of him and he kisses me, hard and rough and wanting.



I let myself get lost in his kiss, pushing anything not related to the two of us out of my mind. There are years of longing between us, years of stolen glances and little touches, and Blake kisses like he's making up for every one of them.

To be honest, I half-expected Levi to show up here and intimidate Blake into keeping his hands off me. I have never seen him so needlessly angry, especially over something as trivial and childish as this.

I'm an adult, fully capable of making my own choices. Levi knowingly and willingly set me up with a hot, strapping athlete with the intention of us faking a relationship and making it look real. What did he expect would happen? That I was going to be a celibate nun? Please. He and Lis might as well have shoved us into a candle-lit hotel room and handed us a box of condoms.

That sounds pretty good, actually.

"Do you think Lucky and I could stay at your place tonight?" Blake asks. I look up into his bright blue eyes, at the quiet sadness they hold. My heart clenches at the sight. "I think your brother might kill me in my sleep if he gets the chance."

"Levi's squeamish around blood, so you'll probably see him coming," I say, though the look on his face tells me my lame joke isn't working. "Don't worry, I'll talk some sense into him."

Blake's thumb runs along my cheekbone. "You know, this might be the only upside of not being with you during winter break; he might warm up to the idea of us. If he doesn't change your mind about me first."

"You really think I can be persuaded that easily?" I scan his face, searching for any hint that he's joking. Does he really think that little of me?

“I hope not,” Blake says quietly. “But we never really discussed...”

He pulls me out of the way just in time to avoid a collision with a couple who clearly need their eyes checked. Noticing the cameras drawing closer, Blake leads me closer to the center of the pond and twirls me to avoid suspicion, though more than one of the other couples roll their eyes at us. Afraid to be upstaged, I guess.

“I know I said I wouldn’t be scared off by your silence, Alexis, and I still mean that.” His hand moves to rest on my jaw, his thumb running along my cheekbone. “But I need to know if you see any kind of future for us as a couple. Because if deep down you can’t see yourself falling in love with me...I’ll honor my promises, but I would need to take a step back from you. To protect my heart.”

I meet his gaze, taking in the heartbreak in his eyes, the five-o-clock shadow on his jaw. Like a mantra, I hear my sister’s voice in my head. To live your life to the fullest and truly be happy, you have to learn to be selfish.

Those gorgeous blues are still staring at me as I raise my hand to his chest and slide it to my favorite place—his heart. “If I didn’t love you, Blake, I wouldn’t be here with you now. I would have run, hard and fast, and hid in my room like I used to. I never would have had sex with you—especially not in public, and you would never have known who I am. I might not be able to say the words yet, but the feelings are there. I am yours, Blake Taylor, as you are mine.”

Relief washes over his body as he blows out a breath, the tension easing from his muscles until that goofy grin appears in its place.

Did he think I was leading him on? That it would be too hard to fall in love with him? Because it’s not hard at all. The hard part was resisting it all those years, pretending there was no invisible string pulling us together.

I glide my hand up to his neck and pull him down, raking my teeth over his lower lip before kissing him.

Blake is mine. I am his. Irrevocably and unconditionally his.

“Aren’t you going to ask?” I whisper against his lips, but his fingers tangle my hair, pulling me closer to him with every breath until we’re forced to come up for air.

“Ask what, Sunshine?” Blake asks, and adds with a wink, “If it’s a proposal you’re after, you’ll have to wait a bit longer.”

I roll my eyes, and his grin gets wider at the sight. “To go home with me, weirdo. To spend Christmas together like one of those couples that can’t be apart for more than five minutes. No presents, no obligations. Just you, me, and the entire Moore family doing whatever they can to embarrass the hell out of me.”

“Are you sure you trust me enough to bring me home with you, Alexis? I mean, for all you know I could be an ax murderer.”

I smile at the callback to our first date, when I jumped out of his moving car and he told me he was mine and mine alone. I took it as a joke when he said it, of course I did. There was no reason for me to think, to hope he meant it. That night, I wanted to get away from him as fast as I could, afraid of my feelings and the possible dangers of having him in my life. But now...I don’t want to be without him for a second.

“The only danger of this trip would be you and Levi sharing a car. But that can easily be avoided by driving up together, just the two of us.” The thought of those two giants having to be polite to each other, handing one another snacks and juice boxes while cramped in a small space, is enough to make my smile bigger. They would not even make it halfway before pulling over to fight.

A shy smile pulls at his lips, and for a fleeting moment, I think he might look away. “Can you believe I’ve never been invited to meet someone’s parents before?”

“Then this will be a first for both of us.” I pull his scarf again, pulling him closer and closer until his breath tickles my nose. “You better be a keeper, Taylor.”

He grins, and the sight of it steals my breath. “Sunshine, you and I both know I can be the one. ”

### Chapter 27

Blake

Despite my careful planning, Alexis and I pull up to the house at the same time Levi and Alissa do.

We took a different route, made extra stops to get Alexis' favorite snacks and tea, and even had lunch at a roadside diner. Hell, I pretended to be lost just to avoid the guy, wanting to preserve the peace and lightness Alexis brings to my day. But it seems like some problems must be faced head-on.

Anger flashes in his eyes as he glances my way, though he doesn't say a word. He merely grabs his bag from the trunk and heads inside. Alissa is at my car before I can say a word, blocking the door so Alexis can't get out.

"You better watch your back, Taylor, 'cause that guy is pissed. " Alissa blows out a breath like she needed to get that off her chest. "Misplaced aggression if you ask me—I think you guys are great for each other. I mean, she's out of your league, but you make it work."

This might be the first time Alissa has said anything remotely nice about me. It's an odd feeling, and I cannot shake the thought that it might be some sort of trap. But the approval from Alexis's best friend is nice either way.

"Thanks, Lis. I think we're pretty amazing, too. Not sure why Levi suddenly resents me for doing what he asked of me."

I run a hand through my hair as I glance at the idyllic mountain cottage that is Alexis' childhood home. Any minute now I will be shaking hands with her dad, meeting her mom. How is a boyfriend supposed to act in this situation? Is it normal for my hands to be so sweaty? Will they like me, or is Levi in there now spreading lies about me?

"Slow down, hotshot. We asked you to fake date our sister, not actually fall for her. Your little stunt at the stargazing thing didn't go over well with him." A loud rapping sounds from the passenger side window as Alexis tries to open the door, but Alissa just flips her off. "Levi thinks you're using Lex like a puck bunny without her realizing, which is just insane. And very degrading to our sister, I might add. I tried telling him you're down bad and disgustingly smitten, but he wouldn't have any of it. I tried everything, but this one's on you. He'll be watching you like a hawk."

Slowly, I start to nod. Levi thinks I'm not serious about Alexis; this I can work with.

"Thanks for the heads-up," I say. "Now, would you mind unblocking that door so I can go embarrass myself in front of your family?"

Alexis's childhood home is the very opposite of mine.

A cute cottage in a wooded mountain area, where kids play in the streets without fear and gardens sprawl out in every direction. The house itself, though tiny in comparison, is filled with warmth and plants and photos. It's the kind of pleasant clutter that makes you feel at home the moment you step inside, like there are actually people living here instead of it being a showroom parading as a house.

"Bet you can't guess which one is me," Alexis says as she catches me looking at one of her baby photos on the wall. Well, hers and Alissa's, as they are rarely not in the same frame.

"Of course I can," I tell her, and point towards the baby with the same adorable

freckle under the eye as she has. “The cutest baby to have ever been born.”

Alexis rolls her eyes, but I know I’m right.

A short, plump woman rushes into the room wearing a simple yellow T-shirt and pants, her long curly blond hair pulled up into a ponytail. I don’t think I have ever seen my own mother wear something so...casual, normal . It’s very clear Alexis grew up in an environment far different than mine, because as soon as the woman spots me I’m engulfed in a warm hug.

It's odd and foreign and strange, but I never want it to end.

“Mom, this is Blake. Blake, meet my mom.”

“Mrs. Moore, it is so nice to finally meet you.” I stumble over the words, not at all how I practiced them in my head, thrown by the hug and the warmth this woman extends to a total stranger.

“Oh please, call me Nora!” she pulls away with a dazzling smile, the same faint dimples on her cheeks that Alexis has. Her arms linger on my biceps as she glances me up and down, and with a wink aimed at Alexis she says, “You picked a handsome one, love.”

I grin at the blush that creeps into Alexis’s cheeks. The sight brings butterflies to my stomach every single time—it’s like crack to me. But then again everything about her is.

Reaching into a tote bag I pull out the box of chocolates I bought this morning. “It’s not much, but I brought this as a little thank you for allowing me to stay in your lovely home this Christmas.”

“Oh love, you shouldn’t have!” Nora gasps as if I’d just handed her a huge envelope of cash, and promptly hugs me again. Something tells me this will be a strange, strange week for me. “Bill! Come meet Lexi’s boyfriend!”

Boyfriend. The term is correct, yet so foreign to me it might as well be a different language. I have never been a boyfriend before. It feels like a title that must be earned; something that comes with a great amount of responsibility. It’s probably not a good sign that I do not know what those responsibilities are.

A man slightly taller and leaner than Nora steps into the room. How these two managed to create the absolute unit that is Levi Moore is beyond me, but I don’t have much time to ponder as Mr. Moore gives my hand a too-firm shake and a clap on the shoulder.

“Blake, is it? Nice to meet you, son. Impressive goal average.”

It seems Alexis has been gossiping about me to her parents. The thought alone gives me a disgustingly fuzzy feeling. “Thank you, sir. Though it’s all due to your son’s leadership?—”

Mr. Moore waves a hand to cut me off. “Drop the formalities, boy. You’re among family. Call me Bill.”

Family. I turn the word over in my mind. Much like boyfriend, it feels distant and foreign, but also...comforting. Like I belong here. Like I am accepted for who I am, not how I play. Like they want to hear about me, and get to know me instead of the Brookside Badgers’ Blake Taylor.

I am not sure how to respond, so I’m glad when Bill stalks back towards the kitchen without giving me the chance to say anything. Alexis makes a tiny sound before pulling me down a hallway and into the dining room; this house is bigger than I



thought.

“They like you,” she says as she fixes my collar. I’m not ashamed to say I dressed up for this trip, trading my hoodies for button-ups and sweaters. Family is everything to Alexis, and if I want to be with her, I’ll need to win over her parents. “I can tell. They’ve never been this welcoming of a partner my siblings brought home. Aside from Lottie, of course.”

A crease forms between my brows. I figured they were simply kind and welcoming people, warm to everyone they meet. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. First year of college Alissa brought home this guy. Nothing wrong with him, but Dad did not say a word to him the whole week. He left early, and they broke up before he even got home.” Alexis holds my gaze, her fingertips brushing my jaw. “That wouldn’t have been us, but...I’m really glad they like you.”

Despite my best efforts, I can barely get a bite down my throat.

I may have my Sunshine by my side, but her brother sits right across from me, his eyes practically dripping with anger. If we had been anywhere else I would have called him out on his childish behavior, told him to fight me to get it out of his system so we could all move on. But I don’t think that would go over well with Bill and Nora, and I need their approval more than Levi’s.

Alexis gets in a few great kicks under the table, though.

It is a shame that I barely get to eat. When I was young my mother dragged me to a great many boring Michelin restaurants, and Nora’s cooking is better than anything they served. I should treasure this meal, savor every bite. But I’m not sure if I can keep it down.

Bill and Nora, visibly thrilled their kids are home for the holidays, do not let a single beat of silence fall the entire meal. I listen intently as Alissa talks about her classes, upcoming expositions, and projects she's working on—who knew she was the person responsible for putting a host of crickets in the administrative building?—but it isn't until the focus shifts to Alexis that I really get into the conversation. I just love hearing her talk. Really, she could be reading an IKEA catalog and I wouldn't object. Depending on the day, I might even get off on it.

She brushes off their questions, however, and I'm not sure why. There is no mention of her stress, no mention of Hudson or the contest or anything other than classes are fine. I thought she was much, much closer to her parents, but if she's not even letting them in...it's not my place.

Nora notices her silence, though, as she doubles down on her efforts to talk with her daughter. "How did the two of you meet? I don't think I've heard the story."

Alexis's cheeks turn bright red as she stammers, "Well, uhm..."

"We actually met right before Christmas freshman year," I say, smiling as Alexis gives my thigh a grateful squeeze under the table. "Levi here sent a puck flying straight into my head, and before I could yell at him about it I heard this laugh—clear and happy and melodic. I followed the sound only to find Alexis sitting in the stands with a book, laughing at me. I don't think she remembers that day, but I do. It was then that I knew I was a goner. It took her a few years to even notice me, but I would have waited eons more as long as it ended with her hand in mine."

Alexis moves her hand up my thigh as she curls up into my side. I brush a kiss to the top of her head, ignoring the quizzical look Levi shoots our way. I'd set out to try and convince him of my intentions with Alexis, but honestly, there are much better uses of my time. Like trying to get this boner down before this dinner gets more awkward.

“That’s so romantic!” Nora sighs. “Isn’t it romantic, Bill?”

He mumbles something noncommittal before turning to Levi, clearly still getting used to me being here. It’s fine, though. Winning their trust and approval will take time. The fact that they haven’t kicked me out or flat out ignored me is more than I could have hoped for.

I turn focus back on my food as Levi and his dad talk, making an effort to smile and nod as Levi talks about his classes and experiences as captain of the hockey team, not realizing this sets them up to talk to me until it’s too late.

“Our Alexis tells me you want to go into the NHL like Levi,” Bill says, staring at me with the same intense eyes he passed on to his kids. “Do you think you’re ready for that kind of commitment?”

I sit up straighter. “Very much so, sir. But while I love hockey, I no longer think the NHL is the right path for me.”

Alexis goes still at my side like she hadn’t expected me to pivot from my plan to go pro, despite me telling her so that night under the stars.

I take her hand, lacing her fingers in mine as I dodge Levi’s resentful look. “You see, your daughter is a wonderful teacher, even when she’s not trying to be. Among other things, she’s taught me that I deserve to live for myself. But more importantly, she’s taught me that it’s never too late to change.”

Alexis squeezes my hand, grounding me in the here and now. “I’m not proud of my past, and there are things I’ll be dealing with for a while yet, but the moment I first saw Alexis I knew I had to better myself to someday be deserving of her. I used to tell people that my major was a random pick, fearing they would hold such a nerdy topic against me, but I really enjoy history. I’ve been toying with the idea of

becoming a teacher myself. A hockey coach, perhaps, if the itch to play sticks around. But I don't think that pursuing hockey full-time would be fulfilling to me in the long run."

I have spent a long time with these thoughts, yet the words sound bizarre coming from my lips. Maybe because I spent a few hours perusing the online Thesaurus so I would not look like a complete idiot in front of Alexis's parents, or because I'm still sifting through what is truly me and what is my mother's influence. It doesn't matter, though; it is the truth, and I feel lighter admitting it out loud.

Looking around the table, it is clear that no one saw my answer coming. Levi is staring at me still, but his gaze is more confused than angry now. Nora and Alissa say nothing as they glance at each other, and Alexis's grip on my hand is so strong I no longer feel my fingers.

After what feels like a lifetime of silence, Bill leans back in his chair, his broad arms crossed over his chest as looks at me. "That sounds like an awfully rational and mature decision. One I admit I did not see coming from someone your age."

"Thank you, sir," I say, and before I can stop myself my eyes find Alexis and that lovely silver-blue I fell in love with. "But I can't take too much credit. I have a great influence."

My heart flutters as she leans in to kiss my cheek. "That makes two of us."

### Chapter 28

Alexis

After dinner, my parents reveal they have made plans for the night, leaving us home alone. It has become a Christmas Eve tradition, them going out for drinks and a movie, giving us the space and freedom to host a small party and reconnect with old friends.

And so, a few texts and a bonfire later, I sit in Blake's lap by a roaring fire, watching as the people I grew up with move around the garden like nothing has changed at all. Though for me, nothing is the same.

A year ago to the day, I sat alone in my room overlooking the garden, like an outsider looking in on a world she no longer belonged to. I had just been diagnosed with Fibromyalgia, and the Hudson issue was still fresh, making it so it felt like not a single part of the old me remained.

I was still in the throes of grief over my old life, the old me. I had no idea that a few months later I would be set up with Blake, no idea that it was possible for me to come alive again.

I'd been right—the old me was dead and gone and now finally buried. But the new me is so much better.

A too-familiar head of black curls moves through the crowd, slipping through the sea of plants and trees and bodies with ease. Levi sits opposite us, his back turned to her.

Yet he senses her the moment she steps through the gate between our houses, jumping to his feet to look for her. A moment passes in heavy silence, the world moving almost in slow motion, and then they are wrapped in each other's arms, my brother's face buried in the crook of her neck.

"Who is that?" Blake whispers in my ear, and it's so unexpected that a shiver runs down my spine.

I lean deeper into his chest to allow him a better view—okay, also to steal his warmth. The snow might not be plenty, but it sure is cold as balls. "Charlotte. Lottie. She's my best friend aside from Alissa. She and Levi have this on-and-off kind of thing that is actually always on because they can't stay away from each other. I guarantee you, they will be making out within the hour."

"She must be special," Blake murmurs. "I've never seen the guy this...vulnerable. Shy, almost."

"She is. They have been together since we were fourteen, I think? Inseparable. If she went to college with us as planned I'm convinced they would have eloped by now. Me and Lis have a bet going that it'll happen, Dad's in on it." I pluck the marshmallow from my stick and tear it apart for us to share, almost burning my fingertips in the process.

"He loves her." Blake's words are a statement, not a question. Anyone who can see knows what it is between them, though love might even be an understatement for what they have. It's adorable and disgusting and, if it's anything like what I feel for Blake, addicting and irresistible.

I stuff my face with sticky marshmallow fluff. "Very much so, yes."

Blake's hands, resting on my hips, snake to my stomach before pulling me tight

against him. His lips brush my cheek as he whispers, “I know the feeling.”

“Me too, Blakey-bear,” I say, my eyes flitting to his lips. A roguish grin spreads on his face before he leans in and claims me with a kiss. The marshmallow left a sticky residue and I graze my teeth over his lips to claim every bit of the sweetness, feeling the effect right beneath my core.

It takes a lot of willpower not to drag him to my bedroom to show me exactly what he’s feeling.

“Lexie!” A high shriek comes from my side and I barely have time to tear myself off Blake’s sticky lips before Lottie throws her arms around my neck. “I missed you! Is this him? It is, isn’t it? Wow, you weren’t lying.”

You might think she’s drunk, and you might even be right. But alcohol or not Lottie has always been this way—loud, bold, and honest to a fault. It’s part of why we work so well; Lottie has no problem saying everything I’m not bold enough to say.

Blake smirks. “More gossip, Sunshine? You know, one of these days you have to share what you’re telling these people lest I disappoint them.”

Lottie laughs. “Oh, she just told me you’re a handsome nerd whom she can’t keep her hands off of.”

Classic Lottie.

My cheeks are burning and I shoot her a look that says to stop talking, but she merely snuggles closer with a smile.

Blake extends his hand, the muscles in his forearms flexing with the movement. The sight has me biting my lip; arms and forearms are kind of my thing. “I’m Blake. A

pleasure to meet you, Charlotte.”

“Likewise! I have to go find Alissa but I will see you two later—much to discuss.” Lottie makes a gesture that says I’m watching you before taking my brother’s hand and dragging him deeper into the garden.

The music changes to a 00’s banger and loud cheers erupt among our friends as they crowd to dance and sing along. I make a mental note that we should send a box of chocolates to our neighbors as an apology for the noise.

“May I have this dance?” Blake asks, and I can’t help but smile as I rise from his lap.

I take him by the hand, leading him to the unofficial dance floor. “You may.”

The warmth of the dance floor takes me by surprise. Not just the physical warmth—though that too—but how everyone cheers as we join them, welcoming us with hugs and smiles. These are Alissa and Levi’s friends, mostly, and I don’t remember spending much time with any of them.

I saw them often, sure; I used to follow my siblings around and read while they did sports or hangouts. But I don’t think I ever had any real conversations with these people, so why are they so kind to me now?

Must be the alcohol.

I should have paid more attention in that dance class, as the best moves I have to show are the backpack kid dance and a routine from the second Mamma Mia movie. Either way, Blake doesn’t seem horrified, so I must be doing something right.

The snow picks up again, harder this time, and I bury myself in Blake’s arms to ward off the cold. It doesn’t work.



“Let’s go inside,” he whispers in my ear, and I have never heard anything sexier.

The sitting and dining rooms are filled with drunks and couples making out, so I lead Blake up the stairs to my room. I used to share one with Alissa, but when our parents redid the loft space and an extra room popped up, Alissa claimed it at once. All the better; her trophies were starting to bum me out.

Blake closes the door behind him, and the room shrinks three sizes. Even on opposite ends of the room we are close, so close. I want to kiss him, touch him, feel his hands on my skin and have my name on his lips. But I don’t move.

He peruses my bookshelves, the used books smelling heavenly of decaying paper, his finger touching the spines as he goes. I drop down on my bed, pulling my knees up to my chest.

The music from the garden is so loud it might as well come from my speaker, but I’m grateful for it. I focus on the steady rhythm of the bass line to keep me afloat, grounding me in the moment as I work up the courage to ask what I’ve been wanting to ask for weeks now.

“I want you to teach me how to fight.”

Blake turns to face me, his surprise written all over his features. “To fight? Why?”

“So I can protect myself. So I’m not completely helpless when…” I twirl a lock of my hair, the knot in my throat keeping me from finishing my sentence. I bite my tongue to keep the tears at bay, but I know I can’t hold them off forever.

Blake must notice, as he moves to crouch before me, taking my freezing hands in his. “If you want to learn, I will be happy to teach you, Alexis. But I promise I will never let anything happen to you.”

“You can’t promise that, Blake,” I say softly. “This world isn’t as black and white as you guys think it is. Danger isn’t always fists and weapons—sometimes it’s sweet words and spiked drinks.”

His hand moves to my cheek and I lean into it, craving the comfort. “Are you saying he...?”

“By the time I came to, I was powerless to stop him.” White-hot tears escape my lids, burning my cheeks like acid. Fire spreads through my lungs, leaving nothing in its wake, but I feel like I can finally breathe again after holding my breath for fourteen months.

I never told anyone this part—not even Alissa. I didn’t know how to. I guess I always figured if I pressed down the memory far enough, pretended it didn’t happen, that I would forget it did.

But it did happen, and I can never truly destroy those memories.

“I never want to feel that powerless again. I can’t—go through that again.” I forcefully wipe the tears off my face with the sleeves of my lavender knit sweater.

Telling someone, saying it out loud, seems to have reopened that wound yet lessens the burden. I don’t feel judged for my tears, though. If anything, my tears are a testament to how safe and loved I feel right now.

Blake looks at me, those bright blue eyes swirling with sadness and rage and a helplessness I know all too well. I know the feeling. “I’m so sorry this happened to you, Alexis.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” I say quietly. “Will you teach me or not?”

A muscle twitches in Blake's jaw as he nods. His eyes have gone softer now, taking in every inch of my face, my eyes. "I'll teach you everything I know, and everything I don't. But not tonight. Tonight, I want you to tell me what it was like to grow up here."

He smiles, a soft, loving thing, and I look at him for a long moment, mapping every inch of his face so I can cling to his image when my thoughts go dark. The lump in my throat refuses to shrink, the tears still on stand-by, but I'm thankful for his effort to get me to think of something positive. It's clear I'm not over it in the slightest—I should probably get a therapist after all of this dies down—but I refuse to let it ruin our first Christmas together.

"Well, if you want the full experience, I think we might as well start here." I wipe my cheeks again and reach down to the foot of the bed, where two carefully wrapped gifts are labeled either Alexis or Blake. Checking the tag, I hand him the one with his name. "It's our Christmas Eve gift from Mom and Dad. It's a family tradition from when we were little."

"And...I got one?" Wonder shines in his eyes like a little kid on Christmas morning. I know he said his mother isn't maternal in the slightest, but I don't think I had a clear idea of how deep that neglect ran until we came here.

The way he kept thanking Mom for cooking and did the dishes to pay her back, like doing something out of love is a concept he's never heard of. Or how he keeps checking in with me to make sure he isn't breaking some unspoken rule or the way he keeps calling Dad 'sir' while the latter really, truly hates formality. It's like he's trying to prove himself and his worth at every turn, trying to earn a place at our table. It's sad that he thinks he has to earn it in the first place.

I smile, my cheeks still damp with tears. "Of course you get one, weirdo. You're part of this family too."

He peels the tape off the shiny paper to reveal black and red plaid fabric. I see Mom chose to go for a classic scheme this year.

He looks at me expectantly, and I unwrap mine to show him. “We match! We all do. Mom likes that cliché Christmas movie scene of the whole family in matching pajamas on Christmas morning, so she gifts us matching sets every year.”

“That’s adorable,” Blake says. He holds out the pajama pants, and I can only hope they fit. I had to guess his size. “How about we try these bad boys on and you pick a movie for us to watch? I have no interest in going back out into that blizzard.”

Blake is exaggerating, of course, but the snow has picked up pace. It doesn’t stop my siblings or friends from partying, doesn’t even slow them down. But for the first time in many years, I don’t feel sad about missing out.

Because I have something right here that is just as special.

### Chapter 29

Alexis

Bright winter sunlight streams through the window, reflecting off the fresh layer of snow outside.

Blake's arm is wrapped tight around my stomach, protecting me even in sleep. I don't want to move, to wake him, but I'd also rather not pee myself. I carefully maneuver out of his arms, sliding one of my old stuffed elephants in my place so he's less likely to wake up, and make a break for it.

I make it to the tiny bathroom just in time, and when I step back out I'm too awake to go back to bed. I'd probably wake Blake if I go back to get my phone, so I decide to leave it and find something else to do downstairs.

Of course, going downstairs is mistake number one. My mother is like a bloodhound, sensing the exact moment you wake up so she can rope you into helping her do whatever. This morning, it's baking cinnamon rolls from scratch. Judging by the burnt smell, she desperately needs the help.

"Good morning," I chirp, and round the small island to kiss her cheek. She's wearing the same pajamas I am, but she paired it with a truly awful knit Christmas sweater of a koala in a Christmas hat with the text "have a koala-ty Christmas" stitched around it. I hope she didn't make any for us.

Mom smiles. "Good morning, love. I'm having some trouble with the cinnamon rolls,

can you take a look?"

A cloud of smoke escapes the oven as I open it, the poor rolls burnt to a crisp. The settings on the oven look fine, so she probably messed up the recipe again.

"I'll do the baking, you set up for breakfast?" I don't wait for her to answer as I start cleaning the counter and grab the ingredients—it's a full re-do. "Where's dad?"

All my life Dad has been an early riser, some days not even making it until sunrise before he left his bed. Not seeing him first thing when I wake is bound to make me worry, especially when he's not with Mom. If that man ever sleeps in, humanity is screwed.

"He's next door checking in on Charlotte and Clint, seeing if there's anything we can do," Mom says quietly. Clint is our neighbor and Lottie's dad. My parents are incredibly close to him, and I know the impending loss of him must be hitting them hard. "I don't think he'll see another Christmas."

I shake my head. "Poor Lottie."

"Yeah, the poor girl's lost too much for her age." Mom grabs a stack of plates and disappears into the dining room. For a moment I swear I hear her snifle, but then the sound of thundering footsteps on the stairs drowns out everything else.

Glancing through the archway I watch as Blake pauses in the middle of the living room. Dad stays up on Christmas Eve to place the presents under the tree and put up a few extra decorations, and it seems it doesn't go unnoticed. His eyes are big as he takes it all in, the wonder in them almost childlike. Then he smiles to himself and keeps walking.

I go back to shaping the cinnamon rolls, pretending I didn't see him.

“Good morning, Sunshine.” Blake presses a kiss to my temple before leaning on the counter. “Are the others up already?”

“Mom and Dad are. Lis and Levi are probably hungover. If we’re lucky, Dad will wake them up by banging pots and pans.” I smile at the memory of him doing just that last year.

“I’d pay good money to see that.”

I laugh, but before I can say anything Dad appears at the back door and steps inside, pulling the hat from his head at once. Mom steps into the kitchen as if summoned by the sound, and they lock eyes for only a moment before Dad gives a shake of his head.

“Now the girl’s come down with something, too,” he says gruffly. “I’m telling you, Nora, it’s that damn curse.”

Blake leans in to whisper, “Curse?”

“When Clint bought his house he and Dad did some construction in the yard. Found a headless doll. Dad wanted to rebury it, but Clint threw it out. Dad maintains the doll had a curse.”

Blake shakes his head with a smile. “I never want to leave this place.”

A flutter passes through my chest as I smile, basking in those words. Blake has made himself right at home here, charming my parents and meeting my friends. I love my hometown, but I love it more with him here.

so as he meets my gaze with a wink, there is only one thought echoing through my mind.

I hope we never do.

One hour and two groggy siblings later, we're gathered in the living room by the roaring fire.

It's the traditional format. Our parents make us accept weird trinkets they found in thrift shops, we give them something we all pitched in for. Then my dad goes, "Well, that's it folks!" and laughs because there is a bulging heap of gifts under the tree.

I get books. Alissa gets make-up and art supplies. Levi gets a few of those miniature building kits he loves to do. My mother keeps apologizing to Blake for not having anything for him, but I think he feels more guilty than she does. Especially when she reaches behind the tree to pull out the last gift, his name scrawled in giant lettering across the shiny paper.

"It's not much," she says. "But I hope you like it."

It's not often that I experience Blake being lost for words—especially fully clothed—but as he undoes the tape and the paper falls away, it's complete silence. He holds the contents in the air to look at it closely, rolling it over in his hands. It's a sweater made from a soft navy-blue wool that will retain his warmth with ease, the color bringing out his eyes in the most beautiful way. Mom must have spent weeks on this, working late into the night the way she does to get it just right .

But why? I didn't invite him until a few days ago. There is no reason for her to make it, let alone wrap it, if he wasn't here to accept it. Unless...unless she knows me better than I'm willing to admit, and saw this coming long before I did.

Blake rises, and without hesitation throws his arms around my mother. He whispers something I can't make out and Mom smiles, whispering something back.



Levi rolls his eyes, his childish streak still going strong. I swat his leg when no one's looking.

Mom waits for Blake to let go first, probably sensing how much he craves this—a home, a real family—and gives Dad a knowing wink when they finally part.

Blake smiles almost shyly. “While I’m up here, I have one more gift, if you don’t mind.”

My heart skips a beat as I watch his movements like a hawk. I didn’t see or feel a ring box, but Blake is sneaky. He could have hidden it somewhere, waiting for just this moment. Would I say yes? We’ve only been dating for a few months—maybe a few weeks, depending how you look at it—but that doesn’t make my feelings less real. With start, I realize I would. It would be a long engagement, sure, but there is no question about my answer.

He is mine. I am his.

He crosses to the tree in long strides before reaching between the branches and pulling out a large envelope. No ring box in sight. I can’t help but feel a little relieved.

“Since me spending the holiday with you was a last-minute decision, Alexis and I agreed not to get each other gifts. But you all have given me more than you will ever know, and I wanted to do something small in return, to show my appreciation.”

A strange feeling passes through my stomach as Blake hands me the envelope. I pause, raising my brow in question, but he just mouths open it.

I reach into the envelope, counting the papers before taking them out.

What the fuck.

No.

NO .

“What is it, love?” my mother smiles. Does she know? Is she in on this, somehow? She could never afford it, but still.

I can only stare at the tickets in my hand, a thousand emotions fighting for dominance. “It’s tickets for all of us to go to Iceland.”

“You always say you want to see the northern lights,” Blake says before kissing my temple. “It’s happening, Sunshine.”

I scan his face. These tickets must have cost a fortune, and he doesn’t seem to care.

Alissa snatches the tickets from my hand. “There’s only five tickets. Have you decided to boot Levi from the trip? Solid move, my friend.”

My brother shoots her a look, but she pretends she doesn’t see it.

Blake laughs. “No. This gift is for you—a nice vacation for the entire Moore clan.”

“Then I’m afraid you’re one short, son,” Dad says. “I’m not getting on that plane unless you are. Don’t feel right.”

“No need. I insist?—”

“So do we,” Mom says in a stern voice. “That’s how we do things in this family, Blake. We do it together, or not at all.”

I take Blake's hand and for a moment he stares at it, his face unreadable. What I wouldn't do to get a glimpse into his mind right now.

"Together," Blake repeats, his eyes trailing up to meet mine. "I like the sound of that."

### Chapter 30

Blake

The girls are out with Charlotte for the afternoon to do some bonding, maybe some shopping. With Bill promising to look after Charlotte's father, it leaves only me and Levi back at the house.

Alexis and her mother haven't stopped talking about Iceland since Christmas, though my gift hasn't helped Levi's dislike of me one bit. Nor did our midnight kiss on New Year's, though that one is on me.

I spend most of the afternoon hiding in Alexis's room, not in the mood for Levi's passive aggressive remarks. She has enough books to entertain me, and I had the foresight to bring a bottle of water with me. I call Raf to ask about his Christmas—he's introducing Nico to his family this week, to mixed results— and send Maria a loving text promising to call soon.

Only a few minutes pass before she texts me back, inviting me over for dinner, and when I tell her I'm at my girlfriend's home for the holidays, her texts become all caps. It's clear that neither of us saw this coming, judging by her reaction, but I know this is exactly what she's always wanted for me.

Eventually my hunger draws me out of that room, and cruel irony puts Levi right at the bottom of the stairs by the front door.

"Check it out, Taylor," Levi laughs. "That guy you tried to beat up sent us a card."

There is only one person he could mean. The blood drains from my face as I snatch the card out of his hand. “How the fuck does he know where you live?”

Have you missed me? Maybe I’ll drop by to wish you a merry Christmas in person. We have a lot to talk about. See you soon. - Hudson

I’m going to be sick.

“He said he had something for me and needed my address. Probably trying to kiss my ass so I’ll put in a good word for him sometime,” Levi shrugs. “It’s happened before.”

He takes a swig of his tea, staring at the deceptively cute card in my hand. Is he really that ignorant? I mean, I know Levi is my future brother in law and I should probably try and work things out between us, make sure we’re on good terms. But after what Alexis told me on Christmas Eve...I can’t help but put some of the blame on him. Not fully, of course—that monster is the only one responsible for his actions—but Levi could have looked out for her better. He’s her older brother, where was he when she needed him most? Why didn’t he spot the signs, watch her drink, and keep an eye on her?

I grit my teeth. “For once in your life think, Levi. That bastard has been off the team for years—why would he care now? What would he need from you in particular?”

“Christ, Taylor, what does it matter?” Levi throws his head back with a groan. “Do you have some sort of personal vendetta against him or something? It’s none of your business, anyway.”

Levi reaches for the card but I dodge his attempt, taking a few steps back. Alexis can never know about this. Ever. Which makes it much safer to destroy it than to give it back. There’s nothing of importance on it, anyway.

“It sure as fuck became my business the moment he laid hands on Alexis,” I say, the words coming out harsher than I mean it. It feels apt, though.

Levi stills, almost dropping his mug. He sets it on a small table by the couch before turning back to face me, the shock clear in his face. “He...what?”

“Oh, yeah. That son of a bitch has been terrorizing her for over a year now, following her, leaving her notes and unwanted gifts. He made her life a living hell while you were out there pretending life is made out of roses, and now you’ve made sure she’s no longer safe in her own home.”

Levi sputters. “You’re blaming me for this? How the fuck was I supposed to know if she never told me?”

“You are her brother!” My voice is louder now, nearly crossing the line into yelling. I don’t care. He needs to hear it, needs the reality check of what he just did. “You’re the one who’s supposed to watch out for her out there, making sure she’s alright. How come I remember the exact day I noticed the change in her while I didn’t even know her then, and you haven’t noticed even now? Are you really that far up your own ass?”

Levi draws closer, nostrils flaring, shoulders locked. But I know that anger isn’t directed at me—it’s the anger that comes with being helpless, of being told about something happening that you have no control over. The anger that comes with shock and grief alike. “You have no right?—”

“Don’t I? Because I’m the one who’s been making sure Alexis gets to and from class safely. I’m the one who threatened Hudson’s sorry ass, twice, to protect her. The one who pried his fingers off her when she was too terrified to do it herself. I am the one picking up the pieces you didn’t even notice were broken.” I shake my head. “You know, I used to look up to you, Levi. But these past few months have shown me

exactly who you are. A self-centered, childish little man who cares more about appearing close to his sisters than being it. I love Alexis, man. She's my world. So you can hate me all you want, but I'm not going anywhere. Especially not now."

I hold up the card, reminding him of his mistake one last time before stalking towards the kitchen. Maybe I should put it in water or scratch it with a sharpie. No—I need fire. That is the only way to get rid of it for good.

"Blake, wait."

Halting in the archway, I glance over my shoulder. He's leaning over the couch, his shoulders sagged in defeat. Even from across the room I can see the tears shining in his eyes; it must finally be sinking in.

Good.

"I'm sorry, man. For all of it," Levi says. "I thought you were using Alexis as some sort of weird threat to make me keep my word, or making her fall for you because you could. I got protective of her, but clearly I was protecting her from the wrong person at the wrong time. There is no way to make this right, so thanks—for keeping her safe when I failed her."

I stare at him for a long time. He's right. There is no way to make this right.

Shit, I can't even look at him right now. I hold up the card again. "Alexis can never know about any of this, understood? I'm going to burn this card, and if anyone asks, we have been playing video games and watching hockey all afternoon. Nothing special happened. Agreed?"

Levi nods, wiping his face on the sleeve of his black sweater, and I take it as my cue to leave. Alexis could be home any moment now—there is no time to waste.

There's still some kindling in the pit, and despite the snow it's easy to call the fire. I stare into the flames, feeding the card to the heat until it melts underneath my touch, shrinking further until nothing remains.

I wish it were that easy to forget.



### Chapter 31

Blake

Eight A.M. classes are the worst invention since calculus.

It's a rough reality check after two weeks of bliss. No amount of caffeine can get me to pay attention, so I will have to record the lecture and stay up late transcribing notes again. Maybe I can talk Alexis into making it a study date. She's the only thing that could make studying bearable.

Downing the remainder of my coffee, I'm about to walk into the lecture hall when a flash of bright pink hair catches my eye.

"What the hell dude?" Alissa shouts and shoves me face-first into the brick wall. "I went to bat defending your lying ass to Levi and this is what you do? She loves you, you dick! This will ruin her!"

Alissa is livid and rough, but I don't try to break free from her grasp. "What are you talking about?"

"Drop the act, Taylor. I've seen the school newspaper. You ran your mouth!" Alissa hisses. "What happened, did she refuse to put out? Did you get tired of being with someone real for a change but were too much of a baby to end it yourself? Well?" she pushes me further into the wall until I'm sure my cheek must be bleeding, but if Alexis is hurt...I deserve it. "You're lucky I don't have my bat with me or I would've rammed it so far up yo?—"

“What are you talking about? Alissa, I promise you I didn’t say a word. Frankly, it’s insulting that you think I would ever hurt Alexis.”

Alissa shoves the latest edition of the school newspaper, the Brookside Times into my face, her manicured finger tapping the prominent headline I’ve seen countless times in my nightmares.

Hockey Heartthrob fakes relationship to scam school.

“Fucking hell. That wasn’t me! I swear!”

She drops her grip, stepping back so I can turn around and face her. Like Alexis, Alissa is a good bit shorter than I am, but both can be intimidating when angry enough. And right now, Alissa is seething.

“You, me, Lex, and Levi are the only ones in on it. Who else could have tipped them off?” she says. “I know Levi is still cross with you, but he wouldn’t do this.”

That’s true. He might hate my guts, but Levi would never put Alexis in the crossfire. Aside from hockey, family is his whole life; it just doesn’t make sense for him to be the leak.

Any of our competitors in the Cute Couples contest could have started the rumor, but somehow I don’t suspect any of them. There is only one person who thinks they benefit from breaking us up, and I should have finished him off months ago.

“I think we both know who did this—it has to be him, right?”

A flicker of recognition passes through Alissa’s gaze as she nods. “Sorry for throwing you against the wall.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have to find Alexis—she needs to hear this from me.”

I rip the newspaper from Alissa’s trembling hands and storm off, muttering curses under my breath. I have to find her before she sees this bullshit article. Before she has a chance to think I betrayed her.

She should still be in class right now, and no one around her will have access to the Brookside Times until after that class, giving me a tiny window to intercept her. She’s on the other side of campus, so I rely on every ounce of my stamina and shortcuts to get there before her class lets out.

People shout as I speed past, some calling me cruel or a liar, others assuring me we’ve got their vote—guess they don’t read the paper. There’s a cheerleader bribing people for votes near the café, and the grin she shoots my way is almost villainous.

I’m sweaty and out of breath, but I make it in the nick of time.

Her classmates pour out of the lecture hall. They move slowly, so slowly, and though it gives me a chance to catch my breath it feels like ages before I see Alexis. But then I see her, and she spots me, breaking into the most dazzling smile that takes my breath away.

“Hey,” she says softly. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in your Legends and Lore class right now?”

Her ability to make it sound like I am only taking fictional classes is adorable, but she’s not wrong. I really, really should be in that class.

“Yeah,” I press a kiss to her forehead so her overactive brain doesn’t jump to conclusions as I say, “Everything’s fine, but we need to talk. Now.”

“We were so close,” Alexis says slowly. “Just three more weeks and we would have made it.”

She lowers the newspaper and lets it fall to the floor, not even watching it fall. This is the first thing she has said in twenty minutes, resigning to stare blankly out onto the empty lecture hall for the rest of the time. I’m not sure this is progress.

Her gaze fixed on a place far behind me. I hate seeing her like this, so... void of anything. Empty. “I have made you many promises, but let me make one more: you are getting that degree come hell or high water. I’ll make sure of it.”

Alexis only shakes her head. “So close, Blake. All those stress-induced pain flares and every stupid date they forced us to go on. We even had sex in a tent, loudly! Then they run one stupid, slanderous article and we’re done. It’s truly over now.”

In the five stages of grief, Alexis is steadily crossing into anger. It’s a good thing, and not just for processing this. There is an ocean of anger hidden beneath her skin, things she has never allowed herself to feel or acknowledge to keep from rocking the boat. I hope she lets it all out now and drowns the world in her wrath.

“By the end of the day, everyone will think I am nothing more than a slut. That I’m a liar, a fraud who was all too happy opening her legs to rip off the school.” Her face is lifeless, a terrifying sight on someone as expressive as her. The knot in my stomach tightens.

I step closer, cradling her cheek in my palm. “You are none of those things, you hear me? You are kind, and honest, and smarter than any one of those idiots out there. Let me fix this for us. I’ll sic my mother’s lawyer on them for defamation of character and force the paper to write a new article. This whole thing will be old news long before the final vote.”

At long last, those silver-blue eyes snake up to meet mine. “What if it’s not?”

“Then you will still have me and my fortune,” I say. “You’ll get your dream, Alexis. Even if I have to set up a colony on Mars or start an apocalypse and build the school myself, you will be a teacher. And a damn good one at that.”

Alexis laughs, but it’s far from the laugh I fell in love with. This one is bitter, almost mocking. “I don’t even know what to do with myself right now, how to go from here. Doing this contest was supposed to take away my panic, the one that’s set off by the unknown. But we’re right back in it now, aren’t we?”

How am I the more level headed one between us now? It’s a strange, unnerving feeling. I hope it doesn’t happen again. “I’ll get everything sorted with the paper, and we take it one day at a time. Classes, homework, dinners. I have a game on Friday, but you don’t have to come if you don’t feel like it. Then there’s the last contest date on Sunday, and we’ll see how to go on from there.”

Alexis isn’t convinced. I can see it in her eyes, in the way they have lost their spark. I know why, though; she is still refusing to take my money, and now she thinks this will be her last year at Brookside. But she underestimates how selfish I can be in the way I love.

So far, she hasn’t questioned why she has not run out of money on her meal card yet, or how her fridge is always stocked. I’m not sure if she suspects my hand in it all, and I don’t really care—I just want her to eat. So if I have to go to administration and pay her tuition without telling her I will do it, even if it costs me her love.

Because to love is to sacrifice, and I will always love Alexis more than I love myself.

### Chapter 32

Alexis

I am so fucked.

Professor Hickey kept us late again, and now I am for sure missing the start of the hockey game. I had promised Blake I would be there to give him a good luck kiss; I guess they will be losing this one.

Still firm in the middle of winter, the sun is long gone and the biting cold cuts through my many layers to nip at my skin. It gives the deserted campus an ominous feeling, not letting you feel safe even on the well-lit paths. I wish I had Blake here with me to chase away the fear. I know he doesn't have his phone with him, being on the ice and all, so I call the one person I know will always pick up and tell her to keep the line on until I'm with her in the stands.

I wore Blake's jersey to class just to be safe in case I was running late—fine, I like to show it off. I stare at Blake's picture on my lockscreen, letting the sight of him calm me as I hop onto the nearly-vacant bus.

It lets out on the other side of a dark parking lot and I clutch my key between my fingers on instinct. The pepper spray I keep in my bag must have fallen out somewhere, as it's nowhere to be found, leaving me far too vulnerable for my liking. Blake might have shown me some fighting moves, but I'm far from strong or skilled enough to take someone on all by myself.

“I figured you would show up here, doting little slut that you are,” Hudson drawls from the shadows. He steps forward, just catching some stray beams of light from the lamppost. “Going to cheer on your fake little boyfriend? Or are you finally done pretending to be interested in him?”

“Go away.” I quicken my pace, trying to keep a safe distance between our bodies without setting off his hunting instinct by running—he is a Neanderthal, after all. Can’t have his two brain cells mistaking me for a gazelle.

“Or what? You will call the cops on me again? Been there, done that, sweetheart. You know, the sooner you quit pretending to hate me, the sooner you will realize you made a mistake reporting me for those lies you fed them. My mother used to lie like that, too, when she was still around.” He leans against the hood of a car, every muscle in his body taut and ready to chase me.

A chill passes through my body at his unspoken threat—I need to get out of here, fast. I lower my head and keep walking as fear claws at my throat. I can see the glass doors, see the people mingling about behind them. If I can just get close enough he’ll have no choice but to leave me alone. Yes, that’s the answer. Run .

His hand closes around my wrist.

“Let me go,” I hiss. “I know a dozen guys inside that arena who would love to see you bleed. Want to try your luck?”

Please, Alissa, be listening.

Hudson stares at me for a moment before throwing back his head with the most nauseating laugh. “Nice try, Lexus. Really, good effort. You know how much I enjoy our little foreplay, don’t you?”

His voice is almost like a purr, the undercurrent of his words sending another wave of panic through my body, my lungs, and my throat, and I believe I might be sick.

Please, Alissa. Please send help.

Hudson shakes his head. “You know, when I called my buddy at the newspaper, he wasn’t even surprised that you and your boy toy were faking it. Everyone can see he doesn’t love you, Lexus. But I do, even if you are spoiled goods.”

Something switches in my brain as his words register, and I stand a little straighter as my anger wins out over fear.

It was him.

He tipped them off.

He is the reason I will never be a teacher.

“You... you were the leak?” I do not recognize this voice, though it comes from my lips. It doesn’t shake, not a tremble. Instead, it holds a warning. “You pathetic little man. Haven’t you stolen enough from me? Haven’t I suffered enough at your hand without you actively sabotaging my future? You are even more disgusting than I thought you were, and I ranked you akin to a cockroach. I need that degree, Hudson. And the only way I could pay for it was that prize money. Yet you stole that from me, too. You stole everything from me.”

Hudson moves in closer, his fingers caressing my arm as he says, “Who cares about a stupid piece of paper? I’ll provide for you, you know I will. And once we have kids, what good will that degree do, anyway?”

The rational part of my brain shuts off at those words, at hearing his plans for me all



laid out. A beat passes in silence. Then my fist connects with his nose and comes away covered in blood.

Any time on that backup now, Lis.

“Stop following me, stop touching me or even thinking about me. I am not yours, nor will I ever be yours. You have taken enough from me. And I’m not anyone’s possession or broodmare either like you love to suggest I am. I love Blake, and I have rebuilt myself. So I’ll say it again. Leave. Me. Alone.”

When I punched his nose he let go of my wrist, so I turn on my heels and make a break for it. I’m mere steps away from the doors when his hands land on my shoulder blades and I hit the rough cement of the parking lot, the force of the fall knocking every scrap of air out of my lungs.

I flip over onto my back in time to see him raise his fist but I am faster, getting in a few more punches and scratches before he bests me. I cry out in a last attempt at drawing attention, and with my face turned towards the door I don’t notice his fist until the light goes out.

### Chapter 33

Blake

My heart hammers in my throat as I push open the double doors. Alissa crouches against the wall a little distance away, stuttering and distraught as she mutters something into her phone—probably calling Bill and Nora. Her bloodshot eyes widen as she notices me, her quivering lips slightly parted. I pull her into a tight hug.

“Hey, she’ll be okay. It’ll be okay,” I whisper. “Where is she, Lis?”

Alissa’s voice, usually brimming with wit and confidence, trembles with emotion like she can barely muster the words. “Room 13.”

I give her a final squeeze before I rush past her and down the hall, the stream of doors never-ending. When it does, my knees buckle as I take in the sight.

Alexis looks so frail in the artificial light, so pale and vulnerable. Wires poke out from her arms, sensors hooked up to her chest and scalp. A bandage is wrapped around her temples, bloodstained and dirty, the rest of whatever skin is visible not faring much better. Even the knowledge that she bruises like a peach doesn’t help, because she still had to be touched there to get the bruises.

My steps are slow and careful, as if I were approaching a wounded animal instead of my beloved girlfriend, but I can’t stop myself because this scene is straight out of a nightmare. It takes every bit of my strength not to start bawling, but I have to be strong. Not only for Alexis but for Alissa and Levi. They need someone they can rely

on, and the best way I can help Alexis is to help her siblings.

Even if I'm a fucking wreck myself.

I should have been there. I knew how dangerous those roads are in the dark, knew that jackass hasn't dropped his obsession with her. I should have insisted on driving her to the game or at the very least arranged for someone else to join her on the way. Hudson bided his time waiting for me to slip up, and I was stupid enough to do just that.

I failed her tonight. She trusted me with her deepest secret, trusted me to keep her safe. And I didn't. I don't think I can ever truly forgive myself for that.

Alexis is mine. I am hers. Even when we were still firmly in the pretend phase, I'd sworn to do everything to make her feel safe and protect her and take care of her like a bodyguard would a princess.

But when it mattered most, I wasn't there.

Her cheek is cold beneath my palm and a stifled sob leaves my lips as I run my thumb along the split in her skin.

"Can you guys stop pretending I'm dead? It's depressing." Alexis's eyelids flutter before revealing those gorgeous silver-blue irises, the color darkened with pain and fatigue. Even so, a ghost of a smile plays on her lips, no doubt for my sake. "Blake..."

"I'm here. It's okay— you're okay." I lean in to press a feather-light kiss to her forehead. "I love you. You're safe now, I promise. I'm so fucking sorry I wasn't there, Alexis. But I'm here now, and I'm never leaving your side again. You're safe."

“I’m sorry.” The words are barely audible through her small and trembling voice, but I hear her loud and clear. I shake my head.

“No need to be sorry. I’m the one who let you walk alone. This is my fault,” I say, and my voice breaks. “You fought so hard, so bravely, and you’re still here. That’s all that matters. That you’re still here.”

Footsteps rush towards the room and within seconds Alissa and Levi appear, the pair looking even worse than I do. Alissa’s hair is in a frazzled bun, several loose strands framing her mascara-stained face. Her brother is more composed, but only slightly, his anger taking the forefront to hide the hopelessness we all feel.

“Shit, Lex,” he gasps with a sob. “I’m going to kill him, I’ll?—”

Alissa stops him with a hand to the chest. “The police as well as half the school are looking for him. Jail will be worse than death.”

“Not the way I’d do it,” I mutter, and the ghost of a smile crosses Levi’s lips as we find a common ground.

Alexis winces, the machine beeping faster. I squeeze her hand, running soothing circles over the top of her palm with my thumb. This seems to relax her a little, as the beeping slows.

“You don’t have to stay, you know. They’re only keeping me overnight for observation, I’ll be out before you have time to miss me,” Alexis says, though her attempt at humor falls flat by the weakness in her voice.

“You’re out of your mind if you think we are leaving you like this,” Levi says. “We’re a unit, remember?”

Alexis mutters profanities with a wince, her hand moving up to her head. From what I've heard, she got quite a blow—her head must be killing her.

“You should sleep,” Alissa says softly. “Don't worry about us. Just think of happy things and sleep.”

The ghost of a smile pulls at Alexis's lips. “I have a concussion, you dumbass. It's not that easy.”

“You're not that easy.”

“Your mom's not that easy.”

“And she's back,” Levi mutters. “Has anyone spoken to a nurse yet? Or are we blindly trusting the sleepy, achy mummy?”

I shake my head no and watch as Alissa does the same. With a sigh, Levi disappears into the hallway to find someone who can give us more information. Alissa clutches her twin's hand like it's a tether, a silent plea to be alright. How terrifying this must be for her, seeing Alexis like this. Their bond is one I will never fully be able to understand, though I'm glad they have each other to call on in moments like these.

I squeeze Alissa's shoulder in support as I make my way toward the hallway, giving them a moment of privacy while I hunt down a few more chairs and some coffee to pull us through the night.

Strong . I need to be strong. For Alexis, but also her siblings. Alissa is a wreck. Even Levi, though we're still at odds, could use a shoulder to lean on. So in an empty room on the other side of the hall, far enough not to be heard by any of them, I allow myself a few minutes of weakness.

The tears come hard and fast, one thing circling my mind over and over and over like a broken record.

I could have lost her.

### Chapter 34

Alexis

I'm not sure who told the rest of the hockey team about what happened, but the second Blake's car stops in front of the house they rush through the front door.

With their tall and broad bodies, they form a protective wall around the path, shielding me as if they were my own sexy secret service.

It's such a kind gesture that for a moment it takes me aback, and tears brim my eyes as I look anywhere but at them. I try to open my mouth and express my gratitude, but nothing comes. Instead, I run for the door and up the stairs, not stopping until I'm in the safe haven of Blake's bedroom.

Because I know Blake's teammates would never hurt me. They are frighteningly loyal to my brother and know both he and Blake would kill them if they touched me. But Hudson was on that team too, once. And they are just as tall and broad and intimidating as he is.

So while I would love to go down the line and give each of them a big hug, I can't. Not now, now without flashing back to last night.

My inner child is crying, and for once there is nothing I can do to comfort her, to show her this is temporary and things will be okay. Because while this might fade with time, this world will never truly be safe for us.

Evil will always be lurking in the shadows, and whether we escape it or not it will never go away. So instead of trying to comfort her with words we both know are lies, I turn to her favorite method of dealing with heavy emotions: hiding.

It's not the healthiest, or the most mature, but as far as bad coping mechanisms go it is by far the least destructive option. I crawl over to Blake's closet, toss out his stinky shoes and curl up in the void. Lucky comes to press his head in my lap in silent support, and that little gesture is enough to shatter me.

Loud, painful sobs tear through me, and for once I let them. I am all alone, anyway. I could wipe my tears, use makeup as a shield and pretend I'm fine like I have done for the past year. But what good would that do?

No. I'm done pretending. Pretending to be okay, to not be angry—no, fuming at the school board for letting Hudson stay. That it took everything that happened last night for the cops to take me seriously. That I had to recount every detail from the past year to the cops twice this morning because they sent in an uncaring rookie first. But I'm also done pretending to be strong, that my pain is mild and manageable and my bone-deep exhaustion is just a bit of fatigue.

I am done pretending I'm anything that I'm not.

But most of all, I'm just done .

There's a commotion downstairs and I hear loud footsteps in the hall, but no one comes. The noise fades as quickly as it came, leaving me in the quiet misery of my sobs.

I don't know how long I sit like that, sobbing all alone in a tiny dark closet. It could be minutes, hours. Time is a concept I have lost all understanding of, and I cannot bring myself to care either.



At some point, the tears dry up.

The numbness makes me fidgety, having me pace the floor with Lucky at my heels. He stays at my side when I head to the bathroom to freshen up, the house is empty save for a shadow at the front door and a soft rummaging in the kitchen. Still, I don't dare shower.

Amid the silence I find Blake at the stove, stirring a pot with clenched fists, clearly seething. But his muscles unclench the moment he sees me, and his face softens.

"Hey," he says, leaning down to pet Lucky. "I didn't expect you down so soon. How are you feeling?"

We both know I feel like shit, so I skip his question to save us both a lie. "Where did everyone go?"

Blake leans against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest as if to keep himself from moving. Conflict swirls in his eyes as he searches my face, no doubt seeing every trace of evidence of my crying. His muscles go taut again. "They are out looking for Hudson so he can be handed over to the police. The cops and school board have proved useless so far, so the guys figured they could patrol the area, be extra eyes on campus."

I shift on my feet. "Did you and Levi make them do that?"

"No one made them do anything. It was their idea." Blake instinctively steps forward but catches himself before he reaches me, like him coming any closer could set me off. "They would do anything for you. They're crazy about you—just like me."

He winks at that last part, trying to make me smile. It doesn't work.

“They shouldn’t be putting themselves in danger like that,” I say. “Even if it doesn’t get to a fight, they could utilize this time so much better by studying or doing extra practice for your next game.”

Blake shakes his head with a sigh. “You have to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Acting like you are not worth the effort, or the affection, or anything else that rattles on in that beautiful brain of yours,” Blake says, that muscle in his jaw ticking with anger. But I know his anger is not directed at me. Not really. “You’re fucking amazing. You are kind, smart, and thoughtful. You made that cake for Raf’s birthday even though we were all too wrapped up in game prep to remember it. You took the time and effort to perfect a high-protein healthy snack and make sure we’re never out of it. You might think we don’t notice those things, but we do. Your big heart isn’t lost on any of us, Sunshine. Please, let us do something for you for once.”

My cheeks are wet and I know the tears are streaming again, but I don’t care. Blake is right; I had no idea they kept track of me, of the little things I do for them. Sure, they have always thanked me for baking them things and they look genuinely happy to see me whenever I come around, but I think I’ve always figured that was because I am Levi’s sister, not because I’m me.

Blake opens his arms and I walk straight into them, craving the warm comfort of his chest and the safety of his arms.

“I’m so sorry, Blake,” I sob. “For everything. For not being more careful and facing him alone, for scaring you, for?”

“You’re still here with me.” His lips brush over the top of my head as he cradles me deeper into his chest, and I wonder if his words are more for me or him. “You’re still

here with me, Alexis. That's all that matters."

I let him hold me until my feet go numb and my knees threaten to give way.

He lifts me so I can sit on the counter, as close to him as possible, and watch him make a massive amount of spaghetti from a recipe I don't recognize but I'm too tired to question. Instead, I taste and give pointers on the sauce and set the table for the guys to help themselves when they come back.

"My mom texted. She and Dad will be here tonight," I say as I busy myself with folding napkins. "I should probably go back to my dorm."

"You need to do whatever you feel is right." Blake puts the saucepan on a lower heat to keep it from burning. "If you want to go home, I'll take you there. But if you feel safer here, then you should stay, no matter what they might want you to do."

Alissa's words come to mind. To live your life to the fullest you have to learn to be selfish.

It's funny how two people can say such similar things at such different times. Then again Blake and Alissa are more similar than they are willing to admit, and I am a predictable people-pleaser. But still.

I know what I want, what I need at this moment.

"In that case, I'd love to stay for a bit longer. If you're not sick of me yet."

Blake turns around, wrapping his arms around my waist before kissing me. "Never. You are my home. I could spend eternity at your side and it would still not be enough."

“Are you paraphrasing Twilight ?” I raise a brow.

Blake laughs. “Come on, Sunshine. I’m trying to be romantic here. Give me a break.”

“Fine,” I bunch the fabric of his maroon shirt in my fist and pull him closer until our lips are nearly brushing. “Let’s start with forever, Blakey-bear.”

### Chapter 35

Blake

Right. Left. Right. Left.

The blades underneath my feet cut the ice as I glide forward, bulldozing my way through the teammates who protect the goal. They don't stand a chance.

Within seconds the puck hits the net and my team erupts in loud cheers and whistles, clapping my hand as I circle back to our side. On instinct I look out into the stands in search of my Sunshine's lovely face, only to remember she's not here.

We decided she should sit these things out for a while and use the time to unwind, go to therapy sessions or catch up with her parents instead. Nora and Bill have been staying in a motel nearby, and from what I've heard from Alissa, they have been a real nuisance to the school board and administration, hounding them for answers and threatening to sue. As if I could not adore them any more.

This practice session is a much needed respite for the team. After many days and nights of scouring the campus for any sign of the bastard it was Eric who spotted Hudson and turned him in to the police. It's too soon to say for certain, but I hope he's locked up for a long time.

No one said it, but I know the anger and frustration at the whole situation piled up inside every one of them. At least in this practice game, we can let it all out without repercussions.

Across the ice, Coach Tucker pulls out his megaphone, the feedback blaring through the rink. “Taylor! A word?”

“Blakey is in trouuuuubleeee!” Raf draws out the words like a child before laughing at the irked look on my face. He and Alexis have been getting along a little too well, and she has clearly been teaching him how to annoy me better. I pray he doesn’t remember her nickname for me—it’s only cute when she says it, even if she does so to mock me.

Once I am off the ice, I quickly rid myself of my skates and follow Coach into his office in full gear.

I expect him to tell me how sorry he is for what happened to Alexis, to tell some bullshit story about how the good will weed out the evil in time—the usual drivel. But the moment I see Levi linger behind the desk, I know this is not that kind of conversation.

One of Coach Tucker’s best qualities is that he doesn’t like wasting time with idle chit-chat, so he cuts right to it.

“Look, kid. I’m sure you and the others must be aware that Levi’s final season with the Brookside Badgers is coming to an end, and that I’m on the lookout for someone to replace him for the big job,” he says. “Levi here has told me great things about your leadership and drive. Kind of pestering me with it, really. Look, I admit I had my doubts, given your record, but even I see how much you have changed for the better these past few months. So I’ve decided you deserve the chance to prove yourself. I’m officially offering you the captain’s position for next season.”

A smile breaks out on my face, so big and wide it hurts my cheeks. Mother would lose it if she found out. I can hear her voice in my head as she brags to anyone who will listen. Her little boy, captain of a winning hockey team, headed for the NHL!

Ah, well. Sucks to be her.

“Thank you, sir. It is an incredible honor that you would even consider me.” Not a lie. This sliver of approval will fuel me for months to come. “But I cannot justify taking that jersey when I know Rafael would be much more suitable for the role.”

In my peripheral vision I see Levi’s lips curl, like this was some sort of test all along. Or maybe he just really likes watching me make a fool of myself. Either way, he knows I’m right just as well as I do.

“I might have the drive to lead us to victory, but Raf has both the skill and the ambition to take this team to a higher level. He should be your next captain, not me.”

Confusion practically drips off Coach Tucker’s face, though he doesn’t say a word. I’m sure it took a lot of effort on Levi’s part to convince Coach of me, and now I am turning down what I once thought was the chance of a lifetime. He looks at me for a long time, trying to make sense of it all.

“You’re sure about this?”

“Fully convinced. I love the sport, sir. You know I do. But it’s not my future, and I would not give it the same kind of attention as someone for whom it is. For Raf, hockey is his whole life. He even studies old games for fun, games he’s not even in. He has shit to learn, sure, but I know he will not let you down.”

Coach Tucker glances at Levi, then back at me. “If you and Levi are willing to take him under your wings for these last few months, get him ready, I don’t disagree.”

I meet Levi’s gaze with a nod. Our relationship, while still rocky, has been improving since Christmas. But we both care about this team and the people in it; it is one of the few things we fully see eye to eye on. So we will do everything we can to whip this

team—and its new captain—into shape before Levi graduates, even if it means we need to call a truce between the two of us.

He is going to have to get used to me anyway.

After practice, I swing by the local flower shop before rushing to Alexis's dorm. The scent of homemade lasagna wraps around my nostrils the moment the door opens, with Bill hard at work in the small kitchen to give his daughters a nice hot meal. Nora hugs me before I've even had a chance to close the door behind us, and it takes me by surprise the same way it did the first time.

This feeling of unexplainable warmth, of true acceptance, of family ...I don't think it will ever feel natural to me. To have a support system like that, with sibling rivalries, inside jokes and open arms after a bad day—I thought that was something that only happened on television. But it's real, and it's here, and one day...one day it might actually be mine.

I drop my bag next to the door and help Nora set the table in a comfortable silence, and when we're done she pinches my cheek with a smile. Alexis and Alissa emerge from the latter's room with freshly done nails and quiet laughter. I wave as she spots me, and she surprises us both by bounding into my arms and wrapping her legs around me. "I missed you."

It's only been a day, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel the same way. "Missed you too. Did you have a nice spa day?"

"It's so she will look extra beautiful in her dress tomorrow!" Nora says, making Alexis roll her eyes.

"Mom, please."



I set Alexis down and give my signal to Alissa, who disappears into her room. “Speaking of dresses, I wanted to do something special for you, to make sure the night is truly memorable. So me and Alissa did a little online shopping.”

As if on cue, Alissa appears in the doorway with the dress hanging from a hanger. Nora gasps, causing Alexis to turn around and look.

Tears flood her eyes and she swats at my arm. “Stop spending money on me!”

She hates it. Shit! I knew I should have let her pick something out herself! Alissa insisted that their ‘Twintuition’ was a thing, but it’s obviously bullshit.

Alexis crosses the room to look at it from up close. Does she notice her nails match the soft pink flowers perfectly?

“It’s beautiful, Lis,” she breathes, running her fingers down the soft fabric. “You picked this out?”

“I know you enough to know you’d hate whatever Blake picked out,” Alissa smirks. My choices weren’t even that bad, but compared to this one I can see how she would have hated it.

Alexis stares at the dress again, pausing a moment before coming back to me. “No more surprises, you hear me?”

“No more surprises,” I agree, though I can’t keep the smile off my face. There is one surprise heading her way still, just waiting for the right moment.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:07 am*

I stare into the dusty mirror on my closet door, running a hand down the length of my dress. The soft organza sways with every movement, giving the illusion that I'm floating, and the flowers match my nails perfectly.

My fingers stray to the healing cuts and bruises on my skin, the visual reminders that what happened that night was one hundred percent real. I could call Alissa into the room, have her cover them up with makeup, but I don't want to. I shouldn't have to hide what happened to me to make someone else feel more comfortable. And I won't.

I refuse to be ashamed of my injuries. It's simply not my shame to carry. Hudson is the one who should feel it, though I know he won't. If he was capable of feeling shame, he would have felt it a long time ago.

My spite and anger don't mean I'm unaffected, though. There are still nights where I'm afraid to close my eyes and I wake up screaming from nightmares that never seem to end. But Blake's arms are always there to comfort me, and the reassuring beating of his heart lulls me right back to sleep.

Whether it be my parents, siblings, Blake, or even one of the hockey guys offering to go for a walk with me, I never have to face the world alone. Classmates I have never directly spoken to are updating me with recordings of the classes I'm missing so I don't fall too far behind. Neighbors are sliding get well soon cards under the door. Levi and Alissa's friends stop by to bring groceries and pre-cooked meals, with those from home checking in via text. I'm not sure what it implies, exactly, but I think it means I am loved more widely and deeply than I thought. That maybe I'd written off the world, but the world has yet to do the same to me.

Tonight, the rankings from the Cute Couples Contest will be made public for the first time. Going off everything I learned from reality TV, the amount of camera time we've gotten seems to indicate a high score. But after everything that happened in the past few weeks I have no idea if we're even still in the running. Do our peers believe the article outing us as fakes, or has Hudson inadvertently brought us the crown by giving me the sympathy vote?

Either way, I'll be glad to be rid of those pesky cameras and added pressure.

I don't know why I agreed to go tonight. Whenever I go out, it feels like people gawk at me as I pass, trying to get a glimpse of the poor girl who got attacked. But Blake deserves a night out, to drink and dance and laugh away all the crap we've been through. And maybe...maybe I do, too.

Maybe a night under the stars with my love is just what I need to feel like myself again, even if it is only for a minute.

And thanks to Blake's gift of my dress, I am well on my way.

Blake knocks on the door at seven sharp, looking handsome in a light gray plaid suit. He takes his sweet time looking me up and down, taking in the way the dress hugs my body, the makeup that compliments my dress and brings out my eyes, and the hair Alissa spent way too much time on.

Mom rushes towards us, her phone held straight in front of her as she instructs us to scoot closer together. The whole thing is giving me flashbacks to prom night.

"Not too late to change your mind, you know," Blake whispers into my ear, as to keep from being overheard. The rest of my family is gathered on the couch, all dressed up and fancy. They insisted on coming tonight, saying they want to watch my face when we win. Really, though, I think they want to make sure I feel protected. Hudson might be gone, but that doesn't stop my brain from expecting him to pop up

wherever I go. The nightmare is over, but the ghost lingers. “I will happily whisk you away to my place and watch your historically inaccurate shows until we’re both snoring.”

“Tempting,” I say, and rise onto my toes to press a kiss to his jaw. A smidge of pink lipstick sticks to his skin, just like it did the night of Miller’s party. The night he told me to leave it so everyone would know he’s mine. “But I heard they have free food and live music, and I want to dance with my handsome boyfriend.”

The band they hired, some sort of 70’s cover band, isn’t half bad.

I press my ear against Blake’s chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart as we slow dance to a Bruce Springsteen song I don’t recognize. His hands are on my hips, his chin resting on the top of my head while we sway.

It’s a little awkward, this whole thing. The cameras are still here, trained on us at all times. We are by far the best-dressed couple, bordering on overdressed. Our competitors aren’t sure how to act, so they don’t look at us at all—a welcome change, really—and my parents and siblings sit at a table right next to the dance floor, their gazes fixed on us. I try my best to ignore them; I deserve to enjoy this moment without worrying about what they might think.

“I don’t think I ever thanked you for agreeing to this whole thing—for sticking by me even when things got rough. I know you had your reasons, but most others would have chosen to walk away. So thank you. For everything.”

“I never considered walking away from this, Alexis. Not once.” Blake steps back with a smile. “This was my one shot at being wholly and exclusively yours. No chance in hell I’d walk away from that. I’m just grateful that you decided to like me back.”

I shake my head, barely suppressing a smile. “You’re such a weirdo. I can’t believe

I'm in love with you."

"Say that again?" Blake's eyes widen, that goofy smile ever growing.

The sight of him like this, this...hopeful, awe-stricken, makes my heart glow. "I love you, Blake."

His fingers rise to comb through my hair, cradling my head as he leans down to kiss me. I close my eyes, letting the rest of the world wash away as I focus on his lips on mine.

When we come up for air, the song has changed to some Elton John tune serenading his lover.

"You can have all the guys you want, you know," Blake says almost shyly. "Why settle for me?"

I lay my hand on his cheek, treasuring the warmth of his skin. "Because it's not settling if it's you. You saw me when I thought I was invisible, saw everything I was trying to hide and loved me anyway. Why would I ever want anyone else when I have the perfect man right in front of me?"

He shakes his head in disbelief, his voice barely louder than a whisper as he says, "I love you."

I bring him down for another kiss, and this time, it takes a lot more than the need for air to tear us apart. The band stops their playing and microphone feedback rings through the room, the high pitch forcing me to break away and cover my ears.

The overly chipper Media I'm in Blake's arms, still dancing even without music, his body solid and steady against mine. My family's close by to love me, support me. And that's all I need.

There will be a tough time ahead, but I know I don't have to face it alone. With some careful planning and strict rules I know I could pay off a theoretical loan from Blake in no time at all, and thanks to my classmates I haven't fallen too far behind on coursework. I even have an army of bodyguards willing to drop everything for me if I say the word. Win or lose, I'll be okay.

Blake must notice I'm not paying attention as he leans down, his breath tickling my ear when he whispers, "Here we go."

A large screen is lowered from the ceiling as the lights dim, leaving barely enough light to see anything. For a moment, there is nothing but a heavy silence in the dark, a kind of tension that takes your breath away. Then the projector purrs to life above our heads and Blake's smitten smile fills the screen, the camera panning to reveal he's looking at me.

It's us.

We've won.

I can't move, can hardly breathe as my eyes stay locked on that screen, watching the footage of us play out in dramatic slow motion.

How Blake looked at me when I wasn't paying attention. The way he threw me over his shoulder in that dance class, and me squeezing his ass in retaliation. Me studying his face when he looked away, and staring at his arms during that cooking class. The whispers and small touches, the stolen glances. There is no sound bite from the camping trip—thank god—but even without it, it's clear that neither of us is anything but smitten. The final shot is of us tangled up on that picnic blanket, slowly zooming out before the screen turns black.

I turn to Blake, wide eyes meeting mine, and without warning he spins me mid-air. The cameras are on us now, I know it, but I don't care. I take his face into my palms

and kiss him.

No more pressure to perform, no more stress about tuition. From this day onward, Blake and I can just be .

He sets me down far too soon for my liking, but I know the others must be getting antsy. Paris motions for us to climb the stage as my family goes wild behind us, filming and cheering and whistling, but all I can see is Blake's dazzling smile as he reaches out his hand for me to take.

“One more time for the cameras, Sunshine?”

THE END