



One Pucking Chance (Crane Hockey #5)

Author: *Ellie Wade*

Category: Sport

Description: Jaden Lewis, the star defenseman of the NHL team the Cranes, is used to getting what he wants—on and off the ice. Confident, charming, and relentless, he's never backed down from a challenge. But when he finally meets his ultimate celebrity crush, the breathtaking and fiercely independent Annalise Sterling, he realizes he's up against his toughest opponent yet. She isn't impressed by his fame, and she definitely isn't looking for love.

As the daughter of Hollywood royalty, Annalise Sterling has spent her entire life fighting to prove she's more than just a famous last name. She's worked tirelessly to earn respect in the industry on her own terms, determined to step out of her parents' shadow. Relationships have never been part of the plan—too messy, too distracting. But when an unexpected situation threatens everything she's built, Jaden offers the perfect solution: a fake relationship.

It's simple. No feelings. No complications. Just a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Until it isn't.

The more time they spend together, the more the lines between pretend and reality blur. Annalise never expected to fall, but Jaden makes it easy. And for Jaden, Annalise is everything he never knew he needed.

But love comes with risks. She has to be brave enough to take the leap, and he has to hold on to the one thing he's always wanted.

The only question is—will they be strong enough to fight for it?

***Book 5 in the Crane Hockey Series. Can be read as a standalone.

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CHAPTER

ONE

JADEN

I slam the door of my locker closed. The metal reverberates with the motion. Lowering my arm, I bring it to my sides, and it aches. My whole body hurts. I'm no stranger to intense workouts, but this month has done a number on me. Back in high school, I was a three-varsity-sport athlete, and at the beginning of each sports season, the coaches would have something they liked to call Hell Week. During Hell Week, we had two practices every day—one in the morning and one after school—and they whipped us into shape. It was both exhausting and exhilarating at the same time.

Coach Albright, the head of our NHL team, does something similar, but he beats on us for a solid month. September, the month before our season officially begins, might as well be called Hell Month. Our days are filled with lifting, drills, and practice on the ice. If we're not doing one of those three things, we're strategizing, watching film, or learning plays. It's physically and mentally exhausting, with very little downtime. Throw in some exhibition games at the end of September, and I'm spent.

"Yo." Beckett, one of our starting forwards and team captain, catches sight of my face and chuckles. "What's wrong with you, J-man?"

"I'm just tired, bro," I respond.

"I hear that." Bash, our center, tilts his head to the side, cracking his neck. "I'm sore

in muscles I didn't even know existed until now."

Max, the other starting defenseman and my best friend on the team, smacks me on the shoulder. "Well, you better get some pep in your step because we have that charity thing to do."

Realization dawns, and I let out a groan. "Oh my God, you've got to be kidding me." I'm not normally this big of a complainer, but after this month, I'm ready for some downtime before our season opener in three days.

Cranes Care is a nonprofit organization run by the Crane hockey organization that has done a lot of wonderful things for people in our community. Usually, I'm all for giving back, but I seriously do not feel very philanthropic at the moment.

Our other starting forward, Cade, leans his shoulder against the metal lockers. He tousles his dark, wet hair, his eyes on mine. "Dude, I don't know what you're complaining about. We've barely done any events this summer."

He's not wrong. Our volunteer schedule has been unusually empty these past few months, though I'm just now realizing that. I've been too busy celebrating to notice.

We won the Cup in June and fulfilled our dreams of being Stanley Cup champions. The summer was a blur as we rode the insane high a championship of this caliber brings. There's nothing better. Every little boy who dreams of growing up to play in the NHL also dreams of winning the Cup. It's an incredible accomplishment very few people can claim.

Truth be told, I'm sure it's part of the reason Coach Albright is pushing us so hard, making this Hell Month more taxing than most. He, along with the rest of us, would love a repeat win. Once you experience being a Stanley Cup champion, it's hard to imagine not winning again. A consecutive win would make us only the ninth team in

the NHL's one-hundred-and-thirty-plus years of history to win back to back. Yet with this group of guys, I believe it's possible.

"Yeah, well, Penny probably hasn't organized any because"—I smirk—"we can't forget the blunder of the closet incident." I raise my eyebrows as a few snickers sound from around me.

The memory of our PR rep and goalie getting caught in a precarious position in the closet of an animal shelter we were building last spring will never not be hilarious. My laughter halts when the giant brute of a goalie steps around the corner, his nostrils flaring.

"Do you want me to kill you?" Gunner asks, his voice low with anger.

"My bad. Sorry. I keep forgetting you all are married now. I didn't mean anything by it. It was just a joke." I turn away from him and zip up my gym bag.

"Jokes are meant to be funny," Gunner deadpans.

"I thought it was funny." Max laughs. I turn my attention back to the massive goalie and catch his eyes squinted in a death stare. Max's laughter ceases, and he clears his throat. "I mean not funny. Definitely not funny."

It's true, though. It's easy to forget that Penny and Gunner are married. They eloped just over a month ago, in August. I honestly never thought Gunner would get married to begin with, and I definitely never thought he'd marry Penny, whom I thought hated him. If I had to put my money on two people tying the knot, it wouldn't have been those two. Yet when I see them together now, I suppose I get it.

Something has to be in the water because a handful of our players have tied the knot within the past year, and soon, the number of married teammates will outnumber the

single ones. I have to admit I'm not a fan of that. And I will not be joining those ranks anytime soon.

There are two reasons I love this job more than anything. The first, of course, is the simple fact that I love ice hockey. It's the most amazing sport ever to be played, and I'm thankful that I get to play it and make a lot of money doing so. The second, undeniably, is the women. Why would anyone get hitched when they could have a different gorgeous woman every night?

I hear Penny's heels clicking before I see her. The cadence of her approach picks up speed as the guys start "oohing" in my direction. Someone whispers, "You're in trouble." It's true that Penny is not someone to be messed with.

The second she comes into view, I raise my hands in surrender. "I didn't mean anything by it. It was just a joke. And you know what? It's cool. You guys are married. You're in love. We all support that. I was just saying I'm tired. That's all."

She raises her brows and surprises me with a smile. "You know..." She puts her hands on her hips. "If anyone should be looking forward to this event, I would think it would be you."

"What do you mean by that?" I ask.

"Only that I signed up for this event with you in mind."

"What are we doing again?" Max asks.

"Well, seeing that it's October first, we're kicking off Breast Cancer Awareness Month by signing some pink jerseys for our fans." She smiles, looking at me expectantly.

I open my mouth to respond before closing it again, blinking. “Um, yeah, that’s cool, Pen. I mean, cancer’s bad and all, but what does that specifically have to do with me?” I ask.

I can’t tell if my brain is too tired to comprehend the obvious or if there’s some hidden agenda I’m unaware of, but I’m beyond confused. I don’t know anyone who has dealt with breast cancer, nor do I have a specific affinity toward the color pink. I’m failing to see why she thinks this philanthropic event is close to my heart.

She smirks. “You’ll see.”

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CHAPTER

TWO

ANNALISE

The bright lights make the suede skirt against my body feel suffocating on the warm set. I've lost all feeling in my feet. The heels provided by costume design are a half size too small and pinch my toes. One would think my feet would be used to such abuse after a lifetime in the industry, but they're not.

The director raises his hand in the air, and the various conversations in the room halt, the space now silent. I run my hands down my brown skirt, roll my shoulders back, and take a deep breath.

"Action!" he calls out.

Holding the manila folders to my chest, I walk down the drab hallway adorned with its 1970s decor.

My costar, Simon, walks toward me from the opposite direction. He raises a hand to stop me. "Hey, Amelia, did you have a second to go over those files?"

I plaster a fake smile on my face. Much like myself, my character doesn't think too highly of this man. Some acting is easier than others. "Sure, Ralph."

Simon—as Ralph—takes a step toward me.

“What are you doing?” My body stiffens.

“We need to talk about last night,” he answers.

“There is nothing to say about last night. It was nothing.” I avert my gaze, dropping my chin to my chest.

In the scope of the movie, Simon’s character misread a situation, his small brain unable to comprehend that a strong, beautiful woman wouldn’t be attracted to him. From the moment I read this script, I was drawn to this project. I’m playing the first woman CEO of a major corporation, and my character is based on a real woman, Annabelle Lighthouse. She had to fight her way past every chauvinistic pig in her industry, working ten times as hard as them to prove her worth and claim her position.

“It meant something to me.” His hands find their way to my hips, and he pulls me closer. The very real smell of alcohol on his breath increases my disdain for this man.

“Don’t—” I whisper, an air of fear weighing heavy in my voice.

“Everyone’s gone for the night,” he murmurs, his voice dropping an octave.

I put my hand against his chest, creating distance between us. Lifting my face, I hold his gaze. “Ralph, it’s just not a good idea.”

Ignoring my protests, he dips his face to the crook of my neck.

“Cut!” the director calls.

My body relaxes, and I move to step back. But I’m startled when Simon places his lips against my exposed skin, supplying me with a soft kiss.

“What was that?” I whisper-shout.

He shrugs and gives me a coy smile. “Just improvising.”

I roll my eyes. “There is no improvising needed on this scene, Simon. Stay on script.”

He squeezes my hip. “Some of the best parts of movies are when the actors go off script.”

I push his hand away and take another step back. “Well, don’t go off script on my neck.” Irritation saturates my words. “Not to mention, you can hear, right? You heard the cut ?”

He shrugs. “Eh, I might have missed that.”

Ignoring our argument, the director says, “Let’s call it for today. It’s all feeling”—he waves his hands around in a chaotic circle—“forced. We’ll finish the scene tomorrow, then move right into the boardroom scene. I think we’re spent. It’s been a long day.”

With a nod, I supply a smile of acknowledgment.

He turns around, raising his voice so everyone can hear. “Remember, if you signed up for the charity meet and greet tonight, make sure you’re here at seven o’clock sharp.” With that, he motions for the lighting engineers to join him, and the group steps off to the side. Let’s hope they’re discussing how to light the space so that the gaudy orange-and-brown decor running rampant makes me look less yellow. The shots I’ve seen thus far aren’t flattering.

My publicist, Miranda, likes to remind me that female actresses that ugly-up —her words, not mine—for a role tend to get more recognition come awards season. While

there seems to be some truth to that statement, I'd prefer not to get recognition for my role as a grown woman with jaundice.

Turning, I walk away from the drab hallway, its wall adorned with mock-ups of unfortunate art from the seventies, and head toward the back of the set. Simon follows in step beside me. "I'm sensing some annoyance," he says.

"You think?" I snap. "We've been filming for two weeks, and you still can't seem to follow the script."

He raises his hands, palms out—his fingers rapidly moving back and forth in the classic "spirit fingers" move. "Oooo, so sorry, Queen of Film, if I'm not living up to your standards."

"I never proclaimed to be the queen of anything, but I do know how to follow simple instructions. I've had it with you adding things into every scene."

"Stop taking everything so seriously."

"This is a serious film." My tone moves toward shrill. "It's based on real events, a real woman's life. It has to go a certain way. Annabelle is not rising to power to become the first woman to take over this Fortune 500 company just to throw it all away by kissing up on some guy in the hallway. You can't just improvise like that."

"You need to chill out, Annalise," he counters, obviously annoyed.

"Oh, like you? I can smell the alcohol on your breath. Is it possible for you to show up to work sober?" I snap.

"I find that it makes it easier to deal with you."

I simply roll my eyes and hurry toward my trailer, leaving Simon behind me. I slam the trailer door and release a groan.

Sprawled across the sofa in my trailer, Miranda looks up from her phone. She's startled, and her eyes widen. "You okay there, Anna?" Sincere concern dwells within her big green eyes, and it brings my anger down a peg. I adore Miranda and don't know what I'd do without her. While she's technically my publicist, she's so much more. She's my best friend, assistant, and right-hand woman. More than anything, she truly loves me—and having someone in this industry of vultures at your side who does is priceless.

I release a frustrated sigh. "I can't stand him."

"Another day in paradise with the jackass, Simon Blackwood, huh?" She sits up.

"It's utterly impossible for him to take anything seriously. He's going to ruin the project!" With the index finger on my right hand, I begin ticking my points off on the fingers of my other hand. "He's not right for the part. He changes the script. He's constantly drunk. He has no work ethic. Oh, and he randomly kisses me on my neck!"

"What?" she gasps, leaning forward. "He kissed you on your neck?"

"Yeah, and it wasn't part of the scene. The camera wasn't even rolling." I wave my hand in front of me. "Whatever, I don't want to talk about it. It's a long story. It's just... I just can't stand him."

She supplies a small smile. "Well, there's only another month of shooting, and then we're done."

"This cannot be another fiasco like the last movie. It has to be good." My voice quivers.

“Anna, your last movie was incredible. It had the biggest box office release out of any movie you’ve made.”

“Yeah, but apparently, it was trash.” I plop down in a chair.

“According to your dad,” she huffs, rolling her eyes. “And who is he to say, anyway?”

In terms of numbers, my last movie was my most successful. It had the biggest opening weekend box office earnings out of any other project I’ve been involved in. It even grossed more than a highly successful superhero franchise in its second week at the box office. Yet...when I look back at that project, I hate that all I feel is shame.

“You know it only made as much money as it did because of the motorcycle scene.” I blow out a puff of air.

“Well, it was hot.” She grins, wagging her eyebrows.

I pull a bobby pin from my hair and throw it at her with a laugh.

“It wasn’t supposed to be that type of movie,” I protest through a smile. “It was supposed to be a serious, award-worthy film, and it turned into light porn.”

I’ll never forget the way I felt when those words came out of my father’s mouth. The disgust in his voice as he compared me to an adult film star hurt at a deep, soul-crushing level. I hadn’t protested when my director at the time came to me with adaptations to the original script I’d signed on for. He felt that the intimate relationship between the main characters had to be seen on film. Who was I to argue with a director’s vision? Plus, my father is Hollywood elite. He’s been an actor his whole life. He knows how these scenes work. Nothing about them is sexy or enjoyable. It’s a well-choreographed dance. An intimacy coordinator comes in and

teaches us the moves, the body placements, and the angles. It's all very clinical. In that way, it's the furthest thing from porn. From what I can tell, at least some of those women actually enjoy themselves.

She throws her head back and laughs. "It was not light porn!"

"Well, it definitely didn't rack up any awards."

"So what?" she quips. "You are more than the awards you are or are not nominated for. Plus, that movie had a lot of reasons it wasn't nominated for an Oscar, the least of which had to do with your flawlessly executed scene on the motorcycle."

I hold her gaze in mine, willing her to understand. "But this one has to be good. It has to. You know how my parents are."

Frowning, she rolls her eyes. "Oh yeah, I know how your parents are."

"I just want to make them proud. This film has potential. It's a great story based on a real woman. It's the kind of movie that gets nominated for the Oscars—but not if that dumbass Simon doesn't fall in line." Sighing, I let my head fall back against the chair. "I just don't want to be one of those nepo baby actors who never lives up to their parents' legacy. I want to have earned my privilege in life. I want my films to mean something."

"You have, and they do! You're a great actress, Annalise. You've put in the work. You are beautiful, smart, and incredible at your craft."

My eyes fill with unshed tears, and I hate that they do. It angers me that I'm not stronger. I loathe that I allow my father's opinions to affect me the way they do. "I just want him to be proud."

“He is proud... I’m sure, in his own way,” Miranda mutters, the last part said in a low whisper.

“No, he’s not,” I say on an exhale.

“Annalise, can I talk to you as a friend and not just your publicist?”

“Sure,” I say with a scoff, knowing this is going somewhere I’m not going to like.

“You’re a grown-ass adult who cares too much about what your parents think. You’re so preoccupied with it that it’s become an obsession for you. You’re not present in the moment, in your own life, and you have an incredible life. You get to travel all over the world and film amazing movies. Plus, you’re every guy’s wet dream.”

“Ew!” I grab a stack of Post-it Notes from the table and throw them at her. “That is not my biggest ambition in life!”

“You’re not going to be able to stick your daily affirmations to your mirror if you mess these up.” She holds up the stack of Post-it Notes, laughing. “And I know...it’s gross, but it’s true.” Her smile fades as her tone becomes serious. “Not only are you gorgeous but you’re kind, funny...cool even.”

I raise a brow because I’m far from cool. I’m uptight and pessimistic—hence my obsession with daily Post-it Note affirmations. I have to rewire my brain to think more positively.

Miranda continues, “You are. People love you. Life is good. Just be happy. Do your best because that’s all you can do. Then just be okay with it. When all is said and done, these will be some of the best years of your life, and you’re missing them, drowning under a cloud of worry.”

“If you were my father’s daughter, you would understand.” My lip trembles, and I pull in a deep breath through my nose, willing my tears to stay at bay. This whole downward spiral started with Simon, but I’ll be damned if I let him affect me so.

She shrugs. “Yeah, I know. I don’t get it, but I still think you have a pretty incredible life and are a remarkable person despite your parents. As someone who loves you, it makes me sad that it’s all passing you by, and you’re not enjoying it. You deserve to be happy.”

“I am happy,” I respond.

“I don’t think you are.”

I blow out a breath and clap my hands. “Well, I’m happy about the charity event today.” Standing, I tug at the hot suede skirt, pulling it down. “Raising funds and awareness for breast cancer brings me joy.”

“Yeah, I know,” she deadpans, “because it’s important to your mother.”

“And to me, Miranda. My mother beat cancer. That’s a big deal. Anyway...” I move the conversation away from my parents. “I feel like I really should complain about Simon. He crosses the line every day. He doesn’t follow the intimacy coordinator’s directions. He’s always adding things to the scenes, and they’re always inappropriate. I get that he’s just some drunk jackass. But unlike him, I take this job seriously.”

“No.” She shakes her head. Standing from the couch, she starts picking up my discarded clothes.

“Stop.” I chuckle. “That is not your job.”

“Taking care of you is my job.”

I stand before Miranda in my bra and underwear. At this point in our relationship, modesty has left the building. “Simon had his sweaty hands all over that skirt,” I tease.

“Ew!” She drops the clothes with a dramatic flair, causing me to laugh. “In all seriousness, Anna. You can’t file a complaint against him. You know how these things go. You’ll be labeled a bitchy actress who’s difficult to work with, and it will make it harder for you to get jobs. Simon’s an idiot, but he’s harmless. Just get through this movie, and you won’t have to think about him again.”

“Fine. You’re right, but I really just can’t stand him.” I finish pulling the rest of the pins out of my hair.

“I get it, but you’re lucky because he’s so damn selfish that he refuses to do the charity event tonight. So at least you get the night off from him.” Miranda retrieves a freshly laundered bath towel from the linen closet and tosses it to me.

Opening the bathroom door, I step in. “Well, there’s another reason I’m excited to go to this event,” I say over my shoulder before closing the door.

“There you go! Now we’re being positive!” Miranda shouts.

“Just finding the joy, my friend,” I say loud enough for her to hear me through the door before I step into the shower to wash away the stress of the day.

CHAPTER

THREE

JADEN

“ T his is it?” I peer out the car window toward a rectangular metal building. The structure resembles a massive pole barn.

“Yep,” Max answers from the driver’s seat.

“It’s a studio,” Finn states from the back seat.

Looking over my shoulder to the rookie transfer with his floppy blond hair, I raise a brow. “A studio?”

Finn’s counterpart, our other rookie transfer, Miles, clarifies, “A movie studio. There’s a movie being filmed here.”

I return my attention to the building as Max drives us around, looking for a parking spot. “Movies are filmed in Detroit?” I question.

Miles responds, “Yeah, a bunch. There’s some tax credit given for producing movies in Michigan. I grew up about twenty minutes from here. My dad is a big film buff, and he would bring me down to watch whenever there were open sets. It was pretty cool. Transformers and Batman v. Superman are two of the cooler movies I remember being filmed here.”

“I still don’t get what Penny was talking about, though. I like movies as well as the next person, but I’m not some movie freak or something. If anything, it sounds like this event is more catered to Hollywood.” I hitch my thumb toward Miles.

“It is pretty sweet,” Miles agrees.

Once the car is parked, I grab my water bottle from the center cup holder and step out.

“Alright, well, let’s get this over with so we can get back.” Max yawns. “I need sleep, man.”

“We’re not going to The Station tonight?” Finn asks of our favorite local bar as he smacks the car door closed.

Max pulls at the bottom of his shirt, straightening it. “I’m not.”

“Me either,” I agree.

“That’s not like you.” Miles shakes his head with a chuckle.

I look at Max. “You know what? It’s not. Are we getting old or something? What the fuck?”

Max laughs. “We’re not getting older. Just smarter. After the month we’ve had, it’s wise to rest up. We have our season opener in three days. Coach isn’t messing around this year. He wants that repeat. I barely held my starting position after the exhibition games. The last thing I’m going to do is mess up and have my spot given to Sean or one of the rookies.”

“I’ll be glad to take it off your hands.” Finn slaps Max on the shoulder, and Max

shoots him a glare.

The rest of the team piles out of their vehicles and heads across the parking lot toward the studio.

Miles starts pointing out parts of the building unique to a movie studio.

Finn cuts into the informative demonstration. “I’m sorry, but who’s Sean?”

Max and I laugh and answer in unison. “Logan.”

“Ahh.” Finn nods as if that makes total sense.

Beckett and a few others join us as we enter the building. “What is this place?” he asks.

“A movie studio. Hollywood here has told us all about it,” I say, pointing toward Miles.

Beckett eyes Miles. “Hollywood.” He nods. “Yep, you’re definitely a Hollywood. He looks like a classic movie star—dark hair, bright blue eyes.”

“Exactly,” Max agrees. “He looks like a more muscular version of Ian Somerhalder.”

“Who the hell is Ian Somerhalder?” Cade asks.

“You know that vampire show that all the women love? There are two brothers. He’s the bad one,” Max answers.

A round of laughter ensues.

“What vampire show?” I ask.

Max holds his hands out, palms up. “I don’t know. Remember that girl Monique that I was hanging out with for a while? She used to make me watch it. She was obsessed with that Ian guy. She looked him up on Insta and made me read all about him. He sells whiskey now.”

“What the...?” I question. This conversation has veered off into something ridiculous, which is the norm now that I think about it.

Bash joins us now. “Vampire Diaries.” He lifts his shoulders. “Hattie used to make me binge it with her. It’s not bad. A little cheesy but not bad.”

“Ah, Cookie...” Beckett grins. “Meet Hollywood.” He points at Miles.

“What is going on here?” Miles’s face scrunches up as he eyes the guys around him.

I lean in and bump his shoulder with mine. “That, my friend, is how long it takes for one to go from Logan to Sean or, in your case, Miles to Hollywood.”

“And seriously”—Max motions around the space—“enlighten us, Hollywood. What are we seeing here?”

Miles accepts his new nickname with a simple bob of his shoulders and points out a tall light used in filming.

Hollywood is a perfect nickname for Miles because he knows his stuff. I find myself actually listening to his short movie studio lesson as I lift my water bottle to my mouth and take a big gulp.

Sweet perfume wafts through the air, and I turn mid-chug. The world changes as I

know it. In an instant, my life is forever changed—split into two categories—before this moment and after. For I am face-to-face with the woman of my dreams.

At this moment, I realize I'm completely unprepared for this wish to come true. Had I been equipped, I wouldn't make an utter fool out of myself.

But as life would have it, I do—make this meet and greet—the one I've only dreamed of—an absolute calamity.

Shocked at her presence, I gasp, inhaling the mouth full of water into my lungs. The sensation burns, and I start gagging and coughing, unable to breathe. The proximity of this woman makes everything worse. I've inhaled water before, and though it's never been a pleasant experience, this elevates it to a whole new level. The embarrassment I feel—coming face-to-face with the goddess before me in this manner is unreal. I'm coughing and gagging. My eyes are watery, and I'm certain my face is red as I force out one disgruntled hack after the next, trying to get air into my lungs. Apparently, the universe is one cruel bitch, and I'm its prime target. This is truly unbelievable.

Her eyes go wide as she cautiously looks from me to Penny, who stands at her side. Her beautiful blue-eyed gaze scans my body as if I'm some freak from another planet. The air around us is saturated in awkward tension. The guys stare at the movie star before us and murmur among themselves, no doubt wanting to say something but unable to get a word in over the inhuman noises coming from my mouth.

I swallow hard. Tears escape from my eyes, and I swipe them away. I hit my chest, and finally, a bit of oxygen fills my lungs. "Sorry, wrong pipe," I croak out.

Penny looks at me, her lips pressed together in amusement. I could be wrong, but I swear her smirk is one of satisfaction. Our evil head of PR, Ms. Penny Dreven, waits a few more seconds while my coughing dies down.

Once Penny's satisfied that my coughing is under control, she clears her throat. "So Miss Annalise Sterling here, along with some of her cast mates and crew, will join us for this meet and greet. There are tables set up." She points behind her toward the other end of the massive building. "Each of your seats are labeled. So please find your name on the tables. Behind each of your chairs will be a box of your pink jerseys that you can sign and hand out to the fans who come through."

Penny looks at Annalise and asks, "Is there anything you want to add?"

Annalise wrinkles her nose and averts her gaze from me before she eyes the other players. "Thank you all for coming. This is going to be really fun. Breast cancer awareness is a philanthropic endeavor near and dear to my heart, and it's good to have you here." She wrings her hands in front of her as if she doesn't know what else to say. And I don't blame her. I'm still confused myself as to the connection between an NHL hockey team and the cast of some movie.

But honestly, I couldn't care less why these two groups were paired together because this might be the best day of my life, if only I can turn my world-class hacking-coughing blunder around. First impressions are important, but they're definitely not everything.

Annalise turns to walk farther into the studio, and Penny waves us forward.

The team follows Annalise, and I hesitate, grabbing Penny's wrist. I pull her to the side as the rest of the guys pass us. "Why didn't you warn me she was going to be here?" I whisper under my breath. "I could have made a better first impression."

"Well"—she gives me a coy smile—"I was going to tell you, but you were so busy talking about the closet incident that it must have just escaped my mind." The corners of her mouth tilt up further.

“Penny, that is so not cool. You know she is my dream girl!”

“Yes, Jaden, I do know that. And let this be a lesson.” She points her index finger toward me. “Do not talk about me and my husband or any closet blunders we may have had in our past or might have in our future.”

I quirk a brow, grinning. “Future?”

She bobs her shoulder. “Just covering my bases. Have you met my husband?”

I swipe my forearm across my face, my cheeks still moist from the tears that leaked from my eyes during the episode. “Still...this was so not cool, Pen,” I grumble.

“I think you mean to say, ‘thank you, Penny,’ to which I would say, ‘you’re welcome.’”

“So you set this up for me?”

“Of course, I set this up for you.” She pushes my chest lightly. “I heard that this movie was being filmed, and I know that Annalise is very active at charity events during the month of October in honor of her mother. So I made some calls, talked to her rep, and I set this up. The studio agreed to host, seeing that it would bring some positive PR to their movie.”

“I can’t believe you did this for me,” I say, truly touched that she went through all the trouble to arrange this.

“I do what I can.” She squeezes my arm and grins. “And if you promise to never talk about the closet mishap again, I have another surprise for you.”

“Never! I will never say one more word about anything to do with a closet ever again.

In fact, I'm going to banish that word from my vocabulary. I promise."

She chuckles. "Okay, well, I may have just happened to set the pair of you up side by side."

"No!" I cover my mouth. "Oh my God, Penny. I just want to hug you right now."

"Well, let's keep it professional." She gives me a wink. "But you're welcome, and have a great night." With that, she turns and follows the others.

I run my hands down my jeans, suddenly nervous because this may be my one and only chance to make a second impression on the woman of my dreams, whom I never thought I'd actually meet in person. I don't take many things in life too seriously—well, besides hockey, that is—but everything else? It's all a game to me. And who knows? Maybe this is too.

The fact remains that I have a couple of hours to charm Annalise Sterling. And if this is a game, it's a game I have to win.

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CHAPTER

FOUR

ANNALISE

I 'm not a fan of sports, and I can't say I'd recognize any of these guys if my life depended on it. I know they're famous in their own right, but ice hockey is just not an area I'm familiar with.

The group of guys are nice. They seem surprised to see me or to even be here. I'm not sure they were really filled in on what this night would entail. I'm introduced to a lot of them right off the start. One in particular, I think he said his name is Miles, asks me all sorts of set-related questions. I don't know if he really cares about the process of making a movie or if he's just looking for a way to connect, but it's nice.

The head of PR for the Cranes, Ms. Dreven, asks us to take our seats, informing us that our guests are arriving.

The team follows me to the line of long tables set up for the meet and greet. Folded name cards are placed along the edge of the tables, and I see my nameplate in the middle of the group. To my right, there's a name I don't recognize, so I can only assume it's one of the hockey players. Then all the names to my left belong to the cast and crew of the movie.

The name beside me is Jaden Lewis, and I don't know whether to feel intrigued or terrified when I see who this name belongs to. Out of all the hockey players, he is the

one I'm most intimately acquainted with, as I had to wipe his spittle from my face. Obviously, he didn't choke on purpose and project his saliva all over me for the fun of it. And admittedly, ick factor aside, it was a little amusing.

His big brown eyes dart toward me, and I can't tell what he's feeling as he closes the distance between us. He's tall and tan, with the perfect bone structure, a chiseled jaw, full lips, and that dark, disheveled hair that says "I wake up with hair this perfect."

To his credit, I'm sure most women find him quite handsome. As far as conventional beauty standards go, I suppose he is, but he's definitely not my type. Not that it matters. This is a charity event, not *The Dating Game*.

Jaden sits to my right. "I'm really sorry about earlier," he says. "That was awful, and I'm quite sure I may have spit on you." He scrunches up his nose and looks at me expectantly.

I nod. "Oh yeah, you definitely spit on me."

"Seriously. Again, very sorry. That's not how that was supposed to go."

He reaches for one of the black permanent markers set on the table between us. His arm is covered with a sleeve of colorful tattoos. A quick glance shows me that both his arms are covered in ink that stops at his wrists. I wonder if his back and chest are covered. I steal a peek at his neck to see if remnants of tattoos are evident beneath his shirt collar.

What am I doing?

I plaster on a tight smile and avert my gaze, looking at the line of fans heading toward us.

Truthfully, I'm not a fan of tattoos anyway. Once again, not that it matters.

This is awkward, and I kind of wish I was sat next to that Miles guy. At least he and I would have something to talk about, seeing that I know nothing about hockey, and Miles seems to be the only one who knows anything about my line of work. But it's fine, I guess. There won't be much talking anyway with all the fans coming in.

"How what was supposed to go?" I question.

"Meeting you," he says.

I retrieve a permanent marker and set it next to the tall pile of my photos on the table. The stack is quite thick and has me thinking that we might be here longer than two hours. "Oh, so you knew you were meeting me? Because I kind of felt like you were caught off guard."

"Oh no, I was definitely caught off guard. I had no idea I'd be seeing you tonight, but I've always dreamed of meeting you. In fact, we actually have met."

"We have?" I turn to look at him. Admittedly, I'm not always the best with names, but I have a memory for faces, and I swear I've never seen his before today.

"Yeah, almost every night in my dreams." He gives me a wink.

"Oh no..." I sigh and hold my hand to my chest. "Please tell me you did not go there."

He shakes his head, lowering his chin to his chest. "Why did I go there? I'm sorry. God, once again—not how this is supposed to go." His voice is filled with frustration.

"So I'm assuming you know who I am?" I ask.

“Of course, I know who you are. Who doesn’t?” He chuckles. “I love movies, especially your movies,” he says.

“Uh-huh.” I press my lips together in a line and nod. I’m sure he’s a fan of my last movie.

As if reading my mind, he states, “I saw your last movie five times in the theater before it was available on the streaming services for purchase, which, of course, I did the second it was available.”

“I bet you did, and I’m sure I can guess what your favorite scene was, too,” I deadpan as I look around for Miranda. I need her to come up with a reason for me to be moved away from this guy. After the shitty day I had on set, I’m not in the mood to deal with him.

I’m pretty good at reading people, and I can tell that Jaden is decent. To most people, I’m sure he comes off as friendly, likable, handsome, and probably even funny. His vibe isn’t what I’m in the mood for tonight, and I can’t spend the evening forcing a smile in response to his idiotic conversation.

“No, actually, it wasn’t.” He surprises me.

“Then what scene was it?” Hope foolishly rises in my chest, and I wonder if he saw me for more than my body.

I know that modern conventions deem me as attractive. My appearance checks the boxes for what society feels is beautiful. I get that, and I’m not trying to throw myself a pity party... Oh, poor little pretty actress . But looks fade. They’re temporary. Not only that but they also don’t define character or talent. I want to stand out as someone who cares about others and is fiercely good at her craft. More than anything, I think my life has been a constant struggle to matter for something that matters.

“I’ll tell you, but not today.”

I furrow my brows. “Well, then you’ll never tell me because we only have today.”

The corners of his mouth tilt up into a grin. “See now, that is where I disagree. I just think this is much more suited to a second date kind of situation.”

I huff out a laugh. “Second date. What makes you think this is a first?”

“Well, maybe not this.” He motions to the room. “The first date will come after.”

I open my mouth to argue when a little girl steps in front of the table to speak to me. With that, my conversation with Jaden is put on hold.

The next two hours fly by, and I don’t have a moment between fans to speak to Jaden again, though I do find myself stealing glances at him. He’s just as busy as he signs one jersey after the next. True to her word, Ms. Dreven keeps the line running smoothly, and at the two-hour mark, it is void of people. It’s one of the best run signing events I’ve been to, and I’m relieved.

Our five o’clock call time will be here before I know it. Our director follows the suggested twelve-hour rule and gives us twelve hours of downtime after each day but not a second longer. Seeing that we ended filming today at five, we’ll be expected on set first thing in the morning.

I stand from the table.

“You ready to go?” Jaden asks.

“You’re not serious.”

“You tell me.”

“No, I have to be on set at five in the morning. It’s late, and I’m tired. It was a pleasure meeting you, Jaden, but I’m afraid this is where our story ends.”

He takes a step toward me, closing the gap between us. “I disagree, Annalise. I think this is where our story begins.”

He inches closer, and his proximity does something strange to me. My skin tingles, and my heart picks up its pace. I’d only have to lean in, and our bodies would connect. I can almost feel the heat emitting from him, though, I know I must be imagining it.

I freeze when he leans in, immobilized with panic. Only, he doesn’t come farther toward me. Instead, he reaches for a jersey folded on the table. When he’s retrieved it, he hands it to me.

“I have an early morning practice, too. Good things are worth the wait, yeah? I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” He smirks, takes a step back and turns away, leaving me with my mouth agape and at a loss for words. “Oh, Annalise,” he says over his shoulder. “I promise not to spit on you tomorrow. That is, not unless you beg me to.” With that, he follows the rest of the team out and leaves me clutching the jersey to my chest.

After he’s out of sight, I hold the jersey out in front of me. It has the number two on it and the last name of Lewis in big block letters across the top back. On the front corner in black marker, he’s written a note.

Anna,

Can’t wait two make you mine.

See you tomorrow.

J

Holding the jersey out in front of me, I read the note over and over. Okay, so the guy likes the number two, evident in the switch of spellings. I'm assuming that was intentional. Maybe that's a hockey thing—to be obsessed with your jersey number?

See you tomorrow? What is he talking about? I never agreed to see him tomorrow. Yet this was written before he asked me out tonight. Is he cocky, confident, or just plain weird? I don't know.

And surely, I'm not going out with him. Why would I? Right? No way.

Exiting the space, I retreat toward my trailer, all the while holding the number two jersey to my chest. I expect the evening and all the weirdness it entailed to fade, yet it doesn't. It was a perfect storm of awkwardness, and then it was just over. I'm not sure what game Jaden is playing, but there is no room for a future between him and me, not even a brief one.

There's just not.

Absolutely not.

CHAPTER

FIVE

JADEN

“Bro, did you see that block? I knocked you out. I’m untouchable today.” Max grips his PlayStation controller and leans toward the big-screen TV.

I scoff. “Seriously? You just got lucky, and you know it. Just wait. Watch this next drive.”

“Bring it on. My defense is rock solid.”

“You got jokes.” I force a laugh, tapping my fingers against the controller. “I’m about to break through your line like it’s nothing.”

Max shakes his head. He stands from the sofa and steps toward the television, pointing his controller toward the big screen as if the movement will give him an edge. “Nope. We’re ready. Not a chance you’re getting through this line.”

“Second in goal,” I tsk. “This is it. I won’t need another shot. Get your Hail Mary play ready.”

With seconds left in the video game, this touchdown is a must to break the tie. My football avatar throws the ball, and the angle is perfect as it lands in the receiver’s hands across the goal line. I toss the controller onto the sofa and raise my arms in the

air. “That’s how you do it!”

Max grumbles and plops onto the couch beside me. “This game is rigged.”

I chuckle. “Just because you don’t win doesn’t make it rigged.”

He points toward the TV. “It does when my lineup was clearly better. I had the better team.” He lifts his phone and checks the time. “Don’t you have to go soon?”

“In about an hour.” I shrug.

“I still don’t get it. How do you know she’s going to show? I still can’t believe she was inches away from you for hours yesterday, and you did nothing.” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“She’ll show, and I told you, my normal methods weren’t going to work on her. She’s not some puck bunny jumping at the chance to get a night out with a Cranes player. I had to read the room, and I could tell that my usual way of doing things would backfire. Annalise isn’t like other girls.”

He scoffs. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“You saw her face. She had no idea who any of us even were. My position on a professional hockey team didn’t win me extra brownie points. I’m sure guys flirt with her all the time, and she’s over it. She signed up for the event to raise money for breast cancer awareness and fill that karma bucket of hers, not to leave with a date. She no doubt has A-list celeb pretty boys bowing at her feet. What could a tatted-up hockey player offer her? You know? Nah.” I shake my head. “She had the upper hand. So I had to read the room and offer her something she didn’t expect.”

“Confusion?” Max grins.

I flatten my palms against my thighs and stand from the sofa. I look over my shoulder at Max and raise a brow. “Intrigue.”

“I don’t know.” Pressing his lips together, he shakes his head.

“I guarantee it’s going to work.” I turn to face Max. “Look, she goes back to her trailer and thinks, What does he mean, ‘I’ll see you tomorrow’? He’s not going to see me tomorrow. ”

Max holds his hand, his finger and thumb touching in the ‘A-okay’ sign, and he clicks his tongue. “Your Annalise Sterling impression. Perfect, man. Spot-on.”

I flip him the finger and return to my normal voice. “The point is, I did the unexpected, which is something I’m sure she’s not used to. Guys fawning all over her is surely a daily occurrence. But a guy just walking away? That’s undoubtedly new. I guarantee she thought about our brief interaction all day, replaying it in her mind while trying to figure out where she gave me the impression that she’d go out with me. The whole night from me coughing spit all over her face, to horribly flirting, to making plans without any indication from her that she’s remotely interested in said plans—it’s all over the place.” I swipe my hands, palm up in front of me, “Causing intrigue. Making her think and wanting to figure me out enough so that she’ll go against her better judgment and spend a couple more hours with me today, if only to put the questions in her head to rest. And that is when...” I pause in dramatic fashion. “I get her to fall for me.”

“You’re either the biggest idiot in the world or brilliant. It’s just hard to believe that you had the girl of your dreams sitting next to you, and you just walked away, leaving it to chance. I didn’t expect it.”

I nod. “Nor did she, and that’s why it will work.”

Max claps his hands together and stands from the sofa. We collect our snack dishes from the afternoon of gaming and make our way to the kitchen. We clean up, loading the dishwasher in tandem like a happily married couple. I've had several roommates in my life, and Max is the best. With our salaries, we could each afford to get our own home, but living by myself in a big house seems lonely. Renting a kick-ass bachelor pad with Max is much more my speed. Thankfully, he feels the same.

As an extreme extrovert, I never thought of myself as lonely. But just recently, when I genuinely think back to my childhood, I know I was. An only child raised by a young single mother who worked all the time left me to my own devices more than was probably healthy for proper development.

Max retrieves a dishwasher soap pod from beneath the sink and opens the little compartment on the dishwasher door.

He groans, pulling out the remnants of the old pod. The different colorful soaps have vanished, leaving just a slimy plastic shell. Holding it up, he turns his mouth down in a frown. "Every time I pull this out, it reminds me of a used condom, and it grosses me out."

I smack his arm. "Gross, dude."

"Well," he scoffs, swinging the drippy plastic in front of my face, "don't tell me you didn't think the same thing."

"I didn't, but I definitely will be now!" I feign a gagging motion. "Maybe we should switch to powder soap."

"That or get someone in here to fix the latch of the little soap door so the thing falls out and all of it dissolves."

“Plastic doesn’t even dissolve,” I state.

“I don’t know. It’s like a special plastic.” He shrugs, still holding the soap condom in front of my face.

I take a step back. “Oh my God, throw that away already!”

He laughs and tosses it into the garbage before placing the new soap pod into the dishwasher, closing the door, and starting the cycle.

My mind drifts back to the date ahead of me, and scenarios start to play out in my mind. I really do think my tactic will work, and she’ll show up. But after that, I can honestly say I haven’t a clue. She could just arrive to tell me that she’s not interested. The reality could be that I’m not the one for Annalise. Crazier still—what if I can’t stand her? My attraction is based on roles she’s played, and of course, how insanely beautiful she is. Yet whether we’re compatible is a mystery. At least I get this chance to see. That gift from Penny was one of the nicest things anyone has ever given me.

“Did you leave a time and place on the jersey?” Max asks as if he’s still trying to work through the logistics.

“No. But Penny passed the information on to Annalise’s assistant.”

He nods. “Ah, that makes sense. Penny sure has come through for you.”

“Damn straight she has. I’m honestly still in shock. I low-key thought she hated me.”

“Yeah, I did, too. I mean, our shenanigans over the years have given her enough reason to.”

I pull my cell phone out of my back pocket to check the time. “Kinda makes me think

I should've gotten her and Dreven a wedding present or something."

Max throws his head back and laughs. "You didn't get them a wedding present? You really are an undeserving asshole."

"What?" I shrug. "They eloped. I didn't think I was supposed to."

"We had a big party celebrating them and their marriage."

My brows furrow. "I thought that was just a normal team barbecue."

"Right." Max nods. "One that was focused around Gunner and Penny and congratulating them on their wedding."

"Well, it's pumpkin spiced latte season, Penny's favorite. I'll bring her a cup tomorrow," I state.

"Dude." Max crosses his arms. "She introduced you to Annalise Sterling, one of the most beautiful women in the world. You owe her a coffee a day for life."

I wave him off. "I'll make it up to her. I can't think about this right now. I gotta get ready for my date." I head into the hallway toward my bedroom.

"Well, you had better turn on that charm tonight. I guarantee you Annalise is the kind of girl who sends people wedding gifts," he calls after me.

"Yeah. Yeah," I grumble under my breath.

He doesn't have to worry about that. Tonight, I will be giving it my all because I know that chances like this only come around once in a lifetime, and I won't waste it. It all comes down to tonight. I'll lay all my cards out on the table and hope it's

enough.

CHAPTER

SIX

ANNALISE

I finish massaging the lotion into my skin and inhale. Pineapple melon. I happened upon this lotion a couple of years ago, and it's my favorite. It's sweet, fresh, and fruity. So much better than the Eau de Gasoline that Simon got all over me earlier. None of our scenes were supposed to be intimate. We reshot the hallway scene from yesterday where he leaned in toward me, and I swear that moment of closeness drenched me in his vile scent. He wears enough harsh cologne to set off a migraine in someone a mile away.

My favorite part of the day is returning to my trailer and showering off all remnants of Simon. I don't know what it is about the guy, but I can't stand him. To his credit, he stayed on script today for the most part, but he was still insufferable. Everything about him rubs me the wrong way.

Initially, I think the director saw more of a sexual tension between Simon's and my characters because, of course, a woman isn't going to rise to the top of an empire without crushing all over the prick in the office. But after a week of shooting and the palpable friction between my costar and me—some rewrites were made. The changes were for the better as a romance wasn't part of my character's history to begin with.

Miranda is always concerned about my reputation in this industry, and I suppose I give her reason to worry. There have always been negative whispers surrounding me.

I can admit that I'm not always the easiest to work with. I'm not in this industry for fame or money. As the daughter of legendary actors, I have plenty of both. I'm an actor because I love the craft. I was raised on movie sets. I was friends with the camera operators and set decorators instead of hanging out with kids my age, having sleepovers, and going to the mall. I followed the lighting technician around, asking a million questions. The entire movie-making process fascinated me and still does. So when something doesn't sit right, I speak up because I want the projects I work on to be incredible.

If I'm being honest, I'm exhausted. I'm tired of challenging everyone and trying to convince them of my abilities. At twenty-six, I feel like I've been in this industry for decades and have yet to showcase my true capabilities. No matter how hard I work, I'm still just a pretty face. I know I shouldn't complain. So many aspiring actors would kill for my life and be thrilled just to get a role in anything, let alone a major motion picture. I should be grateful for what I have. I simply can't stifle the feeling in my heart that yearns for more.

A familiar rhythmic knock sounds at my trailer door before Miranda enters. She hops up the steps into my trailer, full of her usual sunshine.

"That's what you're wearing?" She grimaces.

My mouth falls open, and I look down at my designer boots, baggy '90s jeans, and oversized baby-blue sweater. I was going for understated and comfortable. I have no idea where hockey players hang out, so I decided to play it safe with my outfit.

She grabs my hand and squeezes, a wide smile across her face. "I'm kidding." She chuckles. "You look amazing, as always."

I furrow my brows and hold her stare in mine. "That's not cool, Mir. You know I'm not pleased about this evening as it is. I must've tried on twenty outfit combinations

before settling on this.”

“Yeah, I know.” She smiles and releases my hand before gesturing toward the mountain of clothes piled on my bed. “The guy is obviously smitten. You could pull a garbage bag over your head and wear it as a dress, and I’m sure he’d still be fascinated by you. That”—she once again points at the obscene pile of clothes—“is excessive. Don’t you think?”

“No,” I huff, crossing my arms. “I don’t think it’s excessive, and you know what? This whole night is your fault, so you can put all that crap away.”

“Gladly. If that’s the price I must pay to get you out of this trailer, I’m happy to do so.” She bops me on my nose with her index finger. “Because I love you.”

“If you loved me, you would’ve politely declined when that lady called you.”

Miranda shrugs. “She made it sound like you and Mr. Hockey had already made plans and just needed to iron out a few details.”

“I told you that no plans were made. Plus, he’s not my type.” I toss my hands up. “Not that it matters because I’m not interested in dating anyone right now. You know that.”

“Listen, Anna. I know you...sometimes better than I think you know yourself. As your publicist, it is my professional opinion that a night out will do you good.”

I turn to the mirror and fuss with a few errant waves in my hair. “I think we need to review the parameters of your job. There might be some confusion as to your role.”

“Fine by me.” She retrieves my favorite lip gloss from my purse and hands it to me. “Because this falls under my best friend duties, anyway.”

“I don’t even know what we’re doing,” I grumble.

“Well, you’re dressed for a perfect autumn evening in Michigan, so you can’t go wrong.”

I place my lip gloss back in my purse, then check the time before tossing my phone inside as well. “I’m only doing this because I think a night away from all this and my stress over Simon will do me good, like you said. This isn’t going to be a love match, Mir. I hope you know that.”

“Of course.” She supplies a wink before exiting the trailer.

With one more backward glance into the mirror, I follow her out. We’re silent as we make our way through the studio and to the front parking lot. Miranda opens the studio door and motions me outside.

I can’t help but smile. “I said I would go. You don’t have to escort me the entire way.”

“I’m curious. You know I have to get a peek at this guy. I’m not following you because I think you’re going to bolt.”

We step outside at seven o’clock just as a fancy navy blue sports car pulls into the lot. “Well, at least he’s punctual,” I say.

“He’s taking one of the most amazing women in the world out on a date. He damn well better be punctual,” Miranda states.

The car stops a few feet in front of the door, and Jaden steps out. He sports a smile so big, it’s contagious, and I find myself grinning back as he closes the distance between us.

“Ladies.” He nods.

“Hi, I’m Miranda.” She extends her hand, and he shakes it. “The publicist and best friend.”

“Nice to meet you. So you’re the one who ironed out the details with Ms. Dreven? Thank you.”

“No problem,” Miranda beams, clearly pleased with herself.

Jaden wears a pair of tennis shoes, jeans, and a thin black sweater, reassuring me that I chose the correct outfit. “You ready?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah.”

He extends an arm, motioning me forward and rests his hand on the small of my back as he leads me to the passenger side of the car. He opens the car door.

Miranda shouts, “Don’t stay out too late, kids.”

I shoot her a mock glare as I sink into the car’s supple leather seats. Jaden closes my door and makes his way around the vehicle before taking his place behind the wheel.

He heads out of the parking lot toward the main street. “Where are we headed?” I ask.

His thumb taps the steering wheel, and I find myself oddly fascinated with his hands. “Well, seeing that you’re a Cali girl, I thought you should have the perfect fall experience. In my opinion, autumn is Michigan’s superpower. There’s not much better than it. Not only does it bring the start of the hockey season but it also has some other great perks, which I’m going to show you tonight.”

“The leaves are beautiful.” I look out the window, wishing the sun hadn’t already set. It would be nice to see all the colorful foliage.

“They are.”

“We’re not doing anything pertaining to hockey, right?” I ask.

He quirks a brow. “Not a fan?”

“Not really. I’ve never seen a game.”

“You’ve never seen a game?”

“Nope.”

“So you really have no idea who I am.”

“Zero idea.”

He chuckles. “Well, I’m kind of a big deal.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are.” My words drip in sarcasm.

“In some circles.” He shrugs. “I did help our team win the Stanley Cup this past June, and while you probably don’t know what that is—it’s huge, like the Oscars of hockey.”

“That’s cool.”

He laughs again. “You don’t want to be here, do you?”

“Not really, no.”

“Well, I hope I’ll have changed your mind by the end of the night.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

CHAPTER

SEVEN

ANNALISE

The drive to our destination is uneventful, filled with generic get-to-know-you questions about each of our industries. I'm more informed about hockey, and now know that Jaden is a defender, which is basically exactly how it sounds. He protects his team's goal against the opponents' advances while trying to get the puck back to his teammates. I have to admit that the passion with which he talks about his profession is infectious and warms my heart. It's hard to hate on anything that someone else loves so much. I may not have been raised around sports, but I find myself curious to see a game. A little tidbit I keep to myself. This evening with Jaden is a one-night thing.

I didn't feel a big draw toward him yesterday at the charity event, but the more he talks, the more at ease I am. He has this lightness to him that counteracts my more serious nature, and it's refreshing.

We've been traveling on some backcountry roads for a while, and he starts to slow down. I have to stop myself from gasping as we pull into an orchard. White twinkle lights are wrapped around the trees on two rows, creating a magical path that extends into the center of the orchard.

Jaden parks the car at the edge of the tree line, and we get out. "Have you ever gone apple picking?"

“No, I haven’t.”

He extends his hand, and for some reason, I take it. “Let’s go.”

We stroll between the two lit rows, making our way farther into the orchard. The lights illuminate the picturesque trees with their apples. Yellow apples grow from the row of trees to our right, while the trees to our left carry red ones. Our surroundings are so pretty, it’s hard to believe it’s real. It feels like a movie set, fabricated to look beautiful. Yet it’s different because the grass moves beneath my boots with each step. The leaves of the trees sway with the warm autumn breeze. The air carries a hint of sour-filled sweetness from the apples that have fallen and have started to decompose atop the grass.

“This is so pretty.” I feel my walls—the ones I have built high—start to fall as genuine emotions come to the surface.

Jaden squeezes my hand as we continue to walk through the orchard. “Yeah, despite growing up here, I didn’t go apple picking until I was an adult. I heard all the guys talking about it and wanted to see what it was like for myself. Apples are one of my favorite fruits, but I’m telling you, not a single apple in the store compares to one picked from a tree.”

“Why didn’t you go apple picking as a child?” I look at Jaden, my gaze focusing on his profile and his perfect jaw. It’s always amused me how drawn I am to good bone structure. One wouldn’t think a man’s jawline was that big of a deal, but in my experience, it is. I clear my throat and force my face forward.

Jaden shrugs. “I was raised by a single mother, and she worked a lot. My life consisted of school and sports and not much else. I don’t blame her or anything. Everything I have is because of her. There just wasn’t time for outings like this.”

We reach a spot in what appears to be in the center of the orchard. Checkered flannel blankets are folded beside a large wicker picnic basket. There's a small table with a chilled bottle of wine and glasses. Next to the table are two empty baskets with red-and-black buffalo-plaid ribbons wrapped around their handles.

I look around and can't help but smile. "This is amazing." I release a small laugh. "It feels like a date from *The Bachelor* ." It's true. The romantic ambience is set up so perfectly, it's almost professional.

"Is that a good thing?" Jaden releases my hand and picks up the wine opener from the table.

"I mean, it's beautiful, for sure." I continue to take in my surroundings, feeling almost giddy. While this evening is a one-night thing, it feels good to be out and away from the stress of the film.

He pops the cork from the wine bottle and shoots me a wink. "Let's hope I get the rose, yeah?"

"So you're a fan of the show?" I grin at his *Bachelor* reference.

He hands me a glass of wine, the corners of his mouth tilting up. "I wouldn't say a fan, no. Though, I have been sucked into a couple of seasons. But I blame that on my roommate."

I stifle a laugh. "You do not strike me as the type to watch reality dating TV."

"I'm not... usually. However, come on, those producers know what they're doing. If you happen upon one episode, you're sucked in. You're dying to know who will end up together, which is a joke since none of the couples stay together anyway."

“I think a few of them do.”

“Yeah, like six couples out of the forty seasons,” he states.

“Oh my gosh! Is that the real number? How do you know that?” I question, amused.

“Max and I might have looked it up.” He tilts his glass of wine toward mine, and we click them together. “To tonight,” he says, changing the subject.

“To tonight,” I repeat. “Which is not going how I thought it would.”

He takes a sip of his wine. “I hope that’s a good thing.” He quirks a brow. “How did you think it’d go?”

I raise my shoulders. “I honestly didn’t know. I don’t get out much. I just didn’t expect this.” I extend my arm, showcasing the picturesque ambience.

“Well, first of all, when taking you out, a normal date won’t do. Plus, I didn’t want to do anything in public and have to deal with people wanting pictures and autographs. A private setting seemed better.”

“Yeah, that tends to happen when I go out in public.”

“I was talking about them wanting pictures of me.” He raises his brows with a cheeky grin, causing me to laugh.

“True. I guess we are in your territory, after all.”

“I’m kidding. Yeah, I do get fans coming up to me, especially in this area. But you’re known worldwide. I imagine it’s much harder for you to go out on a normal date.”

“Going out, in general, can be tricky, yes. But dating...that’s not something I do much.”

“Wow, thank you.” He smirks, and his big brown eyes light up. “I feel special. I knew you liked me.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Um, no. You’re just a bit of a stalker.”

He takes my empty wineglass from me and places it on the table. “True.” He hands me one of the baskets and takes the other one for himself.

“What do you mean, true?” I chuckle.

He shrugs. “I am kind of a stalker. It’s a bit of a running joke on the team. I might be mildly obsessed with you and your movies.”

I cover my mouth. “I can’t believe you’re admitting that.” I snort out a laugh.

“Here’s the thing. We have this one date to see if we’re compatible, and who knows, maybe we’re not. But if we catch feelings, I want them to be authentic. So there’s no point in hiding who I am.” He raises his right hand, palm out. “I’m Jaden, a self-proclaimed Annalise admirer .” He lowers his voice to a whisper. “Sounds better than stalker. Now you go.”

I raise my hand. “I’m Anna, and I will not be catching feelings tonight. But I am having a good time, which is the opposite of how I thought this evening would go.”

“The night is not yet over, sweet Anna,” he tsks. “Let’s just save those proclamations. Wouldn’t want you to have to eat your words later.”

“Is being so cocky a professional athlete thing or just a you thing?”

“Hard to say,” he answers. “Come on. Let’s pick some apples.”

Jaden explains the differences between the red and yellow apples. He goes on about crispness, shelf life, and sweetness level. It’s pretty adorable, if I’m honest. I’ve never been schooled on apple differences.

He pulls a yellow apple from the tree and shines it against his sweater before handing it to me. “These are my favorite.”

I take a bite, and I sigh. “OMG. This is so good.”

“I told you. Apples just hit different when they’re fresh.” He joins me, taking a bite of an apple. “Well, let’s pick.”

We begin filling up our baskets. “How did you pull this off? The lights, baskets, and wine...the whole private orchard at night experience?”

“The owner, Mr. Appleton, is a big Cranes fan. I just simply asked, and he and his wife were happy to set it up for me.”

“Mr. Appleton?” I laugh. “Is that his real name? What are the odds that someone with the last name of Appleton would own an apple orchard?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, I’ve never asked. His family has owned it for four generations. It started with his great-grandpa. So whether great-grandpa already had the last name of Appleton or changed it to fit his life’s work, I couldn’t tell you. I like to believe that this family has always had the name. It makes the whole lore of this orchard more special.”

“I mean, I guess if they had the name, they owed it to themselves to start an orchard. So have you done this before, the romantic date in the orchard thing?”

His arm reaches out, and his hand grazes my cheek. “Oh, sweet Anna. Are you jealous?”

“No! Of course not. I was just curious.”

“Well, don’t fret because this is a first, only for you.”

“It wouldn’t matter if it wasn’t.” I pull an apple from the branch a little too hard, and a couple of errant apples fall to the ground. “Oh no. That’s so wasteful.”

“It happens. The deer will eat them up. No worries.”

“By the way, you promised to tell me what your favorite scene in my last movie was?”

We cross over to the opposite rows of apples.

“I did, didn’t I?” Jaden says, picking a red apple. “Now these are really good right off the tree. They’re super sweet and juicy, but they don’t last as long once they’re picked. They go grainy quicker than the yellow ones do, so I usually only pick a few.”

I try one of the red apples, and he’s right. It’s incredibly sweet. A drop of juice escapes from the side of my mouth, and before I can wipe it away, Jaden swipes it with his thumb. The movement causes goose bumps to pebble across my skin.

I clear my throat. “So are you going to tell me or what?”

“Oh right.” He nods. “Well, to be honest, I loved the whole movie, but if I had to pick my favorite thing about it, I would say it was your character Caroline’s growth. I thought the way you played her was really powerful. In the beginning, she was so

timid, and her fear was palpable through the screen. The growth throughout was believable because it was so intricately woven through your actions. Like even with the way you moved your hair. At the beginning of the movie, you were constantly tucking it behind your ear, like you felt insecure and then you started flicking it behind your shoulder and then running your fingers through it. At the end, it felt more wild and fearless as you allowed it to fall where it fell. You know? You didn't try to mess with it, like you—or your character, of course—felt free. Your acting was so understated but powerful. It's hard to explain.” He grins and shrugs his shoulders.

Our baskets now full of apples, we slowly walk down the grassy aisle back toward the table while he continues. “I’m obviously not in the film industry and am probably butchering this explanation, but my favorite thing about the movie was your performance and how you strengthened your character until she was secure enough to leave. It was a beautiful message about loving oneself enough to know what’s best. Caroline left someone she loved deeply. She left a great relationship because she knew it was the best thing for her even though staying would’ve been easier. It was the whole ‘we only live once so make it the best life you can’ philosophy. But the message would’ve fallen flat had you not played that character so well.”

He steals a look in my direction, and my steps halt. I slowly turn to face him. It’s not until I see his eyes widen with shock that I realize I’m crying. A few tears have escaped and are rolling down my cheeks. I swipe them away in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry.” He sets his basket down and raises his hands in surrender. “I’m extremely basic in my movie knowledge. I could be totally wrong. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No.” I swallow hard, shaking my head. Another tear escapes. “It’s not that. You didn’t upset me... you understood me. Very few people get that movie. I mean, critics hated it. My dad especially loathed it. Everyone saw it as a spicy romance and expected a certain ending, but that wasn’t Caroline’s story. The relationship was

meaningful because it allowed her to grow into the woman she was supposed to be, but it was never meant to be her ending.” I hold my hand to my chest. “Thank you for that. It’s so rare that people see beyond the motorcycle scene and understand the movie’s message.”

“Of course. It was an amazing movie.”

“This is stupid.” I set my basket down on the grass and wipe my cheeks. “I’m just so used to defending that character because no one actually sees her. But you did.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’d imagine your job is full of emotions, getting into your character’s head like that. Wanting deeply to convey their message through your craft.” He smiles sweetly.

Without thinking, I take a step forward and wrap my arms around him. He drops his basket of apples and hugs me back. I lean my cheek against his chest. His heart beats rapidly as his strong arms envelop me, and I feel safe and calm.

But most importantly, for the first time in a very long time—I feel seen.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

JADEN

Holy shit. I am thanking my lucky stars that I didn't blurt out my first thought when she asked me what my favorite part of the movie was. Because that motorcycle scene was the first image that popped into my head. Put it off to sheer luck, divine intervention, a favor from the universe, or Cupid himself, but something in me told me to keep my mouth shut and pick another answer.

Given her reaction, that little voice was a game changer.

Holding Annalise in my arms feels more incredible than I dreamed it could. This entire experience is surreal. I'm standing between rows of twinkle-lit trees with my dream girl in my arms. I can't believe this is happening. At the same time, I realize that all of my preconceived notions surrounding this woman were false. She's not at all the person I imagined her to be.

I suppose I always saw her as my female equivalent from another world. Both of us good looking. Both of us at the top of our games in our prospective fields. Both of us confident as hell. Where I rule the world on the ice, she rules it in Hollywood. However, I'm going to have to change my reservation at the smug and cocky table to a party of one. Annalise is the opposite of arrogant, and that realization brings out something primal in me—this fierce desire to protect her.

The way I just described her acting abilities wasn't a farce. While it wasn't the first answer I thought of, it was true. I genuinely think she's brilliant. I don't know what she's been through to make her believe otherwise. Something or someone in her industry has made her doubt herself. Perhaps a multitude of experiences has created this fragile confidence within her, making her feel less than. And I can't accept that. Whether tonight leads to something more or not, she deserves more.

Her warm body against mine, the fruity smell of her hair, and the feeling of her chest rising and falling leave me completely intoxicated. I could stay like this all night. When she starts to move, I release my grasp, not wanting to make it awkward.

"I'm sorry," she says again.

"You have no reason to apologize. Everyone needs a hug every now and again, right?" I reach out and swipe a strand of hair behind her ear.

She grins, and her cheeks flush. "Yeah, I suppose."

"What shampoo do you use?" I blurt out.

"What?" A surprised laugh escapes her full lips.

"Just wondering. Your hair smells amazing."

"Um...thanks." She shakes her head. "I'll give you my shampoo hookup."

"Good. I need it." Bending, I grab both of our baskets and nod my head toward the table. "Come on. There's something else you have to try."

I spread the large flannel basket out and motion for Annalise to take a seat. Retrieving an insulated bag from the picnic basket, I unzip it and am met with one of my favorite

scents.

“Now, the apples are good, but they’re not actually my favorite part about this place.” I pull out a cinnamon sugar apple donut and hand it to Annalise. “Try this.”

“It’s still warm,” she says.

“Yeah, they make them fresh every day, but I made sure to ask Mr. Appleton to make a batch right before we showed up. They’re best when they’re still warm.”

“The Appletons spared no expense for your date setup. I hope you made it worth their while.” She takes a bite of the donut.

“Please,” I scoff. “They are well taken care of. In fact, if you decide to come to a game while you’re in town, you’ll see them in their VIP seats, each wearing signed number two jerseys, navy-and-white Cranes hats, navy pants, waving a giant foam finger in the air, and swinging around noisemakers while half of their faces are painted white and the other half navy.”

“You’re serious?” She laughs.

“Completely. The thing you have to realize is that while not everyone loves hockey, those who do...really love it.”

Seated across from Annalise on the blanket, I pop half a donut into my mouth.

She holds her donut between her fingers and raises it. “You’re not lying about these. Oh my gosh... heavenly.”

“Told ya. They’re the best.”

She takes another bite of her donut and covers her mouth with her hand as she asks, “So do you guys have a thing about your jersey numbers?”

“What kind of thing?”

“Like a pride thing or something.”

“Of course. It’s our number. It represents us. It’s not only the fans who are obsessed with the game. We all play because we love it, and our jersey number is our badge of honor, showing the world that we’re good enough to play the best game there is at a professional level.”

“I get that.” She nods.

“Yeah, and when you come to a game, you’ll wear that number two jersey proudly.”

She puckers her lips and squints. “What if I wore another jersey?”

“I’d die.”

She laughs. “No, really.”

“No, really, it would break my heart, and I would most likely cease to exist.”

She captures me with her big beautiful blues and holds my stare. “Well, I would never want that.”

“Good.” I retrieve another donut and hold it out to her.

She looks at it and bites her bottom lip. “Uh...I don’t know if I should...Okay, fine.”

I hand it to her. “Don’t worry, these are special calorie-free donuts.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” She smiles. “Fried in fat-free oil, no doubt.”

“Exactly.”

She takes another bite. “I’m not worried about the calories. I’m worried about the sugar. The apples, wine, and now donuts. It’s more sugar than I normally have, and I don’t want to feel sick tomorrow. It’s tough enough dealing with my coworker when I feel well.”

“The Simon guy?”

“The very one.”

“I’ve seen the pair of you together in photos on various news outlets. I thought you might be dating or at the very least good friends.” I start setting out the other food containers on the blanket between us. It’s a charcuterie spread with various meats, cheese, crackers, fruits, and vegetables.

“You really are a stalker.” She giggles. “And no... I can honestly say I think I hate the guy. But those pictures were all work-related, and the paparazzi were tipped off to our whereabouts. It creates buzz for the movie.”

“I get that. That’s kinda what Penny does for us. She makes sure we’re photographed doing something good and puts it up on all the socials. She thinks it’s important to maintain a positive image.”

“Penny is Ms. Dreven?” Annalise asks.

I nod.

“I like her, and I agree. A positive image is important in both of our industries. For better or worse, actors and athletes are looked up to as role models.”

“Sure, maybe. But I also can’t live my life based on the expectations of strangers.”

She scoffs, her expression turning almost sad. “Well, I’ve been doing that my whole life.”

The conversation pivots, taking on a lighter tone as we get to know one another over crackers and cheese. I tell her all about the guys on the team who are my family and make her promise to come to a game while she’s in town. She discusses her favorite things about growing up in Hollywood, on one set after the next.

There’s never a dull moment, and our chemistry seems effortless. Call me crazy, but I can picture a lifetime with this woman, a thought I’ve never had about anyone else.

She stretches an arm out to her side and runs it across the soft grass beyond the blanket. Something catches her eye, and she bends to get a closer look. “Oh my gosh.” She plucks at something in the grass. “It’s a four-leaf clover!” She holds the clover out to me. “I’ve never found one of these in my life.”

“It’s a sign,” I say.

“For?”

“For us. This date. I think it’s telling you to take a chance, and you’ll get lucky.”

“Lucky?” She puckers her lips and raises her brows, looking very accusatory.

I laugh. “Not that kind of lucky. Like lucky in life.”

“Hmm.” She takes in the small clover in her grasp. “I’m going to take this back and press it between a couple of books or something so I can save it.”

“Yeah, you should.”

All guys have a dream girl, someone they hung posters of in their teenage rooms. Someone who occupies their mind when they want to feel good. We all have a not-in-this-lifetime celebrity crush. But not all of us get a date with her. The closest most of us get to our dream girl is a picture of her on our phone.

Yet I’m sitting across from mine.

Maybe I’m in awe, my brain fuzzy with the rush of spending time with my crush, but I’m feeling things I’ve never felt. Wanting things I’ve never wanted. Loving every second of this first date knowing it won’t be our last. Until Annalise shatters it all.

“I’ve had the best time tonight, Jaden. I’m so glad we did this. It was amazing to get out and take my mind off work. Thank you for a perfect evening. And I don’t know... maybe we can stay friends somehow. Like texting pen pals.”

Texting pen pals? What in the actual fuck...

My face must give me away. Annalise reaches across the blanket and takes my hands in hers. She continues, her voice quieter now. “I’m sorry. I was serious when I said this was a one-night thing for me. It’s nothing against you, I promise. You’re great, and I’ve had the best time tonight. I’m just not in a dating place. You know? Plus, I’m only here for another month, and then I’m off to the next shooting location. I’m really focused on my career right now. I wouldn’t be any good at dating, anyway. I’m sorry.”

I swallow and force a smile. “You don’t have to apologize. I’m glad you had a good

night. And who doesn't need another friend." The words are sour as they leave my mouth. Placating nonsense that in no way represents the way I really feel. I feign nonchalance, though I feel dead inside.

I've learned a lot about Annalise tonight, but what strikes me the most is that she is just as stunningly beautiful on the inside as on the outside. Now that I've spent time with her and know a little bit more about her, I'm more obsessed with her than ever.

I can't force anyone to want me—I know that. But it doesn't mean I can't try.

CHAPTER

NINE

ANNALISE

A Rolls Royce Phantom limousine in bright white with chrome finishings pulls up to the studio at eight o'clock sharp. The driver opens the door for me, and I get in. My father has flown in for the evening to have dinner with me. He's closed down an entire restaurant for us so we can eat in private. As much as he proclaims to want privacy, he sends the flashiest limo I've seen in a while, making me wonder if he genuinely wants this dinner to go unnoticed. He's a walking contradiction, and after twenty-six years on this earth with him, I still can't figure him out.

The limo pulls up in front of an upscale Italian restaurant, and my stomach rumbles. It was such a busy day on set that a protein shake and some carrots were all I managed to eat. The food table during our lunch break went untouched, as I spent the time looking over a couple of rewrites to make sure I had my lines memorized. I was summoned to makeup prior to shooting and only had time to snag a handful of baby carrots on my hasty walk there.

I can always tell a good Italian restaurant by the quality of their calamari, and by the looks of this place, their calamari is going to be killer.

My dad sits in the very back corner of the empty restaurant. His attention is on his phone, and he doesn't realize I've entered until I've stopped right in front of him.

“Anna love.” He stands from the table, gently holds my shoulders, and air-kisses each cheek. It’s all very formal and the way he’s greeted me my entire life.

“Father.” I smile and take a seat beside him.

I place the cloth napkin on my lap and take a sip of the red wine waiting at my place setting. Looking around for the server, I say, “I’m ready to eat.”

My father releases a heavy sigh. “Have some decorum, Annalise.”

I frown. “Um, I’m sorry. Is there a reason we can’t order right away? I was so busy today, I haven’t eaten much.”

“Tell me about filming. How is it going?” He swirls his wine in his glass and takes a small sip, sucking the liquid in through his teeth.

“It’s good. How’s Mom? She couldn’t come?” My mother’s been in remission for five years, and still, I worry when she’s absent.

“She’s perfectly fine. Sends her love. She had a charity event tonight.”

“That makes sense. I actually did a meet and greet to raise money for breast cancer research a few days ago.”

He furrows his brows. “If I remember correctly, hers had something to do with sea turtles.”

“Sea turtles?”

“Anna”—he releases an audible breath—“you know how it goes. It’s your mother’s world, and we’re just living in it. I don’t question her activities.”

“Right.” I nod, tapping my fingers against the wooden table. My stomach feels as if it’s lost all hope of food and has resorted to eating my kidneys. There’s a sharp pang in my side. “Seriously, where is the server?”

“Annalise. We will order when our entire party has arrived.”

My eyes go wide. “Who else is joining us?”

His gasoline cologne burns my nostrils, and the hunger pains I felt have morphed into nausea.

“Mr. Sterling.” Simon extends a hand to my father, who is now standing. The two men shake hands. “Annalise.” Simon nods.

“Have you lost all manners?” my dad seethes under his breath.

I reluctantly stand from my chair and shake Simon’s hand, though I just escaped his company an hour ago. He smiles and motions for me to take my seat and proceeds to push it back toward the table. I want to ask my father why my costar is here, but he would consider that conversation in front of present company very rude. My dad will stab anyone in the back, but you better believe he will hold utmost civility and manners as he does so.

Simon’s parents have run in the same circles as my parents for decades, and I suppose they would classify each other as friends. But I can’t see my father caring enough about the Blackwoods to have dinner with their son.

“It’s been far too long since I’ve seen you, Simon. You look well,” my dad says.

“Thank you, sir. As do you. I have to say, I’ve missed your New Year’s Eve parties.” Simon puts on what I’m assuming he thinks is a charming smile.

This compliment brings a grin to my father's face. "Oh yes. We did throw some fantastic gatherings, didn't we?"

"Only the best. An invitation to the Sterling New Year's Eve party was an honor." Simon blows more smoke up my dad's ass.

Now that Simon mentions it, memories of the parties are coming back to me. I think I must've blocked them out. Specifically, the time when we were around ten years old and Simon ripped pages out of every special edition, gold embossed encyclopedia in my father's library. A prank I was blamed for no matter how many times I told my parents it wasn't me.

We stopped throwing elaborate parties after my mother's diagnosis, and once her battle was fought and she was finally in remission, we never went back to hosting. Something, in all honesty, I don't miss.

My father takes a sip of his wine and gives Simon an approving nod. There isn't anything he loves more than being complimented.

Fed up, I raise my arm and snap, "Server!" We're literally the only table in this place, and I can't get service to save my life.

"Anna!" my father seethes. "What has gotten into you?"

"I told you. I'm starving, and I need to eat." I leave out the part about the high probability of killing Simon if I don't get sustenance soon. I do not do well when I'm hangry.

The server, a mousy girl no more than twenty years of age, finally shows up. Her light brown hair falls straight to her shoulders, creating curtains over half her face.

“Can I help you?” she asks quietly. Looking terrified, she blinks rapidly. Her eye makeup, in shades of gray and black, and the way her eyes bulge out in what I can only assume is fear give her the unhinged appearance of an underfed raccoon with a hint of rabies.

I don’t mean to be an entitled snob, but when someone has enough money to rent out an entire restaurant, a competent server is usually included.

“Hi. What’s your name?” I give her a smile, one that I hope portrays that we come in peace.

“Bethy.” Her voice quivers.

“Okay, Bethy. Nice to meet you.” I keep my voice calm and smooth. “I’m Anna, and I would love a glass of water and a huge plate of calamari with ranch for dipping as soon as humanly possible. Thank you.”

“A calamari appetizer for the table sounds good,” my father approves.

“No.” I shake my head. “That’s just for me. Please order what you want.”

My words leave my father speechless, which I find comical.

“I’ll start with a gin and tonic and some fried mozzarella sticks if you have them. A menu would be great, too,” Simon says.

“Um...” Bethy looks down at the table. “We don’t have mozzarella sticks, but we do have breaded mozzarella di bufala.”

“What is that?” Simon asks.

“Well, it’s mozzarella di bufala,” she responds.

“So that’s like a type of mozzarella cheese?” Simon asks.

She nods.

“And it’s breaded?” he asks.

Bethy nods again.

“And it’s fried with like a side of marinara dipping sauce?” He looks expectantly at Bethy, pressing his lips in a line to suppress a smile.

“Y-yes,” she stutters.

“Great. I will start with that. Thank you so much, Bethy.” Simon gives her a charming smile, and she seems to stop trembling.

“It would be appreciated if you could bring me a bottle of this same wine.” My father points toward his wineglass.

Bethy nods and retreats to the kitchen.

“Oh. My. Word.” I press my hand to my mouth to halt the laughter that threatens.

“Whoa,” Simon agrees with a chuckle.

“Apparently, Cecilia needs to be more clear when she sets these things up,” my dad says of his secretary. “Why does our server seem so afraid? I’m at a loss for words.”

“Well, you are quite intimidating,” I tell him.

“Hardly.” He scoffs, his forehead wrinkling.

Thankfully, the cooks have their shit together because our appetizers are delivered promptly. I almost want to cry when I see the plate of calamari. I take a bite of the big ring, and I moan. The lightly breaded rings are thick and tender, and the ranch is perfect.

My father furrows his brows and frowns at Simon as if my behavior is somehow his fault. “What is going on here?”

Simon shrugs and suppresses a laugh. “I don’t know, sir.”

I inhale a dozen rings in a matter of seconds and start to feel like myself again. Now that my body has been supplied with some calories, and I can think again, I look at Simon’s plate of mozzarella sticks, and I start to laugh.

He notices me staring at his food and laughs along with me.

“Anna. What is happening?” My father’s face has morphed from one of anger to concern.

I wipe a happy tear from the corner of my eye. “They’re mozzarella sticks.”

“They’re mozzarella sticks,” Simon echoes my statement as he laughs along with me.

Bethy returns to the table with a bottle of wine, halting our joyful outburst. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, Bethy. Everything is amazing,” I say.

“These lightly fried breaded mozzarella di bufala are insanely delicious.” Simon

holds up his hand and presses his thumb and finger together in the A-OK sign.

The guy has a sense of humor. Maybe I was too quick to hate him.

We give Bethy our food orders, and the mood at the table sobers. Over the past several days, I've worked very long days with little sleep and even less food. Miranda would say that this is a bad habit of mine. I get too involved in a project, neglect myself, and ultimately have a breakdown. It's unfortunate that my breakdown occurred in the presence of my father, as I don't think he will forget this any time soon.

"Well, now that the moment of insanity is gone. Shall we talk about why I brought you two here?" my father asks.

His question causes the hairs on my arms to rise. The same ones that have warned me my entire life that the next few moments aren't going to be pleasant ones. I was so naive to believe he flew here just to visit, as if he missed his only daughter or something resembling parental instinct.

Simon and I exchange glances, and my father continues.

"I've been thinking about the best way to tackle the promotion for your upcoming movie. There's a lot of buzz surrounding it, and biopics are always very popular come awards season. But if I'm to be frank, we have damage control to do." My father looks at me, and my heart sinks. "Annalise's last film was an epic failure. Somehow a movie that was meant to gain acclaim garnered nothing but appreciation from porn addicts."

"Dad!" I cover my mouth, my eyes filling with unshed tears.

He holds up a hand and gives me a stern look that warns me not to say another word.

“It’s true, Anna. Your reputation took a hit with that one. There’s no sugarcoating it. However, you come from a good family with a respected legacy.” He motions toward Simon. “As does Simon. The Blackwood and Sterling names are well respected, and that means something. We need to focus on that.” He places his palms down flat against the table. “So you two will date.”

“What?” I gasp.

He glares, shutting me up. “It doesn’t have to be real. It just has to look real. We’ll orchestrate some positive photo ops in the area. Get your pictures in all the magazines and news sites. Everyone will be so excited about this new relationship, finding love on the set of such an inspiring film. The gossip sites will devour this kind of news. It’s sure to be a success. You’ll attend the awards season together and put on the front that you’re the most in love Hollywood couple there is. Once this film is a success and awards season is over, you can announce your amicable break. By that time, everyone will have moved on from your last disaster and think of you in a positive light. I refuse to stand by and allow your blunder to tarnish our name. This is how we accomplish that.”

“Dad...no.” My lip trembles.

“I’ll do it. I think it sounds like a great idea.” Simon gives my father a knowing smile, and I realize now that this announcement doesn’t shock him. The pair of them have already discussed the details. I guarantee Simon is getting something out of this arrangement. He wouldn’t have agreed to it otherwise.

“No, I’m not doing this,” I say with as much strength as I can muster.

“You are,” my father states. “This is nonnegotiable, Anna. The Sterlings have been Hollywood royalty for decades, and you’re putting our good name in jeopardy with your choices. This is how you fix it. And you will fix it.”

My entire body trembles as I force a tsunami of tears to stay at bay. I will not give either of these men the satisfaction of my tears. “I will not, and I cannot.”

“Why is that?” my father growls.

“I cannot fake date Simon because I’m already in a serious relationship with someone else.” The words leave my mouth before I can work through their consequences.

“What?” Simon and my father ask in unison.

I clear my throat. “I’m in love with someone else, and I will not jeopardize what I have with him to fulfill your sick scheme. And I will not apologize for my film choices. I am proud of everything I’ve done.” My voice cracks. “I pour my heart and soul into my roles, and I’m good at what I do. I don’t need you to believe it to make it true. It would be nice if my father were proud of me, but I’ve known you long enough to know that will never happen. So I’m done trying.”

I stand from the table as Bethy arrives with a tray of our food. I take the ceramic bowl of angel hair pasta and the basket of warmed French bread from the tray and thank her before I walk away, food in hand.

“Come back here, Annalise. We are not finished with this conversation.” My father raises his voice.

“I am,” I call back over my shoulder.

I’m so done.

I instruct the limo driver to drive me to the hotel. I left my lines for tomorrow in my trailer on set, but I don’t want to go back there right now. That’s the first place my father will look for me. He knows that I get oddly attached to my trailers. I rarely

spend time at the five-star hotel suite. It takes me out of the role too much. For some reason, staying on set in my trailer keeps my head in character. It's where I like to work my lines and prepare for the upcoming day.

Outside the hotel, I tip the limo driver an obscene amount to tell my father that he dropped me off at the studio, and I head inside.

"Ms. Sterling," the doorman Walter greets me. His gaze wanders to the large food dishes in my hands, but only for a moment. "Can I help you carry anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you. However, please don't allow anyone up to my suite. If anyone comes, especially my father, please tell him I'm not in."

"Absolutely, Ms. Sterling." He nods. "Ms. Miranda stopped by earlier with some boxes for you. I allowed her up so she could drop them off in the suite."

"Oh, that's fine. Thank you. Just no one else tonight."

He swipes his key card in the slot next to the elevator and pushes the button for the penthouse as I step into the elevator.

"Have a wonderful night, Ms. Sterling."

"You too, Walter."

The elevator door opens to the penthouse, and I step inside. A big white box with a blue ribbon sits on the table in the foyer, but I opt to open it later. First things first, food.

I turn on some trash reality TV, change into sweats, and eat the noodles. They're so delicious, and I'm so happy with my decision to take them. It was a spur-of-the-

moment impulse, and the thought of the look on my dad's face as I stormed out of the restaurant with two dishes in hand makes me smile.

I'm not naive enough to believe this conversation is over. This is my father after all, and one thing I know about him is that he will be heard and is accustomed to getting his way. At the very least, I'm going to be expected to produce this so-called love of my life, which could be a problem. I'm certain that if my father finds out I lied to him about having a boyfriend, he won't relent until I agree to his demands.

But I can never agree with him—on principle alone. I am a twenty-six-year-old adult who has been making my own money since I was twelve. He will not force me to do anything I don't want to do. And fake dating Simon is the very last thing I would ever do.

Just when I started to let my guard down and think I might've judged the douche too harshly, I find out he's in cahoots with my father. That camaraderie I felt with him at dinner was just an act. I guess he has some acting skills after all.

My phone buzzes, and I look down, assuming it will be another text from Simon or my father, which I will of course ignore. But it's from Miranda.

OMG, Anna. What happened at dinner? Your father is here, and he is not happy.

I pick up my phone and reply.

Don't let him intimidate you.

Well, I'm not trying to, but I don't know if I've ever seen him this mad. He wants to know where you are.

Tell him I went to Indiana to visit my boyfriend.

What?!

Just tell him that I went to Indiana to visit my boyfriend. Give him no other details.

Okaaay...

He's asking where in Indiana?

Tell him you don't know.

I did, and he stormed out.

Good. Now wait a few minutes until you're sure he's gone. Grab my script and head over to the hotel. We need to talk.

On it!

I chuckle and put my phone back on the bed. I'm so lucky to have Miranda on this adventure with me. She may be my only true friend, but when your best friend is as awesome as she is, one friend is all you need. I'm terrified of the day she leaves me. I pay her really well, but I know someday she'll find someone and settle down. She won't always be able to follow me around the world to all my shooting locations. Thankfully, that day isn't today.

Placing my hand on my stomach, I stretch back against the headboard. I may have inhaled every bite of pasta and enough bread for several people, but I have no regrets. I'm going to have to eat at that place again. Heck, I wouldn't mind seeing Bethy again. Next to my father and Simon, she's wonderful company.

I catch sight of the large box by the foyer, and I hop off the bed.

Tugging at one of the large bows, I flip open the top of the box when the navy blue ribbon unravels. The contents bring a smile to my face. There's an apple, a large foam finger, what appears to be some sort of a navy-and-white noisemaker, a pair of Crane hockey sweatpants and a hat, and a number two jersey signed by the one and only Jaden Lewis. I pull out the jersey and hug it to my chest, feeling happy. I open the card, which has the Crane hockey logo on the front. Inside, I find two tickets to a game and a handwritten note.

Dearest Pen Pal,

Tomorrow is our first home game. Inside, you'll find everything you need to hang with the Appletons. I can't wait to see what you think of your first hockey game. You're going to love it. Can't wait to see you.

Love, your friend

I take the apple out of the box and place it in my basket atop the table that contains the rest of the apples from our date. In my quest to avoid my father, maybe tomorrow is a good day to attend my first hockey game.

My phone buzzes, and I snatch it off the bed to see a text from Miranda.

Walter states you're not here and that he can't let me up.

Oops...I'll be right down.

Walter is the best.

CHAPTER

TEN

JADEN

I shut the locker as my phone buzzes in my back pocket. Pulling it out, I see Anna's name, and an immediate smile crosses my face. Maybe my date didn't end the way I thought it would. But I'm regularly texting Annalise Sterling, and that is a major flex. Hell, just the fact that I have her phone number is pretty badass in any world and more than most can say. It puts me in the company of very few.

Our texts over the past few days haven't been groundbreaking, but Rome wasn't built in a day. I was naive to think I wouldn't have to work hard for a girl like Anna. I have no problem putting in the time because I know she's meant to be mine. If any of my friends were in this situation, I'd be making fun of them. I've lusted over this woman for years—only knowing her characters. I've been on one date, and somehow, I just know . Ludacris. Maybe I don't know shit. Perhaps this is all still the lust talking. Regardless, I need more. I'm compelled to see this through, and maybe I'm wrong, but I feel like we're meant to be more than texting pen pals. I've been given this chance, and whatever the outcome may be, I'll never forgive myself if I don't try everything within my power.

Anna's texting to tell me that she received the confirmation from the limo company, and she'll be ready and waiting for its arrival. I reply with a thumbs-up and then immediately hate myself. Anna deserves more than an impersonal thumbs-up. I quickly type out a response.

Great! Can't wait to see you. I'll meet you in the box after the game.

She replies with a thumbs-up, causing me to laugh.

Bash looks over my shoulder. "Texting your pen pal?" he teases.

Cade laughs and tosses his bag over his shoulder. "I never thought I'd see the day where J-man would put so much effort into a woman who friend zoned him."

I narrow my eyes and zero in on Max standing across the locker room. "What the hell, man? You telling everyone my business?"

Max's eyes dart from me to the guys and back. He shrugs. "I'm sorry, J, but we're a family. There are no secrets among family."

"The hell there isn't," Gunner grunts.

Any anger I felt toward Max dissipates quickly. The truth is, I don't really care if the guys know about my situation with Anna. None of them are texting a hot movie star. "You all only wish you had a woman as perfect as Annalise texting you," I say.

"Please... I have a perfect woman, and she lets me do a lot more than text her." Beckett grins.

"Same," Cade agrees.

I roll my eyes. "Yeah. Yeah. I'm obviously speaking to the non-married guys."

Beckett ignores me and punches Cade in the arm. "Gross, dude. That's my sister you're talking about."

Bash joins the conversation. “Yeah, well... that’s my mother-in-law you’re talking about, Beck.”

Finn, our recent transfer from Boston, shakes his head. He wrinkles his nose, and with a curl of his lip, he states, “What kind of hillbilly hell did I transfer into?”

His bewildered expression causes a round of laughter to break out.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds.” Beckett chuckles.

Finn raises a brow. “You sure about that?”

“I mean”—Max shrugs—“it probably wouldn’t hurt us to venture outside of our gene pool a little more.”

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” I say.

“It goes without saying he means with someone you have a chance with,” Gunner says with a grunt.

I flip him off and grab my bag from the bench. “See you tonight,” I call out. Ignoring their teasing comments, I exit the locker room.

We had a light practice this morning, given that it’s game day. I normally love the easier game-day practices, which consist of some light conditioning and fine-tuning our plays. Though I could’ve gone for hours and not been tired today. Excited energy radiates from my pores. I can’t wait for tonight. The first home game after a summer break is an absolute high. The energy of the fans in the crowd is contagious. Tonight’s will be even more special, considering Anna will be there.

Max jogs up next to me. “Dude, they asked how your date went. I couldn’t lie.”

“No worries. It’s not that deep.” I stop at Penny’s office door and rap my knuckles against the wood before pushing it open.

“Hey, boys.” Iris grins before turning her attention back to Penny. “I’ll see you in a bit,” she says before giving us a wave and heading out.

“Penny,” I say.

“Jaden,” she replies.

“I just wanted to thank you again for all the legwork you did, getting me all the information to get in touch with Annalise and helping me plan everything for tonight. I really appreciate it.”

“Not a problem. I hope everything works out for you, J. Truly,” she says.

An unusually large bouquet sits on the table in the corner. “Nice flowers,” I say.

She looks at the corner. “Thanks. I got them last week from Annalise, actually. She wanted to thank me for setting up the charity event. I’m surprised they still look so good.”

“Flowers as a thank-you from Annalise. Wow.” Max’s words drip of sarcasm, and I elbow his side. He ignores me. “How’s your espresso machine working out for you, by the way?” he asks Penny.

She grins and releases a happy sigh. “Amazing, Max. It’s one of our favorite gifts. We use it every day.”

“Oh, good. Great to hear.” He bobs his head, giving her a dopey smile.

I internally cringe. “Gotta go! Thanks again, Penny. You’re the best.”

“I know it.” She gives us a smile and a wave as we hurry out of her office.

When we’ve made it a fair distance from Penny’s office, I nudge Max’s side. “You’re a jackass.”

He laughs. “What? I just wanted to make sure she liked my wedding present, which she really seemed to. In fact, she seemed to love Anna’s flowers, too. Isn’t that funny?”

“Look, Penny knows how I feel about her and everything she does for me. I don’t need to shower her with material things. A thank-you is enough.”

He presses his lips together and raises his brows. “Yeahhh...” he drawls out. “Absolutely.”

“Actually,” I snap. “I already got her something. Just waiting for it to arrive,” I lie.

“Sure thing, J.” He squeezes my shoulder. “So anyway. Let’s talk about your plans for tonight. Have anything special planned?”

We exit the arena and get into my car. I take off toward our place. “Besides getting her here without being mobbed by fans and making it so she can enjoy the game in peace, not really. I mean, I told her I’d meet her in the VIP box after the game to chat or whatever. I’m not pushing it. Just going to be cool.”

“Dude, what happened to your plan? The intrigue and all that.”

I shake my head. “My plan changes by the second. As I told you, she’s different, and if I’m completely honest, I haven’t figured her out yet. I’m out of my element, man.

At this point, I'm just going with it and hoping for the best."

"At least you have it all figured out," he kids.

"Not even close," I huff out a dry laugh. "But she's agreed to come for a game, and plan or not, that's a win in my book."

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

ANNALISE

Miranda finishes painting the white heart on my left cheek. “Done! You look perfect.”

I stare at our reflections in the mirror, each of us sporting a navy heart on one cheek and a white heart on the other. We’re decked out in our Crane hockey jerseys. Miranda picked one up for herself today, number sixteen. Apparently, it’s one of the new player’s numbers and had the most jerseys available. She felt bad that no one was buying his jersey, so she bought it. Plus, she states that sixteen is her favorite number, so it works out. In Miranda logic, that tracks.

The hat and sweatpants were a bit much, so I opted for jeans. The jerseys and painted faces will have to be festive enough.

“I’m worried,” I state.

Miranda, already knowing why, responds, “I’m sure he put you somewhere private. He wants you to enjoy the game, not be surrounded by people the entire time.”

“Yeah, I hope so.”

It’s not often that I just go out without proper planning. I don’t even have security on

set as I wasn't planning on going anywhere besides here and the hotel. My least favorite part about being a celebrity is the complete lack of normalcy. I can't just pop into a coffee shop without being surrounded and asked for photos and autographs. And not all fans are nice. I've been in some scary situations over the years. Just thinking about it has me questioning our evening plans.

Miranda takes my hand and squeezes it. "It will be fine, and if it's not, we'll leave immediately."

"Okay." I nod.

A knock on the door sounds. Before I can ask who it is, Simon barges into my trailer.

"Hey! You can't just come in here uninvited," I protest.

"Well, you ignored me all day unless we were in a scene, so what do you expect me to do? I have to talk to you." He stands in front of the trailer door, blocking my exit.

"Too bad. I don't want to talk to you."

"Anna..." he pleads.

"What are you getting from this?" I snap, against my better judgment. "Surely not money. You have plenty. What is it?"

His stare flicks to the floor before returning to me. "Nothing."

I shake my head. "I don't buy it. Tell me. What is he giving you for making this happen?"

He swallows. "A leading role in the next Bobby Flair movie. Says he's close with

Bobby and can make it happen.”

“I knew it,” I say.

“Come on, Anna. Bobby is the best filmmaker in the business. He turns good actors into legends. This is my way in.”

“You’re going to have to find another way. I’m not doing this, Simon. There is nothing you can do or say to change my mind. Keep your shit together, and do the best job you can while finishing this movie, and I’ll put a word in with Bobby for you. It’s not a guarantee, but he might listen. He’s like an uncle to me. But I’m not going to pretend to be your girlfriend, and I’m not going to put up with any more of your crap on set. You have to do better.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“If it’s warranted. If you start to actually care about our work here, then yeah. I can’t recommend someone who gives ten percent, though. And believe me...Bobby Flair is as legit as they come. He loves his work. He’s not going to hire you regardless of anyone’s recommendation if he doesn’t think you’re worth it. He’ll take one look at your work on this film and move on. Trust me.”

“I can do better,” he says.

“Obviously,” I scoff. “You’re a good actor. I have no idea why you’re trying to ruin this project.”

He blows out a breath. “I’m sorry, Anna. You’ll see a whole new set of skills on set tomorrow.”

“Good. And block my father.”

“Done.”

“And move out of the way. We have somewhere to be.”

He eyes our outfits. “I had no idea you were into sports.”

I shrug. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“Does this have to do with your boyfriend? You going with him?” He raises a brow.

“I said I’d help you get a meeting with Bobby if you earn it. That’s where this stops, Simon. We’re not friends. Now, please move.”

He raises his hands in mock surrender. “Alright. Alright. I’m leaving. Have a good night.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Miranda and I make our way to the front parking lot where the limo Jaden sent is waiting.

“Awesome, let’s go be sports girls!” Miranda claps her hands. “Can’t wait to cheer for the home runs.” She eyes me, and I shake my head. “Baskets? Points? Scores? Goals?”

I nod. “Yeah, that one, I think. They shoot a puck into a net and make a goal.”

“Yes!” she cheers. “Let’s go watch that.”

The limo driver turns into an unoccupied alley on the far side of the arena. As he pulls to a stop along the curb, a door opens, and Ms. Dreven appears. Instead of the

classy business attire she wore last time I saw her, she's sporting a Cranes jersey, skinny jeans, and some expensive knee-high boots.

She opens the limousine door and welcomes us to the stadium.

"So far, so good," Miranda whispers behind me.

She's right. This private entrance is setting my nerves at ease.

Ms. Dreven thanks the driver and leads us in through the door. "So I hear this is your first live hockey game," she says as we follow her through the hall.

"First hockey game, period." I chuckle. "I've never watched one."

"Oh, you're in for a treat. I've seen the most anti-sports people converted after watching a live game. There's nothing like it." She motions toward Miranda's jersey. "I hope Miles sees you. It'll make his day. He's one of our new guys, and I'm guessing there won't be many number sixteen jerseys in the crowd today."

She's wearing a number twenty-nine jersey with the name Dreven embroidered across the back. "I'm assuming number twenty-nine is your..."

"Husband." She smiles. "He's the goalie. Can't miss him."

"That's fun," I say.

"Yeah, it is," she agrees, a proud smile still on her face.

After following her through a series of back hallways, the noise of the stadium grows louder.

Ms. Dreven gestures toward a door. “This is you. The suite is very private. A few friends and family members of the players are in there, but they won’t bother you. You’ll have a server who can bring you any food or beverage you want, and there’s a bathroom in the suite so you won’t have to leave,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say as I enter the suite with Miranda right behind me.

“Enjoy the game,” Ms. Dreven says. “Jaden will meet you in here afterward.”

We thank her again and head inside. There’s a bar top along the back wall of the suite where a bartender is mixing drinks. “Want anything?” I ask Miranda.

“Definitely.” Miranda follows me to the bar. “What’s a very ‘hockey game’ type of drink?” she asks the bartender, making air quotes with her fingers.

He smiles. “Anything you want to be.”

“What do people drink the most?” I ask.

“Beer,” he replies.

I turn to Miranda, and we shake our heads, noses scrunched.

“What about a martini?” I ask him.

“Very hockey.” He nods.

“You’re totally lying, but we’ll take two, please,” Miranda states with a laugh.

Drinks in hand, we make it down a few steps to the two empty leather chairs in front of the big opening that looks down on to the stadium. The team is skating around the

ice, warming up.

“Hi,” a cheerful voice says to my side. “You must be Jaden’s orchard date.” The voice belongs to a heavier-set man with rosy cheeks. He’s decked out in Crane’s gear from top to bottom. There’s a woman at his side, beaming at me. She, too, is wearing nothing but navy blue and white with a giant foam finger on her hand.

“I am. Are you the Appletons?” I ask.

They nod wildly, wearing matching goofy grins.

Their joy is contagious, and I can’t help but smile back. “Thank you so much for everything you set up the other night. Your orchard is absolutely beautiful. That was such a special night.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Appleton says. “We’d do anything for Jaden. He’s such a good guy.”

“And a talented player,” Mr. Appleton adds.

“I’m excited to see him play,” I admit.

“Oh no, we forgot our foam finger!” Miranda exclaims, sounding legitimately bummed.

I want to tell her left is a more appropriate word. Before I do, Mrs. Appleton pipes up, “Oh, just ask the server, dear. She’ll bring you whatever you want.” She points at the wall where two menus reside. “There’s a booklet with all the food and drinks available, and the other tells you everything the Crane store carries. Order whatever you want.”

“Oh my gosh. This is already so fun,” Miranda squeals as she flips through the books.

Other VIP guests trickle in, and just as we were told they would, they all act normal. I’m guessing I’m not the first famous person to watch the game from this suite. It’s such a relief to feel normal out in a public setting. Or as normal as possible. Every few minutes or so, I become aware of someone from the seats below the box snapping a picture or video of us. I raise my chin, hoping I don’t have a double chin in the pictures they’re sure to post later. It’s definitely not a good angle.

“Ignore them,” Miranda says, holding a menu in front of her face to block out her mouth.

“I am.” I bring my hand to my mouth to cover my lips as I speak.

A girl on TikTok has built millions of followers by lip-reading, and she’s good. She posts videos of celebrities and deciphers whole conversations by reading their lips. It’s added another level of paranoia to my life. The last thing I need is something taken out of context and blasted all over social media.

Booklet still in front of her face, she asks, “Do you need pens?”

“Pens? No, why?”

“Slippers? A robe? Oh look! Funny straws.”

I laugh. “Miranda, we need none of those things.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh, I’m getting some things. Look at this.” She points at an item on the laminated page. “It’s a Crane hockey key chain and bottle opener...plus if your car is ever submerged in water, the end of it will break the glass!”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. Oh! Hockey puck ice trays! I’m going to need one of these pads of paper and a pen to make a list. I’ll order those first.”

I throw my head back in laughter. “Stop, Mir. You have to fly home with all that junk in a couple of weeks.”

“So.” She shrugs. “I don’t think it’s junk. It all looks well made.”

Two big foam fingers are placed in front of me, and I look up to see our server. “Mr. and Mrs. Appleton ordered these for you both.”

“Oh, that’s awesome. Thank you.” Miranda grabs a finger.

We look around the server to the Appletons, who are smiling big, and give them a wave and a thank you.

Miranda returns her attention to our server. “Can I order a Crane pen and paper set, please? I need to make a list.”

“Absolutely. Anything else?” she asks.

I hold up my empty martini glass. “I think I’m going to need another one of these, please.”

“Me too!” Miranda holds up her foam-covered hand, pointing the obnoxious finger at our server.

The server nods and steps away to help someone else.

“Who are you?” I ask, amused.

“What?” She shrugs. “I just really like this sport.”

“It hasn’t even started.” I cover my face, hiding another laugh.

Miranda grabs my arms. “Oh my gosh, Anna. What is happening?”

I follow her gaze to the ice below where the guys are... on their hands and knees, and... thrusting?

“Why are they humping the ice?” Miranda shrieks before hurrying to cover her mouth.

I’m laughing so hard now that tears form in the corners of my eyes. “You better hope no one was filming that little outburst. That’s not a good look to have out there.”

“Okay, but seriously...what is happening?” She looks from me to the players.

Mrs. Appleton leans forward and turns our way. “They’re stretching. And yes...it’s my favorite part, too.” She wags her eyebrows, causing Miranda and me to fall deeper into hysteria.

Once the game starts, the night flies by in a blur. We eat and drink, and Miranda orders an obscene amount of swag. The game is exciting, and though I barely know what’s going on, I’m jumping out of my seat and cheering as if my life depends on it. I’ve never understood sports until now. I totally get it. Jaden somehow got hotter as the night went on. He’s covered from head to toe, from his helmet to his bulky pads to his skates, and still—beyond sexy. It’s a rush from start to finish. I have next to no skin in the game, yet I wanted the Cranes to win so badly. And when they did—the euphoria in the arena was palpable. By the end of the night, the Appletons feel like

family, and I feel like I've been a hockey superfan all my life.

Best yet, for almost three hours, I was a hundred percent present in my life. I didn't think about my lines for tomorrow or worry about my dad, Simon, or the fans catching a video of me from an unflattering angle. I was in the moment with my best friend and an arena full of people, and it was brilliant.

Who knew I was such a sports girl?

Certainly not me.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

JADEN

Seeing Anna in the VIP box cheering for me was a dream come true. Whatever comes, I can die a happy man. The home season opener was incredible. We beat Chicago four to two in an epic battle. The crowd's enthusiasm was infectious. I hope Anna could feel the buzz that we've all grown to crave. Because once the obsession penetrates, you're all in.

I shower and change in record time, anxious to get up to the box to see her. My teammates' jaws drop when I announce that I won't be joining them at our favorite bar, The Station, tonight. Normally, I'm all for a boisterous celebration after a win. But tonight, I have something more important in mind.

When I arrive, the VIP box is empty save for Anna and another woman.

"Hey!" I say as I enter the suite. "What'd you think?"

Anna and her friend turn around, and I have to stop myself from laughing. It looks like the Crane store has puked all over the friend, covering her head to toe in Crane gear. She's holding two large store bags to her side.

I motion toward her swag loot. "You must be Miranda, and I'm guessing you enjoyed your first hockey game?"

Her head falls back and forward with fervor as a resounding, “Yes! Loved it,” comes from her mouth. “We are fans for life.”

“Is that so?” I raise a brow and look at Anna.

“Yeah.” She shrugs and releases a chuckle. “You’re looking at two converts here. We had the best time. I never knew a game would be so exciting.”

“Never knew,” Miranda parrots while she uses the foam finger on her hand to scratch her face.

“So I might be able to get you to another game, then?” I move farther into the suite.

Anna smiles. “Definitely.”

“Are you kidding?” Miranda says. “We’re begging you to invite us back.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t make you beg. It will be nice to see your friendly faces up here.” I notice Miranda’s jersey. “In fact, I know the other guys would love to meet you. They’re all out celebrating right now. But I’m sorry, I didn’t set up security or anything like that for the bar, so maybe next time?”

“Absolutely!” Miranda answers for them both.

“I did order some food from my favorite sushi place if you want to hang out for a bit and eat dinner with me.”

Anna looks at Miranda, and her lips turn down in a slight grimace, causing my heart to sink. She opens her mouth to speak when Miranda responds instead. “You know what? Anna will stay.” Anna whips her head back toward her friend, and Miranda continues. “Yeah, I just came down with a huge headache. Must be all the fun of the

evening. So if you don't mind, I'm going to head back to the hotel, but you two should definitely do dinner. Anna loves sushi."

"Okay, that sounds like a plan. Anna?" I question.

"Sure." She gives me a tight smile.

I hold up a finger and retrieve my phone from my back pocket. "Give me one second. Let me text the driver."

Anna and Miranda whisper under their breaths, the words too soft for me to make out.

"Okay," I address them both. "He's waiting in the alley outside the door where he dropped you off. Can I walk you back there?"

"No." She shakes her head. "I remember how to get back. You two stay here." She turns to Anna. "I'll see you tomorrow morning." On her way out, she stops in front of me. "Thanks again. This was amazing." She gives me a half hug. "I can't wait until next time."

A moment after Miranda exits, our sushi is delivered.

"Can I get you a drink? Wine?" I ask.

"Water is fine, thank you. I think I had one too many martinis already. I'm going to be hurting in the morning." She takes a seat at the table.

I hand her a bottle of water and sit across from her. Setting the containers of sushi out on the table, I snap off the lids and give Anna a pair of chopsticks. "Is it cool if we share?" I circle my hand above the open containers of sushi.

“Sure.” She breaks apart her chopsticks.

“When I was growing up and my mom would bring home takeout, she would just set the food in the center of the table between us, and we’d share the meals. It’s one of my good memories,” I tell her.

She takes a roll between her chopsticks. “You make it sound like you don’t have a lot of good memories.”

“I don’t really. It’s not as if I have a lot of bad ones. I just don’t have many, period.”

“That’s sad.”

I shrug. “I’m not sad about it. It’s how it was. She worked insane hours, and I was alone a lot. It’s simply a fact.”

She bites her bottom lip, and her eyes hold me in their gaze. “Yeah,” she says thoughtfully. “I have a ton of great memories from my childhood. And while my parents were there, I started to question if most of my fond memories really had much to do with them. I mean, they set up the parties and events and brought me to the sets. But it was the other people who I interacted with at these events or on the sets of movies who had a lasting effect on me.” Her cheeks redden, and she gives her head a shake. “Sorry, that seems like oversharing. It’s something I’ve been thinking about lately.”

“I don’t think it’s oversharing. I’m glad you feel comfortable opening up to me.” I throw another piece of sushi in my mouth. After chewing, I ask, “How is your relationship with your parents now?”

“Strained,” she admits. “In fact, I just had a horrible dinner with my father last night.”

“Why was it horrible?”

She exhales and stares off for a few seconds, seemingly contemplating her response. When she places her chopsticks on the table and focuses her beautiful blues on me, I know she’s about to fall into serious storytelling mode.

And does she.

I listen intently as she talks about her dislike of her costar and the complicated relationship she has with her parents, especially her father. She describes the dinner in great detail, including how her father and Simon conspired to create a fake relationship. I feel a sense of pride for her when she tells me how she stood up to her father and stormed out of the restaurant, food and all.

“That’s great, Anna!” I reach my hand across the table, palm out, and give her a high five. “I am so proud of you.”

She grins. “Thank you, but my father isn’t going away that easily. He’s used to getting what he wants.”

“You told him no and that you were in a relationship. That won’t stop him?”

She laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “Absolutely not. He’s only delayed. He won’t stop until he gets his way. Plus, once he realizes I was lying, he’ll make sure the whole media circus believes that Simon and I are together, and at that point, I’ll have to go along with it.”

“But what if you had a boyfriend?” I wonder aloud.

She rolls her eyes. “That’d be all well and good, but I don’t.”

“I’ll be your boyfriend,” I state.

“What?” she gasps. “No, Jaden...” she says my name on an exhale. “I’m sorry. I told you I didn’t want anything more than friendship.”

“I know. I heard you loud and clear, and I’m not pressuring you for that. I’m suggesting I be your fake boyfriend.”

She lets her head fall back and groans toward the ceiling. “Oh my gosh. Absolutely not. Jaden. We are not doing that.”

“Why not? All we have to do is be seen a few times in public. The media will report that we’re together. Your father will back off. You don’t have to fake date your creepy costar. Problem solved.”

“I don’t know.” She balls up a piece of her napkin and turns it between her fingers, staring at the table.

“Who would you rather fake date? Me or your douche of a costar?”

She looks up from the table. “I mean, you. I like you as a person.”

“Okay, then. What’s the issue?”

“Number one, my dad would flip if he thought I was dating a jock. He doesn’t respect sports at all. More so, he hates tattoos. He’d kill me if I dated someone covered in them.” She motions toward my arms.

“Seriously?” I laugh. “Your father has actually told you that you aren’t allowed to date someone with tattoos?”

She shrugs. “Yeah.”

“Well, so what if he doesn’t approve? Actually, that makes it better. Not only will he not get his way, he’ll be completely irritated by your choice. It’s kinda perfect.”

She gnaws at her thumbnail. “He’ll be livid.”

“But he’d leave you alone about Simon?”

“Yeah. I mean, he’d have to.”

I grin. “So let’s do it. You’ve already admitted that you enjoy hanging out with me as a friend . Yes? So wouldn’t you rather go out with me a few times to fake date than Simon?”

“I mean, obviously yes. But I didn’t want to do the whole fake dating thing to begin with.”

“But your father won’t leave you alone if you’re not in a relationship?”

“No, he won’t.”

“So you’re not left with many other options, right?”

She reaches across the table and covers my hand with hers. “I don’t want to hurt you, Jaden. I know you had hoped for more. I do value this friendship, and the last thing I’d want to do is take advantage of you or hurt you in any way.”

“Anna.” I turn my hand beneath hers and thread our fingers together. Squeezing gently, I say, “Anna, I’d rather fake date you than never have fake dated you at all.”

She giggles. “Jaden, be serious.”

“I’m a hundred percent serious, and I’m telling you that you will not hurt me one bit. I can promise you that. I’m a big boy. You aren’t taking advantage of me. I offered. You’re my friend, and you’re in a bind. And I want to help. It’s a couple of friend outings with some paparazzi photos. I promise I have no grand ideas that it will be more than that.”

I don’t believe the words I’m saying, even as I give her my most serious face. The truth is, she could crush me and ruin my heart for anyone else. The smart thing to do would be to heed her warning and drop it, but I’ve never claimed to be very smart.

This is my dream girl, and it’s impossible for me to turn down the opportunity for more time with her. This is my chance, and I’m not going to blow it.

“Okay,” she says.

“Okay?” My voice rises an octave as I jump up from my seat.

“Yes.” She nods, standing. “Let’s do it.”

“Nice!” I give her another high five.

“This is going to be fun.” I wag my eyebrows.

She points a finger at me. “Do not make me regret this, Jaden. Remember, you’re doing this to help me, not make things worse.”

“I’d never make your life harder. Don’t worry.”

“Oh, I’m worried.” She blows out a breath.

I shoot a quick text to the limo driver. “Alright. We should get you back. You have to wake up early tomorrow.”

“That I do.” She grabs a small purse from one of the chairs and meets me by the door.

“What?” I eye her up and down. “No giant bag of Crane swag?”

She chuckles. “I think Miranda got enough for us both and then some.”

“I meant to tell you that you look absolutely amazing by the way. That jersey is”—my eyes wander over her body once more—“simply perfection on you. And the hearts are cute.” I tap her cheek.

“Thanks.”

I open the door to the suite and extend my hand. She takes it, and I thread my fingers through hers.

“Jaden?”

“We’re dating, right?”

“Oh yeah, right.” She nods and squeezes my hand.

I lead her through the halls, and we run into Eddy.

“Oh, hey... J-man, I just finished sharpening your skates. They’re back in your locker.” He’s chatting in his usual cheerful manner, oblivious to the woman at my side. In fairness, I’ve had a lot of women at my side over the years, but they never stick around for longer than a night. His demeanor shifts when he takes a second to register that it’s Annalise’s hand in mine. He morphs from his usual chill persona into

a mumbling mess. “Oh... hi, Ms. Annalise.” He actually starts to bow before correcting himself. Standing up straight, he looks around as if he’s trying to find someone to save him.

I attempt to hide my amusement. Poor guy. I know exactly how he feels. Annalise has a way of turning strong men into mush. “Eddy, my man. This is my girlfriend, Annalise. Anna, this is the best equipment manager in the league and one of the team, Eddy.”

I refuse to let Anna’s hand go, so she awkwardly extends her free one. “Hi, Eddy. So nice to meet you. So you take care of the skates?”

Eddy shakes Anna’s hand, and his face lights up when he registers her question. If Eddy could talk about anything ad nauseam, it would be his job. I wasn’t just blowing smoke when I said he was the best in the league at what he does. “Oh, it’s more than skates.”

Before I can stop him, he’s all smiles as he jabbers on about his duties on the team. I love the guy, I do, but Anna and I have places to be. “Eddy.” I interrupt him. “I’m sorry, but we have a car waiting for us.”

“Oh right, sorry. Are you heading over to The Station?” he asks.

“Probably not tonight,” I respond.

“Okay, well, see you tomorrow,” he says to me before addressing Anna. “It was really nice meeting you.”

“You too,” she replies with a smile.

We leave Eddy and continue through the halls until we’re at the front of the arena.

We step outside into the cool autumn air, and just as I knew they would be, a crowd of fans remains clustered around the entrance.

Before Anna can protest, I turn toward her, thread my fingers through the hair at the nape of her neck, and I kiss her. She gasps into my mouth, but I gently hold her face against mine. I will her to relax as my lips start to move against hers. It takes everything in me to remember where we are and what we're doing because kissing Anna makes my knees weak. After a couple of seconds, Anna's lips start to move against mine, and it takes all my willpower to remain in control. Unable to resist, I slide my tongue along the opening of her lips. I groan when her lips part, allowing me access. Our tongues touch and twirl around one another as Anna clings to my back. She whimpers, and I pull her closer to me, her chest against mine. I could kiss her forever.

"Sir. Sir." A gruff voice at my side breaks the trance. "We should go."

I pull away from Anna and become aware of the crowd of people circling us, way too close for my liking.

The limo driver who doubles as a security guard that I hired for the evening blocks people from getting too close to us. I wrap my arm around Anna as we hurry into the limousine.

Once the door is shut and we're safely inside the vehicle, Anna looks at me, her eyes angry. "What was that, Jaden?"

"That was the hard launch of our relationship." I smile.

And what a wonderful launch it was.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

ANNALISE

T aking my “relationship” public last night is all anyone seems to be talking about today. There’s an excited buzz in the air as those on set speculate on the details. When did it start? How serious is it? It’s all very high school—absurd.

Everyone is professional enough to keep their interactions with me focused on work, for which I’m thankful. Well, all except one.

“Seriously, Anna... where did you meet initially? I heard he was at the charity event, but you obviously met prior, right? You never go out, and up until last night, I didn’t picture you as a sports fan. However, I guess it makes sense now why the cast teamed up with the team for the event. I didn’t get it until now.” Simon tosses a loaded nacho chip into his mouth as he stands behind me at the food table.

Metal serving tongs in hand, I snap them toward Simon. “You didn’t team up with anyone at the event because you didn’t go, remember?” I finish building my salad and place the tongs down before drizzling some dressing over my plate.

“That’s not the point of my question.” He scoops some mac and cheese next to his nachos and follows me.

“You had a question? It must’ve gotten lost in all that rambling.” I grab a bottle of

water and make my way to one of the tables.

Simon sits across from me. “Come on, Anna. You have to give me something.” He gives me a flirty smile, and I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

While it’s true that Simon and I came to a sort of truce yesterday, I still find the act of sitting across from him, eating lunch, and conversing like friends—odd. Very odd. The annoyance I possess for Simon holds a special place deep within my soul. It feels impossible to let it go. He’s not a good person, and I’m no fool. The only reason he’s being kind is because he wants something from me, an introduction to a respected director. He doesn’t truly care about me. Though, I’m sure his curiosity involving Jaden and me is genuine.

“I like to keep my relationships private.” I shrug and fork a piece of lettuce.

He laughs. “Right. I can tell. Super private.”

He’s referencing the pictures and video making the rounds on the internet. What was Jaden thinking?

After the kiss, I spewed one angry question after the next Jaden’s way on the limo ride from the arena to my hotel. Initially, I was mad. The whole stunt was so unlike anything I’d ever do. I’m not lying by telling Simon that I like to keep my personal life private. Normally, I do. I just didn’t have much of a choice last night.

What was I supposed to do? Once Jaden’s lips touched mine, I couldn’t just push him away. That wouldn’t convince anyone that we’re dating. I had no choice but to play in to the show. Maybe I got a little wrapped up in it. He’s a damn good kisser.

Licking my bottom lip, I stare off, remembering the feel of Jaden’s mouth on mine.

I'm brought back to the present by the annoyance of Simon's hand snapping in front of my face. I blink hard and refocus on my costar across from me.

"There you are. Lost you for a second. Where'd you zone out to?" He shakes his head. "Never mind, I don't think I want to know."

"You don't," I quip.

Miranda slides into the empty chair beside me and leans back with a sigh. "You're finally free." She pins me with a stare, and I know exactly what she's thinking.

As my publicist, she's been fielding calls all morning about the kissing stunt last night, yet she doesn't know any more than anyone else who has seen the photos. It's been such a crazy morning. I was in makeup by the time she found me this morning, and there hasn't been a second to catch her up.

I shoot her a coy smile. "I'm sorry."

"You should be. I've had to avoid nineteen calls from your father, Anna. Nineteen." She threads her fingers through her thick auburn hair. "That man is persistent."

Simon grunts, a grin on his face. I suppose no one at this table is immune from my father.

"I'll catch you up on everything. Just not now," I tell her.

"Anna!" she whisper-shrieks. Leaning forward, she splays her palms against the table. "That is not good enough. I have to make a statement and at the very least call your father back or he's going to fly back from LA and storm the set."

Looking around, I take in the cast and crew sitting at the tables around us. They're all

pretending as if they're not hanging on every word being said, but most of them aren't very good actors.

I steal a glance at the time and push my salad away. Truthfully, I'm not very hungry anyway. "Fine." I lean toward her and whisper, "We have ten minutes. Let's go somewhere more private."

Miranda pushes up from the table and scurries out of the room as I follow. We hide away in the costume closet.

"Spill it," Miranda says, hands on her hips.

It doesn't take long for me to give her all the important details, and as I finish telling her everything, I feel bad for making her wait all morning for an explanation. "I'm sorry. It felt bigger than it is, I guess."

"No, Anna... it's big." She chews on the inside of her cheek in thought. "So..." She taps her lip with her index finger. "We're just spinning this as a real relationship. One built out of love, respect, and trust."

"Sure." I shrug.

She shakes her head and forces a laugh. "I don't know what I'm going to do about you. You're so serious all the time, and now that you're on camera making out with your fake boyfriend, you're just all... 'sure.'" She imitates my voice with a scrunched-up face.

I chuckle. "What am I supposed to do? It's done. That genie is not going back in the bottle. I'm 'dating' Jaden." I move my fingers in air quotes. "Now, I don't have to fake it with Simon. There's nothing my dad can do about his Simon proposal, but maybe he'll be a little happy that now that I'm 'serious'"—I use the air quotes

again—“with someone else, I won’t be perceived as a whore. Right?”

Her eyebrows furrow. “Your dad can go fuck himself.”

“And that, too.” I laugh.

“Seriously, you’re not the one who has to talk to him,” she grumbles.

I shrug. “I can call him back tonight if you want me to.”

“No. It’s my job. And honestly, it’ll be fun to hear him all riled up. So I’ll release a statement to... TMZ?”

I nod. “Yeah, they always get the word out.”

“That’s what I was thinking. Thirty seconds after I inform them, everyone else will know the scoop and move on.”

“Right.”

“Okay,” she sighs. “So not so bad.”

“Not so bad.” I grin.

“We still need to discuss how this whole fake dating thing will work. You two will have to be seen in public at least a few times, you know?” she says.

“Yeah, I figured at the very least we can go to all his home games while we’re here filming.”

“Oh, for sure!” She claps her hands. “But I’ll have to set up some other photo ops,

too.”

“I definitely want to go back to that Italian restaurant that my father took us to. They had the best calamari I’ve ever had. As a bonus, it will piss my father off.”

“Consider it done.”

“Can you request Bethy be our server again? I miss her.”

Miranda laughs. “You’re so weird sometimes.”

“Ditto.”

Her eyes light up. “Alright, this is going to be fun.”

“Right? I think it might be.”

“Plus, you’ll get to kiss those lips again.” She wags her eyebrows.

I swipe my hand through the space between us. “Oh, I don’t care about that.”

“Sure you don’t.” She scoffs. “You can lie to everyone else, Anna. But don’t forget that I know you.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You have to get back, and I have calls to make, but I expect a full breakdown of that kiss over dinner tonight. I want all the details.” She throws me a wink as she exits the closet.

Without thinking, I bring the tips of my fingers to my lips, and thoughts of Jaden rush

into my mind. And not just of Jaden but of his lips. His beautifully full and competent lips.

I know that Jaden and I aren't truly compatible. In the real world, we'd never work out. But in this faux reality I find myself in... maybe there's room for a little fun. I mean, why not?

Miranda's right. This is all very strange behavior for me. I don't even know who I am right now. Yet that's one of the great things about being an actor. There's no rush to figure myself out because in a couple of minutes, I'll be expected to be someone else. And that I can do.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

JADEN

It's been an entire week since I was last with Annalise, seven whole days since my lips were against hers. I seriously can't wait to see her. All the practice, games, and traveling that playing in the NHL entails doesn't leave a ton of time to date. Pair my schedule with Anna's, who seems to work around the clock, and it's nearly impossible to find a time when we're both free.

Until Anna, I've never been on a date planned by someone else. Yet tonight is solely made possible by Anna's friend, Miranda. It seems as if I have someone else to thank for every moment I've spent with Anna—a fact Max doesn't let me forget, seeing as I've yet to find a suitable thank-you gift for Penny.

I pull up in front of the studio where instructed and step out of my car. Running my palms down the black peacoat I was asked to wear, I button it up, ignoring the photographer evident in my peripheral. Everything from this jacket to my button-up shirt, jeans, and leather loafers is part of the plan. Miranda sent over an actual screenshot from Pinterest of what I should be wearing to achieve the desired look.

Anna emerges from the building, and if I'm the king of this orchestrated yet supposedly candid autumn photo shoot, I see that she's my queen in her oversized cream-colored cashmere sweater, tight jeans, and knee-high boots. She carries a large chestnut-brown Birkin bag. Long, loose blond curls fall over her shoulders as we

make our way toward one another. The entirety of this meeting may be choreographed for the camera, but nothing about the smile across my face is fabricated. My whole body hums with anticipation as we get closer to one another. My heart beats faster as the space between us closes.

When she's finally within reach, I cup her face with my hands and crash my lips to hers. Holy hell, I've missed this. I've thought of little else since the last time we kissed. I've built our first kiss up so much in my head, I was starting to wonder if a second could possibly live up to it. But it does—it's just as sweet and perfect.

Anna's arms circle around my back, holding me closer to her body as her lips move across mine. All concept of time vanishes as we stay at this moment, a hundred percent staged yet utterly raw. I finally garner the strength to pull my mouth away. Her pink lips appear swollen, and it makes me want her more.

She giggles and presses her face against my chest. I hold her in my arms and kiss her head.

"We are good at this," I whisper, my lips against her hair. "Ready to go?"

"I think that's probably a good idea." She takes a step back.

Holding her hand in mine, I lead her toward my car. I open the passenger door, and she gets in. Once I'm in my seat and my door is closed, we both exhale.

"How was that?" I grin, our conversation safe behind my tinted windows.

"So good." She shakes her head and releases a small laugh. "You followed instructions to a T."

"Well, Miranda was quite clear with her instructions." I scoff.

“She just wanted the pictures to turn out well.”

I start the car and pull out of the lot. “So is it going to be in People Magazine under, ‘Stars—they’re just like us. Their boyfriend picks them up after a long day of work.’ Or, in US Magazine, ‘Annalise Sterling and her beau, the insanely talented and sexy NHL star Jaden Lewis, meet up after a long day for a romantic night out.’”

Anna laughs. “Yeah, probably something like that.”

“You know this isn’t normal,” I tease.

She playfully smacks my arm. “You think I don’t know that?”

“So this is the first time your publicist has tipped off the paparazzi for a staged photo shoot?”

She looks out her window. “Well, no... of course not.”

I chuckle.

“Hey, don’t judge. I’ve been part of this circus my whole life. It’s a give-and-take with those vultures. Sometimes, in order to get any peace, you have to give them something in return. Growing up, if there was a moment that my parents wanted to keep private, we’d set up a photo op with the paparazzi a couple of days prior to the event with the mutual understanding that they’d leave us alone. It’s just how it goes in Hollywood.”

“I get it. It’s all just very strange.”

“It is, but I’m used to it. It’s all I know, honestly.” It’s quiet for a moment before Anna speaks up again. “I can’t wait for dinner.”

“Yeah, me too. You’ve raved about this place so much that I’m dying to try it.” Once the restaurant is in view, I pull the car up to the curb in front of the entrance and retrieve my phone from the cup holder to type out a quick text. “Just letting them know we’re here.”

A few moments later, a thin girl with very dark eye makeup emerges from the restaurant, holding four large brown paper bags by the handles. “Give me a second,” I say to Annalise before stepping out of the car.

“Hi. I’m Jaden Lewis,” I say to the server. “Is this my order?” I ask.

She stares at the ground and gives a subtle nod. I can’t shake the feeling that she’s somehow afraid of me. She holds out her arms with two big bags in each hand.

“All four of these bags are mine?” I verify.

She nods again, but her stare doesn’t reach my eyes.

“Okay, well... thank you so much,” I say to her as I take the bags of food from her. I retreat to the car and place the bags across the back seat.

“What’s going on?” Anna asks once I’m inside the car.

Flicking on my blinker, I check the mirrors and pull into the street. “A little change of plans.”

“Wait, we’re not eating here?” Anna turns in her seat and peers out the back window.

“Nope.”

“Aw.” She sounds sad. “I didn’t even get to say hi to Bethy.”

“Bethy?”

“The server. The one who gave you the bags.”

“You know her?”

“A little, yeah. She was sorta there for me during a difficult night. I was looking forward to seeing her again.” She sighs and turns back around.

“Well, it’s probably for the best. I don’t think she likes me. She wouldn’t even look at me.”

“Oh, that’s just Bethy.” Anna smiles.

“Sorry about that, but I thought, after our paparazzi kiss, we could do something a little more normal tonight instead of closing down a whole restaurant.”

“Like what?”

“Like eating takeout while we Netflix and chill.”

She gasps. “Jaden. I’m not sleeping with you.”

I laugh. “Not that kind of Netflix and chill, like legitimately hanging out, relaxing, and watching something. Like normal people.”

“Oh, okay. As long as you ordered my calamari, I’m good.”

“Oh shit. You wanted calamari?”

“Jaden!”

“I’m kidding.” I laugh. “I didn’t forget. How could I? During our limited text exchanges this week, I think you mentioned calamari every single time. I’m starting to think it’s your whole identity.”

“I did not mention it every single time.” She grins.

“You mentioned it enough.”

“Well, you just wait until you try it, and then you’ll understand.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

A few minutes later, we’ve arrived at the house. Max is out with the guys tonight, which is good for me. Not that it would’ve been that big of a deal if he were here because I have a sofa and big-screen TV in my bedroom, but I’d rather hang out in the living room with Anna. I don’t want her thinking I’m trying to trick her into my bed, especially after the Netflix and chill comment.

Once we’re inside the house, I give her a quick tour, which basically consists of me pointing things out as we walk toward the back of the house to the kitchen. I place the bags on the granite countertop of the kitchen island.

“So you have a roommate, then?” Anna asks.

“Yeah, Max. He’s the best. You’ll like him. He was on the ice opposite me, the other starting defenseman.”

“Where is he tonight?”

“A bunch of the guys are at Eddy’s house.”

“I’ve met Eddy, right? He’s the equipment guy.”

I nod. “Yep, the very one. He usually hosts poker night.” Anna makes a face. “What?” I laugh. “Not a fan of poker?”

She shrugs. “Not a fan of gambling. I think it’s stupid.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, because it is. I mean, I get that you all make good money so you can afford it. I just think the concept of gambling is stupid. You might as well light your money on fire. I’ve never understood why people enjoy losing money like that.”

“It can be fun,” I hedge. “It’s like a game, a competition. We’re a competitive group.”

“Yeah, my dad always had a poker night with some of his friends. I’ve just never understood it. Gambling is not for me.”

“Fair enough.”

“So Max...what does he think about our arrangement?” She looks inside one of the brown food bags.

I pull two plates out of the cupboard and grab some silverware. “I mean, like everyone else, he finds it unusual but is interested to see how it all plays out.”

Anna holds the paper receipt stapled to the side of one of the bags. “Um, Jaden... this isn’t our food.”

“What?” I step toward her.

“It’s an order for Charlene.” She looks at me, her lips pressed in a line.

I look at the receipt on another bag. “This one is for Alexa.”

She walks around the bar and takes the receipt for the third bag. “This one is for Cassie. Oh my gosh. They gave us other people’s orders.”

I grab the receipt from the fourth bag and am relieved when I see my name. “Well, at least, you’ll get your calamari because this one is mine. I knew this was too much food. I asked that server twice if all four of these bags were mine. She said they were.”

“That’s so Bethy.” Anna shakes her head with a smile. “Well, should we take them back?”

“No. I guarantee they’ve already remade the orders. Plus, all the food would be cold by the time we drove everything back, including your calamari.”

“But I don’t want Bethy to get in trouble.”

“If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll call and tell them it was my fault and offer to pay for the extra food and give glowing reviews of Bethy’s service, though if I’m being honest, I think she might be in the wrong line of work.”

“No, that’s just part of her charm.”

“If you say so.” I pull my phone out of my back pocket. “Feel free to start dishing up. The remote is on the side table by the couch. Let me make this call real quick. I’m worried about this Bethy chick you love so much.”

“Okay.” She nods, pleased.

A few minutes later, I join Anna on the couch.

“All good?” she asks.

“All good. Bethy lives to serve calamari another day.”

“Good. Thanks for doing that.”

“No problem.” I take a seat on the sofa, plate of food in hand. “How is everything?” I nod toward Anna’s plate.

“Delicious.” She plops a calamari ring in her mouth. “What do you think about Modern Family ?”

I look at the TV. “I’ve never seen it.”

“It’s such a feel-good show,” she says. “My dad was a guest star on season one, and I got to hang out on set. Everyone was so nice. It’s just one of those shows that makes you happy when you watch it. It’s funny, and it always has a great message.”

“Sure. Works for me.” I take a bite of my lasagna.

It’s surprising how comfortable I feel with Anna already. Two weeks ago, she wasn’t even real to me, just merely an obsession. Now we’re hanging out in my living room, laughing at a sitcom and eating pasta. Even with the orchestrated kiss earlier, this is the most real I’ve ever felt on a date.

Let’s face it, dating has always been a precursor to the desired event. Both my date and I have always been clear on where or how the night would end. I’ve never truly wanted to get to know a woman I’ve been with until now. I’ve never hoped for more until now. Anna has changed my brain chemistry completely. With her, I feel...

different. I want things I've never wanted before. Even when staged, my time with Anna is better than any moment I've ever spent with another woman.

I see it. I feel it. And as much as we say it is—our connection isn't fake. I have to believe that someday—hopefully soon—Anna will see it, too.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

ANNALISE

I realize I might be lonely. If I'm honest, the night should've ended after the photos from the tipped-off paparazzi were taken. There's no reason to be here. The point of the dates is to keep up with the facade that we're together. We did that.

Snuggled up on the sofa with Jaden isn't propelling any story. There are no witnesses or photographic evidence. It's just us. I'm not even sure how I ended up in this position. My back against Jaden's front, our legs stretched out across the sofa. His arms are wrapped around my middle. We've talked about our lives, laughed at the show, and have remained in silence tangled up in one another's arms.

It's obvious this whole night is going above and beyond our agreement, but I like it. I'm happy, comfortable, and at peace. Three words that would not usually be used to describe me. I'm normally a neurotic mess, always worrying, planning, and chastising myself for underachieving.

I'm never just happy.

Until now.

Jaden is unlike any friend I've ever had. He's outgoing, charming, and confident. At the same time, he's calming and safe. He's so far removed from my world that I feel

as if I can let it all go while I'm with him. And I want to be here with him. It feels like a needed break from the everyday chaos that engulfs me.

I'm starting to recognize that while people constantly surround me, my life is a lonely one. The only person I truly trust is Miranda. She's the best friend a girl could ask for, and I know she'd do anything for me. But Jaden brings something different, a protection I didn't know I craved.

Jaden and I slide farther down onto the sofa until we're lying across it. I turn in his arms to face him. "When did you know you wanted to play professional hockey for a living?"

He swipes a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. "I think I've always known. Our apartment was by a park with a small lake. Our neighbors had a boy my age. He gave me an old pair of his skates, and the two of us would play on the frozen lake all winter. His dad told me I was a natural. I don't know, I guess I liked the compliments. After that, I asked my mom to join a league, and I never looked back. How about you? When did you know you'd be an actor?"

"Same. I feel like I always knew. Truthfully, it was kind of expected, right? Growing up as the only child of two of the darlings of Hollywood. I, along with everyone else, just assumed I'd follow in my parents' footsteps. But it was something I wanted to do. I love the industry. I grew up engrossed in this life, and I was fascinated by it." I leave out the part about the crippling self-doubt that comes with this line of work because that's just not a good look on anyone.

He drags his fingers up and down my back, and my skin starts to pebble beneath my sweater.

He clears his throat. "So this thing that we're doing. How long do you see it going on? Do you have a timeline in mind?"

“Well, I guess it depends on the awards season. If I’m invited, I’d need you there for that. My father insisted that I be on Simon’s arm on all red carpets, stating it was a better look for me than going alone.”

“When is awards season?”

“January through March.”

Jaden absentmindedly bobs his chin in thought. “Have you thought about standing up to your father? Telling him that he doesn’t get to dictate what you do with your life, given that you’re a twenty-six-year-old adult?”

I lean my head back to look Jaden in the eyes. “Do you not want to do the fake dating thing anymore?”

He shakes his head. “No, that’s not it at all. I offered to do this, and I’m still committed to that. I just hate that your father thinks he has a say in what you do with your life. You’ve gotten to where you are with your hard work and talent. You don’t have to answer to him.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. I do. But trust me... it’s just easier this way.”

We’re silent for a few moments. Jaden’s face is only a breath from mine. I take in his features, and my body warms. I question why I don’t feel awkward openly observing him as I am. But I don’t. He must emit calming pheromones because when I’m near him, I’m different. I can’t explain it.

After a beat, he clears his throat. “I should probably get you back. We both have early mornings.”

“Yeah,” I agree, though neither of us move. I take in his long, dark lashes that frame

the beautiful browns focused on me.

I know I should sit up and slide off the sofa, but my mind has lost all communication with my muscles. I'm frozen in this space of lingering stares and weighted breaths. My body aches to be closer to his, to feel the pressure of his hands on me. This physical yearning is at complete odds with my brain that's sounding warning bells of retreat. The cautionary sirens muted beneath the explosive beats of my heart.

Unable to withstand the intensity of our connection for another second, I close my eyes.

And then I feel it...

His lips on mine.

With a quick intake, I inhale a shared breath and release a whimper of relief.

He threads his fingers through my hair, sliding them against my scalp. Goose bumps erupt over my skin as my mouth moves against his. My tongue enters his mouth first, eager to deepen the kiss. His grip on my scalp grows as he holds my face against his. Our kiss is deep, desperate, and insanely delicious. I feel the effects of this connection throughout every cell of my body.

The needy ache between my legs burns, and I move my hips forward in search of relief. The movement produces a deep groan from Jaden, and his hips push toward me, his hard desire evident. He removes one of his hands from my hair and slides it down my body. Even through my clothes, his touch singes my skin. I'm an inferno desperate to explode.

I'm wrapped up in our kiss, barely aware of his movements below. In the far recesses of my mind, I'm aware that he's unbuttoned my jeans and is moving them down my

pelvis, but the kiss is too magical for me to pay the actions any mind until his finger enters me.

I pull my mouth from his as the pleasure from his touch courses through my body. My interior walls clench around his finger, inviting him in. His strokes feel so good as he curves his finger to stroke my front wall and all the needy nerves that reside there.

Head back and eyes clenched shut, I release a moan of pleasure. He's fucking me with his finger, and I don't want him to stop. The sensations are too good, and I know this is just the beginning. I want him to make me come with just a finger. I want his dick to fill me up and push me to new heights of pleasure, and I have no doubt he will. It's evident that Jaden knows a woman's body. He will make me feel so good, and I desperately want it.

I do.

I want it so badly my body quakes with need.

It takes every bit of willpower I possess during a sliver of clarity to stop it. I shove my hands against his chest and push myself off the sofa and away from his touch. "No!"

My body hits the floor, knocking the lust from me. I scramble to my feet and hurry to zip up and fasten my jeans.

Jaden stands from the sofa, his face confused and his stance shaky as he no doubt tries to take in the scene before him through a haze of desire. "Anna, I'm sorry... I thought you wanted..."

I hold up my hand, halting his explanation. "No, I did, but we can't."

He drags the palms of his hands down his face. “Did I do something wrong?”

I blow out a breath. “No. Not at all. You were fine, and for a moment, I thought maybe... but we can’t go there. It will complicate everything.”

“Complicate everything, how?”

I move my hand between us. “This isn’t real, Jaden. We aren’t together. All that”—I motion toward the sofa—“will confuse things.”

He rubs the nape of his neck. “It doesn’t have to. I’m fully aware of our arrangement. I know this isn’t real, but we can have fun.”

“It’s just that I know I don’t want more, and I’m afraid if we go there , feelings will be involved, and people will get hurt. I don’t want to hurt you.”

He releases a dry laugh. “I’m not naive enough to think that sex equals love. In fact, I’ve had a lot of sex in my life, and it has never led to love. It can just be fun.”

I throw my hands up. “I’m not the just-for-fun type of girl, Jaden. I’m sorry. Boundaries are essential for me. I have plans for my career, and right now, that is all that matters. Sex is a distraction, and it’s messy. I can’t control the feelings that result from it, and I don’t want to add any more to my plate.”

He shrugs. “Okay. Fine. I get it.”

I nod.

“I should probably get you back.” He moves toward the foyer.

I agree and follow him out the door.

On the way back to the hotel, he makes an effort to give me a smile every couple of minutes. I know him well enough to know that they're not genuine, but I appreciate him making an effort to show me that we're all good.

Only, I don't feel good about the way the night ended. It was perfect until I ruined it. I know I did what I had to do by stopping it. I've gone over everything in my mind, and I'm certain a casual fling with Jaden isn't in either of our best interests.

The only thing I can't figure out is why I feel so awful. If I made the right call, why does my heart ache as if I didn't?

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

JADEN

“M om, it’s me,” I call out as I enter my mother’s place for my monthly proof-of-life visit. Despite living a short drive away from my mother, I rarely see her.

The home, a gift from me, is much smaller than I wanted for her. It’s a three-bedroom bungalow in a nice neighborhood in the city of Ann Arbor. While I preferred to buy my mother something more grand, it was a struggle to get her to accept this one. She complains that it’s too much house for one person.

I purchased most things my mom owns, from her car to the house and everything in it. I wanted to thank her for all the sacrifices she made when I was growing up. She always had two jobs and worked hard. I was never without, and she even made sure to work enough to pay for my passion for hockey, which is not a cheap sport. While I always had what I needed, I had just that—what I needed and nothing more.

My childhood wasn’t filled with vacations, birthday parties, big holiday celebrations, or elaborate presents. The greatest gift my mom could’ve given me was hockey—and she did just that. Now that I’m making good money, my goal is to make her want for nothing, which is why my face falls when I see her in her diner outfit and apron.

“Hey, Jay. I’m just heading out.” She grabs her car keys from the table by the front door.

“Mom, why are you still working at the diner? If you need more money, I can give you more money.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t work for the money. You’ve given me far too much already.”

“Then why are you working? And at the diner of all places?”

I’m blocking her exit so she’s forced to talk to me. “I’ve been a server my whole life. I’m good at it.”

“You could do anything. Aren’t there any other hobbies or passions you want to explore? You don’t have to be on your feet all day, carrying heavy trays and dealing with jackass customers.”

“Jay.” She sighs. “I don’t want to argue, and I have to go. You know I hate being late.”

“Okay.” I step aside, allowing her to exit the house. I follow, closing the door behind me. “Do you have any free time coming up? We could do dinner, or I could get you tickets to a game?”

She unlocks her car and tosses her purse in. “My schedule is pretty full. I’ll call you.”

I nod as she closes her car door and backs out of the drive. My eyes follow her until the car turns the corner and disappears out of sight. As always, I question why I stopped by in the first place as I descend the front porch steps and walk to my car. Per usual, I feel worse than I did when I arrived. That’s pretty status quo for my visits. I’m not sure what it is about our dynamic, but my mother and I are not close. More than that, sometimes I question whether she even loves me. The thought doesn’t compute because she worked so hard when I was young to give me what I needed.

Yet she's still working hard when neither of us want for anything. Did she work all those hours to avoid me? Does she resent me?

I don't know, but I feel as if I've tried in my adult years to bring us together. The fact remains that we barely know each other. Despite our shared DNA, we're strangers. She won't even go to a game, stating that she prefers to watch them on her TV at home. But does she actually watch them? Who knows.

Before pulling out of the drive, I shoot Anna a text to let her know I'm on my way.

We haven't seen one another since the incident on the sofa. The team has been away on road games for most of the past week, and there hasn't been a time to get together. We've texted regularly, but the conversation hasn't ventured toward what almost happened, and I doubt it will. Anna made her feelings clear that night. She isn't interested in a friends-with-benefits situation, so there's nothing to really talk about anyway.

Will it be difficult to spend time with her knowing what it feels like to touch her so intimately, to have heard the delicious noises she makes when I make her feel good? Yes, most likely torturous. Every part of me wants every part of her, and that desire doesn't just go away. Despite all that, I'm excited to see her. I've missed hanging out, and I've chosen a date that won't put us in any awkward situations.

She's standing outside the studio door talking to Miranda when I arrive. She doesn't wait for me to greet her. Instead, she hurries over to the car and gets in.

"Hey!" She leans over the center console to give me a hug.

"No cameras today?" I wave at Miranda through the window and put the car in drive.

"No, not today."

I always find it odd when we hang out without a staged photo shoot because the whole reason for us getting together were these photos. It leads me to believe that Anna's feelings for me are more complicated than she lets on. Perhaps it's true, and she's not looking for a romantic relationship. But I fill some need because otherwise, she would've spent her evening with Miranda.

"Tell me about your week," I say.

She talks about the scenes she's shot and what they entailed. I look over at her and smile as she speaks excitedly about every aspect of the process. She really loves what she does. It's obvious. And I love that for her. I've come to realize over the years that most people don't have a career that fills their soul. For the majority, a job is simply a paycheck. Those like Anna and myself who live for our careers are rare, and it's a privilege I'll always be grateful for.

Anna continues chatting, and my mind wanders back to my mother. More specifically, I think about what she gets from her job. She doesn't serve people food for the money because she doesn't need the paycheck. Surely the long, hard hours on her feet serving others doesn't fuel her soul. So why does she do it? Even as I ask myself these questions, I know I have to be fine with never having the answers because she'll never give them to me. My mom and our relationship are two things I've been trying to make sense of for years, and still, nothing makes sense.

"Did you hear me?" Anna says with a grin.

"Yeah." I nod.

"So?" She twists in her seat to face me.

"So?"

She chuckles. “Where are we going?”

“Oh, right. Yeah, I heard you,” I say as I pull into the movie parking lot. “I rented out a theater. You love movies so much, I thought we should watch one.”

“Oh, how fun,” she squeals.

Once the car is parked, we walk hand in hand into the theater. “What are we watching?”

“One of the greats—apparently. I’ll have to weigh in after I’ve seen it.”

“Titanic !”

“The very one.” I laugh.

Anna leans into me and squeezes my arm with her free hand, pleased. She loves this movie and has told me on more than one occasion how great it is. I’ve heard about the imagery, themes, costume, and set design—name the attribute, and Anna has gushed over it. She says while all the movies that receive awards like the Oscars don’t always earn them, this one did. In her words, it was brilliant for its time and is a must-watch. So here we are.

We enter the theater, where the staff eagerly waits. We order half the food they have to offer at concessions and make our way into our private theater.

“Theaters have come such a long way, haven’t they?” Anna asks.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the leather loungers with a footrest and tray for your food. Back in the day,

setups like this didn't exist."

"Yeah, I vaguely recall. I love going to the theater now, but I didn't go much as a kid. One of the kids on my hockey team had a birthday party at a theater once, though I barely remember the setup."

"Well, I can tell you it wasn't as nice as this," she says. She looks at the blankets next to our seats and runs her hand over one of them. "You thought of everything."

"When you're dating Annalise Sterling, you have to." I take a seat.

She sits in the chair beside me and extends her footrest before tossing a blanket over her legs. "Speaking of, did you see the girl with her phone out?"

"Yeah," I huff. "You pay good money for privacy, and a video will still be posted."

"It's always the way. Her video of our movie date will be all over social media by the time we're done with this movie."

"I'm not surprised, given that this movie is over three. Hours. Long," I groan, causing her to laugh.

"It's worth it. I promise you."

"I'm just excited to finally weigh in on whether or not there was room on the door. I don't even know what that means, but when people discuss this movie, that's what they talk about."

Anna smiles. "Well, just so you know, there was. But you have about three hours to wait to find out what that means."

The lights dim, and the movie starts. Anna offers me the box of Sour Patch Kids, and I dig in, grabbing a few.

“The red ones are the best. Agree?” I toss some of the sour gummies in my mouth.

“Shh.” She holds a finger to her lips. “You can’t talk through the movie, or you’ll miss something.”

I laugh. “So you’re that type of movie watcher.”

“Shh.” She repeats the finger to her lips motion.

I raise my hands in surrender and make a show of clamping my lips closed.

Pushing the button, I lean my chair back as far as it will go, and I watch the movie.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

ANNALISE

I find a quiet space on set for lunch and sip on my protein shake. I always get a little nostalgic on the last day of filming. It's impossible for me not to become emotionally invested in my projects. I grow to love the character I'm playing and the world I'm living in. It's always sad knowing it's about to end. A good film grows on you and becomes part of who you are. There will be many other projects in my life, but I'll miss this one.

Hell, I'm even going to miss Simon. The jerk has grown on me. Ever since our truce, he's been decent. When his head is in the game and he's not being an ass, he's actually really talented. I never planned on putting in a good word for him with my "uncle" Bobby, but I just may. I suppose he deserves it, as he held up his end of the bargain. He hasn't been annoying me, and his effort has been incredible. This movie feels special. I can only hope it's well received.

I check my phone to see if my mom has messaged back but nothing. I don't think I've had one conversation with her since I've been in Michigan. She's been impossible to get ahold of. Even my father, who has an opinion about everything, has been a ghost since news of Jaden and I broke. The last time I saw him was at the Italian restaurant.

Tapping her name, I wait for the ringtone. I'm in shock when she actually picks up.

“Mom. Oh my gosh, I’ve been trying to get ahold of you forever.”

“Oh, Anna, hi. Sorry, just been so busy.” She sounds winded.

“Why haven’t you called or messaged back? You’ve literally been ignoring me for a month,” I say. I realize I don’t have time to get into this now as I only have about ten more minutes of break left, but I have to say something.

“I’ve been busy, Anna. You know how it is.”

“I’ve been busy, too, Mom, but I’ve called. I just don’t understand. Is this because of Dad?”

She scoffs. “No. Don’t get me wrong, the way you treated your father was unacceptable, but I simply have a lot going on. That’s all.”

“So Dad’s still mad?” I toss the rest of my protein shake in the trash can.

“Can you blame him? You humiliated him. You ran out on him after all he did to set everything up for you. And then ignore him?”

“You haven’t even heard my side, Mom.”

“I know.” She sighs. “But now is not the time. I have a spa appointment. I have to go.”

“Mom!”

“Yes?”

“Today is my last day of shooting, and then I’ll be back. We’ll get together.”

“Sounds good, Anna. Have a good last day. Chat soon.”

Before I have a chance to respond, I hear a click, and she’s gone. I stare at my phone’s screen, bewildered.

Miranda rounds the corner. “Anna, there you are. You’re wanted in makeup, and you have a visitor.”

I push my conversation with my mother to the back of my mind. “Oh, he’s here? Great.”

Jaden’s wearing a fitted black T-shirt and jeans. His hands are in his pockets as he looks around the set.

“Hey, you.” I lean forward and give him a small peck on the lips for show.

“Hey.” He scans my body. “You look very 1970s.”

“Good.” I grin. “Then our costume department knows what they’re doing.” Raising a hand, I tousle his damp hair.

“Practice ran a little late. I showered and came right over.”

I take his hand in mine and give it a squeeze. “Perfect timing. We’re getting ready to do our last scene, and if all goes well, we’ll wrap today. You can just hang out here. There are tables of food if you’re hungry. If you need anything, just text Miranda.”

“I’ll be fine. Have fun.”

“I will.” I give him another kiss and retreat to the makeup chair.

Once filming starts, I'm transported to a 1970s boardroom where a brilliant woman defends her appointment to CEO of a major company. I channel what it must have felt like to be the first woman to do so. I imagine it would've been terrifying but infuriating to fight so hard for something I deserved. To have to prove time and time again that I'm more qualified than any of the men sitting around me. Chest out, voice strong, I deliver the monologue as if I was personally the one who made this company what it is. My voice quivers with a pent-up rage that the role deserves.

We film for hours, and it's so fun. The time flies by. My favorite scenes to film are the emotionally charged ones. In order to give the performance the film deserves, I have to truly get lost in the character, and that's my favorite thing to do.

When the director cuts and says it's a wrap, the entire cast and crew cheer. I hug Simon and all the other actors on set. There were moments in this project when I wasn't sure how it'd turn out, but I believe it will be an incredible movie.

Jaden is all smiles as he waits for me with open arms. I lunge into his embrace, and he hugs me tight. "You are amazing. Fucking chills, Anna. God, that was good."

"Thank you." I melt into his hug.

"I'm so glad I got to see you in action. Thanks for the invite. It was really cool seeing all the pieces come together."

Arms still around his middle, I lean back to see his face. "I'm so glad you liked it."

"It was great. I can't wait to watch it in the theater and see how it all comes together."

I nod. "Yeah, it's fun to see the final edit. I guarantee that scene will have some dynamic musical score playing in the background and a mix of close-up shots and full frame images to capture all the emotions happening in the board room."

“Do you have any say in the edit?”

“No, not as an actor. If I was a major producer or the director, I would.”

He drops his arms from my waist, and I take a step back. “I think you’d be really good at one of those roles.”

I shrug. “Someday. It’s definitely on the bucket list. Come on.” I extend a hand, and Jaden takes it. “I have to get changed.”

I lead Jaden through the studio and the back lot to my trailer.

Miranda is already waiting inside. She’s on the sofa amid a pile of Crane hockey swag.

“I can’t believe it’s our last night here!” she groans as we enter.

“Tell me about it,” Jaden agrees. “That went fast. So what’s on the agenda for the rest of the night?” He turns to me.

“Well, we’re going to have a big cast and crew farewell dinner. Then, Miranda and I will head over to the arena.”

Jaden nods. “Good. Mrs. Appleton told me she was bringing you an apple cake as a parting gift.”

“Aw. She’s so sweet.” I turn my back to Miranda, and she helps me unzip and unsnap everything. I shimmy out of my wool suit, leaving me in my bra and underwear.

Jaden holds up his hand. “Geez, Anna. I’m leaving.”

“You don’t have to leave.” I chuckle. “It’s no different from a swimsuit. Plus, if you’ve seen my movies, you’ve seen me in less.”

“You’re so weird.” Jaden shakes his head. “You go from slightly prudish to strip tease city.”

“Hey,” I protest. “I am not a prude, nor am I teasing anyone.”

“I said slightly prudish, and I’ll be the judge on the latter.” Jaden raises a brow.

Miranda tosses my clothes into the hamper. “She’s like that. Super intense until she’s not. In the rare moments when she lets her guard down, she’s much more chill.”

I point my finger toward Miranda. “You are supposed to be on my side.”

She laughs. “I am, but does that mean I’m supposed to lie?”

“Whatever.” I turn my attention back to Jaden. “So everything is set up for tonight?”

“Sure is. Penny came through once again. A car will pick you two up after your dinner, and you’ll be in the suite for the game. Afterward, we’re celebrating at the team’s favorite bar. It’s a private party with extra security and a guest list. So you shouldn’t have to worry about anything. It will be a great time.”

“I can’t wait,” I say.

“Me either,” Miranda chimes in.

Jaden motions toward the door. “I’m going to head out before you take any more clothes off and let you get ready for your dinner. Thanks again for the invite today, and I’ll see you tonight.”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

He gives us a wave and quickly exits the trailer.

“Are you still going to pretend that nothing is going on between you two?” Miranda crosses her arms and narrows her eyes.

“There’s not.” I smile. “I promise.”

“Anna, you could cut the sexual tension in here with a knife.”

“That is so not true,” I scoff. “There was no tension, sexual or otherwise.”

She looks toward the closed door. “You know, sometimes, when I see you two together, I forget that it’s all fake. It seems real.”

“We have a great rapport, for sure. He’s become a true friend, and I enjoy hanging out with him. That’s all you’re seeing. You know I have no interest in dating anyone right now. And even if I did, it wouldn’t be Jaden. He’s not my type. It would never work.”

“If you say so.” She rolls her eyes.

“I know so.”

“Go shower.” She flicks her hand toward the bathroom. “We have places to be.”

I laugh. “You’re just bitter we’re leaving Michigan. Who knew you had a die-hard Cranes fan hibernating inside you all these years.”

She sighs. “Yeah, I really am going to miss it here.”

“It sounds like we’ll be going out with a bang, at least.”

“True. Now, go... I was serious about that. We have to leave for dinner soon.”

“I’m going!”

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

JADEN

I skate around the ice, waving to the crowd of fans as they give us a raucous applause. Winning at home never gets old. No matter what I have going on, this kind of adoration always lifts my spirits.

A group of fans start chanting my name. “Lewis! Lewis! Lewis!”

I stop and face them. Touching my gloved hand to my heart, I hold it out to them and wave with a grateful smile. A woman from this group hurries down the steps toward the ice and tosses a pink poster board to me. It hits the ice, and I skate toward it, giving her a wave of thanks.

When I reach it, I force a smile. In the center of the board, it says “We love #2” in big black letters while the rest of the board is filled with cutouts of Annalise and me from pictures printed in various magazines over the past month. Holding the sign over my head, I face it toward the VIP box where Anna and Miranda sit. With a final wave toward the woman who threw me the sign, I blow a kiss to the VIP box because everyone knows that my supposed love is up there, and that’s what a man in love would do. I’ve gotten very good at playing this game. With a final skate around the ice, I retreat toward the exit, anxious to get away from the stares.

The landscape of the crowd has changed a little over the past month. There are

definitely people here that care more about getting a view of Annalise or of the pair of us together than they do about the game. My jersey sales have skyrocketed, and I seem to have more fans than ever. Fans of hockey? Not so sure. Fans of true celebrity love? More likely.

The added attention toward the sport is great. I'd never bash something that creates more love for the game. Despite how they came to be a fan, I'm hoping when the dust settles on this sham, they'll stay because they've grown to love hockey.

After the night that could've been the greatest of my life, the date of which we do not speak—things changed. I no longer venture outside of the prescribed agenda. Miranda sets up a public outing, usually dinner, where certain photographers are waiting to capture us together. They get their shots, Anna and I have a nice meal, and I return her to the hotel.

I haven't brought her back to my house since that night. It's better this way. I'd never admit it, but she was right to stop things. I barely touched her, and it's still all I can think about. I couldn't have stopped my feelings from progressing if I tried. Full-on sex with Anna would've been the death of me, I'm certain. To feel all the things I do and have none of it be reciprocated would've hurt in a way I can't even describe.

Do I regret volunteering for this torturous faux-boyfriend experience?

No, how could I?

I've gotten to spend so much time with Anna, and I've loved every second of it. We've built an incredible friendship and get along so well. If I had to choose between having this small piece of her or nothing at all, I'd take the scraps any day, despite how difficult it can be.

A round of hoots and hollers greets me as I enter the locker room.

“J-man, our celebrity!” Beckett cheers. “Let’s see the glamour shots.”

I throw the poster board toward him. He scans the magazine clippings with a handful of guys looking over his shoulders. “Can we have your autograph?” He grins.

“Shut it.” I roll my eyes and pass the group admiring the poster. “Toss it in the trash when you’re done ogling me.”

At this point, the whole team knows what’s going on. They’re all privy to the deal I made with Anna. I’m thankful I can trust them enough to share because I’ve needed to talk about it over the past month. These guys are my family, and they’d never spill the tea and jeopardize the ruse. I thought talking to Beckett, specifically, would be helpful since he had a fake marriage arrangement with his wife for a few months. Though, I quickly realized that talking to Beckett was the last thing that would make me feel better. Unlike my situation with Anna, Beckett and his wife were screwing like bunnies almost from the beginning. They fell in love hard and fast despite claiming it was all pretend.

Did a little part of me think that would happen with Anna and me, too? Sure, and if I’m being honest, not even a little part. A huge part of me thought I could charm her into more from the beginning. But I was ill-prepared for someone as disciplined as Anna. That woman has her feelings locked up tight in an impenetrable vault. Or maybe she’s really just not into me. At this point, I don’t know which is worse, and the fact is, it doesn’t matter. It is what it is—and it sucks.

“Will there be photographers at The Station?” Finn questions.

“Oh, I’m sure,” I deadpan.

Max nudges Finn’s shoulder with his own. “What is it, Johnny Bravo? Looking for a redo? Too late for that!”

The guys laugh, and Logan, known by the nickname Sean, slams his locker shut, showing Finn's enlarged picture taped to the surface. The laughter ensues.

Finn had the unfortunate mishap of walking behind Anna and me as one of the paparazzi snapped our photo. While our picture looked great, Finn—in the background—did not. He was wearing jeans and a black shirt. The wind was blowing his floppy blond hair up into a tall swish. His face was scrunched, making his mouth and nose appear smaller than usual. His outfit, sunglasses, and windblown hair gave him a cartoonish appearance. He looked like the human version of the cartoon character Johnny Bravo—the resemblance was uncanny. I laugh every time I think about it.

Logan took the liberty of cropping the photo, blowing it up, and getting copies made. The day after the picture showed up in a tabloid, we all came into the locker room with a poster-sized picture of our very own Johnny Bravo taped to our locker. It's one of the best nickname origin stories we have.

“Can you blame me?” Finn grumbles. “I deserve a redo.”

“It doesn't matter how many photos of you end up in the tabloids. You'll now and forever be Johnny Bravo to us,” Cade states. “Hell, I've been married for over a year, and I'm still Heartbreaker. When you earn a nickname on this team, it sticks.”

“And honestly, it could be worse.” I scoff. Not that I have room to talk, given I have the tamest nickname on the team.

“So what's the deal tonight?” Miles asks. “Is it going to be different tonight because Annalise is coming?”

“Oh, definitely.” I pull my jersey off. “Lots more security. An approved guest list.”

Logan raises his eyebrows. “Translation: fewer girls.”

“Pretty much.” I close my locker and grab my shower supplies.

“Boo!” Finn groans.

“I don’t want to hear it. I sent a message to the group thread yesterday and told you all to let me know who you wanted on the list.”

“I didn’t think you were serious,” Logan grumbles.

“I didn’t see anything about a list,” Finn protests.

“Did you read the messages?” I ask.

He throws his hands up. “A lot is going on in that thread. This team is so chatty.”

“I hear that,” Gunner huffs.

The conversation continues, but I ignore it, making my way to the showers. I need to clear my head before I leave here. It takes a certain headspace to deal with my new reality. Hanging out with a woman I’m infatuated with, kissing her for the cameras but keeping a distance in real life, isn’t easy. Yet who am I kidding? If I’m going to have a problem—it’s a good one to have.

“This is the place.” My fingers entwined with Anna’s, I lead her into our favorite bar.

She looks around. “It has a cool vibe. I like how they’ve kept a lot of the old firehouse elements.”

I nod. “Yeah, people love the pole. One of the best parts of this place is Betty.”

“Betty?”

“Yeah, the bartender. She makes the best drinks. She’s like a master mixologist.” I smile. “What would you like?”

“A martini is fine. Whatever Betty wants to mix up.” She looks toward the bar. “Is Betty the one with her hands all over Finn?”

I follow Anna’s line of vision and chuckle. Sure enough, Betty is leaning over the bar top and running a finger down Finn’s cheek. He appears frozen in place with a satisfied look on his face. “Oh, good for Johnny Bravo. He’s had a rough day.”

Anna turns to me and quirks a brow. “You think they’re going to hook up?”

“It’s a possibility. Betty has a thing for hockey players.” I pull Anna through the crowd of people. While there are fewer strangers than normal, the place is still quite full.

“As in multiple guys from your team have slept with her?” Anna asks.

Taking the tip of my finger, I gently bop her nose. “Don’t be jealous, babe. I’m here with you.” I plant a kiss on her lips. The familiar tingles vibrate through my body at the contact the way they always do.

Anna pulls back from the kiss. “You’ve slept with her?” Her voice raises an octave, and I could be wrong, but I sense a little jealousy.

I cup her face in my hands. “My sweet girl.” I press my lips against hers again before I slowly kiss down her neck and then back up again. Anna sighs and tilts her head to the side, allowing me access. I nibble on her earlobe before whispering against her ear, “Babe. You know beautiful, blonde, talented movie stars are my thing...

especially the ones who will never love me back.” I pepper kisses back down her neck and pull away.

Her eyelids are heavy as her lips part in an exhale. She clears her throat and forces her eyes open wide, pretending that my lips against the soft skin of her neck didn’t affect her. “So you didn’t sleep with her, right?”

“No, of course not,” I lie because sometimes the truth hurts.

Anna and I are very similar in the fact that neither of us has had any serious relationships, but we’re opposites in our views on casual sex. Where I have had a ton of it, it’s not her style.

“Oh, okay.” Her gaze darts toward the ground and back up to meet mine. “Was the neck kissing necessary?”

I hold up a finger. “Number one... you know you liked it. And number two... I had to make sure I wasn’t caught by any lip readers,” I tease. Anna fears we’ll be discovered and called out on social media if someone reads our lips and posts it. I don’t pay too much attention to social media, but apparently, some influencers have built their entire platforms by reading celebrities’ lips and outing conversations. I find it all very amusing.

Anna laughs and hits my chest. “Stop. It’s real, and it happens.”

“I believe you.” I grin before leaning back into her neck. I pepper kisses against her skin. “That’s why all secret conversations will be handled in this manner.”

She giggles and pushes me away. Holding a hand in front of her face like she’s trying to block her mouth as she chews a big heap of food, she instructs, “You can do this instead.”

“I will never do that. It looks ridiculous,” I say, amused.

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes. “Are you getting me a martini or what?”

“Of course.” I reach for her hand. “Come on.”

We make our way to the bar. I introduce her to Betty and order us some drinks.

“So it’s your last night here?” I take a swig of beer. Anna has finished shooting and is heading back to California.

She presses her lips in a line. “Yeah. I’m going to miss Michigan. The autumn really is gorgeous. I’m going to miss your games, too. But at least our last game here was a good one. I don’t know if I can convince Miranda to come back with me. I might’ve lost her to your world.” She chuckles.

“Where is she anyway?”

“You can’t miss her. It looks like your Crane shop threw up on her.”

I scan the room and find Miranda holding a drink in her hand and dancing in a group with some of the guys. She’s wearing Hollywood’s jersey. Her auburn hair is braided in two piggy tails, the ends tied with long navy and white ribbons.

“Looks like she discarded her foam fingers for the bar.”

“I’m surprised. She’s very attached to those things.” Anna chuckles. Her smile fades.

“We are going to miss the games. We’ve had a blast.”

“Well, we play out in LA, too. You can catch some of our road games.”

Her eyes light up. “Oh, that will be great.”

I lean in, my mouth a breath away from her ear. “I know this is all for show, but I’m really going to miss you. The past few weeks have been great.”

Anna sets her empty martini glass on the bar and threads her fingers through my hair. I place my palms on the bar on either side of her waist, caging her in. We’re silent for a moment, lost in one another’s stare until she tilts her face up toward mine and our lips meet. The kiss throws me off guard as I’m used to initiating these photo ops, though this moment doesn’t feel staged. I’ve kissed Anna dozens of times before, all amazing, but there’s something so raw about this one. There’s a longing in the way that Anna’s mouth moves against mine, a beautiful melody in the way our tongues dance.

It takes all my willpower to pull away. “Anna, I don’t think anyone is taking pictures here. These are our friends. There’s no press allowed.”

“I know.”

I study her full lips and flushed cheeks, the way her eyes keep falling to my mouth, and her tongue as it pokes out, wetting her lips. I’m normally pretty good at reading women, and I feel as if I know what she’s thinking, but this woman confuses me at every turn.

“Anna?”

She strokes her thumb across my cheek. “Take me to your place.”

“What?” My voice cracks.

She gives me a chaste kiss. “You heard me.”

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

ANNALISE

Jaden is quiet on the ride back to his place, and I can't blame him. I've been sending him mixed signals all month. On top of the entire let's make out for the cameras charade that—let's be real—isn't much of a charade at all, I've made it clear that I don't want this thing between us progressing to anything more physical.

Nothing has changed on my end. I don't want a relationship. More than that, I don't want Jaden to fall for me because I genuinely care for him and wouldn't want to hurt him. Yet something about tonight being my last night here has me wanting things I know I shouldn't.

The house is quiet with Max still celebrating at the bar. He's responsible for making sure Miranda gets back safely. I'm not sure who is going to miss Michigan more, Miranda or me. She's grown to love the guys on the team and gets along so well with all of them. I love hanging out with them too, although there's no question that I'll miss Jaden the most.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Jaden asks.

"A water is fine, thanks."

He disappears into the kitchen, and I make my way around the living room, taking it

all in. I've only been here once and want to remember all the details. I have to admit that for a bachelor pad, Max and Jaden keep a nice home. Everything is clean and nicely decorated. There are framed photos of the team on the walls, the biggest one from their Stanley Cup win last season. If there was ever a photograph that emitted pure joy, it's that one.

"Here you go." Jaden hands me a bottle of water.

I point at the championship photo. "I love this one."

He looks at it, and a contented smile crosses his face. "Yeah, that was the best day."

"Do you think you'll get a repeat?"

"I don't know. We're sure as hell going to try, and we've been playing really good so far this season. But repeats aren't common. So much can happen in a season. It requires lots of talent, a shit ton of luck, and maybe some divine intervention to win it all." He smiles and then turns to me, his face going serious. "Anna, what are we doing here?"

I set the bottle of water on the table beside me and wrap my arms around Jaden's middle. Hugging him, I rest my cheek against his strong chest. "I don't know," I admit. "I just wanted to spend my last night here with you."

"Yeah? In what way?"

I tilt my head up and hold his stare. "Maybe something memorable... to, you know, bookend this amazing month we've had."

"Something memorable?" He raises a brow.

I nod.

“There’s a lot we can do that’d be memorable, Anna. Give me some parameters.”

“I don’t know.” I lie because I definitely know, but I am suddenly too scared to say the words aloud.

He dips his chin. “Okay. Well, tell me this. Did you want to do something memorable with or without clothing on?”

I swallow. “Without.”

The corners of his mouth tilt up into a satisfied grin. “I think that sounds like a great idea.”

“Just for fun, though,” I say. “Nothing for me has changed.”

“I like fun.” He takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilts my face up. Cradling my jaw, he draws his lips to mine, and I release a sigh. Add Jaden’s kisses to the very long list of things I’m going to miss about this place.

The kiss starts out soft. Our lips move against one another in a reverent melody. There’s so much emotion, and it’s hard to process, but it steals my breath with want. He moves one hand around the back of my neck, threading his fingers through my hair, and pulls my mouth closer to his. Sliding his tongue into my mouth, he deepens the kiss—and, oh my lord, how I love when he does it. Kissing has always been a precursor to pleasure, but Jaden’s kisses could be the main event. I moan into his mouth as the cadence of our tongues increase, and I feel desire pulse between my legs.

It might be a mistake, but I want him, just for tonight, and I can’t pretend I don’t.

He circles his arms around my back and lifts me. I wrap my legs around his middle. Our mouths stay connected as he moves us toward his bedroom.

My need grows with an intense urgency as his lips continue to move against mine, sending me spiraling into a haze of lust and desire. He shuts his bedroom door and pushes my back up against the wood. With my hands laced around his neck, I pull his face closer to mine, groaning into his mouth.

Dropping my feet, I pull away and make quick work of removing my clothes while Jaden does the same. His chest and forearms are a tapestry of beautiful art, and I'm dying to ask him about every piece of it. I open my mouth to do just that when he drops his final piece of clothing to the floor, leaving him bare before me, and my words get lost in my throat.

Jaden is a handsome man, for sure. But without clothes, he is a work of art—tall with lean, sculpted muscles. His impressive length stands erect, and my insides melt with lust.

His brown-eyed gaze, all lusty and primal, roams over my naked body. "You sure you want this?" His voice is all low and gravelly.

In response, I drop to my knees, take the base of his cock in my hands and wrap my mouth around him.

"Fuuck, Anna." He slides his hands over my scalp, fisting my hair as I take him deeper, his tip hitting the back of my throat.

The erotic sounds coming from Jaden and the way he's moving his hips to fuck my mouth have me vibrating with need. Removing one of my hands from his base, I slide a hand down my torso and between my legs, needing to relieve some of the pressure.

“Oh, hell no.” He pushes away from me and removes my hand. “The only one making you feel good tonight is me.” His voice drops an octave, making him all hoarse—his words a tantalizing promise.

He leads me toward the bed, and when the backs of my legs hit the mattress, he guides me onto it. Legs hanging over the side of the bed, he grasps my knees and opens my legs wide. I prop myself up on my elbows and take in the scene below.

“I have dreamed of this moment more times than I can count.” Now it’s his turn to fall to his knees.

My skin practically vibrates as he kisses up my leg and over my inner thigh. He stops where I want him most. Taking two fingers, he opens me wide for him. The expression he wears as his eyes drink me in, admiring me as if I’m the most exquisite thing he’s ever seen is seared into my mind. My breaths come out in pants, jagged raw breaths as the anticipation of his touch builds.

He inserts one finger and then two—moving them in and out of me. My mouth falls open as a moan of pleasure escapes, and I drop to the bed, my quivering limbs unable to keep me up. My skin flushes, burning with a fiery need, and I release a pained whimper as his mouth circles my bundle of nerves. He starts flicking his tongue in rhythmic movements, and I lose control. My body is engulfed in an inferno of fiery pleasure as it shudders in release. I quiver and cry out as his tongue worships me through one of the most intense orgasms of my life. Put it off to the fact that we’ve had a month of foreplay, the reality that I’ve been depriving my body of this type of pleasure for far too long, or that Jaden Lewis’s mouth is magical, but I’ve never come so hard.

“Oh my God,” I cry as I come down from the high.

My eyes clamped shut as I soak in the aftershocks of pleasure. I hear a condom

wrapper in the fuzzy distance. Jaden lifts me, positioning me farther back on the bed. His strong frame hovers over me as his lips find mine. He kisses me senseless, and then his lips are gone. “Anna baby, I’m going to need you to open those eyes.”

I do as instructed.

Jaden has positioned himself between my legs. He pushes my knees to the side, leaving me open to him. He regards me with an intensity that penetrates straight to my core. “Keep your eyes on me. I want to see you when I fuck you.” He positions himself at my entrance and slides in.

Our mouths fall open in unison, and we release a collective moan. He fills me so deeply and fully, and it feels so good. Hands pressed on my thighs, keeping me spread wide, he increases his cadence. Each thrust hits deeper and deeper. My heartbeat quickens, and my lips part to accommodate faster breaths. I feel an inexplicable pull toward him as I’m consumed with the greatest pleasure I’ve known. In the recesses of my mind, whispers of the truth warn me that one time with Jaden will never be enough.

“You. Are. So. Fucking. Beautiful.” Each word is uttered in staccato as he thrusts into me over and over again. He slides the palms of his hands up my body, burning me with their touch until he reaches my breasts. “Perfection,” he says as he tugs at my nipples.

The familiar warmth builds as I chase my release.

“I’m so close,” I whimper in a half sob.

He pounds into me harder, working me higher and higher. Pressing his forearms into the mattress on both sides of my head, he boxes me in with his arms, his mouth hovering a breath away from mine. In a deliciously low and demanding voice that

makes my eyes roll and my toes curl, he orders, “Come for me.”

Pleasure tears through every cell in my body as I convulse in a rippling orgasm. Jaden impales me with a final thrust and groans into the lust-filled space as his body shudders along with mine.

“I fucking knew it.” He gasps for breath as he falls atop me. A cocky grin lights up his face, and he presses his forehead to mine. “I knew we’d be perfect.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY

JADEN

My room smells like sex, sweat, and the sweetness that is Annalise—and it's intoxicating. The clock on my bedside table says it's almost six o'clock in the morning, and we've yet to find sleep. We've explored one another's bodies all night long. No matter what the rest of my days bring me, I don't think I'll ever top this one. I've experienced unmatched pleasure and had more orgasms than I knew was possible with the most incredible woman I've ever met. Our tongues have tasted every inch of one another's bodies. I've brought Anna to release when she was shattered with exhaustion and didn't think she could come again. Our sexual chemistry is off the charts.

I'm ignoring the fact that I had Anna within my reach for a whole month. It makes me sick to know we missed out on feeling like this all that time. Though I'm not sure there was anything else I could've done. It had to be on Anna's terms.

I hate that she's leaving today, and more than that, it pains me that she insists on this being a one-night thing. Withdrawals from this connection will be tough, but I'd go through them a hundred times to experience what we did.

“When did you get this one?” She runs her finger over the skin on my rib where the tattoo of an orange koi fish resides.

“Two years ago, a group of the guys and I went to Japan. A couple of us got tattoos while we were there. In Japan, an orange koi fish represents wealth, prosperity, and fortune.”

“Did it work?” she asks.

“I think so. The year after I got it, we won the Cup. And talk about fortune. I just fucked Annalise Sterling until my muscles gave out. Can’t get more fortunate than that.” I kiss the top of her head.

She chuckles. “Oh, stop it.”

“What? It’s true.”

She points at a Chinese symbol on my bicep. It’s simple—small with black ink and not the same caliber as the rest of the ink that surrounds it, but it’s special because it was my first. “What about this one? What does it mean?”

“That is actually the first tattoo I got. It’s the Chinese symbol for the name of the girl who took my virginity.”

“Really?” Her voice raises an octave.

“No.” I laugh. “It is my first one, but it means champion or winner. My high school hockey team all got it the summer after graduation.”

“Do any of them play in the NHL?”

“No,” I scoff. “I heard somewhere like less than two percent of high school hockey players go on to play in the NHL. A couple of the guys played briefly in college. But none of them play now. Most are married or heading that way, working normal jobs.”

“Playing professional hockey isn’t a normal job?”

“Hardly.” I chuckle. “It’s up there with yours, I’d say. Most people don’t get paid millions to simulate sex on a motorcycle.”

“Hey.” She slaps my chest. “We’ve talked about this. That is the scene that shall not be named.”

“And I told you I don’t agree with that because it’s one of your best.”

She rolls her eyes. “What about this one?” She points at a blue-and-gray sandhill crane tattoo on my forearm that extends from my wrist to my elbow. She’s inquired about almost every tattoo on my body, interested in their meanings.

“I got that when I signed with the Cranes. It’s one of my favorites.” She wrinkles her brow, so I continue. “That’s a sandhill crane, a common bird around this area of Michigan. It’s what the team’s mascot is named after.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

I shrug. “Yeah, a lot of people, even those from around here, don’t make the connection.”

“It’s pretty.” She trails her finger down my skin. “I like the colors. Do you think you’ll get more tattoos, or are you all done?”

“I’m content with the ones I have now, but never say never. As you’ve heard, each one carries a memory or a meaning. So who knows what event in the future I’ll want to memorialize with some ink.”

“Are you going to move down to your legs?” she asks.

“God no.” I scrunch my nose in a grimace, causing her to laugh. “I hate leg tattoos.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I don’t know why, but I hate the way they look.” I scan my arms, which are pretty much covered in a sleeve of tattoos. “I have some more room on my front.” I motion toward my abdomen, which is free of tattoos. “And I have lots of space on my back. But I kinda like the look I have going on.”

Anna flings a leg over my torso and sits up to straddle me.

“Anna.” My voice lowers. “What are you doing?”

Her tongue peeks out to lick her lips. “Just looking,” she says with an innocent charm. She places her hands on each of my wrists and trails her palms over my arms and across my shoulders and chest where my tattoos reside. “I like the look you have going on, too.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Anna’s naked body atop me and the way she’s ogling me with want has my dick standing erect immediately.

She moves her ass back and grinds it into me. I grab her thighs, digging my fingers into her skin. “You ready to go again?”

Her eyes dart to the clock. “I think we have time for a quickie. I have to leave soon to pack for my flight.”

Not needing to be asked twice, I sit up and snatch a condom from the bedside table. I put it on before getting behind her. With both hands on her waist, I spin her around so

she's on her hands and knees facing the headboard. We've experienced each other in every position and tempo, but now, I want to take her hard and rough for the last time. When she's back home, across the country, I want her to still be able to feel me and be reminded I was here.

One hand palms her ass while I slide my other hand between her legs. With one finger, I enter her and am consumed with need when I find her wet and ready for me.

"You are a fucking goddess, Anna," I say on an exhale, aching with want. I remove my finger.

In one quick motion, I thrust deep inside her. She moans and presses a hand against the headboard to hold her body in place. I brand her with my touch as my fingers dig into her soft skin. Rocking her back and forth against me, I move inside her. She feels just as amazing as she did the very first time. Every nerve cell in my body is lit on fire with desire for this woman.

I pound into her hard, unable to get deep enough. I'm feral to come together again.

The sounds coming from her lips, the feel of her skin beneath my touch, the sight of her body glistening with sweat, and the silky tightness that consumes me with pleasure with each thrust cause me to ache so deeply with an intense need for her that it unnerves me. I agreed to one night, but I don't know how one night could ever be enough. Hell, I don't know how one lifetime could either.

The pace of her breath increases, and I can tell she's close. Knowing this is our last time, I'm overcome with the need to get lost in her striking blue depths.

I pull out, and Anna moans in protest. She turns around. "What?" She starts to question, but when she sees me, she knows what to do.

Sitting, I prop myself up from behind with my hands, and Anna climbs onto my lap and lowers herself down until I'm back inside her again. We release a collective sigh of pleasure. She takes hold of my shoulders and uses them to steady herself as she rocks up and down.

I swallow the emotion in my throat and hold her stare. The ecstasy on her face as we move together owns me. Sitting up, I trail my hands up her back and lace my fingers through the hair at the nape of her neck, pulling her face to mine. Our lips collide, and our tongues clash in a soul-devouring kiss, a goodbye kiss.

The hypnotic spell of a kiss intensifies as our bodies move faster, chasing our next release. My entire body hums as my emotions spin out of control. I want to commit this entire evening with Anna to memory, but I'm out of my mind with sensations I can't control.

Sliding one of my hands between us, it only takes one stroke of her clit, and we're both convulsed with ripping orgasms.

Anna is still atop me, and our foreheads are together. We breathe in the same air as we come down from our highs.

Our naked bodies are still wrapped in one another, and Anna whispers. "I arranged to have a car pick me up. It should be here."

Her lips find mine, and she kisses me so softly that my lips quiver against hers.

I sit motionless as she climbs off me and throws on her clothes.

There's so much I want to say, but I'm frozen in a space and time that I never want to end. Only it does.

“It’s been fun. You’re the best fake boyfriend I ever had.” She blows me a kiss, and then she’s gone.

I remain. Speechless.

I’m torn by indecision. Emotions are flying at me at a record pace, and my mind is a convoluted haze of regret. After the night we had, my exhaustion is soul deep. My mind and body spent. At the same time, I’ve never felt more alive. Anna is the answer to everything I never knew I was missing.

Now that I know what it’s like to have her, there’s no going back to when I didn’t.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

ANNALISE

My brain hurts as dueling emotions square off within my skull. The high of wrapping a movie that might turn out to be the best I've done mixed with the low of leaving this place that has brought me so much joy and Jaden has my head pounding.

After a long shower, I can still feel Jaden everywhere. I can see him places too, like below my collarbone, where I'm sure he purposely left a hickey. I can't even be mad. The truth is my heart twists when I see the memory of Jaden's mouth on my skin.

Last night was stupid on my part. I should've known better. I fear I made a mess of a beautiful friendship. I know that Jaden wanted more, and maybe in a different world, it could work, but not in this one. We're too different.

Miranda's voice startles me. I didn't hear her enter. "Everything from the trailer is packed and in the car. You almost set here?"

I turn from the pile of clothes on my bed that is far from packed.

She gasps. "Anna! Why are you crying?"

I am? I lift the palm of my hand to my face to find wetness. "I...I didn't realize I was. That's weird." I plaster on a smile. "It's nothing."

She purses her lips, lifting her brows. “The hickey on your chest says otherwise.”

Bringing my hand to my chest, I quickly cover it.

“Too late. Already saw it. Spill it.”

I sigh. “I slept with Jaden last night.”

“Obviously.” She nods. “And?”

I lift my shoulders. “I don’t know. I’m going to miss him. I really loved it here.”

She gives me a warm smile. “I know. I did, too.” She joins me by the bed and starts folding my clothes. “Can I remind you that you’re both millionaires? You have the money to fly across the country and see each other whenever you want. He travels for work and quite often out west. You can meet him. When you’re not on location, you can be here. It could work if you want it to.”

“I don’t want a relationship,” I counter.

“Why?”

“You know why. It’s not time. I’m not going to be tied down. I want to focus on my career. Plus, Jaden and I are different. We don’t fit in each other’s worlds.”

“Well, that’s not true. Anna, I know you love your work, but what will it take to prove to yourself that you’re worthy? You think some gold statue of a naked guy given to you by stupid academy members means anything? They don’t get to dictate your worth. Their opinion means nothing.”

“I know.” I choke on a sob. “But I have to show them that I was right.”

Tears fall as I think back to the intervention my parents put me through. I was seventeen when they sat me down with a couple of their closest friends, other actors I've known my whole life. They all took turns telling me why I wasn't cut out for this business, why I would be happier doing something...anything else. They assured me that I didn't possess the talent or aptitude to learn the skills required to be a respected actor. They made me feel so small that the weight of that day still pushes me down today. Those people, who I thought loved me, shattered my heart. The worst part is a little piece of me believed them. I almost quit. I probably would've if it wasn't for Miranda. She's been my closest friend since I was twelve and, at points in my life, the only one who's believed in me.

"Honey." Miranda takes my hands in hers, tears now rolling down her cheeks. "They don't matter. You know that you will never be enough for them. The only person you have to be enough for is yourself."

"I want them to see me." My voice cracks with emotion. "Just once, I want them to be proud, realize they were wrong, and tell me I'm talented. That's not too much to ask of one's parents."

She squeezes my hands. "Normal parents, no. But Anna, you were raised by narcissists. They will never give you the validation you want. I'm so sorry because you're the sweetest person in the world and deserve better, but that's the reality. They will never love you like they should because they're too stuck on themselves. But you can't let their issues ruin your life. You have to let their expectations go..." She pulls me into a hug. "You have to love yourself."

I hold my dearest friend as my tears continue to fall. "I'm just tired. I didn't sleep last night."

Miranda chuckles. "That good, huh?"

Stepping back from our embrace, I swipe my fingers under my eyes to wipe my tears.
“Better.”

Her head falls back. “We have a lot to talk about. But first, you need to get packed. We were supposed to be on the plane an hour ago.”

“So what? They can wait.”

“That’s the spirit.” The hotel phone rings, and Miranda picks it up. “Hi. Walter. Sure. Send him up.” She hangs up. “Speaking of the sex god. He’s on his way up.”

“What?” I shriek.

Amusement dances in her eyes. “I’m going to go run some errands, maybe hang out with Walter for a bit. Call me when you’re packed and ready.”

She heads toward the elevator and greets Jaden as he steps out of it.

Miranda steps in, and as the doors close, she makes a heart with her hands and shoots me what I’m sure is meant to be a reassuring smile, but I’m nothing but nerves as Jaden makes his way toward me.

“Hey.” He fixes me with his gaze, frowning. “Are you crying?”

I shake my head. “Just tired. What’s up? Aren’t you supposed to be at practice?”

He stands before me. “I told him I was puking, stomach bug. I had to see you before you left. I didn’t like the way things ended this morning.”

“I’m sorry. I know I kind of ran out of there, but I had a lot of packing to do.”

He takes my hand and moves us to the bed. We sit facing each other. “I...” He swallows. “I have never been in a relationship.”

I open my mouth to stop him, but he raises his hand. “Just hear me out. I’ve never been in one because I’ve never wanted to be in one. I know you say everything between us is fake, but I don’t buy it. I may not have a lot of experience when it comes to relationships, but I’m not an idiot. You and I have something... something really great. I don’t know how to describe it, but I want to say that we work. We get along great, have fun, and just... fit. You know?”

I raise my hand. “Jaden, stop. All of that is true. We’ve had a remarkable time together. It’s nothing to do with you. I’m just not in the right space for a relationship, especially a long-distance one.”

He bites his bottom lip. “I just feel that if I let you walk away, I’m going to lose the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“We’ll still see each other. You promised Miranda and me tickets to your Cali games. And depending on how the awards show season pans out, I might need you then. As far as anyone knows, we’re still dating. We’ve definitely had enough face time in the tabloids this month to keep that story going for a while. We’ll stay friends.”

The longing in his eyes shoots a pang of sorrow straight to my heart. “I don’t want to be your friend, Anna, or at least not just your friend. I want to be more.”

I press my hand to my chest. “I’m sorry. I can’t give you more.”

He scoots closer to me, our legs touching. “Anna, against all odds, we were brought together. In a world where I should’ve never known you, we met. And we’re so good together. I can’t figure out what you’re so afraid of, but I will always protect you. You may be able to shield the truth of what we have from yourself, but don’t forget

that I lived it, too, and I know it was real. We were given one fucking chance, and if you're brave enough to take it, it could change your life. I'm just asking for a chance to prove how good we could be."

I swallow hard. "You know I don't gamble."

"Just this once. Take a chance, and you might get lucky. I promise you, it's worth a shot," he pleads.

I close the space between us and circle my arms around his back, holding him tight. He reciprocates. His strong arms hug me back, and I sigh in relief. I can't deny that being wrapped in Jaden's embrace is one of my favorite places to be. He makes me feel cherished and so safe.

He holds me close to his chest and kisses the top of my head. "I know this was all supposed to be fake, and I pretended it was, but the truth is, it was always real to me. I was utterly enchanted with you from the very beginning. Somewhere along the line, I fell in love. I didn't mean to, and I know I wasn't supposed to, but that doesn't change the fact that I did, and I think you did, too."

My heart twists at his words. "Jaden..."

"I don't need you to promise me forever right now. I just need you to give me a chance. Please, Anna."

I lean back so I can look into his eyes. "I love you, Jaden. I do. I just need time."

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "You can have all the time in the world. I'm not going anywhere... besides California to visit you, of course."

I grin. "I really picked the wrong guy to fake date, didn't I?"

“If you wanted a guy who you wouldn’t fall for, then yeah, you did. However, from where I’m sitting, I think it’s going to turn out just fine.”

“I hope so.”

“We can figure it out, and it doesn’t have to be today. You can have tomorrow, too, and even till the end of the week if you need it.” His signature sexy smirk is back, and the weight of the day is gone. A few minutes in his presence and I already feel better.

“Very funny.”

He raises a brow. “So last night. That was...” He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth, his brown eyes appearing darker.

I pull in a breath and nod. “Yeah, it was.”

“While you’re taking this time, we should explore that a little more. Don’t you think?”

I lean forward and give him a chaste kiss. “We might be able to work something out.”

“I can’t wait.” He cups my face in his hands and deepens the kiss.

We’ve kissed a lot, and just like all those kisses in front of the paparazzi, this one is deliciously real, too.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

JADEN

“This doesn’t feel good.” I sigh.

“No, it doesn’t,” Max agrees.

Our newest recruits, Miles and Finn, skate around on the ice as if they were meant to be starting players. I don’t remember a time since joining the team that neither Max nor myself didn’t start the game. There have been a few times over the years when one of us has been on the bench when the game started—one of us was ill, had a back week, or was nursing an injury. It happens. Yet both of us warming the bench? Never.

On the bench to my right, my best friend, the pair of us completely down and out. I have to question our life choices. It’s actually insane that in two weeks’ time, we went from two of the most happy-go-lucky guys on the team to the melancholy duo. Okay, I can’t speak for Max. I think he’s too overwhelmed with his recent events to land on an appropriate emotion for his situation. The one thing we both are is distracted. The other similarity between us is that we’re playing like shit, and it’s not fun. It’s actually downright gut-wrenching watching the new guys playing in our place.

Finn has been the standout player this first period, and if I wasn’t so jealous, I’d be

happy for the guy. We're in Boston playing against the team he was transferred from. He deserves to show his former team the talent they traded. If only we all got what we deserved.

It's been two weeks since I poured my heart out to Anna. Two weeks since I begged her to give us a chance. Two weeks since she said she loved me. And in that time, I've received all of two texts, both telling me she was busy. The number I wear on my chest has always been lucky for me, but right about now, it's feeling like a bad omen.

I understand that Anna needs time, but so much so that we can't have a simple text exchange? I've ghosted many people in my day, but I'm regretting those actions now that I know what it feels like to be ghosted. Maybe this is my penance for being a crappy human.

Unlike Max, I haven't missed practice since the morning Anna left. But it's clear that though I was physically present, my mind was elsewhere. I've always said that the greatest attribute an athlete can have is their mind. I've seen it time and time again. A player can have all the skill in the world, but if they're weak-minded—don't believe in themselves, get nervous, or second-guess their ability—they won't go far. I was born with confidence to spare. From the moment I touched the ice at a young age, I knew I'd be great. I believed in myself so much that the universe could only get in line with my plan. This situation with Anna has messed with my mind more than anything ever has. I can't seem to find clarity.

It all feels impossible. Regardless of what happens in my love life, I can't let it derail everything I've ever worked for. I'm stronger than this. I hate that loving Anna makes me feel so weak.

Boston's left forward makes it past Miles and slaps the puck toward our goal. Gunner lunges for the puck, but it slips in beneath his leg. The home crowd roars in

celebration as their team ties up the score.

“Lewis,” Coach Albright barks out my name. “You think you can get your head out of your ass and play?”

I stand. “Yes, Coach. I’m good.”

Eddy hands me my stick, and relief consumes me. As much as I want Anna, I can’t lose this. I pull in a deep breath and block out everything but the game.

Right now, this is all that matters. It has to be.

The drinks flow as we celebrate our win over Boston. Sitting out for the majority of the first period was the kick in the ass I needed to get my head on straight. From the moment I stepped on that ice, I was on fire, and it felt good. Sorrow is a choice. My mind is one of my best attributes, and I’ve always been able to block out the noise to concentrate on what’s important. I simply had to remember that.

Somewhere around my seventh beer, I realized that Anna’s avoidance might’ve opened some buried mommy issues that I didn’t know I had. While my mom has done so much for me, she was never present—emotionally or physically. The truth is, she still isn’t. I never knew it affected me, probably because my brain buried the hurt to make way for my successes. This past month of me fighting for Anna’s attention and love paralleled my childhood in a lot of ways. If I know anything, it’s that I can’t force anyone to do anything or be someone who they’re not. If I’m not enough for Anna, that’s it. I have to accept it. I lost my way when I begged her to love me. It’s embarrassing really. I need to chalk it up to what it was—a fun month with a hot movie star. I can’t keep hoping for something it wasn’t—a magical love connection.

I am Jaden fucking Lewis, starting defenseman on the reigning Stanley Cup-winning team, The Cranes. And I’m single.

That is good enough for me.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

ANNALISE

My mother looks so frail. She's always been a slender woman without an ounce of extra fat on her frame, but now, she looks skeletal. She wears a stocking cap and is covered in blankets as she sleeps in the chair beside me. Breakfast at Tiffany's, one of her favorite movies, plays on the big screen TV in my parents' theater room, but I muted the sound when she dozed off. I'm drowning in overwhelm and crave the silence.

I replay the past several months in my mind, trying to figure out where I missed the signs. Both of my parents blame me for not noticing, for being too involved in my own life to care enough to realize that my mother's breast cancer had returned. The thing is—I do care, so very deeply. Yet when the two people who are supposed to love me more than anyone else tell me that it's my fault, I can't help but question everything.

Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that I don't know how sick she is. It's impossible to tell. This isn't our first time through it. Years ago, when she was first diagnosed, she appeared the same—skeletal and deathly ill. Yet she recovered and went into remission. Physical appearances aren't a stable enough predictor. I need to find a way to speak to the doctor or get a peek at her records. Neither of my parents has given me much information as to the status of the cancer and the effectiveness of the treatment. Just like always, my mother is very private.

My mother has always been the most gorgeous woman in any room she's been in. She's stunning, the epitome of beauty. Seeing her like this makes me feel ill. The woman sleeping beside me doesn't even resemble the one I know.

I leave the movie playing on mute and situate the blankets around her—tucking them in at her sides before quietly exiting the room. I need air. My parents' mansion, despite the obnoxious square footage, has always seemed stuffy. It's hard for me to draw in a full breath here, always has been.

The mature thing to do would be to locate my phone and get some work done. There are probably dozens of missed texts, calls, and emails from my agent, Miranda, and Jaden. When my mother's sick, it feels like my world stops spinning. I've never been good at regulating my emotions. Miranda thinks it's because my parents never gave me a safe space to express various feelings. In fact, emotional displays of any kind were highly discouraged. But at twenty-six, playing the blame game seems wrong. Sometimes I think my parents are right, and the problem is me. Maybe I'm just broken.

I step outside on the back patio. This has always been my favorite part of the property. The landscape team has created a serene space with so much beautiful foliage. I love the sound of the waterfall that empties into the pool. If I ignore the massive building behind me, I can almost pretend I'm relaxing in some tropical getaway far away from the negativity of this home.

The tranquil facade crumbles when my father's voice cuts through the air. "You left your mother alone?"

"She's sleeping."

He huffs. "Well, what if she wakes up and needs something? You won't be there."

“I was just stretching my legs for a minute. I’m going back.”

“You said that you wanted to spend time with her. So I sent the nurse away. Now, you leave her by herself?”

I sigh. “Dad, I do want to spend time with her, and I have been. I’m going right back.”

“Annalise. You’re an adult, and if I can’t count on you to do the things you say you’re going to do...”

“I’m going back.” I raise my voice in frustration and immediately regret it.

My father takes several steps until he’s face-to-face with me. His eyes bulge like they do when he’s angry. “Do not raise your voice to me.” Spittle flies from his mouth. “You’re the one who abandoned your mother when she needed you. You do not get to take an attitude with me.”

I take a step back, and tears fill my eyes. “I told you. I didn’t know she was sick. No one told me. How was I supposed to know? I tried calling Mom, but she never picked up, and when she did, she told me she was too busy to talk. You were in Michigan and didn’t tell me.”

“Oh, you mean that time you ran out of dinner to go be with that lowlife? Was I supposed to yell it across the restaurant as you retreated? Scream to your back? You didn’t answer my calls or return to your hotel or trailer that night, so should I have sent a carrier pigeon to deliver the news?” he snaps.

When I think rationally, I know he wasn’t going to tell me that night. He was there in an attempt to put things in motion so I wouldn’t embarrass him. He had no intention of informing me that my mother was sick while Simon was sitting at the table with

us. He would've never shared such intimate information in front of Simon. In my heart, I know this to be true. Yet he's so good at casting doubt and making me question my actions. Was he planning on telling me that night when he came to my trailer? Is it my fault that my mother struggled with this vicious disease for another month without her daughter at her side?

He continues, "To think that the woman who gave you life was suffering while you were out embarrassing yourself with that man."

"I wasn't embarrassing myself," I say in a low voice, defeated.

"No? Then just me and your mother?" he quips and hands me a folder I didn't notice he was holding.

"What's this?" I hold the manila folder in my hand, afraid to open it.

"Open it and find out."

My hands shake as I open the folder. If my father is eager for me to see the contents, they can't be good. The first piece of paper is a mug shot. The man looks to be in his fifties, and while I don't know him, he looks familiar. There are two more mug shots of another man and a woman. Confused, I continue flipping through the stack of papers. While I'm uncertain who is in the first three photos, my heart drops when I see who is in the rest of the photos because I'd know him anywhere.

My heart hammers in my chest, and tears roll down my cheeks as I see one picture after the next of Jaden with other women—each photo a new woman.

I raise my gaze to meet my father's. "Need it explained?" he sneers and rocks back on his heels. "The first mug shot is of Mr. Lewis's father, who is currently serving twenty years in prison for sexual assault. The next two mug shots are his

grandparents, also in prison for attempting to rob a bank. The rest are obviously of Mr. Lewis with various women. He's making a mockery of you and this family. The man you chose to go public with comes from a long line of criminals. He is a disgusting whore and a complete waste of space. His only attribute is that he can hit a puck with a stick, and you think he's worthy to date a Sterling? Do you really hate us that much?"

"I don't hate you." I swallow the lump in my throat.

"Then explain to me why the first man who you go public with, the man who you show up all over the tabloids with his tongue down your throat, was him? Just look at him." He smacks the pictures out of my hands, and they fall to the floor. "He should be the last man on earth you'd choose, so I can't help but think you did this just to spite us, just to hurt your dying mother. I thought I knew you, Annalise, but you are such a disappointment. This is low. Even for you."

"Mom is dying?" My body shakes with sobs, his words slicing my heart like a knife. "Dad, I?—"

He cuts me off. "Go home, Annalise. I'm calling the nurse back. I don't want to look at you."

"No, I want to be here with Mom." My voice quakes.

"Go home, or I'll have security remove you," he snaps. "Your mother deserves better."

Tears blur my vision, and I hardly see him walk away. Yet I know he's gone because I can breathe again, if just barely. My chest tightens as a torrent of tears consumes me as I hurry to pick up the photos from the patio floor. I can't process the contents now, but I have a feeling I'll need to revisit these photos later when I can think straight.

My father's words always cut deep, but this tongue-lashing was the worst. My heart is completely broken, and this time, it feels beyond repair.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

JADEN

I've second-guessed myself this entire trip. I had to stop from turning around on the way to the airport. I had to make myself get on the damn plane in Detroit, and now... standing outside this home in LA on this beautiful seventy-five-degree November day, I'm in need of a major pep talk to garner the nerve to push the intercom button.

I haven't heard from Anna in almost a month. She's been radio silent, save for the two texts I received shortly after she left Michigan. I halted my attempts at communication after Boston, realizing that I needed to create boundaries for my own sanity. To say I haven't thought about her almost nonstop every single day since would be a lie. But I've somehow managed to compartmentalize my longing in order to deliver on the ice.

Having never been in love, I have no gauge in which to measure how well I'm moving on. Though, I have to believe that falling for and subsequently losing a woman as incredible as Anna earns some extra mourning time. Yet I feel given the circumstances, I've been doing well—which is why I'm currently questioning my choices.

There's not a doubt in my mind that I was dropped off at the correct location. Everything about this property reminds me of a home she'd own.

I press the intercom button and wait, internally debating what I should say when her voice comes through. I don't have to worry for too long because no voice sounds. There's a buzz, and the heavy gate starts to open. I suppose it's a good sign that my image on her security cameras is enough to grant me access. We left things on good terms, so I'm not sure why she wouldn't want to see me, but given our lack of communication over the past month, I was nervous.

Truthfully, I don't know why I'm here. Miranda sent me a vague message that told me to get out to California. It stated that Anna needed me, followed by an address. No other information was given. However, it was enough. With a two-day break in our schedule, I boarded a plane within hours of receiving Miranda's message.

I make my way up Anna's driveway. The path of smooth, neatly laid cobblestones is flanked by a line of tall palm trees gently swaying in the warm breeze. Beyond the tall trees is a beautifully landscaped front yard filled with a variety of native plants and colorful flowers.

The house has a contemporary aesthetic, a combination of elegant stucco paired with stylish wood and metal accents, clean lines, and expansive windows. I haven't stepped inside, but I have no doubt it'll feel very welcoming, with an equal combination of style and charm that mirrors the exterior.

Pulling in a breath, I raise my hand to knock on the large solid wood door, but it inches open before I do. Anna stands on the other side, and the sight of her sounds alarm bells in my head. Something is not right. She appears sickly with pale skin, dark bags beneath her eyes, and sunken in cheeks. I'm certain she's lost weight, and she wasn't someone who had extra weight to lose. She's wearing baggy sweats that swallow her small frame. Her face is makeup-free, and her hair is atop her head in a messy bun.

All reservations I had prior to coming here vanish. All I can think about is holding

her in my arms and protecting her from whatever is happening.

“Anna.” Her name gets caught in my throat, and I step toward her, pulling her into my arms. She melts into my embrace, and her body shakes with sobs as she cries.

After kicking the door shut with my foot, I carry Anna over to the sofa. She sits atop my lap, her arms slung over my shoulder and around my neck, her face pressed against my chest. I don’t know what happened, but she’s broken, and my heart pounds with an equal amount of sorrow for my beautiful girl and rage for whoever hurt her.

I have so many questions. My mind races, searching for possible causes for her anguish, but I come up short. I don’t know, and that’s what bothers me the most. I don’t know. Anna has been going through something big, and I haven’t been here for her. Shame engulfs me.

An eternity goes by as Anna continues to cry. All I can do is hold her, rub her back, and kiss her head. After a while, her tears start to abate, and her body slumps against me in exhaustion. I’m desperate for answers, but there are more urgent matters to deal with first.

I slide her off my lap and onto the sofa. She starts to protest, her arm reaching for me. “I’ll be right back,” I reassure her.

Hurrying through the house, I locate a bathroom with a big clawfoot tub and begin running a warm bath. I locate lavender bath salts beneath the sink and add some to the steamy water. While the tub fills, I pull out my phone and order a bunch of food from local eateries and set delivery for an hour. I’m dying to call Miranda, unable to believe I wasn’t given more of a heads-up or even a general briefing of the situation, but Anna has to be my singular focus. The rest will come.

Passing through the kitchen, I fill a glass of water and take it to Anna. “Drink some of this.”

It’s clear from her sunken cheeks that she hasn’t been eating, but her dry, cracked lips indicate she hasn’t been drinking much either. She doesn’t argue, and I’m pleased when she downs the entire glass.

I set the empty glass on the coffee table and take her hand. “Come with me.” We make our way to the bathroom. “I think you’ll feel better after a warm bath and change of clothes. I ordered some food, too. After that, we’ll talk. Okay?”

She grabs my wrist as I turn to leave. “Stay.” Her soft order is the first thing she’s said to me since I arrived, and it breaks my heart a little more.

“Okay.” I nod, giving her a reassuring smile. I start removing one piece of her clothing at a time until she’s bare before me, and I hold her hand as she steps into the bath and sinks into the water.

“Will you join me?” Her weak voice is filled with emotion.

“Are you sure, Anna? I’m happy to wait...”

“Please.” Her voice cracks.

“Okay.” I nod and start removing my clothes.

I climb in behind her so her back is to my front. I grab a sponge that rests by the side of the tub and squirt shower gel onto it. Using the soapy sponge, I lightly wash all the areas I can reach, running the sponge up and down her arms, over her shoulders, across her chest, and against her back.

When I'm finished, I have her lie back to wet her hair and begin washing that. She sighs as I massage my fingers against her scalp, and very slowly, I see her start coming back to me. It's a subtle change, but minute by minute breathes more life into her.

After she's clean, I wrap my arms around her middle and pull her back against me, hugging her tight. I press my lips against her shoulder and hold her. "You're going to be okay."

She doesn't reply, but she pushes back into me and squeezes my arms.

I love this woman so much. At this moment, it becomes very clear to me that what I want most is her happiness. Whether or not she chooses me seems irrelevant. I simply need the color to come back to her cheeks and the light I've grown to love to sparkle once more in her eyes. I need to live in a world where she's okay. I pray I can fix whatever it is that's hurting her.

Goose bumps pebble against her arms as the water runs cold. I trace a finger over her skin. "I think that's our cue to get out."

The food arrives shortly after we've dressed, and we sit beside each other at the table and eat. Anna remains quiet as she picks at her food. Her normal appetite isn't present, but she eats a decent serving.

As I clean up and put the rest of the food away, placing it inside her empty refrigerator, I hold a one-sided conversation just to fill the void. I talk about the guys, my trip here, and comment on California's beautiful weather. I want to slap my own face when the topic of weather surfaces because what is wrong with me? It's lame, but I'm trying. Anna doesn't seem to mind my feeble attempts at conversation.

"Jaden." Anna interrupts a particularly long musing about palm trees, to which I'm

grateful.

“Yeah?”

“My mom died.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

ANNALISE

Jaden hurries over to me and wraps me in a hug. “Oh my gosh, Anna. I’m so sorry.”

That was only the second time I’ve uttered those words. My mom died.

The statement doesn’t seem real. When I told Miranda, it felt like someone other than me was saying those words because how could they be real? She beat cancer years ago. How can something she beat come back for her?

The moment I got the call, my chest tightened, and everything around me blurred. My mind could hardly understand the words. She’s gone. How could she be gone when I never got the chance to say goodbye? In recent years, I barely saw her. She was always too busy for frivolous visits, so I shouldn’t miss her as much as I do. But she was my mother. My only mother. Her absence is loud, and my world feels different. I feel different.

The past month has been the darkest point of my life. One thing after another has broken my heart. One thing after another has pushed me lower than I’ve ever been. I was buried in grief, and I didn’t know how to get out of it. While I know I’m nowhere close to breaking free from it, I can breathe again. Jaden gave me that.

I’m so mad at him, but when he showed up at my door earlier, my heart beat again. I

knew he'd save me because, despite everything, that's what he does. Despite the lies and the women, he knows how to care for me in a way that no one else does. He sees me—all of me. My heart comes alive when he is near. My lungs expand fully in his presence. My soul feels nurtured. I don't want him, but I need him. He's so very flawed, but I can't pretend he's not the one who can get me through this. I hate that I love him, but I love him just the same.

The contents of the folder cast a world of doubts on someone I thought to be incredible, and while he was in no way perfect, he was perfect for me. Now I don't know. The knowledge I gained doesn't match my time with him. My mind has been too dark, and my heart too heavy to deal with my issues with Jaden. At this moment, I'm just glad he's here because I needed him.

“What happened, Anna?” He rubs my back.

I start to feel numb as I recount the details of my time here since returning from Michigan. “She was sick all that time, and they didn't tell me.” Tears start to fall, and it makes me angry. I'm so sick of crying, but there's no stopping them as I tell Jaden the worst part of all. “He didn't let me say goodbye.”

His mouth opens to speak, but he closes it. The expression on his face is one of shock, and I understand because what father doesn't allow his daughter to say goodbye to her mother? There aren't words.

“He said I was a disappointment and I brought shame to her.”

“You know that's not true, Anna. You are amazing. Please believe me when I say that nothing is wrong with you. Something is really wrong with your father.”

“Her too.” I swallow hard. “She ignored my calls for a month. She didn't think I needed to know.” I shrug. “I don't know how parents deprive their daughter of the

most precious thing—time. How could they do that? It's so awful and cruel that I have to wonder if they have a point. Maybe something is really wrong with me, but I just don't see it. My whole life, everything that has gone wrong has been my fault. I was always to blame, never good enough. The sad thing is that since my earliest memory, all I tried to be was good enough."

He takes my hands in his. "Please listen to me and hear me when I tell you that you are good enough. You are the most amazing person I've ever met. You are beautiful, smart, kind, funny, and talented. You love with your whole heart. I don't know your parents, and I'm no expert, but something is really wrong with them. I'm sorry to speak ill of your mother, but that's just not right, Anna. You have to see that."

I sigh. "That's what Miranda says, too."

"Well, Miranda is right."

"It's just that every time I start to believe a different narrative than the one that I was raised with, something else knocks me down and validates everything they've ever said."

"Said about what?"

"About me not being enough."

He shakes his head. "How, Anna?"

"You said you loved me." My voice falls to a whisper.

"I do love you."

"Can you grab that folder on the island?" I point toward the kitchen.

Jaden retrieves the folder and returns to the couch, sitting beside me.

“Open it,” I say.

He does as instructed. The first photo is of his father. “Who is this?”

“Are you serious?” I ask. “Look at the next two pictures.”

He flips through the first three pictures. “Am I supposed to know them? I’m confused.”

“That’s your dad and your grandparents,” I say.

His eyes narrow as he stares at the mug shots. “I don’t know these people, Anna. I’ve never met my father or his parents. Not once. I was raised by my mother, remember? I’m not sure these people are related, but if they are, why does it matter? Whatever they did to end up in jail isn’t on me.”

“What about the rest?”

He flips through the pictures. “Where did you get these?”

“My father. I’m assuming he hired someone to look into you.”

“Why?” he asks.

“To prove to me that I made a mistake in loving you. To show me that I just wanted to embarrass him.”

“He said that? That you dated me to embarrass him?”

I nod.

“Anna, we all have a past. You know you’re not the first woman I’ve been with. If these criminals are indeed related to me and I had known they were in jail, I would’ve told you. I haven’t kept anything from you. I certainly haven’t pretended that no other women have come before you. Why does some woman I went to the beach with three years ago put shade on what we have in any way?”

“Three years ago?”

“Yeah.” He points at himself in the picture. “This was before I went to Japan. I didn’t have my koi tattoo yet. I don’t even remember who this chick was. Probably just someone who wanted a picture with me.”

“These photos aren’t recent?”

“No.” He looks through them. “They’re all old. Your dad’s PI probably got them from the internet or off these girls’ social media or something. Wait...” He looks at me, and realization lights up his eyes. “Did you think I was with other girls after you left?”

“I...”

“Anna...” His head falls back, and he sighs. “I have not so much as looked at another woman since I sat next to you on October first. Why would I tell you I love you and jump into bed with someone else the moment you leave? I can’t believe you thought I’d do that to you. I love you. And if we’re speaking truths here... I thought you were over me. I thought you’d moved on. I didn’t hear from you, so I just assumed. And even then, I couldn’t fathom being with anyone else. Now that I know what it’s like to be with you, I don’t ever want anyone else.”

“Really?” Sorrow lines my voice. I can’t believe I let my father manipulate the situation yet again. After a lifetime with him, I should know his tactics by now. “I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not. Your father’s an asshole.”

My sadness is replaced with fury as it dawns on me that my father used a lie to keep me away from my mother during her last two weeks of life. He robbed me of a goodbye, all in the name of control. He does not love me. He has never loved me. Miranda has been right this whole time. He loves to control me. The only person he cares about in this world is himself. If I’m truly being honest with myself, my mother was the same way. The pair of them used me as a pawn to make themselves look better. When they couldn’t control me, they tore me down until I was so shattered that they could. I wanted so badly to be loved that I convinced myself otherwise. Growing up, I took every awful thing they put me through and found a way to rationalize it to prove to myself that they cared. But they never did.

I’m devastated that my mom’s gone and heartbroken because I didn’t get to say goodbye. As much as I want to hate them both, they’re still my parents. I’ll always hold a space for them in my heart because I’m not them. I love deeply. But I am done. My father’s actions over this past month are unforgivable. I will never let him manipulate or hurt me again.

“I’m such a mess,” I admit with a shake of my head.

“That’s fine. Who isn’t? I love you, Anna. Be my beautiful mess.”

Ever since I received the news that my mother was gone, it’s felt like the ground had disappeared beneath me. I was floating in some awful endless free fall where no one could catch me.

It no longer feels as if I'm falling. Jaden showed up here today, and he caught me. He'll always catch me.

"I'm yours." As the words leave my mouth, I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

JADEN

I seal the last box with packing tape and slap a label on it. Every second that I'm here, I'm actively working on not thinking about the guys or how they're playing. I work especially hard not to think about Miles skating in my position.

I can count on one hand how many practices I've missed, and those were all because I was actively puking with some bug or the last one because I was trying to get the girl before she got on a plane to fly across the country. I have never missed a game. I've played through a hundred-and-three-degree fever and an active bout of puking. One game, I was so sick with food poisoning from a very shady restaurant the night before—if this literal hole-in-the-wall joint can even be classified as a restaurant—and I still played. I had to take breaks to puke, but I still made it back on the ice. I take my profession very seriously.

Coach Albright said he understood and to take the days that I needed. I know the guys are sympathetic as well, but it still kills me. But nothing is more important to me than Anna. She has very quickly become my whole world, and she needs me.

Miranda enters the room. Her auburn hair is up in piggy buns, and her face is makeup-free, making her look younger than usual. "All done?"

"All done. This was the last box," I state.

She rocks up on her heels. “Awesome. That didn’t take too long.”

“Nope. Not bad at all,” I agree.

Anna is leaving all of the furniture and selling it with the house. She said none of it holds any sentimental value. This way, we can choose furniture for our new home together. The movers are coming tomorrow to pick up the dozen boxes or so that contain her clothes and other personal items.

“Where’s Anna?” I ask.

“She is trying to decide between two almost identical black dresses for tomorrow. She’s tried them both on about five times.” She shrugs.

“Well, it’s something she has control over. I know she’s anxious about tomorrow.”

“I know. Exactly. I just can’t wait until the funeral is over so we can get out of here.”

“So you’re really moving to Michigan? Aren’t you going to miss the palm trees, ocean, and beautiful weather? You are flying back to cold and snow.” I chuckle.

“I can always visit warm places, but no, I’m not going to miss it here. Anna is my only family. Where she goes, I go.”

“She’s lucky to have you.”

Miranda’s eyes well with tears. “I’m lucky to have her. I don’t know if Anna has told you, but I literally wouldn’t be here without her, and by here, I mean on this earth. She was there for me during a very dark time when we were kids. She’s the best person I know.”

“No.” I shake my head. “She hasn’t told me.”

Miranda swallows. “Well, there’s enough sadness around here. That’s a story for another day. Anyway.” She sighs. “I feel like I’m missing something.” She starts ticking items off on her fingers. “Movers are coming tomorrow. Everything is set with the real estate agent. Everything else work-wise we can take care of remotely. Right? It just seems like there should be more to do when moving across the country.”

“I’m sure you’ve remembered everything. You always do. But you’re right; most things can be handled online. Not many things have to be handled in person anymore. You donated her car yesterday. Anything else you need to do with that?”

“Nope. It’s going to a low-income single mother. All that paperwork has been signed.”

“That’s really great.”

“Yeah, she’s going to need a car with four-by-four and power to drive in the snow anyway, so it made sense. Not that she really drives herself that much, anyway. Her car was two years old and had hardly any miles on it.”

I pick up the box and stack it on top of another to clear some space. “The offer still stands. You can live with us. We have plenty of rooms.”

“No. I need my own space. I love Anna, and it’s great that I get to spend my days with my best friend, but at night, I want solitude. I like watching my shows and eating what I want in my own place. You know?”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“What about this one?” Anna comes into the room wearing a black dress. “There are no underlying whore vibes, are there?”

“And if there was?” Miranda stands tall and crosses her arms.

Anna shakes her head. “You’re totally right. Who cares what a certain someone thinks? Not me!”

Miranda claps her hands together. “That’s the spirit!”

“To answer your question, unfortunately, no... there are no whore vibes. It’s completely sophisticated. Not a slit of cleavage in sight.” I walk over to her and pull her into a hug, kissing her forehead.

She wraps her arms around me. “Thank you. I think I’m going to wear this one, then. It’s crazy to think that this is my last night here. Tomorrow night, I will be a Michi...”

“Gander. A Michigander,” I say.

“I like it.”

“Me too.”

Miranda takes a step toward us. “Well, now that we’re all packed up and the outfit decision has been made, I say we order some food. Should we go out with a bang and order Manuel’s empanadas one last time?”

Anna’s face lights up. “Oh my goodness. Yes!” She takes a step back from our embrace. “Manuel has this Cuban eatery a few miles away. He makes the best Cuban food, though the empanadas are the best. They come with this cilantro crème sauce

that's to die for."

"Yeah," Miranda chimes in. "All of his dishes are made from his grandma's original recipes."

Anna looks at Miranda. "It will be nice to say goodbye to him, too. He's one of the few people I'm going to miss around here."

"Agreed." Miranda taps her chin. "Oh, there's Angela from Romano's. Her lasagna is..." She kisses the tips of her fingers. "Chef's kiss."

"Brooklyn and Stevie, our favorite servers from Los Tres Amigos!" Anna exclaims.

"Four-eyed Louis from Sushi Nation," Miranda adds.

"Pippi and Freddy from Al's Pizza," Anna says.

"Oh." Miranda holds a hand to her chest. "Benito from Asian Nation. I'm going to miss him so much!"

"He is the best." Anna pouts out her bottom lip. "Oh! Jen-Jen, Frankie, and Bean from Mama Mia's Tacos, Pizza, and More."

Miranda shakes her head. "No, remember Jen-Jen switched over to Bubba's Burrito's on the corner by the Coffee Hut, and Frankie moved to San Diego with Ben. So only Bean is left at Mama Mia's."

"You're right. I totally forgot, and we haven't even tried Bubba's Burrito's yet." Anna stomps her foot against the floor.

"Time-out." I hit the tips of my fingers against the palm of my other in the classic

time-out motion. “I have so many questions. First, are all of your ‘friends,’”—I use air quotes on the last word—“employees at your favorite restaurants? Why do you call your friend Louis four-eyed? And Mama Mia specializes in tacos and pizza? What’s the more? Sushi? I am so confused.”

Anna and Miranda exchange amused grins. “First of all,” Anna says. “I’m not digging the air quotes, my love.”

“I’m just saying. Are these friends like Bethy from the Italian place is a friend?” I ask.

“Hey.” Anna pins me with a serious stare. “Bethy is a friend. We have history. To answer the rest the four-eyed thing started as a joke of some sort. Something funny happened. Right?” she asks Miranda.

“Yeah. It was funny, and the name stuck, but I don’t remember what happened exactly.” Miranda purses her lips.

“Me either. Anyway.” Anna returns her attention to me. “The more at Mama Mia’s changes by the week. Sometimes it’s sandwiches. Sometimes it’s pasta. Oh, remember pierogi week?” she asks Miranda. “That was good.”

“Oh my gosh, you’re so right. Pierogi week was amazing.” Miranda answers.

“Was there another question?” Anna asks.

I shrug. “Honestly, I can’t remember. But answer this. Is there anyone in this city you’ll miss who doesn’t work at a food joint?”

She looks at Miranda and then back at me. “I don’t think so,” she says.

“That’s what I thought.” I chuckle. “So let’s go meet your bestie Manuel. I haven’t had a good empanada in a long time.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

ANNALISE

I t's been three months since my mother passed and almost as long since I spoke to my father. In my heart, they both died on that day. I had to grieve both of my parents because having my father in my life was no longer an option. He's never been good for me. Now that I finally see it, I'm putting my happiness and the happiness of those I love first.

My father and I shared a few civilized exchanges, seeing that we had an audience, at my mother's funeral, and that was the last time we've had any contact. The funeral was as beautiful as one can be. I had no question my father would make it a gala to remember. When others' judgments are at stake, no expense is spared. Oddly enough, the funeral wasn't one of the worst days of my life. It was sad to say goodbye to my parents. Death is never easy. With Jaden at my side, it was bearable. In a weird way, it felt cathartic because I knew it was the final step until I broke free.

I've since sold my place in LA. Jaden and I bought a gorgeous house here in Michigan, a few miles away from the arena and close to all of his teammates. We picked it out and decorated it together, and when I'm here, I'm completely at peace. I'm home. Of course, anywhere Jaden is will always be home for me. My oasis has one flaw, and it's the weather. This Cali girl has yet to warm to the cold, snow, and ice of a Michigan winter. Jaden reassures me that I'll get used to it, but I highly doubt I will. I suppose nothing is perfect.

I've been seeing a therapist twice a week and attending support groups for children of narcissists. Apparently, these groups are a thing, and not only that, they're surprisingly well-attended. All these years of feeling hopeless, never knowing I was living under a veil of abuse. So many of my life decisions and behaviors make sense to me now.

I still love everything about my craft and have no intention of giving it up now that I've moved away from Hollywood. Ideally, I want to find a project I can produce and direct here in Michigan so I can be close to home. Jaden assures me that no matter where my career leads me, we'll figure it out, and I believe him. The main difference in me is that I'm no longer afraid. I'm living a life surrounded by hope and love—real love—and it's pretty incredible.

I eye the large framed selfie of Jaden and me from our first date at the apple orchard. It's displayed above our bed. In the corner of the frame beneath the glass is the four-leaf clover I found. Every time I look at the picture, I smile. When he snapped the selfie, I remember thinking no way would there be a second date, but at least he had a photo to remember our singular outing by. There was never anything wrong with Jaden. I was always the problem, too wrapped up in my insecurities. He was handsome, charming, and sweet from the start. He's been a constant in my life since I first met him. I was emotionally closed off while chasing some faux sense of security that would never be found.

Grateful doesn't fully grasp what I feel when I think of Jaden's persistence. My constant rejection could've shattered his ego. He could've easily moved on and found happiness with another woman. Yet he remained steady, sure that I was the one for him, and I'm so damn fortunate he did. I guess a four-leaf clover brings luck after all.

The front door opens and closes, indicating Jaden's return from practice. "Babe!" he calls out.

“In the bedroom,” I call back. I’m standing in front of a full-length mirror wearing nothing but a tiny pair of black satin panties, a matching bra, and a lacy garter belt holding up a pair of thigh-high pantyhose with clips. Jaden is picking up my dress from the dry cleaners on his way home.

He steps into the room. “I have your dre... what the fuck, babe.” His mouth falls open, and he tosses the plastic garment bag containing my dress onto the chair. He makes it over to me in two big strides and smooths his hands down my sides. “You are the hottest woman I have ever seen.”

Standing behind me, he takes in our reflection in the mirror. “How much time do we have?”

“Not enough.” My grin fades as he circles his arms around me and trails his fingers over the swell of my breasts.

He moves my hair to the side and presses soft kisses over my shoulder, all the while keeping an eye on me in the mirror. “How long?” his hot breath whispers against my skin.

“An hour, max,” I groan as he slides his hands into the front of my bra and twists and tugs at my nipples.

“So. Much. Time,” he says between kisses as his lips make their way up my neck and to the base of my ear.

I sigh as he removes his fingers from my bra and trails them down my sides, goose bumps appearing in their wake. “But I’ve already showered and...” My protest decreases in volume until it diminishes altogether.

“Okay, well... tell me when to stop.” His fingers slide under the front lace of my

panties, tickling my delicate skin. I stare into the mirror, holding his gaze as he kisses down the side of my body, following the path of his fingers.

He kneels behind me, hooks a finger under the band at the top of my pantyhose, and snaps it against my skin. “You should wear these every day. They look amazing on you, but then everything does.” His hands slide back up and find the waistband of my panties. “But just for fun, let’s see what these look like a little lower.” He shimmies them down until they’re around my thighs, leaving me exposed.

Pushing my leg to the side, he widens my stance and slips a hand through my thighs from behind, still watching every move I make through the mirror’s reflection.

I reach my arm out to the wall beside me to steady myself as one, then two fingers slide inside me. “Should I stop?” His fingers move in and out of me.

I shake my head, unable to get a word out as a euphoria of sensations finds me.

He places two fingers from his free hand in his mouth, wetting them. Circling his hand around my thigh, he slides his wet fingers between my legs to find my bundle of nerves. He deliciously fucks me with one hand while the other rubs me into a frenzy. I begin to moan and clamp my eyes shut as my legs start to shake.

“Anna, baby. Open your eyes. Look at me.”

I do as instructed and hold Jaden’s stare as he works me higher. His mouth falls open to accommodate his heavy breaths, and his expression is carnal with desire. His fingers pump harder and cry out, the sensations exquisite.

“You are so beautiful, Anna. I love the way you fall apart at my touch. Look at you,” he growls.

My skin is flushed with patches of pink, and my expression looks pained from pleasure. I cover Jaden's hand with my own as he pushes me over the edge. His fingers thrust deeper as an orgasm hits. My head falls back between my shoulders, unable to hold the connection, and I cry out as I fall over into ecstasy.

As my twitching muscles slow, he leads me to our bed, splays a hand across my back, and pushes my front against the bed. Feet on the floor, he nudges them as wide as they can go with my underwear still around my thighs. He frees himself from his jeans before he slams into me from behind. I rock forward on the bed and fist the duvet cover as he pounds deep inside me. My cheek against the bed, my eyes clamped shut, I'm still boneless as I relish the feeling of him inside me. He slams into me again and again. The room is filled with the sound of our skin slapping together and our lusty moans.

He grabs my ass, pulling my body back against his.

"Touch yourself, Anna." His voice is strained, and I know he's close.

I slide a hand between my legs and rub my sensitive mound. In a matter of seconds, the warm, tingling sensation in my body crescendos, and a wave of pleasure erupts. Jaden moans as we find our release together.

He pulls out of me and plops onto the bed. "God, I love you."

"I love you, too."

I roll over on my back and thread my fingers through Jaden's.

"Are you excited for today?" he asks.

"Yeah, I am. I hope it's as wonderful of a movie as I think it is. It felt great while

filming. You just never know how it may change in editing.”

“It’s going to be great. I know it. The editors would have to really suck to make it anything less than amazing.” He squeezes my hand. “I saw one of your scenes after all, and it gave me chills.”

“Even if I sucked, you’d never tell me.” I chuckle.

“True, I wouldn’t. But I’m serious when I tell you it will be amazing.”

I release his hand and roll to my side, propping my head up. “I’m good. If it’s amazing, great. If it sucks, I’m okay with that, too. I know I did the best job I could. The rest is out of my hands.”

“Good attitude. When we get back from the premiere, can we recreate the motorcycle scene?”

I laugh and smack his chest. “There isn’t a motorcycle scene in this movie.”

“I know, but I still want to recreate it.” He pouts out his lip, causing me to smile.

“You don’t even have a motorcycle.”

“True. I could borrow one.”

“No.” I roll my eyes. “I’m not recreating the motorcycle scene. That scene haunts me. I swear if I go to hell, it will be me sitting in a room watching that scene over and over.”

This time, Jaden laughs. “You’re way too good to go to hell.”

I point a finger toward him. “Yeah, we’ll see. Mention a motorcycle again, and I might just lose it.”

“Fine. I have an idea for another role-play type of scene. It will be better than the scene not to be mentioned, too. You’ll find out tonight.”

“I can hardly wait.” I shake my head and stand from the bed.

“Am I sensing a little attitude?” He sits up and raises a brow.

I take his face between my hands. “Yes, because I now have to go shower again.”

“But it was worth it... yeah?”

“Yeah.” I kiss him. “It’s worth it.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

JADEN

Tonight is one of those milestones that makes me feel like Anna and I are a real couple. It sounds silly because, obviously, we are. But every day I wake up with her at my side, I still can't believe it. It's surreal. More than the attraction, fun dates, and intimate times—relationships are going through it all together. We're celebrating an important day in her life together tonight, and I feel so privileged to do so.

We've become insanely close since her mother's passing a few months ago. Late nights have been spent engrossed in deep conversations as we've shared and grown together. It's crazy to think that after filming wrapped and we spent her last night together, she couldn't commit to more and was so unsure. So much has changed.

Anna's upbringing wasn't easy, particularly her relationship with her parents. She's had a lot to unpack over that situation, and I've been happy to be her sounding board. She's made me address my abnormal relationship with my mother, too. It's easier to pinpoint the problems with Anna's parents because they have clear, diagnosable issues. I don't know what's wrong with my mother or our inability to connect to be honest. We're simply not close. We love each other and want the best for one another, but we don't have a tight bond. I feel like I've tried to get to know my mother over the years, and our relationship hasn't improved. Honestly, I've accepted it. Maybe it will change. Perhaps it won't. But I'm happy regardless. I have an amazing family and support system with the Crane organization. While my mother

turned down an invitation to tonight's festivities, all of my teammates and most of their parents accepted.

My relationship with Anna has further driven home my philosophy to love those who love me with an unmatched ferocity. And for everyone else—those who don't want me in their lives, I wish them well, but I can't allow them to make me feel less than because I have more than enough in this life.

The limo pulls up to the drop-off area at the end of the red carpet.

"You ready?" I ask Anna. She nods and gives me a reassuring smile. "You look incredible."

"Thank you." She leans in for a kiss. "So do you."

I flick the lapels of my fancy tuxedo. "Yeah, I clean up pretty nice." I slide my hand up the long slit in Anna's tight black dress until I reach the clips of her garter belt.

"No." She shakes her head with a chuckle. "Absolutely not."

"What?" I feign innocence. "I just wanted to remind myself of their presence so I could imagine you wearing nothing but your undergarments."

"You don't have to imagine." She squeezes my cheeks and plants a chaste kiss on my lips. "You got to see everything under this dress a couple of hours ago. I know your memory isn't that bad."

"I'm sorry. Can I help it that I find it really hard to keep my hands off you?" I curve my hand around her inner thigh.

She grabs my wrist and pulls it down. "That's fine. I love your hands on me. Just

keep it PG. There will be lots of cameras, and I don't want an indecent photo taking away from the PR for the movie."

I place a finger beneath her chin and tilt her head up. Her gaze meets mine. "I know, babe. I would never do anything to jeopardize your career. You know that. I am so proud of you. You look stunning. The movie is going to be incredible. Tonight is going to be fun. Enjoy it. I'm just grateful to be on your arm." I kiss her softly, and she releases a sigh.

"Let's do this," she says.

The driver opens the door to the limo, and I step out onto the red carpet. I extend my hand to Anna and assist her out of the limo. She straightens her dress and fixes her hair.

"My lipstick is good?" she questions.

"Perfect. You are absolutely perfect."

I take her hand, and we make our way onto the carpet. I'm instantaneously enveloped in a dazzling whirlwind of excitement. I love the movies, and to be here at a movie premiere with the love of my life feels incredibly surreal. Photographers stand in a line behind a velvet rope, calling Anna's name. Flashes seem to come from every direction as cameras click. It all feels very glamorous, and I have to remind myself that we're in Michigan.

Anna expressed concern about traveling back to LA for the premiere of her new movie. So I met with Penny, Iris, and Miranda to see if there was anything we could do. Penny and Iris are phenomenal event planners, and I quickly found out that Miranda can make anything happen because the three of them managed to get the premiere moved here. The cast of the movie enjoyed their time filming here and

needed very little encouragement to return.

The setup is gorgeous. Fancy golden heaters line the carpet, so the walk across the carpet is pleasant despite the cold temperatures. Large golden vases set along the carpet hold hundreds of white lilies. It's all very Hollywood and extremely beautiful.

Anna and I position ourselves in front of the movie backdrop and stand as a couple, posing for the cameras. Photographers call out instructions, but I'm honestly blinded by all the flashes to know where to look.

"Alright, baby. Just you now. This is your moment." She squeezes my hand and smiles.

I retreat from the sea of flashes, stepping back as Anna poses for the cameras, a wide smile on my face. She truly is the most beautiful woman in the world, and she's mine.

"She looks good." Simon Blackwood steps up beside me.

"She looks fucking great," I correct him. "You should step in and get some shots with her."

"True." Anna's costar joins her, and the pair smile for the cameras.

Once we move past the crowd of photographers, we're met with a line of entertainment reporters holding microphones with a video camera behind them. I stand beside Anna as she graciously answers one question after the next with complete sophistication. She talks about the movie and the true story behind it, how it was important to make, and the value she thinks it will bring. I'm literally in awe and so proud of her.

After the cast has made their way across the carpet, the guys from the team and their

dates start to arrive. It's our first movie premiere, and we've all gone all out.

Miles, our resident Mr. Hollywood, shows up in a golden polyester suit with his parents on his arms as his dates.

"Oh my God." I chuckle. "You look straight out of Saturday Night Fever," I tell him.

"Right?" He does a flashy turn on his heel that ends with his hip cocked to the side and a finger pointing toward the red carpet. His mother claps at his side, her expression full of pride. "It's a movie that takes place in the seventies. I know how to do a theme."

"He looks good," his father says proudly. Miles has told us stories of his father's love of cinema and the times they've spent bonding over movies. It's really cool that they're here.

Tonight will be something every guy on the team is going to remember for a long time.

Cade and Iris and Gunner and Penny show up in the same limo, both pairs looking incredible. They stop briefly for photos and hurry over toward us. Anna squeals and extends her hands to squeeze Penny's and Iris's.

"This is all so pretty. I can't even tell we're not in Cali. It's warm, and the flowers are all so tropical," Anna gushes.

"Yeah, the flower arrangements turned out so pretty," Penny says. "The tropical feel is a nice little preview of our week to come. There's a cold front coming tomorrow, and it's supposed to be fifteen degrees below zero."

"Oh my gosh, Hawaii is coming at a perfect time. I don't know if I could survive

negative fifteen,” Anna says in all seriousness.

I know how much she hates the cold. Her comment makes me laugh. “You’ll get used to it.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think I will, but I’ll suffer through Michigan winters for you.” She wraps her hand around my arm.

“Hawaii is a welcome reprieve for us all,” Penny says. “I’ve lived here my whole life, and I’m still not used to the cold, so you’re not alone.”

The team’s yearly bye week starts today. It’s a league-prescribed week of rest from training and games halfway through the season. It’s something we look forward to every year. We usually rent a mansion in a warmer climate, and the guys and their guests party the entire week. Every year is different, unpredictable, and a blast. This year, our chosen location is Hawaii. It’s going to be the best one yet because I’ll have Anna there with me.

Anna looks at Iris and then Penny. “Well, seriously... thank you so much for doing all this for me. It’s truly incredible, and I’m so grateful.”

“It was a blast,” Iris exclaims. “This was more fun than any Crane party we’ve planned, no offense,” she says to her husband, Cade.

“None taken,” he replies with a grin. “We haven’t even made it inside, and it’s definitely more fun.”

“The whole theater is ours,” Penny states. “The lobby has been transformed into an elegant dining experience, so after the movie, we can eat and talk about how great it was.”

Anna steeples her hands together and presses them to her lips. “God, I hope it’s good.”

“It’s going to be great,” Iris says. “Hey, where is Miranda? I mean, Penny and I helped, but she’s the one who made this all happen. She’s amazing.”

“I know. Isn’t she?” Anna beams. “She’s inside making sure everything is perfect, of course. Speaking of, we should probably get inside.” She looks at me.

We exchange a soft-edged smile. “Let’s do this.” I extend my elbow, and Anna loops her arm through.

The interior of the theater has had a Hollywood makeover, feeling as glitzy and glamorous as the red carpet. We’re guided to our guest of honor seats as the rest of the cast, crew, film critics, and invited guests are led to their seats.

We chat with our friends seated around us as the servers deliver food and beverages. The director stands at the front of the theater with a few of the producers and talks for a few minutes about what it meant for him to make this movie. He gives a shout-out to the cast, Anna especially. When his speech is over, we take our seats, and the lights dim.

The movie is two hours and twenty minutes of greatness, and I don’t say that just because I’m sleeping with the star. It’s a fantastic movie. It’s one of those films that make you think, but unlike some artsy type films, it carries a message while telling a really enjoyable story. It’s incredible, and Anna’s performance was mesmerizing.

The premiere goes off without a hitch. Everyone in attendance loved the movie. We enjoy food and drinks afterward and have an amazing time.

“Do you want me to retrieve the gift?” Miranda pulls me aside as Anna chats with her

costars.

“No.” My gaze stays locked on Anna. “I don’t want to pull focus from her night. Look at her.”

“Yeah.” Miranda smiles. “She’s so happy. She deserves this. For what it’s worth, I don’t think you would pull focus.”

“Nah, I’ll give it to her when we’re home. I thought this would be a great setting, but I think at home with just the two of us will be better. Do you mind putting it in our limo for me?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you so much, Miranda. I really appreciate it.” Anna’s best friend really is terrific at everything. I went to her with my idea, and she made everything happen.

“Of course. I’m a little bummed I won’t see her open it, but I’m sure she’ll tell me all about it,” she says.

“Oh, I have no doubt she will.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

ANNALISE

I 'm floating. At least it feels like it. I can't feel my feet as I step into my house with the best boyfriend in the world coming in behind me. Is this what unadulterated, guilt-free happiness feels like? Had I known this level of euphoria existed, I would've faced my demons and cut out my father years ago.

I've never experienced a premiere without his dark presence casting a shadow of melancholy and doubt over the whole event. I've never left a premiere thinking about all the parts of the project I was proud of instead of what I could've done better. I honestly think I'm experiencing true happiness for the first time in my life.

Entering the house, I extend my arms out to my sides and spin into the foyer, causing Jaden to laugh.

"Happy?" He chuckles.

"So happy. What an incredible night." I throw my arms around him.

I release a contented sigh, the adrenaline of the night seemingly dispersing with the expelled air because, in a matter of seconds, tears wrack my body as I sob against his tuxedo. In an instant, I went from flying on cloud nine to an emotional basket case.

“Hey.” Jaden runs his hands over my hair. “It’s okay.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” I swipe at my tears. “I don’t know why I’m crying. I’m happy.”

We exchange a knowing look. “That’s why you’re crying, babe. You’re happy.”

He’s right. I’m overwhelmed with joy. It’s intense.

“I’ve never been this happy. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop or something, I guess. My body’s in shock that nothing horrible happened tonight. It was perfect.” I raise my hand and cup his cheek. “You made it perfect.”

He kisses my forehead. “That’s all you.”

My tears of relief cease, and I take a step back, noticing a long black box wrapped in a golden ribbon in Jaden’s hand. “Hey, what’s that?”

“It’s a present.”

“For me?” I splay my hand across my chest and give Jaden a coy smile.

“Who else?” He quirks a brow. “But maybe we should wait.”

“Until my emotions are regulated?”

“Perhaps,” he teases.

“Gimme.” I hold out my hands, wagging my fingers.

He takes my hand and leads me to the living room, and motions for me to have a seat

on the sofa.

“Oh, this is a serious gift,” I say.

He places the long, rectangular box in my lap. I pull the ribbon, untying the bow, and pull the top off the box. A huge smile comes to my face. “You got me my own Oscar?” I pull the golden man from the padded silk holder inside the box.

“I think you should have one. We don’t know what the Academy will do or who they will vote for, but I want you to know that, to me, you are the absolute best there is. I truly mean that.”

I hold the golden statue to my chest. “Thank you. You are so sweet.”

“Now, unscrew the bottom,” he says as he gets on his knee before me.

“What?” I twist the base of the statue and gasp when it loosens. I turn it a couple of times until the top of the statue separates from the bottom. Atop the base of the statue that was moments ago hidden within the golden Oscar is a diamond ring. “Jaden!” I bring a hand to my mouth.

He takes the ring from its holder, and I set the pieces of the Oscar onto the sofa as he holds the ring out to me. “Annalise Grace Sterling, I first fell for you the moment I saw you on screen years ago. You weren’t just a beautiful actress in a movie. You were someone special, and I felt it soul deep. When I finally got to meet you and get to know you, I was so grateful to find that you were the person I always knew you’d be. I know we haven’t been together long, and we don’t have to rush into a wedding, but I want to wake up every day for the rest of my life knowing that you’re mine and I’m yours. I feel as if I was put on this earth to love you and only you. No one will ever love you as much as I do. I promise to make you feel loved, cherished, and supported every single day of our lives. Anna, will you marry me?”

New tears roll down my cheeks, and I make no effort to stop them. “Oh my gosh. Yes, Jaden! Yes!” I throw my arms around him and tackle him to the ground.

He laughs. “Wait. I need to put the ring on your finger.”

“Oh yeah.” I sit up, resting on my knees, and hold out my left hand. Jaden slides the ring onto my ring finger. “It’s so beautiful. It’s perfectly me.”

“I thought it was, but I ran it by Miranda, just in case. I didn’t want to mess it up. She agreed that it was perfect. She actually helped me find someone to make the Oscar guy with the spin-off bottom ring holder, too. The girl literally has a person for everything.”

I chuckle. “She does. It’s part of what makes her so great at her job.”

He continues. “I was going to propose at the premiere tonight, but it was so perfect, and you were so happy and in your element. I decided to wait, wanting the night to be about you and the movie.”

How could this man be any more wonderful? “I love you, Jaden.” I hold out my hand, staring at my ring. “I never thought I’d be here, but I’m so happy I am.”

We face one another, kneeling on our living room floor. He takes my face in his hands and pulls it toward him. Our lips meet, and everything else fades away. The past, the future—all the joy and all the sorrow. Everything vanishes, and it’s as if Jaden and I are the only two people in the world. The kiss starts as a gentle touch, soft and tender. His lips caress mine, sending a warm shiver down my spine. At this moment, nothing matters to me but Jaden. My heart races, and I’m lost in the sensation. The way our mouths move together and our tongues dance gives me life. It feels like two halves of a soul coming together in perfect harmony. Our kisses are addictive, and the bliss that engulfs me, knowing I’ll always have this in my life, is an

all-consuming inferno. The engagement—his words—were beautiful but this kiss holds a universe of emotion, saying more than words ever could. It speaks to a forever I never knew was possible but one I'm so happy I found.

Forever.

Jaden is mine forever.

More than just love, I feel safe and protected. For someone who's never known the peace that comes with feeling whole, who has never had someone love her enough to put her first—I'm so much more than in love with this man.

I want to give Jaden my mind, body, and soul. With significant effort, I pull my mouth from his. "Let's go to bed."

He kisses the tip of my nose. "I love the plan."

We stand from the floor, and Jaden picks up the two pieces of the statue from the sofa. He screws on the base and, statue in hand, gives me a look—one that causes me to stop in my tracks.

Oh no. "In the limo. You said you had a sexual experience that you were excited to play out with me tonight."

"Uh-huh." He bites his bottom lip.

I hold a finger out. "If that statue has anything to do with it, I'm going to lose my mind."

"He's very phallically shaped, and I'm quite sure he'd feel good exploring certain places." Jaden shakes the statue back and forth, giving me a devilish smile.

I snatch the golden statue from him. Walking over to the fireplace, I place him on the mantel. “Little Oscar is staying out here, and I’m going to pretend that you didn’t just suggest we use him as a sex toy.”

“Anna, it could be...”

I hurry toward him and place my finger on his lips. “Don’t finish it.” I shake my head. “I appreciate the attempt at adventure, but the vessel that held the most stunning ring I’ve ever seen, the ring that is a symbol of our forever, will not be inserted anywhere. Got it? And because I love you so much and because you have made me the happiest woman in the world, and because I want to make love to my new fiancé until I can barely walk—I’m going to forget you ever mentioned it. Deal?”

He laughs. “Deal. I like the until you can’t walk comment.”

“I thought you would.”

I take his hand and lead my fiancé into our bedroom, where I intend on making good on my promise.

CHAPTER

THIRTY

JADEN

Anna's long blond hair cascades over the satin pillowcase. She lies naked on her side, her perfect body covered by a sheet. Her left hand is splayed atop the pillow, showcasing her ring, and I'm instantly hard—again. I don't know what I did in another life to deserve this one.

At our bye week in Texas a year ago, I was sleeping with a stripper of whom I can no longer remember the name of and watching Anna on the big screen. I was content with being a single man-whore for the rest of my life. I didn't see a life where I'd want to settle down with one woman forever. I lusted after Anna, like anyone lusts after a movie star they don't know, but I never thought marriage—even with Anna—would ever be an option.

I didn't see a point in marriage for me. Because I'd never loved someone the way in which I love her.

It's hard to fantasize about spending the rest of your life with someone until you find the person with whom you want to spend the rest of your life. Then you just know.

We've had a fantastic week in Hawaii. Anna gets along with the guys and their families as if she's always been a part of it.

We've spent our days exploring the island—snorkeling, hiking through the tropical forests to find waterfalls, surfing, swimming in the ocean, and lying on the beach. We've participated in numerous competitions with the guys because everyone here loves to compete. We've eaten the best food and stayed up late laughing until our sides ached. And, like tonight, we've made love until we passed out from exhaustion.

It's, hands down, the best bye week I've ever had.

"Anna." I shake her arm gently to wake her.

She stretches and blinks her eyes in confusion. "What's up?"

"Put something on. We're having a watch party downstairs."

She sits up, scooting up against the headboard. Cocking her head to the side, she asks, "What do you mean?"

"It's the day. Everyone is downstairs and ready to watch the announcements with you."

She fists the sheets in her hands and holds them to her chin. Shaking her head back and forth, she whines, "No. No, Jaden. I don't want to do this."

"Come on," I urge. "It will be fun. Whether you're nominated or not, we're proud of you."

Laughter and cheers can be heard from downstairs, and she eyes the door. "It's their vacation. They did not all get up at five thirty in the morning to watch Oscar announcement coverage. That's not cool. They should be sleeping in."

I chuckle. "Coverage starts at five thirty California time. It's three thirty in the

morning here, so to be fair, most of them haven't gone to bed yet. Come on," I urge gently. "Everyone's really excited."

"Jaden. This is a lot of pressure."

I climb into bed with her and pull her against me. Hugging her, I rub her back. "Babe. We love you and support you whether you get nominated or not. But you know there have been rumors, and if they're correct, we want to celebrate your nomination. It's a big deal."

"Those rumors aren't reliable."

"Worst case. You're not nominated and we yell slurs at the TV at those who are."

She laughs. "No, most of them probably deserve the nomination."

"Okay, fine. Then you tell us which ones to hate."

"Deal. Okay, let me put some clothes on." She sighs.

A few minutes later, we've made it downstairs. Everyone hoots and hollers for Anna, and her cheeks flush.

"You all better keep this same energy whether I'm nominated or not," she shouts across the big open space and is met with more cheers.

"You haven't missed anything. They've only announced ones that no one cares about, like lighting and costumes and shit," Logan informs us.

"No nominations for any of those?" Anna asks.

“No, despite the on-the-nose seventies attire, your movie failed to acquire a costume nomination,” Miles says.

Anna shrugs. “That’s fine. Our costume department was kind of rude.”

“They really were.” Miranda chuckles. “The head of costume looked like she hit her prime in the seventies and should be retired. She kept yelling at the cast for getting lint all over the costumes.”

Anna continues the story. “When the whole time the lint was coming from this fuzzy sweater she insisted on wearing on set every day.”

“Because she was cold and hated Michigan, but it’s like, come on, spring for a different sweater, lady.” Miranda shakes her head.

“Was her name Anita something?” Iris asks.

“It sure was,” Miranda replies.

Iris grins. “Yeah, she RSVPed to the premiere with a very adamant no. Said she wanted nothing to do with it if it was in Michigan.”

Miranda scrunches her nose. “Good. She was not missed.”

The nominations continue, and everyone follows Anna’s lead on whether we’re to cheer or boo the nominees. It’s hilarious, really. We don’t know shit about the happenings on the TV, well, save for Miles. The rest of us couldn’t tell you if someone was talented or not. But we have loyalty to spare. Once you’re in with us, we’re ride or die and in your corner, rooting for you always.

I’m not sure why the academy announces Oscar nominations so early in the morning,

but it makes for hilarious commentary from this crew, who are mostly drunk and exhausted after a long day in the Hawaiian sun.

We finally reach the Actress in a Leading Role category, and the room goes silent as the man and woman read this year's nominations.

To say we go insane when Annalise Sterling is announced is an understatement. Everyone in this room jumps and cheers and circles Anna in a rowdy group hug.

My girl is nominated for an Oscar, something she has dreamed about her whole life. I'm not remotely surprised. She deserves it.

She deserves the world.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

ANNALISE

As the hot water rolls down my body, I can only pray that this hotel has amazing coffee. My exhaustion is soul deep. I am currently running on adrenaline and love. The Cranes had five road games this week, and I attended every one. Jaden urged me to stay home and relax in preparation for today, but I love being there for him. It fuels me.

I won't always be able to attend all of Jaden's games. Life will happen, and I'll be kept away with other projects or maybe children. I'm aware that this snapshot of time in our lives is fleeting, and I want to soak in every second of it. Right now, I'm a hundred percent committed to spending every day with my fiancé. Exhaustion be damned.

Besides, this sleepy haze will pass. It always does because life with Jaden is exhilarating. It's just hitting extra hard this morning because we got very little sleep last night. We flew into LA on a private jet after the Cranes win in Toronto last night. When my head was finally able to hit the pillow, sleep was on strike as my brain thought about today.

Do I want to hold that golden statue in my hand? Sure. What actor would say otherwise? However, is it as important as I used to think it was? Not at all. Winning an Oscar was always the barometer on which I measured my worth. Both of my

parents won one, and I saw their golden statues displayed in our mansion my whole life. I was desperate for their approval and love. In my twisted mind, I thought winning one would finally earn me the validation I had always sought. But I know now that it won't. Nothing could've made my relationship with my parents the way I wanted it to be because they weren't capable of loving me.

I've been hit with a plethora of truth over the past several months, which hasn't been easy, but it has helped me find true happiness. Regardless of what happens tonight, I'm flying back home contented, and that's pretty incredible.

The shower door opens, and a very naked Jaden steps in behind me. "Hey, babe. Breakfast is here, and the coffee smells incredible."

"Oh, good. I was just dreaming about it."

He stands behind me, his front to my back, and wraps his arms around my middle. He kisses my shoulder. "When is your stylist going to be here?"

"About two hours."

"So much time." He nibbles at my skin.

I laugh. "So little energy."

"So what I'm hearing you say is that you could use a little pick-me-up?" He traces light circles across my abdomen and moves his hands up until he's cupping my breasts. He massages, tugs, and twists at my delicate skin.

I release a sigh into the steamy air and lean my body back into his, my head resting on his collarbone. "Two seconds ago, I would've said no. But color me intrigued."

He chuckles. “Oh, please. You’ve yet to say no.”

Lifting an arm, I wrap it around his neck and pull his mouth to mine while his hands continue to tease my nipples. “I might this time,” I tease, my lips against his. “You better convince me.”

“Well, you know that’s my favorite thing to do.” He captures my mouth with his and kisses me senseless.

All traces of exhaustion vanish the second his tongue touches mine, leaving hot, pulsating need in its wake.

“Oh,” I groan. “I need you.”

Jaden’s chest rumbles with a laugh. “I haven’t done anything to convince you yet. I have moves.”

“Oh, I know you do, and they’re amazing. But right now, I just want you inside me.”

“Fuck, I can’t argue with that.” He pushes me toward the shower wall, my back against the warm tiles. Hiking one of my legs up and over his forearm, he holds it out to the side, opening me wide for him. He impales me, thrusting in deep, my heel lifting from the shower floor.

“Yes,” I moan.

He takes me again and again, hitting me so deep the sensations erupt through every nerve cell in my body. I feel my orgasm building, my body preparing for a delicious onslaught of divine sensation.

Who needs coffee when I have a partner who brings me the greatest high I’ve ever

known? Yeah, regardless of what happens tonight, I already have everything I need—and his name is Jaden.

“You look ill, Annalise. The truffle pasta not sitting well? I told you to get the steak.” Simon jabs another piece of pink fleshy meat with his fork and puts it in his mouth.

With a fork in my hand, I move some of the pasta around on my plate. “The pasta is fine,” I retort.

The food at the Academy Awards is prepared by some of the best chefs in the world, and I’m certain I’d appreciate it more under different circumstances. The fact that my meal tastes like chalk has nothing to do with the dish and everything to do with my nerves.

This day has been one giant episode of exposure therapy. While most people undergoing such a treatment confront one thing—like a person afraid of flying steps on a plane or someone afraid of spiders is forced to hold one. My exposure therapy includes almost everyone and everything I’ve encountered since stepping on the red carpet a few hours ago.

Hollywood is like a small gossip town where everyone knows everyone. Most people in this room are tied to my father in some way and trigger a memory from my childhood. I’ve grown up with these people on various movie sets, awards dinners, parties, and social events. I thought I was over all this. Safely tucked away in my therapist’s office over two thousand miles away in Michigan, I feel safe from the insecurities this place brings. In my day-to-day life, I have endless support from Jaden and our friends and haven’t had this pounding pressure in my chest for so long.

Jaden slides his hand over the top of my satin dress covering my thigh and gives it a reassuring squeeze. He leans in and kisses the side of my head. “You are okay, my love,” he whispers against my hair.

Not that long ago, before I left to film in Michigan, I was surrounded by this life twenty-four seven, and it never bothered me in this way. I always questioned my therapist when she said that it gets harder before it gets easier. She said it's easy to put a Band-Aid on the problem and pretend it isn't there, but once you rip it off and release the truth, you're forced to confront it. My life with Jaden has been such a safe space for me, I thought my therapist was wrong because, contrary to her words, it hasn't been hard back home. But now, our conversations resurface, and I finally see what she means. Squashing the denial I've held in my past makes me see this place and everyone here differently.

"If you're all worried because you're not sure if you'll win, don't worry. You know you will," Simon says through a mouth full of food. "By the way, have you spoken to Bobby Flair yet? And why isn't he here? I was sure he would be. I've been looking forward to the introduction."

"Do you ever stop talking?" I pin Simon with an annoyed stare. "At least to finish chewing your food?"

"Oh, Sassy Annalise is my favorite." He grins.

"Annoying Simon is not mine."

Jaden takes my hand in his and pulls my attention. "Have I told you how incredible you look?"

I smirk. "No less than a hundred times."

"Well, you do. I'm obsessed with the gold dress. It makes you look like a Grecian goddess." He pulls at one of my wavy curls, the simple interaction calming my nerves.

“Thank you, babe.” I lean into his side, wanting this night to be over.

He lowers his face and kisses my shoulder. “Anna, you need to get out of your head. Take a deep breath and enjoy the evening. Win or lose, it’s an honor to be here. Enjoy it.” He half covers his mouth as he speaks, the way I taught him. That gesture alone pulls me from the chaos in my head.

I half laugh. “Look at you being paranoid and covering your mouth for me.”

“Well, we all know those TikTok lip readers are on the prowl.” He winks and wraps his arm around my back. His hand rubs against the bare skin of my arm.

I release a sigh. “You’re right,” I tell Jaden, feeling more at peace.

I’ve come too far to allow my emotions to twist into a frenzy and ruin my night. The whole production breaks for a commercial break as they do between awards. The host is on stage going over something with the director and the person in charge of the teleprompter.

“Come on, Simon,” I say to my costar as I stand from the table. I let Jaden know that I’ll be right back.

“Where are we going?” Simon practically skips behind me like an overzealous six-year-old.

“Giving you your introduction.”

I knew where to find Bobby the whole time. He’s one of the best directors in Tinsel Town. Of course he’s here. I didn’t feel like speaking to him because I also knew that more than likely, my father will be by his side.

Bobby and my father stand against the bar at the far end of the venue, each holding a glass of overpriced scotch. I stop and take hold of Simon's arm when we're still out of earshot.

"Be careful, okay. Neither of these men are good people. Know your worth, and if they're disrespectful in any way, walk away. I promise, there are other great directors out there."

"Um, okay. Yeah, sure," he says with a nod.

We close in on the two men at the bar. Bobby shoots me a fake smile, but one nonetheless. On the other hand, my father regards me with the annoyance he'd throw at a stranger interrupting his conversation. Oddly enough, it doesn't hurt because I suppose I am a stranger. The man doesn't know me at all.

"Annalise!" Bobby sets his drink on the countertop and grips my arms. He pulls me in for an air-kiss on each cheek. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Thanks. Hey, so"—I throw a nod toward Simon—"this is my costar Simon Blackwood. I'm not sure if you've had the chance to preview our latest movie, but he really was stellar throughout. It got me thinking that he'd be great for one of your projects."

"Is that so?" Bobby raises a brow and extends his hand to shake Simon's. "I'm always interested in meeting the latest talent."

Simon shakes Bobby's hand with a little too much fervor, laying his admiration on thick.

I tap Simon's back, nudging him to calm down and relax.

“Well, I’m sure you will have lots to talk about. I’m going to head back to the table. My fiancé is waiting. It was good seeing you, Bobby. Father.” I dip my head toward them both and turn on my heel, leaving them behind me wearing an enormous smile. The man with emotions of steel flinched at the word fiancé, and the satisfaction I received from that is priceless.

Put it off to following Jaden’s advice to get out of my head and enjoy the night or my jab that put a dent in my father’s armor, but as the night progresses, I start enjoying myself. I celebrate with the winners in the other categories, and my smile is genuine. Some really good people here, like me, just want to make beautiful art.

Finally, the wait is over. Presenters walk onto the stage, one of them holding a golden envelope in their hand with the name of the winner for best actress. The nominees’ names are read, and short clips of their performance are played for the crowd in attendance and everyone watching on their TV screens at home. The clip they chose of me was from the emotional boardroom scene, and seeing it again, I’m proud. No matter what happens, I can hold my head high.

The presenters read the content of the envelope together. “And the Oscar goes to... Annalise Sterling!”

I cover my mouth in shock. A round of clapping ensues. Jaden stands with me and gives me a kiss. I turn back to him for one more glance as I make my way toward the stage. He claps, wearing a smile that radiates pure joy.

I did it.

I really did it.

I’m handed the coveted golden man, and though I’ve held my parents’ Oscars, this one feels heavier.

Standing at the microphone, I look out at a room of peers before me, hold my hand to my chest, and say the most cliché award speech opener. “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe this,” I exclaim.

My speech starts by thanking the cast and crew of the movie, but then I pull in a breath and think for the briefest of seconds about what I really want to say.

“I grew up surrounded by the magic of movies. Some of my earliest memories are on set, where I would talk to the people who make the magic happen. I wanted to know everything because I respect this industry so much. Doing what I do is an incredible privilege. For a couple of hours, films offer people an escape from life. Beautiful stories with beautiful messages inspire us, allow us to reflect, or remind those of us who may be going through something similar that we are not alone. I want to thank Annabelle Lighthouse and every brave woman in our history for paving the way for women everywhere. This movie speaks to so much more than becoming a CEO of a major corporation. It speaks to bravery, grit, and confidence. It speaks to knowing your worth and then fighting for it.” I hold up my Oscar. “Thank you for this honor. To every person out there, dreams are worth fighting for. Go out and fight for yours as only you can. Believe in yourself and make your life beautiful.”

The orchestra music starts playing as I’m escorted off stage. I replay my acceptance speech in my head, wondering if I said everything I wanted to say. In all honesty, I can barely recall any of the words I just uttered. The speech has left my brain, leaving only emotion—a vibrant wave of happiness surrounded by peace. And that is what I am going to take away from tonight.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

JADEN

Life is crazy sometimes, but that's what makes it so incredible. This year has been a roller coaster in the best way possible. The team—my family—has accomplished so much, earning our name an eternal place in the record books as one of the greats.

Over the past couple of years, I've watched as one teammate after the next has fallen in love, gotten married, and some even have babies. While I was happy for them and loved all the new additions to the Crane family, I didn't really understand it. Marriage means one partner for the rest of your life. Kids mean that you are no longer the most important person in your life. Once the babies come, you live for them. While I saw the good points to both scenarios, neither situation was one I coveted.

I loved my life as it was. I was a rich, talented sports star who could get any woman he wanted. That is a dream by any account. Or at least I thought it was.

My love for Anna has taught me that loving another more than oneself is the dream. That kind of love is special, and until you've actually experienced it, you have no idea just how incredible it is. True love is a rarity, and I'm so grateful every day that Anna took a chance on us. I can't imagine loving anyone else the way in which I love her.

It's been almost a year since she agreed to go on one date with me. And now—in the

place where we shared our first date, we're going to promise our forever.

The Appletons were beyond thrilled to offer up their orchard as the venue for our wedding. Besides the hefty check they received, they've pretty much sealed the deal on their lifetime VIP box seat status.

Our event planner extraordinaires, Penny, Iris, and Miranda, turned this into the most magical orchard to exist. The barn was cleaned up and decked out in beautiful furnishings and an insane amount of flowers. There is the perfect space to eat, dance, and have the best night with all the important people in our lives.

The only person from Anna's past life in attendance is Miranda. Anna's circle was tight, but it's so much bigger now. Every guy on this team and the women they love would do anything for Anna. She's one of us now.

"Is this spot okay?" I ask my mom as I lead her to a seat in the first row.

"Oh, it's just fine, Jay. Thank you."

"You look beautiful, Mom."

She's wearing a flowy ankle-length navy dress, and half of her dark hair is clipped back. She looks very elegant, almost unrecognizable. I don't know if I've ever seen her in an elegant dress, to be honest. Growing up, she lived in one work uniform after the next, her hair always up in a tight bun.

After Anna's mother's funeral, I went to visit my mother with the mug shots in hand. She never gave me a lot of information on my dad's side of the family when I was young. All I knew was that my father didn't want to be a father and left my mom to raise me. What I found out after returning from California was much worse.

Finally opening up to me, she confirmed that the people in the mug shot photos were

my father and his parents. During a rebellious stage in high school, she started talking to an older guy from the “wrong side of the tracks,” as she explained it. Come to find out, my conception wasn’t made of love but something far more sinister and heartbreaking. Her parents were devastated and ashamed, and instead of being there for her, they abandoned her, not wanting anything to do with her or me.

She raised me all alone in what must’ve taken so much strength. She said there was always an element of regret when she saw me, which made her feel guilty. She desperately wanted to connect with me but felt that she didn’t love me the way a mother should love their child. I was the daily reminder of her choices, heartache, and struggle. She was basically a child herself, raising a child and, from the sounds of it, suffered from years of untreated depression.

My heart broke when she opened up to me, and I didn’t blame or hold any hard feelings. For the first time, it all made sense. She wasn’t capable of loving me the way she wanted, so she worked to make sure I had sports and activities to be a part of so I wouldn’t feel alone. She gave me a support system.

Our conversation was a heavy weight off her heart, putting an end to years of shame. I told her that I understood, and not only that, but I was grateful for her and all she did for me.

I don’t know if my mother and I will ever be close, but I’d like to think there’s a chance. Time heals, and now that she’s not carrying around such a blanket of shame, maybe she will feel more comfortable opening up and exploring a relationship. I’m hoping someday, when Anna and I have children, my mother will get a second chance at feeling what love for a little one should feel like. Deep in my heart, I believe that she will.

Mrs. Appleton sits beside my mother, and I smile, knowing she can brighten anyone’s day. My mother is in good hands. The Appletons have a warmth to them that makes anyone feel good.

Besides my mother, Miranda, and our gracious hosts, every other person in attendance is part of the Crane organization. The ladies from the offices, the players, the coaches, and the owners—and of course all of their families make up the bulk of people here. It's a perfect group.

My teammates have all taken their seats. I walk across the row, receiving fist bumps and handshakes from the guys.

"This is so beautiful," Ari, Bash's wife, says to me.

"It really is." I look around.

It's earthy, elegant, and whimsical all at once. The orchard alone brings so much beauty to the venue. Add in the other elements, and it's off the charts.

"Ready, Jay?" Max claps his hand against my shoulder.

"So ready." I follow him toward the tall arch of flowers and the minister who stands in front of it. The two of us get in position.

There are no nerves, no whispers of worry as I get ready to marry the most beautiful person in the world. Only gratitude.

Tall bouquets filled with gorgeous bushy white flowers line both rows of apple trees that make up the grassy aisle—the same location where we shared our first date. The aisle opens up into a grassy opening where the guests are seated.

From my spot in front of the beautiful floral archway, I can see the end of the grassy aisle between the rows of apple trees. A string quartet plays as Miranda walks toward us. I'm so happy to experience this with everyone I love. Max is at my side, and the rest of my brothers watch on from the front seats. In the front and center is my mother, who, without knowing it, created a life for me where all this could be

possible.

Miranda shoots me a smile as she takes her spot across from me on the bride's side.

The string instruments change songs, indicating the bride's approach, and Anna begins her journey to me. I commit every detail, every step she takes to memory. I never want to forget this moment.

Anna's stunning form-fitting white satin gown flares out at her knees. It has a decent-sized train that trails behind her as she closes the distance. She wore her long blond hair up in an elegant updo, making her look like an angelic goddess.

I blink hard, clearing the tears welling in my eyes. I don't want to miss a second. I am so in love with this woman, and my love runs deep. I don't know what the future holds for us, but I know it will be incredible because we'll be navigating it together. She is part of me, and no matter where this life takes us, she always will be.

Anna reaches the floral arch and stands opposite me as I take her hands in mine. She radiates pure happiness and love.

Standing across from her in front of our family and promising her forever is the easiest thing I've ever done.

I still can't believe a marriage with Anna is a part of my journey. It's so surreal. My life is pretty amazing. I'll forever be grateful for it and will cherish her always. A love that I never knew existed and a life of happiness beyond measure exists all because two people took a chance and fell in love.