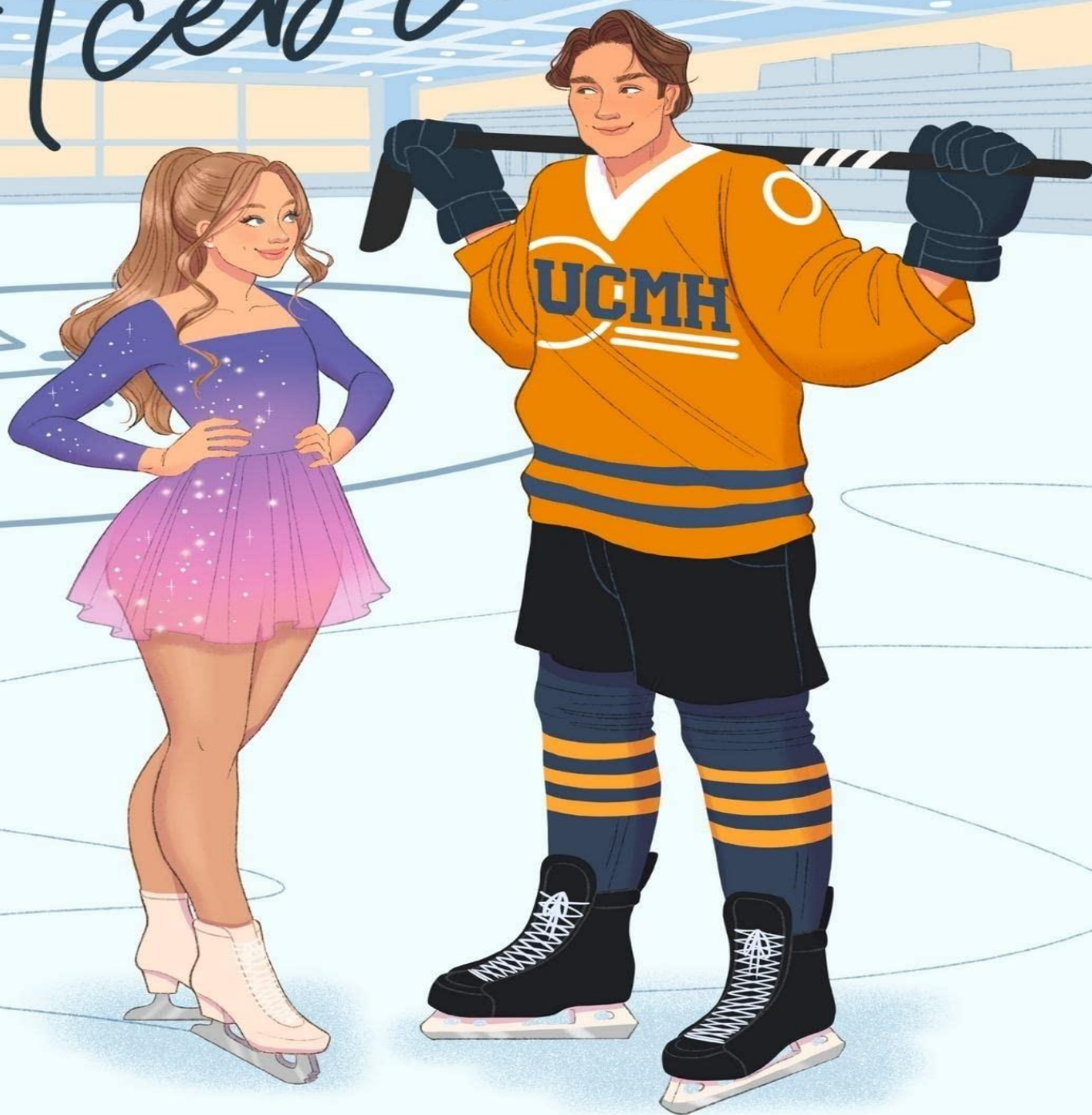


THE UCMH SERIES

Icebreaker



HANNAH GRACE

ICEBREAKER

THE UCMH SERIES

BOOK 1

HANNAH GRACE

CONTENTS

[Playlist](#)

[One | Anastasia](#)

[Two | Nathan](#)

[Three | Anastasia](#)

[Four | Nathan](#)

[Five | Anastasia](#)

[Six | Nathan](#)

[Seven | Anastasia](#)

[Eight | Nathan](#)

[Nine | Anastasia](#)

[Ten | Nathan](#)

[Eleven | Anastasia](#)

[Twelve | Nathan](#)

[Thirteen | Anastasia](#)

[Fourteen | Nathan](#)

[Fifteen | Anastasia](#)

[Sixteen | Nathan](#)

[Seventeen | Anastasia](#)

[Eighteen | Nathan](#)

[Nineteen | Anastasia](#)

[Twenty | Nathan](#)

[Twenty-One | Anastasia](#)

[Twenty-Two | Nathan](#)

[Twenty-Three | Anastasia](#)

[Twenty-Four | Nathan](#)

[Twenty-Five | Anastasia](#)

[Twenty-Six | Nathan](#)

[Twenty-Seven | Anastasia](#)

[Twenty-Eight | Nathan](#)

[Twenty-Nine | Anastasia](#)

[Thirty | Nathan](#)

[Thirty-One | Anastasia](#)

[Thirty-Two | Nathan](#)

[Thirty-Three | Anastasia](#)

[Thirty-Four | Nathan](#)

[Thirty-Five | Anastasia](#)

[Thirty-Six | Nathan](#)

[Thirty-Seven | Anastasia](#)

[Thirty-Eight | Nathan](#)

[Thirty-Nine | Anastasia](#)

[Forty | Nathan](#)

[Forty-One | Anastasia](#)

[Forty-Two | Nathan](#)

[Forty-Three | Anastasia](#)

[Forty-Four | Nathan](#)

[Forty-Five | Anastasia](#)

[Forty-Six | Nathan](#)

[Forty-Seven | Anastasia](#)

[Forty-Eight | Nathan](#)

[Forty-Nine | Anastasia](#)

[Fifty | Nathan](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank you for reading](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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For Erin, Kiley, and Rebecca

*Thank you for believing in me.
This book is for you guys.*

PLAYLIST



CRUEL SUMMER | TAYLOR SWIFT
KISS ME MORE (FEAT. SZA) | DOJA CAT
TALKING BODY | TOVE LO
SHUT UP | ARIANA GRANDE
IDGAF | DUA LIPA
ENERGY | TYLA JANE
MOTIVATION | NORMANI
ONE KISS (WITH DUA LIPA) | CALVIN HARRIS
DANCE FOR YOU | BEYONCÉ
NEEDY | ARIANA GRANDE
WHO'S | JACQUEES
LOSE YOU TO LOVE ME | SELENA GOMEZ
KISS ME | SIXPENCE NONE THE RICHER
BOYFRIEND (WITH SOCIAL HOUSE) | ARIANA GRANDE
RUMORS (FEAT. ZAYN) | SABRINA CLAUDIO
MORE THAN ENOUGH | ALINA BARAZ
YOU SHOULD SEE ME IN A CROWN | BILLIE EILISH
I'M FAKING | SABRINA CARPENTER
MAKE ME FEEL | JANELLE MONÁE
CAN I | KEHLANI

“Skating was the vessel into which I could pour my heart and soul.”
—Peggy Flemming

ONE | ANASTASIA

“AGAIN, ANASTASIA!”

If I hear the words *again* and *Anastasia* together in a sentence one more time, it might be the thing that finally tips me over the edge.

I’ve been on the edge since I woke up this morning with a hangover sent directly from the pits of hell, so the last thing I need right now is more grief from Coach Aubrey Brady.

I focus on suppressing my annoyance, like I do every training session when she makes it her mission to push me to my limits. Rationalizing it’s her dedication that makes her such a successful coach, I decide throwing my ice skates at her is something that should stay in my imagination.

“You’re being sloppy, Stas!” she yells as we fly straight past her. “Sloppy girls don’t get medals!”

What did I say about not throwing skates at her?

“Come on, Anastasia. Put in some effort for once.” Aaron snickers, poking his tongue out at me when I shoot him a cold glare.

Aaron Carlisle is the best male figure skater the University of California, Maple Hills has to offer. When I was offered a spot at UCMH and my skating partner wasn’t, Aaron was luckily in the same position, and we became pairs. This is our third year of skating together and our third year of getting our asses kicked.

I have a theory that Aubrey is a Soviet spy. I don’t have any evidence, and my theory isn’t well developed. Developed at all, actually. But sometimes, when she’s screaming at me to straighten my spine or lift my chin, I swear a slight Russian accent slips out.

Which is peculiar for a woman from Philipsburg, Montana.

Comrade Brady was a figure skating superstar in her heyday. Even now, her movements are delicate and controlled, and she moves with such grace it’s hard to believe she can shout as loud as she does.

Her graying hair is always pulled back into a tight bun, which accentuates her high cheekbones, and she’s always wrapped tight in her signature faux-fur black coat, which Aaron jokes is where she hides all her secrets.

The rumor is she was supposed to go to the Olympics with her partner, Wyatt. However, Wyatt and Aubrey were practicing those lifts a little too often, and she ended up holding a baby instead of a gold medal.

That’s why she’s been in a bad mood since she started coaching twenty-five years ago.

“Clair de Lune” fades as Aaron and I finish our routine nose to nose, our chests heaving against each other as we try to catch our breath. When we finally hear a single clap, we move apart and skate toward what will undoubtedly be the source of my next headache.

I haven’t even stopped moving when her green eyes lock on me and narrow. “When are you going to land your Lutz? If you’re not going to deliver, it needs to come out of your long program.”

Aside from Brady, successfully doing a quadruple Lutz and not landing on my ass is the current bane of my existence. I’ve been practicing for God knows how long, but I can’t

quite manage to nail it. Aaron can execute it flawlessly, which is why I convinced the choreographer to put it into our routine in the first place.

Pride is a foolish thing. It's incredibly foolish when it comes to figure skating, since when you get it wrong, you bounce your face off solid ice. I'd take face-planting over the annoying, fake disappointed face Aaron pulls any time it's suggested we take it out.

"It's coming, Coach," I say with as much fake enthusiasm as possible. "I'm getting there; it's not perfect yet, but I'll keep practicing."

It's a minor lie, a harmless one. I *am* getting there. What I've failed to mention is I'm only getting there off the ice, specifically when I'm attached to equipment that helps me get there.

"She's getting there," Aaron lies, throwing an arm around my shoulders. "Just a bit longer, AB."

It's nice for Aaron to be on my side and show a united front to KGB Aubrey. What he says in private is that the only way I'm going to pull it off is if I start doping and build a time machine to get my prepuberty body back.

She mutters something inaudible and waves us off flippantly. "I'll see you two back here tomorrow, and if you could both not be hungover, that would be great. I'm fairly certain eating In-N-Out before training isn't going to get either of you onto the Olympic team. Understood?"

Shit. "Yes, Coach," we say in harmony.

Aaron is staring at his phone, waiting for me in the lobby when I finally exit the women's locker room.

"I fucking told you she'd know." I groan, swinging my bag toward him as soon as I'm close enough to hit him in the stomach with it. "I didn't even have anything!"

He grunts at the impact, tugging the bag from my hands and flinging it over his shoulder. "The woman has the nose of a bloodhound."

Like most things in life, skating is far easier when you're a man because nobody is picking you up and launching you across the room twice a day.

Freshman year, I gained the freshman fifteen. Well, it was more like the freshman five, but Aaron said I was getting too heavy to lift, so I haven't put on an ounce since.

I try to stick to my meal plan religiously, with the odd party here and there to keep me lucid. My best friend's twenty-first birthday yesterday was the perfect opportunity to let loose a little, even if it did mean braving Brady with a hangover.

We climb into Aaron's new G-Wagon, the latest guilt gift from his adulterous but wealthy father, and head home. Aaron and I decided it would be cool to live together, with my best friend, Sabrina, at

the end of freshman year. Our schedules are similar, and our lives revolve around skating, so it made sense.

Aaron takes the turn onto Maple Avenue and looks over at me while I rummage through my purse for my most prized possession. "What does the planner say you're doing tonight?"

I roll my eyes, ignoring his teasing tone. "Getting laid."

"Ew," he says, the tip of his nose wrinkling as he grimaces. "It's bad enough you plan what time you sleep and eat, but do you need to plan having sex?"

He's not lying about the sleeping and eating thing, every minute of my life is meticulously scheduled in my trusty planner, which my friends find equal parts hilarious and ridiculous. I wouldn't necessarily say I'm a control freak, but I'm a woman who needs to be in control.

There's *definitely* a difference.

I shrug, suppressing the urge to point out that at least I'm getting some, unlike him. "Ryan is a busy guy and I'm a busy girl. I want to see him as much as I can before basketball season."

Ryan Rothwell is six foot, six inches of pure, athletic perfection. UCMH point guard and team captain, he's as serious about his sport as I am, which makes for a perfect no-strings-attached situation. The added benefit is Ry is the sweetest guy, so we've become great friends through our mutually beneficial arrangement.

"I can't believe you're still fucking around with him. He's like double your size, how does he not crush you? No, wait. I don't want to know."

"I know he is." I giggle, pinching his cheeks until he bats me away. "Sorta the whole point."

Most people assume Aaron and I are more than partners, but we're more like siblings. It's not that he isn't good looking, we've just never had any romantic interest in each other.

Aaron is much taller than me and lean like a dancer with his sculpted, muscular body. His black hair is kept short, and I swear he wears mascara because his sky-blue eyes are framed with the darkest, jealousy-inducing lashes, contrasting prominently against his pale skin.

"I officially know too much about your sex life, Anastasia."

Aaron can't decide if he likes Ryan or not. Sometimes he's cool with him and Ryan gets to see the Aaron I see—the one who's fun to be around. You'd assume Ryan had personally ruined Aaron's life or something the rest of the time. Aaron can be so abrupt and harsh that it's embarrassing. It's unpredictable, but Ryan brushes it off and tells me not to worry about it.

"I promise to not talk about it for the rest of the drive home if you promise to give me a ride to Ryan's later."

He contemplates for a minute or so. "Okay, deal."

SABRINA LOOKS up from the salad she's stabbing aggressively with her fork and huffs. "I'm just saying, who's dick is Olivia Abbott sucking to get the lead role for the third year in a row?"

I can't help but cringe at her harsh words, but I know she doesn't mean it. She was already feeling delicate this morning after the copious amounts of alcohol we consumed last night for her birthday, so today wasn't the best day to find out she didn't get the part she wanted.

I've watched every show for the past two years, and Brin knows as well as I do, Olivia is an exceptionally talented actor.

"Can she not just be very talented? And not be sucking someone's dick?"

“Anastasia, will you please let me be petty for five minutes and pretend I don’t know she’s better than me?”

Aaron throws himself into the chair beside me and reaches over to pick a carrot stick from my plate. “What’re we being petty about?”

“Olivia Abbott,” Brin and I respond in unison, the distaste in her tone evident as hell.

“She’s hot. Might be the hottest girl on campus,” he says nonchalantly, clearly not paying attention to how Sabrina’s jaw drops. “Is she single?”

“*Ya Allah*. How am I supposed to freaking know? She doesn’t talk to anyone. She swans in, gets the role I want, and carries on being an anomaly.”

Sabrina studies performing arts, and it must be an unwritten rule that you have to have a larger-than-life personality, because everyone I’ve met on her course is like her. It’s usually an exhausting battle for attention, even as a spectator, but Olivia keeps to herself, and for some reason, it seems to bother people.

“I’m sorry, Brinny. There’s always next time,” I offer. We both know it doesn’t mean anything, but she blows me a kiss anyway. “If it makes you feel any better—I still can’t land my Lutz. Aubrey is going to work it out soon and banish me to Siberia.”

“Oh no. You’re officially a failure, how can you ever step foot on the ice again?” She grins, her honey-brown eyes shining as I scowl at her. “You’ll get there, babe. You’re working hard.” Her eyes move to Aaron, tapping away on his phone, totally uninterested in our conversation. “Hey, Ice Princess! You gonna help me out here?”

“Huh? Sorry, yeah, you’re hot, too, Brinny.”

I’m surprised I don’t see the steam leave Sabrina’s ears as she yells at him, about what I assume is him not listening to her, in a mixture of Arabic and English.

I slowly retreat to my bedroom, eager to not draw attention to myself and get caught in the crossfire of my roommates’ argument. Living with Aaron and Sabrina is like living with siblings who always wanted to be only children.

Aaron, like me, is an actual only child. The miracle baby to his two aging, midwestern parents desperate to keep their marriage together. Living with other people after being his parents’ pride and joy for eighteen years was a big transition for him, and for us, who are the ones who have to live with him and his mood swings.

Now he’s not in Chicago, things between his parents aren’t great, and we always know when they’re extra bad because Aaron gets an obnoxiously expensive and unnecessary gift.

Like a G-Wagon.

In contrast to the two of us, Sabrina is from a huge family. Being the youngest and the only girl with seven older brothers guaranteed her the number one spot in her house. After being constantly showered with attention, she traveled so far from her native Brooklyn for some peace.

When we met for the first time, she said she’d considered going to college in Algeria, where her parents are from, but she changed her mind quickly when a few of her brothers suggested moving with her.

She also realized there wouldn’t be frat parties.

I’m still hiding out in my room when my phone buzzes, and Ryan’s name flashes on my screen.

RYAN

RYAN: The boys wanna throw a party tonight. Your place instead?

RYAN: They were supposed to be going to a pep rally or some shit, but now they're staying home.

RYAN: Just wanna be alone w you.

STASSIE: Sure, roommates are in though.

STASSIE: Will have to be quiet.

RYAN: Ha

RYAN: Should probably give yourself that instruction in a mirror.

RYAN: You free now?

STASSIE: Yeah, come over.

RYAN: Omw. Bringing snacks.

“Everyone friends again?” I call out cautiously as I make my way from my bedroom to the living room. They're both fixated on the *Criminal Minds* rerun on the TV, but I get a faint “Yeah” in response, letting me know it's safe to approach.

I lean over the couch for a handful of popcorn from the bowl resting between them, making a mental note to add it to my food tracker when I get back to my room. “So, the basketball team is having a party. I was wondering—”

“If we will go with you?” Aaron interrupts, sounding uncharacteristically hopeful.

“No?”

Sabrina spins to face me, her chestnut brown curls bouncing around her shoulders and delight written all over her face. “If we mind that Ryan wants to come here?”

“Yeah. How did yo—”

“Cough up, Carlisle.” She laughs, holding out her hand. He presses a few twenties into her palm, muttering something under his breath as she counts them out. “We heard about the party, and I didn't think you'd wanna get railed with drunk freshmen making out on the other side of the door. We're going to walk there.”

Our home is one of Aaron's dad's better *forgive me* presents. It was either after his affair with his secretary or before he decided to have sex with the interior designer. Maple Tower is a beautiful condo block on the edge of campus, and our place has a great view and tons of natural light.

The building isn't exclusive to students, so it's a peaceful place to live, but it's close enough to everyone else that stumbling home from parties is easy.

Aaron and I aren't supposed to be at parties, but what Aubrey doesn't know won't hurt her.

I'VE ALREADY WATCHED Sabrina try on ten different outfits when Ryan texts to let me know he's finally on his way up, giving me an excuse to leave her and her ten almost identical black dresses.

The butterflies I get when there is a knock at the door and I know Ryan is on the other side of it were strange to me at first, but now it's cute.

He's practically filling the doorway when I open the door to let him in. His messy blond hair is still damp, and he smells strongly of orange and something I can't quite put my finger on, which is now weirdly comforting to me. His head dips to mine, and his lips press against my cheek lightly. "Hello, beautiful."

He hands me the bag of snacks he always insists on bringing because apparently, I don't eat enough, and I don't have anything good to eat when he's here. Ryan eats more than any person I know, and his version of good is loaded with sugar.

For some reason, Aaron and Brin are watching us from the living room like they've never seen other human beings before. Ryan laughs when he spots them; fortunately, he's used to their antics by now, and he offers them a quiet "Hello" as I lead him in the direction of my bedroom.

"Hey, Rothwell?" Sabrina shouts as we reach my door.

He lets go of my hand, turning around to face her. "Yeah?"

She's leaning over the back of the couch, and I know from the mischievous look on her face I don't want to hear whatever she has to say.

"Since my bedroom is next to Stassie's and I'm going to be listening to your grunting and balls slapping all night," my eyes widen as far as they can go from behind him, "can I have the code for your room, so I don't have to fight for the shared bathroom at the party at your place?"

Campus housing has electronically coded locks on bedroom doors for security. Ryan's room has a private bathroom, so Brin's request is a good idea since the bathroom line gets ridiculous the drunker people get.

It's her delivery that's going to require some serious work.

"Sure, I'll text it to you. No snooping, Allali. I'll know if you have."

She holds up a peace sign. "Scouts honor. Enjoy all the sex."

"*Jesus*, Brin." I groan loud enough for her to hear as I drag Ryan into my room away from her. "I'm so sorry."

"I like her. She's funny." He chuckles, taking my face between his hands and tilting my head up so he can kiss me.

It's soft at first, then more urgent as his tongue moves against mine. His hands travel down my body gently until they reach my thighs, scooping me up in one quick motion. My legs automatically wrap around his waist, my body familiar with his after doing this so many times.

There's banging outside of my room, which I *think* is my roommates leaving, but every hot kiss Ryan places on my neck steals my attention away. I should check if it is them going, but it suddenly plummets to the bottom of things on my mind when Ryan lowers me to the bed and climbs on top of me.

"How was your day?" he mumbles beneath my ear.

He always does this. He kisses me perfectly, positions his body between my legs, applies enough pressure to have me squirm, scrambles the thoughts in my head, and *then* asks me something mundane like how my day was.

The second I try to formulate a response, his fingers journey beneath my T-shirt, and he traces the curve of my jaw with his nose. Every inch of my skin feels like it's buzzing, and he hasn't even done anything yet. "It was, uh, uhm, fine, I, mhmm, skated..."

His body rocks as he laughs. “You mhmm skated? Sounds interesting. Why don’t you tell me more, Allen?”

I hate him. I really, really hate him.

I incoherently mumble something about ice and Russians as he strips us of our clothes until we’re both in our underwear. Ryan’s body would make a Greek god weep; tanned skin from his summer home in Miami, and a torso with more abs than I can count.

Forget a Greek god, it makes me want to weep.

Gripping my panties on each hip, he waits until I nod before slowly pulling them down my legs, throwing them behind him, and spreading my legs wide.

“Stas.”

“Yeah?”

His forehead creases. “Can Sabrina really hear my balls?”

TWO | NATHAN

THERE'S a hand near my dick that isn't mine.

She's fast asleep, snoring loudly with her hand wrapped around my waist and tucked into the band of my boxers. I gently untuck and examine it—long fake nails, Cartier rings, and a Rolex strapped to her slender wrist.

Who the fuck is it?

Even after a night of God knows what, she still smells expensive, and there are strands of long, golden-blond hair draped over my shoulder from where she's lying behind me.

I shouldn't have gone to the party last night, but Benji Harding, and the rest of the basketball guys, are persuasive little shits. As much as I love throwing a party, nothing beats going somewhere else and coming home to a quiet house not full of other people's mess.

Unless you're talking about this kind of mess. The kind where there's a woman in your bed, and you can't remember who the hell it is.

The common-sense part of my brain tells me to roll over and look at her, but another part that remembers all the silly situations we've gotten ourselves into keeps reminding me that drunk Nate is a dick.

That part of my brain has real concerns this is going to be someone's sister, or worse, someone's mom.

"Can you stop moving about?" the mystery guest snaps. "What is it with fucking sports guys and early mornings?"

That voice. It's one I wish I didn't recognize.

Oh fuck.

I slowly roll over so I can confirm my own worst fear: that I did have sex with Kitty Vincent last night.

And I do.

She looks peaceful when she's trying to sleep; her facial features are soft and delicate, lips blush and pursed. From how calm she looks right now, you wouldn't know she's an absolute raging bit—

"Why are you staring at me, Nate?" Her eyes fly open, and she disintegrates me with one look, like the fucking dragon she is.

Kitty Vincent is everything wrong with rich girls with Daddy's credit card, a subspecies of women at UCMH I happen to be an expert on. Expertise I've gained from having sex with practically all of them.

Except for this one.

I was never supposed to do it with this one.

There's nothing wrong with her visually. To be frank, she's an absolute knockout. She's just an absolutely terrible human being.

"Are you okay?" I ask carefully. "Do you need anything?"

"I need you to stop staring at me like you've never seen a naked woman in your bed before," she snipes back, pushing her body to lean against the headboard. "We both know you have, and you're creeping me out."

“I’m shocked, Kit. I, uh, don’t remember how this happened...”

I remember being at the party and trying to get Summer Castillo-West to give me her number, but tragically being rejected for the fourth September in a row. I also remember playing beer pong with Danny Adeleke and losing, which I’d rather not remember, but I still don’t remember how *this* happened.

“Oh shit. Wait, aren’t you dating Danny?”

She rolls her blue eyes and reaches for her purse sitting on the table beside my bed, cursing when she finds her phone battery is dead. Brushing her hair from her face, she finally looks over at me, and I have never known a woman to look so irritated by my existence. “We broke up.”

“Right, right. That sucks, I’m sorry. What happened?”

I’m trying to be polite, a gracious host, some would say, but she raises one of her perfectly sculpted eyebrows at me and frowns. “Why do you give a fuck?”

I rub my jaw nervously with my palm as I attempt to think of a reason to give her. She’s right. I don’t care, I hate cheaters and panicked, but since they broke up, I don’t have anything to worry about. “Only trying to be nice.”

She gives me the fakest smile I’ve ever seen, swings her legs off the bed, and struts butt-ass naked toward my bathroom. It’s hard to concentrate on how good she looks because, with one last

disinterested look over her shoulder, she scowls at me. “If you want to be nice, get me an Uber.”

Thank God. “Sure.”

“Exec only, Nate. It’s bad enough I’m going to be seen leaving here. Don’t make me suffer further by being cheap.”

When the bathroom door slams shut and I hear the shower turn on, I know it’s safe to scream every curse word I know into my pillow.

I’M STANDING at the front door watching Kitty climb into her Uber, Exec obviously, because of all the potential shame.

Raking a hand through my hair, I can’t decipher how I ended up here after swearing this year would be different.

I distinctly remember saying to Robbie, my best friend, on our drive back to California from Colorado, that senior year was going to be different. I must have said it at least twenty times on our two-day coffee-fueled journey.

I lasted three weeks.

I’m quickly dragged from the pity party I’m throwing for myself by the sound of muttering behind me. Robbie and my other roommates, JJ and Henry, are all sitting in our living room sipping their mugs of coffee like the cast of *The View*.

“Well, well, well,” Robbie says smugly. “What happened here, you little hoe?”

Robbie has been personally terrorizing me since we were five years old. Robbie’s dad, who I still call Mr. H sixteen years later, was the coach of our local ice hockey team back in Eagle County, where we grew up. That’s where we met and became friends, and he’s been a pain in my ass ever since.

I ignore him and head straight past their prying eyes to the kitchen, pouring a mug of coffee and giving him the finger instead of the satisfaction of a response.

Gulping down my coffee in what feels like two seconds, I can still sense their eyes on me. This is the worst part of living with your teammates—nothing is a secret.

JJ, Robbie, and I are all seniors who have lived together since we shared a dorm freshman year, but Henry is a sophomore from the team who moved in at the start of term.

The guy is incredible at hockey but has a bit to go with the whole social pressure side that comes with being on a sports team. He hated living in dorms and struggled to make friends outside the team, so we offered to let him move in here.

We've always had a spare bedroom because our garage was converted into a wheelchair-accessible bedroom for Robbie, and Henry was more than grateful for the offer.

Even in the three short weeks he's been here, we can already see him more confident—which is probably why he no longer has a problem helping JJ and Robbie give me abuse.

"Why did you have sex with Kitty Vincent?" Henry asks over the rim of his coffee mug. "She isn't very nice."

Oh yeah, and the kid has *zero* filter.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't, buddy. She wasn't very excited about it, either, and I don't remember one second of it, so it doesn't count." I shrug, walking over to the living room and throwing myself into a recliner. "How the fuck did you three let this happen?"

Am I old enough to not pass off the blame for my mistake? Sure. Will it stop me from trying? No.

"I tried to stop you from leaving with her, bro," JJ blatantly lies, holding up his hands defensively. "You said she smelled nice and her ass felt good. Who am I to stand between you and true love?"

I groan loudly, making my own head thump from the noise. If Jaiden claims he tried to stop me from leaving, he probably requested the Uber and put me in it with Kitty.

JJ is an only child from middle-of-nowhere Nebraska, so messing with the people around him was his only source of entertainment when he was growing up.

His parents always visit in June so they can join the rest of us at LA Pride with JJ, proudly wearing their pansexual flag ally pins. The time they spend at our house has allowed me to get to know them well, which is how I know JJ's dad is exactly the same, to the point I don't know how his mom coped with having two of them in the house.

Mrs. Johal is an amazing woman with the patience of a saint. She always makes sure she fills our refrigerator full of different curries and sides before they leave, and she has amazing taste in horror films, which might be why I love her so much.

She might be the only reason I haven't murdered Jaiden yet.

Robbie maneuvers beside me and wraps what I think is supposed to be a comforting arm around my shoulders. "Your focus on school and hockey lasted longer than I was expecting. Now come on, sort your shit out. You have to drive us to class."

I HAD no idea what I wanted to study when I got accepted by Maple Hills. I'm graduating in less than a year and I'm still not sure studying sports medicine was the right choice.

I was drafted to the Vancouver Vipers when I finished high school and it was a hard choice to put my education first, especially when joining the NHL has been my dream since I was a kid. All I want to do is play, but I know shit goes wrong in hockey all the time; one bad injury or one unavoidable accident and your career is over.

Even with a spot on my dream team waiting for me as soon as I graduate, I still wish *something* I've learned in the past three years had stayed in my brain so my backup plan felt worth it.

My dad wasn't a fan of me heading out of state for college, and he was even less of a fan about me signing with a hockey team, never mind one in Canada. He wanted me to *learn the family business*

and run the ski resorts until I'm old and gray like him. The idea of turning into my father has always been enough to kick my ass into gear and get my goals.

I'd have better luck understanding cell structures if I wasn't constantly exhausted from practice, not to mention keeping my clown teammates out of trouble. When Greg Lewinski graduated and handed the captain torch to me last year, he didn't prepare me for how much babysitting it takes to keep butts on benches ready to play.

Robbie helps me out since he's assistant to Coach Faulkner. After a skiing accident in our junior year of high school, Robbie didn't regain movement in his legs and now uses a wheelchair. He transferred his skill of shouting shit at me on the ice to shouting shit at me from the edge of the ice.

He loves nothing more than waving his oversized clipboard in my direction and telling me to do better. The guys on the team love that I take the brunt of Robbie's abuse because it gives the rest of them an easier time.

A perfect example is days like today. On Fridays, JJ and I have classes in the science building, so we have a tradition of dragging ourselves over to the rink for practice via a Dunkin' for a pre-workout doughnut.

It's our little secret, but JJ knows if we get caught, I'll get the blame anyway, so he doesn't mind the risk. The last class of the day on a Friday is my least favorite thing in the world, so I don't mind the risk either.

I'm lazily scrolling through my feed, waiting for JJ outside his lab when I hear his cheery tone getting louder as he approaches me. "You ready to get your hungover ass kicked?"

"Nothing a rainbow sprinkle ring can't solve. Sweating out alcohol is good anyway. Will get me fresh for tonight."

His brows furrow together. "What are you talking about? Have you not seen the group chat?"

The last thing I saw was Robbie deciding we were throwing a party tonight. Our first game isn't for another two weeks and it's tradition for us to bring in the season with a party or five.

The second I pull out my phone I can see the messages I haven't read yet.

PUCKBUNNIES

BOBBY HUGHES: Might be dying.

KRIS HUDSON: God speed, buddy.

ROBBIE HAMLET: Drinks at ours tonight?

BOBBY HUGHES: In the words of Michael Scott, I am ready to get hurt again.

JOE CARTER: I'll bring the tequila roulette board.

HENRY TURNER: Email from Faulkner says go to the awards room, not the rink.

JAIDEN JOHAL: Wtf?

HENRY TURNER: Sent an hour ago.

The awards room is a function room in the central area of the sports building. Most of us don't spend much time over there unless we're in trouble; it's where the coaches work outside of practice and games. It's where ceremonies are held at the end of the year. If we're being called there it means someone has massively fucked up, and I hope it wasn't me.

"I don't know what's going on," JJ says as we climb into my car. "Y'know Josh Mooney, the baseball guy in my class? He said their practice has been canceled too. They have to go to the awards room, but they've been told to go thirty minutes after us. Fucking weird, man."

It's the third week of term, how much trouble could we be in?

WE'RE IN SO MUCH FUCKING trouble.

When we walk through the door, Coach doesn't even look in our direction. Half the team is already sitting in front of him, each wearing an identical look I recognize: fear. JJ takes a seat next to Henry and gives me a look that says *Find out, Captain*.

Neil Faulkner is not a man you want to get on the wrong side of. Three-time Stanley Cup winner before a drunk driver knocked him off the road, shattering his arms and right leg, instantly ending his NHL career. I've watched his old game tapes countless times, and he was—no, still is—one scary motherfucker.

So, the fact he's sitting on a chair in front of the team, red faced like he's going to implode but saying nothing, is triggering my fight or flight. But my team needs me, so I reluctantly poke the bear.

"Coach, we we—"

"Get your ass on a seat, Hawkins."

"W—"

"I'm not going to tell you again."

Stumbling back to my teammates with my tail between my legs, they look even worse now than they did a minute ago. I'm racking my brain, trying to think what we could have done because there is no way he's angry over the house party we went to last night.

Apart from Henry, most of the underclassmen weren't there. They're not old enough to drink, so we don't invite them to parties with us. Not to say they're not all out getting wasted on frat row instead, but at least I'm not the one putting the beer in their hands when I'm supposed to be their responsible leader.

When Joe and Bobby finally arrive and sit, Coach finally makes a move, well, a huff, but at least it's something.

“In my eighteen years at this school, I have never been as ashamed as I was this morning.”

Fuck.

“Before I go on, does anyone have anything to say?”

He’s looking at each of us like he’s waiting for someone to stand and confess, but I genuinely don’t know what we’re supposed to confess to. I’ve had the *I’ve never been so ashamed* speech so many times since I joined the team—it’s a Faulkner special—but I’ve never seen him look this angry.

Folding his arms across his chest, he leans back in his chair and shakes his head. “This morning, when I arrived at the rink, I found it destroyed. So, who has been causing trouble?”

College sports are full of traditions. Some good, some bad, but traditions all the same. Maple Hills is no different, and each sport has its own quirks and superstitions that get passed down from year to year.

Ours are pranks. Reckless, childish pranks. Against each other, against other teams, against other sports. I’ve been in enough of these Faulkner verbal beatings over the years to know I wasn’t letting it happen during my time as captain. Egotistical guys were fighting to outdo each other, and even themselves, until it got to the point the school was being forced to get involved.

So, if our arena has been trashed, it means someone hasn’t been listening to me.

I creep forward slightly to get a better view of my teammates, and it takes approximately 0.2 seconds to spot Russ, a sophomore who’s been playing with us for the last year, and right now looks like he’s seen a ghost.

Faulkner’s voice gets louder to the point it’s echoing around the room. “The director is furious! The dean is furious! I’m fucking furious! I thought we’d drawn a line under this prank bullshit? You’re supposed to be men! Not kids.”

I want to say something, but my mouth is dry as hell. I clear my throat, which does nothing to help, but manages to capture his attention. Taking a sip of water, I finally manage to speak. “We have drawn a line, Coach. We haven’t done anything.”

“So, someone spontaneously decided to smash the generator and cooling system? My rink is on its way to being a swimming pool, and you expect me to believe you clowns have nothing to do with it?”

This is really, really bad.

“The director is holding a meeting with every student athlete in five minutes. Buckle up, gentleman. I hope none of you want to make hockey your career.”

Have I said fuck?

THREE | ANASTASIA

MY PLANNER IS IN TOTAL, irreparable chaos and I'm irritated as hell.

This is the opposite of the Friday feeling people so famously love. Today was going to be a problem-free day; I woke up under a beautiful man, and the rest of my day was planned to perfection. Gym, college, training with Aaron, dinner, and finally, dancing until my feet hurt at whichever party sounded the most fun.

I even had the option to see Ryan again and concentrate on scratching those mutual itches while he's still got time.

But according to the very passive-aggressive email I received, David Skinner, Maple Hills Director of Sport, doesn't give a flying fuck about my planner or my training schedule, and he certainly doesn't give a fuck about my sex life.

Why else would he universally cancel training and drag every student athlete to the worst corner of campus?

This building is where all the coaches lurk and plot how to make us all miserable. When I posted a picture this morning that said *just enjoy where you are now*, I didn't realize where I was going to be was a huge line of students trying to get into the awards room.

I'm lost in angry, borderline murderous thoughts when two muscular arms wrap around my waist from behind, and I feel lips press gently against the crown of my head. Instantly knowing it's Ryan, I settle into his embrace and tilt my head back to look at him. He moves to peck a kiss to my forehead, and sure, I might feel a little better. "Hey, beautiful girl."

"I'm stressed," I grumble, looking ahead to watch the line shuffle along. "And you're cutting in line. You're going to get into trouble."

Gripping my shoulders, he spins me around to face him. His long finger nudging under my chin, tilting my head up to meet his gigantic height. When I think he can't be any freaking cuter, he brushes my hair from my face and smiles at me. "You control the planner, Stas. The planner doesn't control you."

"You're still cutting in line."

He chuckles, shrugging. "You were holding my spot for me. That's what I told everyone I pushed past. Come on, what sickeningly motivational quote did you post today? Do we need to revisit it?"

Ryan and I started hooking up last year when we met at a party and were beer pong partners. Naturally, we won because we're the most stubborn and competitive people within a hundred-mile radius of Maple Hills. The next day he slid into my DMs, joking he wasn't expecting to find someone who plays drinking games so aggressively preaching about *positive vibes only* on their social media pages.

Since then, whenever I'm grumpy or fed up, he reminds me I'm supposed to be a ray of sunshine.

Dick.

"Well?" he asks, guiding me along as we get closer to the entrance.

"It was about stopping to enjoy the moment you're in."

His smile widens when he realizes he's got me. "Okay, yeah, I can work with that. It sucks practice was canceled, *but*, if you enjoy the moment, you're hanging out with me and I'm great."

Folding my arms across my chest, I try my hardest to stop the smile trying to break through, continuing to pretend he's not having a blind bit of impact on my mood. "Hmm."

"Tough crowd, *jeez*. As soon as we get out of here, I'll take you for food, and later, there's a hockey party we can hit to let you blow off all your stress-y energy."

"What else?" I let him spin me back around now we're only a few people away from finally getting into the room, and his hands stay on my shoulders.

"I'll take you home and let you take out any remaining stress on my body?"

"With a bat?"

His fingers sink into my tense muscles, rhythmically working out every knot as I roll my head side to side. "Kinky. Will you dress up as Harley Quinn too?"

He grunts loudly as my elbow sinks into his ribs, which is ridiculously dramatic, because my elbow is definitely hurting more.

After what feels like a lifetime of waiting, we finally make it through the entrance to the awards room. Instead of normal round tables, the room has row upon row of chairs all facing the stage.

What the hell is going on?

Ignoring my immediate concern, Ryan insists I enjoy the moment, which roughly translates to me being forced to sit with the basketball team. So now I'm wedged between Ryan and Mason Wright, his teammate, who make my respectable five-foot-four-inch body look like one of an overgrown toddler.

"Chip?"

I struggle to look at the bag of Lays being shoved under my nose, but they smell like barbeque flavor, which Ryan knows is my favorite. "I'm good, thanks."

He leans forward to dig in the bag at his feet, rustling loudly, not caring people are staring at us. Throwing himself back into his seat with a huff, he holds out a packet. "Cookie?"

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry." I'm trying not to draw attention to us again, but it's hard to ignore the look of disappointment on his face. "Don't look at me like that. Regionals are right around the corner; I can't gain weight."

Ryan slouches in his seat so our heads are level, and he leans in to give us more privacy. His breath dances across my skin as his lips hover beneath my ear, sending a wave of goose bumps across my entire body.

"As someone who throws you around quite a lot, I feel like I'm qualified to say this: if that jackass isn't able to cope if your weight fluctuates a few pounds, which is perfectly normal by the way, he shouldn't be your partner."

"We're not having this conversation again, Ryan."

"Sta—" he starts, cutting himself off when Director Skinner finally strolls onto the stage, squinting under the spotlights. Ryan sits back up straight and rests his hand on my thigh, squeezing softly. "Maybe we will need a bat later."

The high-pitched squeal of the microphone turning on echoes around the room, causing everyone to wince. Skinner has taken his place behind the podium but hasn't

managed to force a smile yet.

He's aged a lot in the time I've studied at UCMH. He previously looked approachable and eager, but now, with the disdain he's sporting deepening the lines on his forehead, he looks anything but.

"Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for taking the time to come here on such short notice. I'm sure you're all wondering why you're here."

I don't know why he's pretending like the email didn't have the word *compulsory* in bold, capital letters.

Skinner shrugs off his suit jacket, hanging it over the chair behind him, sighing as he turns to face us all again. He drags a hand over his thinning, gray hair, which I swear was thick and black when I was a freshman.

"There's a certain expectation when dealing with college students. It's a given there will be some level of chaos as you begin your lives as adults away from home." He sighs again, his exhaustion clear. "When you add competitive sport into the mix, the balance changes as you try to manage your skill against the authentic college experience."

Well, this is patronizing. It feels like he made his secretary write this little speech, and he practiced it in the mirror a few times. If Brin were here, she'd be highly critical of his performance.

"Some of you have been enjoying the college experience a little too much."

Here. We. Go.

"In the five years I've been Director of Sport, I have dealt with countless avoidable situations. Out of control parties, medical expenses due to students behaving recklessly on campus, more pranks than I can count, unplanned pregnancy, an—"

The noise of Michael Fletcher's chair scraping across the floor rings out as he springs to his feet.

"Mr. Fletcher, please take a seat."

Fletch ignores him, bending to grab his bag from the floor instead. He stomps toward the exit, pushing both doors open forcefully and leaving the room.

I don't know a lot about football, but everyone says Fletch is the best linebacker this college has ever seen and is practically guaranteed a spot in the NFL when he graduates.

More importantly, he's an incredibly proud father to his little girl Diya, who he had with his girlfriend, Prishi, last year.

Prishi was on the skate team with me before she accidentally fell pregnant at the start of her junior year. When I asked her if she'd be returning, she said her bladder isn't what it used to be after pushing out a nine-pound baby, and she didn't fancy peeing on the ice in front of an audience.

They live together with their friends, and everyone takes turns looking after the baby to allow Fletch and Prishi to go to class. The fact Skinner is using them as an example in his delinquent student-bashing exercise is shitty of him.

Twenty minutes pass and he's still going. I rest my head against Ryan's shoulder and close my eyes, accepting the cookie he sneaks into the palm of my hand.

"...To summarize."

Finally.

“Going forward, there will be a zero-tolerance approach to misappropriation of your status on this campus.”

I feel like I’m missing a huge part of the puzzle here because—despite his long-ass, still-not-over speech—I have zero idea what prompted this rude interruption to my schedule.

“For the seniors hoping to join professional teams at the end of this school year, it would be prevalent for you to take note of this message.”

Beside me Ryan snorts, shoving another cookie in his mouth. When I open my mouth to ask what’s so funny, he shoves one into mine, grinning like a fool because I have no choice but to eat it.

Skinner finally runs out of energy. He leans against the podium and his shoulders sag. “I don’t care what your potential is. If you don’t fall in line, you will be benched. I’d like the skating and hockey team to stay behind, but the rest of you are dismissed.”

Ryan grabs his bag from the floor and stands, stretching and letting out an overexaggerated yawn. “I’ll wait for you outside. Food?”

I give him a nod, creeping onto my tiptoes to wipe the cookie crumbs from the corner of his mouth with my thumb. “Hopefully I won’t be long.”

Everyone, bar the fifty-ish of us, filter out of the room. Ironically, about five times quicker than they filtered in.

Brady and Faulkner, the ice hockey team coach, join Director Skinner on the stage. “Come closer everyone, I’m tired of this microphone.”

As we all head to the front of the room as requested, I spot an annoyed-looking Aaron in the crowd and move to his side.

“You okay?” I ask quietly as we take a seat in the front row.

“Yep.”

It doesn’t take a genius to know he isn’t in a great mood, but this feels directed at me, not at Skinner. “You sure?”

His lips are pulled in a tight line, and he hasn’t looked at me yet. “Yep.”

Skinner steps out from behind his podium and pushes his hands into his suit pants pockets, his tired, sunken eyes scanning those of us left. “I’ll make this quick. Following what can only be labeled as a colossal shit show, Arena Two is out of action for the foreseeable future.”

Oh God.

“An investigation is underway into how the extensive damage was caused, but I’m told there will be significant delays when it comes to repairs, due to a shortage of parts for our particular equipment.”

The realization doesn’t wash over me, it fucking drowns me. The hockey team is known for causing trouble with rival teams, and each other usually. The spoiled, rich boy to hockey team pipeline thrives at this school, and I’d put money on someone causing trouble.

“What this means for you,” Skinner continues, “is you will need to share a rink for the foreseeable future, and I expect you all to work together to make this situation work.”

Clearly knowing the number of questions about to come his way, Skinner proves he doesn’t actually care about us, and immediately dips. He’s not even off the stage before I’m storming over to Coach Brady.

“We have regionals in *five* weeks!”

“I’m well aware of your competition schedule, Anastasia,” Coach Brady draws, waving off some of the underclassmen when they attempt to crowd around when I’m very close to having a meltdown. “We have no other option, so it isn’t worth getting upset over.”

Is she for real? “How are we going to qualify if we can’t practice?”

Ten feet away, Coach Faulkner is flanked by his own team, I would imagine fending off the same concerns. Not like I care, they obviously caused this mess, and now we’re the ones who are going to suffer.

I’m trying to not catastrophize, to not blow this out of proportion in my head. I’m concentrating on breathing in and out, and not bawling uncontrollably in front of strangers, while I listen to my teammates voice the same concerns. When I let my eyes drift back over to the hockey team, most of them have gone. There’s one guy talking to Faulkner, and he must feel me watching him, because his eyes meet mine. He’s looking at me with a weird expression on his face, a forced pity grimace, I think.

Frankly, he can take his fake sympathy and shove it up his ass.

“We’ll talk about this at practice, Stassie,” Brady says, offering a rare—almost borderline friendly—smile. “Enjoy a Friday evening off for once. I’ll see you both on Monday.”

After another small protest, I finally listen to Brady’s pleas for me to leave her alone, and head toward the exit. I’m trailing behind Aaron, dragging my feet, and feeling sorry for myself, when I hear a “Hey” and feel a hand land on my bicep.

It’s Mr. Sympathy, still sporting—you guessed it—a pity pout. “Listen, I’m sorry. I know this sucks for all of us. I’m going to do what I can to make this as easy as possible.”

He lets go of my arm and takes a step back, giving me the chance to look at him up close for the first time. He towers over me by at least a foot, broad shoulders, thick muscles straining against the sleeves of his Henley. Even beneath a dusting of stubble, you can see the sharpness of his jawline. I’m trying to work out if I’ve ever met him before when he starts talking again.

“I know you’re probably feeling stressed, but we’re having a party tonight if you want to come.”

“And you are?” I ask, forcing my voice to sound calm. I can’t ignore the twinge of satisfaction I get when his eyebrows shoot up for a split second.

He gains his composure just as quickly, amusement lighting up his deep brown eyes. “Nate Hawkins. I’m captain of the hockey team.” He holds out a hand for me to shake, but I look at it, then back up at his face, folding my arms across my chest.

“Were you not listening? Party time is over according to Skinner.”

He shrugs and reaches round to rub the back of his neck awkwardly. “People will show up regardless, even if I tried to stop it. Look, come over, bring friends or whatever. It’d be good if we could all get on, and I swear, we have good tequila. Do you have a name?”

I refuse to be charmed by a pretty face. Not even one with little dimples and nice cheekbones. This is still a disaster. “Do you meet a lot of people who don’t have names?”

To my surprise, he starts laughing. A heavy, rich noise that makes my cheeks flush. “Okay, you’ve got me there.”

His eyes flick behind me as an arm lands across my shoulders. I look up, expecting to find Ryan, but instead find Aaron. I shrug off his embrace, since stuff like this is what makes people assume we're dating, when I'd honestly rather eat my skates. "Are you coming?" he snaps.

Nodding, I take one last look at my new rink *friend*. He doesn't bother introducing himself to Aaron, instead he mouths, *Remember the party* to me.

God, Sabrina is going to love all this drama.

FOUR | NATHAN

THE ENTIRE HOCKEY team pours through the front door and immediately heads toward the liquor cabinet.

I wait until Russ is about to walk past then grip his arm, stopping him in his tracks. “My room. Three-nine-nine-three.”

His face drops and he forces a nervous laugh. “You’re not my type, Cap.”

I tighten my grip when he attempts to walk off toward the rest of our team members, who are passing around beers in the living room. “It’s been a long fucking day. Don’t make me do this in front of the whole team.”

His shoulders drop in defeat, and he trudges up each step like a naughty school kid, his head hung low. I mean, technically right now he is a naughty school kid.

Sharing a rink right before the start of the season is a logistic fucking nightmare—not to mention when we have home games. *Fuck*. I feel like I have a migraine coming on already and we haven’t even attempted to work out a schedule yet.

The brown-haired figure skater was seething earlier. I’m surprised a vein didn’t pop out of her forehead when her coach told her to not worry about it. I was trying to discreetly listen in, which wasn’t hard since she was yelling.

I feel like doing the same when I think about “not worrying about it,” so at least she and I have something in common. Her boyfriend looked totally unfazed, so maybe he’ll help her calm down, or maybe not, judging by the way she shrugged him off.

She’s a funny little thing. Immediately sassing me, holding her head high, but I *think* she might have been warming to me. Minutes earlier, she was clearly on the brink of tears. I’m hoping she takes up my offer and we can have a drink, form a friendship of some sorts. It’ll make this whole situation easier.

I decide to let Russ wait for twenty minutes, hoping the guilt will be eating away at him, and it won’t be hard to find out what’s happened. He’ll be upstairs listening to people laugh and joke without him, but he won’t realize people are laughing about how fucking awful this season is going to be.

I feel sorry for them.

So much so, I’m not even kicking the rookies out as they drown their sorrows in their beer bottles. I feel like I need to make a motivational speech or something, cheer everyone up, but first I need to work out exactly why we’re in this mess.

Russ is sitting on my desk chair, spinning in circles, when I finally join him. I expect him to make a snide remark, moan about waiting so long—something I would have done when I was a cocky little shit—but he doesn’t say anything. He sits silently, waiting for me to make the first move.

“What did you do?” He rubs his hands together, leaning forward to rest his elbows against his knees. He’s uncomfortable. His face is pale, and he looks ill more than anything. “Buddy, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what I’ve gotta help with.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

I run my hand across my face, trying not to lose my patience. “I know you’ve done something, and I can’t fix it if you lie to me.”

When I first started playing hockey at Maple Hills, our captain was a dick, and everyone hated him for it. I never expected to become captain, but I knew if I did, I wouldn't be like him. Russ has a shitty home life, and I know he didn't work his ass off to get himself out of that situation to come here and be treated the same way by me.

Maybe I wouldn't be this patient with some of the other guys on the team but being a good leader means knowing how to get through to your men.

Taking a seat on my bed across from him, I slowly watch about ten different emotions hit him all at once. "It wasn't a prank, I promise."

"Right, keep talking."

"There's this girl at UCLA. I met her at a party a couple of weeks ago. We started screwing around, and then every party I was at she'd be there. I thought she was single but..." he looks at his hands, picking at the calluses on his palms.

"But?"

"But she has a boyfriend. He found out somehow and sent me a message saying I was gonna fucking regret even looking at her. Then this happened so it must be that, right?"

"You still talking to this girl?"

He shakes his head. "I blocked her on everything as soon as I found out she had a boyfriend."

"You don't tell anyone this, okay? You'll get kicked off the team," I say seriously. "I mean it, kid. When they ask why you've been up here, tell them you got shit going on at home or something, and you wanted to talk to me."

"Okay, Cap."

I nod toward my door. "Get yourself a beer."

I wait until he's out of the room and stomping down the stairs before I scream every curse word I know into my pillow, for the second time today.

A FEW HOURS after my best attempt at being a responsible captain, the house is overflowing with people, empty bottles, and red cups. Part of me is expecting David Skinner to walk through the door, or worse, Faulkner.

I doubt Coach would be too thrilled we decided to end the worst day ever with a party we were told not to have. Normally Friday parties are full of tired athletes, aching from Friday games or practice, looking to unwind and watch other people make some questionable choices. But tonight, there's something different in the air. It's almost like being reminded we shouldn't be misbehaving is making everyone want to go wild.

I spot Briar, Summer's roommate, pouring herself a drink at the kitchen counter, which immediately makes me feel better. Those girls are inseparable, so if B is here, Summer will be here somewhere. She can't reject me twice in one week, right?

Summer jokes the only reason I want her is because she's not interested, and she's the only woman who's ever rejected me. Hearing her say she's not interested makes me want her more, so thinking about it logically, she's probably right. As much as I want a chance with her, we are good friends, which makes her rejection sting a bit less.

I push past the masses of people and put on my friendliest *I wanna marry your best friend* face. She's so engrossed in the random liquor she's mixing, she doesn't even notice

me as I lean against the counter beside her. “That looks like you’re gonna be throwing up on my lawn later, Beckett.”

Her head snaps up, long blond hair swishing as she finds me next to her. “It’s a good job I’m not drinking alone then, isn’t it,” she slurs, her accent an unusual mix of English and American.

Her green eyes are glassy, and her smile is more of a lazy, drunken smirk as she winks at me and pushes the cup in my direction, immediately reaching for a new one. “I heard you had a shitty day. I did, too, we can be sick together.”

I wait until she’s mixed another disgusting concoction before tipping my cup to hers. “To dipshit sophomores.”

She snorts. “To dipshit ex-girlfriends.”

I throw back the drink and *fuck* does it sting. “*Jesus Christ.*” I choke as the fluid burns its way down my throat. “Who the fuck taught you to mix drinks?”

“My Uncle James. He calls it a magic cocktail. You looking for Summer?” She rolls her eyes at me when I nod. “She’s playing beer pong with Cami in the den.”

“I’ll remember this beautiful moment when I’m making the speech at mine and Summer’s wedding.” I knock back the rest of my poison, trying not to gag, but failing.

“No you won’t!” she shouts after me. “She knows you fucked Kitty last night!”

Fuck.

Summer is bent over the table, lining up a shot, when I push my way through the crowd to stand next to her. She’s playing Ryan and CJ from the basketball team with her other best friend, Cami.

“You winning?”

“Go away, Nathan.” She laughs, not bothering to look up at me. “You’re going to distract me.”

“Rude. What if I’m your good luck cha—” I don’t even get to finish my sentence because I’m eating my words as she sends the ball bouncing across the room by accident.

She finally looks up at me, her eyes murderous in a way I find weirdly sexy. I clear my throat. “I’ll cheer you on from over here.”

She rolls her eyes, muttering under her breath knowing I won’t understand her. “*Es buen cosa que eres atractivo.*”

Scanning the den to see who turned up, I immediately spot Miss I-don’t-have-a-name. She looks significantly more relaxed than she did earlier; her long light brown hair is curly, bouncing around her face as she throws back her head and laughs at something her friend said. Her cheeks are flushed, ocean-blue eyes bright; she looks happy.

I like it.

She spots me before I reach her, and I might be imagining it, but I swear she checks me out. “You made it!” I say cheerfully, although she doesn’t react. I try her friend instead, who’s staring at me with an intrigued look on her face. “I’m Nate.”

“Sabrina.” She flicks her finger between the two of us, eyes narrowing. “Do you two know each other?”

“We met earlier,” I confirm, watching her ignore my attempt to get her to look at me. She takes a sip from—what I can see from my height advantage—is an empty cup. “Didn’t get your name though, sadly.”

She stops pretending to drink and finally looks at my face. She only looks like she wants to hit me with a hockey stick a little bit now, which is a huge improvement from earlier.

“Anastasia. Or Stassie. Whichever, it doesn’t matter.”

“Can I get you guys a drink?”

“I can get my own, it’s fine.”

Sabrina huffs and rolls her eyes at her friend, smiling up at me. “Ignore her, she doesn’t know how to play nicely with others. Only child thing.”

“*Jesus*. Okay, I’ll help you though,” Anastasia says, walking off toward the kitchen, dragging Sabrina behind her with her free hand. I jog after them, scooping the empty cups from her grip. “A drink isn’t going to charm me into not being mad about the rink, y’know.”

I can believe that. Nothing about this girl tells me she’s going to be easy to crack, and it’s made this whole rink situation a bit more interesting. “You haven’t even seen how charming I can be yet,” I tease, grinning ear to ear when I catch the corner of her mouth creeping up. “You’re going to be impressed.”

She takes the cups back from my hands and moves in front of me to place them on the counter, getting to work making two drinks. “I’m immune to hockey player charm.”

Robbie wheels his chair to my side and digs me in the leg, mouthing *What the fuck* behind the girl’s backs with wide eyes. He clears his throat and they both turn to face him. “What about charming assistant hockey coaches?”

“Oh, she’s *definitely* immune to those, but I’m not. Hi, I’m Sabrina.”

“Robbie.”

Sabrina elbows Stassie who mumbles a “Hi.”

“This is Stassie. She acts like she’s grumpy but she’s actually very nice.”

“Thanks for coming to my party,” he says, not taking his eyes off her. I don’t know whether to cringe or stand in awe as she flutters her eyelashes at him and giggles.

Unbelievable.

Anastasia has the same blend of confusion and amusement on her face as she looks between our friends. “Brin, I’m going to get into line for the bathroom. Are you coming?” Sabrina’s eyes flick to hers then back to Robbie’s, before shaking her head. “Okay, I’ll meet you back here.”

I hold out a hand to lead her toward the stairs. “Come on, you can use my bathroom.” She looks at my hand once then back up to my face, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “I have a password-protected door and a private bathroom. You can join the line if you want?” I say, pointing toward the people drunkenly draping over the staircase.

She sighs in defeat and drops her hand into my palm, weaving her fingers between mine. “This isn’t me forgiving you.”

“Obviously.”

I navigate us through the crowd, keeping her body close to mine, her free hand resting gently on my waist until we reach the stairs. She walks around me to go first, and I immediately realize letting her go in front of me is a mistake, because as soon as she gets a few steps ahead, I’ve got her ass in my direct vision, swaying side to side as she takes each step.

I usher her in and point toward the bathroom, getting a weird sense of déjà vu watching her after this morning's antics. At least she's clothed. *Wait, why am I saying it like it's a good thing?*

She exits the bathroom after a couple of minutes, stopping in her tracks when she spots me waiting for her on my bed. I hold up my hands defensively. "I didn't want you to get lost."

"It's fine." She folds her arms across her chest and tilts her head to the side in a way that almost looks playful. "I'm disappointed you're here; I was going to snoop."

It's nice to see a different side to her after the one I met this afternoon. Not that there's anything wrong with showing emotion, I just prefer to see her more relaxed.

For the first time, I get a real look at what she's wearing. Tight leather pants that look like they were freaking painted on, and a black lace corset, showing her body in a way I'm not sure I even know how to describe. What I'm saying but not saying is she's hot, and maybe getting to know her a little better won't be a bad thing.

"Don't let my presence deter you from snooping," I joke. "I'll wait right here."

The sound of her heels clicking echoes around the room as she walks slowly toward my desk, not taking her eyes off me. Her fingers travel across the pile of biology books littering my desk. "What're you studying?"

"Sports medicine, you?"

"Business." She picks up a picture from my desk, analyzing it thoroughly before looking back at me. "West Coast kid?"

"Mountains."

"Wyoming?" she asks, putting the photograph down and picking up the one next to it.

"Close." I stand and walk over to the desk, taking the picture from her hand and replacing it with one of me and Robbie at our first hockey game when we were five. "Colorado. Eagle County. You?"

"I'm from Seattle. That's Vail right? Rich kid hockey star from Eagle County is a bit predictable, isn't it?" I sit on the desk so we're at eye level, folding my own arms to match her guarded stance. "A little bit cliché?"

I can't keep the smirk from my lips as her ocean-blue eyes lock with mine. "You think I'm a star?"

Turning quickly, she scoffs and heads across the room, sitting on my bed. I want to follow her like a little puppy, but I force myself to stay put, watching as she places her hands behind her and leans back, letting her silky brown hair drape over her shoulder.

"I've never watched you play," she says with a bit more cheer than I'd like. "I *strongly* dislike hockey."

"I'm offended, Anastasia. I'll have to get you tickets for rinkside seats at our next home game."

"I don't need tickets for an event in my own arena. That's if you guys don't fuck up before then and your team gets axed."

There is almost a bit too much optimism in her tone when she says the word *axed*. It's like being verbally abused by Tinkerbell.

"Who did you guys terrorize enough to deserve getting your rink trashed?"

This isn't going to be the last time I get asked this question, so I need to buckle up to take it, even though I hate lying to people. It's a white lie, but I'm not a fan of starting a friendship with a negative. "We haven't done anything, so I'm not sure." Her eyes narrow because she clearly doesn't believe me, so I panic. "I promise, Anastasia."

Her eyes soften and I immediately feel like shit. *Why the fuck did I promise?*

"Should we head back downstairs?"

"Sure. Robbie has probably charmed the pants off your friend by now."

She chuckles and it's borderline embarrassing how happy I feel finally getting her to laugh. "Trust me, Sabrina is more than happy to be charmed by a hot guy."

This time I'm smart enough to walk in front of her down the stairs, resting our interlocked hands on my shoulder for her to use me to balance. It's not until I'm on the bottom step I see her

boyfriend—who I'd forgotten existed—standing there, staring at me like all hell is about to break loose.

FIVE | ANASTASIA

NATE STOPS ABRUPTLY in front of me, almost sending me tumbling down the stairs.

“What’re you doing?” I ask, confused when he practically rips his hand from mine. He steps to the side, and as soon as his massive body is out of the way, I see what he can see.

“Your boyfriend looks like he wants to murder me.”

“Well, that’s odd,” I muse, moving so we’re on the same step. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

He’s right, though; Aaron does look ready to murder someone. It doesn’t change as he approaches me and Nate when we step off the last stair. “Hey,” I chirp. “I thought you were staying home tonight.”

Aaron is still staring at Nate, even when I place my hand on his arm and give it a squeeze. Aaron’s eyes finally meet mine, eyebrows raised. “What were you doing upstairs with him?”

I feel Nate beside me, the ghost of his touch hovering around the bottom of my back. I decide to play nice instead of tearing Aaron a new one for being so weird and rude in front of an audience like I want to. “Aaron, this is Nate. Nate, this is Aaron, my skating partner.”

The testosterone oozing out of them is practically palpable as they shake hands, each of their hands turning white when they try to crush each other’s bones. *Pathetic*. When they eventually let go and the blood returns to their fingers, I turn to Aaron and force a fake smile, even though he doesn’t deserve it. “You good? Where have you been?”

“I asked you first.”

“I was peeing, is that a sufficient answer?” I snap, finally losing my composure.

It’s been a long-ass day and I’ve already had to tolerate Aaron’s bullshit once, when he decided Ryan was public enemy number one after the meeting.

Ryan wanted to take me for food, you know, a normal activity between friends. Aaron kissed his teeth as he reminded me I have an outfit to fit into for regionals. Like I could ever possibly forget, especially being around him. Ryan was pissed, so told Aaron if he couldn’t lift me, he needs to work harder in the gym.

Of course, Aaron didn’t like that so fired back, and in the end, I was so tired of the drama Ryan ended up giving me a ride home. Unfortunately, my chicken salad didn’t taste as good with the knowledge that Ryan would have convinced me to eat a burger or something.

So now I’m irritated and hungry, a bit drunk, and once again watching Aaron be an ass and embarrass me.

Aaron quirks a brow, clearly not believing I was using the bathroom. “Thought you were collecting team captains like Pokémon. Where’s Rothwell? He’s normally the one draped all over you.”

His words hit me right in the chest like he wanted them to, and I can’t stop the lump forming in my throat. Nate’s hand settles on my back as he takes a step closer. “If you’re going to be a dick you need to leave, dude. People are trying to have a good night.”

“You’re intruding on a private conversation, *dude*,” Aaron responds bluntly.

“You’re in my house and you’re being rude to my guest. Lighten the fuck up or leave.”

Nate is a big guy, much bigger than Aaron. He’s a good half a foot taller, broader, more muscular. Not to mention he’s a freaking hockey player. Aaron is built like a ballet dancer, strong, too, but lean. Plus, has never been in a fight in his cushy, privileged life, which is why it’s so surprising to me that he starts shit with people who have.

“I’m sorry, Stas,” he says, my name slurring slightly. “I suppose I’m upset now I know why the rink was trashed.”

“Nobody knows what happened,” Nate answers quickly.

Too quickly.

Aaron laughs, but there’s no humor to it. “I do. Rookie couldn’t keep it in his pants. Knocked up someone’s little sister. Ghosted her.” He turns to me, the shock on his face clearly fake. “How bad is that, Stas? Ghosting the freshman you knocked up? And now we’re suffering.”

“That isn’t what happened,” Nate says coldly.

God, I feel foolish right now. I shouldn’t have believed his promise; of course he knows. My body stiffens under Nate’s hand, and he removes it quickly, moving away to give me space. “Well, this was fun,” I say flatly, trying not to show any emotion, since it’s clearly what Aaron was hoping for. “I’m heading home.”

“Cool, we can ride together. I’ll go find Brin.”

He’s a different guy in a matter of minutes. It’s like being friends with Jekyll and Hyde sometimes, especially after a drink when his nasty side comes out. It’s disappointing because most of the time he’s great, but he’s so fucking good at hiding the nice side of himself.

Nate pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers, blowing out a frustrated sigh as we both watch Aaron disappear into the crowd. “I didn’t want to lie to you.”

Putting some distance between us, I turn to face him. He looks like he’s got the weight of the world on his shoulders right now, and he might for all I know. But I have goals too. I love my sport and my time on the ice is as valuable as his.

He drags his hand down his face and forces a smile. “I don’t want this to affect our friendship, well, like, the friendship we could have.”

“You think a good friendship starts with a lie?”

“No, well,” he says, stumbling over his words. “I didn’t want to lie to you. But my team doesn’t even know, and I swear, it isn’t what happened. Your partner is lying too.”

I wish I hadn’t come to this party. “Great, so everyone is lying to me. *Fantastic*,” I say sarcastically. “Forget it, it’s fine. The hockey team can look after themselves, and the rest of us will, I dunno, go fuck ourselves or something.”

I doubt Dr. Andrews, my long-suffering therapist, would be impressed with me right now. *Communication is king* is what he’s said every session for over a decade. Technically, I am communicating, not very well, but it still counts. I don’t know how to tell Nate how stressful this whole situation is for me without seeming dramatic. Maybe I’m not trying hard enough to not react the way Aaron was hoping, but I blame the alcohol and lack of decent food.

Nate catches my arm as I turn to walk away. Looking at him over my shoulder, I see his face soften. “I promise, he only hooked up with her. She’s got a boyfriend and he didn’t know. Nothing about a pregnancy.”

He looks like he’s being genuine, but he did earlier as well. Turning to face him, I take a step back to keep enough distance between us but his hand stays on my arm. “No offense, but your promises don’t mean shit. You have zero idea the pressure I’m under, the sacrifices I’ve had to make. You have no idea how it feels, knowing it all hangs in the balance because some kid doesn’t know how to wrap up his dick.”

His brows furrow together, confusion maybe. “Hangs in the balance? You’re blowing this out of proportion. If we don’t overreact and we work toge—”

It’s like I can physically feel my blood boiling. Clearly he has no idea of the impact of his team’s mistakes. He has a full team to help him win, but it’s just me and Aaron. If we don’t practice enough, we don’t win. If we don’t win, we don’t go to the Olympics. If we don’t go to the Olympics, what was the fucking point?

There is a reason Maple Hills has two rinks. There is a reason it produces some of the best athletes in the country. It’s because the school makes sure we have enough space to get the time we need to be the best.

“You think I’m being dramatic? You know what, Nate,” I say sharply, shaking off his hand. “Forget it. Stay out of my way and I’ll stay out of yours.”

“Stassie!” he shouts after me as I head into the crowd.

But I ignore him, the start of what is going to be a lot of me ignoring him.

At the end of what is possibly the worst day ever, my level of irritation continues to rise because trying to find Sabrina in this house is like trying to find Waldo.

Aaron is also nowhere to be seen, although I can’t quite decide if it’s a good thing or a bad thing after his little performance.

I track down Ryan easily; it wasn’t hard since he’s still in the den with his basketball friends. However, I wasn’t expecting to find him sitting on a couch, whispering into the ear of Olivia Abbott.

Weirdly, my first thought is *I wonder if Sabrina knows her archnemesis is here*, but after I shake that off, I’m in shock.

I don’t think I’ve seen Olivia at a party before, ever. She’s even more beautiful up close than she is on the stage; long golden-blond hair styled like an old Hollywood icon, eyeliner that would take me three weeks to perfect, and a perfect red lip. She looks like she should be going on the red carpet, not sitting at a college party.

“Hey, I’m sorry to interrupt,” I say as I approach them. Ryan stops whispering and looks up at me. “Have you guys seen Sabrina?”

Ryan immediately looks concerned, even though he doesn’t need to be. Well, unless I murder Aaron tonight and he has to help me hide the body. “Everything okay?”

“Aaron being Aaron. We’re heading home.”

“I saw her go into Robbie’s room with him quite a while ago,” Olivia says quietly. “I can make sure she gets home okay if you need to go. I’m not drinking and my car is right outside.”

“Do you need my help with Aaron?” Ryan asks cautiously.

“Olivia, if you could I will love you forever,” I promise, breathing a sigh of relief now I know Brin is covered. “Aaron will be fine now he’s got all his bitchiness out. I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to talk to you tonight, Olivia. You look beautiful, next time we can get to know each other properly. My Uber is outside, though, so I need to go.”

She gives me a shy smile. “That would be nice. See you soon.”

“Text me when you get home, ’kay?” Ryan shouts as I walk away. “I mean it, Stas. Don’t forget.”

I know it might be weird to think about the guy you have casual sex with and your best friend’s fake archnemesis together, but an Abbott x Rothwell relationship would be the type teenage girls cry over because of how perfect it is.

Ryan and I work so well because I don’t want a relationship, and he doesn’t care. If he found someone he wanted to date, I would never stand in his way. He deserves to be loved like that and he deserves to be happy, because he’s such an amazing guy.

He would be Olivia’s greatest supporter, and maybe he’d bring her out of her shell a little. I don’t know Olivia yet, but even when she gets the role Brin wants, Brin can’t deny Olivia seems like a nice girl.

I can’t wait to see where this goes.

I STARTED WORKING at Simone’s Rink freshman year when Rosie, a friend of a friend, mentioned her mom was looking to hire help.

The cost of textbooks was mounting up and I couldn’t ask my parents for money, since they were already paying for all my skating stuff. Simone, the owner, paid for me to do a coaching qualification, which meant I could teach Saturday classes to kids under ten.

“All good?” Simone asks, walking into the break room where I’m sitting, contemplating what to eat.

“Yeah, great. I’m gonna go grab some lunch before my next class, I think.”

“There is a very handsome man in reception asking for you,” she says with a wink. “Looks like he has food with him.”

Venturing out to the reception desk, I see Simone was right, there is a very handsome man.

Ryan looks super out of place with the energetic six-year-olds circling him, screeching. The second he spots me, his tired eyes soften, and the corner of his mouth tugs up. He holds up paper bags in each hand. “Wanna be my lunch date?”

“I’ve got another class at one p.m.; can you eat all that in thirty minutes?”

“I can achieve a lot in thirty minutes, Anastasia, you should know that by now.”

We settle down at a table in a quiet corner next to the concession stand, and he begins to unbox the food. “Before you shout at me, I got you a Cobb salad...but I also got you a side of bacon cheese fries and nuggets, because I saw your post this morning about how important balance is.”

I roll my eyes because I’m not sure which of us is becoming more predictable. “Balance is important, stop teasing me! Anyway, thank you. You didn’t have to bring me lunch, well, two lunches, but I appreciate you. Where did you end up last night?”

Ryan takes a bite of his cheeseburger and stuffs in some fries, groaning happily. “West Hollywood at The Honeypot. I overdid it.”

“With Olivia?”

I swear his cheeks blush a little. “No, Liv headed home unfortunately. Stop looking at me like that.”

“Oh, she’s *Liv* now is she? I’m excited for you. I’m allowed to be excited, so you can’t stop me. You haven’t dated anyone in so long, and she seems like a nice person from the little I know.”

“I’m not dating her, drama queen. We exchanged numbers.”

“The first step of any marriage.”

He huffs, shrugging and wiping his hands on a napkin. “We’ll see. Why can’t you marry me, Allen?”

“Why did you skip over being your girlfriend and go straight to marriage?”

“Why date when we’re already best friends? Dating is scary. Mind-blowing sex and someone who doesn’t get pissy with my schedule? Sign me up, I’ll put a ring on it right now. Will you accept an onion ring instead of a diamond?”

“I don’t get pissy with your schedule because I’m too busy to notice you’re busy,” I say, leaning over to nudge him in the arm. “Olivia is nice, Ry. Take her out and see how it goes. Worst-case scenario you can tell your future kids you went on a date with a famous movie star or Broadway star, whatever she ends up becoming.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea for me to take advice from you? A huge commitmentphobe?”

He might have a point there.

“I’ll ask her out, but if it goes horribly wrong, Anastasia, I’m blaming you.”

“That’s fair.”

“Want to tell me what went on with Aaron?” I can tell by the tone of his voice he’s trying his best to seem calm and uninterested. In actual fact, based on the twelve texts he sent me at various stages of the night, I know he’s very interested.

“He asked me if I was collecting team captains like Pokémon,” I drawl, unboxing my nuggets and throwing one into my mouth. “Saw me coming downstairs with Nate Hawkins and assumed I’d fucked him.”

“What the fuck is that guy’s problem?” Ryan mutters, stabbing his fries into ketchup aggressively. “I don’t know how you spend so much time with him. Even if you had been hooking up with Hawkins, it’s no one else’s business. You’re a single woman and you can do what you want.”

“I know, I know. But then Aaron revealed he’d found out what happened with the rink trashing, and Nate had promised me he didn’t know minutes earlier, so it caused a bit of an argument.”

“Aaron is a dick, Stassie. It’s not great Hawkins lied, but at the same time, he’s gotta put his team first. It’s not the same as me lying to you or something, you guys don’t have trust yet. Surely you understand?”

“Yeah, of course I do, but when I was trying to explain how much this impacts me, he made out I was being dramatic. And whether I was or not doesn’t matter. How are we supposed to be equals when he doesn’t even try to see my point of view?”

“Being captain is a tough gig, take it from me. You’ve gotta think of twenty-plus people as well as yourself. They’re all looking for you to have their back, no matter what senseless shit they’ve done. It can fucking suck sometimes. Hawkins is a good guy, though, don’t hold it against him.”

I’m having an intense staring contest with my nuggets because I can’t face looking at Ryan’s while he talks sense.

He snickers, leaning forward to grab my attention. “You’re going to hold it against him, aren’t you?”

“Definitely, without a doubt. Forever. Even longer than forever if I can manage it. They threw a huge curveball into the mix, and I’m going to stay away from all of them.”

He’s laughing at himself before he even says anything. “You know curveballs are baseball not hockey, right?”

SIX | NATHAN

THE LAST THREE weeks have been some of the most stressful of my life.

Aaron Carlisle—God, even his name sounds dick-ish—ran his mouth off to anyone who would listen. Including his coach, who told our coach, who then threatened to start tearing off limbs if someone didn't explain to him what the hell was going on.

I've spent more time getting screamed at with the team than I have playing hockey with them recently. The guys who trashed the rink were on the UCLA hockey team, our closest rival college. Aaron wasn't fully lying; the girl is pregnant, but it has nothing to do with Russ.

The poor kid didn't know anything about it; he thought he'd been hooking up with someone's girlfriend. She blamed him when her older brother found out, and she panicked. I suppose it was easier to blame a stranger, and I doubt she expected him to drive over here and fuck up our arena.

Russ has aged about ten years since this started. The relief on his face when we told him the real story was unbelievable. Faulkner and I had a meeting with the UCLA coach and captain, and they were able to tell us the full story. I've known Cory, the captain, for years and he was as pissed about this as I am.

I felt like Dr. Phil giving the results of a paternity test, well, Jerry Springer is more accurate for this bunch. Safe to say, we're all on thin ice with Faulkner. He said the next person to do something irresponsible will get benched for the rest of the season. He said he didn't care about our post-college prospects; he'd forfeit every game until we learned how to behave.

I'm on my best behavior for the rest of the year because I'm not sure Vancouver will still want me if I get expelled or delimbed, and there is no fucking way I'm going back to Colorado after I leave this place.

Is it a cliché being a guy who grew up with immense privilege and also having daddy issues? Yes. But in my defense, my dad is a massive jackass. I'm pretty sure he didn't get hugged enough as a child and now he's making it my and my sister's problem.

Luckily, I managed to move a thousand miles away, but poor Sasha is still stuck with him since she's only sixteen. Even when she turns eighteen, I doubt he'll let her leave. She'll be stuck being an underappreciated, overworked skiing prodigy.

Dad is prepared to throw money at every coach in the northern hemisphere, if it means Sash gets to be the next Lindsey Vonn. Ideally without the injuries, but I'm not sure he's concerned about her safety anyway; he just wants her to win.

Thankfully, he hates hockey. *Careless, violent sport for people who lack discipline and crave chaos*, he says. It was Mom who signed me up for Mr. H's team all those years ago. She was pregnant with Sasha at the time and needed something that would tire out her energetic five-year-old.

I didn't take to skiing like my dad had hoped, and I can proudly say I've been disappointing him every day since. He wouldn't even be surprised if I told him what has been going on recently, but it would involve answering his calls, and that isn't something I tend to do.

Plus, he'd only find a way for it to be my fault.

The intensity of Robbie's stare feels like it's burning into my skin, which jolts me from my thoughts.

Annoying him is my favorite thing to do, and it makes me realize why JJ likes being an asshole so much. Rob keeps dropping things on the floor, banging his phone against the TV remote to make a clanging noise, and after about ten minutes of getting no response, he's started coughing loudly.

I keep my eyes on the TV and smother the urge to smirk. Mike Ross is about to nail another case when Henry elbows me in the side. "Robbie is trying to get your attention. Are you ignoring him on purpose?"

"Great question, Henry, thank you," Robbie shouts dramatically. "Are you ignoring me on purpose, Nathan?"

When I finally look at him, he's staring at me like an unimpressed mother. "Sorry, buddy. Did you want something?"

Robbie mutters something under his breath, followed by a loud huff. "Have you organized my birthday party?"

"You mean the surprise birthday party? The one you *specifically* said you didn't want to know anything about? So it was, y'know, an *actual* surprise?"

Six weeks ago, Robbie told me he wanted a surprise party for his birthday, claiming hosting parties is very stressful and time-consuming. He didn't want to deal with the problems of his own birthday, so I needed to do it. I told him if it was such a hassle, he didn't need to organize our parties anymore.

He called me a dipshit and told me to grow up.

"If the surprise is you haven't sorted anything, I don't fucking want it."

Henry immediately stands, his eyes darting between me and Robbie, and rushes toward the stairs. Robbie follows his fleeting frame with narrowed eyes before flicking back to me. I shrug it off, acting like I don't know Henry has been worried about spoiling the surprise for weeks. The kid doesn't have a poker face, and he's convinced himself with only a few more days to go, he's going to fail at the last hurdle.

"You need to relax, Robert," I say, knowing using his full name will rile him up a little bit more. "Stress isn't good in your old age."

I think that's the end of it, but instead, he scratches at his jaw and makes an *uhm* sound. It's not like Mr. Confident to struggle with his words, so now he has captured my attention like he wanted to. "Did you...Did you invite Sabrina?"

Oh, this is fun. "Who?"

I narrowly avoid the cushion he launches in my direction. "Don't be a dick, *Nathaniel*. You know who she is."

Three weeks ago, when I was royally fucking up with Stassie, Robbie was getting better acquainted with her best friend. He won't tell me what happened, claiming he's a gentleman, but it's hard not to draw your own conclusions when she only left on Saturday afternoon, wearing one of his T-shirts.

I haven't seen her since, so I thought it was a one-night thing but judging by the nervous look on his face, maybe not. "Would you want her there? In the hypothetical situation where there is a party?"

“We’ve been talking, so yeah. Hypothetically.”

Robbie has no problems with women, but I can’t pretend he doesn’t rotate them when he gets bored. The fact he’s talking to her and not only hooking up with her is a good sign.

“Noted. Ready for practice?” I ask him, carefully changing the subject before I give away party secrets.

“Yeah, let me get my sweatshirt first.”

Shit. Now I have to find a way to get Sabrina here.

JJ IS sprinting down our street as I’m putting Robbie’s chair into the trunk of my car. Pressing the button to lower the falcon-wing doors, I climb into the driver’s seat and put the car into reverse, automatically locking all the doors.

He bangs on the window, panting and mumbling something inaudible. I lower the window a little so I can hear him. “Don’t leave without me, you douchebag.”

“Hurry up!” I bark back, watching him frantically run toward the front door to get his stuff. I’d feel sorry for him if I didn’t know he’s been tucked up with one of the football cheerleaders since last night.

This whole situation with sharing a rink means we’re training at different times each day. Since it’s technically their arena, Coach Brady demanded we work around the skaters’ scheduled training. A lot of them have competitions coming up and she argued anything less than our total agreement wasn’t going to work for her.

Aubrey Brady is a fucking terrifying woman, and she has Faulkner’s balls in an iron vice. As soon as she found out why our rink was trashed, she used it to bully Skinner into bowing to her every demand, and now she owns us.

I can’t blame her, she’s looking out for her athletes, but awkwardly brushing past Stassie every day got old quickly. Seeing how hot she is in her skating stuff got old quickly. Watching her joke around with her dickhead skating partner, you guessed it, old.

Quickly.

She looks at me like she wants to set me on fire most of the time, or alternatively, she doesn’t look at me at all. The girl knows how to hold a grudge, with everyone except Henry apparently.

Last week, Henry saw Anastasia studying in the library alone. He bought her a coffee, explained about the Russ situation, apologized profusely, saying he totally understood why she was so upset, and now he’s the only one of us in her good graces.

“Why do you always want girls who don’t like you?” Henry asked me as she stomped past us one afternoon, still managing to flash him a sweet smile. “Summer, Kitty, Anastasia... Why?”

“Fucking hell, Hen,” JJ spluttered out, choking on his water. “Kick the guy while he’s down, why don’t you.”

“I don’t know, kiddo,” I confessed, wrapping my arm around his shoulders as his cheeks flushed at the guys laughing. “You find me a nice girl who likes me back and I’ll give it a shot.”

JJ snorted. “He’s not a fucking miracle worker, Hawkins.”

Robbie claims he could be in her good graces if he wanted to be, and Jaiden said he prefers being the mysterious bad boy anyway. As for me, I could bow down at her feet and apologize, but I think she'd use it as an excuse to kick me in the head.

Parking up outside the rink, I let the guys know I'll see them in there, quickly climbing out to jog toward the door. She's throwing her skates into her bag when I push through the doors, her eyes flick up in response to the noise, but she grimaces when she realizes it's me.

Charming.

I sit on the bench beside her bag and clear my throat. "Anastasia?"

Her eyes lock with mine, plush lips immediately pouting. "What do you want?"

"I need a favor."

"No"

"You haven't even heard what it is yet."

"Don't need to. The answer is no."

"What if I told you it's super important to both of our best friend's happiness?"

She sighs, a noise I'm used to hearing now, putting her hands on her hips. "I'll bite. Go on."

"It's Robbie's twenty-first birthday on Saturday and I'm throwing him a surprise party. He'd like Sabrina there, could you pass on the message? You're invited, too, obviously."

"Fine."

Success, maybe. "Sweet, thanks. It's Vegas themed, so black tie. Free bar, poker tables, all the fun stuff. I hope you guys come; it'll make Robbie very happy."

"Okay." She struts off toward the opening doors, the guys coming through at the same time. She pats Henry's arm and murmurs "Hi" as she passes him, and the kid's cheeks flush again.

When she's officially out of earshot, JJ traps me in a headlock, cackling as I fight him off. "You're losing your touch, Hawkins. The kid has more game than you."

"I'm not trying to date her," Henry says quickly, scratching at his jaw nervously. "I'm trying to be nice to her, y'know, so she likes us again. She's got a boyfriend anyway."

"He's her skating partner, not her boyfriend. She doesn't have a boyfriend, she told me so herself."

Henry shakes his head. "Not him, Ryan Rothwell. I saw them hugging last week."

"Hugging someone is hardly the sign of a relationship, Hen. Kris and Mattie would be in a relationship with half the campus, if that were the case," Robbie says with a snort.

"They were making out and he was grabbing her ass," Henry adds.

Great.

Aaron is still fucking about on the ice when we're all ready to start practice. He's an obnoxious prick and I truly cannot stand the guy. It's got nothing to do with Stassie, either, he gives me the worst vibes imaginable, and it's enough for me to hate him. Obviously, it doesn't help he fucked us all over with his big mouth.

I know I said it wasn't about her, but one thing I don't like about him is how he speaks to Anastasia when they're skating. I gave him the benefit of the doubt at the party because

he was clearly wasted, but because of their class schedules, a lot of the time their session is pre or post ours.

When we're either early or finishing up, I hear him telling her not to be sloppy this session or telling her she'll get it one of these days in the world's most patronizing tone.

It's shitty, but it's none of my business. She's not the type of girl who needs defending, and if I were to try, it'd probably land me higher up her hit list.

When he hears us coming, he finally skates to the edge. He's wearing the smuggest grin when he spots me. He's already massively testing my patience, and he hasn't even opened his mouth. I'm sure if I punched him, I'd feel better. But thinking back to what Faulkner said about behaving, I take a deep breath instead. See? I can be an adult.

"She's not going to fuck you. You're wasting your time."

"Excuse me?"

Don't punch him. Don't punch him. Don't punch him.

"You heard me." He sits on the bench and starts to unlace his skate, not bothering to look at my shocked face.

The guys are dragging the goals onto the ice and Robbie is talking to Faulkner, otherwise, I'd be looking for confirmation I was hearing this jackass correctly.

"You might think she's playing hard to get, but she's not. The iciest thing about her is her heart. She'll drag you along like she does Rothwell, so save yourself the trouble."

This fucking guy.

"You're a dick, do you know that?" I tell him brazenly.

He throws his skate in his bag and switches to the other one, looking up at me to grin. "Truth hurts, buddy."

"I'm not your fucking buddy." I clench my fist, desperately trying to keep my temper at bay. "And if you talk about her like that again, you're going to be picking your teeth up from that rink."

He gives me a sickly sweet smile. My fingers crunch, I'm clenching my fist so tightly, but he's unfazed enough to bump into my shoulder as he passes me. As he reaches the exit, he turns to face me. "I'm going to enjoy watching her turn you into a simpering fool, just to drop you like she does everyone else. Happy skating."

SEVEN | ANASTASIA

TEAM BUILDING.

Two words. Twelve letters. Two hours of hell.

“We’re going to be doing some icebreaker activities,” Brady announces to the room. She sounds as enthusiastic as I feel; I know she doesn’t want to do this because she bitched to me about it on the way here. Coach Faulkner is standing by her side, also looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

David Skinner—who is becoming a pain in my ass—wants to see an improvement in the *dynamic* between our two groups. Brady told me Skinner happened to drop in when Ruhi, one of the younger solo skaters, was arguing with one of the hockey guys for interrupting her skate. Skinner got to witness Ruhi’s creative use of hockey-based insults.

So now, we’re team building.

What a great use of time I could be spending doing *anything* else. I may as well throw out my planner since nobody seems to give a shit about my routine anymore.

Faulkner clears his throat, looking to Brady for guidance. He looks out of place anywhere that isn’t an ice rink, and if I wasn’t so miserable about being stuck in the awards room again, I’d probably find it funny.

“I’m sure all of you have heard of speed dating,” Brady says. “My skaters, you’re going to each sit at a table. Hockey team, you will move from table to table every five minutes.”

“A reminder: this is not real dating,” Faulkner bellows, finally saying something. “The goal is to get to know each other better. Discuss your aspirations, your hobbies, your dog’s name, I don’t care, but keep it respectful. Hughes, Hudson, Carter, and Johal, to be clear, I’m specifically talking to you four.”

The four guys each pretend to be shocked, gaining a laugh from the rest of their teammates.

“This is a joke.” Aaron groans. “We’re not kids.”

As much as it pains me to agree with Aaron, I sort of do. He’s been on his best behavior for the past three weeks, and he’s been an absolute dream to be with. He even treated me and Brin to dinner at Aiko, a fancy Japanese restaurant I wouldn’t be able to afford otherwise.

He seems to have turned things around and I’m so grateful. I haven’t seen Ryan a lot because he’s been spending a lot of time with Olivia, but when he does come over, Aaron has been nice. I try to see the positives so Aaron doesn’t get grumpy. “It might be fun. Some of them are nice.”

I have the *softest* soft spot for Henry Turner, one of the sophomores on the hockey team. I was stressing over my corporate social responsibility essay in the library when he approached me, sporting a worried look. He introduced himself, explaining he was on the team and he’d heard what happened. He said he couldn’t tell me too much, but he wanted to explain.

Then he proceeded to tell me everything about everyone.

Henry started with explaining that Nathan put an end to the prank traditions the minute he became captain. He promised there was nothing the team—including Nathan—could have done to prevent this disaster.

Russ, the impregnator—or not impregnator as it turns out—has a difficult home life, which he’s managed to escape by working exceptionally hard to get a full-ride scholarship.

Nathan knew that if people found out, Russ might lose his scholarship, and with his parents being unable to cover his tuition, he’d have no choice but to head back to the life he’s worked so hard to get away from. Nathan didn’t even trust his own team with the information, that’s how protective he is of Russ, despite his indiscretions.

Henry wanted me to know that Russ isn’t some cocky trust fund kid, he’s quiet and tries to keep out of trouble, and Henry can relate to that because he’s the same. He didn’t make any friends freshman year; even though he’s from Maple Hills, college was overwhelming for him.

He hated dorms but without friends to live with, he was going to have to stay on or move home. Nathan offered him a room in their house, even though a sophomore living with seniors is unheard of on their team. That was his basis for telling me how much of a good guy his captain is, and while I’m mad now, I should try to give him a chance.

After telling me gossip about all the team members I don’t know yet, he finished off his speech by telling me I was the most beautiful figure skater he’d ever seen. He quickly followed that by clarifying he meant my performance, not my appearance, and that when I’m not landing on my ass or looking like a baby giraffe, my performance is exceptional.

And if I wasn’t enamored with him enough, he bought me a coffee and helped me study.

Brady claps her hands to get us all moving. I take a seat on the other side of the room to Aaron. He might be being friendly at the moment, but it doesn’t mean I want to have him listening in on my conversations.

I can do five-minute conversations, right? That’s only two and a half minutes each. I can talk about myself for that long. It’s going to be fine.

I think.

My first *date* takes a seat in front of me, immediately making me feel relaxed with a huge smile. His buzz cut is bleached blond, the golden-brown skin of his arms is covered in intricate black tattoos, which I can see because the second he sat down, he rolled up his sleeves and winked at me. His jawline is covered in short stubble and he has a small silver nose ring. He looks like the type of guy you could get into heaps of trouble with, but in a good way.

He holds out a hand for me to shake, which feels oddly formal. “Jaiden Johal, but you can call me JJ.”

This feels awkward, but I go for it anyway. “Anastasia Allen. Stassie is fine too.”

“Oh, I’m more than aware of who you are. I make it my mission to know any woman that puts Nate Hawkins in his place. I’m a big fan.”

I’m blushing, *great*. “Thanks? I think. Tell me about yourself. We’ve gotta fill five minutes somehow.”

The room is filled with the sound of people chatting, which is a positive sign. JJ stretches out his legs, getting comfortable in his seat. “I’m twenty-one. I’m a Scorpio sun,

moon, and rising. I'm from Nebraska, which if you've ever been to Nebraska, you'll know there is nothing to fucking do." He rubs his palm against his face, pausing to think of what to say next. "I play defense, I'm going to San Jose Marlins when I graduate, I hate pickles. Faulkner said we weren't allowed to talk about sexual stuff, so I don't know what else to say."

Looking at the clock on my phone, we've covered ninety seconds.

"I'm twenty-one. I'm from Seattle, I'm an only child, I work at Simone's Rink. I've been figure skating since I was a kid, always pair skating, and I've been skating with Aaron since freshman year." I shift in my seat uncomfortably, wishing JJ was still talking about himself. "Our goal is Team USA, we wanna be at the next Olympics." *Why is this so hard?* "I study business. You wanna know my big three?"

He nods enthusiastically. "Obviously."

"Virgo sun and rising, cancer moon." He hisses and shakes his head immediately. "What?"

"Cancer moon. Red flag."

"From the triple Scorpio?"

Jaiden holds up his hands defensively, widening his hazel eyes. "I'll have you know we are incredibly misunderstood."

Looking at the clock again, we've got one minute left. "Sixty seconds. Anything else?"

He rubs his hands together in a way that makes me worried about what he's about to ask. "Would you rather...have a fish head but your body, or would you rather have your head but a fish body?"

At least thirty seconds pass where I stare at him, unable to formulate a response. He taps at the watch on his wrist. "Tick tock, Stassie. Time's almost up."

"I don't know."

"Ten, nine, eight, seven..."

"Fish head with my body. I think. God, that's disgusting to visualize."

"Great choice," he praises, looking satisfied with my answer. Brady blows her whistle, indicating for everyone to switch. He winks at me again and I'm definitely blushing. "I hope to see more of you soon."

Time flies as each guy sits at my table before moving on. Three freshmen asked for my number, a guy called Bobby spent our five minutes talking about a girl instead of himself, and when a guy called Mattie realized we're on the same course, he spent five minutes asking me to explain our latest assignment and writing the answers on his phone.

Robbie approaches my table when the whistle blows, and it's nice to see someone I kind of know. "Anastasia."

"Robbie. Fancy meeting you here."

Sabrina and Robbie might be a thing, I'm not sure. She's not even sure. The second she found out we'd be *team building* together, I was given strict instructions to find out. "How are you?"

"I'm good. I'm hoping you're going to spend the next four minutes and—" he looks at his watch, "—twenty-eight seconds talking about your roommate."

She's gonna lose her mind when I get home. It's the easiest four minutes of my life; Brin is an open book, what you see is what you get. Talking about her to someone else is easy, because she likes everything and she's the most loving and supportive friend ever.

I'm ashamed to say, Joe and Kris are very funny and had me slapping my hand over my mouth to stop laughing, which is so annoying because I had no intention of adding other hockey players to my approved list.

It was going to be Henry only, forever.

Ten minutes of laughing was well-timed, because I'm in a good mood when Russ sits at my table.

It feels pointless describing hockey players at this point, because the only word that ever comes to mind is *big*. Russ is no different, but the one thing that sets him apart from his friends is his baby face. Unlike the rest of the team, there is no stubble in sight. His eyes are big and soft—like a puppy.

I've never noticed before, but I've also never seen him up close. He looks nervous as hell, too, and I think back to what Henry told me about him being a quiet guy. "I'm Stassie. Russ, right?"

He nods, the tips of his ears reddening. "Yeah. It's nice to meet you. Do you wanna talk about yourself or something? I don't have anything interesting to tell you."

Oh, Russ, why did you have to be like a timid animal when I want to be mad at you?

I launch into the same spiel I've given every other guy; he asks follow-up questions that keep me talking, and by the time the whistle goes and he's moving on, I still don't know anything about him. "It was nice to meet you," he says gently as he leaves.

The activity is nearly over, and I'm incredibly annoyed that it's sort of had the desired effect. It's hard to begrudge letting the guys share the rink after you've heard all about their aspirations and motivations.

I mean, I said it's hard. It's not impossible.

Through the process of elimination, I know I've only got two people left. My social battery is wavering, but I try to push through, because I know it's worth it when Henry drops himself into the seat in front of me.

"This is unnecessary, isn't it?" he mutters, placing his elbows on the table to rest his head in his hands. "Why do I need to know what someone's childhood pet is called or when their birthday is? The only person who cares about that information is a hacker. And I don't even like computers."

I'm in shock.

During the few one-on-one encounters we've had, Henry was calm and so laid back he was practically horizontal. It appears Skinner has found the thing to get under his skin—forced socialization.

"Please don't tell me about your pets, Anastasia," he begs, brushing his hand over his short, auburn curls, sighing heavily. "I don't have the energy to pretend to care."

"You wanna sit in silence? You only have one more person after me. You can have a little pre-finale break."

"That's a good idea, thanks."

Henry shuts his eyes and I have no choice but to just watch him have a micronap. I feel like a creep, but equally, what else am I supposed to do? He could go into modeling if

hockey doesn't work out for him. Perfectly symmetrical face, smooth, glowy brown skin, the most defined cheekbones I've ever seen on a man. He's beautiful.

"I can feel you staring at me. Can you stop?"

I'm glad he keeps his eyes closed, that way he can't see the very aggressive shade of red my face turns. Brady's whistle blows and Henry struts off with only a glance in my direction.

There's only one person I haven't faced yet and it's the one person I've been dreading. He takes forever—or what feels like forever, at least—to take a seat. He's in a Maple Hills Titans T-shirt and gray sweats, and I hate myself for being a woman swayed by a man in gray sweatpants. *Shit*. No, there will be no swaying.

"Hi," he says cheerfully. "I'm Nathan Hawkins."

"You're playing it like that, are you?"

He ignores my questions and quirks an eyebrow. "And you are?"

"Nathan, what are you doing?" I ask, folding my arms and leaning back in my seat. He mirrors me, folding his own arms. To an outsider, we probably look like the least approachable table, which to be fair, we might be.

"We're starting over. Everyone loves a fresh start, right? Let's have one. You can't stay mad forever."

"I was planning to stay mad longer than forever, so I feel like you're massively underestimating me." He starts laughing and I don't know what to do with myself, because my face is fighting to smile too.

Damnit.

"Your commitment to the cause is admirable, Allen," he teases. "I already know you're a figure skater, you're studying business, and you're from Seattle. I've found out that you can be terrifying, but you can also be sweet." My eyebrows immediately shoot up, confused, so he clarifies. "To Henry, not to me."

"Henry has been nice to me."

His face sinks a little, the charming façade slipping. "I want to be nice to you. Look, I'm sorry I lied to you. My hands were tied and I had to put Russ first. I honestly do want to be your friend, Anastasia."

"I know, I get it. You don't know me, can't trust me or whatever, and that's fine. I understand that, but I tried to share how I was feeling so you could see my side, and you immediately brushed it off as an overreaction."

I feel naïve sharing this, but I've had enough therapy in my life to know I should try to communicate my feelings. Well, when I'm not being petty. People keep telling me Nathan is a good guy, so I'm giving him the opportunity to be one.

"I can see why that would make you want to stay away from me." His hand sinks into his hair, tugging with what looks like annoyance at himself. "I'm sorry, it's not okay that I did that. Can we start again?"

Brady's whistle blows for the final time, but he doesn't move. He waits for me to answer, his brown eyes practically staring into my freaking soul.

"You're on probation."

Heat creeps back to my cheeks when he gives me the brightest smile. "I'm gonna nail it."

“You better.”
Shit, shit, shit.

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