



Kiss and Cry

Part 3

Meadow Murphy

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(The conclusion)

By
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[Obooko Edition](#)

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Prologue

As previous Olympic pairs champions, I am known in the media for being freshly divorced and dumped by my all too handsome skating partner and soon-to-be ex-husband, Ryan Kennedy.

He ignored me for three very long months after finding out Adam, my ex-boyfriend (the first true love of my life who de-virginized me) kissed me in Tara's bathroom. I started batting him off before sinking into that needy kiss of his and why shouldn't I have, after all, Ryan slept with my best friend Sierra and got her knocked up (she ended up aborting the baby). Surely one kiss with Adam is more forgivable than THAT.

Ryan met me at the airport, ready to talk. He took me back to where we first fell in love, the rink. It was the most romantic destination he could have chosen for us. He said he was willing to give me another chance at regaining his trust and that he wanted me back, on the ice and in his bed. It would have been music to my ears, something I wanted more than anything else in the world, had it not been for all the hurt feelings I couldn't manage to bury. Its time for me to spread my wings.

"I need a minute," I say before stepping off the ice. We sit next to each other by the rink removing our skates before leaving the ice pad. He follows me down to the locker rooms walking closely behind. He rests his hand on my shoulder and turn to face him, "Rethink your decision," he pleads, "you're the only one I want, the only one I can ever see myself skating with."

"You don't know what you put me through," I pout.

"I didn't mean to put you through anything," he explains. "I was hurt, and I needed time."

“We both were, but if there’s anything I’ve learned from being away from you, is that I have to do what’s right for me, I’m sorry Ry. We have to go back to your house and tell our mom’s.”

“Tell them what?” he says cautiously.

“We’re finished. It’s what you wanted in the first place anyway.”

“I’m stopping for coffee,” he says pulling into the same Starbucks Adam took me to ages ago when I first dated him. If I remember correctly, we sat at the table next to the one I chose today. Adam wouldn’t let me have a chair, he wanted me to sit on his lap. We used to think our problems were so serious back then. He would kiss me like he was going to do it with me right on the spot, it didn’t matter how many patrons were watching us. He was so rebellious and hot back then, our relationship new and exciting. We didn’t have any complications or expectations, and sadly, dad was still alive.

Ryan goes to order our drinks, he knows what I like so he doesn’t ask me before ordering. I notice his mood plummet dramatically after our little chat at the rink. Maybe the harsh reality of our current situation is finally dawning him.

He places our drinks down and takes a chair immediately next to me.

“They’re going to find out sooner or later that we’re not skating together and we’re filing for divorce,” I tell Ryan.

“Who said anything about filing for divorce?”

“I guess I am.”

His face loses its colour as I gaze into his eyes. For a second, I almost feel sorry for him. He looks at me wearily, “I don’t want to rush into a divorce, what if we change our minds?”

“I won’t,” I say confidently. I don’t know what’s in store for me, but what I do know, is that it’s not going to be with him. I don’t trust him not to break my heart again and I know it will be too hard to maintain a professional relationship with him.

“What about all the show’s we’ve already booked? You said yourself, you need the money,” he argues rather convincingly.

“I do need the money but I’ll find another way to make it.”

“How? You’re going to school full-time. Have you even thought this through?”

“No Ryan, I haven’t.”

“Shouldn’t you?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“You’ll never make as much money as we can together. I’m not ready to give up skating yet,” he says sounding desperate. It isn’t just about the shows anymore, it’s about us. He’s too proud to say it.

“The money isn’t everything and I’m not forcing YOU to quit skating, you can always find another partner or skate alone.” I say honestly.

“I can’t even imagine skating with anyone else. Tell me what you need. I’ll do anything.”

“I need for us to stop hurting each other and move on.”

“I won’t hurt you anymore if we stay together.”

“How can you promise that?”

“I will.”

“Says the one who filed for separation.”

“It was a mistake. If you stop skating with me, then you’ll probably have to drop out of Uni.”

“Then if that’s what I have to do, I’ll do it.”

“Dal,” he says raking his fingers through his hair. He doesn’t touch his coffee.

“Don’t Ryan, let’s go home.”

Mom and Aunt Rosalind are sitting around the dining room table being waited on by Sara when we get back. Their dishes are half empty and it appears as though they have finished their first bottle of chardonnay and are working on their second. They are light drinkers, so spirits are running high as we approach the table.

When we walk in they see our faces and all chatting ceases. The room becomes uncomfortable at best, Sara wipes her hands dry on her Anastasia Grey apron. She locks eyes on her son who shakes his head despairingly answering her

unspoken question. Her gaze lands on me waiting for an explanation. I can tell Mom and Aunt Rosalind are two steps behind her as far as communication is concerned, they still have hope in their eyes.

“He ignored me for THREE MONTHS because an ex-boyfriend kissed me,” I try explaining to Sara, “he wouldn’t even answer my calls or let me explain.”

She looks at Ryan, “You told her you’re sorry didn’t you?”

Ryan shakes his head.

“Then, that’s that!” Aunt Rosalind interjects her own conclusion.

“Everything’s fine now, of course she’ll skate with you. You’re her husband.” She says looking at Ryan, “You’ve even apologized to her. Every relationship has its ups and downs. Your uncle Bill had that torrid affair on me back in the nineties and I forgave him, we were right as rain after that, until he died..”

Mom interrupts Aunt Rosalind, “We’re not talking about Uncle Bill and his misdemeanour, Dalia hasn’t had an affair on Ryan, have you dear,” she says to me.

Aunt Rosalind annoyed with mom’s take on the events, “Hardly a misdemeanour darling, you should have seen the whore.”

Mom waives off Aunt Rosalind, “Ryan dear, you have nothing to worry about, she never talks about that terrible boy anymore, do you dear?” she says giving me her evil eye.

Auntie asks suspiciously, “What exactly did you do with that little boy that upset Ryan so bad? I can’t imagine him not talking to you for three entire months if it was nothing. Tell us dear.”

I look to Ryan to be saved, but he sides with them, “Go ahead, tell her what you did.”

It’s becoming frustrating now. I snap at Auntie, “He kissed me, can we drop it?”

“Did you tell Ryan what you did or did he catch you red handed with the hooligan?” mom asks.

“You already know mom, fuck I thought you were on my side!”

“We’re not taking sides dear,” Sara mediates.

“Surely you jest, even if you take sides, you’re hardly in a position to,” I say losing my filter.

“What does that mean?” She asks, but I think she knows where I’m going with this.

I leer at her, Ryan jumps off the couch he’s sitting on, “Dalia pack your bags, I think time to yourself is exactly what you need.”

“Suddenly you know what I need?” I say sarcastically to Ryan. I ignore him and explain to mom, “Ryan forgive me mom, he wants to pick up where we left off, but it’s me who can’t. He broke my heart and I don’t ever want to go through that again. It felt almost like losing dad. He says he’ll never hurt me again, but he can’t keep those kinds of promises. My heart breaks every time I see him. I lost thirty pounds in three months!”

“You’re being overdramatic Dalia. With the way you eat, you’ll regain that weight in a months time. Ryan’s not dead dear, maybe you need professional help. We can have you see someone while you resume your training with Ryan.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I argue.

“You’re not going back to that hooligan! Are you? What’s his name?” Aunt Rosalind asks.

“His name is Adam,” I said, “and no, I’m not.”

Mom sighs with relief, “Thank goodness. What about the flat? Are the two of you going to live their until your done school or is Ryan moving out? You know I can’t afford to help you anymore than I already am!”

“Why should Ryan leave the apartment, she’s the one who cheated?” Sara asks defensively.

Mom looks at her astonished, “He told me he’s letting her have it.”

“You did no such thing did you?” She glares at Ryan, “That wasn’t for you to decide.”

Mom looked confused, “Ryan, you didn’t tell her you offered to help Dalia out with finances?”

“How’s he supposed to help her? Don’t be ridiculous! He’s just a student himself. They’re not even partners anymore. He doesn’t have the income to help her.” Sara says with agitation.

Aunt Rosalind defends us, “When Alex died, he left the poor dears with nothing.”

“That’s not Ryan’s problem,” she argues, “she chose not to go back with him. He can’t even trust her!”

“I’m in the fucking room,” I remind Sara and mom. “You want to talk about trust?” I seethe.

I storm towards the drawer, Ryan tries grabbing my arm on the way but misses. I pulled out the picture and toss it on the table in my mother’s direction. Sara is too shocked to do anything. Aunt Rosalind sits cluelessly and I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ryan so angry in my life. I lost control of my anger and wasn’t thinking anymore.

In slow motion mom picks up the picture and her hand covers her mouth in shock as she stares at Sara in disbelief, “You and my husband?”

“She didn’t what?” asks Aunt Rosalind.

Mom showed her the picture.

Auntie gasps, “You miserable trollop!” This wave of guilt came crashing down on me. I knew I shouldn’t have done that.

Mom breaks down into tears when she realizes what she’s seeing, “Where you ever going to tell me?” she asks Sara. “How could you pretend to be my friend?”

“We didn’t get a chance and then I grew fond of you, why would I want to ruin your image of Alex?”

“He’s not Alex to YOU! You even comforted me!”

“He was My Alex too.”

“Were you together more than once?”

“Yes, just before the kids met.”

“Did you do it in our bed?”

“No.”

“Did he love you?”

“That doesn’t matter?” Sara says. Her skin is pale.

“Did he love you?” mom insists she answer that question.

“Yes, he loved me.”

Mom looks at Ryan, “Did you know?”

His eyes look pained, “I did Mrs. Middleton, I’m sorry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me son?” she asks him.

“He’s not your son,” Sara says quietly.

“Because she’s my mother, and can’t help who she falls in love with.”

Mom glares at me, “When did you find out?”

“Just before I went to Honolulu.”

“Pack your bags,” she says to me and Aunt Rosalind, “we’re leaving!”

“I’ve got unfinished business here mom, I can’t leave right now. I’m supposed to be starting school and all my belongings are in London.”

“We’re not staying here,” mom announces. “I can’t spend another second in this tramp’s house. You can come to Florida with us if you like Dalia. Keep your phone charged.”

“I’m so sorry for the way I told you. When I found out, I was so angry. Ryan and I fought about it, and I haven’t visited dad’s grave ever since.”

“I never suspected Alex would deceive me like that,” mom admits. To think I mourned over a year for that bastard. When I get back to Florida I’m calling Clive. He might be old but at least he treats me like a queen.

Ryan storms off to pack. My belongings are still in his trunk. He comes down with his suitcase and goes straight through to the front door without looking or saying anything to anyone, he is pissed. By the time I go outside the car is already started and he’s waiting for me to get in.

Chapter 1

The shadows of the night hide his rage. I can feel it emanating from every pore of his body. His hand doesn't rest on the headrest and his foot sits heavily on the gas pedal as we speed back to London forty kilometres an hour over the speed limit.

We just turn onto the 401 when Ryan's phone lights up and vibrates with his BFF's name on it.

Ryan answers, "Hey Jer, ..She's not!"

"Bro!" his voice booms, "Sierra's in labour! I'm going to be a father any minute! She's screaming for Dalia! Get your asses here!"

"We're on our way," he answers.

Sierra screams Jeremy's name and then we lose our connection. Ryan turns off at the next exit never slowing down. Our best friends need us.

"It's going to be a long night," he comments under his breath. It's the first thing he said to me since we left his mother's house.

He parks the car and we walk into the hospital holding hands out of habit. The old man at the information desk with hearing aids in both ears directs us to the labour and delivery department. He says that when we get there, they will tell us which room Sierra is having her baby in. We don't have a moment to waste. Ryan and I walk briskly down the hallway when we see Jeremy hugging his father in the lobby. I freeze for a brief second as I catch sight of Adam standing next to Jeremy.

Ryan senses my hesitation, "Go to him if you want," he boils over with jealousy.

Adam is maturely dressed in a fitted black suit and tie that does more than just flatter him. He is sharp, bordering on hot. His shoes shine and his hair is cut short, almost like Ryan's. I'm stunned, he looks so different, professional.

I acknowledge Adam with a swift nod and a smile I know Ryan won't see before hugging Jer, "Congratulations dad! Is it a boy or a girl?"

"It's a girl Dal, Sierra named her Frankie. I think it's her hormones, go in their and talk to her. The poor kid is going to be teased relentlessly the rest of her life." His father nods in agreement with Jer.

"Is it okay to go in now?" I ask politely.

"The sooner the better!"

I push the door to Sierra's room open and hear Jeremy greeting Ryan behind me, "Hey bro, I thought you guys were never going to make it."

"Wouldn't miss it," Ryan says feigning happiness.

Sierra lights up when she sees me, "Dalia!" she whispers.

I walk up to her and lean in kissing both her cheeks, "Sierra! You look so beautiful!" I whisper back. I'm not lying, she looks pale, exhausted and gloriously happy, but I guess that's what all new mothers look like after having a baby. I try not to envy or be jealous of her but it's hard. I imagine myself where she is holding Ryan's baby, the look of happiness in his eyes.

"Check her out!" Sierra encourages.

I walk over to the glass bassinet and admire her precious bundle. Franky's features are cute, her skin is so pink. All you can see is her tiny little face, the rest of her is snugly wrapped in a warm hospital blanket with blue and pink stripes on it.

"She's beautiful," I admire. A while ago, Ryan actually slept with Sierra when Ryan and I weren't together. She didn't know at the time that I cared about Ryan. She actually was knocked up by him, but terminated the pregnancy, it's water under the bridge now, but hard to forget.

"Are you cold?" Sierra notices my shiver. She studies the despondent look in my face.

"No, I'm not cold."

“Don’t worry, one day it will happen to you guys! Your back with him aren’t you? Jer told me that Ryan picked you up from the airport and apologized to you.”

“It sort of didn’t work out well,” I try to explain.

“How so?” Sierra asks. “Didn’t he apologize to you? You know he loves you, right?”

“I told him I can’t go back to him as partners or husband and wife, I can’t let him hurt like that again.”

“How do you know he’s going to hurt you?”

“I just do.”

She looks at me skeptically, “You never struck me as a coward!”

“He ignored me for three months, I lost thirty pounds and wanted to die.”

“His ego is bruised, he’s a proud guy. He didn’t know how to cope with his jealousy. Surely you can forgive that?”

“He told me just now to go back to Adam if I want.”

“He didn’t! I thought Adam left.” she said forgetting to whisper.

“Yup, they’re both out there with Jer and his dad.”

“I hope their not fighting.”

“You would hear it if they were.”

“Ryan’s already furious with me because I told my mom that his mother slept with Dad when he was alive.”

“You what? Why did you do that? You’re only hurting your mom by telling her.”

“Because Ryan’s mom had the nerve to talk about trust to me after what she did with my father. She said Ryan should get our apartment in London after he promised it to me.”

“What happened with your parents is in the past. Don’t let it ruin your relationship with Ryan.”

“Either way I’m not going back to him.”

“Like I said, since when did you lose your spine.”

Sierra is starting to ruffle my feathers. Who is she to judge whether I have a backbone or not? She has everything I ever wished for, a beautiful baby and a great guy.

The baby starts squirming. I look over at Sierra, “Do you want her?”
“Please.”

I carefully lifted the baby cradling her in my arms. The door opens, Ryan and Adam step in. I look up meeting Ryan’s gaze. I see a flash of warmth pass over him before he turns stone cold again. We are locked onto each other. I step towards the bed and only break my gaze as I place Franky in Sierra’s arms.

I glance at Adam who nods his head in my direction curtly, “Dalia.”

“Adam,” I respond politely. I can’t help notice how much he’s changed. He looks so good.

“I hope you two aren’t fighting out their,” Sierra says.

“There’s nothing to fight over,” replies Ryan callously. His malicious comment is uncalled for a brings a wave of nausea with it.

Adam glances casually at Ryan and then me, “Trouble in paradise?”

“None of your fucking business asshole,” Ryan hisses at him.

Sierra’s brows furrow in a scolding glance directed towards Ryan, “Not in here boys.”

Adam never removes his eyes from me, “Marriage or partnership?”

“Both,” I confess.

“The tabloids are going to find out, I can schedule a press conference with both of you present to answer questions, or it can leak out. I’ll give you guys 48 hours to decide.”

“Get the fuck out of here before I break your jaw, again,” Ryan warns.

Adam reaches into his pocket and pulls out his card handing it to me, “48 hours.” He walks up to Sierra and kisses her on the forehead before turning to leave.

There is a tap on the door and it slowly opens, it is Jeremy. He peaks his head in and lights up when he sees Sierra holding the baby. That’s when I notice there is no Tara or Luke since we arrived, “Where’s Tara?”

“They went to get something to eat. They’ll be back. Did you talk to her?” Jer asks me referring to the baby’s name.

“I sort of like it,” I whisper in his direction.

“I think she’s hungry,” Sierra interrupts.

“We’ll leave for a few minutes,” Ryan offers.

“Thanks,” says Jer.

Ryan directs me out of the room with his hand on the small of my back,
“Are you hungry?”

“Starved,” I confess. I haven’t noticed how hungry I am until he asked. I start looking around for directional signs to the cafeteria, “You?”

“Ya, Lets get some food.”

“Hospital cafeteria?”

Ryan shakes his head, “We might bump into Tara and Luke, I’m not in the mood for conversation.”

“Sure, we’ll go wherever you want,” I say trying to be easy.

We drive in complete silence again. I assume he’s emotionally spent. He pulls up to our favourite McD’s and orders our usual. “Love Me Like You Do,” comes on in the car and he shifts into park, but he keeps it on accessories so we can listen to the music.

He grins at me, “Do you really like the name Franky for a girl?”

I smile back at him, “It suits her. She’s really cute,” I say wistfully.

We chow down like savages. Ryan finishes his burger and stares into my exhausted eyes, “You looked beautiful holding her in your arms. It’s the first time I ever saw you carry a baby,” he whispers. His eyes fill up.

“It wasn’t long ago I wished I was carrying yours,” I reflect getting all choked up.

“Are you sure about all of this, it’s not too late to change your mind about us,” he says with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

‘You said it yourself, there’s nothing to fight for,’ I quoted.

“Adam was in the room and I get pissed off. I keep imagining him touching you. I’m not going to beg you,” he warns.

“I don’t expect you to,” I say respectfully, “I’m sure.”

He tosses what was left of his food back into the bag appearing to have lost his appetite, “We better get back to say our good-byes, so I can drive you to London.”

“What about the press release?”

“Call him and tell him we’ll do it, at least that way we can maintain some sense of control over what’s being said about us.”

I pull my phone out of my purse with the card Adam handed me in the hospital and dial his number. Ryan watches in silence as I wait for him to pick up. I put him on speaker so Ryan can listen, “Hello Adam?”

“Dal?” There is a moment of uncomfortable silence. Ryan’s pained expression returns to his face, I can notice it even while sitting in the darkness of the car, his eyes are blackened with sadness, making him appear lost.

“Ryan and I will do the press conference,” I inform him.

“It’s the right thing to do,” Adam consoles. “I’m sorry I had to give you an ultimatum.”

“Are you?” I doubt.

He ignores my question, “Does this Monday evening work for both of you? We can meet at the Canadian Skating Association around six?”

I look at Ryan, he nods, “That’s fine,” I answer.

“Hang up,” Ryan orders quietly.

“I have to go now,” I say into the receiver.

“I’ll see the two of you then,” Adam says almost triumphantly. There is a click noise and the line goes dead.

Ryan rakes his fingers through his hair out of frustration before starting the car. We head back to the hospital to make a final appearance before going home. When we arrive at Sierra’s room, Tara and Luke are there. They speak to us like they are walking on eggshells, obviously Sierra filled them in.

I take a seat next to Tara, “What are you going to do?” Tara whispers to me.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I answer cluelessly.

“Don’t take him back no matter how much you love him,” she advises. “I’ve never seen you as broken as what he did to you.”

“I know,” I say finally feeling understood. “Sierra doesn’t get it. She thinks I’m spineless.”

“You’re not. I know exactly where you’re coming from,” Tara confides. “If you go back to him and he breaks your heart again, I don’t know if we’ll be able to pick up the pieces.”

“You won’t.”

Ryan's brooding eyes land on both of us, "I'm right here you know. I can hear everything you're saying." Shit, I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

"With friends like you," he glares at Tara.

"Don't mind her," Luke defends. "It's taking the heat off us having a baby. Sierra has one and they all want one," he complains.

Ryan chuckles.

"It's pretty amazing," Jer defends Tara's maternal desires. He looks at me with concern, "Are you going to be all right?"

"Ya, just tired."

"You guys go home get some shuteye," Sierra coaxes. "You've all had a super long day. Jer and I are so happy you spent it with us."

I speak for Ryan and me, "We are too. Congratulations!"

Tara gets up and takes Luke's hand, "Do you need anything before we go."

"No thanks," Sierra says.

We kiss her good-bye and the boys shake hands. When we leave the room Tara and I hug before going our separate ways.

Chapter 2

It was almost midnight and we are just getting onto the highway. Ryan is quiet which is becoming his new norm. I buckle my seatbelt and lean my head against the passenger side window closing my eyes. He puts my favourite soundtrack on with the volume on low and I drift off, I awaken to him carrying me effortlessly into our apartment, but I pretend to still be sleeping. My arms are wrapped around his thick neck and my head is nestled into his chest. The faint scent of aftershave still lingers on his skin.

I wonder if this is the last time he'll ever carry me. He lowers me onto the bed and begins undressing me. He unclasps my bra from the front and then gently places both his hands on my breasts, caressing them without disturbing me. I focus on his soft touch. He removes his hands and the cold air hits my breasts for a second and then I feel pressure by my nipple as he presses his lips against me. It hardens in response to him and I have to fight the urge of shoving my breast into his mouth. He is being a very naughty boy, and I love it.

He suckles my nipple forgetting himself, taking it with his teeth, he nips at it. There is no way I can pretend to sleep through that. He takes my other nipple in-between his thick demanding fingers and pinches it hard while pulling it away from my body. I cry out in ecstasy giving myself away. I open my eyes to find him staring at me, as his tongue fills my mouth. He kisses me feverishly with his eyes wide open. I want to succumb to his every need, his touch, his mouth, and most of all his cock, wanting him to absorb me.

He stops kissing me for a second and as he caresses my cheek, he asks, "I have a few questions for you, but first I want to know, can I make love to you?"

"Yes," I answer breathlessly, "since you asked so politely."

He chuckles and then laces his fingers through mine and raises both my hands above my head, “When Adam pulled you into the bathroom, you never admitted it but you enjoyed kissing him didn’t you?”

I don’t answer.

“Answer,” he demands raising his voice.

“Yes.”

“I thought so,” he says with disgust.

“When you showed your mother the picture, you never once considered her feelings did you?”

“No,” I readily admit, “I was angry beyond reason.”

“When you saw Adam tonight you were attracted to him weren’t you?”

“No,” I lied.

“Don’t bullshit me, you froze up, I could feel you doing it. I know your body better than you know it.”

“No,” I waiver.

“Don’t lie to me Dal. I’m partners with you. Your body is an extension of mine. I can feel it just by holding your hand. You can’t lie to me about that.”

“I was just shocked by his transformation. I don’t think I’m attracted to him.”

“Admit it,” he broods.

“Maybe a little,” I confess. “Is that what you want to hear?”

“I just want the truth.”

“Yes! I’m attracted to him,” I say honestly.

“After all we’ve been through Dal, you know how much I love you.”

“You don’t need to be insecure,” I reassure him.

He pushes himself off the bed choosing to forgo on our last time together, “I’m not insecure, I’m leery.”

Chapter 3

I linger in bed long after I wake up. The sun is peaking through the blinds and casting shadows on the opposite wall. I reach for my phone sitting on the night table, and check my messages. There are four:

Sierra: Dalia how R U? Franky isn't latching. Why can't she just eat cheeseburgers?

Sierra: 4got 2 tell U, Jer want's me 2 change Frankie's name. Can U talk to him?

Tara: Pls don't take offence but if U & Ry split, can we have dibs on U'r flat?

Ryan: Picking up food. We'll talk when I get back.

I replace my phone back on the night stand and select the clothes I'm going to wear for the day. I wanted to freshen up before Ryan gets back so I take a shower. I can only imagine what he wants to talk about.

I hear the door open just as I finish my hair. He puts the groceries away when I join him in the kitchen, "Hi Ry."

"Hi Dal, there is two different types of croissants in the bag."

"Thanks," I say reaching for the coffee pot. I grab a mug and a large dish from the cabinet and start laying out the croissants he bought.

He pulls a chair out for me at the breakfast table before taking his own, “We need to discuss our living arrangements. I promised you the apartment, so if you want it take it you can. I need time to find another place.”

The day and a half’s worth of stubble on his beautiful squared off jaw distracts me. I can’t tell if he hasn’t showered yet or just decided not to shave today.

“Your mother doesn’t think I should have it.”

“It’s not my mother’s decision to make, its mine.”

“If one of us has to move, it should be me,” I volunteer. “I’m not even sure I want to finish Uni.”

He starts rubbing the stubble on his face looking obscenely attractive in a raw sort of way, “I didn’t just hear that.”

“You sure did, my hearts not into it. I might take a year off. If you don’t want the place you can offer it to Luke and Tara, they want the flat. I need time to figure out what I’m going to do.”

“Take all the time you need,” he offers.

“I will,” I say getting up from the table.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“To pack and then your guess is as good as mine. I’ll send for my stuff once I’ve settled.”

“Now? You’re leaving already?”

“Sure, don’t you have class?” I ask trying to distract him.

“It starts at ten.”

“It’s ten.”

“Well, I guess I’m missing it.” He says irritably. “Dalia, I don’t want you to leave.”

“I’ll see you Monday at the press conference.” I turned away from him and go to my room. I know I’m doing the right thing, but it so hard. He leaves me alone giving me time to pack.

“You need help with your bags?” He asks.

“Please.”

He carries them to dad’s car for me, “Call me when you get to wherever you’re going.”

“You stopped taking care of me months ago, it’s too late to start now. I’ll see you Monday,” I tell him.

I opened the door with my head held high and go into the car not showing any sign of weakness. His brown eyes look longingly into mine and his chocolate wisps drape over his eyes, making him appear profoundly sad. I roll down the window of my shit box and Ryan leans on the frame, “Take care of yourself Dal,” he says.

I wanted to cup his cheeks in the palms of my hands, and kiss those tender lips of his but my desires are making everything so much harder on me. His eyes burn through me feeling like it’s the last time we’ll ever see each other. My willpower isn’t strong enough, and I reach for him, cupping his stubbly face in my hands just the way I want to. I picture myself pulling him closer to me and our lips meeting in a kiss that will rock my world and fuck it, not able to stop myself, I do. I pull him an inch or two closer and then I let my lips press firmly against his and I don’t want to pull away, can’t pull away, but this nagging bitch ass of a voice in the back of my head keeps reminding me that I’m just going to get hurt again and I rip my lips from his even though I yearn to keep them there and then he leans away from the car with a single tear falling down that beautiful cheek of his, I force myself to let go of him and my heart starts gushing like it’s suffering this pandemonium death, I just want to curl up in his muscular arms and feel safe again, never letting him let go of me. I force myself to turn the key in the ignition and without another word he steps away from the car and my hand hits the shifter dropping it roughly into drive as I press on the gas, I speed away from the love of my life. Nothing can be more painful than what I’m feeling now.

Chapter 4

Luckily I'm safely out of site as this wave of grief forces its way passed my illusionary dam of strength I created. Tears that threatened to break free moments ago are now blinding me. After a few minutes, I hastily wipe them away and restart the car, worrying that Ryan might find me weeping pathetically.

I have two packed bags, four hundred dollars, and a cell phone with 80 percent battery left, and no place to go. I drive towards Toronto not sure whether I should fly back to Florida and live with mom and Aunt Rosalind or not. What other choice is there? I know mom is going to freak out on me when she finds out I'm not going back to school this year, maybe never.

Then it clicks as I start driving again, I'm staring at this break in the clouds that the sun is shining through. It's from the heavens above, like a higher being is speaking to me. Suddenly my destination is obvious: Coach Hick's house.

There is no car in the driveway, but I park there anyway. I knock on the door and then ring the bell, no answer. I leave my belongings in the car with the doors locked and walk across the busy street to the arena. His back is turned to me when I get inside so I'm able to sneak up on him. I cover his eyes with my hands and wait for him to guess who it was.

"Matt Bomer?"

"Nope! Guess again!"

"Taylor Lautner?"

"I'm a girl!"

"Can't blame an undersexed gay guy for dreaming! Goldie Hawn?"

"No, it's me!" I release him and stretch out my arms.

"Dalia!" He opens his arms to me and squeezes the bejeezus out of me, "What are you doing here? Oh.My.God. You're so skinny!"

One glance and he backs away shaking his head suspiciously, “No! You’re not!”

“No what?” I said playing dumb.

“Where’s Ryan?”

I shake my head, “It’s a long story.”

“I don’t finish for another four hours, you want to wait around? I can give you my keys.”

“Please?”

“Sure, I’ll be home soon. Help yourself to food if you’re hungry.”

“Thanks Coach.”

I can’t help but reminisce about the time I found Ryan all beat up after getting into that fight with his father. I felt so sorry for him, his face and ego were all bruised up. Coach Hicks gave him a place to stay when he couldn’t go back home. He’s like a second parent every kid needs. He never casts judgment, just provides the support needed to get through the rough times.

I’m beginning to drift off when the key in the door lock startles me. I scoot the recliner back up into a sitting position and glance over at the stove from where I’m sitting to see how much longer until dinner is ready.

Earlier, I found a lasagna in the freezer that I placed in the oven for when coach gets home. I figure it will be nice for him to come home to an oven cooked meal even if it isn’t from scratch. I get up and start heading for the kitchen.

“Dal?” he calls out.

“I’m in here,” I say loudly enough for him to hear me from the foyer.

“You made dinner?”

“Yes, it’s done in five minutes, it’s just salad and the lasagna you had in your freezer, do you want red wine or Pepsi?”

“Wine please.”

I place the salad out in the middle of the table and start pouring the Merlot.

I turn the chandelier on in the dining room and played some classical music on the television for background noise, “Do you mind if I join you for a glass?”

“Help yourself Dal, this is lovely,” he comments.

“Thanks.”

I place our drinks on the table and then place two squares of lasagna at each setting.

“I could get used to this,” he comments.

I smile warmly at him.

Coach starts cutting into his lasagna, “What happened with you and Ryan?”

I took a sip of my drink, “A few months ago, we were at a friends house and that boy I used to date before Ryan and I became pairs made a pass at me.”

“So, you batted him off like a good girl in love with your husband I assume?”

“Well, not exactly,” I grin sheepishly.

“You kissed him back and then confessed to him?”

“Well, not exactly,” I start chuckling lightly. He knows how to lighten a terrible conversation.

“You heterosexuals are such sluts,” he teases. “You kissed him back and didn’t tell Ryan.”

“Yes, that would be more accurate.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

“No.”

“Well, if you were going to get shit from Ryan you might as well go all the way. How did Ryan find all this out if you didn’t tell him?”

“He saw me shortly after the kiss and noticed my lipstick was smeared. He was so angry he didn’t speak to me for three months after that. He said I hurt him.”

“That seems harsh,” Coach says siding with me. “It’s not like Ryan to overreact. If you slept with him, then the crime would have suited the punishment.”

“You’re right, he doesn’t usually overreact. He’s the level headed one.”

“So then what happened?” Coach asks.

“He agreed to meet with me and talk three long months later. During the separation, I got severely depressed and pretty much stopped eating.”

“I can see the weight loss,” said Coach Hicks, “a little too much.”

“That’s not all.”

“Go on,” he encourages.

“After we break up, Ryan drives me back to London when a friend of ours goes into labour. We visit them at the hospital and bump into my ex-boyfriend Adam again. It turns out that he’s works for the Canadian Skating Association. When he sees us, he senses our discord and calls us out on our relationship troubles. He gives us an ultimatum.”

“First of all, why is your ex-boyfriend working for the CSA? It sounds like he’s stalking you. He’s obviously gunning for you. Second of all, are you sure he has the power to cast any ultimatum over you and Ryan?”

“He sure does, apparently he has a lot of pull there.”

“What’s his name?”

“Adam McBride.”

“Son-of-a-bitch, you’re not kidding.”

“Adam said we either speak to the press in a press conference that he will set up or eventually it will leak out and they will tear us to shreds.”

“You wisely chose the press conference, I take it?”

“We did.”

“When is it?”

“This Monday at six, it will be held at the Canadian Skating Association (CSA). So after we finished visiting with our friends we drove back to London and I packed my bags.”

“I’m so sorry for you and Ryan, but I don’t like where this is going,” Coach says cautiously.

“I’ve got nowhere to go,” I blurt.

“What about your classes?”

“I dropped out, I want to take a year off.”

“Oh my, what did your overbearing mother say to that one? I’m sure Ryan isn’t to pleased either. He always wants what’s best for you.”

“Mom totally doesn’t know.”

“You better tell her. That woman won’t think twice about castrating me if she knows I’m stowing you away and not forcing you to go back to school.”

“She doesn’t have to find out right away,” I say desperately, “I have an idea on my way here.”

“She does if you plan on staying under my roof for any longer than sixty-seconds, I insist you tell her, does she know you and Ryan are over.”

“Along with other sordid details.”

“What’s the plan?”

“I was hoping you would let me be your assistant coach for free room and board. Whatever money I draw in for lessons, you keep. Think about it Coach, just being an Olympic Champion has to carry some weight in the skating world, I can boost your profits.”

“On what condition?”

“You help me get me back into shape.”

“To compete or for shows?”

“Shows.”

“Alone or with a partner?”

“Alone.”

“I’d be more than happy to help you, but if you thought I was tough on you and Ryan before, just wait to see how I am on you now. Make yourself look like a million bucks for the press conference. Use it to your advantage. They’re going to be fighting for you to sign.”

“Bring it on Coach,” I say sipping the last of my wine.

“Inform your mother, or I’m having no part in it,” he reminds me.

“You’re scared!” I tease.

“Damn right!” he laughs.

I do the dishes before retiring to the room that Ryan stayed in when he was here. I try calling mom but there’s no answer, so I settle with a text to her. I’m apologetic as I explain that I tried calling her first before resorting to texting big news like this. I leave her Coach’s number and when we finally have a chance to talk, she is surprisingly supportive. Knowing my mother, I think she is wishing for a reconciliation between Ryan and myself.

Chapter 5

The week passes quickly. Hicks keeps me busy which is perfect medicine for keeping my mind off Ryan. I get weepy if there is a break in the day or when I have to go to bed knowing Ryan slept there before. Sometimes a song that Ryan and I skated to will do it to me. Once in a while a skater would land a jump for the first time and I instinctively want to share my excitement with Ryan, but instead share it with Coach Hicks. I wonder how Ryan will feel if he knows I'm working on making a triumphant personal come back in the skating world, even if it is only for shows. Skating is all I have left.

I cut my coaching day short Monday evening to get ready for the press conference at six. I use mom's plastic that is given to me for emergencies on a sexy black number that accentuates my curves which I didn't know I have. I drop by Sierra's pulling her away from Franky long enough to give me an up-do that will accentuate my outfit and borrow her killer black heels that she never wears anymore. When all is said and done I'm quite pleased with my reflection.

I get into dad's shit box praying it will start and head to the Canadian Skating Association, a bundle of nerves. In merely a few minutes from now, I will be facing Ryan in front of the associated press, and if that isn't nerve wrecking enough, Adam is going to be there.

The parking lot to the CSA is all but deserted with the exception of a few familiar cars, Ryan's black Mercedes and Adam's black Mustang. The CSA is located on the top two floors of an impressive modern white stone building. I take a deep breath and then enter the main doors leading into the lobby. I take the lift up to the top floor and find Ryan and Adam waiting for me on the chesterfield in front of the empty receptionist's desk.

They stand up at the sight of me. Both men tower over me looking like they stepped out of a Hugo Boss catalogue, “Are you ready?” Adam asks both of us.

I can’t help but to stare at Ryan in complete shock, “What did you do!”

“I was drunk and had Luke shave the mess off.”

“You look rough,” I comment quietly.

“I feel it,” he admits. “Nothing is the same without you. I offered Tara the apartment, you were everywhere in it.”

Adam is getting annoyed by all the attention I pay Ryan. He rushes us into the next room where the press is waiting.

There are six reporters covering Canada, Great Britain, and the United States. There is a table with two chairs for Ryan and myself to sit at. Adam stands behind the cameraman overseeing everything. When the cameramen are ready Adam steps in front of the cameras and introduces us, “I would like to thank all of you for coming out this evening. As you are aware, Ryan and Dalia Kennedy have become Canadian Icons, adored by figure skating fans all over the world. Their shows have been selling out in Canada and the United States this past year since they’ve won the Olympics. We have brought them here today to give you their exclusive story, Dalia?”

I shake my head motioning for Ryan to speak instead of me. He addressed the press after clearing the lump in his throat, “Dalia and I are honoured to represent Canada at the Olympics and to perform in many ice skating shows all over North America. Unfortunately, it’s with a heavy heart that we are announcing the end of our skating partnership.”

Adam jumps in, “The floor is open to questions.”

Each reporter has name badges on their clothing so we can address them individually.

Dave holds his hand up, “Are you going to do finish the scheduled shows?”

Ryan answers, “No, we’ve cancelled them, the public will receive a refund.”

Susan asks, “Who’s choice was that?”

“Mine,” I speak into the microphone.

Paul raises his hand, “How has this affected your marriage?”

Susan cut to the bone, “Are you getting a divorce?”

Ryan nods affirmatively, “Yes.”

Julie looks at me, “Are you pregnant?”

“No,” I say surprised by that left fielded question.

Dave called out, “Did he cheat on you Dalia?”

“No,” I answer forthright.

Then surprise, surprise, Susan asked the million dollar question, “Did she cheat on you Ryan?”

Ryan’s eyes glance over at me and his voice booms deeply into the microphone, “In a matter of speaking.” I can’t help but to boil over at Ryan’s inability to keep our dirty laundry hidden. I pinch his thigh under the table hoping nobody notices.

“It was one kiss,” I defend myself angrily. “He broke up with me over just the one kiss.”

“It’s not the first time you’ve gone back to him,” Ryan argues. “It wasn’t just that.”

“With whom?” A reporter going by the name Adam spoke for the first time.

“Adam McBride,” I announce spitefully.

All camera’s turn to him and judging by his expression he didn’t expect the interview to come full circle and land in his lap, “Dalia and I have an extensive history, which Ryan has no need to be jealous of. Tell me I’m not the reason for all this,” he feigns innocence.

“Are you leaving Ryan for Adam?” another reporter calls out. I can’t make out his name.

“No,” I answer honestly.

Paul speaks out, “Are either of you open to new relationships?”

“Not at present time,” I offer.

“No,” says Ryan bluntly.

“Where are the two of you going from here? What are your future plans?” Susan asks.

Ryan speaks first, “I’m continuing with College to become a doctor, that’s my plan anyway.”

He looks over at me cuing me to give my half of the answer, “I’m working with Coach Hicks as his assistant. I’ve also chosen to continue training in the hopes of doing shows on the side.”

Now Ryan is staring at me in complete shock.

Julie says out loud, “Judging by Ryan’s reaction he wasn’t aware?”

“That’s correct,” I answer. “We haven’t spoken since we broke up,” I explain.

“Are you going to perform with a new partner?” she asks.

I smile, “No Julie, I’ve chosen to go solo.”

“We look forward to seeing you,” she gushes.

Adam speaks up, “If the questions are finished, again, we would like to thank you for coming. Please help yourself to complimentary refreshments in the main lobby on your way out.”

The reporters thank us for the interview and wish us luck with our future endeavours. Several of them give me their cards.

Adam thanks us for the press conference and makes a hasty retreat leaving me alone with Ryan.

“I wish you didn’t air our dirty laundry in front of everyone like that.”

He takes my hand in his and starts playing with it, stroking my fingers, “That was the whole point of this press conference.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you can’t date anyone Ryan I know life goes on after me.”

“Touche Dal, but why didn’t you tell me you were going back on the ice, your plans on coaching?” his voice sounds hurt.

“I made the decision after we broke up. I had nowhere to go,” I admit.

“You could have stayed with me.”

“You know as well as I do, I can’t. I have something to prove to myself: that I can get back on my feet without relying on anyone else. Surely you understand that.”

I’m tempted to pull him down for a kiss but I managed to fight the urge. He holds my hand all the way to dad’s car.

Chapter 6

Coach Hicks is waiting on the couch for me dressed in his pyjamas with two shots of bourbon and a movie sized bowl of popcorn, “It’s coming on, hurry up!”

“Be there in a sec,” I call out, throwing my housecoat over my pyjama’s. I’ve been living with him for a little over a week, and I still don’t feel comfortable enough to sit around with him in my night clothes.

The news is cutting to the sports and our segment is coming on.

Coach Hicks nurses his bourbon as we watches our interview, “What the fuck did Ryan do to his hair?”

“I know, it looks awful doesn’t it? His friend shaved it.”

“Not much of a friend if you ask me. If your gorgeous soon to be ex is going to be austere with his appearance, he should at least have a damn tan, he looks sick!”

“Shh, I can’t hear!”

“Sorry, we’re recording it, you can watch it again.”

We watch in silence for a minutes, before Coach Hicks puts his drink down on the table making the ice cubes clink together, “Damn, that pregnancy question startled you! All the colour drained from your face when she asked you. Is there something you should be telling me?”

“No, I totally wasn’t expecting it,” I admit. “We did have a scare, but it turned out I wasn’t. Ryan was the one scared. He didn’t want to stop doing our shows. He said family life could wait.”

“Ryan’s right honey, now’s not the time for you to be getting pregnant. You haven’t established yourself yet.”

The camera’s pans to Adam during the cheating segment and Coach looks over at me, “Dal, you were with Adam McBride?”

“Ya, he was my first boyfriend. Don’t you remember? Ryan said he wouldn’t skate with me if I continued to date him.”

“He’s more than that. He can make or break you.”

“So I keep hearing,” I roll my eyes.

“His father is the CEO of the Canadian Skating Association. Did he tell you.”

“Nope, we never talked about our parents, we were too busy getting it on,” I joke.

“His father has to be around what sixty-three? I wouldn’t be surprised if in a few years time, that young McBride boy takes over when his father retires. He’s going to have a lot of pull in the skating community, you mark my words Dal.”

“He won’t have an affect over any of my decisions.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” warns Coach Hicks.

Mom texts me after the show:

Mom: I saw U’r press conference. I can’t tell who looked worse U or him?

Dalia: Don’t hold back, tell me what U really think.

Mom: I’m sorry honey, but really? Really? He shaves his head looking like Dwayne Johnson or some bouncer buffoon at a strip club and you look anorexic! What’s the public going to think? You went from a beautiful couple to a freak show overnight. Stay away from that boy and his mother, they’re toxic.

Dalia: Okay mom, I will. (It’s easier to agree with her than argue.)
Someone else is text me, sorry mom, I’ll call you tomorrow.

Mom: Sure dear.

Tara: Hi! I saw U & Ry on the news! How R U?

Dalia: Better.

Tara: I’m so proud of U

Dalia: I don’t know why but thanks!

Tara: I take it Ry told U he gave us the apartment?

Dalia: Ya, glad it’s going to good use.

Tara: We want U to be our first guest this weekend.

Dalia: Sounds like a plan, I'll come up Saturday Evening

Tara: C U then. BTW Sierra says she's been meaning 2 text U, have U heard from her.

Dalia: No, I'll text her. She's probably busy with the baby. TTYL

Tara: TTYL

Coach gets off the couch, "Can I drag you away from your cell long enough to have another bourbon with me?"

"No thanks coach, I'm sending another text and then I'm retiring for the night. Some friends of mine invited me away for the weekend. You think you can manage without me for a few days?"

The coach shakes his head grinning, "I managed before you moved in."

"Cool," I get off the couch and head for bed, texting Sierra as I was walking.

Dalia: Sierra?

Sierra: Baby's crying, here's Jer!

Dalia: Jer?

Jer: Hi Dal how's it going?

Dalia: Good U?

Jer: Sleep deprived!

Dalia: :-(

Jer: Sierra wants U 2 visit sometime this week.

Dalia: Can't! Coaching during the week & Tara invited me over Sat.

Jer: I really need U 2 come Dal, she's not herself.

Dalia: What's wrong?

Jer: She's acting weird. Can't put my finger on it.

Dalia: I'll talk 2 Coach Hicks & get back 2 U?

Jer: Thanks Dal.

Chapter 7

I couldn't wait to see Franky, it's my main reason for taking time off work, and helping Sierra out of course. I show up on their doorstep with suitcase in hand at 8:00 A.M. sharp. It's rather early, but my hours are on coaching mode and I figure they aren't too different then baby mode. Tempted to come dressed like a nanny, but fortunately: unfortunately my wardrobe doesn't support the temporary image change. Jeans and a sweater will have to do.

Jer answers the door in cotton pyjama bottoms hanging off his waist and shirtless, "Nanny Dal at your service," I chirp.

He greets me while adjusting himself, "Mother and child are upstairs, first door on your right, damn morning hard on," he complains as he walks towards the bathroom.

"I hope I wasn't the cause of it," I tease Jer.

"If I said you were?" he closes the bathroom door behind him.

"I will add you to my long list," I joke. Taking the stairs two at a time I hope to catch the baby and Sierra sleeping. I love how babies look when they are sleeping. I turn the knob and inch the door open. Sierra is lying on her back and the baby is attached to her!

I start backing away, "I'll come back."

"We're almost done."

"Great," I say closing the door behind me, following the scent of percolated coffee to the galley style kitchen that barely has enough room for me and one other person in it. If the fridge and stove are open at the same time, you can't come in. I forage through their messy cabinets in search of sugar for my coffee.

Jer returns just as I was sitting down to enjoy it, "Thank God you're here, can I get you anything else?"

“You don’t have anything else! It looks like the first thing on my to-do list is go shopping for you. Make me a list and I’ll go after this cup.”

“Thanks Dal.”

I admire his bare chest as he reaches into the cupboard for his mug. Damn, he is way more muscular than I remember him to be, “You’re not too hard on the eyes, have you been working out?” If it isn’t the fact that it was Jer, I might have swooned a bit. The fact that I even notice is probably a good sign that I am starting to heal from the heartbreak I just endured.

“Ya it relieves the sexual frustration from not getting ANY since the baby was born.”

“That bad eh?”

“Worse.”

“What’s wrong with Sierra and why are you so worried about her? Has she said anything?”

“She’s over emotional. Cries over anything and everything. I offered to call our parents for help, but she flat out refuses. You being here, will be a nice break for her. She won’t let me bottle feed so she can sleep either. The incessant preaching about breast feeding has her brainwashed into thinking Franky won’t develop properly if she doesn’t.”

“I’d probably be the same way if Franky was mine. It’s still early days,” I reassure.

I finished the last sip of my tepid coffee, “I’m going now.”

Jer gets up, “If you give me a minute I’ll drive you. I can use a change of scenery. I don’t think we’ve left the house since she was discharged from hospital.”

“Sure, I’ll wait.”

He returns a few minutes later appearing less obscenely gorgeous in jeans and a black turtleneck sweater, “You ready?”

“Yup!” He leads me out of their house to his beat up Acura that doesn’t look much better than dad’s shit box Honda.

“Will it get us there?” I tease as I run my hand across the bonnet.

“Drives better then your dad’s car. Ry still worries about you driving around with it.”

“He said something to you?”

“He talks about you all the time to me.”

“News to me.”

“We’re pathetic, driving terrible cars? I don’t even know if mine will pass drive clean,” I gripe.

“Me too, and now safety is another concern now that the baby’s here. We just can’t afford anything right now.”

It felt good spending time with Jer. Even though he’s friends with the guys, he remains profoundly loyal to me. He always gives me the inside scoop, leaving nothing to mystery.

He starts the car and then his censor broke wide open, “Sierra doesn’t want me to go back to school, she’s afraid of being left alone too long with the baby. She doesn’t want me to work for the same reason. She won’t leave the baby in anyone’s care other than her own. We never leave the house. I can’t remember the last time we had sex. When I saw the afterbirth spill from her previously beloved pussy, I almost threw up. I don’t know if I can put my cock back in her after that.”

“Food Basics or Metro? I prefer Food Basic’s it’s cheaper.” I absolutely don’t know where to start with Jeremy.

“Did you hear anything I said?” he asks frustrated.

“You’re tired Jer. You probably hallucinated the afterbirth. Things will look better after you get some shut-eye.”

“My life’s falling apart, and you’re concerned about which grocery store we go to?” he balks.

“Short of having sex with you, there’s nothing I can do to help YOU except do the groceries and gain Sierra’s trust to let me spend time with Franky..”

“Would you mind?”

“Mind what?”

“Would you mind having sex with me?”

I giggle, “Having sex with you? You’re hallucinatory and delusional! You’re the only stable thing I have left in my life, I’m not ruining it with cheap meaningless sex.”

“There’s always a queue for you, I just want to see why!”

“Ha ha, that line stopped in high school. Ryan chose divorce me and Adam’s moved on.”

“Ryan’s proven to be a complete idiot were you’re concerned and Adam’s still not dating anyone.”

“You’ve got to be joking. Maybe he’s not kissing and telling. It might get back to the wrong person, namely YOU!”

“You have to hear the way he talks about you, especially at the hospital, as far as he’s concerned you walk on water.”

“Ha ha,”

“Dal, I’m not kidding. When you’re not around he says he will do anything to have another chance with you. The only reason he took his father’s job offer at the CSA was because of you. He knows you’ll never completely leave the skating world, so he joined it.”

We pull into the Metro parking lot and start walking towards the store, “You’re pulling my leg,” I downplay his comment.

“I know I’ve told you this before, but he’s changed. He’s really nice now. I said it all along, you should have given him more of a chance rather than Ryan.”

“Why? Why do you always side with Adam?”

“Because when the going gets tough, where the fuck is Ryan? He made you pick skating over Adam because he can’t handle competition. Instead of fighting for what’s rightfully his, namely you, he shrugs you off over a kiss to Adam. I don’t ever think I’ve seen such insecurity in my life,” Jer shrugs.

“You’re just tired and not seeing situations logically,” I tell Jer.

“I might as well get this in then, I know I’ll never bag you, but I know if we did, it would have been good together.”

“No doubt!” I smile.

Jer and I tackle aisle by aisle. I load the buggy as he pushes it. I focus on healthy easy meals assuming I’m going to do the majority of cooking while I’m visiting. His phone beeps in the produce section and Jer stops pushing the cart and starts typing away.

I glanced over at him, “Sierra?”

“No, Adam, he’s asking if you’ve arrived yet.”

I stop what I'm doing.

"He know's I'm here?" I asked incredulously.

"Sure, he was over when Sierra was talking to Tara. He practically lives at our place when he's not working. He wants to come over tonight. He says it's to see the baby."

"Really," I ask in disbelief. "He wants to see Franky?"

"Ya I know, serious bullshit, what do you want me to text him?"

"Fuck Jer," I said sarcastically, "invite him over for dinner, you might as well invite Ryan too while your at it."

Jer starts texting Adam back. His lips are spread in a salacious grin, "If I can't get it, at least one of my friends will."

"I can tell you right now, you have more chance than he does," I say half serious, half joking. Jer's eyebrows furrow in surprise.

"No shit!" he winks flirtatiously at me. "I knew you were seriously checking me out this morning."

"You were checking ME out this morning, You were the one complaining of the hard cock."

He starts laughing, "Whatever! Let's get back and check on Sierra. God forbid I leave her alone with the baby too long."

"First, let me see what you texted Adam."

"Don't get mad?"

"I'm not promising that."

"Promise."

"Okay, I promise."

He hands me the phone and I go to the texting application. Adam's name is on top.

Adam: Is she here?

Jer: Ya bro

Adam: Can I come over tonight?

Jer: Running it by Dal

Jer: She invited U 4 dinner, don't fuck it up man! Dessert is a definite possibility.

I look at Jer totally appalled, “With friends like you.”
“I’m doing you a favour,” he insists.

For a little baby, Franky can make several messes: she vomits on me, fills a nappy full of pee, another of mustard coloured poo that smells like Ryan’s beater shirt after skating hard. I manage to place her in her Tropical Rainforest Swing which is to be every mother’s saviour, long enough for Sierra and Jer to get two hours sleep.

Later, pandemonium breaks out. With a wide open mouth that appears to be shaking and alligator tears to boot, I take princess Franky out of her swing and start walking around the house desperately trying to keep her quiet. It doesn’t take long for me to realize she is inconsolable as her mouth keeps reaching for MY boob. I try telling her that mines a dud, but when she manages high screeching decibels, I feel I had not choice but return this little peace challenged squirt back to her mother before I lose it!

I found sanctuary in their shower stall before getting dinner ready. There are only a few minutes to go when I hear a light knock at their door.

I called out, “Do you want me to get it?”

“Please,” Sierra asks ducking into the bathroom for a shower.

“Where’s Jer?” I call through the door.

“He’s changing the baby.”

I take a deep breath thinking this will somehow increase my courage. I stop by the mirror on the way and run my fingers through my hair like a makeshift comb and rub my lips together so my lipstick will appear even. I don’t know why I care so much about my appearance but I do, even though mom says I look like a freak.

I swing the door open and my heart skips a beat with nerves.

Oh my! I didn’t think he still has the power to evoke this kind of reaction from me anymore but obviously he does, “Adam.”

“Dalia.”

“Would you like a drink?” I offer.

“Whatever you’re having,” he says with a husky voice.

I open the liquor cabinet and find a half empty bottle of Scotch.

“Scotch okay?”

“Sure,” he agrees.

I find two glasses, “Neat or straight up?”

“Neat.”

I pour both drinks and turn to find him standing directly behind me. I lose my breath. The unrestrained attraction I feel towards him is making my head spin. I hand him his glass before taking a large drink of my own. I try getting a grip, “You’re looking sharp, I take it you’re doing well?” I say thinking light conversation and maybe a couch to sit on will be a good idea before my knees give out from underneath me.

“I am, thank you, and you?” his eyes are dark with concern or is it lust?

“Better now,” I say referring to my break up with Brian and the loss of my father.

“I’ve noticed you’ve lost quite a bit of weight Dal, the camera’s aren’t on us anymore, you can tell me, what’s HE done to you?”

“He hasn’t doing anything to me. What makes you think that?” I ask defensively.

“What else could it be?”

I follow him as he leaves the kitchen and walk into the living room. He takes a seat on the couch and gestures for me to sit next to him.

Obediently, I sit down where he wants me to and watch him as he studies me, “You’ve been through a lot,” he perceives.

“I have,” I say reflectively.

“You’re still beautiful,” he says more to himself rather than to me.

In that self-assured way he has about him, he takes the drink out of my hand and places it down on the table before pulling me into a demanding kiss that undoes me. His hand cups my cheek guiding my face into the angle he wants as I slide my arms into his jacket. His kiss sweeps me away, to a better more forbidden place.

We heard Jer drawing near, Adam holds his finger up warning him not to interrupt us, determined to finish the kiss. He places his lips deliberately close to

my ear and I can feel the heat from his breath as he whispers to me, “This is by no means finished.” I can’t resist the temptation of looking down, to see if he is as aroused as I am.

The four of us sit at the dinner table with dishes filled with food, drinks poured, and Sierra ready to pounce out of her seat with a weary expression on her face. You can tell she’s just waiting for Franky to cry.

As cook of this fairly decent meal, I have to put my foot down, “She can wait for you to eat. There’s nothing that’s going to happen to her if she lies in her crib for a few minutes and cries.” I order.

“I’ll go to her if she cries,” Jeremy offers.

“You will not, you’re going to sit here and eat too.”

They devour their food attempting to be subtle, but it’s obvious they can’t relax and enjoy a meal without worrying about Franky. Watching them is scaring me off children of my own. Once they finish, they excuse themselves from the table leaving me alone with Adam.

Adam reaches over for the wine bottle, “More wine?”

“Please.” I answer. He fills my glass to the rim which instinctively puts me on high alert.

“My father wants me to spearhead a new project for the CSA, and I want to run it by you. Let’s go to the living room and I’ll tell you more about it.”

“Okay,” I say, making sure not to spill my wine as I get up from the table. “Does Jer know about it?”

“No, nobody does,” he admits.

He follows me into the living room and I sit on the couch we were so rudely interrupted before.

“Dad’s concerned that Figure Skating is becoming a dying sport in Canada. He says its up to the CSA to ensure we generate public interest. He’s given me two weeks to come up with a proposal that will be presented to broadcasting stations in Canada and the United States. If we succeed with this project, dad will step down and I will take his place.”

“We? Who do you mean by we and what did you have in mind? Can you tell me?”

“I think with the Winter Olympics soon approaching, you and I can put together a training camp for hopefuls. I can’t think of anyone more fitted to the role of running a figure skating television show than you. I will give you full autonomy, of course. You will run ideas by me for input but you won’t be ‘reporting’ to me. We will work as a team, ultimately under extreme circumstances as outlined in the contract I’m going to provide you, I can veto any decisions I’m not in agreement with, of course.”

“You want ME to work with YOU?”

“What’s stopping you?” He says obviously referring to Ryan. “You will make shit loads of money and I might become President, it’s a win-win situation.”

“What about my skating?”

“You’ll have full access to an arena, I want it to take place in Alberta.”

“Why Alberta and not Toronto?”

“The ’88 Olympics were there. They have the facilities to support what we need.”

“What about Coach Hicks, what will happen to him? He’s been training me.”

“You can hire him to coach the hopefuls, and yourself of course.”

“What about the shows I was planning on skating in?”

“You’ll be producing one instead. I can assure you, you will be generously compensated.”

Oh my! This is the opportunity of a lifetime, “I’ll need some time to think about it. How long do I have to give you an answer by?”

“Is a week long enough?”

“Sure, that will be great.”

“If you choose to do it, our first order of business will be to draw up a proposal the networks won’t be able to refuse.” Adam gets up from the couch, “I better go now, there’s a lot of work to be done. I also want you to know something before I leave.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I didn’t offer this to you to get in your bed, It’s because you’re amazing, and one of the few people I think that can pull it off.”

“Thanks Adam, I will give it serious consideration.”

I walk him to the door. He calls out good-bye to Jer and Sierra before saying it to me and then turning to leave.

Chapter 8

I knock on my old apartment door waiting for Tara or Luke to let me in. Strange, they changed the locks, I stare at the door for a second wondering what else they did since Ryan and I left.

I have no doubts it will feel different being here without Ryan, but I know Tara and Luke will keep me occupied enough so that I won't be wallowing in self-pity. I wonder how Ryan's University was going. Personally, I don't miss it because of the amazing opportunities that are falling in my lap since the Olympics.

Time is running out for me as far as Adam is concerned. He's expecting my answer soon. I'm having troubles coming up with reasons why I shouldn't take him up on this offer. We haven't discussed dollars and cents, but he said his father gave him a generous budget and when it involves skating, it isn't the money but the love of the sport that drives me to the decisions I make.

My thoughts are interrupted when the door suddenly swings open and Tara is jumping up and down with excitement at the sight of me. She squeezes me really hard as she squeals in my ear. Luke is two steps behind her grinning at the pair of us idiots. The aroma of pot roast comes wafting towards me from over Tara's shoulder.

It was her best dish, and my favourite, she wants something! "What are you up to, you cheeky mare!" I ask suspiciously.

"Nothing," she says indignantly. She grabs her purse off the table, "Luke and I have to run out for an ingredient, we'll be back!" They squeeze passed me and out the front door locking it behind them. I hear a solitary step on the linoleum floor and an indescribable feeling runs through me. Then I see movement from the corner of my eye. I'm not alone.

I slowly turn finding Ryan standing in the doorway behind me with a shocked look on his face.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I was invited over for dinner,” he responds.

“Too right, so was I! Did you know I was going to be here?” I ask.

“No, you?”

“Nope, they never said a word.”

“You don’t think?” he said putting the pieces together.

“That we’ve been set up?” I finish his thoughts, “Sure do! I even noticed they changed the locks.”

“Try the front door,” he suggests.

I go to the door and turn the knob left and right. Nothing, “Shit, they really did. We’re locked in!”

“How long do you think they’ll be gone?”

Slightly annoyed he asks me, as if I know, “I don’t know! They said they were only going out to pick up an ingredient.”

“Maybe they’ll be back soon,” he says hopefully.

“It’s hard to tell. They went to a lot of effort, changing the locks and Tara’s famous pot roast. It doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Why?” Ryan asks.

“Tara was there for me when you dumped me, putting it nicely, she’s not your biggest fan.”

“It had to be Luke’s idea,” he says to himself.

I start walking around the apartment not sure of what I’m looking for. I find it next to the crockpot. A folded piece of paper with our names on it:

Dear Ryan & Dalia,

As you might have guessed by now, you’ve been set up. Through great deliberation, we’ve decided that the two of you are best suited for one another and this is our attempt at helping you get passed your differences. Enjoy the pot roast as I know it’s your favourite Dal. Please leave clean sheets for us, they are neatly stacked in the linen closet. We will see you in the morning!

Yours Truly

Luke & Tara

We look at each other speechless, “What now?” I ask.

“Let’s eat,” he says simply enough, “I’m starving.”

We load our plates and help ourselves to the last two beers in the fridge. I gesture towards the clock on the wall, “Look at the time.”

“Coronation Street?”

“Now you’re talking,” I chirp happily. We park side by side on the couch as per our usual and fiddle with the unfamiliar remote controls until we successfully find our show. We eat, drink and sit in silence following a soap we’ve both watched for years. I feel like my best friend is back. The show ends with the thirty minutes flying by, and then we are left to our own devices. Ryan picks up the remote and turns off the television,

“There’s something I have to tell you,” Ryan says rather dramatically. His chocolate brown eyes grow serious quickly, “I think I know why Luke and Tara did this.”

“Really?” I ask curiously. “Why?”

“I wasn’t honest when you asked me something a while ago.”

I don’t like where this is going. He is always honest with me, my rock. I feel nervous, “About?”

“Luke knows I’m seeing a girl on campus, it’s nothing serious, a few dates,” he admits.

My lungs deflate, my heart stops and my blood stops circulating. I feel cold and breathless instantly, is this how death feels? Everything is going in slow motion and nothing feels real, its like travelling in a tunnel with no end or control over anything I do.

“I asked you,” I managed to speak.

“You wouldn’t give our relationship another chance, you refused to skate with me, I had this big void to fill. I’m just going through the motions, but I’m not living, everything feels barren.”

“So you’re pinning this on me? YOU broke up with ME. I just STAYED broken up to stop you from hurting me again, and you still manage to do it. Are you sleeping with her?”

“Come on Dal, I can’t answer that.”

“You just did!”

I wonder if Tara knows. This is the foremost thought on my mind. Did she know? How can she be a part of this if she knows. She better not know. I search for my purse and grab my phone and punched a text to her.

“What are you doing,” he asks.

“Texting Tara,” I say angrily without looking up from my phone. I keep telling myself: don’t cry, don’t let the hurt show, don’t let it show.

Dalia: He told me he’s Cing some1 from school. Did U know?

Tara: Ya, he swore it wasn’t serious. Luke said he’s really depressed He calls him a lost soul.

Dalia: He’s fucking someone, there’s nothing lost about him. I can’t believe U still did this? LET ME THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!

Tara: We’ll be there in an hour. Sit tight. For the record I told Luke it wasn’t a good idea.

It all becomes clear and I know my answer. Any glimmer of hope for us has been extinguished with this conjugal visit. I will throw myself into Adams project and never look back. Moving to Alberta will be the best thing for me.

I back away from Ryan on the couch, completely disillusioned, “They’ll be here in an hour to let us out. I have something to tell you as well,” I say just as dramatically.

“What’s that?” he waits with trepidation.

“I’m taking a job in Alberta. I’ve just decided there’s nothing keeping me here anymore.”

Chapter 9

I wait for Coach Hicks to go to work before I get up. I have a little more than an hour to transform myself from a wrecked lost soul, into a self-confident, brilliant, business woman! I need a miracle or at the very least a jeanie in my pocket. I dress in a beautiful cream coloured outfit my mother gave me for special occasions. My unruly brown curls are pouffier than usual so I douse them with spray making it look intentional. I wear high heels to accentuate my nugget calves and spritz Coach perfume to ice the cake. I look at my reflection with satisfaction before leaving for the office.

I pull into the parking lot of the CSA and remember Ryan walking me to my car after our press conference. The office structure looks different in the day, more impressive. It's chillier outside, and remembering him is like a bitter pill that I have to shake off before straightening my shoulders and walking into the building with every bit of pride and dignity I can muster. This is the first day to the rest of my life, a brand new start. I'm grateful to Adam for giving me this opportunity to recreate myself.

The lobby is empty with the exception of a young guy with red hair and speckles of acne covering his face, standing at the information booth between two sets of elevators.

He acknowledges me curtly, "You're looking for?"

"Adam McBrides office please."

He points to his right, "Take that elevator up to the top floor. There's only two there, you can't miss it."

"Thanks." I follow his directions and find myself standing in front of a fancy wooden door with Adam's nameplate displayed on it. I tap lightly and then push it

open. His secretary is expecting me, she looks down at her watch and then at me, “Dalia Kennedy? Your right on time,” she smiles at me approvingly, “go right in.”

“Thank you,” I say walking passed her. I open the doors to find Adam on the phone. He holds his finger up indicating he will be another minute. I help myself to the black leather chair located in front of his desk, and admire him as he speaks with whomever on the phone. He sure did mature since we first started dating. He seems a lot more responsible. Everyone says he’s nicer too, but I haven’t spent much time with him so it is hard for me to judge.

He places the phone down on its receiver and stands to greet me, “Dalia!”

I get up from the chair and watch as he approaches me, unsure whether he is going to hug me or shake my hand. He choses the professional route and shakes my hand, “Adam.”

“I don’t know what swayed your decision but welcome to CSA,” he greets.

He returns to his seat behind his grand mahogany desk and slides a large brown envelope in my direction, “This is your offer of employment, I had HR draw it up early last week. If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to your new office.”

“My new office? I thought I was going to be working in Alberta?”

“You will still have an office here. The majority of planning for the show will take place in Toronto. We will fly you out to Alberta just before the show starts. If we don’t get approval for the show, you will still have a position at CSA. It’s all outlined in our letter of employment. A contract is attached to the back of the letter that has to be signed and witnessed. I will show you to your new office where you can review it at your leisure and then I will have you sign the offer in front of me and Mrs. Crompton. Again, I stress take as long as you need to review it.”

“Thank you,” I say as I start following Adam out of his office door. He presses the button and we wait for the elevator to come. He glances over at me, “You look sharp,” he compliments before looking at the number above the lift.

“As do you,” I smile. I want to tell him that he should be really proud of himself, he’s obviously come a long way since high school, but it doesn’t seem appropriate. The elevator arrives and I step on first. He reaches for the button and hits the number fourteen which is just below Penthouse.

When we step off the elevator, I notice there are only four offices on this floor. He leads me to the door that is the farthest left from the elevator. There is a plaque with my name on it just like his. I stroke it tenderly with my fingertips, “Beautiful,” I comment.

He unlocks the door giving me my own key, “So you can come and go as you please. Here is also a pass card to get into the building.” He places it gently in my hand and then opens the impressive wooden doors leading into my office. This is so exciting! He steps aside so I can walk passed him and admire my new office. It is stunning. My desk is solid glass and my chair is white leather with diamond tuck. Instead of having an office light I have a chandelier with crystals, something you would see in a dining room. I love it!

“It’s gorgeous Adam, it’s so not what I was expecting!”

“You approve,” he asks hesitantly.

“I love it!” I repeat excitedly.

“That door to your left is your personal bathroom, and the door to your right is a small pantry for business guests. We’ve kept the walls painted white until you choose a colour. We can have it painted over the weekend or anytime you are out of the office. I’ll leave you alone to get familiar with your contract. Once you are ready to sign, we’ll meet back in my office and then I’ll send you down to H.R. Do you have any questions?”

I bite my lip, not because I have questions, but because I feel like I have to make sure I’m not dreaming, “Yes, how do I contact you when I’m ready?”

“Just dial my extension directly, 7985. It’s a back line so Mrs. Crompton won’t pick it up. If you need to speak to her, the extension is 7986. Do you need me to write it down?”

“No, I think I’m good.”

He turns to the door, “I will wait to hear from you then.” He walks out, the door closes loudly behind him. I walk over to the window to open the blinds. I have a view of the CN Tower. I open the bathroom expecting it to be small but on the contrary, it was very modern looking with a stand up shower. How much overtime did they expect from me? I get excited after seeing the bathroom, I can’t wait to see the pantry. To my disappointment it only had a small fridge and an area to keep alcohol, wine and whisky glasses and some type of panel. I start fidgeting

with the panel until it finally pops off and hidden behind it is a full sized microwave. Wow! I'm impressed.

I stroll leisurely back to my desk to start reading over my offer letter. I use the letter opener near my pen holder. The pen holder is a figurine of a pair couple. It is a thoughtful touch.

I started reading the offer until I get to the second paragraph.

Canadian Skating Association
1234 Front Street,
Toronto, Ontario
M2M 2M2

Dear Mrs Dalia Middleton-Kennedy

Congratulations! We are pleased to confirm you have been selected to work for the Canadian Skating Association/Publicity Department. We are delighted to make you the following job offer.

The position we are offering is that of Communications Director at a salary of \$275K a year including a company vehicle of our choice. The CSA will insure you under their fleet insurance and provide routine maintenance to your vehicle.

This position reports to Adam and Ted McBride. You will be expected to work Monday to Friday from 9:00 A.M to 5:00 P.M.

Future travel is a strong possibility. All travel and living expenses outside of Ontario will be provided for you by the Association.

This is a contract position with the expected length of a two year term.

Benefits information relevant to the position are as follows:

Vacation - 5 weeks in the first year

- 6 weeks in the second year

Probation 15/10/15-15/01/16

Employee Benefits Include: Group Insurance, MSP, Short/Long Term Disability, Dental and Health care.

We would like you to start work immediately. Please notify me when you are ready to sign the enclosed documents and we will meet in my office.

We are confident you will be able to make a significant contribution to the success of the Canadian Skating Association and look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Adam McBride Vice President

I had to read it twice! I know Adam told me his father has a generous budget, but really? Really? Oh my God! I dig through my purse for my phone just to calculate what that comes to each week. The answer is obscene, even at a 50% tax deduction! I storm back to Adam's office with letter in hand. Mrs. Crompton wasn't at her desk so I fly passed it and open the double doors. The abrupt noise startles Adam, who happens to be on the phone. He looks taken aback by my entry. He says into the receiver, "Bill, I'll have to call you back." He hangs up the phone and if looks can kill, I'm bludgeoned and laying on his carpet right now.

"Its courtesy to knock quietly before entering, where's Mrs. Crompton?" Adam scolds.

"She's not there. Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" he asks sternly.

"You're offering: this obscene salary, this fancy office, the title, and a CAR! Is it your way of getting back into my bed, because if it is, it's not going to work! I don't want the job. You can't buy me! You're an asshole if you think that's all it will take."

“You might want to calm down, maybe have a think before you ever storm into my office like this again. Let me remind you that you are on probation and even if you aren’t, your insubordination is grounds for dismissal. I remind you that you are an Olympic Gold Medallist. Having your name on our roster is worth more than \$275K. You are going to draw people to us, you’ll be working with networks and possibly producing a reality television show that will put the word sport back into figure skating. You might want to google what television producers make or look into your earning potential from royalties should you have chosen to do shows and commercials instead of signing our contract. The first five years after winning Olympic Gold is when you are at your maximum earning potential. We will be taking two of those years away. Finally, I have worked hard for this position and I don’t use my power to get anyone into my bed. That would be considered sexual harassment, and I take offence to that. Do you think I am capable of such an indecency. I have never treated you with anything but respect, and I expect that courtesy to be returned in the workplace, are we clear?”

I deserve the reprimand and I know it. I want to shrink, no, I want to become invisible, “I’m sorry.” My cheeks feel flaming hot. I just want to get out of there before I cry.

I turn and start for the door but he grabs my wrist stopping me from leaving, “Don’t be. Take the rest of the day off, and decide if you want to work here.”

“I do,” I say without hesitation.

“Are you sure,” he asks slightly less angry than before.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s wait for Mrs. Crompton to get back so you can sign the papers. Go to HR after that and then you can go home. I want to see you 9:00 A.M. tomorrow morning in my office so we can start planning the proposal.”

Chapter 10

I don't know how he's going to take the news. He thinks I was sick, at least that's what I texted him after he went to work. I don't want him waiting for me and me not to show up. I order his favourite takeout and wait impatiently by the door. It is a late night for him and he doesn't get home until eight. He works thirteen hours today.

He walked in and gives me a friendly hug, "Feeling any better?"

"About that," I say.

He stops, "You have something to tell me?"

"You're too wise," I tease.

"Can you tell me while I eat? I'm starving."

"Sure, I got you're favourite takeout."

"You're a doll," he says patting my shoulder.

He loads his plate and takes his proverbial chair in front of the television, "I won't put it on until you tell me what you need to."

"I've been offered a job at CSA."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

He takes the remote and turns on the t.v. He starts flicking through channels looking for something to watch, then he begins eating.

He didn't look or say anything to me, "That's all?" I ask indignantly. "Aren't you going to ask me about it?"

"It's old news Dal. I knew the offer was on the table weeks ago. McBride warned me you might be leaving me to work for him. He did it as a courtesy, no surprises. You know gossip in the skating world travels fast."

"Adam called you?"

"No, The father called me. I think his name is Ted."

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He swore me to secrecy. I was protecting you. What if they decided against offering you the position and you had your heart set on it?”

“Thanks, I think.”

“You can stay here even if you’re not working for me,” he offers. It’s the first time I see him as almost a father figure.

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all, you’re a pleasure to live with.”

“Thanks. The feeling is mutual!”

I started playing with my phone and decide instead of calling mom, Aunt Rosalind, Jer, Tara, Sierra, Carter and the lot, I will just post my new position under place of employment on Facepage. I know that once I make the change to my profile it will show up on my feed.

Dalia changed her work status:

Place of Employment: Canadian Skating Association: Communications
Director

I turn my phone off and watch television with Coach. When I turn it back on, I checked Facepage and my posting has 15 likes. Ryan isn’t one of them and I hate that I care.

Chapter 11

Mrs Crompton appears to be enjoying her coffee when I show up at five minutes to nine, “Go right in, he’s waiting for you.”

“Thank’s,” I say opening both wooden doors.

He’s closing his paper, The Globe and Mail, “I take it you haven’t been to your office yet?”

His question catches me off guard, was I supposed to? “Um No, should I have?”

He presses the intercom button on his phone, “Mrs. Crompton, can you pick up Dalia’s computer from her office?”

“Sure Mr. McBride.”

“You bought me a computer?” I gush.

“The CSA provides you with one. I did not personally, no.”

I can’t wipe the stupid smile of excitement off my face. He must think I’m an idiot.

I might as well give you these before we start working. He digs through his pocket and produces a set of key’s, “As stated in your offer letter, your position comes with a car. It will be delivered to your address later this evening. You will have a designated parking spot downstairs, number three. It’s all part and parcel of the image we expect you to maintain while you work for us.”

“That’s great Adam, thanks.”

Mrs. Crompton taps on the door before letting herself in, “The initial set-up still needs to be done. Do you want me to go ahead and do that while you proceed with your meeting? She can always change the passwords to suit her later.”

“That would be great, thanks Mrs. Crompton.”

She leaves us taking my Apple with her.

“She’s very nice,” I comment.

“And efficient,” he adds. “Our first order of business is to put together a proposal for the networks. I mentioned to you earlier that I wanted to do a show focused on training Olympic hopefuls.”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” I say trying not to sound overly enthusiastic. “I’ve come up with a few idea’s of my own since we last met.”

Adam started doing something on his computer and then turned it around so I could see the monitor, “This is the Olympic arena I was thinking about.”

“In Calgary?” I confirm.

“Yes.”

“Its beautiful inside, we skated there just before we quit. There’s a cute Olympic Village not far from there, it could house the hopefuls while at the camp.”

“Exactly what I thought,” Adam grins. “What ideas did you to come up with?”

“I thought we could do something along the lines of a ‘reality’ show. We invite the top four female and male competitors in Canada so our camp consists of eight skaters total. We start with a skate-off between the girls. First and Second place get to stay on the show. Third place get’s paired up with the third place male and whomever comes in fourth place is eliminated entirely. We would do the same for the men. The person who gets eliminated still has a chance to win the top prize if he/she manages to pull off a win at the Olympics. Otherwise whomever places the best in their category wins the prize. In the end, we will have a final show that will announce the winners.”

I looked at Adam expectantly. Now he has this stupid grin on his face that makes him look devilishly handsome, “I love it. How do you want to select the skaters?”

“We can go by last years competition results.”

“That is reasonable, how will you lure them to our camp?”

“You hire the best: jumping, choreography, off-ice instructors, with a monetary prize at the end of the show, and good luck finding one person who will turn it down.”

“Point noted.”

“How are you going to pick the coaches?”

“You promised me Hicks.”

“I did.”

“Well, that leaves choreography, I want Sally Beezac.”

“And for off-ice?”

“Miles Taylor, it’s a no brainer.”

“Of course,” he teases. “We’ll have camera’s on everyone 24/7, even in the Village. You will run the entire camp. If you run into any difficulties, we are a phone call away.”

“So what’s our next step?”

“We take it to the stations. I’ll make a few calls and see what I can set up, you read over your employee manual until I have a time and date set up. I’ll call you when I know.” With that, I’m dismissed. I get up from my chair and head out to see if Mrs. Crompton is finished with my computer.

Adam calls me just before noon, “Hi Dal, I have a bite. Global is interested in hearing your pitch. We have a meeting set up for tomorrow at three. We’ll meet her in the lobby at two and take one car.”

“That’s wonderful Adam,” I say calmly before hanging up. I do my Happy Dance! I shake my booty until my ass hits the corner of my desk and I feel this sharp pain on my buttocks. I stop dancing and texted Sierra and Tara the news instead. They are over the moon with excitement for me.

I manage to keep myself busy googling places around Alberta and coming up with a list of things that need to be done if the idea is approved. When five o’clock rolls around, I can’t wait to drive home to Coach Hick’s house to see the company vehicle I will be driving in. As luck has it, I’m caught in bumper to bumper traffic and my fifteen minute ride turns into forty-five minutes.

I kept trying to guess what type of car will be waiting for me, reminding myself that I can’t keep it, it’s a loaner car only while I work there. The car has to be nicer than dad’s shit box which will always hold a special place in my heart. I turned the last corner before arriving at Hick’s house to see a beautiful pearl white Jag convertible parked in the driveway. I can’t manage to stop tears of happiness springing from my eyes as I see Adam and Coach Hicks waiting for me. My life is finally taking a turn for the better.

I throw dad's car into park on the side of the road and even after I shut it off, it still continues making choking and sputtering noises, a slow death.

Adam strolled over to my shit box and strokes it with his hand, "Its time to put this baby to rest. It's done you well." His gesture makes me cry a little more.

In a completely unprofessional manner, I threw my arms around Adam's neck and thank him from the bottom of my heart, "It's beautiful!" He is taken so off guard by my reaction that he sort of stumbles a bit. I smelt his aftershave when my head nears his chest for a second. He looks down as I looked up, "It's nice to see you smile," he comments.

"It's nice to have something to smile about," I admit.

Coach Hicks looks over at us, "Come in McBride, I take it we have something to discuss?"

We follow Coach into his house and he gestures for us to make ourselves comfortable in the living room, "Drinks?"

"What do you have?" Adam asks.

"Whisky, Vodka, Beer, Juices, you name it."

"A Whisky, neat."

"Dalia?"

"I'll have the same."

I have this permanent smile etched on my face, I give up trying to hide it. Coach comes in with our drinks, laying them on the common table. Adam takes the wing chair facing the couch where the Coach and I sit on. Adam takes his drink, "I've offered Dalia a Director of Communication position at the CSA."

"I take it she's accepted," he grins knowingly at me. "The car gives it away," he winks at me.

"She has of course, but with conditions." Adam informs Coach Hicks. Adam looks at me, "Did you tell him?"

I glance at Coach then back at Adam, "No, not yet."

Adam takes a sip of his whisky and then places his glass down, "We are planning on initiating the first reality skating show of its kind. We present our proposal to Global tomorrow afternoon."

"You have my attention," Coach Hicks sounds intrigued. Adam explains my concept to him and then ends with, "So the job's yours if you want it. You'll be

coaching the top men and women in Canada for the duration of the show, we will pay for accommodation and travel expenses along with offering you a sizeable salary for services rendered. Your students will be provided with a suitable replacement in your absence personally selected by Ted McBride.”

“I don’t come cheap!” Coach Hicks warns Adam.

“This show will make you the most sought out coach in all of North America. You will have an opportunity to teach the top male and female competitors in the country!”

“Don’t give me that fluff, you’re selling me something I already did with Dal and Ry. I want dollars and cents boy!”

“50% more than last year’s gross as stated on your 2014 tax return in year one and 5% increase in year two. We will be offering you a two year contract, assuming Dalia’s show gets approved tomorrow.”

“Who will I be coaching with?”

“Sally Chatterton and Miles Taylor.”

“Car?”

“No car,” Adam laughs. “Deal?”

“Deal” The two men shake hands.

Chapter 12

I take the lift down to the lobby at 1:55 P.M. Adam is there waiting for me dressed sharp in a black two piece suit and tie. I know how important this meeting is so I do something completely out of character and buy a GORGEOUS outfit for the day on plastic hiding all the tags, so I can return it after the meeting. I don't want my appearance to be a part of the cause for rejection, this way, I look every bit the part Adam expects me to.

When I step off the elevator, he looks unimpressed, "Are you ready Dal?" His reaction disappoints me immensely. When I tried on the outfit yesterday, I imagined him being struck with this massive pang of desire for me. I pictured him jumping me in the limousine or elevator, unable to keep his hands off me or remain professional.

Butterflies in my stomach go from doing double axels to triple axels after seeing his reaction to my appearance, "Sure," I lie blatantly.

He looks flipping gorgeous. Pathetic enough to look for a reason to get close to him, I take my dead time getting into the limousine, hoping he will bump into me or at least touch me by accident. Being the gentleman he is, he stands far enough back, preventing any unseemly accidents from happening.

Adam tells the driver the address and then closes the window between us ensuring privacy. Maybe now he will jump me. I hold my breath, with anticipation.

"Don't be nervous. Pretend you are telling me your idea for the first time. It will sell itself," he says confidently.

"You think so?" I still wait. I want to inch closer to him, will it be obvious. Maybe if he smells me, he will want to get closer too?

I do the subtle inching and he subtly shifts away from me.

"I know so," he says confidently.

My confidence level hits an all time low, I decide to pull my phone out and check my emails and texts. There are two texts from Sierra and Tara wishing me luck. To my surprise, there was an email from Jer. I quickly open it knowing we were only a few more minutes away from the station.

Dal,

How's Adam treating you? I told you, he's turned into a real stand up guy! I want your car!

Jer

I looked up at Adam, "Jer wants my car."

"Tell him once he wins the Olympics and works for me he can have one too but they don't come with baby onboard stickers," he teases.

"Then he won't want it," I joke back. I place my phone back in my purse and pulled my compact out. I start reapplying a red layer of lipstick. Then I smear my lips together to even out the fresh colour. I feel his eyes on me, this time I'm sure. I put everything back into my purse as the car starts slowing down in front of a familiar building I have driven by a gazillion times in the passed.

The chauffeur opens the door for us and we step onto the busy sidewalk. It is windy outside and it blows my vest open. I squeal from the instant cold breeze I feel and close my vest quickly while walking towards Global's doors. Adam reaches for the handle and opens it letting me in first. The lobby isn't all that impressive everything is grey or black and somewhat dated. Adam seems to know where we are going so he doesn't stop by the information desk on his way to the elevators. He presses the button and we waits in silence.

The door opens and I step on, he follows standing very close to me. This is closer to what I fantasized about. I don't want to move. I just focus on his proximity to me and try ti ignore the wave nausea my nerves bring, "Relax!" he advises, sensing my nerves. "Take a breath."

"I can't help it, there's so much riding on this."

"You've got this," he encourages, "this is just a formality."

The doors open to a big desk with an oversized lady sitting in it, with an even more oversized sign saying Global behind her. She looks up from her bifocals that sit halfway down her nose, “May I help you?”

Adam speaks with a sophisticated almost pompous air about him, “Adam McBride with Dalia Middleton-Kennedy.”

“Middleton,” I correct him quietly.

He smiles approvingly, “I’ll notify H.R.” he says under his breath.

“You do that,” I flirt regaining a smidgeon of my confidence.

“Go right in,” the secretary directs.

There are four people in the boardroom sitting on one side of the large rectangular table. The other side has two chairs for us. There are two pitchers and water glasses on a tray, to which I assume we can help ourselves. They stand as we enter the room and we all sit down at the same time. The man on the far left introduces the other two men and one woman sitting with him. Adam introduces us. We shake hands.

Adam starts, “The Canadian Skating Association would like to join with Global in televising a Figure Skating reality show that will benefit both parties involved. Dalia Middleton who’s here with me today will present our proposal. Dalia:”

I take a deep breath and explain the concept to them in detail. When I finish, I asked if there are any questions. The lady is the first to look at everyone before asking the first question, “How do you feel this will benefit our station?”

I smile at her with my eyes, “Great question, Figure Skating appeals to all ages which leaves open a large target audience. This idea has never been done before, making the concept fresh, original. It is more than a dating reality show, or a housewives fighting show.

This show will encompass drama in it’s finest form. Let’s not forget Nancy and Tanya. You throw a bunch of competitors living and skating under the same roof vying for one title, it will get ugly, most definitely. Your audience will tune in week after week because our cameras will be catching every dirty detail, increasing your ratings and getting those advertising dollars every station works so hard for.”

“Great answer,” bounces back the lady.

A gentleman on my right is the next to ask a question, “Why do you think the skaters will want to come to the camp?”

“They will be offered premium skating time, fabulous coaching and a cash prize combined, there is something for everyone.”

“Are there any other questions?”

The room falls silent.

Another man speaks up, “Will you or Ryan be coaching?”

“No, I’ll be directing. He’s not employed by CSA.”

The room falls into disapproving silence.

One of Global’s man stands up breaking it, “We’d like to thank you for your proposal. We’ll be in touch after we’ve decided.”

We shake hands and that same man sees us out. We walk passed bifocal lady and step onto the elevator waiting for the doors to close before we speak, “How did I do?”

“We’ll have to wait and see,” says Adam not committing to an opinion.

When we get to the lobby our car is waiting for us. I step in first with Adam following close behind me. This time I’m sure I feel his hand on the small of my back, I freeze for a second not sure where he is going with it.

He stops abruptly when I do and says, “Tag.”

I’m beyond mortified. “It’s just that I didn’t get my first cheque yet and I wanted to exude the image you were expecting from me.”

“You did,” he giggles, tearing the price tag of, “Consider it a bonus.”

Chapter 13

There isn't much to do but wait for Global to call us back with their answer. In the meantime, Adam is making calls to other stations in case Global doesn't take us on.

There is a tap on my door five minutes before I'm going to leave for the evening. I call out, "Come in!"

Adam strolls in and I stand to greet him. We both sit down before he asks, "How are you settling in?"

I smiled nervously at him, "I'm getting comfortable, thank you for asking. Have you heard anything?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," he says. He crosses his legs and steeples his fingers, "I think I'm going to need a drink for this."

I get up and head to my mini pantry, it's stocked with a few wine bottles, whisky, and coffee packets, "Do you have anything in mind?"

"Whisky, Can you make it a double?"

"Sure, but that doesn't sound good, I take it, it's bad news?"

I pour two glasses, a large for him and a smaller one for me, "When did they call?"

"I just got off the phone with them."

I wait impatiently for him to talk, "They're doing the show with conditions."

"Which are?" I ask waiting for him to elaborate.

He drinks his drink in one swig, "They want Ryan hired on as coach for the pair couple we create, Hicks will train the rest of the skaters. I think the Global execs feel you guys might reunite on national television. They think the Canadian audience will love it. I need another drink," he complains rightfully so.

I pour him another one and sit across from him again, “So what are you going to do? Are you going to offer him a job?”

“I don’t want to.” Adam says honestly.

“He’s in school, he probably won’t even accept it.”

“He knows YOU work here, of course he’s going to take it.”

“Your wrong, he’s moved on. He has a new girlfriend.”

“Dal, seriously, he’ll never stop wanting you.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“We’ve both moved on, he has his mind set on becoming a doctor. What if he declines the offer then what?”

“Global won’t do the pilot,” he says. “My people are on the phone with him right now. They will call me when we have an answer.”

The possibility of working as a coach with Ryan never dawned on me. It’s too much for me to process.

A few minutes later, Adam’s cell rings. He answers the call and sits silently while the caller speaks to him, he stares at me the entire time, and then says, “Thanks,” and hangs up.

He drinks the second drink faster than the first if that is possible and then he hisses, “He accepted the offer,” before stalking out of my office. I decide to stay behind and draft the offer letters, hoping to please Adam.

November 14, 2015

Canadian Skating Association
1234 Front Street
Toronto, On
M2M 2M2

Dear [insert skater's name],

It is our great pleasure to inform you that you have been chosen as one of the top eight figure skaters in all of Canada based on your performances from last

year's competition results. For this we would like to congratulate you! Global Television and the Canadian Skating Association would like to extend to you a special invitation to train in Calgary, Alberta for one year starting in March 2016 to March 2017. All expenses paid by the CSA.

You, the skater, will live in your own room in the 1988 Olympic Village in Calgary, Alberta. Training will take place at the Olympic Ice Facility to which you and seven other competitors chosen will have 24 hour access. You will also have 24 hour access to the gym facilities for off-ice training. We hand selected: Sally Chatterton for choreography, Coach A. Hicks for jumping, Ryan Kennedy for pairs, and Miles Taylor off-ice training. These coaches have produced the best Canadian skaters over the past five years.

You will be expected to compete at all levels of competition, all expenses paid. At the divisional level, one male and one female camp skater who does the worst in his/her category will be asked to leave, until the camp is left with three top male and three top female skaters who will progress to Olympics. Divisionals, Canadians, and Olympics will be held at the Olympic Ice Facility in Alberta, so essentially the majority of the competitions will be brought to you.

Global Television will be recording at all times. This new reality show is expected to bring the viewers into the athletes' world, the highs, the lows, and finally we would hope the podiums. You are expected to act like dignified, trained professionals at all times. The top placing Female and Male competitor from the camp during the 2016 competition year will win \$100K, even if s/he does not make the podium at World level.

Family is prohibited from visiting the Olympic Village at any time but will be permitted to attend all competitions. Each skater will have his own room for all competitions. Should you choose to decline the invitation to the camp you will still be eligible to compete on behalf of Canada, however, please note, if one of the aforementioned coaches is yours you will be expected to use the suitable

replacement provided to you by the CSA with whom to train. You must accept or decline this offer by mail or phone before February 2, 2016.*

Your main contacts while you are in Calgary will be Dalia Kennedy, personal representative of the Canadian Skating Association. Miss. Middleton will be your go-to person should you have any special requests or problems while at camp.

We look forward to the skating year of 2016. We wish you luck and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Adam McBride
President, Canadian Skating Association

SHOULD YOU NOT MAKE TOP 10 AT CANADIANS PRIOR TO CAMP
THE INVITATION CAN BE REVOKED.

Happy with my drafted letter, I close my eyes and stretch my neck. I pour another shot of whisky and start drafting the coaches letters.

November 15, 2015

Canadian Skating Association
1234 Front Street,
Toronto, Ontario
M2M 2M2

Dear * {Insert Coaches Name}

It is our great pleasure to announce that you have been chosen as one of the top four coaches in all of Canada. For this we would like to congratulate you! Global Television and the Canadian Skating Association would like to extend to you a special invitation to coach in Calgary Alberta for the period of one year starting in March 2016 to March 2017. All living expenses not including a salary of \$175K will be covered by the CSA.

You will room with the athletes in the former 1988 Olympic Village in Calgary. Training will take place at the Olympic ice facility to which you will have 24 hour access. You will also have 24 hour access to gym facilities for off-ice training.

You will be flown to all competitions excluding Divisionals, Canadians, and Olympics which will be held in Calgary, essentially bringing the competitions to you and your skaters. At the Divisional level, the camp will drop the skaters who perform worst in his/her category. Those two skaters will be asked to leave the show immediately.

Global television will be recording everything at all times. This camp which is essentially a reality television show is expected to bring the viewers into the athletes world showing them the highs and the lows and finally we hope the podiums.

Athletes families are prohibited from visiting the Olympic Village or communicating with you at any time. A new coach will be provided for your skaters at the arena where you coach while you are gone. This will come at no cost to you. A response to this invitation must be received by no later than December 1, 2015.

Your main contact in Calgary Alberta will be Dalia Kennedy who represents the CSA as Director of Communications. She will be your go-to person should you run into any problems while at the camp.

We look forward to watching you coach in the 2016 competition year. We wish your competitors good luck.

Sincerely,

Adam McBride

V.P. Canadian Skating Association.

I e-mail the letters to Adam before calling it a night. The office is dead quiet, not even the cleaners can be heard. Outside is dark, it has to be late. I check the clock, 8:45pm. Where has the time gone? I lock my office and take the lift down. It feels good putting in some extra time, maybe Adam will realize how committed I am to my new position. Streetlights are on but it's still dark around the building, so I walk briskly to the car. When I get in, I lock the doors, safe.

I turn my jag over expecting to hear the purr of her motor, instead, nothing. I try again, this time she comes to life and Taylor Swift comes blaring out the speakers singing, 'Shake it Off.' I drive back to Coaches singing with Taylor, when I pass a large white building with a sign out front saying lofts for rent. I stop singing to memorize the number so I can program it into my phone, its time for me to get out from under Coach Hick's feet.

Chapter 14

Adam calls me up to his office the following morning, “I signed off my approval on those letters you drew up yesterday. The coaches letters are good to go, but we have selection issues in the female category that I’m not sure you’re aware of.”

I help myself to a chair in front of his desk, “How so?”

“Rumour has it, the top female skater injured herself recently. I don’t know if Marcia is going to be better in time to compete this year. I don’t want her to take a spot if she’s not going to be in medal contention, what do you think?”

“Do you know what’s wrong with her?”

“No.”

“I can put a condition in her offer letter that she provide medical reports before deciding what course of action we’ll take.”

“Sounds like a plan. You draft that while I put together a tape of her program along with other possible hopefuls, we’ll meet after you’ve heard back from her and then decide together which way we should go.”

“Sure.”

Adam sees me out of his office with his hand lodged in the small of my back, “Keep up the good work,” he encourages.

I manage to complete the coaches letters and obtain Marcia’s contact information before lunch rolls around. I drop the letters off in the mailbox and then sit in my car so I can call the loft’s number from yesterday.

It rings twice before an old man with a nasally voice answers the phone, “Hello?”

“Hello, Are you the person I should be speaking to about lofts for rent?”

“Hello?”

He is obviously hard of hearing, so I repeat myself and this time much louder, “Are you the person I should be speaking to about the lofts for rent?”

“No need to yell! Yes, I’m renting out lofts. How can I help you?”

“I would like to see one please.”

“Sure, sure, when would you like to come?”

“Is now too soon?”

“Not at all, I will sit and wait for you in the lobby.”

“Thanks.”

He is just as I picture him on the phone, a slight man in his seventies with a full head of grey hair. He is dressed well with hearing aides in both ears and walks with a cane.

“You the lady who just called?” he asks.

I smiled warmly at him, “That would be me. I’m appreciate you showing me the loft on such short notice!”

“Don’t have anything better to do,” he grunts.

I followed his slouched back as he leads me to the vacant loft, “It’s got no furniture in it, available immediately if you want it, once I do a bureau check that is.”

He fumbles with the door and when he can’t get it to open he turns to me, “Would you hold this please?” he asks handing me his cane.

I take the cane and stand back giving him more room as he uses all his body weight against the door. It finally gives, catching him off guard, causing him to stumble into the loft.

I hand him back his cane and start looking around, “You say it’s available right away?”

“Yes, this one, and another one like it, next door.”

“Are there any differences between the two?”

“Ya, this one was fumigated already, buddy is coming back this afternoon to do the other one.”

“What’s it been fumigated for?”

“Madagascar cockroaches,” he replies sounding like he is on that television show.

I squeal in disgust before I have a chance to filter it out.

“Just kidding, we spray for field mice. The damn things keep coming every time it gets cold out. This year we think we have it licked. We spray ensuring the little so and so’s don’t come back.” I keep looking around the loft while he rambles on about what a nuisance they are, but every time I open a door I do it quickly to see if I can catch one running around. By the end of my journey, I find one carcass in a bathroom cabinet that hasn’t been disposed of yet. The old man sees me and quickly picks up the carcass with his bare hand and throws it into the kitchen garbage.

The old man turns to me, “Listen lady, I know it don’t look good, but I took care of it, I was asking \$1500 a month but I’ll let the place go to you for \$1200, not a penny less. I’ll forgo the credit check.”

“Deal!” I jump at it. I write a cheque for first and last, and sign the lease before rushing off.

We shake hands vigorously, “You only have two days until the end of the month, you can start moving in today.” He hands the key and then I explain if I don’t get back to work they will notice I’m gone, before apologizing for my hasty retreat.

I get back to the office fifteen minutes late from lunch and spend the rest of the afternoon drafting Marcia’s letter following my call with her. I take the opportunity to explain the entire camp idea to her and the reason for my call expediting the process. Once I’m confident she knows who I am and that I’m legitimate, she says she will get to a store with faxing services and send me her medical records pertaining to her current injury.

By the end of the business day, I have a tailored offer letter to Marcia, and all of the medical information we need to make a decision. I go ahead and call Adam. Mrs. Crompton answers the phone and puts me right through to him:

There’s a pause of dead air on the phone, “Adam?”

“Yes, let me take you off speaker.”

“Sure,” I respond hearing a click and then his voice coming in clearer. “I spoke with Marcia. I was able to get my hands on her medical files so we can make a decision.”

“Already? I’m impressed,” he comments. “Why don’t you bring it over to my office so we can review it now?”

“I’ll be right there,” I say eagerly, glad I’m pleasing him.

I gathered all the papers from my desk and place them into a neat pile except for the ones I’m bringing to Adam. I take the lift up to his office and I’m welcomed by Mrs Crompton who gestures for me to go right in.

I opened his door to find him waiting for me, “Dalia!”

“Adam,” I smile.

I approached his desk laying the folder before him before helping myself to a seat, “I think you will have everything you need in there.”

He slides on black rimmed glasses and places his feet up on the corner of the desk to read. I see them do it in the movies all the time.

“It’s just a sprain,” he tosses the folder onto the desk as he starts deliberating.

“I give it six weeks and she’ll be back to her usual self,” I predict.

“What makes you so sure?”

“If you look at the dates, she’s already been off for two weeks. Sprains don’t take that long to recover from. I think we should invite her.”

Adam studies me, “Put a clause in protecting us, something that in the event that she re-injures herself, we can revoke her invitation.”

“So we’re inviting her?”

“Yes,” he confirms.

I jump off my chair and start heading for the door before he has a chance to dismiss me.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“I’m going to finish the rest of the invitations so I can send them out tonight, then I’m making Coach Hicks a special dinner.”

He gets up from his chair and follows me to my door, “What’s the occasion?”

“I found a place of my own.”

He smiles at me approvingly, “If you need help moving, I’m only a phone call away.”

“I hardly deem that appropriate,” I tease. I change my posture making myself appear rigid, and prudish.

“I would agree with you, if I was asking YOU to move my stuff for me as a boss to an employee, but I’ve reversed the role. You should consider it..”

“Put that way, how can I refuse! My landlord said I can move in anytime I want, but tonight I need to break the news to Hicks. My plan is to start moving my things in tomorrow after work.”

“I’m at your service if you need me. Don’t forget to tell HR your change of address,” he dismisses me.

“I won’t, thanks.”

Chapter 15

I pick up Sushi for dinner, and make baked Alaska for desert. It was one of coaches favourite meals. The door opens at half past seven and I hear him drop his bag in the front foyer, “What’s for dinner Dal?”

“Sushi and baked Alaska.”

“What’s happening now?” he asks suspiciously. “You hate Sushi.”

“That’s not true, I just don’t eat it very often.”

“You’re buttering me up for something and I’m not in the mood to drag it out of you, my day sucked.”

“I’m moving out,” I blurt.

“Well, damn!” he says sitting down on his usual dinner chair, “If that’s not the best thing I’ve heard all day! No offence Dal, but since you’ve moved in, I’m practically re-virginized. I can’t bring any of my boyfriends home..it’s been terrible. The only person worse to live with was Ryan!”

“Why?”

“He’s like alcohol to an alcoholic. Living with him is a constant fantasy of putting my dick in-between those sweet cheeks of his!”

“Oh my God, too much information Coach!” I say chuckling.

“Sorry,” he grins, “but you asked! Where are you moving to? Obviously not far if you’re working at the CSA.”

“I found a loft a few minutes from here.”

“Damn, a few minutes from here? Seriously? Tell me you’re kidding.”

“I’m not, I’m moving to 15 Avenue Road.”

“I need a drink,” Coach complains getting up from his chair.

“Now I’m worried, “Why do you need a drink? You’re happy aren’t you? Do you have something to tell me?”

“I’d rather not,” he says evasively. He goes to his liquor cabinet and pours two large glasses, both doubles. Oh my, I know whatever it is, it has to be bad.

He hands me my glass, “Drink this first.” I take a large gulp which burns going all the way down. We haven’t started eating our dinner yet, so I know I’m really going to feel the effects of this, and soon. I take another drink as he watches me.

“Your ex-husband called me last night.” I choke over my drink as I swallow and it starts coming out of my nose. I can’t stop coughing. I put my glass down and get up to grab a kleenex to wipe my nose.

“You weren’t going to tell me,” I accuse him.

“I didn’t want to upset you,” he explains. “You’ve moved on”

“Why did he call you? Why now?”

“He needs a favour,” Coach explains.

Hicks took a drink and in the time it took for him to down his glass, I already know the answer. Hicks must have secured the other Loft for HIM.

“He’s going to be my new neighbour?”

“He’s got loft seven and you?”

“Five.”

“Then I guess so.”

“Is there any way you can back out?”

“No, I signed the lease and gave the deposit, you?”

“No.”

This won’t fare well with Adam. If I don’t tell him, he might find out through his own HR. I have no choice with both of us working for him, but to come clean. He has to hear it from me first.

I don’t take Adam up on his offer for help moving in, not because of the turn in my new living conditions, but because I’m too embarrassed for him to find out I didn’t own one piece of furniture yet. I move out of Coach Hicks house with two bags of clothes and my skating bag. I borrow a torn up old sleeping bag from him until I have some sort of bedding delivered. It’s a humble beginning but one I’m proud of. I’m going to do this all, on my own.

Chapter 16

I strategize on how to present the news of Ryan and me living in the same duplex to Adam. At first I'm not even sure he will care because Adam and I aren't even dating. Maybe I'm blowing this all out of proportion, then I remember how he acted when Ryan accepted the job and I know I'm not.

I only have two choices: the office or over dinner. It isn't like I can invite myself over to Adams although I'm dying to see how he lives with such a prosperous career, and I definitely can't invite him over to my place.

Trying not to overthink it I grab my phone and call Mrs. Crompton. I don't go into detail but I ask her if I can see Adam sometime this afternoon when he is free. She gives me an appointment with him for two o'clock. My eyes are glued to the clock, slowly I watch it tick away, minutes feel like hours.

Ten minutes before I'm expected in his office, I reapply a coat of lipstick and re-spray my already bulletproof hair. God, I hate my hair. The natural curls drive me crazy and I don't have the patience to use a straightening iron on it everyday.

Two minutes to go and I'm pressing the elevator button to go up. When I get there, Mrs. Crompton isn't at her desk. I tap on his door and wait. I hear a faint, "Come in," and proceed to open the door. His back was turned to me.

"Hi Adam," I greet walking to a chair.

He turns in his chair to me, "Good afternoon Dalia, I asked Mrs. Crompton to schedule this meeting with you and she said you beat me to it. What would you like to discuss?"

"It's not important, what did you want to meet about?" I sigh inwardly with relief that I have a few minutes to spare before I'm going to have to force myself to tell him my new living arrangements.

“Well,” he pauses stroking his intentional six o’clock shadow. He looks crazy sexy in his navy Hugo Boss suit that fits him perfectly with just the right amount of stubble adorning his face. He breaks the mould getting hotter with age, becoming more manly and sophisticated. His voice startles me back to reality, “I hope you don’t get upset with me, but I took the liberty of booking you a flight to Alberta. I made a list of things you’ll need to do while you’re there. Would you like me to go over it with you?”

I’m stuck on liberties. Yes, this man, now god of a man can take liberties on me anytime. I want to take my own liberties and be at his mercy, it’s been a long time since I’ve been with anyone.

“Please,” I almost chant and then I look at his list, “this list is what you want me to do?” I’m rather shocked at the length of it.

“Yes, it might seem long, but you’d be surprised how much you can get accomplished in a day. It’s not too late to book someone to go with you, if you feel its necessary.”

“You?” I ask hopefully.

“No, my father needs me here,” he says begrudgingly.

“Then who?”

“Well, let’s take a look at the list first before we decide.”

“Sure.”

Alberta List

Arrange Global videotaping for each athlete and coach as they arrive at the camp.

Arrange transportation for Athlete’s and Coaches from airport. (A schedule will be provided for you before you leave.)

Arrange a Meet and Greet party.

Plan the televising of the party with Global ensuring most interactions are captured on tape.

Gift bags for Coaches and Athletes neatly placed in rooms.

Strict living rules for the Village.

Assign rooms to athletes keeping in mind close competitors should live proximal to one another ensuring drama.

Hidden camera's in all rooms, arena, work out rooms, eating area's.

Diet planning according to individual athletic needs.

Arrange training schedules. Meet with people who run the arena and book flood times around those schedules.

Makeover episode creating dramatic changes in a top salon. (These episodes tend to get high ratings.)

Book a final live audience televised episode after the competitions where we hand out our rewards and have a question and answer period.

Have the two people voted off the show come back for the last episode

Announce another season, re-inviting all the athletes back, including the ones previously voted off.

I'm speechless, suddenly I know why I'm getting paid the big bucks! I have the weight of the world on my shoulders. He waits patiently for a reaction that I'm not so forthcoming with, "What did you want to meet with me about?" He redirects the topic of conversation while I decide.

"Hicks unknowingly arranged for Ryan to live in the same complex as me. I found out after it was too late to do anything about it and I didn't want you to hear it from somebody else."

Adam shrugs indifferently, "It's something I'm going to have to live with. You'll be living in the same Village together anyway."

I can't tell what blows me away more, his more than mature reaction to my news or the list of to-do's coming my way. Maybe the chemistry I think Adam and I share is more one sided then I realize. How will I accomplish this all on my own? I am way in over my head!

"You won't be working with me at the camp," I panic.

"No, I'm in charge of running all the skating events including media across Canada while you're gone."

“Oh,” I say not masking my disappointment. “I was under the impression that I would be working closely with you, even in Alberta. I can’t do this by myself. I don’t want to.”

“You aren’t expected to.”

“With whom will I work? I don’t know anyone more than to say hi or bye to them at the CSA with the exception of you.”

“That isn’t true.” Adam says calmly. “Let’s go out for dinner and talk. I’ll pick you up from the lobby fifteen minutes after quitting time.”

“Sure,” I say getting up hastily and seeing myself out of his office. I feel like quitting just due to the feeling of being completely overwhelmed.

He is waiting for me in a silver gull-winged Mercedes sports car. Its beauty is breathtaking. He unlocks my door and it shoots up into the air. He had Recaro Sports Seats with a racing harness that acts as a seatbelt. He takes his time strapping me in, making sure everything is secure before closing my wing. I welcome his touch and his scent which is finding its way to my side of the car and I can’t help my body’s natural reaction to him. I’ve been attracted to ever since I hurt myself as a single competitive skater which was years ago. My breathing gets shallow and I try hard to suck my gut in without appearing obvious. I can only hope that he still holds a candle for me the way I do for him. My fear about Alberta vanishes as my libido goes into sudden overdrive. I wanted him all over me.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve gone out,” I said lightly.

He looks over at me, “Too long, you pick the restaurant.”

I look at him and for a second and I think I can squeeze the old Adam out of him, and at the same time find the right ambiance, “Chez McBrides! Let’s kick our feet up and order in.”

“Seriously?” he asks incredulously. “I offer to take you to any restaurant of your choice and you chose takeout at my apartment?”

“Yes, takeout at your apartment sounds perfect to me. No waiters interrupting our conversation, no pre-tense, just you, me, and the food.”

There is a large opening in the road and Adam takes advantage of it to change directions while flooring the accelerator. I get knocked back in my seat and my adrenaline is pumping, but I’m not scared. I trust him.

He damn near drives almost all the way back to CSA when he slows down at a beautiful high-rise, “This is convenient, why do you even bother having a car?” I questioned.

“I love driving and having the freedom to take off whenever I want,” he admits.

He stops at the front doors and we dis-embark from the gull wings before he hands his key to the valet. I feel this weird vibe like we are being watched but chalked it up to paranoia and I don’t mention anything to him. We enter the elaborate lobby furnished exquisitely with an eclectic style. Anyone who sees Adam nods salutations to him as we head for the elevator.

“You appear to be well respected,” I observe.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” he asks indignantly.

“I didn’t mean,” I start defending my comment.

“Dal, relax, I’m yanking your chain. What do you want, Chinese, Thai, Italian?”

“Surprise me,” I suggest.

The elevator arrives and he presses P. I should have guessed it. Daddy must be generous to him too. We stop at the penthouse and when the lift doors open I find myself in an elegant contemporary setting predominantly black leather everything with mahogany wood everything. His kitchens and bathrooms spare no expense, he shrugs when he sees my expression, “I got it this way.”

I flash back to the old man carrying the rodent carcass in my new apartment and start laughing.

“What are you laughing about?” he asks.

“It’s embarrassing but yesterday I got my new apartment and it came with a dead mouse.”

“I want to see your place,” he says protectively. “Do you need more money?”

“Jesus no! You are not seeing my place and I definitely don’t want anymore money.”

“Why won’t you let me see your place?” he asks.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say praying he will change the subject already.

Adam starts taking off his jacket, “Spill, or I’ll go see it for myself tomorrow after I look up your address in HR.”

“I don’t have furniture yet.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you sleep on?”

“Coach lent me a sleeping bag.”

“Seriously? Do you have a Television?”

“Youtube on my cell, but I mostly enjoy reading.”

“Chinese?”

“Sure.”

“Drink?”

“Sure, wine if you have any.”

“Red or White?”

“White.”

He leaves me for a minute and I continue exploring. There is something cold about his place, no pictures or small decorative pieces. This is a cave dwelling at best lacking any sign of a woman’s touch. He taps me on the shoulder while I’m gazing into the next building. If I squinted hard enough, I think I see two shadowed figures doing what I would killed to be doing with Adam right now. At least someone is getting lucky.

“What are you looking at,” he asks while handing me my wine.

“You see the next building? If you look at the second highest floor third window in, I think I can make out a couple doing it.”

“Ah, I see them.” I can feel him standing right behind me looking over my shoulder. I knew I shouldn’t move, but I do. I turn around and I now I’m facing him, if he wants a chance to kiss me here it is, our eyes lock and I wait for a split second and he does nothing but step back from me and turn to the couch. I’m shattered with disappointment jumping to the immediate conclusion that he isn’t attracted to me anymore. I put all the signs up, I suggested his place, turn to him like I did. He didn’t respond to any of it.

He takes a seat on his plush leather chesterfield and motions for me to sit next to him. He grabs his converter and starts messing around with it while I take

the seat he offers. My pride is in my boots at this point. He selects something he recorded rather than a television show and put his arm around the back of my headrest as the top male Canadian figure skater comes onto his 90 inch LED screen.

Here I hope the evening will turn to more, but he is all about his job. I don't get why Jeremy told me he still likes me, when obviously he doesn't. I need to stop putting myself out there for Adam and move on, the way he did.

"I recorded last years programs from media films we had saved at CSA. I was going to show you them at the office, but this saves me a step," he says happily.

We watched his long program and the three other men invited to the camp before the doorman calls up to Adam on the PA, "Your takeout is here sir."

"Thanks, send him up,"

Adam lays out our feast on the table in front of us and we enjoy our food while watching the rest of the skaters invited to our camp.

The video ends and our stomachs are full when Adam said, "I have one more video to show you."

I had no idea what it can be because I know for sure we've seen everyone, "Oh? What is it?"

"It's something I think you will enjoy," he says mysteriously. Instead of him resting his arm on my headrest, he places it directly on my shoulders. I'm in his arms and it feels good. I knew I shouldn't be reading too much into it but this isn't how bosses sit with their employees, it has to be something else. He turns on a video with his free hand.

I find myself staring at me and Ryan, our Olympic program.
Flabbergasted

My eyes glue to his set. For four minutes and thirty-eight seconds I watch myself skate with Ryan who I thought was the love of my life while in the arms of Adam my first love.

It's surreal. I never watched myself on television since my father died. I didn't realize it would evoke such an emotional response from me. The loss of my

father feels like it just happened and the natural high I got with Ryan when skating with him remembered. I'm angry at Adam for not preparing me for this. He obviously didn't expect these emotionally intense reactions.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask.

"I want to know if you miss it."

"Of course I do."

"Him?"

"No, yes!"

"What do you mean?"

"I miss dad, our skating, being on top of the world, but not Ryan."

"Are you sure that's all you miss? Judging by your reaction, I doubt you."

"Yes, of course I'm sure. Why don't you believe me?"

"Listen, I won't put myself out there for you if you're going to go running back to him again, I've waited far too long."

"I won't." I promise him.

"How do I know?"

"I guess you don't know, you're just going to have to trust me."

"Listen Dal, I can't compete with the level of intimacy the two of you shared on the ice, I see it every time I watch the two of you skate."

"Then stop watching because what Ryan and I have together didn't survive."

"That point is the only thing that keeps me going. I've dated other girls Dal, but I've held out for you. You're the one I want."

"I want you too."

"I'm not so sure of that. I don't think you are ready. Grab your things I'll take you home."

Chapter 17

The valet brings his winged car around, and the novelty of its elegance wears thin due to our changing moods. He buckles me in and we sit in silence as he drives slowly back to the office lost in his own thoughts. I stare out the window devoid of any hope that the evening can be salvaged. He swipes his card to get into the underground and pulls up next to my lone car. He places her in park and I start digging through my handbag for my keys to the Jag.

I find them and press the door locks making it beep a hollow sounding echo before looking at Adam, "I'm sorry our evening is ending like this."

"So am I," he admits. His eyes look dark and he's brooding. I don't wait around to see if he will kiss me. That will make me look desperate. I unbuckle my belt and press the button to open my wing. He opens his wing too and escorts me to my car door.

I turn to him to thank him for the evening, when he slams my body against my car door and his lips press hard against mine. He kisses me with the hunger of a thousand starving men. I return his hunger getting lost in the warmth of his lips, his firm body presses hard against mine. He is making me want him more and more. His hands grab hold of both sides of my face and he uses them to guide me in different directions, his tongue delves deep into my mouth. I crave him inside of me, but he eases off and stops kissing me. His hands still cradling my face, "I'm sorry for losing it. It won't happen again, not until I know your ready."

At this point I see into his troubled eyes, as I throb with desire for him and I know I won't be satiated anytime soon. Frustrated I look down and that's when I notice it's a mutual frustration. He walks away quickly and gets into his car closing both wings, I watch as he starts it and throws it into reverse, and then he burns out of the lot, narrowly missing a pole on his way out.

Chapter 18

I slowly get into my car and lock the doors. I try stabilizing myself after this roller coaster of an evening. Conflicting emotions consume me, as my thermostat slowly returns back to normal, I'm left with a disarray of emotions. Unable to concentrate, I manage to drive home while my mind constantly replays what happened this evening. I remember the video he played to me and I feel sad about my past, the present, and my unforeseeable and desolate future. I feel so alone.

I get off the lift and walk directly to my door. "Dalia?" I hear Ryan's voice in the hallway. A short time ago, his voice would have a soothing affect on me, but now I respond with rigidity. I half turn in his direction but stop myself, not wanting to show him weakness. I also don't him seeing my apartment for obvious reasons.

I say, "Hi," before quickly going into my loft and closing the door behind me. My thermostat, mind, any sense of calm I previously had is gone. With my back pressed against the door, I slide slowly to the floor where I really break out into a sobbing mess.

Ryan's here, he's back. I don't even have a couch or bed to cry on, how pathetic is that? Feeling sorry for myself, I strip down and head for the shower. The water is tepid at best, and the pressure leaves something to be desired. I turn the knob more and a rush of freezing water shocks me. I readjust the temperature again and close my eyes to it as it pours over my face and then the rest of me.

The shower stall door opens. I hear it before seeing it. My back is still turned towards the door, before I have a chance to react, familiar hands cup my breasts. He pulls me back from the spray so that my naked body is touching his naked body. He drops a hand from one of my breasts and reaches down for me, fingering me. I melt to his touch instantly moist and responsive to him.

I gasp with pleasure, leaning my head with eyes still closed against his broad chest.

I reach back to fist his hair, happy that he's changed his mind, to find there isn't any. Confused, I turn expecting to see Adam but instead Ryan is looking back at me. He must have let himself in.

Caught completely off guard, I push him off me in attempt to recover my dignity and hide behind a towel, but of course he doesn't budge because he's too fucking strong.

"What are you doing?" I ask angrily. "Let me go! Do you always break and enter?"

He ignores me and takes advantage of my speaking by kissing me again. His tongue flicking mine wildly. His fingers kneading me effortlessly with amazing skill. The surprise kiss leaves me breathless and I push away for a second time but he's ready for it and bridges the gap. I resort to breathing through my nose until his kisses end. He pulls back and asks, "Who were you expecting?"

"Not you," I say rebelliously. He doesn't like the answer because then he pushes me under the water and impales me with his thick cock.

He lifts me carefully into the air and carries me until my back is pressing against the shower wall. I wrap my legs around his firm gluteus maximus. Agh I cry out as the water rains over us and he fucks me with everything he has. My nipples are hard and they bounce off his chest with each thrust. I caress his shaved head as his tongue dives deep into my mouth muffling my cries of arousal. I come undone around him as he fills me with his sex, the warmth of his fluids running down my legs.

He turns the water off and lowers me down to the shower floor where we stay kissing for a few more minutes. When we finish I look into his warm brown eyes and say, "That shouldn't have happened. Forget we did this," I resolve.

We start drying ourselves off.

"You never answered, who were you expecting?"

"It doesn't really matter, what matters is that I wasn't expecting you. What are you doing here?"

"Adam offered me a job."

"I know, but that's not supposed to start until Camp."

“He said he needs me to help you arrange everything. I’m meeting with him tomorrow morning. Giving you a director position is pretty impressive Dal. You should be proud of yourself.”

“I am. He never told me he asked you to come early,” I say taken aback.

“He doesn’t report to you.”

“I guess so.”

“When is your furniture being delivered?” he asks looking around my barren loft.

“Whenever I have the time to go pick it out. I’m starting to get used to living with nothing,” I joke. I slide my nightgown over my head and then he reaches for my hand and starts rubbing it with his thumb, “You want to stay at my place tonight?”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“At least let me give you back your old bed. I still have it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely, it’s yours.”

It will good having my old bed back. Ryan is nice enough to set it up in my bedroom before leaving.

Chapter 19

I show up early for work arriving at my office fifteen minutes to nine. Oddly enough there is a paper strewn across my desk with a highlighted headline. I pick up the paper and a picture of me and Adam catches my eye. The headline reads:

‘Less than a year after her divorce Dalia Middleton snatches the heir to Ted McBrides millions!’

There is a tap on the doorframe and Adam walks in, “I take it you’ve read the article?”

“Yes, I didn’t see anyone take our picture.”

“You wouldn’t, the photographer could have been anywhere. Don’t worry about it. We don’t have anything to hide. I hired you because of your credentials, if a relationship evolves, we’ll deal with the media. They happen in the workplace all the time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you asked Ryan to start earlier?”

“It was dad’s decision and last night didn’t go as I’d planned it to go, I take it you’ve spoken to him?”

“Yes, I bumped into him at the loft.”

“That didn’t take long,” he complains.

“I wasn’t looking for him, we bumped into each other.”

The guilt hits like a tidal wave even though Adam’s not dating me. He has in fact completely rejected me last night. I have no idea why I’m feeling guilty except for the fact that Adam’s correct about me having residual feelings for Ryan.

I walk up to Adam and grab his hand, “You’re the one I want,” I reassure. “Let me prove it to you.” I start unbuttoning his jacket and sliding my hands

around his waist. Maybe I'm overcompensating right now, would I be doing this if I hadn't slept with Ryan last night?

"I'm meeting with your ex in five minutes," he warns me.

"Just remember, that's exactly what he is, an ex. Don't let me keep you."

"You've upped your game," he notices.

"Maybe I need to," I say as seductively as I can in an office before nine o'clock in the morning.

To my surprise Adam leans in and kisses me lightly on the lips, "Dinner tonight?"

Maybe upping my game is exactly what he needs to believe that I want him?

"Sorry, I want to but I can't, I really need to get some furniture. Do you want to come?"

"I pick the store?" he begs.

"Sure, you pick the store," but I don't want crazy expensive.

"Sounds good to me."

The second knock on my door occurs shortly after two.

"Come in," I call.

He comes in with paper in hand, tossing it halfway across the room with the majority of it landing on my desk. I pinch the bridge of my nose dreading this confrontation. I look passed Ryan at the door left ajar. I don't want to make a scene. He notices and slams it shut behind him.

"Of all people," he complains. "You're with him?"

"Pretty much."

"Pretty much." He imitates me, furious beyond reason.

"Does he know?"

"About?"

"Last night?"

"No, I didn't tell him how you broke into my place or that I mistook you for him, or how we fucked like sexually depraved animals. I guarantee you that will never happen again."

"You can't resist me," he seethes. "You fucking love me the way I love you."

If words could make me stumble, I'm falling backwards fast. I force myself to ignore the possibility of any validity to his last statement and trudged forward, "Your mistaken you arrogant asshole! You're toxin to me. Now unless you have work related issues to discuss, I'd appreciate you vacating my office."

The door opens swiftly and Adam's larger than life presence interrupts us. He looks at the paper strewn across my desk, "I can hear the two of you arguing from down the hall. This is a place of business, not a place for relationship rows. Is this going to be a continuous problem?"

"He is just showing his dismay, hearing about us from a third party," I explain.

"It won't happen again," Ryan promises.

"Don't give me grounds for dismissal," Adam warns. "I'm glad you're both here. Mrs. Crompton has booked your flights to Alberta. You'll be spending three nights there, we can extend it if necessary. A car will pick you up at your duplex. I expect the two of you to be cordial with one another, and more importantly, productive."

Chapter 20

I can't wait to pick out new furniture! I leave my office at five sharp and wait in the lobby until I see his car. Unfortunately he is on time. I want to spend every second in the stores. I have a feeling he's going to select an exclusively rich store to shop in. I have to make my dollar stretch and I also wanted to be stylish. This is truly going to be a challenge. At least, I don't have to buy a bed.

When I see his car, I hurry out before he can come to a stop.

"Waiting long?" he asks.

"No just excited to hit the stores." I say pumped.

"Did you have a particular store in mind?"

"I thought you'd never ask, I have several. Mind if I drive?"

"Seriously?"

"Darn tootin! I can shop in three stores to your one."

"How so?"

"I've seen your furniture!"

"Wow, low blow!"

"Is there any other kind? Now get out of the car!"

My attitude takes him by surprise but he gets out of the car and lets me drive. This has to be a big step for Adam since I've known him, he's always has to be in control. I get in the drivers seat and let him buckle me in before I step on it. He looks over at me, "I didn't know you know how to drive standard."

"Maybe you should have asked," I suggest haughtily.

I chose a common furniture store first, just to see what they have. When the employee's see us get out of the car we are accosted immediately. They must work for commission. I subtly put my hand up indicating for them to back off.

When they don't, I warn, "We'll leave." The sales staff then disperse themselves all over the store.

"You couldn't have chosen a classier store?" Adam criticizes.

"I have to stay within my budget," I chirp.

"You make almost three hundred a year! You have shoestring tastes on a Royal's salary."

"Watch and learn sweetheart."

I start in the sofa section and asked Adam casually, "Have you ever imagined having kids?"

"Three," he says very specifically.

I stop and looked at him, "Why three?"

"A boy to fill my shoes, a pretty little girl just like you, and a third just because we can."

"Oh my," I said. He must have really thought this out, "I better get leather." I pass the upholstery sofa's and started looking at the leather couches. My eyes gravitated to a set of black recliners that aren't too puffy but oh so comfortable, "These will do!"

Adam nods approvingly.

I continue walking in the rather large showroom passing the beds. Adam stops, "Don't you need one?" he asks pointing to them.

"No, Ryan offered me my old bed last night."

"He was in your apartment?"

"You prefer me to move it myself?"

"Buy a new bed," he orders.

"I don't need one," I whine.

"Do it," he said.

"Yes, sir!" I say to him.

As a reward he kisses me tenderly on the lips, "If it's going to be for us, I want to go higher end. I'll pick the store." He kisses me again, this time with tongue. I close my eyes and let myself be swept away with it. His lips are warm and soft. He tastes so good. When he finishes with me I lick my lips wanting more. I look around to see if anyone sees us, apparently we are the centre of attention.

"What do you want to look at now?" he asks.

“Dinettes. What shape table do you prefer?”

“It’s up to you, it’s going to be in your place.”

“I asked you, doesn’t mean I’ll buy that shape.”

“Rectangular.”

“Okay, scared to ask, why?”

“I like to be at the head of the table.”

“How about I just give you head, and I pick whatever shape I like.”

“I want it now,” he demands.

“Ew, naughty boy, you’re going to have to wait. There’s nowhere to do it inside of here, sir.”

“Pay for the couches and let’s go to the car.”

“Sorry sir, but I have more shopping to do, remember beds, dinette, television, that sort of thing.”

Adam motions for a sales person to assist us. A quite handsome young man came to our aide, “This young lady would like those two black sofa’s and which dinette?” he asks pretending to forget.

I quickly looked at all of them and chose the most expensive rectangular set I can find, “That one.”

“Good choice,” Adam says. The salesman asks, “Is that everything for today?”

“Yes, Thank you,” I reply.

We follow him to a desk and Adam pulls out a platinum card.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he asks sarcastically.

“You can’t,” I try grabbing the card as Adam starts handing it to the salesman.

“I will,” he argues.

I huff, I didn’t bring you to pay.

“I know that,” he growls obviously not impressed this is happening in front of the salesman. I back off and plan for delivery, before rushing out of the store with Adam to go to the next one, “Where to now?” he asks.

“Television store,” I answer.

“Can you please select one where they don’t work off commission?” he asks with dismay.

“Okay, you take me to one.”

“I thought you would never ask,” he says faking indignation. This time he is driving. The store he chooses isn’t too far from the one we just left.

We start strolling in the store. Nobody approaches us. I mumbled to him, “I don’t know much about t.v.’s.”

“Let me do the talking then,” he suggests.

“Sure,” I gladly hand him the reigns.

He motioned to a salesperson and they talked for a short while. When they were done their discussion she showed him three televisions and he asked several questions, some of them going way over my head. I look at him like he is crazy, “Will those even fit in my apartment?”

“Sure they will fit,” he smiles.

“I wasn’t planning on spending that much money,” I whisper.

“Think of all the money you saved on your sofa’s and dinette set.”

“That’s true,” I say to him. I look at the salesman, “Do you have anything bigger.”

His eyes pop, “No, that’s as largest one we have.”

I looked at the three sets again and as a joke, I point to the most expensive one, “I’ll take two of those!” I explain to Adam, “I need one for my boudoir you know.” I wink at him, and he knows I’m joking, but he plays along to see how far I will go.

He looks at the sales clerk and says, “Give her two.”

I stepped back from them, “I’m kidding, a 42 inch is more than enough in the bedroom.”

“Give her two,” Adam insists. Again, he pulls out the platinum card and refuses to let me pay. The salesman steps away for a second.

“You’re making me feel bad,” I complain.

“Don’t, I worked my ass off for this day, it’s a dream come true for me.”

“You’re too kind,” I say humbly. “I don’t deserve you.”

“On the contrary, it’s me who doesn’t deserve you.”

When we got back into the car I ask, “Where to now.”

“A new bed.”

We arrived at the store of his choice an hour before closing. A pleasant lady approaches us offering us help in selecting a mattress. After a short discussion, she leaves us to our own devices to try the beds.

I lay on one bed and rub beside me for him to try it, “There’s no telling what I will do,” he warns.

“There’s people here,” I tell him.

“Doesn’t matter.” You select the mattress.

“What kind do you like?” I ask.

“Don’t bother with the memory foam.”

“Really? How come?”

“Because, you’ll never be in one position for too long.”

He was so alpha male, I’m getting turned on, I didn’t give a shit what kind of bed I had just so long as he was in it with me. I look around the store more quickly than the rest and chose a medium as opposed to firm or soft, king sized with pillow-top. Done!

Adam insists on paying for half the bed. When the lady charges us, Adam whispers in my ear, “I paid for half to make sure you don’t share it with anyone else,” he growls.

His message is loud and clear, “Yes sir.”

He looks at his watch and informs me, “We ran out of time.”

“We got most of it done,” I reassure him. We stroll back to the car. I feel really good about how much we got accomplished. He takes the drivers seat, and buckles me in before starting the car.

The car roars to life and he pulled out of his spot, I start releasing the belts on my harness.

“What are you doing” he asks. “we’re going to get a ticket.”

“Trust me, it will be worth it. What I’ve wanted to do to you since we started shopping,” I say to him while unzipping his trousers. I reach into the warm depths of his pants and pull out his cock. The touch of my hand is all he needs for it to grow hard and start throbbing.

I reached over the hump of my Recarro Racing seat and start tugging at it before slipping it into my mouth. He groans wanting to close his eyes, but unable

to because he's still driving. I feel his hand grab my hair at the back as I slowly sucked on the tip of his penis. My tongue swirls over every square inch of it before I started taking him deeper into my mouth. He grabs my hair tighter showing me how much I'm pleasing him. He flexes his hips forcing me to take more of him into my mouth as he pushes my head down at the same time. His coordination surprises me. His groaning increases, I knew he's close.

I start sucking more wildly and he begins to lose all concentration on his driving, he has to slam on his breaks before he almost hits another car in front of him. He protects my head making sure I'm not jolted, "I'm going to come," he warns. I don't relent or slow down, I just keep sucking, I can feel it throbbing against my tongue. Warm salty fluid starts erupting from his tip. I swallow all of it, gratifying him immensely.

I tuck him back into his pants before restraining myself with his harness. He isn't driving me back to the Association as I assume he will, rather he drives me back to his place. He isn't finished with me yet. He stops abruptly in front of his building and hands the valet his key.

We take the lift up to his penthouse, and there is no small talk, no offer of food, he directs me straight to his bedroom, because he wants more of me.

His lips found mine as he fists my hair, backing me onto his kingsized bed, he speaks one word at a time in-between his passionate kisses:

I've
waited
so
long
to
be
with
you.
I
won't
be
able
to

control
it.

After his most pleasurable warning he kisses me for so long, I find it hard to catch my breath. I pull back gasping for air.

“Then don’t,” I encourage. “Do what you have to.”

“I want to make love to you all night long,” he confides. His deep voice says words long to hear, literally music to my ears. His mouth covers mine again and he kissed me softly, prying my lips apart so his tongue can explore my mouth at his leisure. When the kiss is done he gives me a second to catch my breath and a chance for me to respond, “I want the same.”

He unzips my skirt at the back and lets it fall to the ground, “Remove your nylons,” he orders.

I slipped them off hastily, not caring if I cause a run. Then he slides his hands in my underwear and tears them off before grabbing my sex with his hand, squeezing it. He slowly inserts his finger into me while he starts licking my clit like a starved man with needs. Ahhh I groan feeling his tongue performing long strokes on my soft folds. His finger slowly sliding in and out while his tongue begins swirling around more quickly. I know I’m not going to be able to hold on for too much longer, so I nestle my fingers into his cropped hair and start tugging at it harder and harder the more turned on I get until I’m literally yanking. He slides his finger out and then I have his full mouth on me. He is eating me out and I scream his name as his mouth makes my body shake in response to him. I came all over his face leaving a glossy film that makes him lick his lips in pleasure.

He unzips his pants and without even taking them off all the way he pulled out his hard dick and guided it into me. He spread my arms above my head, pinning me against the bed. He slowly eases himself in and out of me making sure I feel his full length. His pace quickens rapidly, each thrust increasing in intensity. As I hadn’t completely finished my first orgasm, my body is thrown into a second. I’m seeing stars as he roughly bores into me. Oh my go.. I call out in convulsions. He pulls out emptying himself all over my stomach marking me.

His eyes are soft with adoration as he comments, “You’re so beautiful.” He kisses me one last time and then says, “Don’t drip on the bed. My sheets cost more than your new dinette set.”

“But it’s okay for you to spray your juices all over me?” I giggle.

“Gives me an excuse to wash that beautiful body of yours off. Shower or bath?”

“Both, let me rinse this off,” I say gesturing to my stomach, “and then we can bathe together.”

He disappears into his en suite and starts a shower for me. I jump in rinsing myself off before joining him in his jacuzzi. Later, we settle down for a nice dinner consisting predominantly of leftovers from the night before. It’s too late and we were so tired by the time all is said and done, that he chooses for me to stay overnight at his place, who am I to argue? I love every minute I spend with him.

Chapter 21

The next morning Adam pulls up to my duplex parking in front of the lobby to wait for me while I run up to grab a quick change of clothes. I open the door to my loft thinking this will be one of the last time's I open it to an unfurnished apartment.

I closed the door locking it behind me, remembering how Ryan let himself into it and head straight for my closet to choose an outfit for today. The pickings are slim and I know I better go shopping and do something with my hair before camp starts. Maybe I will see if Sierra can squeeze me into her busy schedule. My phone is dead, so I throw it on the charger before leaving the loft and locking the door behind me.

I press the button and waited for the lift. As I get in, the door starts to close and a hand goes in-between them to stop it from happening. I looked for the open button and press it vainly trying to help him.

Ryan steps on, "Sorry, I'm running late or I would have waited for another elevator."

"No problem." I said cordially.

He notices the parking button wasn't lit and he pressed the floor his car was parked on.

"Would you like a lift to the office," Ryan offers.

"No, but thanks," I appreciate the conscious effort he is making.

The elevator door opens on the lobby floor and as promised parked outside, is Adam waiting for me, the passenger wing of his car is open.

"Are you in love with him," Ryan asks.

"Falling," I confide.

"So you're not yet," he concludes. I step off ignoring his comment.

The next couple of days before the trip Adam keeps me busy in meetings with him and his father. They make sure I know exactly what is expected of me while I'm there. When I'm not working, I'm rediscovering Adam. He insists on me staying with him until my furniture arrives. When it comes time for the trip, Adam drives me to the airport and Ryan shuttles alone.

Chapter 22

It's freezing cold, and I'm sure it's going to snow. Adam's Mercedes is now stored for the winter and we are roughing it in his Cadillac Escalade, "Couldn't you have chosen California instead of Calgary, you must have had your cities confused," I complain.

"Nope, proudly Canadian!" We pull up to the drop-off section of the airport and Adam pops the trunk. We get out of the SUV and he places my luggage beside me. He flags a porter down who waits patiently as Adam and I say our good-byes.

"Call me if you need anything."

"Promise."

"Don't let him touch you."

"You're the only one I want touching me."

He places his hand on the back of my neck and pulls me in for another kiss. It is slow and hot, warming the blood in my veins, "Are you sure you can't come?" I plead.

He follows the first kiss with a more aggressive second kiss knowing I like it a little rough, needier. I gasp into his mouth pulling his hips against mine, showing him I want him again.

"You're insatiable," he laughs. I'll pick you up when you get back."

"I forgot my phone!" I panic.

"Take mine," he offers.

"Are you sure," I ask hesitantly.

"Yes, I'm sure, It'll be easier to track me down than you. Try home and the office if you need me."

"Okay, I say," nipping at his ear.

“Do you need me to book the two of you a room,” the porter hints impatiently.

Adam ignores him and gives me another kiss before slipping him a generous bill and leaving me with the porter who is very kind in helping me to find the correct desk to check my luggage in. I spot Ryan in the lounge and then check my watch, “We have an hour before our flight, you want to get coffee?”

“Sure,” he says. “There’s a Starbucks down the hall.”

We join the long line, “Your usual?” he asks.

“Please.”

A black barista with a distinctly flamboyant voice winks at Ryan, “I can definitely help you over here,” he flirts.

I chuckle to myself, “His name is Randy,” I goad quietly to Ryan.

He smirks back at me and then orders our drinks, “A grande mild, and a six pump, non fat, no water, no foam, chai latte.”

“Oh you remembered, how sweet,” I teased.

“I can’t believe you still drink that shit. I bet if you stopped drinking it for a year you wouldn’t have regained the thirty pounds you lost..”

“Thanks mom, I’ll get right on that.”

“I’m just saying,” he defends. “How is she anyway?”

“She’s grieving over Clive. Apparently his blood pressure bottomed out when he was doing her in bed. Some sort of drug reaction with viagra and nitro.”

“Oh tell her I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, he was 97.”

We take our drinks to the last vacant table in the seating area and people gaze while we sip our way too hot to drink beverages.

“What made you quit school and work for Adam?” I ask out of curiosity.

“You had your heart set on becoming a doctor.”

“Truthfully?”

“Of course.”

“You,” I quiver inside when he says that one word.

“You quit your dream of becoming a doctor for me?” I’m taken aback. I would never have let him do that had I known.

“I can always go back to it, anyway, his offer was too sweet to pass up,” he add.

“I felt the same way about school. I know your offer, I was the one who drafted the letter. Global insisted they hire you or they wouldn’t do the show. They said the public wants to see us together and they are under the impression we might reconcile on the show. They’re relying on our popularity to draw in the viewers.”

“Oh, Now it all makes sense. I couldn’t fathom Adam offering me a job on his own accord.”

“They’re announcing our boarding, we better go.”

The flight is just over four hours long. I figure the reason why our seats are at opposite ends of the plane is because they were bought at different times, giving Adam the benefit of the doubt.

We disembark, sharing a cab to our hotel that Mrs. Crompton books for us. We give our names to the registration desk and this oversized man with thick black glasses and a name tag saying, ‘Sam’ on it hands us our keys and says, “You beautiful lady, have the best Princess Suite in our Hotel.”

“Really?” I asked excitedly.

“Yes, its theme is Cinderella! The owner spared no expense!”

“Oh, I can’t wait to see it!” I gush. “What theme does Ryan have?” I ask.

Sam looks at him, “Well, Mr. Kennedy’s room is standard features for a more economical stay. We’re planning on renovating it next month,” he said like it was a big secret.

“Thanks,” I say looking from Sam to Ryan.

Ryan rolls his eyes, “I can hardly wait!”

We arrived at Ryan’s room first, “Do you want to see my room?” he ask.

“Please,” I say politely.

He opens the door to a double bed with a puke green pattern bedspread from the seventies. He does have a 42 inch LED television with a remote control that is nailed down to the night table. The bathroom is small and functional. Sam wasn’t kidding when he said it was in need of a Reno.

“Do you want to see mine?” I ask all charged up with anticipation.

“Sure, why not?” he answers.

I open the door to my Cinderella Suite. The furniture is made to look like it came right off a Disney set. The bed is tented with elaborate white sheers and the headboard is white with diamond tuck, each inlet filled with large pretend diamonds. There is a dozen red roses on the bedside table with a note on it and rose pedals sprinkled over the comforter. The bathroom is lavish with velvet red decorations and towels, an area just to put on makeup and elegant Hollywood lighting.

“This won’t come without a price,” he warns.

“I didn’t ask for this room,” I tell him.

I start laughing at the differences between the two rooms, and then reconsider the flight, knowing it was probably intentional now. What I don’t get is why Ryan is situated next door to me if he is so worried about him. Adam’s special treatment of me is painstakingly obvious, bordering on funny. Ryan doesn’t see the humour in it. We plan to meet in the lobby for dinner before he stormed off to his room.

Finally alone, I laid on the bed and call Adam. Mrs. Crompton answers the phone, “CSA, Adam McBrides office, how may I help you?”

“Mrs. Crompton?”

“Mrs. Middleton?”

“Call me Lesli,” she says pleasantly.

“You call me Dalia,” I return the gesture.

“I take it you got there okay?”

“I did thanks. I love my room, and the flowers,” I can’t stop myself from gushing.

“All Adam’s doings,” she admits.

“Well, thank you, I’m sure you helped.”

“I did, and your welcome. Did you want to speak to him?”

“Is he in?”

“He is, hold on.”

Elevator music comes on and then Adam’s voice, “Dalia?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Did you get the roses?”

“Loved them. Thank you. I haven’t read the card yet, don’t tell me what it says, I couldn’t wait to call you. The first class seat on the airplane, my Cinderella Suite, it’s all amazing.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said.

There is a long silence between us. I can tell Adam wants to say something so I wait. I hear his breath in the receiver, “I wish I could thank you in person,” I tell him.

“I haven’t been this happy in a long time,” he admits.

“Either have I,” I agree.

“I think I’m..,”

“Me too,” I interrupt.

There is a long silence on the phone, “I want to say this to you in person, but here goes.”

I wait in anticipation.

“I’m falling in love with you,” he says in a gravelly voice. I get goosebumps all over, moaning quietly into the phone.

“Are you?” he asks.

“I’m falling in love with you too Adam,” I whisper. I think I hear him moan in the background. I listen very carefully.

He whispers, “What are you doing right now?”

“I’m laying in bed.”

“With your clothes on?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Take them off,” he orders.

“What are you doing right now,” I ask suspiciously.

“You know what I’m doing. Are you naked yet.”

“Just a second,” I put the phone down and finished taking off my clothes.

“They’re off,” I tell him.

“Play with your breasts until your nipples are hard.”

“Okay,” I took my left breast into my hand and then start touching my nipple lightly, then I do the same to the other one.

“Pinch them hard the way I would,” he insists. “I need to hear you moan.” I do what he says moaning into the phone.

“They’re nice and hard now Adam. They crave your lips though. My whole body craves your lips, your tongue, and you. I wish your warm wet mouth is nipping at my hard nipples. I’m wet for you. It’s your turn, roll your chair under your desk and then slide your hand into your pants.”

“I’m already there. I’m about to come. I need you to touch yourself Dal. Pretend your fingers are mine and play with your clitoris the way I would. I want to hear you breath heavy and beg for me.”

“I’m sliding my hand down between my legs and starting to touch myself the way you would. Adam please, I need you to make love to me please. I’ll do anything for you,” and then I begin panting into the phone.

Adam begins groaning, “Dal, Oh Dal, Oh, I Love You.”

I cry into the phone as my body begins to climax too, “I love you too Adam.”

Chapter 23

I step off the elevator and he is there waiting for me, dressed in a snazzy shirt and tight jeans to boot. His muscles look way too big for the shirt threatening the integrity of the seams.

“If I didn’t already have Adam!” I compliment him in an overly flirtatious manner.

He takes a step closer to me so now he is totally in my personal space and with those puppy dog eyes and his really deep, super sexy voice he asks, “You would?” He reached his arms around my waist quite presumptuously.

“Let’s just say, I would be swallowing more than my dinner,” I entice. He stares into my eyes like I’m a twelve ounce Sirloin and he hasn’t eaten in weeks, and I stare back at him, “A comeback elude you?”

My mouth parts slightly and he starts looking like he’s going to kiss me.

Close enough to smell his cologne and feel the heat of his body, he’s about to swoop down for a kiss when I quickly turn my head so his lips land on my cheek.

I super teased him, “You can wipe that pissed off expression from your face, you’re the one who threw me back into the sea! Let’s go get dinner I’m starving.”

“Sure, where?” he grunts.

“In the hotel, I don’t feel like going out.”

“We could do room service,” he suggests. “We can really talk when we’re alone.”

“Let’s not, and say we did,” I joke. “The hunger in your eyes is making me nervous.”

“It should. Okay, hotel restaurant it is.”

The waitress takes our order and then we review our list while waiting for the food, “How should we approach this?” I ask.

“Well, first I’d like to tie you up,” Ryan said salaciously. Just the memory of Ryan going all fifty on me makes me have to reposition myself in my chair. “Oh, you like that?” he notices “Is it making you wet?”

I ignore his question, and start putting his initial next to half the items on the list and mine on the other half, “How’s this?” I asked handing him the copy.

“I don’t want you doing the Village by yourself. I think we should do it together.”

“Why?”

“It’s not safe.”

“Sure it is safe.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Okay, we’ll do that together. Is the rest of it fair?”

“More than,” he agrees.

Ryan flags the waitress down, “Can I order a drink?”

“Sure,” she said looking at him, “what would you like?”

“I’ll have a Long Island Ice Tea.”

“And you?” she asks glancing at me.

“The same, please.” She sticks her pad in her back pocket and the pen she used, in her hair as she walks ever so slowly to the bar.

The waitress returns placing our drinks out before us with a small bowl of peanuts. Ryan picks his drink up off the table and says, “I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?” I pried.

“I’m going out for a cigarette, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Since when do you smoke?” I can’t see anything but stress driving him to that. He thought it was a disgusting habit.

“Since my mother was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer,” he snaps.

“Pardon?”

“Stage 4 breast cancer.”

“Oh my God, Ryan, I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks,”

“Is she going to be okay?”

He doesn't answer. He turns his back to me and leaves the restaurant, which I guess is my answer. I google the prognosis while I'm alone. There is a 22 percent chance she will live past five years.

He comes back to the table smelling of smoke, his eyes watery and his drink half gone, "Are you okay?" I ask.

"Listen Dal, it's not your problem, I shouldn't have told you."

"Why not? We're still friends"

"I can't stomach pity."

"She's my mother-in-law, and you're my friend, nothing I do is out of pity."

"Was your mother-in-law, until I managed to fuck up the best thing in my life."

"Water under the bridge now," I said taking a rather large sip of my drink, "how is she doing right now?"

"They're starting palliative chemotherapy treatments, hoping it might help her live a month or two longer. Dal, it has spread all over," his brown eyes fill with tears. I reach out and cover his hand with mine. I stroke his shoulder with the other hand. He looks so lost, I wished I could take all his sorrow away, while my heart melts for him. He was so supportive for me when my dad died.

"I'm so sorry, Ryan."

"Don't be, and as much as I hate Adam, I have to admit he's been very understanding about all this."

"He knows?"

"Of course. I told him I would be taking her to her appointments before I accepted the job. If he wasn't okay with it, I wouldn't have accepted."

"I didn't know," I admit.

"Adam's a prick, but he's professional, and he knew I told him in confidence."

"I guess," I said finishing the last of my drink.

The waitress laid our pot roast with baby potatoes and carrots before us and Ryan asked, "Can we have two more please?"

"Sure," she said as she turns and walks unhurried back to the bar. We end up closing down the restaurant and staggering back to our rooms that night. It was our first friendly talk, long overdue. When I got back to my room, out of habit I

checked my phone forgetting I had Adam's. There were two missed calls from the office, I assume they were for him, so I didn't return any of them, it was too late. I texted mom telling her about Sara and then got ready for bed.

Chapter 24

We start at the crack of dawn, going our separate ways. I have my errands, Ryan his. When we finish that night, we meet back up at the hotel restaurant and do a repeat of the night before minus the talk about his mother and plus a whole bunch of laughing. We are downing the Long Islands like they are water, Ryan being a big guy can handle them, I on the other hand, not so good.

I wear my favourite black dress with these new heels I bought at Payless before the trip. I shop like a peasant on a princess's salary. It's something I haven't got used to yet. Anyway, it is closing time at the restaurant, and Ryan holds his arm out for me like the gentleman he is. I take it and we head to the lift and everything is fine until the hotel carpet starts doing my head in and then everything begins to spin.

My body gets really hot, and I know I'm close, "Ryan," I groan.

He looks down at me with a grin on his face, "Yes?"

"I'm gonna be sick," I slur.

"Hold on, we're almost at my room," he encourages while scrambling for his card in his back pocket.

He gets the door open in the nick of time for me to go running into his bathroom. I lose my balance, slide on his tiled floor, land on my ass with the toilet bowl between my legs like I did it on purpose.

"Oh My God! Are you okay?" he asks laughing.

"It's not funny," I scramble to get up on my knees.

"Your heel broke," he notices.

I feel my hair being grabbed as my dinner comes back out into Ryan's toilet. It's lovely. I have chunks of veal with baby potatoes and string beans repeating on me in a horrid acidic vomit that manages to come out my nose and mouth in tiny

chunks. It finally slows down into a dry heave where my stomach makes these large movements desperate to rid itself of all its contents. All I can do is thank God that it is only Ryan seeing me in this humiliating scenario rather than Adam.

I get up and flush the toilet, "I'm going back to my room to clean up," I slur.

"Go clean up, but you're not sleeping alone."

"Pardon me?" I ask giggling. "Who died and made you boss?"

"I don't want anything to happen to you, you can sleep here, or I'll sleep with you."

"Ya, no!" I take the remaining part of my heel off and walk as dignified as I can with one leg four inches shorter than the other. Oh, the embarrassment of it all! When I get back to my room, I clean up and change, hoping not to speak to the tidy bowl man for a second time. Its close though. I resolved to never have another Long Island forever.

I didn't notice Ryan follow me into my room until after I came out of the bathroom. I brushed my teeth three times and blew my nose the same amount, but I still couldn't get that vomit taste to go away.

He looks at me with concern, "I won't stay overnight if you don't want me to, but I'm staying until you fall asleep and I feel you are okay to leave alone."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to. I want to." That night, I didn't check Adam's phone. I talked to him twice already, and he said he was going to be tied up in meetings until late that night. I stretch out on my princess bed above the covers and get emotionally drunk saying things I sort of wish I could take back. I don't remember any of it, but Ryan has no problem reciting everything to me the following morning at breakfast.

"What did I say?"

"You don't want to know," he smiles.

"Tell me!" I warn.

"Are you sure?"

"Please."

"Okay, but just so you know, I am not making any of this up."

"Okay, go ahead," I encourage.

“You said that a part of you wishes we are still married.”

“Did I say married specifically to you?”

Ryan looks surprised by my question, “No, I just assumed.”

“Don’t assume anything. What else did I say?”

“Forget I brought it up,” he says trying to stop the conversation in its tracks.

“What did I say?” I persist.

“That you wish you had my baby.”

“Oh my, anything else?”

“Just that I’m still the love of your life.”

“Fuck off! I did not say that,” I laugh.

“You did, just before you fell asleep.”

“Did I say your name?”

“You didn’t have to Dal.”

“Just take it with a grain of salt Ry, I was inebriated, not in my right mind.”

“Damn it Dal, it was so honest and sobering,” he says seriously, “you’re with the wrong guy, you should be with me.”

“Let me be the judge of that. If I said all that to you, what did you say to me?”

“Just that I need you back in my life, any way I can have you. You complete me, and I was a fool for not knowing it.”

My head is throbbing, “I’ll take those aspirins you offered me.”

Chapter 25

Our last night we opt for room service in my suite without alcohol. Ryan went back to his room to change, while I stepped into the shower. I use the complimentary amenities booklet as a door stopper so Ryan can let himself in if I'm still in the shower. I finish, wrapping a towel around my hair and another one around my body. That's when I heard the noise, "Is that you Ryan?" I call out.

"Do you want it to be?" asks a voice that's not Ryan's.

"Adam?" I squeal with excitement.

"Yes," he calls out from the foyer.

"Oh my God!" I'm so excited, I run to greet him throwing my arms around his neck and plant a kiss on those soft lips of his. His aftershave and the demanding way he kisses me back make me swoon.

I begin kissing his ears and neck and that's when I feel my towel being confiscated from me, "You don't need this," he says.

"Sure I do! Ryan's expected over any minute, we haven't had dinner yet!"

"You mind if I tag along," he asks coyly.

"I'd love it!" I said enthusiastically. "Now say it again!"

His dark eyes bore into me because he knows what I'm talking about, "I'm in love with you."

He leans down to kiss me and it's magic. Even his kisses know how to take charge. Instantly I need him in me, "You better get dressed," he stops us.

I turned to get changed and almost trip over his bag, "How long are you staying?"

"A few days, there's some things I need to do here. You and Ryan are still going back tomorrow morning. I'll just take over your room when you leave."

"My princess room," I giggle.

“Your sheets, your smell, I won’t want to sleep anywhere else,” he made everything sound so sexy. Then he slaps my behind rather hard and says, “Now go get dressed.” The warmth of his hand against my buttocks remains there long after the slap. I pout before turning away from him to decide what to wear.

I’m almost ready and I’ve started rambling off about what Ryan and I accomplished when there’s a knock at the door, “Dal?”

“Come in,” Adam calls out.

Ryan opens the door and spots Adam first, he nods at him, “Adam, didn’t know you were coming.”

“Hi Ryan, I wanted to see how the two of you are doing first hand, and I have a few things I need to arrange before I go back home.”

“Checking up, you mean,” Ryan rumbles accusingly.

“Hardly,” Adam dismisses his comment. “I will be tagging along for dinner if that’s okay, I haven’t eaten yet. We can discuss what you’ve accomplished and address any concerns the two of you might have.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ryan changes his tune.

Adam has a car take us to one of the best steakhouse in Alberta, reservations made by none other Mrs. Crompton. The restaurant is busy, and our dinner conversation and demeanour remain professional while Ryan is in our presence. We give our schedule and rules for him to review:

Policy and Rules

No sex, drinking, smoking, or drugs will be permitted by the athletes during their time at the camp.

Attendance to all booked ice and off-ice times is mandatory unless athlete is ill, and in said case, be able to provide a doctor’s note.

Rooms are to remain neat; competitors are liable for any damage done to their rooms.

No member of the opposite sex is allowed in your room after curfew.

Curfew is midnight.

There will be no swearing or cursing. We wish you to present a professional appearance and attitude.

Steroid usage is strictly prohibited.

Makeovers must be accepted and clothing provided by CSA must be worn when officials request you to do so.

No food is to be brought into Village dorm. All food must be consumed in cafeteria.

Athlete is responsible for any items of value.

The camp takes no responsibility for any of your belongings so lock your rooms.

Schedule

Camp Schedule:

Monday-Friday:

7:00 a.m.: Breakfast

8:00-8:45 a.m.: Figures (5 skaters granted 15 min private lesson)

8:45-9:30 a.m.: Stroking and Footwork

9:30 a.m.: Flood

9:45-10:30 a.m. Freeskate (Group LessonX2 3 skaters in each)

10:30 a.m.: Flood

12:00-1:30 p.m. Lunch

1:30: 2:15 p.m. Patch (5 skaters will get 15 min private lesson)

2:15-3:00 p.m. Freeskate (Group LessonX1 4 skaters)

3:00 p.m.: Flood

4:00-5:00 p.m. Off-ice training

5:30-7:00 p.m. Dinner

7:00-9:30 p.m. Private Lessons (1 fifteen min coach and skater alone on ice for all 10)

9:30 p.m. Flood, Free time begins

12:00 midnight Curfew

(9:45-10:30 a.m. Group 1 Lesson)

(9:45-10:30 a.m. Group 2 Lesson)

(2:15-3:00 p.m. Group 3 Lesson)

We look at Adam hoping he's pleased with our work. He smiles to me and then Ryan, "Excellent. The two of you seem to have been working very efficiently together." Ryan thanks him curtly and then excused himself from the table to go to the loo. That's when I feel Adam's fingers reach under my skirt. They start at my knee and subtly caress my inner thigh until he's there. He grabs me hard before inserting two of his fingers. I pretend nothing is happening and look to see if the other patrons are watching. My breath catches ever so slightly as I fight hard to remain inconspicuous. I wanted to close my eyes and concentrate on the feeling, but instead I lean into him and kissed his plush lips. I notice Ryan heading back to our table, his jaw tight, I warn Adam, "He's coming back."

Adam removes his hand, but kissed me hard one last time ensuring Ryan's nose is rubbed in it. The kiss ends but the tormented look on Ryan's face remains the rest of the evening. Even when we leave the restaurant, Adam makes sure we walk out together, his arm draped over my shoulders. I can hardly blame him for staking his claim to me, there is so much history between the three of us.

Chapter 26

We have a few drinks together and then call it a night, Ryan and I are flying out early the next morning. He thanks Adam for dinner and reaches over to give me a casual hug good-bye before going back to his room. I can feel Adam's disapproving gaze when I'm in his arms. I opened the door to my room and Adam follows me in, taking a seat on the sofa. I close the door behind us and join him. I face him undoing his tie, his eyes boring into mine, needy. When his tie is undone, I held onto both ends and pull him in for a kiss. His hands clasp the back of my neck.

"I'm so glad you are here," I say in-between the kisses as I slowly undo his buttons. He kisses me back with urgency, that makes me feel desired, hot. He wants me now, and I'm more than happy to accommodate. He places his hand on my knees and I can feel his fingertips slowly glide up my leg.

"Take your clothes off," he orders. I couldn't get them off fast enough, Adam is being Alpha male, and he knows how much I like that. When I'm done undressing, he lifts me from the couch and places me on the bed, taking my knees and spreading them wide open.

"Marry me," he says sliding a rock the size of an almond over my engagement finger.

"Yes!" I answer not even needing a second to think about it.

"Don't move," he orders holding my legs firmly apart. His head drops in-between my legs and I close my eyes obeying as I feel his tongue licking my clit, and then he pauses keeping my legs securely placed.

"Do you want more?" he asks even though he doesn't need to. I'm soaking for him.

“Oh, yes!” I moan willing to do anything just to keep his skilled tongue in place.

“Say please,” he orders.

“Please,” I say quietly.

He strokes me with his tongue. His speed increasing and then diving to new depths. Consumed with my desire for him, he halts again exasperating me. My frustration is increasing at alarming rates.

“Who do you want?” he asks.

“You.” I moan.

“Free me,” he orders.

I undo his pants, yanking them down, his hard cock is throbbing, and ready. I want to wrap my lips around it but he is in command. He re-pins my legs and continues sucking and stroking me with his tongue until my toes curl and I am grasping the comforter ready to orgasm.

He stops again, adjusting his position, assuring I can’t move. He is directly on top of me as he stared into my eyes.

With a sense of finality he says, “You better be sure, are you sure you want me?”

“Yes.”

“Who do you want?”

“You,” I avowed.

“Louder! Let Ryan hear it in the next room,” he commands.

Warning bells start going off in my head, my face gets hot with realization. He has this planned along with everything else, the rooms side by side, “You,” I urge needing my release. “I want you,” I grovel.

Pinning me roughly, he takes me with brute force. The headboard slams repeatedly against the wall with every thrust. Bang, Bang, Bang...

His way of taking me from Ryan permanently, ensuring he’s heard all of that. I surrender to him as tears spring from my eyes over Adam’s cruel methods. He is relentless as his thrusting continues. The bed keeps banging, jarring the lamp on the nightstand. Adam completely dominates me as his sweat is dripping from his forehead onto my body.

My body on the brink of orgasm, he orders, “Come!” My body begins pulsing around him, oozing with satisfaction. He fills me, and then wipes away my tears. Ryan will never forgive me for this. “He needed to know you’re not his anymore,” Adam says with no remorse. He rolls off me and I curl into his arms.

I phoned the front desk and ask for a wakeup call for 5:00 a.m. When it comes, I leave Adam lying in bed and go take a shower. I finish packing all my toiletries and pieces of clothing that are left in the room and head over to Ryan’s room to pick him. I knock on the door, but there is no answer. I went back into the room and try the adjoining door.

His room is empty. I go downstairs and confirm my suspicions with the front desk. Ryan already checked out.

I take the rental car back to the airport. He isn’t in the boarding lounge. I check my bags and wait for the plane to board. I go to the bathroom, and then I return noticing people boarding for Toronto. I show my ticket for guidance and then follow the other passengers down the tunnel. Ryan is already seated. The shine from his eyes is gone. He looks tired and defeated. I take my assigned seat next to him.

Keeping us apart on the plane wasn’t overlooked, it’s not necessary anymore.

“Do you want to talk?” I ask.

He touches the large engagement ring on my finger, before looking me in the eye, “Will it make you feel better? To be honest with you, I think I’m a better listener. I heard him propose to you, then I heard you pick him over me, and then I heard you moaning as the headboard continued to hit the wall. Quite a coincidence that our rooms happened to be next to each other.”

Chapter 27

Camp

Ryan and I hardly speak to each other when we get back. He has a hard time looking at me, let alone being my friend. If I go into a room he would see me, turn around and leave, unless it is work related. I started feeling the loss, breaking my spirits during what is supposed to be an exciting time in my life: newly engaged, amazing job. Surprisingly, I find myself missing Ryan like crazy.

I decide to treat myself to a complete makeover now that my financial situation is stabilized and I have furniture. I want to look the part of my newfound position at the Association. Soon, the camera's will be on us 24/7 and I have no choice but look good all the time.

Luckily, when it comes time to fly in, Ryan ends up being booked on a different flight altogether. Mrs. Crompton reschedules his flight for a day later. His mother has a final treatment and he wants to be there for her. I feel so sorry for Ryan, It has to break his heart that he has to leave her in her time of need even though she is seeing someone new now.

My mother has chosen to forgive her for the affair she had with my father and plans to move in with them and care for her while Ryan is gone.

I do a Google search for stylists before I leave for Calgary and make an appointment with the top one for after I land. My last makeover in Toronto was a bit extreme, and I figure Calgary would probably be a little more conservative.

I have an hour and forty-five minutes to check in at the hotel and be there for my appointment. It's ten minutes after two, but they said they will still take me. The salon is fancy decorated in Gala decor, with a Starbucks right outside the front door. The receptionist has to be in her twenties with long blond hair and a purple

streak running down her bangs. She gestures for me to follow her, “Would you like to follow me please. Gerard will be with you soon.”

I wait for Gerard who looks at me as though he is seeing a new species for the first time.

He starts pulling hair away from my head, “What would you like? It haz natural highlights. It doesn’t need z colour!”

“I don’t know. I need to look professional. What do you think?”

I’m expecting him to send me to the sink, but instead he looks like he is thinking while he starts brushing my hair vigorously. He ties it up in a ponytail without telling me his intentions, I flash back to all those reality shows Tara and I used to watch, makeovers.. I think, there’s no way he’s going, “You’re not!”

“I am! Say good-bye!”

“Wait!”

He rolls his eyes, “You said you want to look professional, iz this right?”

“Yes but..”

SNIP, SNIP, SNIP, I feel the cold scissors touching the nape of my neck before I have a chance to respond. I cringe as I feel him chopping off all my length. What used to land in the middle of my back now is lucky to touch below my chin. There is no fucking around with this stylist. He has to be a hair nazi! Perfect for the show, I think wiping my tears of self pity away. It’s going to take forever to grow it back.

My hair is thick and the friction against the scissors creates a tugging sensation, giving me goosebumps on the back of my neck. I can’t look anymore. Aren’t makeovers supposed to be fun? Gerard thins out my hair with thinning shears and then cuts what was left into wisps reaching my chin and framing my face. The initial shock takes a long time to recover from but after that, I am delightfully surprised.

The makeup artist at the salon works on my face. She brings out my eyes and made my lips more full. Between the makeup artist and the new cut, I look ten years younger. I can easily be confused for one of the competitors at the camp instead of someone running it. I can’t wait to see Adam’s reaction! He has suggested in the past that I cut it.

We had everyone's flights arrive in Calgary, Alberta on the same day. Ryan meets the guests and sends them up with a limo to the Village and a welcome goodie bag. The camera crew records the contestants disembarking while studio staff are planting cameras throughout the Village, including the arena. Skating sessions will be televised with the same method used for competitions.

At last, the guests arrive at the Village. My excitement for this moment hardly feels containable. I show the hopefuls to their rooms and inform them of the meeting in the boardroom at 9:00 p.m., followed by a wine and cheese party. Adam instructs Ryan and I to observe how the competitors and coaches interact with one another and report back to him.

When 8:45 p.m. rolls around, I know Ryan and the last coach will be arriving. I hightail it to my room to get ready for the evening events. I chose to wear a cute sailor dress I picked up in Yorkville the previous summer. I spray on perfume and freshen up my makeup. When I'm satisfied, I stop and look in the mirror. That is the best I can do.

I grab my handbag and speech and head down to the lounge next to the boardroom at 9:00. The lounge was set up with sofas scattered throughout the room and framed pictures of the athletes from last year's photos on the walls. Wine bottles and long-stemmed wine glasses are set up on a table and a volunteer is posted to serve the coaches and athletes. A cheese and cracker table is also set up. Everything we requested is ready and looked good. I decide it was time to go to the boardroom and turn to leave.

Ryan stands in the doorway. "Everyone is present. You can start whenever you want." He must have been watching me. When I hear his voice it startles me.

I peer into his eyes; they looked tired and forlorn. His mother must be doing very poorly. He wears a black Hugo Boss that barely contains him. Our divorce or keeping distance from me with the exception of the sadness I see in his eyes, must be working for him.

"Thanks," I say, starting for the boardroom. Ryan turns sideways allowing me to pass. I savour his familiar scent as our bodies touch for the first time in weeks. Ryan follows me in. The seats at both ends of the table are earmarked for Ryan and me. The coaches stand and the athletes sit on either side of the table.

"So glad everyone could make it. Thanks for coming. This is truly an exciting undertaking. I am Dalia Middleton. You might recall from your invitation that I'm going to be your go-to person. With me today is your other go-to guy, Ryan Kennedy. You, however, are the real stars, so I'd like each of you to introduce yourselves. Tell us a little bit of your background and why you decided to come. We'll hear from the skaters first and then the coaches."

After everyone has a chance to speak, I'm able to provide more of the day-to-day basics, "Your schedules, itineraries, and contracts that were drawn up have been placed in the desks in your individual rooms. We will give you the full day tomorrow to review the paperwork before signing. Please read it carefully. They can be returned either to Ryan or myself by 9:00 tomorrow night." I looked around the room into the faces of our guests. "As I mentioned, Ryan is your go-to guy for any concerns or problems you come across during your stay at our training camp."

"I will be running the show and working closely with Global Television. The first two weeks of the camp are slated for creating promotions and rest for the athletes before training starts two weeks from today. Ryan and I will be around the Village all day tomorrow to answer any questions you may have."

I look over at Ryan and ask, "Did you have anything you want to add?" There is an awkward silence in the room as everyone gawks at our interactions with each other. The skating world is small, and the Kennedy's divorce is common knowledge.

Ryan smiles back at me but it never reaches his eyes, I can see the hidden bitterness towards me, "Nope, you said and did it all. Let's start the wine and cheese party!" Ryan rises from the table and everyone follows him to the lounge.

There is music playing in the lounge-Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On," which Ryan knows I love. We skated to it for pleasure, it was such a romantic song for us. I reminisce while the athletes are giving each other hugs and talking excitedly amongst themselves in intimate groups.

The coaches are in their own group getting to know one another. I take a drink from the wine table and when I turn around I notice Ryan is no longer in my sight, so I joined their group.

“No, you can’t be serious!” Sally questions Miles. There is a fraction of a second where I sense everyone get quiet on account that I joined them. Sally is the first to notice Ryan reenter the room, “If you’ll excuse me.” She picks her glass up and starts heading in his direction. She combs her fingers through her already perfect hair. She is a natural blond beauty with a high forehead and 5’9 in height. When she stands with him, she looked like a wedding cake couple. I feel my stomach turn. Green with envy, I wish I hadn’t chopped off my hair, not that it will ever look as good as Mrs. Clairol Chatterton! Damn it, I should have lost her invite in the mail!

Sally embraces him warmly. He hugs her back and lifts her in the air at the same time. He smiles at her and the two sit down on a couch by themselves like they’ve known each other for years. They are close, and if I was seeing correctly, I think I spied her hand on his leg. I’m not sure though, because I can’t get a good look at them without being too obvious in front of the other coaches.

I try to focus on the coaches' conversation. Coach Hicks greets me, “How are you, Dalia? It’s been ages since I’ve seen you. Is it true, you’re engaged to Mr. McBride?”

“Yes,” I grin! “How are you doing?”

“Great!”

Miles tried catching me up to speed, “We were just talking about what a privilege it is to be invited to this camp.”

“I agree,” said Hicks.

Hicks asks, “I thought Adam would be here on the opening day, no?”

“No, he couldn’t make it. He’s going to visit us periodically when his schedule allows.”

“I heard the bad news; I’m sorry about you and Ryan,” Miles said with sincerity. “It must be hard to work so closely with Ryan when you aren’t together anymore,” he adds.

“You don’t know the half of it, crazy hard,” I assure him.

Hicks turns to Miles and says, “If you don’t mind, I’m going to steal this lovely woman for a few minutes...” He takes me by the hand and leads me to a vacant couch. “I’ll get you another glass of wine. You wait for me here.” I do as he asks and take the last sip of my merlot. I place it on the table and look again at

Ryan. He is still sitting with her, and I can see that they are definitely holding hands. My face feels warm. I want to go over to them, stop what is happening in its tracks. He is vulnerable right now, and she is taking advantage of it. Hicks gets back just in time.

I can talk to Coach Hicks about anything. He is like a surrogate father to me. Anything I say to him I knew he will keep private. Discretion is something I can easily give him credit for, along with busting my ass on the ice every day for as long as I could remember. The only opinions he gives are honest ones and most importantly I trust him.

“What really happened with you and Ry?” Hicks asks out of curiosity.

“He shut me out, and then when he realized he made a mistake, I already moved on. I couldn’t wait forever.” He moves closer and puts his arm around me. I put my head on his shoulder.

He is the closest thing I have to a father since dad died, “Things have ways of working ourselves out,” he reassures. He looks at my ring, “So are you announcing your engagement?”

“At a press conference right before we are televised.”

“That will get people to tune in. The guy running the show, you, Ryan, you’re sure to get viewers.”

“All this didn’t happen for that reason.”

“I know,” replied Hicks, “are you still in love with Ryan?”

“You tell me.”

“You wouldn’t be eaten all up inside if Kennedy was talking to me, affirmative.”

“I love Adam,” I insist. “I wouldn’t have accepted his proposal if I didn’t.”

“Are you sure you weren’t just taken by him, the glamour, the power. Sure as shit I’d bend over for that hottie!” Coach Hicks jokes.

“Keep your dick in your pants!” I tease, “He’s mine!”

Hicks looks at Ryan and Mrs. Clairol, “You need to tell him before you lose him for good.”

“Look at Ryan, he’s getting pretty damn cozy with that, that woman. She’s taking advantage of him!”

“How so?”

“He’s vulnerable. His mother is practically on her death bed.”

“Oh!” says Hicks seriously, “I had no idea.”

Hicks advised, “Ignore them. Focus on what you’re here for, the skaters. Don’t let him know it bothers you seeing him with her. That will push them together, and you don’t want that.”

Hicks takes a drink of his Chianti and changes the topic. He plays with the tips of my hair and says, “I love the new hairdo. Despite everything, you look fantastic.”

“I don’t feel it. This is supposed to be a high point in my life and disappointingly, I’m feeling pretty damn low.” I give him a kiss on the cheek and turned in to hug him. “Thanks for listening,” I say. “It feels good to talk to someone openly.”

“You’re welcome.” He takes his arm away from my shoulders and grabs my hand to guide me from the couch. “Let’s go mingle with the skaters.”

Mustering up as much dignity as possible we walk past Ryan and Sally before approaching a group of female skaters. Sheena, Paris, and Cindy are standing by the table of cheeses. They welcome us into their group and fire off a barrage of questions about camp.

“What are we going to be doing for the next two weeks before training starts?” Sheena asks.

“Do we get to shop and do whatever we want?” Cindy pipes in.

“Are we all getting makeovers?” Paris inquires.

Hicks chuckles saying, “One at a time...”

I put on as good a smile as I can, “We prefer that you don’t make any changes to your appearance; the makeovers will be done in about a month. For the next two weeks, if we aren’t taping you for commercials you are allowed to shop until you drop. You will be doing commercials, commercials, and more commercials. When you aren’t doing promos, you will be doing more commercials! I’m just kidding, you are free to rest and do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t break any rules.”

Paris runs her fingers through her hair and comments, “I can’t wait for the makeovers!”

“Me, too!” Cindy chimes in, “You guys can do whatever you want to me. I’m sure it’s going to look great! I adore your new cut!”

“Thanks.” I smile self-consciously. “We have plans for all of you!” I say creating intrigue.

Hicks takes my hand, and then looks at the girls, “We will leave you to enjoy yourselves.” He leads me over to another group of skaters. Rick, Brett, and Scott are standing together. I look over at each of the three men and my admiration for their talents comes bubbling out of me. “You guys were fantastic this year! I’m so glad all of you agreed to come to the camp!”

All the men smiled at me and Brett responds on behalf of the trio, “Thanks.”

The competitors we approached asked similar questions and I try to answer as many as I can. I noticed Ryan is circulating, too. He always seems to be on the opposite side of the room as me. Hicks, being the supportive friend he is, never leaves my side. The party is nearing the end when my worst fear comes to fruition. Hicks leaves me for not even a minute to go to the bathroom when I feel a hand on my shoulder. I turn to see who it is, and to my horror, it is Sally. I smile in her direction, putting on a confident appearance. There is nothing in her smile that is sincere.

“I was just speaking to Ryan. He told me everything that happened.” She glows. I can’t let Sally get to me. She needs to know this conversation isn’t bothering me, even if it was.

“Two sides to every story,” I shoot back.

“I’m only interested in his,” Sally dismisses me. “So, I assume the two of you are finished then?”

“Our relationship is really none of your business!”

“It became my business when Ryan told me everything you did, and I mean everything. Let me assure you that if he needs my comfort or support, my door will be wide open. He will get the respect he deserves from me.”

Hicks couldn’t have returned at a more opportune time. He put his arm around me and said, “Ladies.” I have never been so happy to see anyone more. Ryan comes over to us and takes Sally’s hand while looking into my eyes. It left a paradoxical message. Hicks, who was quickly becoming my knight in shining armour, looks at Ryan and says, “I’m going to take Dalia back to her room, she’s

not feeling well. Wrap this party up for her,” he orders. Once a coach, always a coach, I guess. “I look forward to catching up with you later, Ryan.” Hicks takes my hand and leads me away.

Hicks escorts me to my room, he hugs me and leaves. I put some music on, turning off the lights, and collapse into bed. I feel this new urgency to protect Ryan.

Chapter 28

I wake up feeling a little bit brighter. Coach is right, I have to focus on why I am here and not on my personal relationships. I call Adam needing to hear his voice.

He answers the phone with a distracted tone, like he's looking at something while talking, "How did the party go last night? Did all the athletes show? I haven't gone through the tapes yet."

"They did, and it went well. We gave everyone a day to go over their contracts and ask any questions they might have before signing. Are we still going with the skate off idea? Have them compete with each other, the coaches will pick who stays and who goes?"

"I think that will work well," he advises.

"We will give the athletes forty-eight hour access to the arena and then begin the commercials with a skate-off. We chose the most fascinating skaters with the best jumps and spins. The coaches, Ryan and I will decide who the four worst skaters are, and then send the bottom two home immediately. The other two will be saved and go on to compete as a pairs team. The camp will be left with a total of six competitors, two males, two females, and one pairs team."

"Will they be doing jumps or perform their long programs they used last year for this skate-off?" he asks.

"Definitely their programs."

"You have my approval. Did you run it by Global yet?"

"I wanted to run it by you first."

"Thanks Dalia, I'm going to try to fly out to see you this week. I'll keep you posted if I can have my secretary free up some time for me."

"That's great." I smile to myself. "I'll run it by Global when we get off the phone. If I have a problem and it's not approved I'll call you back. If I get the

green light I'll start working on it immediately and you won't hear from me. I'd love the visit by the way."

"Ciao for now."

"Bye, Adam, I love you."

"I love you too."

I hang up and call Global. I discussed my idea over the telephone and they were immediately on board. They thought it would increase the tension of the show immediately, all the while drawing in viewers. I texted Ryan immediately because we had to get moving on this if it was going to happen:

Dalia: Can we talk?

Ryan: Sure, text or in person?

Dalia: In person would be better.

Ryan: Come to my room.

I don't bother texting him back, it's faster to just go there. I knock once and he answers right away, "How are you feeling?"

I remember the lie Coach came up with, "Better today, thanks."

Following Coaches advice I start discussing work right away. That is, after all, why we are here. I'm dying from curiosity to ask if he scored with Sally, but I know a part of me really doesn't want to know that answer so I decide it is a topic I don't want to bring up, "I spoke with Global and Adam about an idea I had, and it's been approved."

"What's that?"

"We give the athletes forty-eight hour access to the arena and then begin the commercials with a skate-off. We will collectively decide who the two weakest skaters are, and send them home. The next weakest skaters will be forced two to become a pairs team and we'll leave the best two female and male skaters alone."

Suddenly it strikes me, who better to coach the pairs team then me and Ryan? "So, the camp will be left with a total of six skaters, two males, two females, and one pairs team that we will coach together. Hicks, will be busy coaching the top individual skaters, so that leaves us to coach the pairs. That small little detail, I did fail to run by Adam, but I'm sure it will be fine."

Ryan sits on his bed, “You and me coach? We can hardly stand to be in the same room together. Do you really think we can work with each other that closely?”

I explain meekly, “Can’t we?”

“My skates aren’t even here,” he informs me.

I get excited, because he is actually considering the proposal. “We’ll send for them! Mine aren’t here either.”

Hiding my jealousy and probing like a pro I added, “You can run it by Sally if you’d like.”

“I don’t ‘need’ to run it by anyone.”

I shrug. “Well, I saw you together last night and I just assumed.”

“Don’t assume anything,” he advises. “Let me take care of my business and you take care of yours. My answer is yes.”

“Great!” I’m hardly able to contain my excitement. “So can you help me round up all the coaches for a meeting to discuss the skate-off? We’ll need a second meeting to inform the skaters of this new challenge.”

“No,” Ryan disagrees. “Just do it in one meeting. Round up everyone and break the news to them at the same time. I’ll do the talking.”

“That will be great,” I respond. “We need to televise it. I’ll make the necessary arrangements. We’ll use the boardroom. We’ll sit with the judges at the table and have the skaters stand before it. Pictures of the athletes can be taken from the lounge and posted in the boardroom.”

“Let’s go around and tell everyone about the meeting,” He says walking to the door.

“Wait, I have to talk to Global Television first! They have to film the reactions of the competitors and coaches receiving the news,” I remind him.

He smiles at me. “Okay, I’ll wait.” An awkward moment passes between us. I don’t really want to break it. “I guess I’ll get back to work.” My eyes are screaming stop me, stop me, but I head for the door to avoid being too obvious. I can feel Ryan close behind, really close. The heat of his body spikes my temperature.

I imagine his arm wrapping around my waist as he is behind me. I can picture myself reaching for the door and Ryan rubbing up against me in the heat of

the moment. "Text me when everything is arranged," he startles me back to reality. "I'll help you round up everyone for taping." He opens the door for me and I realize how ridiculous I am carrying a torch for two men.

"Sure," I say as I walk passed him. I know if I didn't leave soon I will do something I would regret. I just need Adam to come, then those silly feelings for Ryan will go away.

Justin is my go-to man in Alberta. He works for Global Television. We discuss my plan and he says, "Great. I'll need a few hours to prep the boardroom."

I text Ryan:

Dalia: It's all set up. Do you want to come to my room?

Ryan: We have to stop meeting like this:-(Be there in a few minutes.

Dalia: I have to take a shower and dress though.

Ryan: Still coming.

Dalia: I'll leave something in the door jamb so you can come in and wait.

I call Mrs. Crompton asking her to ship mine and Ryan's skates to Alberta for coaching purposes. I leave the phone on my bed, grab my clothes and jump in the shower.

I step out of the shower and towel dry my hair. It doesn't take long since I had it restyled so short. I get dressed in the bathroom and then open the door before I start putting on my makeup. Ryan has taken liberties and is lying across my bed.

"Make yourself at home." I comment sarcastically.

His eyes penetrate me as I focus on my face in the mirror. I study his reflection, and feel his gaze on me, so I know he is watching my every move. "You're staring at me!" I say with unfamiliar discomfort.

"I'm not used to your hair yet." He smiles. "Can I touch it?"

"You're silly!" I admonish.

His eyes glow with a playfulness I haven't seen in a long time. He gets off my bed and comes over to me in the bathroom. His fingers comb gently through my hair. I close my eyes and let myself get lost in the feeling, opening them once

to find his closed. He does the same motion with his fingers in my hair again, but this time his hand goes into a fist securing my hair between his fingers.

"I miss showing you, what you do to me," he gasps.

"I miss feeling what you do to me," I flirt with sincerity. "We should round up the gang," I try resisting the intense feelings I'm having right now. Where are they coming from?

"Just a minute," he pauses. "I want to give you something Adam can't."

"What's that?" I don't know where he is going with this.

His arm brings my hips to his, and his other hand guides my face to him. He kisses me ever so tenderly on the lips, making it clear to me that he is filled with desire for me. "Look into my eyes and tell me you don't want me anymore, then I'll leave you alone forever, Dalia."

"I can't do that," I whisper breathlessly. He kisses me again. His tongue explores my mouth as if the first time we kissed.

"I'm still in love with you," he confesses.

"I'm marrying Adam Ryan. This equation still doesn't work for us, we are better off as friends."

For a second, okay maybe way longer than a second, I wish Ryan will not listen to me and take me with reckless abandon until a cold splash of reality rears it's ugly head and I remember the ridiculous amount of camera's we just planted all over the place. One of them is bound to be aimed directly at us! "The Cameras!" I whisper hoping it's not too late and no footage of us will land on Adam's desk.

We separate and start gathering the people in the boardroom. Sally takes a seat next to Ryan. I try ignoring it because it still bothers me. I sit on Ryan's other side and Hicks takes the chair next to me. The coaches are shooting looks of curiosity at Ryan and me wondering what the meeting was about. Justin lines up the skaters with the men in the back row and the ladies in front.

We have the skaters come dressed in matching outfits with their skates on. The clothing was made for the camp. The cameras start rolling when Ryan stands to speak. Ryan introduces the panel and explains the show to the viewers at home.

"By invitation only, we have chosen the top four male and female Canadian Figure Skating competitors and invited them to a televised training camp." Ryan

introduces the athletes one by one. Ryan informs the audience how they placed last year. "There will be twenty-four hour access to an Olympic sized skating arena and gym facilities. The athletes are aware that they can, and will, be filmed at any time. The top male and female athlete who does the best at the end of the year will become a hundred thousand dollars richer."

"What our athletes and even our coaches don't know is that we are going to give forty-eight hours to practice before we have a skate-off. The skaters will perform last year's long program before the panel, and the lowest scoring male and female will be sent home immediately. The next two skaters with the lowest scores will be allowed to stay but must compete in all competitions as pair skaters. Ms. Kennedy and I will personally coach them." Oh my God, I can't believe he said that on national television. I haven't run it by Adam yet. It will mean that we will have to work together a lot and I don't know how to take it. I flash back to the last stunt Adam pulled and the fact that we sat next to each other on the plane ride home, and a small portion of me thinks, maybe he will be okay with this.

The camera pans the skaters' reactions and they are completely shocked. When the filming is done we dismissed the skaters and talked among ourselves.

Miles says, "That's a wicked twist."

Sally adds, "A wicked, but a good one. Is there anyone we should be voting off, and should we be coaching?"

"We will be fair and discuss everything after we've seen all the programs who should and shouldn't stay," says Ryan. "There will be no coaching during the first forty-eight hours. You are simply expected to watch and share your input for final decisions."

Sally adds, "Sounds like fun to me."

"Totally," I agree. "I want to go to the rink and watch these kids practice. Does anyone want to come?"

Not a single coach declines. We walk as a group to the arena that is approximately half a mile from the Village. It is a quiet night with a full moon and the distant sounds of cars in the background.

We watch the practice session until I notice the skaters getting tired. That's when I call an end to it. I leave the coaches and go down to the skaters for a second. I summon them and they huddle in a semicircle around me while I speak.

“Some of you are starting to look tired. If you are, its wise to call it a night and start again tomorrow. Skating when you’re fatigued just leads to injury. We don’t want any of you walking back to the Village alone either. You guys did a great job out there on the ice.” As an afterthought, I look over at Rick and ask, “How’s the ice for your jumps? Is it soft enough?” He is, by far, the most talented jumper.

“Its perfect,” he answers. "Thanks for asking.”

I asked Coach if he will walk me back to my room so I don’t have to go alone in the dark. Ryan jumps from his seat. “I’ll take her.” Sally looks displeased. I smile at her smugly, flattered by Ryan’s enthusiasm to spend a little bit of extra time with me. He almost reaches for my hand but stops himself as he leads me back to the village. I notice his pace is very slow.

I unlock my door and turned to look at him. He surprises me by pinning me against it. He rubs against me, revealing his desire, upping his game. I’m open to his advances unable to exercise self-control. Ryan drops his head to mine and slowly runs his tongue across my lips tantalizing me, kissing me seductively before releasing my shoulders and walking away. I’m left ungratified and full of need. It takes a really long time for me to fall asleep that night.

Chapter 29

The next two days are spent in the arena watching the athletes. The coaches stand rink side studying their skaters, offering no instruction. The invigorating feeling of competition is in the air, and it is evident the skaters aren't as friendly with each other since the announcement.

Practices continue around the clock until its time for the skate-off. Universal camera operators are all set up and ready to start filming. Each woman will do her four minute program. They wear their colourful competition dresses full of rhinestones and glitter. They don't interact with each other, they are zoned into competition mode.

The male skaters sit at the edge of the ice watching the females compete. Their behaviour to one another doesn't change much compared to the women's. The women are more catty with each other.

When the Zamboni takes to the ice the men disappear to get ready for their competition. They started stretching and practicing in the hallways while the ice is being flooded. The females sit in a group to watch the men as they take off their skates. They are all chatty and best friends like nothing happened. The judges resume their note taking.

After all the skaters perform the judges go to the boardroom to deliberate. Discussions are televised. It is in the boardroom they come to their final decisions. The skaters are to wait in their individual rooms until we call them back and inform them of our decisions.

Decisions are about to start when my phone rings from inside my purse. It's Adam. I cover the receiver and tell everyone in the room I have to take the call. I step out of the boardroom.

"Hi, Dalia, I hope I haven't caught you at a bad time."

I feel a sense of being rushed know that everyone is waiting for me to film, “Sorry Adam, but you sort of did, they’re waiting for me to discuss who should leave the camp, we’re filming.”

“Good, hold off until I get there. I want a say in who stays and who goes.”

“I thought you gave me full autonomy over decisions regarding the show?”

“To a degree,” he snaps. “I can’t risk you sending the wrong person from camp home, and that person winning the Olympics. We will look like fools.”

“So you don’t trust me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You want me to go back into that boardroom and humiliate myself by telling them that you’ve revoked my decision making autonomy because you’re calling into question my judgment?”

“Correct but word it in a way so that they’ll understand,” he teases.

“It’s not funny, Adam,” I say defensively. “I’m an Olympic champion with years of skating under my belt. Have you even stepped foot ice?”

“I agree with you, nothing about this situation is funny. If YOU and YOUR PEERS make one mistake by upsetting the viewers, I guarantee you we’ll lose millions in advertising revenue, which can cost us our second season. I’ll be their tomorrow morning.” He hangs up not allowing me to get another word in.

I walked back into the boardroom with all eyes on me. “I just got off the phone with Adam, president of the Association. He’s flying in tomorrow morning to review the tapes and assist us with our picks, so we’re to hold off for now. Coach Hicks, will you inform the skaters? We’ll reconvene at 11:00 a.m.”

Hicks smiles in my direction and assures, “Not a problem,” while he gives me a knowing glance that something is wrong.

I leave the boardroom immediately and walk briskly to my room, I’m fuming. I splash cold water over my face with no affect. I start questioning everything: Do I really want to be in a relationship with someone who doesn’t trust me to make a decision? This is my field of expertise, not his! I’m so mad I can scream.

I hear a knock at the door and open it. It’s Ryan.

“What happened?” he asks. “This is going to slow everything down!”

“I know, believe me I’m really upset with him.”

“Why does he want to be here so badly?”

“He doesn’t trust us to make the right decision. He says if we let someone go and they come back to win the Olympics we’ll lose millions in revenue.”

“And he knows more about skating than we do,” Ryan says sarcastically.

“Apparently,” I answer.

Ryan switches off the light, making the room pitch black.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m upping my game,” he whispers.

“The camera’s!”

“The lights are off, he won’t be able to see us, shh”

He has to have stepped closer because I can feel the heat from his body. His hands caress my face, and when he finds my lips, his hands stop probing. He whispers, “I need you, Dalia.” His lips barely touching mine. He feeds me slow, soft kisses. The hand that found my lips is now resting on my chin as he guides me into one kiss after another.

“Ditch Adam for me,” Ryan pleads. His tongue slips into my mouth and lingers there. Not one kiss is hurried. The feeling I receive from Ryan is intense. I’m lost in his slow and natural seduction. I caress the back and top of his shaved head as his kisses intensify.

His muscles make his entire body feel rock hard, yet his skin is warm and soft. He pulls away from my lips and says, “Hearing you choose him, beg for him still haunts me.” His voice starts quivering. “I’m drawn to you, regardless that you’re with him. Everything in me says to walk away, but I can’t, and quite frankly I don’t want to.”

“Watching the competition tonight, reminds me of all the wonderful moments we shared Ryan. I still miss them.”

“So do I,” he admits. His kisses intensify and my face starts feeling wet from his.

My breasts press against his chest. “Maybe we shouldn’t do this. It might do more harm than good.”

“I want to make love to you,” Ryan confesses. “Let’s live in the moment, please.”

“Do it,” I beg with urgency.

He backs me onto the bed and holds my hands down as he mounts me. He deliberately slides into me very slowly, savouring every second of it. I can hear him groaning as he goes deeper inside of me, “This is where I belong.” Our bodies work slowly and steadily passing a threshold that makes me weep with emotion. It is the most forbidden yet beautiful experience I’ve ever had.

We fall asleep in each other’s arms. When I wake up Ryan is gone. I am unaware of what time it is, because my room was so dark. I start thinking that maybe last night was just a dream.

Chapter 30

I feel like I've been sleeping for a long time. I hear the click first and then the light come beaming into my room. I see Adam's silhouette in the doorway. He closes the door behind him and the room goes black again. I frantically slide my hand across the bed ensuring Ryan isn't still beside me. The other half of the bed is empty. A wave of relief floods me. Ryan must have known enough to leave early before Adam arrived.

He turns the light on and it takes a second or two for my eyes to adjust. I'm naked in bed. He's dressed in a suit, his facial expression is glacial. I remember my anger from the previous night and start reaching for my clothes.

"You slept naked." Adam states rather than questions.

"I did," I answer. "Let me get dressed, then we'll talk."

"Don't bother. Did you sleep with Ryan," he asks.

"No, what makes you think that? Don't you trust me?" I sound lame.

"After I got off the phone with you, I checked the camera's. I saw you kiss him in the hallway. Now tell me the truth because I can always check the cameras," he's enraged, "did you sleep with him?"

"You don't need to answer," he seethes. "Your hesitation speaks volumes. The cameras in yours and Ryan's rooms have first-photon imager capabilities. In case you don't know, that means they capture images in the dark."

"I did," I admit spitefully. I had absolutely no idea that they could film us in the dark too. "You try controlling me, and you made me look like an idiot in front of my colleagues. How dare you put special cameras in MY room, when I'm not a competitor? Maybe you pushed me so far hoping I would resort to this. It might hike up the ratings. Wild horses wouldn't have kept me away from Ryan last night. As far as I'm concerned you asked for it!"

“You whore!” he rages. He raises the palm of his hand and smashes it into the side of my face. The blow is so hard it causes me to stumble backwards. My hand goes instantly to the spot he hit, my fear of him heightens.

He closes the distance between us, “You want to act like a whore, then I’ll treat you like one. I’m sure his juices are fresh inside of you, well I’m going to fuck his smell off of you! I’m sure you cut your hair to attract Ryan because when I suggest it, it’s inconceivable. I waited for you, making sure you were ready for us. I gave you everything: my heart, a job worthy of your reputation, a wonderful lifestyle, and this is how you repay me. I ask you to become my WIFE! Nobody else compares to you. I trusted you to come here and spend a year with him, even making exceptions for him so he can take his dying mother to therapy. Your behaviour is that of an adolescent schoolgirl. You should be thankful, and gracious, instead you are deceitful and a cunt!”

Adam shoves me onto the bed, and orders me to please him. Scared of getting hit again, he opens his pants and fills my mouth with himself as he grabs my hair. I pray for it to be over, tears are streaming down my face as he’s pulling fistfuls of my hair. I concentrate all my efforts on not gagging or vomiting hoping he will calm down soon.

“Do you still have the taste of Ryan in your mouth?” he questions. “How do I taste, any good?” His anger is immeasurable. He leaves me to go to the bathroom and grabs a facecloth that he uses to gag me. I’m tempted to break free and run, but fear he will catch me and get more angry. I don’t know what to do next.

With the hand towel in my mouth, he proceeds to take my dignity with each loveless thrust. I struggle to get away thrashing my legs around but he overpowers me. Adam grows stronger and more confident the more I writhe. My legs throw off his balance and he punches me hard, hitting my eye. The blunt pain is overwhelming and I try to free my hands to cover my face but I’m unsuccessful. One hand is free for a second while Adam pummels me but I am unable to get him off. I scream out but it only sounds like a soft moan.

My face is red with heat, sweat and the tears flowing down my cheeks until they meet the towel in my mouth. I start choking until his violation ends. He fills my hollow cavity and then looks into my eyes. “You got what you deserved.”

Chapter 31

Calmly, Adam fixes his clothes and leaves me broken on the bed with the towel in my mouth. Too scared to move, I can tell I'm bleeding and it is hard to see out of my left eye. I keep recalling him saying as he tightened his belt, "You can go to him now. I'm done with you. If you press charges you'll ruin all three of our lives, so I advise against it. You gave assumed consent to this the minute you kissed Ryan knowing cameras were pointed on you."

I remove the gag from my mouth and remain crying in the dark until there are no tears left to shed. My energy depletes, I feel no hunger, only the desire to die.

Eventually, my body betrays me, forcing me to get up and go to the bathroom. It burns when I void, and I feel the need to shower his dirt away. I take the bar of soap and rub her skin raw, scrubbing my legs, arms, and flank until I draw blood. I tear at the layers of my skin like there is an invisible film that needs to be removed, trying to undo what happened. Full of self-loathing and blame, I lose all sense of self-worth. It is the worst feeling in the world.

My left eye is swollen shut and my jaw is throbbing with pain. I walk over to the sink and try to brush Adam's filth out of her mouth. I can't eliminate his taste. His germs are suffocating me. I return to bed with blood stained sheets and curl into the fetal position.

I keep waking up and then falling back to sleep again, until I hear a frantic knock at her door. "Dalia? Are you in there? Dalia!" Its Coach Hicks, I have no energy or inclination to answer.

The door to my room bursts open and Coach gasps. "Who did this to you?" He collects me from bed but I scurry away squealing in terror. I cower in the corner of the room, and he pulls his cell phone from his front pocket and calls 911.

I want him to stop but I can't form the words. I'm petrified. Coach stands at the opposite end of the room reassuring me everything is going to be okay, until the ambulance comes.

The voices can be heard down the hallway before there is a second knock at the door and this time it is the ambulance attendants entering the room. They advanced towards me as though they are entrapping a wild animal. I lash out in self-defence. They step back, regroup and mumble amongst themselves. Then all three come at me at once. They pin me to the floor and I feel a needle pierce my arm. I drift away.

I open my eyes to find myself in a hospital room unlike any I've ever seen before. It's nicer, calmer looking and less sterile. A nurse with a name tag that reads Betty is standing close to me. She notices my eyes open and smiles at me and then tries to explain, "The paramedics had to sedate you. Do you know where you are?"

Her blond curly hair and blue eyes catch my attention, and distract me, I already forgot what she said, "Pardon me?"

"Do you know where you are?" Betty repeats.

"In a hospital?" I guess.

"You're in a section of one that's involved with sexual crimes."

My eyes feel heavy.

"We need to examine you. We'd like to have your consent," Betty explains.

I nodded and felt another needle in my arm. "I think this exam needs to be done with sedation," she conspires with her coworker. I see her just before my world goes black, I still hear her say, "The ambulance attendants had to sedate her just to get near her," and that's all I remember.

While under, the nurses place my legs in stirrups and do a physical exam trying to obtain evidence that can be used in a court of law. I'm tested for sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. A pregnancy test is also performed. I later find out that I shouldn't have showered before the physical examination because evidence can be destroyed, but there is definitely evidence found on me. Then I'm left on the bed with a female registered nurse at my side. I'm in a secret part of the

hospital not many people know about, preventing further harm to me, should the assaulter look for the assaulted. (Me..).

“We took samples and performed the necessary tests while you were under.” The nurse looks at me with concern in her eyes. She didn’t try touching me in any way. “Can you tell me what happened?” she inquires.

I answer the nurse in my mind but nothing comes from my lips. I’m numb. The nurse looks at me again and tries a different approach. “Today is Friday. Do you know when this happened to you?”

My brow creases as I try figuring out what day it happened, but my mind comes up blank. I can’t talk about it even if I want to. The nurse then reassures me, “During a traumatic event the body doesn’t act the way it would usually, under normal circumstances. The likelihood of you being pregnant is slim to none. We have taken a pregnancy test, but your blood results aren’t in yet.”

“It’s advisable that if it’s been within forty-eight hours of the assault, that you take the morning after pill. Are you willing to take it, to prevent pregnancy by your attacker?”

“No,” I manage to reply. “I can’t take it. I was with Ryan too and I would never kill HIS baby.” I start crying.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“Will I have to tell anyone else?” My swollen face and sore jaw make it uncomfortable to talk. If I have to tell someone else what happened, I don’t want to have to repeat myself, it’s too humiliating.

“I won’t lie. You’ll have to repeat it to the police,” Betty replies.

“Then I’d rather tell all of you at the same time so I don’t have to say it twice.”

“I’ll call them in now.”

“Do they come even if I’m not going to press charges?”

“Yes,” Betty responds. “They come whenever someone is brought in to us.”

“So, I don’t have to press charges?” I confirm.

“No. You don’t,” Betty answers. “It’s up to the police to decide if they can make a case or not. They can charge him, even if you don’t.”

I close my eyes and rest until they come.

They knock on the door and Betty lets them in. Two police officers in full uniform introduce themselves. I'm not able to retain either of their names. They look about the same age as I am. One officer pulls a pad out of her pocket and begins writing.

"Kindly state your name and age."

"Dalia Kennedy, twenty-seven."

"Can you explain the events that occurred, resulting in the 911 call?" Adams prediction of all of our lives being ruined leads me to fudge my story, "I was with my boyfriend...we just got carried away. It was all consensual." The police officer looks at her partner with disbelief and then back to me.

"State your boyfriend's name and age?"

"Adam McBride, he's twenty-eight."

"So let me confirm, the activities that took place between you and this Mr. McBride was consensual?"

"That's correct." I nod.

Her partner looks at me and says sarcastically, "So you asked this Adam guy to give you a black eye? Is that correct?"

"Yes, in a manner of speaking," I answer, "we got carried away, I upset him. It was all my fault."

"Did you have sexual activities with Adam McBride on the morning in question?" she went further with her questioning.

"We did," I verify.

"Did you have sexual activities with anyone else on the morning in question?"

"No. the night before," I know these cops don't believe it was consensual.

"Can you confirm you weren't forced to do anything against your will?"

"Yes," I answer.

The officer looks into my eyes and asks, "Have you been threatened?"

"No," I confirm.

"Do you want Mr. McBride to go to prison for what he did to you?"

"No, I don't. This has all been blown out of proportion."

The officers get up, "If you change your mind, here's our card." There is an edge of frustration in the female officer's tone.

They leave and Nurse Betty says, "What can I do for you now?"

I check the time on the wall and see that it's after midnight, "Can I call Coach Hicks, a friend of mine, and have him pick me up? I just want to go home, please," I beg.

"Is that the man who found you?"

"Yes, it is."

"Sure, you can call him while I go to the nurses' station and page the doctor to get a discharge order. Just dial nine and the number."

I called Coach Hicks and he answers on the first ring.

"Coach, it's me," I say in a soft cracking voice, barely a whisper.

"Dalia? Are you okay?" he asks with concern.

"I can go home now," I choke out between sobs.

"I'll come get you," he says soothingly. "Ryan wants to come. He's worried sick."

"Sure," I answer.

I hang up the phone and close my eyes again, reviewing what happened in my head. What could I have done differently? Why did I get so malicious to Adam? I shouldn't have admitted to sleeping with Ryan but he would have found out anyway, the tapes. What I did would have infuriated anyone. I made him so angry, intentionally. I was a foolish idiot. He was the head of the Association, my fiancé, he had every right to be a part of the deliberation. I deserved everything that happened to me, and more.

The knock on the door told me the men arrived. Coach walks in first. He has seen me right after "it" happened. His expression is neutral, but Ryan is shocked. He instinctively goes to hug me and Coach stops him. "I don't think you should do that right now," he warns. He whispers in Ryan's ear, "I've taken care of things. I called Justin right after EMS took her. I have the tapes. Adam is going to destroy tapes with nothing on them: he'll never know."

"I want to see them." Ryan smoulders.

Nurse Betty looks at both men and informs them, "You will notice changes in her behaviour, nightmares, weight loss, over the next few days, even weeks. If any concern you, please feel free to contact us, or better yet, bring her back."

Ryan looks at the nurse with gratitude, "Thanks." When we get to the car, the first words out of Ryan's mouth are, "I'm so fucking angry." I cower at his tone.

"Check your temper," Hicks admonishes, "your going to scare her."

"It was my fault, Coach." Ryan is reduced to tears. "I should have stayed with her and confronted that prick head-on. This is my fight with Adam not hers."

"Bullshit it's not your fault," Coach argues. "Nobody ever expects someone to react like that, or asks to be treated that way."

"Coach, Dalia and I were together last night before Adam flew in. I should have stayed with her, but I was so stupid! I was too afraid we would get caught. I left her behind, before Adam arrived. I should have stayed with her, staked my claim, if you will." Ryan wanted Coach to know, he failed me.

"No, it was my fault," I interject meekly.

When we arrive at the Village, Ryan glances at Coach and says, "It's okay, I'll take care of her. Keep your phone on. I'm coming over later to watch the tapes. We're going to have to postpone camp filming indefinitely until her face heals. We can't have anyone seeing her like this. I'm going to kill him," he mutters.

"Just be there for her," Hicks chastises. "That's what she needs right now."

Coach goes ahead to the Village. Ryan looks at me and says, "Are you ready to go in?" I nodded, he takes his jacket off and uses it to cover my head as he carries me back to the Village.

He takes me to his room and lays me down on his bed before turning on the shower for me. He speaks softly, "Do you want me to undress you, or can you do it?"

I answered with my actions, as I started disrobing.

Tears stream down my face again as I notice Ryan looking at the scratches all over my body. He's horrified, I can see it in his eyes. I walk slowly to the shower and step in. I don't move. Ryan comes in to check on me and when he sees me still, he starts lathering soap in his hands and begins washing me, gently touching all my scratches, where I was assaulted. Tears fall down his cheeks. He starts crying again, which only makes my shame worse.

I'm broken. He's trying to piece me back together again. He begins washing Adam off my body and for that I'm grateful, even though I'm not able to show it. It hurts me so much to see him crying, I feel unworthy of his tears.

I can tell Ryan is going to wash me where I was violated. He lathers extra soap on his hands and then started washing my private area. It burns like peroxide in a fresh wound. I begin sobbing uncontrollably until Ryan has to towel dry me off, and then dresses me. He carries me to his bed, turning out the light.

"Go to sleep, baby. Nothing is ever going to hurt you again. I'm so sorry." He sits at the opposite end of the room and vigilantly watches me sleep, my soldier.

When Ryan is sure I'm sleeping, he sneaks out of his room and goes to Coach Hick's room. He taps lightly on the door and Coach answers immediately, "I can't believe what that prick did to her. You should have seen her just now. She undressed herself and let me shower her, but she just stood there frozen. When I went to wash her where that fucker violated her, she went into this uncontrollable sobbing fit. She is lying in my bed right now and she couldn't even see out of one of her eyes. One side of her face is completely swollen. She has scratches all over her body, like she's been clawed. I swear to God he'll pay for this."

"I have the tape right here, but I don't think you should watch it," Hicks said with concern. "You are too angry."

"I know I shouldn't watch, but a larger part of me needs to see what I let that asshole do to her."

Coach stops Ryan with a flat palm to the chest. "You didn't let him do anything to her. Get that out of your head."

"I never should have let him be around her. I have to see for myself what happened. I have to be fast, I don't want her waking up without me being there."

"I can't watch it," Hicks confesses. "I'll stand outside the door until you finish." He presses play and steps out into the hallway.

Ryan watches, unaware of how brutal the confrontation is going to be. The first thing that shocks him is that Dalia admits to him that they slept together, oh my God. He smashes his hand, full force, into her. "I can't believe it. That slimy bastard wanted to fuck my smell off of her. It was my fault, my fault entirely," Ryan mutters to himself.

The tape shows Adam forcing her to suck him like she's a two-bit prostitute. Ryan has to run to the bathroom to puke. When he returns, he sees her face gagged with a towel and Adam violates her. She struggles to get away and he punches her harder in the eye. Finally its over, the prick tells her she got what she deserved!

Ryan storms out of the room passing Hicks. He looks back at him on the way out and spits, "He has to pay for this. Where's he staying? He's lucky my skates aren't here, I would slash his fucking throat with my blade."

"Check your anger, Ryan, vigilante justice isn't going to benefit Dalia in anyway if you lose control of your temper now. He's on the top floor; its like a penthouse for Olympic officials."

Only seeing red, Ryan takes the elevator to Adam's floor. It opens to a hallway with a set of French doors at the end. Ryan knocks on the door and waits for Adam to open so he can gain entry. After the second knock, the door opens.

"You better go back to Toronto before I fucking lose my temper and give you what's coming to you," Ryan warns. His hands are fisted at his sides, knuckles turning white. "Dalia and I will run the camp when she recovers from being brutalized by you, you fucking asshole. We'll decide who will leave the camp when Dalia has recovered."

"Brutalize Dalia? Whatever are you talking about?" he feigns innocence.

With the sheer force of the Olympic athlete he is, Ryan draws his arm back and plants his fist heavily into Adam's face. There is a distinct crack noise followed by the spewing of Adam's blood. The sight is rewarding to Ryan. He is ready to inflict more damage when Coaches words linger in his memory, 'Vigilante justice isn't going to help Dalia.'

"I'm going to care for her now, and if I ever see you go near her again I will kill you with my bare hands," Ryan promises slamming the door on his way out. He then sneaks back into his room.

Dalia is lying in bed and Coach is sitting in a chair watching her. Her eyes are closed and she is covered with blankets. "She has to be hungry," Hicks comments.

"I haven't seen her eat in a while," Ryan confirms. "I'll go down to cafeteria and get her food. You want anything?"

He shakes his head. "No, thanks, I'm fine. Are you okay?"

“No, I’m boiling over. I broke the fucker’s nose. I left him bleeding profusely, but that’s not enough for me, I feel the need to kill him,” Ryan hisses to him.

“Okay, that’s enough, contain yourself. Go get her some food now,” he insists.

Ryan goes down to the cafeteria and spots Sally. She is getting her breakfast when she turns and sees him. She smiles and pushes her wavy blond hair from her face. “Hey, Ryan!”

“Hi, Sally.”

“Do you know what the delay is? When are we going to deliberate?” she inquires.

“Let’s do this, collect all the skaters into the boardroom for 3:30 and we’ll have a meeting with the skaters and staff informing them what is causing the delay. Call Justin and have the cameras rolling.”

The person behind the counter interrupts impatiently, “Can I help you?” Ryan glances at her with irritation and orders two breakfasts.

“Sounds like a plan.” Sally smiles at Ryan. “I hope everything is all right. You look stressed.”

“No, it’s really not,” he answers honestly. He wants to confide to her, but she will know, soon enough.

Ryan takes the food back to Dalia. She is still sleeping, or at least pretending to. To Hicks, Ryan says, “I bumped into Sally downstairs. She’s going to round up everyone at 3:30 in the boardroom. I’ll make an announcement. This reality show isn’t going to have censorship. Dalia’s going to be upset, but she needs this. Thanks for watching her, I’ll take care of her now.”

Coach gets up. “You’re welcome. I don’t think what you’re planning is a good idea,” he warns. “She might not forgive you if you show her looking like this on national television. You are going to ruin Adam’s reputation, and if the police don’t have enough evidence to press charges, then he can probably file a lawsuit against you for slander.”

“I don’t want to show the tapes of Dalia, but I want to show the aftermath. If it will help one person in the same kind of situation, then it wasn’t for nothing. I know from the bottom of my heart she’s a caring soul who is willing to help others,

and it will squash him at the same time. It might even force the police to press charges if we get enough pressure from public supporters."

"Don't you think you're getting revenge at her expense?" Coach argues.

"No, I'm not. I'm helping her recover in a way I know will work. I'm doing it for us. We've always been a team and when one of us gets weak or gives up fighting, then the other compensates. That's what people who love each other do. I'm doing everything in our best interest. If you watched the tape you will know he's destroyed her. I think it's her only chance at full recovery."

"You know what's best." Hicks shrugs and quietly leaves the room, leaving Ryan alone with me.

"Open your eyes, baby. I brought you some food."

I get up and go to the bathroom, avoiding the mirror. I'm disgusted by the way I look. I go back and sit a foot away from Ryan. He takes the food out of the bag and places it on his bed.

I wonder if Ryan is angry with me. Does he see me as a whore, too? I can't bear the thought.

He brought me scrambled eggs and toast with juice. Ryan takes a forkful of eggs and tries feeding me. When the eggs hit the back of my throat, I flash back to when Adam shoved his meat into me, and I start gagging. I race to the bathroom to throw up.

Ryan follows me. I brush my teeth in an attempt to erase the vile memories. Out of habit I look in the mirror, its like seeing the damage for the first time. I'm shocked at my reflection. My eye is black but open no more than a mere slit. My cheek is swollen and angry bluish-purple. I don't think I ever looked worse in my life. I felt dirty, demoralized, violated, broken. I want to take another shower. Ryan is wrong, I'm not even a little bit hungry. I'm repulsed by food. I freeze facing the mirror.

Ryan clears his throat as he stands closely behind me. Recalling his presence, I flinch and he step back. "You're still beautiful, sweetheart."

"I'm marred." A tear falls from my wretched face. "I'll never be the same."

“Only you can control whether you will be the same. This is temporary, a really bad blip in your life that I’m going to help you get through. It’s what’s on the inside that matters.”

“That’s ugly too,” I spit.

“No, you’re not,” Ryan says firmly. “Do you want to try eating again?”

“No, thanks. I’m not hungry.”

“I want to take you back to your room. We have to get some of your clothes. We are having a meeting in the boardroom at 3:30,” Ryan informs me.

“Will Adam be there?” I tremble uncontrollably. I felt sick again but this time with nerves.

“No, he won’t. I sort of punched him. I’m pretty sure I broke his nose. I told him to go back to Toronto before I kill him, we can take care of everything from here, he’s not needed,” Ryan elaborates. “I have to make a phone call. I’ll be right outside the door.”

Ryan goes into the hallway pulling his cell from his pocket, “Hi, Justin? I want to announce the sexual assault at today’s meeting. I want the athletes and coaches to know the truth about why there’s a delay. I want to provide what is promised and that’s a reality show with no censorship. I need you to get this approved by the studio before we go ahead. I’ll check back in with you at 3:30. That should give you enough time to have it okayed.”

Ryan returns to me, taking my hand in his and leading me out of the room. He locks the door behind us before departing. We go back to my room where it all happened. A new wave of nausea hits, and I run to the bathroom to bring up nothing, my stomach is dry heaving due to its lack of contents.

I feel anxious, not wanting to stay a second longer than necessary. The visuals of what happened flash in my mind. I grab some clothes and hurry to the door. Ryan follows my cue and shadows me. We go back to his room and he lays down on his bed. I go to the bathroom to get dressed. I opt to wear a casual dress shirt and slacks.

“Do I have to go to this meeting?” I balk.

“It’s in your best interest. Everyone wants to know what the delay is and why we haven’t done any deliberation. The schedule has started, but people want

to know what's happening." I fidget as I search for an elastic in all the drawers and pockets around his room.

"What are you doing?" He asks.

"I want to put my hair up, it's bothering me. No, Forget it, just cut what I have off. Cut it all off." I say in absolute frustration.

"No, I'm not cutting your hair," he tells me. "Now finish getting dressed." His eyes locked with mine. He takes a step towards me. This time I don't step away. He caresses my blackened eye and swollen cheek with his finger. He kisses my face tenderly, looking forlorn, desolate. "You're going to be okay. I promise."

I slip on my shoes and inform Ryan, "It doesn't feel like I'm going to be okay."

Ryan's phone rings. "I'll be just a second, Dalia, I have to take this." He doesn't leave the room this time. From his end of the conversation I figure out he is on the phone with Justin and that his idea, whatever it is, has been approved.

Chapter 32

When Ryan and I reach the boardroom, everyone is present. People see me and gasp! There is understandably much whispering. Sally is standing close and I take her hand for support. The lights are on and the cameras are rolling. I am mortified. It isn't what I expect and the second I realized my humiliation is going to be televised, I want to die even more than I did before, a quick and painless death, again. I try hiding behind Sally on one side of me and then Ryan on the other but it's futile. There is no escape.

Ryan starts speaking, "First, I would like to thank all of you for coming to this impromptu meeting. As you are all aware, we delayed the deliberation until Adam McBride, the president of Canadian Skating Association, was able to view the performance tapes. He wanted to provide his opinion as to who should stay at the camp and who should go."

"A few mornings ago, Adam McBride arrived in Calgary and sexually assaulted our very own Dalia Kennedy. Dalia has decided not to pursue charges as over ninety percent of rape/assault victims do, but I'm hoping with everyone's strength and encouragement we might change those statistics, and help Dalia to do the same.

"This assault was captured on videotape and is being safely stored. It's important we don't cover this event up, so that other victims of rape out their might find the courage needed to press charges against their attackers. If we can help at least one person then none of this was in vain."

Everyone, including the boardroom camera operator, mistakenly applauds for the strength they credit me for having, which I really don't. I'm whimpering, still mortified at Ryan for airing this. Tears are streaming down my face again, I turn to Sally and beg her, "Please get me out of here." Sally takes my hand and

when the least amount of people are looking in our direction we run from the room.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Are you okay?” Sally asks concerned. The animosity between us is forgotten.

“No, I’m not. I wouldn’t normally ask this, but can I stay with you tonight?”

“Of course you can. You can stay as long as you want.”

“I just can’t go back to my room, and I’m so angry at Ryan for announcing this without telling me he was going to!”

“Do you want me to go get your clothes?”

“Would you?”

“Sure,” Sally agrees. “Just tell me your room number and give me your key. I’ll be right back.”

I sit on Sally’s bed and wait. I loathe Ryan for televising this without warning me, not that I would have done it if he had. I liked Sally’s room for the fact that nobody knows where I am right now.

It doesn’t take her long to come back with an armload of my clothes. She brings enough for me to stay a few days. I get dressed in the bathroom and go to lie down.

“Do you want to talk?” she asks.

“I’d rather not if you don’t mind. You know, I want to apologize for my behaviour earlier. I was jealous when I saw you with Ryan. I was out of line and I’m sorry.” With that off my chest, I just want to curl up in a ball and fall asleep, hide from the world. Yeah, that sounds like a great plan, I think.

“No worries, I’m going to head off in a bit. I want to watch the off-ice training with Miles and then I have to eat dinner before I teach at 7:00. Did you want me to bring you back some food?”

“No, thanks, I really don’t have an appetite.”

“If Ryan wants to come and see you is that okay?”

“Of course, thanks for asking.”

I like her, she’s kind and compassionate. I misjudged her. Sally goes to the bathroom to get ready while I snuggle in bed. The normal sounds of Sally getting ready are soothing. It isn’t long before I fall asleep.

I wake up to a light tap at the door, it opens. I gasp and hide under the sheets. A stream of light is coming into the room and I can see the outline of a male figure. "It's only me, Ryan." The door opens wider and he turns on the light so I can see him.

"You really scared me." My heart was pounding, and I was breathing really fast. I glare at him and then think better of it. I don't want to upset him enough to attack me like I did Adam.

"You never consulted me before televising me on national TV with my face looking the way it does and after being assaulted the way I was. I'm so disappointed with you."

"I'm acting in your best interest. I'm sure you don't see it that way now, but you will later. Trust me," he pleads.

"Would you rather stay with me?" He offers, "Please?"

"I'll just be in your way. Is there any possibility you can talk to the woman who showed us around the Village and have my room changed? I can't go back there again."

"Consider it done," Ryan reassures.

This question is eating away at me, and finally it surfaces, "Do you think I'm a whore?"

"Of course not. I failed you Dalia. I didn't protect you the way I should have."

"Do you blame me for what happened?" I ask timidly.

He looks at me like he was unsure whether he should say what he is going to say but he says, "No, I don't. Do you feel like you are to blame? Is there something you need to tell me? I saw it happen. You are definitely not to blame."

My face turns hot with shame. "You watched the tape? I didn't give you consent. That was the most humiliating time of my life and you watched it? Now I feel even more violated than I already did, I didn't know I could feel worse.

A tear falls from his cheek. I can tell he's sorry.

"Because, when Adam hurt you, he hurt me." He rubs the back of his head in distress. Ryan looks like he was falling apart. "I should never have left you that night. You're not a whore or to blame. Adam's to blame, and I failed you, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to live with myself again."

I feel confused. “You didn’t know he was going to do this to me, so you shouldn’t condemn yourself.”

“I can’t change the past or take away what happened, but I can protect you in the future,” Ryan says with determination. “You are my world, and if I lose you then I have nothing. I never want him or anyone else to come between us again. You are mine.”

Right now, I don’t feel like anybody’s, but I don’t want to tell Ryan that because he’s being so kind to me and I don’t want to hurt his feelings. “I would like to just forget this ever happened to me. I need normalcy back, routine. I want to start focusing on the camp. Let’s make our decisions tomorrow. We can review the tapes in the morning and complete our decisions by noon. Maybe that will help me heal, and yes, I will go back to your room with you. I just want to warn you though, when I am in bed, I can’t have you anywhere near me.” A voice inside of me is telling me that I’m moving way too quickly. I ignore it. I find out later, this is another one of many stages victims of rape go through.

“Deal,” he agrees. “I’ll call Sally and tell her you’re coming back to my room, and then I’ll let Justin we are rendering decisions tomorrow.”

He watched the film of my rape. Who else will see it? He will never see me in the same way again. This is going to destroy us, me. I want to turn back time. When I lay down on Ryan’s bed and imagine skating with him I feel more peaceful. “Did our skates come yet?” I need to get out there on the ice with him, that will help me heal and I don’t know why, I just do. I closed my eyes.

Chapter 33

Since my assault is now public knowledge, I don't feel the need to hide the bruising on my face. I'm determined to put the past events behind me, like war badges, if you will. I'm jolted back to the present when Ryan's phone rings. He answers and mouths, "Justin."

"Okay, I'll tell her. Round up the coaches for 11:00 in the boardroom and tell the athletes to be there for noon. Thanks, you've been a great help."

My mother calls from Toronto shortly after. Ryan answers the phone and has a chance to talk to his mother before almost passing it to me. When I realize who he is talking to, I frantically signal for him to say I'm sleeping.

Mom gives him the third degree, and Ryan shares all the events in restricted details to avoid upsetting her too much. He explains that I just couldn't bring myself to talking about it yet. He promises her repeatedly that he will take care of me, reassuring her there is no immediate threat or need to fly out. By the end of the conversation, I can tell, he talked her out of coming.

In the boardroom, Sally, Miles, Hicks, Justin, Ryan, and I start immediately reviewing all the long programs and rating the skaters with a score out of ten. The female with the lowest score is going home. Of all the female skaters it was unanimous that Paris's inconsistency would affect future results, so she received the collective lowest score. Scott, her boyfriend and fellow skaters at the camp, were going to be upset, especially losing his girlfriend for an entire year. This would definitely create drama in the camp.

The men proved to be a much harder decision. Scott, Rick, and Brett all skated well. It became more subjective in these cases. We decided to send the man with the weakest jumps home, and that ended up being Trevor.

Scott and Diane are chosen to be the pairs team and that is who Ryan and I will be coaching. With around-the-clock training from Ryan and me, I won't be surprised if they make top ten. We allow them to compete for individual titles too but all coaching at the camp is geared towards their pair skating.

We finish our deliberations and then Ryan said to Justin, "Let the skaters in." They entered the boardroom wearing their team outfits and figure skates. They're nervous because apparently nobody wanted to leave camp and train at home. The cameras start rolling and Ryan hosts this episode.

"We would like to thank the athletes and coaches for the patience and consideration they've shown during this trying time. We would also like to acknowledge the outpouring of support from fans who have reached out to Dalia. It is my personal pleasure to announce that Adam McBride has been charged this morning with sexual assault causing bodily harm. We all hope that justice will be served.

"The judges have deliberated, Dalia will you be kind enough to call out the names." Justin cues the music. I pick up the photos of the skaters who are safe and started calling out the girls who will remain.

"Paris, I'm sorry to say you will be going home tonight. Please say your good-byes, go back to the Village and pack. You will still be allowed to represent Canada in competitions, and when you arrive home you will be provided with a new coach, if yours is currently on the panel. Your coach will not be returning with you."

Miles, Paris's personal coach prior to the camp walks up to her and gives her a hug. Tears run down her cheeks rendering her a pitiful sight. Jay stands with her, both facing me. "The coaches have discussed your progress, Paris, and feel that training off-camp will benefit you. Your relationship with Scott is distracting you from focusing on your skating. This separation will do you good. We want to thank you for coming to the camp." I lean in to hug Paris and wipe her tears in an attempt to provide comfort to her.

Scott is next to approach her. "I'm going to miss you, baby," he whispers in her ear. "I'll see you at the competitions. Don't worry. It's not going to be an entire year before we see each other again." They begin kissing each other like lost lovers for a few seconds before the rest of the skaters cluster around Paris to

show support and hug her. She then stands alone in the room until the men are summoned.

We do the same for the men. Trevor is now left alone. I look at him and give my commentary followed by a hug and then the skaters cluster around him to proffer their support. Trevor joins Paris putting his arm around her and the two head back to the Village to pack. Everyone else remains. The two will be taped in their rooms and in the car taking them to the airport.

I ask the skaters to return to their original positions, and that's when I announce the new Canadian pairs team, "You will train harder than all of our competitors put together, because it's completely new to you. You will no longer only be accountable to yourself and your coach, but now you will be accountable to your partner. You will support one another, share the wins and losses." I pause and look into Ryan's eyes. I tell him I love him without exchanging a single word. I remember when one of us would let the other down, it was that person's job to say, 'it's ok, we'll win next time.' "Canada hasn't had any stellar couples since Ryan and I competed. You will win the hearts of Canadians and everyone will be rooting for you! Scott and Diane, please step forward. You are going to be Canada's next super couple!"

Diane smiles and appears excited. Scott, however, fails to display any modicum of enthusiasm. He carries a look of shock on his face. "Paris-" he said. The skaters cluster around Scott and Diane and make it difficult to see their reactions. I sneak over to Justin and said, "Show Paris in the limousine watching what we just announced. Have her reaction televised as she's driven from the Village."

The skaters leave the boardroom and continue following the schedule set up for them. The camp has only six skaters. I looked at Justin and asked, "Can I see the footage from the limousine ride?" Justin looks at his watch and then at me. "The driver should be back in about forty-five minutes. Why don't you and Ryan meet me in my room and we can watch together?"

"Thanks. I'll tell Ryan." I walk over to Ryan and tell him I want to watch the limo ride. I'm secretly hoping the drama in the car will steer the spotlight away from me.

We meet at Justin's room, "The limousine driver is bringing up the tape now." It was perfect timing, as seconds after he says it, we hear a light tap on his door. Justin opens the door and takes the tape from the driver. He thanks him and closes the door. When we were all seated, Justin plays the tape.

Both athletes are in the one limousine. Paris's makeup is smeared from when she was in tears during the boardroom scene, she's a mess. She and Trevor go to the car and at first they are quiet. They sit on the same bench seat together and Trevor's arm is around Paris's shoulders for support, both genuinely upset. The staff member in the car driving said, "Dalia has footage of the rest of the boardroom meeting she would like you to watch."

"I don't want to see anything. I just want to go home," Paris says petulantly.

Trevor interjects, "Sure, play it. What do we care? We'll end up watching it later anyway." The boardroom scene is played for Trevor and Paris and their reactions are videotaped.

"Unbelievable! Of all the men they could have chosen to go into pairs, they chose your boyfriend!" Trevor is astounded.

"Scott told me it's going to be okay, that we'll still see each other at competitions. This is bullshit! I'm going to go back home and work my ass off. I'm not going to let any person or show discourage me. The only thing I have the power to do is make them regret not keeping me there," Paris sneers.

Trevor smiles. "Now that's the attitude of a fighter!" The filming stops when they pulled up at the airport. I thank Justin for letting us watch the film. I tell him it was good to air. I lead Ryan back to his room and take out my phone. I call the salon that did my hair and asked if we can close off a section for one day filming makeovers. Gerard will consult with them, but Ryan and I will have final say over how the athletes will walk out. The staff is very accommodating because to them it's a huge free commercial. They give us an alarmingly high price for the day, but in the end we agree to the terms. The date is set for the following week, allowing time for the salon to readjust previously booked appointments.

This week the focus will be on training and commercials with the athletes sporting their before-the-makeover looks. I make myself comfortable on Ryan's bed and look at the six pictures of the remaining hopefuls. On the back of each

photo I jot down my ideas. I wanted the "kids" to feel good about their new looks and I tried really hard to come up with styles that will flatter them.

"Do you want to go over my suggestions on makeovers for each skater?" I ask Ryan.

"What do I care about makeovers? It's out of my realm of expertise. I'm into wash and go," he jokes. "You go ahead and do whatever you like. To be honest with you, I'd rather not go."

"Please, come," I plead. "I don't want to do this by myself. You have to come."

"I won't make you do it by yourself," he reassures.

Ryan and I go to the arena. All the skaters are present. We announced that a week from that day, the makeovers are going to take place. The skaters are excited about it, except for Scott, who seems to be in a foul mood. Ryan and I are going to have to work on him. After the announcement we allow all the competitors to continue with their practice except for Scott and Diane, whom Ryan and I hold back to talk.

"Our lessons with you are going to start tomorrow," Ryan informs them. "You guys have to get used to skating with each other. Dalia and I will be coaching you every free skate session without fail. Your coaching will take place on the ice, in a pool, and in the gym."

"Sure thing, coach," Diane says.

"Please say that again, Diane." Ryan has a look of satisfaction at being called a coach.

"Sure thing, Coach!" I like the sound of that too. It's the first time we had ever been called coaches. Scott rolls his eyes and runs his glove through his hair, moving strands away from his eyes as he skates off in a huff. Diane appeared to be disappointed by his reactions.

"Don't worry," I encourage. "He'll be okay. It's just a lot for him right now because Paris was sent home. Give him some time. He'll come around to the idea."

Chapter 34

I'm excited when the next morning rolls around. I'm eager to build a rapport with Scott and Diane. I layer on the sweaters and don snow pants. Ryan and I have breakfast early, since we have to be on the ice for 8:45 to teach them. Ryan and I keep our conversation light. The subject about what happened to me or his mother's health is quickly becoming taboo.

Deep down I know my assault is the reason for the success of the show. It is only our second week of taping and we already had just over two million viewers and growing fast. The show is a hit at my expense.

We arrive on time at the rink. It is invigorating to be in a cold arena in the morning watching champion figure skaters tear up the ice. Ryan summons the pair who skate to him. Their cheeks are pink from the cold, and their spirits seem slightly elevated from the previous day.

Scott looks really handsome. He was wearing Nike workout pants and a white turtleneck. His sport jacket is zipped closed but after stroking for five or ten minutes he got hot and stripped off his jacket. I don't think there is a girl on the ice who doesn't notice how great he looks with it off. It reminds me of when I saw Ryan skating for the first time. He was the only skater I knew who practiced in a wife beater T-shirt. I insisted that if I was going to skate with him, he would have to lose the shirt.

Diane is much shorter than Scott. She is dressed in tight leggings and a hoodie. The hood is left down and her dark chestnut brown hair is secured in a ponytail off her face trailing down her back. She is the one Adam said needs the most work with Sally on choreography.

They skate back over to us after they rehydrate. For almost the next half hour, we watched the two of them skate and then the flood begins and they got off the ice.

We go our separate ways. After Ryan eats lunch, he goes back to our room and watches television while I sleep. I can feel him on the bed next to me. His scent is nice and familiar. He lets me sleep until twenty minutes before we have to be back on the ice.

Ryan kisses my cheek to wake me. We look at each other for a millisecond and I can't help wonder what he could possibly have seen in me or why he has so much patience with me. How and why he will ever take me back after I went back to Adam is beyond me. It makes me sick still thinking about Adam's ferocious temperament. Images of him invade my thoughts frequently.

For the remainder of the day I work on editing film with Justin and have my dinner with the other coaches. I don't think I have a minute to myself all day. I think Ryan has something to do with that, but I don't complain. He is making sure I'm okay and for that I'm grateful.

Ryan says, "I have something to show you. Let's go back to our room. By the way, Justin spoke with the woman who runs this Village and you have a new room on this floor. I have the key. You don't have to move in there until you are ready."

"What if I'm scared?"

"Then stay or come back to me. You can stay with me forever," he says longingly.

We go back to the room and Ryan instructs me to close my eyes. He opens the door and in front of the bed are two boxes. I know right away what they were. I squeal with delight. Our skates arrived!

"When can we skate?" I ask enthusiastically.

"We'll go on after the last flood of the night. It will just be you and me."

"I can't wait," I said eagerly. I opened the box with my name on it. I pull my boots from the box and I take a long sniff of them.

Ryan laughs, "That's just gross."

The final session the skaters leave the ice and it is flooded for the next day. Ryan and I race to put our skates on like two adolescents. It has been quite some time since we did our last show together, so we start slowly. Its like riding a bike for us, cathartic.

Ryan leaves me on the ice alone for a few minutes while he goes into the music room and plays a slow tape of songs, ones both of us love listening to. Singers like Usher, Timberlake, Bieber, and my favourite song, "Say Something I'm Giving Up on You."

When Ryan and I begin to feel comfortable on the ice. I stare into his eyes. He is so strong and handsome. He never really changed from the time we used to compete as a pair. Neither of us moved. Ryan holds me close for a second, and I'm not scared. It's okay, more than okay. Caught up in the moment, and before I can stop myself words surge from my lips, "I love you, Ryan." He kisses me returning the sentiment.

"You don't know how badly I needed to hear that," he confides. "I love you, too."

Ryan takes me by the hand and we circle the ice. "Let's do some throws," he says excitedly. When we tire, he puts his arm around me the way he always does, and we glide around the ice a few more times. Tears fall down my cheeks. It is the first time I feel a hint of hope.

Ryan looks at me concerned, "This is the first time I've ever seen you cry while we were on the ice together and not competing."

I half smile at him. "Who needs a Zamboni when I'm on the ice?"

"Do you remember when we bombed our program in the Paris competition? You bawled like a baby while Coach yelled at us! Good times." He is trying to get a smile out of me, and its working.

"I was in pain," I argue. "My foot was sore."

"No, you were crying because you knew your screw-up cost us that title!"

We stop skating when we get to the boards, and head back to the Village in silence. Ryan carries both bags. It's in that moment I have an epiphany: Ryan is my hero, everything to me, always was, forever will be. Something inside of me stops me from telling him though. I'm not sure if the fear is from getting hurt, or hurting him again.

When we arrive back at the Village he asks me, “What do you want to do?” I think for a minute and staying longer in his room is imposing myself on him, so I chose to leave.

“I’ll take the new room. It’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure?” he asks. “I’ll show you where it is and let you in. Then I’ll get some of your stuff so you can get ready for bed.”

“Thanks,” I say.

We walked to the new room and he leaves me alone with my skating bag. It is quiet there, lonely. Ryan is only gone a few minutes, and when he comes back, he has almost all my belongings. I open the door for him and subsequently start putting away all the stuff he brought over. It doesn’t take long.

He says, “I’ll bring the rest of your stuff over in the morning before breakfast. Remember, Come back anytime. You have my number! I’m going to miss you.”

“Sure, thanks Ryan, for everything,” I say.

Ryan goes to the door and lets himself out. I watch him walk down the hallway back to his room. I want to go after him but encouraging him to stay with me so I won’t be alone is just delaying the inevitable.

Chapter 35

Everybody is excited on the morning of makeovers. Two stretch white limousines are hired for this episode. Justin and I go through all the footage and decide what we are going to use. The makeover show is always my favourite episode of any reality show. I want theirs to be outstanding as well. I know the changes have to be dramatic and the skaters will be emotional.

We have optimal weather for taping. It is unusually mild, so we all wore light jackets. The sun is shining and the chrome on the cars is gleaming. The air is filled with the fragrance of spring, and there are buds winking from the tree limbs.

Downtown Calgary is plagued with traffic, but we are commuting after nine. We pulled up to the salon and have the camera operator jump out of the car. The cars drove around the block again to film the limousines arriving at the salon. We have the competitors get out of the car and act slightly more thrilled than they really were. Last weeks previous anticipation transformed to dread.

Gerard (a.k.a. the hair nazi) meets us at the door. There where no changes to the salon's decor since my victimization. Everything is black and white with beautiful chandeliers imported from Napa, California. Gerard gives me a hug and delivers really good news, "The salon is yours today! I had my receptionist reschedule all my appointments!" He says it with a wicked grin. He is wearing a black suit and he had his long black hair pulled back into a braid down his back. For lack of a better word, he looks cool.

"Oh, Gerard, that's great! How do you want to do the makeovers?" I unzip my jacket and hang it up.

Gerard appears to be thinking for a minute. "I think its best we do one at a time. We'll start with the men. The women can go to Starbucks and we'll get them when it's their turn."

“Sounds great, Gerard. Did you hear that, girls? The men are getting done first. You can go to Starbucks for coffee and we’ll come and get you if you haven’t returned in time.”

Rick is the first to volunteer and sits in the makeover seat. Gerard circles him, looking at his hair and touching it.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“He has a good cut. I think we’ll keep the style and take it down an inch. Add some gold highlights to lighten the brown. He’s going to look sharp,” Gerard comments.

“Sounds good,” I agree.

They started working on Rick right away. An hour later, and he looks almost the same. I don’t let on what I think, the last thing I want to do is offend Gerrard. We act like it’s a big change and compliment the bejeezus out of him. If I hadn’t seen him getting his haircut and highlighted myself, I wouldn’t have believed anything was done to it.

Gerard looks up. “Who would like to go next?”

Brett jumps into the chair. “Here goes nothing!” he says with a hint of hesitation.

Gerard assesses his long blond hair that kisses his shoulders and looks at me. I told him what we had discussed in the meetings. “Our plan for him is to bulk him up a bit. He comes off on the ice as sloppy. We want to improve his image, increase his sex appeal and masculinity.”

Gerard shrugged. “Let’s shave it then.”

“Not bald, that doesn’t look good on the ice,” I add quickly. Ryan is close so I’m hoping he didn’t hear.

“I heard that!” Ryan teases.

“Heard what?” I play dumb. I don’t want to hurt his feelings.

Brett’s change is dramatic. His new cut is spiky on top and the back and sides were very short. It made him look exceptionally masculine and handsome. He is definitely going to give Scott a run for his money in the looks department. His colour was left alone. His blond hair looks good on him.

“Fantastic!” I comment.

Someone came to sweep up and then Gerard calls, “Next!”

Scott jumps in the chair. Gerard shrugs. Scott braces himself. I toss back my head and laughed.

“How can you improve perfection?” I ask. He absolutely is God’s gift to all womankind. “You’re dismissed,” I order.

Scott sighs with relief. His shaggy brown hair is going to be left as is. It complements his facial features and never seems to bother him when he is on the ice.

Gerard calls out, “Next.” The females come back into the salon just after. They all flock to Brett. The words oh my and holy shit are being whispered by all the girls. There is an element of seriousness to the girls right after they realize that dramatic changes can also happen to them. Cautious optimism permeates the room.

The last of the men to go to the chair, Gerard smiles at him, “This one is easy. We’ll darken his colour to a sandy brown and crop it close on the sides and back. The front we’ll cut making it look all chunky and rough. He has to have six o’clock shadow with this look to work.”

They started dying his hair and following Gerard’s instructions. I didn’t give any input on this one because I trusted Gerard when he was this confident. The result was no less than trendsetting. All the men are literally being transformed into heartthrobs before our eyes, except for Scott who already had the honour.

The girls are flirtatious while the cameras roll. They were running their fingers through the men’s hair and hugging them for absolutely no reason. This can mean trouble. I pass it off though, as it made for good television.

“Gerard, can we break for a while? I want to go pick up some food. It looks like we are going to be here at least four more hours.”

“Sure,” Gerard smiles at me. “Did you want a complimentary set to your hair while you’re here? It’s the least I could do for you with all the publicity you’re generating for me.”

“Sure,” I reply, “after the girls are done. I insist on paying you though. Did you want me to get you something?”

“No, thanks,” Gerard answers.

“I’ll go,” Ryan offers.

“It’s all right,” I respond. I’m afraid if we’re alone he will ask me about the bald comment I made.

“Can I come?” he asks politely.

“Sure you can.”

Ryan leads me out the door. “Where do you want to get food?”

“There’s a pizza place around the block I saw it when the limousines circled.”

Ryan takes my hand and I lead him to the restaurant. We come back with several pizzas and Gatorade. Lunch only takes about thirty minutes before all the pizza and drinks are consumed.

Now it was the girls' turn.

Gerard said, “Who’s first?” Sheena gets in the chair. I shrug. Gerald shrugs. “You’ve been dismissed, Sheena. I can’t fix excellence.” She glows with the compliment and quickly gets off the hot seat.

Gerard calls out, “Next!” It is quickly becoming his trademark. Petite five foot four Diane is in the spotlight next. Gerard raises his eyebrow and comments, “This young, beautiful woman needs a ponytail!” Her hair is black and the longest of all the girls. It cascades to her waist. Oh my God, I think. He’s going to cut off all her hair!

Gerard takes her hair and ties it in a ponytail as he did to me, and to add to the dramatic effect, he holds up the scissors and asks, “Who wants to do the honours?” Diane gasps in shock as her eyes fills with tears.

The girls shriek and try to commandeer the scissors but Scott, being the gentleman he is, says, “Please allow me.”

Gerard instructs, “Cut just above the elastic.”

Tears well in Diane's eyes and Scott leans down to whisper in her ear something nobody can hear. I go over and offer my hand in support. Diane closes her eyes and Scott slowly cuts off her hair as instructed. He wipes her tears away before he steps back to allow the stylists to complete her new look. Gerard took the ponytail and said, “Locks of Love will be happy to have this one!”

Diane keeps her eyes closed as they gave her a Cleopatra cut, short fringed bangs with a bob that is slightly longer in the front. The change is dramatic but suits her face nicely. She is gorgeous! It’s obvious when she opens her eyes that she hates it. I give her a hug and tell her how truly beautiful she looks.

“Next!”

Brandy sits in the chair. She is Sheena's biggest competitor. Dalia recalls what Adam said, advising us to style her hair like Sheena's so they looked the same. I like the idea of having the two top females look alike because they will stand out only by their performances and who skates better. They will fight harder than they already do against one another.

Gerard looks at Dalia and says, "I'd like to keep the length."

"I agree. Let's keep it Sheena's length, and as a matter-of-fact, let's dye it the same colour, too." Brandy's eyes nearly pop out of her head.

"You can't be serious!" she complains.

Ryan speaks up, "If you look like your biggest competitor, then you are forced to stand out on your merits of skating ... and skating alone."

I call for the limousines to be waiting for the skaters in front of the salon. Gerard goes to work on Brandy taking a few inches off the ends and then stripping the colour from her hair so that the blond will take and be as light as Sheena's. When he is done, one has to look twice to confirm who is whom.

Gerard bellows, "Next!"

The last girl takes the hot seat. Sally is dating Liam. Gerard shrugs. I shrug. The girls are catching on to the gestures.

"How can you fix such flawlessness?" I question. "You are released." After a long day, all the skaters are beautified and allowed to return to the Village for the night.

Ryan hangs back with me so I can receive my complimentary style which I offer to pay for. Gerard went out of his way to pamper me. He has his receptionist go to Starbucks to get my favourite tea and styles away until he's satisfied. He kept going on about how pretty my face was. If I'm honest with myself, no matter what he does to my hair, I still feel ugly, and the best hairstyle in the world can't fix that mindset.

We said their good-byes to Gerard, and then I ask Ryan if he wants to take a walk with me before returning to the Village. He happily agrees. When we go around the first corner, Ryan stops me and says exactly what I expect him to say, "I heard your comment about shaved heads and I can't say that it didn't disappoint me. I can stop doing it." I don't deserve him. Ryan waits for me to speak. I answered honestly, even though it's embarrassing for me to say what I'm truly

thinking. “It took me a while to get used to it, but now it’s erotic to me. I love it. Its part of who you are.”

“You don’t know how much I wish I can take away your pain. I would do anything for this not to have happened to you. I want to love you so badly,” he confesses.

“Too scared,” I said timidly backing away from him.

Ryan bridges the distance between us pulling my body to his. Shaken by his advances, I cower from him and start whimpering. It’s the same noise I made when Adam finished assaulting me. It comes back to me like a bursting dam. I sob uncontrollably like it’s happening for a second time. My heart is pounding and my body breaks out into a sweat. I’m in fight or flight mode.

Ryan looks troubled, not knowing how to calm me, “I’m so sorry,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry.” He keeps repeating the sentiment, like he has just hurt me. My legs give out from underneath me. He catches me just before I go down. I fight his embrace and try freeing myself from his grip. I hear myself getting hysterical, tears blind me, my devastation breaks me.

I thought I was getting better, but I’m crumbling. I can’t breathe. My heart races. This time I’m going to get away from Adam before he can do it to me again. This time I’m definitely getting away. I struggle, kick, claw, scream with everything I have. I break free; I have superhuman strength and I run like hell.

I’m certain I can hear Adam chasing me. I scream and try running faster feeling damp-from-sweat. My clothing is being pulled back away from me. Trapped, I screamed louder. The next thing I feel is his arm grabbing mine. Damn it, I’m captured. I hear Ryan yell, “Call an ambulance,” as he gasps for breath. I don’t remember anything else.

Ryan doesn’t let go of me until the ambulance arrives. I’m given a needle, a sedative. Then, I’m strapped to a stretcher so I can’t move. Was it Ryan holding me or Adam, I couldn’t remember.

I'm taken back to the hospital where I was first admitted. This time Betty isn't working and I'm formed. I can't talk to my nurse because I'm too heavily sedated. I sleep for what feels like a month.

When I wake up, I ask for Ryan, then water. They tell me that Ryan isn't allowed to come and that I have to be more alert to have water. I remember being at the salon but nothing after that. I keep trying to go over what happened in my head but nothing makes sense. Did I see Adam? Why was I so afraid? I must have seen him. Maybe he was hiding and I'm the only one who saw him? I recall the people with me at the salon. I only remember Gerard, Justin, Ryan, and the skaters. I'm losing it. I can't let them know or they won't let me leave. I fall asleep again. The drugs keep me drifting in and out.

When I wake up the next time, I see a nurse and ask her for water. She refuses saying that I can't have it while under sedation. The nurse asks me if I remember what happened. I shake my head, letting her know I'm not sure. Then I ask, "Can I call someone from the Village to come pick me up?"

"I'm sorry, but you can't go anywhere, you've been formed."

"Formed?"

"Yes, the doctor signed a Form One due to your history and the events that led up to you coming here today. Our staff psychiatrist deems you weren't getting the help you needed after the physical assault you suffered a few weeks back."

"How long do I have to stay here?"

"Three days"

"Can I have visitors?"

"It's not advised."

"Get some sleep now, dear. There's nothing you can do but let the doctors help you."

Another needle of Haldol is plunged into my arm.

Chapter 36

After the last needle, my nurse lets the sedatives wear off to see how I'm doing. My affect is devoid of emotion. The nurse tells me they are starting me on a medication called Paxil, giving me the first pill with a bit of water. My mouth feels like it was full of cotton from being so dry and I'm desperate for a shower. My hair is matted and grungy.

"Can I take a shower?"

"Sure, its down the hall. Towels are on a cart right next to the shower room. Are you hungry, dear?" the nurse asks genuinely concerned.

"No, I'm not yet." I hadn't even thought of food.

"Okay, dinner is at 6:00," my nurse informs me.

I trudge down the tiled hallway that reeks of antiseptic. Aligning the corridor are rooms with fresh beds and others that are messy. All the rooms seem empty right now. It's 1:00 p.m.

There is a receptionist with "Psychiatry" in bold letters on the wall behind her head. I stopped and looked; I'm stunned. A psych ward? The receptionist looks back at me but that is as far as her acknowledgment goes. She is enclosed in a glass partition, no doubt for her own safety. I guess it protects her from the likes of me. The empty rooms and the time of day lead me to the assumption that people must be having lunch, together.

I find the shower, imagining the germs and bacteria floating around this place. I go inside and strip down. There is an emergency button in case I need a nurse. It is nice to feel human again. I close my eyes as the tepid water cascades down my body. I'm hoping I'm dreaming, and that I'm not really here. I reopen my eyes to the same place as when I close them.

On my way back to my room I see people leaving what I assume is a lunchroom. Some of the people I see look normal, yet others don't. They are different ages; some sadly enough are very young, like teenagers. The most notable ones speak to themselves, wear headphones playing loud music, look unkempt.

The nurse is in my room waiting. "The doctor wants to see you in his office now."

"Where's that?"

"Follow me."

I shadow her down several corridors until she stops to tap on a doctor's door. She introduces me and leaves the room. I look around his windowless office, thinking it looks as desolate as I feel. It consists of a cluttered desk, two patched up leather chairs, and a crammed dusty old bookshelf.

The little man with coke bottle glasses appears to need a shower himself. He has a very approachable, friendly look to him but it irks me that they don't find me a female psychiatrist after being raped by a man. Maybe if they double my dose of Paxil, the aliens will come back and my world will be better?

He studies my appearance before introducing himself, "Hi Dalia. My name is Dr. Bill Carson, but for our sessions you can call me Bill."

"Hi," I said. "No couch?"

"Do you need one?"

"No, not really."

"Why are you here?"

I notice his open question. It is the kind of question designed to open a can of worms. "Do you want me to psychoanalyze myself? If you do, I would say because I'm suffering PTSD"

"How so?"

"This will take longer than seventy-two hours," I complain.

"I'm not going anywhere, so yes, for you, I do have the time. Let's start with you telling me about your childhood. Was it a happy one?"

"Yes, it was albeit an abnormal one."

"Why?"

"I never had time to hang out with kids my age, I was either at school or in the arena."

“Did you like that?”

“For the most part. I didn’t know anything else.”

He studied me for a minute and then says, “Tell me about your mom and dad.”

“Mom was my primary caregiver and dad. They spent every last spare dollar on my figure skating. I almost quit in my teens due to an injury.”

“What stopped you?” he asks.

“Meeting Ryan, and trying something new, namely pairs figure skating.”

“Are you glad you kept going?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about Ryan,” he delves.

“We were paired up when he was nineteen. I was a little younger. We fell in love and got married. Then we ran into problems, after the shows stopped our relationship started falling apart.”

“Can you tell me why you think that happened?”

“We never got over missing the training part of our careers. We had to find new things to spend our time on. Family secrets started surfacing and he had this unreasonable jealousy towards my ex-boyfriend at the time Adam.”

“The one who assaulted you?”

“Yes.”

“Ryan and I found it hard to talk to one another. We closed ourselves off.”

“Can you tell me a bit about his personality? How were you treated by him?”

“We started off as friends. He was sweet and we worked hard together.” I lamented.

“Looking back, I think I was always attracted to him but I had Adam at the time. Ryan forced me to break up with him to concentrate on my skating and I resented him for it.”

“We got married soon after winning the Olympics. When dad died, Ryan supported me more, cared for me more. He was taking on his role too. He was supportive, nurturing, and a good provider but he would never replace my father. Ryan became the centre of my universe. I became too dependent on him. It was unhealthy. So he pushed me away to work on his own issues.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“I felt like I was sinking, lost, alone. I misinterpreted it, as a personal rejection, which led to fighting. I fell into a depression and lost thirty pounds.”

“Did you become suicidal?”

“I wanted to die, but I would never kill myself.”

“Are you divorced?”

“Yes.”

“Do you still see him?”

“All the time, we work together and remain friends.”

“So, How is your relationship with him now?”

“Closer.”

“Our session is over. We’ll pick up tomorrow, where we left off.”

“Thanks.”

The next morning, I line up like in the movies for my pill. I swallow it and show inside my mouth proving I’m not pocketing it. I don’t feel any change after taking it, but I guess it needs time to work.

I waited in bed to be called down to Dr. Carson’s office. As before, the nurse brought me to his office and he invited me to take a seat.

“Shall we carry on from Yesterday?” Dr. Carson inquires.

“Sure,” I feel weirdly comfortable talking to him. “What do you want me to talk about?”

“Adam McBride.”

“He was my first boyfriend, fiancé and later, my boss at the Canadian Skating Association. We worked closely together planning the show. He turned out to be smart, wealthy, and very powerful. I had the misfortune of being attracted to him after Ryan and I split. He was the only other guy I’ve ever been with sexually.”

“How did he treat you before the attack?”

“He was kind, supportive and encouraging. I was flattered by the length of time he carried a torch for me, it was mutual. My attraction for him was magnetic. I felt this irresistible pull to him.”

“Can you tell me what happened? The events leading up to the attack?”

“I was afraid you were going to ask that.”

“Take your time. Whenever you are ready.”

“I respected him, and I was definitely attracted to his charm and charisma. He became my future. I had this insatiable need to please him. I worried that I wasn’t good enough for him anymore. Adam was forced by Global to hire Ryan. He was hesitant about having Ryan and myself working with each other, but he wasn’t given any choice. I convinced him that there was nothing going on between me and Ryan, because at the time, there wasn’t.”

“So what changed?” Dr. Carson asked.

“I was angry at Adam for throwing his weight around and embarrassing me in front of colleagues by taking my professional autonomy away. Ryan was empathetic and one thing led to another. I was also lonely, missing Adam while I was working in Alberta. While I was engaged to Adam, I slipped up and fell back into Ryan’s open arms in Calgary. I knew I shouldn’t but I will always have a thing for Ryan a special soft spot after all those years of skating together. All the rooms had cameras in them, but the lights were off, and we didn’t know that Adam placed special ones in my and Ryan’s rooms. He came to Alberta early in the morning and saw that I slept naked, which wasn’t typical for me. He accused me of sleeping with Ryan and then threatened to watch the videotapes in my room. I was cornered and it made me defensive and angry. Not only did I tell him that I wasn’t loyal to him but I rubbed it in his face. I said not even wild horses could have kept me from Ryan. Adam was infuriated, and looking back, I drove him to battering and raping me.”

Dr. Carson shakes his head, “Nobody ever drives anyone to doing that. What happened next?”

“He forced me to have sex with him. Please don’t make me relive it. He treated me like dirt. Honestly, I felt like I had it coming. I wouldn’t have pressed charges, but in Canada you don’t have a choice. Ryan made it public knowledge on television, submitting a copy of videotaped evidence to the authorities. He’s being charged with sexual assault causing bodily harm. They clearly have enough evidence. You know what really bothered me?” I confide.

“No, please tell me.”

“Ryan watched the tape before submitting it in for evidence. I felt like I was violated twice. I’m angry at him”

“Did you tell him how you felt?”

“I told him how it upset me, but has no idea of the magnitude.”

“Did you get any professional help after you were assaulted?”

“No, not the amount I needed. I begged to be discharged after a day.”

“What happened to you the day you were brought in here? Do you remember?”

“Vaguely, we were at a salon doing the makeovers on the athletes. It was the end of the day. Ryan and I stayed behind to get my hair done. We were feeling good with each other and went for a walk. We talked. Ryan held my arm and I could swear it was Adam. My heart raced. I remember sweating profusely and running as fast as my legs took me. I was captured.”

“I don’t know, I thought it was Adam, but apparently he was in Toronto at the time.”

“I think we’ve done enough for today. I’m impressed you were able to discuss all of that with me. I’m not able to hold you here more than seventy-two hours against your wishes. I don’t feel you are a danger to yourself or others, however, with that being said, you definitely need further counselling if you want to resume a somewhat normal life with healthy relationships.

“I want you to stay on Paxil until your stable. I also want to see you a minimum of once a week in my office, until I feel our sessions are no longer necessary and you are handling difficult situations well on your own. You are here for one more day with nursing staff watching over you. Are you having any side effects from the Paxil?”

“No, but it doesn’t feel like it’s working.”

“Here is a prescription for you to get filled. You need to take one a day, every day. It takes a few weeks to take affect, and it can’t be stopped quickly. You have to be weaned off it when you are doing better. You can have someone come and get you after tomorrow night's dinner. I’ll see you again in my office before you go. The nurse will come and get you again.”

"Thank you, Dr. Carson." I go back to my room for the rest of the day except for when meals are being served. I’m thankful to be leaving the following evening.

On the third day, I meet for the final time with Dr. Carson. He looks at me while rubbing his chin, “What do you want out of your future?”

I take a minute to think. “Do you want to know my long-term goals or what I want over the next year or so?”

“Let’s start with over the next year or so.”

“I would like sleep without nightmares, look in the mirror without feeling disgust and self-hate, and most of all I would like to take back every little bit of hurt I ever caused Ryan.”

“Is that realistic?” he inquires.

“No, but that is how I feel.”

Dr. Carson’s eyes are searching mine, “The nightmares should cease,” he reassures. “It is a stage many people suffer from after being sexually assaulted as in your case.”

“When will I stop losing sleep over what happened?”

“I don’t know. Give yourself time and learn to stop blaming yourself, that’s when the self-loathing will dissipate. You can be responsible for your actions but not those of others.”

“I still think that I brought it on.”

“When it comes to Ryan, you can’t take away the hurt you previously caused, but you can control how you handle your interactions with him in the future. Focus on what you can change, not what you can’t, an example is past events, you can’t change them but you can relearn how to love yourself.”

“Okay, let’s move on to the second part of the question, the distant future.”

“I’ve always seen myself as happily married with children.”

“To whom?”

“Not to Adam anymore that’s obvious.”

“Do you feel you can raise a child on your own?”

“I guess if I had to, why do you ask?”

Dr. Carson, picks up his file and starts sifting through the papers, “Aren’t you?”

“Aren’t I?”

He pushes his glasses up higher on his nose reviewing my chart,, “You don’t know?”

“Know what, you’re talking in riddles!”

“Oh my,” he says more to himself then to me, “On your last admission, they did blood work and must have failed to tell you.”

Suddenly, unease sets in, I know what he’s going to say, but it was too hard to believe, “Your test came back positive Dalia. You are pregnant.”

The room starts spinning, I must have turned pale. Dr. Carson says, “Put your head between your legs quickly, you look like you’re going to pass out.”

I do what he asks and after a few minutes, I start feeling better. He looks at me concerned, “Give yourself time to think and process the news. I’m taking you off Paxil. We’ll discuss this further and I’ll assist you with any future decisions as much as I can.”

“Thanks Dr. Carson.”

“No problem, I’m sorry you had to learn about your results that way. I want to see you regularly as outpatient.”

“Definitely.”

“Take care of yourself, Ms. Kennedy.”

“Thanks, Dr. Carson.”

Chapter 37

Ryan picks me up the next evening after supper. I'm perkier on day three because I know I'm leaving after supper. Ryan carries my duffle bag of belongings.

He has a smirk on his face, "I rented a car I think you're going to like." When we get to the hospital parking lot I take a deep breath of air into my lungs, it has been over three days since I've been outside. There are six or seven people clustered around an automobile. Ryan clicks a button on his key fob and the onlookers are startled by the beep the car makes.

I smile at him. "You've got to be kidding!" In front of them is a sleek, red Ferrari 458 Italia. "How much did this rental set you back? You're such a kid!"

"You don't want to know, but you're worth it." His face lights up with excitement. I want to give him a squishy hug, but I don't.

"You know you did it for yourself?" I tease.

"Maybe! Get in." He grins back at me.

He opens my door and then gets in himself. The car has a standard transmission with soft leather interior, definitely the most expensive car I've ever been in. I didn't even know anyone can rent a car like this. It amazes me how an exotic car that Ryan only rents can take my mind off my problems so quickly and easily. Its good medicine, the car makes Ryan look more exotic, if that is at all possible.

"You didn't rent this just to take me back to the Village, did you?" I question.

"No, I did this to escape with you. The camp can run itself for a few days. Coach Hicks volunteered to teach Scott and Diane while we're gone." Ryan's eyes

look rough, his face scruffy, but he has a really edgy, sexy look about him. He's not himself though; he looks troubled.

"You're mom?"

"Still hanging in there by a thread."

"I'm glad. Where are we going?"

"I booked two rooms at the Fairmont."

"Where?"

"Lake Louise, it's in the mountains."

I sit back and enjoy the drive, staring every now and again at Ryan's profile. The seriousness in his eyes reveal maturity beyond his years, his perfectly shaped nose, his soft lips that I crave to kiss all the time melts my heart. His thick neck boasts a large jugular vein, his contoured bold shoulders drop gracefully to beautifully rounded biceps. He looks as exotic as the car we are driving in, if not more so. The baby in my belly, could very likely be his. The nurse said that during stressful events, the body doesn't act the way it normally does. It could belong to either.

He stops at a light and his eyes meet mine. I can see deep into his distraught soul, he is worried about me and his mother. I can't even imagine how he will react to the news. I want to bring him comfort even though I am more damaged than he is.

It's getting darker and darker outside and I'm starting to feel nervous driving through the mountains in the dark, "Are we almost there?" I ask timidly.

His hand closes over mine reassuringly, "It'll be all right. I'm never going to let anything happen to you ever again."

We get to the Fairmont in good time. Ryan takes the travel bags out of our car before handing it over to the valet to park.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" Ryan comments peering at the car.

"Yes," I agree. Admittedly, not even thinking about the car.

We go to the lobby to check in. Ryan books two adjoining rooms. He whispers to me, "If you need me, you just come in any time."

I always need you, you just don't know it. There's so much you don't know.

“Thank you.” My eyes hold his. He returns my gaze. The depth of emotion his eyes reveal speaks volumes.

When we get to our rooms Ryan drops my luggage on the bed before turning to leave. “Do you want the middle door open or closed?”

“Open.”

“Sure.”

He opens the door and leaves to go to his room. He opens the adjoining door so our luxurious rooms are essentially one.

I’m checking the bathroom out of habit when I hear the television turn on in my room. He calls room service ordering a snack to be delivered to my room. I called out to him, “Ry!”

He comes into the bathroom carrying two glasses and champagne, “You want me to run a bath?”

“Would you?”

“Sure,” he says. His voice is deep yet soft, almost soothing. He runs the water and starts pouring the champagne before running the jets to get a generous surface of bubbles to appear. Then, his eyes pierced mine, giving me his undivided attention. He undresses me letting my clothes fall to the ground.

He reaches out placing his hands on my shoulders and then slowly slides them down my arms until he’s holding my hands, “I’m not going to hurt you,” he reassures.

I take a deep breath, “I know,” I whisper.

Naked, I step into the water, and once seated, Ryan hands me my glass. He undressed himself and joins me. We savour every drop of our alcohol, and my conscience gets the better of me, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

I slide between Ryan’s legs, leaning my back into his chest. I could feel him stiffen and his body become rigid, “Are you okay with this?” Ryan asks concerned.

“I am,” I reply with a newfound confidence. It must be the counselling, because discussing my problems with Dr. Carson, makes me function better.

“Ryan, I’m pregnant. The first time I was brought in after the rape, they offered me the morning after pill, but I didn’t want to take it in case I was pregnant with your baby. They never told me I was pregnant until this hospital visit. The doctor apologized and said it must have been missed. I don’t know what I’m going

to do.” He drops his chin on my clavicle and wraps his arms around me where the baby is. I turned my head slightly to see tears running down his cheeks. I snuggled into him more waiting for him to put words together. He places his finger on my chin and turned my face to his and then kisses me carefully.

He stops for a second not appearing to have taken any time to consider options and says, “I don’t care who’s it is, I will love him or her because they come from you,” he says honestly.

A large sob escapes my mouth as his lips find mine again. There is hunger in his kisses and he’s pressing into me. He wants me and I think I feel ready for him until we hear a tap on the door interrupting us, “Damn,” Ryan curses. “Sorry,” he says getting out of the bath quickly and putting on a robe so he can answer the door. I drain the water following him out.

After dressing, I go into my room. There is a table covered with a white tablecloth and two plates with silver domes overtop and a full sized bottle of wine with two glasses. He puts on a new pair of pants but sits bare chested across from me. It serves as a distraction from my tasty dinner. He pours another glass of wine for himself and holds my hand after cutting his steak, making us eat and drink with our free hands. It’s the best I feel in a long time.

“Feed me a shrimp,” he directs. He knows I love it when he takes charge. I take one by the tail and hold it to his lips. His tongue deliberately licks it before taking it into his mouth. My body shivers with anticipation as I watch him. His eyes close and he whispers, “Delicious,” he says not referring to the food. My desire for Ryan to savour me the same way increases. I want his mouth on me.

“Feed me too, please,” I beg submissively.

Ryan takes one of my shrimp and holds it before my lips. I ever so languidly begin to lick the shrimp, and then I slowly cover the shrimp with my mouth biting it free from the tail. I closed my eyes and swallow. He takes my wine glass and offers me the substitute orange juice he pours into it.

“Everything tastes so much better when you feed it to me,” I purr seductively.

His eyes are carnal with desire for me.

“Dalia, you’re making this way too hard for me,” he complains.

“You started it,” I defend myself.

“Get on the couch,” he orders with a sexy, breathy voice.

I do as I’m asked. There is apprehension mixed with tension in the room. He places one hand on the cushion by my hips and the other near my head and he leans down to kiss me from his standing position. The kiss is laced with intense carnal desire, giving me cold shivers. This is going to be AMAZING.

Then, it stops! He pushes himself away from me fighting his conflicting needs of providing me with safety and his personal needs for intimacy. He leaves the room through our connecting door and closes it behind him separating us like an angry bear. As the lock clicks shut, I find myself yearning for him to come back.

I take the comforter from my bed and lay on the couch where Ryan wanted to make love to me. I look out the window and gaze at the stars, lost in some wonderful memories from the past. However, I savour the new feelings I have tonight. My spectrum of thoughts and feelings are so wide, I can’t help but wonder if this is what the beginning of recovery feels like. I slept well that night, never moving from the sofa.

I knock on Ryan’s door in the morning to see what he wants to do. He opens the door for me and goes back to the bathroom. I caught him in the middle of brushing his teeth. I sit on a chair in his room and look out the window. The sight is breathtaking.

“I thought we would go for a walk this morning,” Ryan says coming out of the bathroom.

We have a light breakfast before heading out. We bring water bottles at the gift shop along with a few travel sized essentials before strolling around the lake holding hands as if we are on our first date.

The still water is clear, deep blue, with snow-covered mountains reflecting on it, it is like a scene plucked from every artist’s fantasy and made real. Lake Louise is a beauty that can never be truly depicted on canvas, although hundreds of artists have tried. The serenity and grandeur of it brings tears to my eyes. I let them fall.

Ryan sees my tears and remains silent, he just stays: THERE, by my side. He is my soldier; harbouring strength I can only draw from him. He squeezes my

hand tighter leading me through my path of darkness to a side where security and tranquility await.

Ryan picks a spot and we sit together. His concerned eyes stare into mine as he speaks to me. Ryan is always a man of few words, but when he speaks, everything he says is well thought out and intelligent.

“Kitten (My dad used to call me that), I brought you here to find the strength and courage you need for your next step in recovering.” He touches my cheek with sweet tenderness as he speaks.

I looked at him not knowing where he is going with this, “Your trial starts in a few weeks, can we visit my mom before it? I don’t know how much more time she has. I want you to come back to Toronto with me to see her.”

“Sure,” I would do anything to be there for him the way he’s been there for me.

He places two fingers on my chin and lifts it. I’m staring down at the ground instead of him. He makes my eyes meet his. “You are not a whore. This was not your fault. I’m sorry I said you weren’t worth fighting for, because you ARE worth fighting for. I said that out of anger,” my eyes fill up with tears from his words, “I’m going to make love to you now,” he tells me.

“You are my soldier and my hero Ryan,” I finally share my epiphanies.

He starts with baby kisses, lightly pressing his lips to mine. Each kiss gets longer. Then he starts licking my lips before he slowly pries my mouth open. I welcome him in savouring his sweet kisses. The calmness of the lake soothes me during his slow, deliberate advances.

“It’s taking everything in me to move slowly until you’re healed.”

“Take me,” I encourage.

He kisses me raking his fingers through my hair, his tongue becoming more brisk, and then like last night, he forces himself away from me, “I’m sorry, but I change my mind. I think I’m rushing you too much.”

“Let me be the judge of that!” I insist.

“Believe me, I want you Dalia, you don’t know how badly. That’s why it’s important we don’t rush it.”

We stomp back to the Fairmont with Ryan still supporting a half-a-hard-on, both of us grouchy from unfulfilled needs, but I know he has a point, and the last thing I want is to hurt him.

Chapter 38

The Ferrari made him happy. He decided to go for a drive in it, while I opted for a rest.

I hear a knock at my door. I get up to answer it. I'm dressed in street clothes from the walk, so I'm not concerned about my appearance. I ask who it is, but there is silence. The peephole is covered so I can't see who's outside. It has to be Ryan. I open the door and to my horror it's Adam!

He stands there staring at me, "Aren't you going to invite me in?" he asks darkly.

"How did you find out we are here" I ask startled to see him is an understatement. "Ryan's going to be back any minute! Did your father pay your bail?"

He pushes me aside, to come into the room "I paid my own bail, silly girl. You know it's all about money with the courts, don't you?"

He's dressed in a Hugo, he's clean cut, and smells of his favourite aftershave. He grabs me roughly by the nape of my neck and pulls my face to his, shoving his tongue into my mouth. He starts sucking hard on my tongue as I fight to push him away from me. He tears the clothing from my body with animalistic roughness, biting at my neck, ears, and breasts. He draws blood in some spots.

He rips his pants off in record time before pulling mine down and then shoves himself into my soft folds. I screamed for help whimpering, I keep screaming, this time I can hear myself and I struggle flailing my arms and legs. I can feel my body being squeezed and I'm shaking, "Open your eyes, open your eyes" keeps being screamed at me.

I forced myself to listen to the command and fight to separate my eyelids as the voice demands. I become aware of Ryan leaning over me, fighting to keep me still. It must have been another nightmare. I'm dripping of sweat. All I remember was Adam trying to rape me again. I cry with relief when I realize its Ryan holding me. My body is still shaking with the terror that hasn't subsided.

"You are broken," he observes. "Adam's truly destroyed you."

He stays with me in bed the majority of the day stroking and caressing me, trying to keep me comfortable. We only getting out of bed to eat. Ryan never leaves my side after that. Ryan is trying to save me from the damage Adam inflicted. It feels like just as I take one step forward with the trip, then I fall two steps back with a stupid nightmare.

We leave Alberta to spend precious time with our moms. It will be the last time Ryan ever sees his mom. He is stoic in his grief as it happens shortly after the trial begins. I attempt to be that shoulder for him I so desperately want to be, and I am.

Chapter 39

The morning of the trial, I dress in a navy blazer, a starched white blouse and a skirt that reaches my knees. The prosecutor informs me that the image I portray may impact the outcome of my trial.

Ryan, Hicks, Justin, and I hire a cab to the downtown courthouse. I'm nauseous from nerves. We have previously discussed televising the proceedings as part of our show. I plead with Justin and Ryan not to but no censoring wins and if I can help one person argument...

Our cab pulls up to a sixteen-story silver building in the middle of downtown Calgary. The car slows to a stop, and to my horror, we are greeted by paparazzi as I exit the car. I hold my head high, and wait for the others to join me before entering the courthouse, cameras and shutters are going off all around us.

"Are you going to testify, Dalia?"

"Can you give us a statement?"

"Is it true you were sleeping with Adam McBride?"

"Are you back with your ex now?"

"Have you had sex since the rape?"

"Are you pregnant?"

"Who's baby is it?"

It is a relentless barrage of questions from every angle. The last one was really jumping the gun.

Ryan speaks up for us, like he always does, "Sorry, we're going to be late. We'll make a statement after the trial. Thank you."

Flashes distract us, but a little opening does part for us so we can continue making our way up the stairs. We slip through the glass doors and go to security for direction to our assigned courtroom.

When we get to the courtroom the prosecutor pulls me away from Ryan and Justin, closing the half door separating us from the front section of the courtroom. The prosecutor offers me a chair next to his and whispers, “You will be sitting here for the duration of the trial. I’m going to put you up on the stand, so the courtroom has an inkling of the damage Adam’s caused.”

“I’d rather not,” I say firmly, but he obviously doesn’t care at this point what I want, it is what is in the best interest of the case he’s presenting.

I look back into Ryan’s eyes, which buoyed me with courage. He is sitting directly behind me as I whisper back to the prosecutor. My stomach is doing back flips knowing that any moment Adam is going to be walking into this courtroom. The trial is supposed to start momentarily.

The double doors burst open behind us and the sound of paparazzi chattering ricocheted into their courtroom. Adam stands in the entrance larger than life. His piercing gaze catches my attention immediately and holds it. All the progress I made, suddenly vanishes.

The chattering buzz and the sound of cameras eventually deadens as the courtroom doors begin to close. My heart is bursting through my chest. Adam passes by me holding me captive with his stare. I can feel Ryan’s eyes on me as well.

He stops at my table and mouths words to me that he thinks Ryan can’t see. “I’m so sorry.”

Ryan obviously sees him, because he stands up challenging Adam, “Fuck the hell off!”

He went to reach for him but Coach Hicks and the prosecutor struggle to hold him back.

The prosecutor is overtly pissed at Ryan, and he vehemently hissed, “Sit back down!”

The clerk comes into the courtroom at the worst possible time asking everyone to stand for the honourable Judge Winston. Once settled, he looks at all of us and responds, “Please, be seated.”

The prosecutor glances back at Ryan and seethes, “If you do that again, I’ll throw you out of here personally.”

The judge offered a reintroduction of sorts, and then asks the clerk to seat the jury. Twelve of Adam's apparent peers walk into the courtroom and take their perspective seats close to where I'm sitting. They all stare at me, making me feel as though I'm a specimen of some sort, on display.

The prosecutor's announce, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, we are here today to determine if Dalia Kennedy consented to being physically abused and having sexual intercourse with the defendant, Adam McBride. You will be listening to testimony, seeing videotaped evidence, and viewing pictures to help you determine the answer. I will like to forewarn you that the content is very disturbing and graphic. I also thank you for your time and objectivity."

The defence's opening, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I too would like to thank you for your service today. I am here to argue that Ms. Middleton intentionally upset Mr. McBride, which led to his uncharacteristically irrational behaviour."

"Before this event, he was a reputable man, contributing to his community in many ways. I will argue that Mr. Kennedy and Ms. Middleton's behaviour triggered a blind rage in which Mr. McBride was incapable of controlling at the time. Ms. Middleton additionally admitted to the police during their interview, that the sexual relations were consensual. Thank you."

Judge Winston nodded at the prosecutor. "Please call your first witness."

"If it's okay with the courts, I'd first like to show the tape and photo's depicting the harm Adam McBride did to Dalia Middleton."

The photographs of me were given to the jury to be passed around and then tacked onto a board for the courtroom to see. Next, the video is played facing the jurors with the sound on. It echoed through the court. Shocked, pale expressions plague the jurors' faces. I begin feeling sick to my stomach and spend the majority of time trying to keep my breakfast down and wiping away my tears.

The prosecutor's lip turns up. Indeed, he seems satisfied with the result. I'm traumatized at this point.

Adam is then called to the stand. He stands with pride and dignity, and he strolls to the stand to be sworn in. He describes himself as a fan, my employer, and fiancé.

The prosecutor said, "It sounds more like stalking," under his breath so the jury can hear.

The defence objects and it's sustained.

The prosecutor glares at him saying, "Stick to the evidence, strike that from the testimony." Then asks Adam if I initiated sex on the day in question. He is honest and said that I didn't. He admits to gagging me, and that I was trying to fight him off. He says that he hit me. It all seemed so black and white. The prosecutor then asks, "Did she deserve it?"

Adam pauses before answering, "No. she didn't."

The defence starts cross examining Adam, "Were you in love with Ms. Middleton?"

"Yes," he says without pause.

"Are you still in love with her?"

"Yes."

"Did she tell you she was in a relationship with Ryan Kennedy, her ex-husband?"

"No, she said that relationship was over, she was engaged to me."

"So you believed her?"

"Yes."

"Was she in love with you?"

"You have to ask her that question."

"What happened the night before you flew in to see her?"

"I saw her kiss Mr. Kennedy on one of the videotapes."

"Did Ms. Middleton know she was being videotaped?"

"Yes."

"And she still kissed him?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you flew in to see her?"

"Yes, among other reasons."

"How was she dressed when you found her?"

"She was naked in bed."

"Is that an anomaly worth mentioning? Did Ms. Middleton always sleep that way?"

“I don’t know, although I suspected she didn’t.”

“Did she admit to you that she slept with her ex-husband?”

“Yes, she did; she said that there wasn’t anything that could have kept her away from him.”

“Thank you, that will be all.”

“Would you like to call your next witness?” Judge Winston inquires.

The prosecutor looks at Dalia questioningly and she shrugs. “I’d like to call Dalia Middleton to the stand.” I drag my suddenly heavy body off the chair from where I was sitting and walk to the front of the courtroom where I’m sworn in.

“Please state your name and relationship to the accused.”

“Dalia Middleton. I was engaged to Mr. McBride and he was also my employer.”

“Did you consent to having sex with him on the day in question?”

“No, I did not.”

“Did you try to fight off his sexual advances?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Thank you. That’s all, your honour.”

The judge turns to the defence lawyer, “Would you like to cross examine?”

“Yes, your Honour.”

“Were you in love with Mr. McBride?”

I look over at Adam and then Ryan and I respond with heartfelt honesty, “Yes, I thought so, or at least I was enamoured.”

“Had you had intercourse with Mr. McBride on more than one occasion?”

“Yes,” I look at him for a few more seconds. Our eyes meet for a second time.

“Would you say that intercourse with Mr. McBride was unusually rough with him or more on the gentle side?”

“Rough,” I blush with humility.

“So we should assume, you like that?”

“Yes.”

“Did you like it this time?”

“No, I did not.”

“Did you tell Mr. McBride you slept with your ex-husband to make him angry with you?”

“No, he asked if I slept with Ryan.”

“Were you aware you were being videotaped?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have intercourse with Mr. Kennedy the night before you had intercourse with Mr. McBride knowing he could see the tapes at anytime?”

“No. I didn’t think Mr. McBride would see the videotape of Mr. Kennedy and myself.”

“But you knew the rooms were being recorded.”

“The lights were off,” I explain.

“Where the lights off when you were kissing Mr. Kennedy before intercourse that night?”

“No, they were not.”

“Did you want Mr. McBride to see you with Mr. Kennedy?”

“No, I did not.”

“Had Mr. McBride ever been violent towards you on any other occasion?”

“No, he hasn’t.” I look back at Ryan. He wears a somber expression, his eyes are dark and unreadable.

“Thank you, that will be all.”

The judge breaks up the oppressive tension in the courtroom. “Would you like to call your next witness?”

“I’d like to call Mr. Hicks to the stand.” Coach stands from his seat and walks to the stand where he is sworn in.

“Please state for the jury how you know Dalia Kennedy.”

“I was her former coach and now I’m her coworker.”

“Did you witness the attack on the day in question?”

“No, I did not.”

“Did you see her after the attack?”

“Yes.”

“How did she look?”

“Terrible, her face was swollen and bleeding, and she was terrified.”

“Was Mr. McBride present at the time?”

“No.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hicks. That will be all.”

The judge looked at the defence attorney and says, "You may cross examine if you wish." He gets up from his chair and paces in the front of the courtroom.

“What is your relationship with Mr. McBride?”

“He’s my employer.”

“Has he ever disrespected you, treated you rudely, or exhibited a propensity towards physical violence in any way?”

“No.”

“Have you ever seen him act in any of those ways to other people, or in particular Ms. Middleton?”

“No.”

“Thank you, you may step down.”

“Would you like to call your next witness?”

“The prosecution would like to call Officer Soares to the stand.”

The officer is sworn in.

“You interviewed Ms. Middleton immediately after she was sexually assaulted, is that correct?”

“Objection,” interjected the Defence. “It hasn’t been proven she was sexually assaulted versus consensual.”

The judge responds, “Sustained. Please rephrase the question.”

“After the 911 call, you went to the hospital to question the alleged victim, correct?”

“That’s correct.”

“Did Ms. Middleton say she consented to intercourse with Mr. McBride?”

“Yes, she did.” The entire courtroom with the exception of Ryan and those involved with the case, gasp.

“Did you believe her?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you believe her?”

“She seemed scared, like she was threatened or under duress.”

“Thank you, that will be all.”

The judge looks over at Adam's table. "Would the defence like to cross examine Officer Soares?"

"Yes, your Honour."

"Did you see Mr. McBride assault Ms. Middleton?"

"No, I did not."

"Did Ms. Middleton say the intercourse and events leading up to it were consensual?"

"Yes, she did."

"Did you decide to pursue the case at the time?"

"No, we did not."

"Thank you, Officer Soares, that will be all."

The judge looks at them. "Would the prosecution like to call their next witness?"

"Yes, your Honour, we would like to call the forensic expert to the stand who investigated this case." A strange looking man I have never seen before is sworn in. The prosecution paces in front of him.

"Please state your name and profession."

"My name is Henry Smith. I am a forensics expert."

"Was there any evidence of a struggle found in your investigation of this case?"

"Yes, there was."

"How so?"

"There were traces of skin and/or hair found under the victim's fingernails also slight tears and traces of ejaculate in the lining of the vagina. She also presented with slight bruising around both wrists and the back of her neck. Her eye was swollen shut and her cheek was swollen."

"Did the traces of skin and hair belong to Mr. McBride?"

"Yes, For the most part."

"Thank you, that will be all."

"Would the defence like to cross examine?"

"Yes, your honour."

"You said there was evidence of a struggle, is that correct?"

"Yes, I did."

“Could excessively passionate intercourse the way Ms. Middleton testified to engaging in, similar to sexual dominance, bring forth the same kind of evidence?”

He stops and thinks for a second. “I suppose it could.”

“You said the traces of skin and hair predominantly belonged to Mr. McBride, is that correct?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Were there other traces that didn’t belong to him?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, that will be all.”

The judge looks at the prosecution again. “Is there anymore witnesses you would like to call?”

“Yes, your Honour, the prosecution calls Dr. William Carson to the stand.” Dr. Carson gets sworn in. He smiles at me and I return his gesture.

“Did you interview Ms. Middleton after the assault?”

“Yes, I did a month or so later.”

“Can you please explain to the jury the meaning of 'formed,' Dr. Carson?”

“When people are kept in hospital involuntarily because they are considered a danger to themselves or others.”

“How would you describe Ms. Kennedy’s frame of mind during your interviews?”

“She was clearly disturbed.”

“Thank you, Dr. Carson. The prosecution rests, your Honour.”

“Would the defence like to cross examine?”

“No, your Honour.”

“Okay then, we’ll take an hour lunch and reconvene at 1:30.”

The clerk stands up. “All rise,” and the judge leaves the room.

Coach Hicks insightfully walks straight over to Ryan and pulls him from the courtroom before he can get to Adam or me. The prosecutor looks in my direction and says, “Your testimony really weakened our case.” He is visibly angry. “I’ll see you back here in an hour.”

“Then you shouldn’t have put me on the stand,” I spit.

Chapter 40

I left the courtroom to freshen up, and then wander the halls aimlessly stretching my legs. I just round a corner when I literally bumped into Adam. “Dal!” he whispers, “Don’t be scared, I’m need to talk to you, can we go somewhere? Please?”

“No!”

“I believed everything you said to me and when I found out what you did I was unhinged. Please, let me make it up to you. Don’t destroy what we have over one incident that I swear will never happen again.”

“We have nothing. There’s no going back.”

“You don’t mean it,” he says solemnly. “I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

I hear Ryan’s steps before I see him coming in our direction, “So what do we have here? Is he threatening you?” Ryan sneers.

“I’ll tell you later” I tell Ryan.

“Now,” he insists. “Why the fuck are you talking to him? Don’t you remember why you’re here and what he put you through? How much more of this shit are you willing to take?” Ryan berates.

I look at Ryan, “He was apologizing.”

“You’re still with him?” Adam questions.

Coach Hicks watches as the two men converse with one another, while Justin is filming us. Hicks looks at his watch and says, “Its time to go back.” The clerk stands and says, “The Honourable Judge Winston presiding. Please rise.” Everyone stands until the judge sits down and motions that we can sit, too.

Judge Winston speaks, “Would the defence like to call its first witness?”

“Yes, your Honour, we would like to call Ryan Kennedy to the stand.” Ryan is sworn in.

“Please state your relationship to the accused.”

“Employer.” He is glaring daggers at Adam.

“Were you aware that your actions at the Village could be taped at any time?”

“Yes.”

“Were you in a relationship with Ms. Middleton when you were at the Village?”

“No, not officially but I was actively pursuing her.”

“Were you aware she was dating Mr. McBride?”

“Yes.”

“Did you kiss Ms. Middleton the night before she was assaulted?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have intercourse with Ms. Middleton the night before Mr. McBride arrived?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, that will be all.”

The judge looks over at the prosecutor. "Would you like to cross examine?"

"I'll pass," he says.

Judge Winston glances at Ryan, “You may step down. Is there anyone else you would like to call?”

“No, your Honour, the defence rests. I would like to submit as evidence articles written about Mr. Adam McBride and what he has done for his community. He's been a tremendous financial contributor. I would additionally like to submit written letters of character references from Mr. Adam McBride's family and friends.”

The clerk takes all the defence lawyer's evidence for the jury to review when deliberating. Judge Winston announces that court would reconvene at 8:00 tomorrow morning. We head back to the Village in the white limousine. Nobody speaks in the car, and when we get out, we all go our separate ways. I thought Hicks and Justin were afraid to say anything and Ryan was simply too angry to speak.

The next morning Judge Winston says, "Let's continue with closing arguments. Prosecutor."

The prosecutor stands up next to me before the judge can utter his full name. He starts pacing, making eye contact with each of the jurors. "Ms. Middleton did not consent to having her cheek almost broken, being given a black eye, and forced to have sexual relations, including oral. You can clearly see her struggling, trying to get away from the defendant on tape. He gags her, for God's sake!

"What she did before all of this heinousness took place is completely irrelevant. No woman asks for this kind of brutality, causes it nor deserves it. Ladies and gentlemen, you may have daughters, wives, granddaughters, nieces, sisters, think of any one of them when you render your verdict. Men even as reputable as Mr. McBride need to know this behaviour is not acceptable. You give a voice to any female who has been or will be brutalized. Thank you."

"Defence:"

Defence paces and looks at the jurors for dramatic effect. "Ms. Middleton and Mr. McBride were in a relationship at the time of this unfortunate incident. Ms. Middleton clearly admitted she was unfaithful to Mr. McBride and it was evident she suffered no remorse over her indiscretion. She was also aware she could be videotaped at any time and she still continued to carry on with Mr. Kennedy thereby provoking my client's anger in this single, isolated incident."

"I agree that no woman ever asks for that kind of brutality and forced sex, but Ms. Middleton is no martyr for meek and mute women. No, she clearly pushed Mr. McBride's buttons until he had no other choice than to act uncharacteristically. I would also like to remind the jury, that under oath in the police interview, she said that relations on the day in question between Mr. McBride and Ms. Middleton were of a consensual nature.

"My client is exceedingly remorseful for what he did, but putting him in jail will not benefit society as much as putting him to work in our community. Let him do his penance on the outside, should he be found guilty, that is. Thank you."

After instructions are given, Judge Winston dismisses the jurors to deliberate. Both sides sit outside the courtroom not uttering a word. It takes merely twenty minutes for a verdict to be reached.

The clerk ushers the people back to their seats and announces the arrival of the judge back to the courtroom. “The Honourable Judge Winston presides. Please stand.”

After he takes his seat, everyone sits down. Adam is asked to remain standing. The judge faces the jury. “Has a verdict been reached on the charge of sexual assault causing bodily harm, what say you?”

The jury spokesperson stands facing the court, “Guilty.” The judge makes a note in his ledger.

The jury spokesperson remains standing and adds, “The jury asks that the court consider extensive community service over jail time, as we all feel it is an isolated incident that he is truly remorseful for.”

Judge Winston looks like he was considering what we said. “I will take that under advisement in regard to sentencing.”

Judge Winston leaves the courtroom to deliberate. When he comes back he addresses the court. “I have considered all parties' requests. I will follow the jury's advice and sentence Mr. McBride to one hundred and fifty hours of community service at the Red Cross in Toronto. Additionally, I am fining you two hundred thousand for the pain and suffering he's caused Ms. Middleton, which will be donated to women's shelters in her name across Calgary. Court is adjourned.”

The gavel slams down and the room is buzzing. Adam smiles but not victoriously like one would expect, it was more of relief. Justin shuts off the camera and we drive back to the Village in silence for the second day in a row.

Chapter 41

We arrive at the Village, Justin says, "I'd like to have drinks in the lounge after dinner, with only the coaches." We go our separate ways except for Ryan who follows me to the only camera-free room, which is mine.

"Explain," he orders.

"Explain what?"

"Your testimony, Dalia! What he said to you in the hallway!"

"I told the truth, for that I have nothing to be sorry for. In the hallway, he was telling me how sorry he was and that he loves me. He asked me not to throw in the towel over the one incident."

Ryan is enraged, "You shouldn't be giving him the time of day. Just standing there listening to him is sending mixed signals, or maybe I'm the one getting them." He starts backing away from me like I've slapped him.

"I will never forget what he did to me or go back to him, but there's a chance I might find it within myself to forgive him."

"You also violated me by watching the assault without my consent and I'm still trying to get over that too. Then you force me into the public eye when I can barely manage to cope with what's happening. You say if it can help someone else than its worth it but that doesn't explain you watching, doesn't explain you not getting my consent. Both of you have let me down time and time again."

"I pushed you to help you get strong."

"I'm not so sure all of your intentions were good or fair," I say suspiciously.

Ryan starts walking towards the door, "We're going to be late for the get-together in the lounge."

My vision is blurred with tears as I throw my belongings into my suitcase. I placed my bag near the door and leave to join the coaches. I even pack my skates, in case I don't want to come back.

I rinse my splotchy face and reapply makeup to hide any sign that I've been crying before going to the lounge where the coaches are meeting.

I text Adam:

Dalia: Adam?

Adam: Yes?

Dalia: I need 2 take a leave of absence. I can't B here any>.

Adam: Take all the time U need. It'll be paid.

Dalia: That's not necessary.

Adam: It's the least I can do. Your job will B waiting 4 U.

Dalia: Thank you.

Adam: Come back, Dalia, & please, forgive me.

Dalia: :-(Please don't contact me while I'm away.

Adam: Sure.

All the coaches are present in the lounge. I place my phone down on the table where I'm planning to sit and go to the bar to help myself to a glass of pre-poured wine. My phone vibrates on the table and from the corner of my eye, I see Ryan reach for it. His eyes look at the screen and then back up to me, "You're texting him?" he asks incredulously across the room, "He rapes you, and you text him?"

"Let's announce it on a p.a. no better yet, how about on national television?" I snatched the phone from his hand, "I requested a leave of absence if you must know, should we televise that too?"

All eyes land on me yet again, "I'm sorry, I was going to tell all of you. Ryan will be in charge while I'm gone."

Coach asks, "How long are you planing on taking?"

"I'm not sure. Adam said I could take all the time I need."

“Well, isn’t that lovely of him,” Ryan says hatefully

I storm out of the room. I hear Coach Hicks say, “Go after her,” faintly. He never does come after me. I return to my room to get my luggage and passport, and when I reached for it, I feel material instead. I gasp. My hand finds the light.

Standing before me is Adam.

“Don’t be scared. I have to see you before you leave.”

“What are you doing here? There’s camera’s they’ll see you here! Don’t touch me!”

“There’s no camera in this room,”

“Where are you going? To the airport? I’ll take you there, let me drive you to where you need to go, I just want a few minutes.”

“How do I know you’re not going to hurt me?”

“Because if anything happens to you, I’ll be the first person everyone suspects. Once they catch me they’ll send me to jail and throw away the key.”

“How do I know you aren’t going to kill me and then yourself?”

“That’s just stupid, I never understood why people do that.”

“Okay, I will let you take me to the airport. Lets just go,” I say impatiently.

We take the stairwell down to the garage where Adam's car is parked. Once seated, the car roars to life. He looks at me and asked, “Where to?”

“The airport, Adam.”

“Do you have a destination?”

“No fishing for information!”

“Sorry.”

His eye’s remain on the road while he drives, “Listen, I know I can say sorry a million times, and it will never be enough. Nothing I will ever do can fix this. I need you to know, Dalia, that I really, really love you and I want to spend my life giving you a happily ever after together.”

Chapter 42

Speechless, Adam drops me off at the airport as promised. He takes my bag from the trunk and heaves it onto the porter's dolly. "You pack heavy," he complains.

"My skates are in there."

"That explains it."

He pays the porter before offering me some of his money. I decline waiving it off, "Thanks for the lift."

"Thanks for hearing me out," he says walking away.

The porter follows me. The ticket counters are busy, so I picked the shortest line, and waited patiently. "I'll take the next flight out!"

The too ugly to be a flight attendant girl says, "Uh," as she pops her gum and stares at her screen, "that would be Istanbul. They are already boarding, so we have to hurry."

"Yeah, that won't work. What's the flight after that?"

"Jamaica."

"That is better. I'll take one ticket please."

"You have plenty of time to make that flight," she smiles pleasantly at me.

"Thanks."

I land at the Montego Bay airport, and I book myself into the Ritz (four-star resort) close to the airport and beach. I checked into a room a few floors from the top. My queen sized bed has a ceiling fan swirling over it. The walls are painted a powder yellow, and the curtains are cream chiffon. It is crazy early in the morning so I take a shower and turn on the television until I can go for breakfast by the pool.

I text Adam:

Dalia: Are you there?

Adam: Always.

Dalia: If U need 2 get a hold of me FOR WORK RELATED PURPOSES, leave messages with my mother.

Adam: Where R U?

Dalia: Bye.

I turned off my phone and closed my eyes to the children playing in the pool and the sounds of water splashing. I must have drifted off, because the chirping of my phone startles me.

Adam: Where R U staying? Which resort?

Dalia: Persistence will get U nowhere.

Adam: Please? I'm already on my way.

Dalia: No! Please No!

I returned to my room for a nap. I liked having nobody to answer to, this aspect of being single is a good one. I dine on my balcony when my phone chirps again!

Adam: Let me C U.

Dalia: Stop

Adam: Now, pls

Dalia: No, Where R U?

Adam: Here.

Dalia: No you're not!

Adam: Don't be scared, I just want you to forgive me.

Dalia: Pestering me isn't going to work. U.R. on probation

Adam: \$\$ talks, & I have loads.

Dalia: Sadly that's all you have.

Adam: Step onto U'r balcony.

I do what he says and scan the other balconies when I notice a figure of a man in the corner of my eye.

Dalia: Stalker!

Adam: Unlock your door. Promise I won't touch you.

Robotically, I waited for his knock. When I hear it, I leave the chain on and open the door a few inches, "How do I know you won't hurt me if I let you in?"

"You don't, but it's a packed hotel, and if you were to scream, I'm sure someone will come."

"Okay."

I close the door and slide the chain off before opening it to him. I placed my suitcase in-between the door and the doorjamb so that my voice will carry if I need help.

He looks saddened when he sees what I have to do to ensure my safety, "I can't believe its come to this."

"Neither do I, we were going to get married."

"If you want me to leave or if I do something you don't like, just tell me and I will go."

"Okay."

"Come here," he pets a spot on the bed beside him.

Timidly, I do.

The sliding door is open and the curtain is blowing in the breeze, Reggae music is playing in the background.

I don't know why I tell him but I do, "I'm pregnant Adam."

"What? Pardon?"

"I'm pregnant."

"By who?" He has the nerve to ask.

"Good question," I say morosely.

"When did you find out?"

"A few days ago."

"I'll arrange for an amniocentesis, so we can determine the paternity. What will you do if its mine?" he asked nervously.

“I haven’t got that far yet. More likely it’s Ryan’s because during rape, the body doesn’t apparently act properly and people don’t usually get pregnant from rape.”

“Do you think you’ll ever get passed what I’ve done?”

“I’m trying. Its hurt my self-image, my trust in everyone, I have anxiety, nightmares.” I tried remaining calm, but panic is starting to set in, “Adam, I think you better go, I feeling a panic attack coming on.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Just arrange for the amnio and leave some DNA on your way out.”

“Consider it done, will you tell me the results?”

“Sure, now go,” I beg.

He runs his hand through his hair yanking a few strands out for me. He places them on the desk and leaves my room the way I asked him to.

“I follow him to the door, locking it behind him.

Chapter 43

The Next Day

I lathered myself with suntan lotion and close my eyes to the morning sun. In my prone position I sense a shadow over my eyes and warm lips descending on mine feverishly. It startles me. My eyes flutter open, and to my surprise, they were met by Ryan's. I place my arms around his neck and kiss him back just as passionately; I have a burning desire that is becoming unrestrained.

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

He doesn't answer, he simply keeps kissing me. His fingers slip beneath my bathing suit and are met with wet excitement for him.

"Let's go to your room," he says. He takes my hand in his and leads me upstairs. He lifts me up onto the bed and then lays down on top of me.

"I'm going to make love to you now," he warns me.

I wrap my legs around him tightly and pulled his body closer to mine. I'm not scared. I'm excited with desire, euphoric.

A hand touches my shoulder and shakes it gently. I open my eyes to find a woman standing over me, asking if she can take the chair next to me. I am so frustrated realizing it was just a dream, "Sure," I say, reflecting on the fight I had with Ryan before I left Alberta.

Later That Same Day

As hard as I try, I can't bare waiting to see if Ryan is going to text or call me. I break down with a text:

Dalia: Missing U, Ryan.

I wait.

Ryan: Turn around.

My heart is in my throat. He is here, really, really here. I pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming. He is ripped like a body builder with lotion highlighting his powerful, physique. He stands a few feet from me.

"When did you get here? How did you find me? Adam followed me here. He's trying to get back with me, but I told him to leave."

"Your mother told me you are staying here," he said taking a chair on the other side of me.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," I confess. "I miss you." I wrap my arms around him and the scent of coconut oil overpowers me. "Have you forgiven me, are you still mad?"

"I need to know you're okay. Where's Adam?"

"I don't know, I asked him to leave here."

"Did you call him?"

"Mom told him where I was."

Ryan gets up and starts walking away from me.

"Where are you going?" I call out.

"To find out if he's still here." I get up and start chasing after him. He is walking quickly, but I manage to catch up. I stand next to him as he asks the front desk for Adam's room. He hasn't checked out yet, so I follow Ryan up to his room. Ryan pounds on his door and after a few seconds people in rooms down the hallway peek out to see what the disturbance is. When it seems like nothing is happening they all go back to their rooms. That's when Adam opens the door.

Ryan confronts Adam, "I'm going to claim her now," he brags. I was rather surprised by his candour. "This time, you can stay in the next room and listen."

Adam's eyes are dark and hateful. He punches Ryan in the jaw with feral force. Ryan pulls back to swing at Adam, but Adam blocks his efforts and counters with a jab to the stomach. Ryan isn't ready for it and buckles over, the wind knocked out of him. When he recovers, his fist makes contact with Adam's chin,

and this time, Adam staggers backwards. Ryan grabs my hand and pulls me to my room.

His face is bleeding from Adam's attack. I know his heart must be racing from the fight. I grab a towel from the bathroom and pat his face dry, then I kiss where it looks like it hurts.

"I really am here to claim you," he says softly. "Since I boarded in Calgary, I've done nothing but fantasized about having sex on the beach with you," he confesses.

He grabs two towels from the bathroom and leads me out of the hotel. We walk holding hands to the beach until he finds a spot that satisfies him.

He lays out the towels and motions for me to sit down, before he removes his top. His chest is broad and beautiful. I sit beside him and he gently kisses me while pushing my upper body back so I'm lying flat. His kisses are small, yet slow and tender. I can tell that the blows to his face are causing a great deal of pain, but he kisses me anyway.

"I want you naked," he says taking off my bathing suit and cloaking my body with his. His kisses become boldly arousing, intoxicating even as he fights the pain forcing his jaw wider. I cradled his face in my palms. His lips and tongue leave mine to tantalize my neck, getting that sensitive area right in the curve. I get goosebumps.

His fingers pinch my nipples hard, tugging at them, and causing me to cry out.

"I think you are ready 'Kitten,' pull off my shorts," he whispers in my ear. I pull them off and free his throbbing member. He is ready for me. His upper body resembled that of a cobra, his muscles wide, then narrowing off at the waist. I touch the contours of his upper body and don't stop until I get to the part that arouses me most.

He strokes my hair and says, "We can stop."

I eagerly take him into my mouth, wanting to please him. I make wild circular motions with my tongue, licking the tip and bringing him deeply into my mouth repeatedly. I spend most of my time at the tip. I can feel him in the back of my throat. His husky groans encouraging me to suck harder, faster, deeper. I'm throbbing for him.

“Your turn,” his fingers touch my sensitive skin that is already wet with arousal. He slides his fingers into me and then lets them slide down my leg, proving to me just how juicy wet I am for him. His tongue dances on my inner thigh and stops at my soft pink folds. He spreads me wide with his fingers and delves his tongue deep within me, until I’m pleading for him to take me, “Please!” I beg.

He stops everything and looks into my eyes. His body is dripping with sweat from the heat and friction of us, fully aroused. “I can’t hold back on you this time. I’ve waited too long,” he warns. Ryan eased himself into me and my hips and pelvis raise to accommodate him. I shudder with his rhythmic thrusts; I can tell he is trying to hold back so he won’t hurt me. Each stroke slightly harder and faster than the last.

The thrusting turns to a pounding sensation, his beastly body against mine, is making me crazy with lust. I feel like I can’t contain myself any longer. I look into his eyes and break down in tears of compassion squeezing his forearms and alerting him that I’m out of control. My body shakes violently from my orgasm as he releases inside of me.

Ryan pulls up his pants and then helped me with my bathing suit. We get up and go hand in hand to the water where we stood, neck deep, kissing, before we return to the resort for lunch.

“I want to be the last man you ever make love to.”

“You’re the only man I want to make love to,” I say pressing my lips to his.

“Don’t worry about the baby, I’m sure it’s ours,” he says casually. “We’ll raise it together.”

I stop dead in my tracks. “It could be Adams. If it is, I don’t even know if I want to keep it,” I admit.

I never thought I would be in a position similar to Sierra’s. It’s still hard for me to believe I am. Can I love the baby if it’s Adams? If it’s Ryan’s, will he be staying with me just because it was the right thing to do?

“We made love Ry, but I still don’t know where my head is at. Adam’s arranging for an amniocentesis to determine paternity.”

“You asked HIM to arrange that?”

“He offered.”

“I don’t know if I can carry Adam’s baby and then there’s me and you, we’re so unstable. What if you leave me again? There’s no question, I want it to be yours if I keep it, that I DO know.”

“We’ll find out, but no matter what, I know you’re going to keep the baby. You’ll do what’s right.” His eyes fill as his fingers slide into my panties, he begins kneading me with his thick fingers making me pant while he is kissing me. He brings me back to my room where he takes me again. This time he pumped me more vigorously, leaving me raw and sore.

Chapter 44

My body was betraying me, and I was starting to feel the first signs of pregnancy. I keep having to pee! I fly back to Toronto and have DNA tests done there while packing up my condo and eventually visiting dad's grave. I have my test results sent to Alberta.

My flight to Calgary fills my with joy. I'm ready to return. A huge smile befalls my face as I scan the morning sky that resembles what I think Heaven looks like. I don't tell anyone when I'm coming back. The only person who knows is Adam.

When I get to the airport I grab my luggage and hail a cab to go back to the Village. I calculate what time I think I will get there and realize that Ryan will be teaching at the rink. I drop my luggage off in my room and head straight there, assuring I'm not seen by anyone on the way.

I spot him immediately, teaching rink side. I sneak up from behind and reach up covering his eyes. "Guess who?"

Ryan turns around and literally throws me up in the air, before catching me and planting a huge kiss on my mouth. "Now, that's the kind of welcome I like!"

"When did you get back?"

"Just now!" I can't stop kissing him, and he can't stop kissing me. It's sweet.

Scott and Diane are genuinely excited to see me. Before I know it, everyone in the arena is coming over to greet me with hugs and kisses. I give a little impromptu speech explaining that I am feeling better, and I am planning to coach the remainder of the competitive season. The big ones are just around the corner.

Scott and Diane perform their new program and we get right back to work, like nothing happened. Hicks and Ryan groomed them well. Their original

awkwardness is transformed into grace and beauty. Their throws cover large areas of the ice, and their spins have elevated to competition standards. Their lifts are impressive and strong. I'm so proud of Ryan, I can cry, and I do cry. These damn pregnancy hormones are absolutely killing me! A commercial for dog food can make me cry these days, but that's another story.

When we finish at the rink, Ryan and I go out for food. We talk about my visit with dad, how I packed up the condo, and the amniocentesis. I reassure Ryan of my deep love for him.

For the next couple of weeks when I'm not going to the bathroom every ten minutes to pee, or being sick for no apparent reason, I breathe, eat, and sleep figure skating until the Olympics approaches. The competition is coming to the camp, and my skaters are excited.

When it comes time for Scott and Diane to compete, Ryan and I stand rink side like two bundles of nerves watching them as if they are our own kids.

"The kids" didn't let us down. They skate cleanly both times. When they landed a jump, the camera consistently pans to Ryan and me jumping up and down with excitement for our protégés. We are so proud! Their marks don't matter to us; they are perfect in our eyes. Scott and Diane truly become Canada's sweethearts. After they are done, they skate over to the kiss and cry where we are waiting for them to receive their marks.

Their scores are revealed and they win by a landslide. We kiss the couple with excitement as they are the ones to assist Ryan and I to another milestone in our lives: coaches of Olympic champions. I weep from happiness as those damn pregnancy hormones won't let up.

Epilogue

Global personnel were in a frenzy preparing for the live show of interviews after the Olympics. It's a no-holds-barred, two-hour episode of questions and answers.

The auditorium has low lighting, except for a spotlight on the couches, which made one perspire if you sat under it too long. The seats were filled with fans that had been watching the show from the beginning. Pictures of athletes and coaches created a dramatic backdrop. No one, except Justin, knew who or when we would be called up to the stage or which scenes from the year would be re-televised.

Justin did all the interviews personally. If circumstances were different, and Ryan and I hadn't become such a big part of the story, we probably would have been the ones to host. In the end, it didn't really matter.

Justin introduced all the skaters involved at the camp, and their faces appeared on the screen behind them as they walked on stage. He announced the big winners first off, since viewers would already know the Olympic results. A group picture was up on the screen and all the skaters faded out of the picture leaving only Scott and Diane's faces remaining.

They were jumping up and down with excitement hugging each other. All the other skaters appeared genuinely happy for them and they clustered around the happy couple hugging and congratulating them. Confetti and streamers were released from the ceiling throughout the studio and "We Are the Champions" played in the background. Canada's favourite pair had won the Olympics and our show.

The audience clapped and Justin shook the couple's hands as they took their seats. The stage grew dark where the rest of the skaters were standing and the ones

who would be appearing were brought back to the holding area. The rest took seats at the top of the theatre.

Justin said, "Let's have a recap of your journey, shall we?"

The lights dimmed and the cameras recorded Scott and Diane as they watched their progress over the past year. Clips included those when they were selected as a couple, Scott saying good-bye to Paris, Diane's dramatic makeover, and finally, their win at Worlds.

The lights came back on and Justin segued into his interview.

"Any regrets or resentment for not being able to compete as singles instead of a pair?"

Scott spoke up, "Not at all, Justin. It took some time for us to get used to the idea, but once we were, we focused on the task at hand."

Justin crossed his legs and turned to Diane. "You were quite strong during makeover time, as most women would have cried having their long locks chopped off! Do you recall what Scott whispered in your ear?"

Diane shrugged. "Of course, I do. He told me to close my eyes and be brave, it would all be worth it in the end."

"Was it?"

"Yes!"

Justin looked at the pairs team who were holding hands on the couch. "The two of you seem to get along rather well. Are you dating?"

Diane smiled. "Not currently, but Scott has truly become my best friend. With such intensive training, there's been little time to even think about relationships."

"Scott, are you and Paris still an item?"

Scott reddened. "I broke it off with Paris."

"Will you and Diane compete next year?"

Scott smiled at Diane. "We haven't decided."

Justin took two envelopes out of his pocket and said, "On behalf of the Association and Universal Television, we'd like to present you with two checks for fifty-thousand dollars each. Congratulations!"

There was a break, which I assumed was a cut to commercial. Scott and Diane remained seated. The lights came back on and soon after the show resumed.

“Scott and Diane, please welcome Paris back to the stage.” Nobody knew Paris was going to make an appearance. She must have been in a different holding room.

Paris came dressed in a beautiful purple, backless dress and five inch heels. Her hair was swept up in a blond bun. I was, in a word, stunning. She shook Justin’s hand and took a seat, “First, we would like to congratulate you for your second place finish. Bravo!”

Paris smiled at Justin. “Thank you.”

“So apart from Scott and Diane’s win in the pairs category, you are by rights the person who placed the highest overall above all the people who attended the camp.”

“I did,” she agreed.

“Were you angry when you were asked to leave the camp?”

“No, Justin, I think it made me more determined to work hard and prove that I didn’t need it to do well.”

“You definitely did prove that, Paris.”

“If they invite you again next year, would you be willing to go?”

“I’d be Honoured.” she smiled and looked at the audience.

“Are you dating?”

“No, not currently.”

“Are you still friends with Scott?”

“Absolutely not!” Justin nodded at her in understanding.

“Any resentment towards Diane?”

“No, it just made it easier for me to win my medal!” she flashed a winning smile.

He redirected, “I hope we see you next year at the camp! Thank you so much for coming as a guest on the show.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for having me.” Justin gave all three competitors hugs and then there was a break.

The show resumed with Justin in his chair and both couches vacant.

“I would like to call all the athletes back to the stage please. Please help me welcome them.” The audience clapped and everyone came back out.

Justin introduced them one by one starting with the men and going on to the women. He congratulated all of them and discussed how they placed and their individual programs. Justin then gave the audience a question and answer period. They would put their hands up and Justin walked around with a microphone.

The show was approximately half an hour in when the athletes were thanked and left the stage. Yet another commercial aired between takes.

Upon return, Justin introduced Sally, Miles, Coach Hicks, and Ryan.

“Sally, it looked for a short time like you had eyes for Ryan. Would you say that’s correct?”

Sally laughed. “Well, look at him! Any red-blooded female would have eyes for that man!” The audience clapped and whistled in response.

“When did you stop actively pursuing him?”

“Oh, Justin, must we go there? It was evident that Ryan only had eyes for Dalia, but I guess I would say I stopped after the attack.”

“Did you get along with Dalia?”

“Sure we did. I offered for her to stay in my room and helped her get away from the press when she needed to.”

“Are you seeing anyone now?”

“As a matter-of-fact, I’ve just been asked out on a date!”

“May we ask who the lucky guy is?”

“Sure, it’s Miles!” Everyone clapped. He was a very private man, so he blushed as a result.

Justin laughed. “No pressure, Miles!”

“I must comment,” Justin added, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you win an Emmy for your choreography!”

Sally grinned. “Thank you.”

Justin turned to Miles. “I guess I’ll congratulate you first on the date you’ve acquired!”

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Coach Hicks, would you say you are close to Ryan and Dalia?”

“Sure, I taught them when they were kids.”

“Is it true you were the first to find Dalia after the infamous attack?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do? How does one react to such violence?”

“I called 911 and helped the EMTs take her to the hospital.”

“How did she look?”

“Terrible, her face was swollen and bleeding. She couldn’t even open her one eye. It took three of us to get her into the ambulance. Understandably, she didn’t want to go to the hospital. She cowered in the corner of her room, afraid to move.”

“How did you get her to leave?”

“Sedation.”

“Have there been any more attacks?”

“Not of which I am aware.”

They cameras cut to another commercial. Justin spoke with Miles and Coach Hicks but their voices weren’t picked up.

The next segue dealt with coaching strategies. Justin looked at Miles and then back at Matt. “You guys were rough out there with the skaters!”

Hicks took the lead. “It gets results.”

“Did you have to reduce them to tears?”

Miles defended Hicks. “The kids are under significant amounts of pressure so they break down quite easily, but the skaters are used to it from the coaches.”

“Was there any one particular skater you were excited about more than the rest?”

Miles responded again, “No, they were all talented in their own ways. They all worked very hard, and we’re proud them.”

Hicks added, “Usually if we aren’t yelling at the kids then the parents are. I think it’s mostly that the arena is so large and you are trying to be heard over the music that’s playing in the background.”

Sandra jumped in. “Figure skating is an intense sport that requires a lot of hard work, discipline, and money. Parents in the skating world can’t be compared to the likes of parents in glamour competitions. That is a completely different ballgame.”

Justin argued, “If that were the case, why didn’t you allow the parents to stay at the Village with their kids?”

Sandra responded, “I had no say in the matter, but I would surmise the powers-that-be wanted significant control over the kids to ensure their success. They didn’t want any of our coaching undermined by the parents of the athletes, it intrudes on the coach-athlete relationship.”

Justin congratulated them on their fantastic tutelage that could be seen in the results of the competitors.

The show cut to another commercial, leaving an hour of taping. It was evident the next hour would be focused on the assault by the way the interviews were going. The box of Kleenex on the coffee table might as well have had my name on it, because nobody else was going to need it.

Justin introduced me for the next segment. He shook my hand and pointed to where he wanted me to sit, “Thanks, Dalia, for allowing me to interview you and letting me discuss what happened to you on such a public forum.”

I nodded hesitantly.

“What made you decide to go public after the attack?”

“I didn’t really. Ryan forced it. He thought it would help me and other victims who’ve been brutalized.”

“Did it?”

“It was hard. I would have to say, to a degree, yes.”

“Were you physically assaulted or sexually too?”

“Both.”

“Who attacked you?”

“Adam McBride,” people acted shocked although the news had already been broadcasted by the media.

“Let’s take a look at some clips I’ve collected.” The camera focused on me as I looked at images of Adam punching me in a darkened room, then in the boardroom after the attack when my face was swollen and bruised, and twice in the courtroom, once when I was talking to Adam and again when the jury was watching the videotaped evidence.

I started while it replayed, I grabbed a tissue to avoid having my mascara run down my face as I tried to pull myself together.

“It’s still hard?”

“Of course. It’s getting easier.”

“When you bumped into Mr. McBride in court, what did he say to you?”

“He said he was sorry. He said he cared about me so much that he couldn’t control his anger when he found out I was back with Ryan.”

“Have you forgiven him?”

“I’m trying.”

“Did it bother you he got off so easily?”

“Yes.”

“What was the reasoning for that?”

“The courts felt it was an isolated incident and that he would be of more use helping the community and contributing to charities rather than taxpayers supporting him in jail.”

“How have you been handling difficult situations since the attack?”

“Not well,” I looked down. “I’m still in counselling.”

“Has it helped?”

“To a certain degree, it’s hard to overcome.”

“Are you currently in a relationship?”

“I don’t know how to answer that. I’ve been trying to sort through my feelings, but I’ve been really messed up.”

“Is it true both men are actively pursuing you?”

“Yes.”

“I see that you’re pregnant!”

“Yes,” I answered. The audience collectively gasped and then clapped.

They cut to another commercial and when they returned, Justin introduced Ryan and gestured for him to sit next to me.

“Thanks for coming, Ryan.”

“It’s great to be here.”

“Let’s look at some clips with you and Dalia.”

The camera focused on Ryan as he watched tapes of us. All the clips were of us happy and together. I couldn’t stop from laughing.

Justin picked up on it, “What’s so funny, Dalia?”

“It’s not too obvious who you guys like me with!”

“Dalia, you can’t blame me for trying to influence your future decisions. I’ve worked with the two of you, I know what you have” Justin looked over at Ryan. “Honestly, are you still in love with her?”

“Most definitely.”

“Is that why you followed her to Jamaica?”

“No, my original reason was because I found out Adam followed her. I wanted to protect her.”

“Is it true you punched Adam on more than one occasion?”

“Wouldn’t you?” he countered.

“Is the baby yours?”

“In my heart, I want it to be but I don’t know, we haven’t gotten the test results back.”

Justin stood up and said, “Adam, come on out!” The audience booed at the sight of him. Justin gestured for him to take a seat on the empty couch after shaking his hand.

“Thanks for being here.”

Adam nodded.

“Go ahead, Adam, the floor is yours.”

“I was in what I thought was an exclusive relationship with Dalia, and when I found out she still had feelings for Ryan, her ex-husband, it unleashed a jealousy I didn’t even know I was capable of.”

“Do you still feel this jealousy?”

“Yes. I hate him.”

“The feeling’s mutual, asshole!” Ryan hissed. The audience gasped.

“Are you still in love with Dalia?”

Adam looked into my eyes. “Yes, I am. I want to marry her and be a father to her baby.”

“Does Ryan know how you feel?”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“How did Dalia respond to that?”

“She didn’t.”

Justin turned to me, “Do you still have feelings for Adam?”

“Yes, I do, but they aren’t good ones. I understand he was angry and couldn’t control his rage. He’s repeatedly told me how sorry he is for doing what he did and said he would spend the rest of his life making it up to me if I let him, but I’m terrified of his capabilities, since the attack.”

“Ryan?”

“Ryan is an amazing man. He held my hand and led me out of some of the darkest moments in my life. As you know, we have a history. I love him, he’s supportive, handsome, and truly amazing.”

“Did you and Adam plan to go to Jamaica together?”

“No, he followed me there, attempting to win me back.”

“Was he successful?”

“Somewhat, he did win a small level of trust back. I know deep down, that he won’t attack me again. By the end of the trip, I knew I could never go back.”

“So can you tell us what happened in Jamaica?”

“Ryan found me.”

“How so?”

“My mother told him where I was and he came.”

“What happened then?”

“The men argued and fought, then Ryan and I renewed our love.”

Justin announced another cut to a commercial. We remained seated until the taping restarted. Justin stood to introduce a courier on the stage. He had my paternity test results in a sealed envelope. He gave them to Justin, who, in turn, handed them to me. “Here are the results of your paternity test taken in Toronto.”

“In all honesty, who do you want to be the father?” Justin asked.

“Ryan,” Dalia answered.

“Is everyone curious to find out who the father is?”

The audience went crazy, screaming “yeah” and clapping. I handed Ryan the envelope and stared into his eyes. I couldn’t be the one to open it. He looked back at me and asked, “Are you sure you want me to open it here right now?”

“Here and now.”

Everyone faded into the background; the cameras were gone, so he kissed me. We were the only two on the planet. He spoke to me as though I was the only one listening, “You know I don’t care who the father is. I love you no matter what.

I will provide for you and be a loving father, because that baby, no matter who it belongs to, is a part of you. When Adam broke your spirit, I loved your pieces until you became whole again. I truly felt everything come together when I saw the life in your eyes at the Olympics.”

“You captivated my heart when I first met you, and I would go through everything, including the pain I felt when you were attacked or the jealousy I felt hearing you were back with him if it meant spending every minute of the rest of my life with you.”

Ryan got down on one knee and pulled a box from his back pocket. He opened it and he asked without hesitation, “Dalia, will you be my wife ... again?”

“Yes,” I cried. “Yes!” I fell to my knees and was met with the warmest embrace of my life. I could feel my dad’s approval and spirit through Ryan’s warm hug. I was crying openly now. I said, “I’m still in love with you, sweetheart. Nobody can ever take that from us.”

We composed ourselves, taking our places on the couch again, finally remembering where we were. I handed the envelope back to Justin, “You read it.”

Justin stared at me as he ran his finger along the edge of the envelope, opening it. The crowd was silent with anticipation, “The paternity test results taken for Dalia Middleton on February 14th, 2013 were inconclusive, Adam McBride IS NOT THE FATHER.”

The audience went crazy whooping with excitement. We couldn’t hear ourselves think. Ryan’s lips were smothering me. The studio went dark, and then the credits started rolling. A preview of next years season came on immediately after.

The end.

Meadow Murphy

MURPHY MEADOW

Murphy Meadow is proudly a Canadian Author with a passion for romance and writing to readers who still believe there is love out there, in its purest form.

Mother of two, she is happily married and works as a nurse, for which she is also very passionate about.



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