

Chapter 1: The Rusty Nail

Ivy POV

Three jobs. That is what it required to maintain a roof over my head and to ensure that my cupboard contained something other than expired ramen. Library shifts before class; filing paperwork nobody read at the campus office in the afternoons; and bartending, the loudest, sweatiest, and most chaotic of the three, at The Rusty Nail on a Friday night. Most nights blurred together, but tonight was worse than usual. Some local team had won their game, and half the bar had spilled in behind them, riding the high of the win like they'd scored the goals themselves. The noise was relentless, a steady roar that pressed in on my eardrums. I hadn't even caught which sport. Didn't matter. Drunk was drunk, and drunk tipped either generously or not at all, with nothing in between.

Sweat prickled at my temples as I wove between tables, a tray of empties balanced on one hip, my other hand occupied with wiping down the sticky, battered bar. If I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine I was somewhere else, anywhere else. Every hour felt like a day, and I was already counting down to the moment I could fall face-first into my mattress and not move for the next decade.

Somewhere between pouring a whiskey neat and breaking up an argument about darts, I caught it.

A smell.

The scent was rich and warm, reminiscent of cedarwood and rain, and, hell, I couldn't even find the right word for it. It cut clean through the reek of spilled beer, cheap cologne, and too many bodies packed too close together, and it snagged something in my chest that had no business being snagged by a smell in a dive bar on a Friday night. It was out of place, almost magical. For a second, I wondered if I was hallucinating from exhaustion.

I glanced around, half expecting a candle, an air freshener, or some other logical source. Nothing. Just the same churning crowd, the same neon signs buzzing over the register, and the same chaos. The bartender next to me didn't react, and the regulars nursed their drinks with glazed eyes, nobody else seemed to notice.

Weird. I filed it away, shoving the curiosity down, and kept moving. No time to be distracted by phantom candles when I had a full tray and an empty patience reserve.

The first hand landed on my ass somewhere around my fourth trip past the corner booth.

I didn't even flinch. Years of foster homes and worse bars had trained that reaction clean out of me. Instead, I set the tray down slowly and gripped the guy's wrist so hard I felt his pulse fluttering beneath my thumb. His stupid grin faltered, his mouth halfway to some kind of comeback.

"Touch me again," I said, low and flat, "and it won't be my hand you're dealing with. It'll be your teeth. On the floor."

He laughed it off, the way drunk men always did, like my warning was just another part of the entertainment. I didn't wait around for a comeback. I picked my tray back up and kept moving, because the bar didn't stop just because some guy's ego needed managing. But beneath the surface, anger simmered, with a dull, familiar ache in my chest.

The smell caught me again on my next pass. Stronger, somehow. Closer. It was almost comforting, threading through the stink and noise like a lifeline. I scanned the room

without meaning to, like my body had decided this was suddenly a priority worth pursuing over, you know, my actual job. Faces blurred together: red-faced fans, couples pressed close, old-timers hunched over their drinks. No one looked out of place.

I didn't get the chance to chase it.

The same guy, the second time around, grabbed my wrist and yanked me hard enough that my tray went sideways and two beers hit the floor instead of a table. The crash of glass echoed, drawing a few half-hearted cheers from the corner. He pulled me toward his lap like I was a party favor. My stomach dropped, adrenaline spiking hot and fast, but my body remembered what to do before my brain caught up: I twisted my wrist against his thumb, the weakest point of his grip, and wrenched free clean.

His buddies laughed. Called me feisty. Nobody moved to help. The bar owner, watching from across the room like always, did what he did best: absolutely nothing. I could feel his eyes on me, calculating, waiting for a reason to dock my pay.

I braced both hands on the bar for half a second, catching my breath, telling myself I had this handled. I did have this handled. I just didn't know how many more rounds of "handled" I had left in me tonight. My hands were shaking, just a little. I flexed my fingers and forced them to be steady.

That's when the smell hit hardest, a wave of it, warm and rich and impossibly close, like it was standing right behind me. I turned, chasing it on instinct...

And I didn't get the chance to locate the source, because the same drunk idiot lunged a third time, actually managing to get an arm around my waist and haul me backward against him.

I didn't even have time to elbow him.

One second he had me; the next he didn't. He was hauled off me and slammed face-first into the nearest table hard enough to crack the wood. Glasses shattered. Someone screamed. I stumbled back, catching myself on the bar, staring at the man who'd just materialized out of nowhere like some kind of avenging idiot.

He was... Oh my word, he was something. Broad shoulders straining his shirt, dark hair, a jaw made for gritting through exactly this kind of moment, and when he turned his head slightly, I caught a flash of ice-blue eyes that didn't look like they belonged to someone who fought bar drunks for fun.

And the smell. It was him. It had been him the entire night.

I didn't have time to process that revelation, because chaos hadn't finished with us yet.

The drunk's friends surged up from their booth, some idiot posturing about who exactly he thought he was, and it might've turned into a real brawl if the stranger hadn't rounded on them with a look that made all three of them sit back down without another word.

Tables overturned. A chair went down. Someone's drink exploded against the wall. By the time the bouncer finally decided to earn his paycheck, the drunk and his friends were being hauled toward the door, sputtering about knowing the owner, about how they were VIPs, about how this wasn't over.

The owner, of course, didn't even glance at the man who'd started it. He rounded on me instead, his face red, veins doing something concerning at his temple.

"You're paying for every single thing broken tonight," he snapped, gesturing at the wreckage like I'd personally thrown the chairs myself. "Every glass. Every table. All of it."

I opened my mouth to argue that I hadn't broken a damn thing, that I'd been the one assaulted three separate times while he stood there doing absolutely nothing. And then I did the math on what "everything broken" might actually cost, and the words died somewhere in my throat.

Chapter 2: The Human Girl

Alex POV

"That shot in the third period? Unreal, man." Milo clapped me on the shoulder so hard my teeth rattled. I grinned, letting the warmth of his praise soak in, even as I tried to play it cool. "You're gonna get scouted before the season's even over."

That was Milo, always making it sound easy, as if any of us would be so lucky. As we pushed through the door of The Rusty Nail, the noise from the bar hit us like a wall, thick with laughter, music, and the sticky-sweet smell of spilled beer. Half the team was packed in behind us, flushed from the win and already halfway through the first round of drinks. There was chanting my name this time, and for just a moment, I let it wash over me. I let myself believe I was just Alex, the guy who scored the last goal, not the son of an Alpha, not the heir, not the wolf who could never quite fit into his own skin.

I tried to hold onto that feeling as we jostled our way to our usual table, Milo's hand still heavy on my shoulder. For a few hours, I could just be a college guy surrounded by sweat and noise, the future and the past held at bay by the simple magic of a team win. That's when I smelled it.

At first, it was barely there, like a memory, like moonlight after rain, moss and earth, and something wilder underneath. It was so out of place in the Rusty Nail, so clean and sharp, that for a moment I thought I was imagining it. But then it hit me full force, threading through the stink of old beer and fried food, and my wolf, the part of me I usually kept leashed so tight, sat up inside me, alert and electric.

"Mate."

The word slammed through my skull. Everything else faded: Milo's voice, the music, the aftershocks of the game. I blinked, trying to focus, feeling like the ground had tilted under my feet. Milo didn't notice; he was already waving at someone across the room, shouting for a round of shots. My teammates swept me along, crowding into the booth, everyone talking at once, replaying the game and laughing at the way I'd nearly tripped over my own skates after that final shot.

But I wasn't really there. I was already searching for her.

My gaze swept the bar, skipping past the regulars, the couples pressed close in the booths, the bartenders hustling behind the counter. My heart hammered. I didn't even know what I was looking for, not until I saw her.

She was small, her hair chopped short and dyed black with streaks of blue that glowed under the neon. She moved fast, weaving through the chaos with a tray balanced on her hip, dodging outstretched hands and spilled drinks with the ease of someone who'd been doing it forever. There was a set to her shoulders, a squared jaw, that made it clear she was exhausted but stubborn. She'd stand upright even if the roof caved in.

Human. Completely, unmistakably human. I could tell by the way she flinched at nothing, the way she kept her distance, the invisible walls she built around herself. No wolf would carry themselves like that, all sharp edges and silent, simmering strength. And yet, the scent was hers.

I watched as she passed a corner booth and some guy reached out, grabbing her wrist like he owned her. Something hard and ugly twisted in my chest, a possessive, furious urge to break his hand right there. I was half out of my seat before I realized what I was doing, already bracing to step in.

But she didn't need it. She didn't even blink. In one smooth move, she twisted out of his grip and glared, her voice so flat and cold I could almost hear it from across the room. The guy laughed, the way drunk guys always do when they're embarrassed, but he let go.

I sat back, breath leaving my lungs in a rush. Relief. Frustration. Admiration. My wolf wanted to bare his teeth, but all I could do was watch.

Milo slid into the booth next to me, his phone buzzing. He glanced at the screen, frowned, and excused himself. The table felt weirdly empty without him, and for a moment, I just stared at the bar, watching her work. She moved like she had too much to do and not enough time. I watched her wiping down the bar, refilling drinks, and dodging another drunk who slurred something in her direction.

I wondered what it was like for her working here every night, dealing with this crowd, holding her own against the constant tide of idiots and creeps. I wondered what she'd do if she knew a wolf was watching her.

Milo came back, looking even more tense. "Your father called," he said. His voice was low, but I could hear the warning in it.

"Why do you torture yourself answering?" I barely looked at him, unable to drag my eyes away from the bar.

He gave a tired shrug. "Someone has to."

"I told you a hundred times, I'm not going back..." My voice was sharp, and this time, I tore my gaze away from her, searching his face.

"Well, you might not have a choice," he said, choosing his words carefully.

My stomach clenched. "Why? Did someone die?" I tried to sound flippant, but it came out too flat.

He shook his head. "No. Uh..." He hesitated, glancing at the table, then up at me. "Your engagement is..."

I didn't even let him finish. I was on my feet, anger snapping through me like a whip. I moved before I thought. I crossed the room in three long strides, just as the guy from the corner booth reached for her again, except this time, he grabbed her waist, pulling her toward him. I didn't see red. I saw nothing but the way her eyes widened, the way her tray clattered to the floor, the way she looked for a second like she was bracing for something worse.

I got there before she had to handle it alone. Before I knew what I was doing, the bottle was in my hand, and then it shattered against the guy's skull, sending glass, beer, and blood spraying onto the table. The bar exploded. Chairs went flying. Someone screamed; maybe it was her, maybe it was someone else. I didn't know.

His friends jumped up, fists clenched, but I turned and met their eyes, and the wolf in me was right there on the surface, daring them. They backed down. Milo was at my side, breathing hard, eyes wide.

"Okay," he said quietly, "that's one way to change the subject."

I barely heard him. All I could see was her. She was standing behind the bar, breathing hard, eyes fixed on me like she wasn't sure if I was her hero or a bigger threat.

I wanted to say something. I wanted to apologize, to explain, and to ask her about the blue in her hair, about the tired set of her shoulders, and about why she smelled like a miracle. But my throat closed up, and all I could do was stand there, waiting for her to say something, anything.

The bar was a mess. The owner was shouting. People were staring. But all I could think about was that I wasn't leaving until I found out her name and found some excuse to see her again, to figure out why the universe had decided to throw us together in the middle of all this chaos.

For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be, no matter how much trouble was waiting for me outside.

Chapter 3: The IOU

Ivy POV

There was no way I'd be able to pay that. Not now, maybe not ever. I stared at the number the owner had thrown out, no written bill, just a wild guess, zeros tacked on for emphasis while he ranted at me in front of everyone. My hands were shaking, and I hated that he could see it.

Damn it. I'd had it handled. Three separate times, I'd kept my cool, gotten free, and made sure nobody else had to get involved. Now I was the one staring down a bill that looked like it could cover a semester of tuition and still leave enough leftover for rent and groceries. All because some guy with more muscle than sense thought smashing a table was a good way to defend my honor. Or his ego. Or whatever.

I tried to hold onto the anger, but it kept slipping. Maybe it was just how tired I was. Or maybe it was because, for one wild second, I'd actually felt... safe, when he'd stepped in. Stupid.

Bloody hell. He was gorgeous, too. I caught myself thinking it even as the owner kept shouting, the words sliding in sideways, unwanted. He was tall, broad-shouldered, hair a little too long and falling across ice-blue eyes that had barely left me since the chaos died down. There was a kind of quiet in the way he stood, hands in his jacket pockets, watching me like I was something important. I tried not to stare, but my gaze snagged on his mouth, it was soft-looking, too soft for the sharp angles of his jaw. Completely unfair.

And that smell. Still in the air, stronger than ever up close, and the part of me that knew better than to daydream in bars was suddenly daydreaming anyway.

"Get it together, Ivy," I mumbled to myself. "You just got handed a bill for a crime you didn't commit. Now is not the time to notice anyone's lips or wonder what their cologne is called."

"I'll pay," he said.

His voice was low, rough around the edges, and it did something to me, something embarrassing and soft and absolutely not allowed. I forced myself to focus on the facts.

"You?" The owner's head snapped up, all that fake authority draining out of him in a blink. For one second, he was just a guy realizing he'd been shouting at the wrong person. "Oh... no problem, Al—Alex."

I frowned. The owner had been ready to rip me to pieces, and now he was practically offering Alex a free round. The switch was instant, like Alex carried a get-out-of-trouble card in his back pocket. I crossed my arms, mostly to stop myself from noticing how good he smelled up close.

"You don't have to do that," I said. "I'm not a charity case."

"Didn't say you were." He smiled just a little. I could see he'd expected exactly that response. "Wouldn't expect anything less."

"You don't even know me."

He grinned wider. "Working on it."

I blinked, thrown off. He said it so casually, like there was no universe where we didn't end up knowing each other after tonight. I tried to remember how to breathe.

"I don't need you swooping in and fixing my problems," I said, fighting to get the conversation back under control. "I had it handled."

"You did," he said, and I could tell he meant it. "Doesn't mean you should have to."

I didn't have an answer for that. I wanted to argue, but the words got stuck somewhere behind my pride and my exhaustion.

"Fine," I said. "Then consider it a loan. I'll pay you back."

"With interest," he replied, almost before I'd finished. He looked so sure, like he'd already decided how this was going to go.

I bristled. "Excuse me?"

"I don't do favors. I do deals." He tilted his head, studying me in a way that made my skin feel too warm. "Lucky for you, I need an assistant."

I stared. "A what?"

"An assistant. You work off the debt. This option is faster than waiting tables here for the next decade and involves fewer drunks grabbing at you.

"I already have three jobs," I said, more out of habit than hope. "I don't need a fourth."

He shrugged, like it was obvious. "You could quit this one."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why would I quit? The tips are great." Which was a lie, but he didn't need to know that.

For a second, a flicker of something crossed his face—regret, or maybe just surprise that I'd push back. "I'll pay you more. Double your tips. No—triple."

"What's the catch?"

He shrugged again, casual as ever. "No catch. It's a win-win. You get out of this place, I get an assistant, and—"

"Can I think about it?" I cut him off, needing a minute to get my feet back under me. My world was spinning, and not just because of the bill or the adrenaline.

"You can," he said, eyes never leaving mine. "But you'll still owe me. Working for me just means paying it off faster. Fewer hours. Less exhaustion. Your call."

The logic was solid, which just made me more suspicious. He was too calm about it all. Too patient, too...sure.

Before I could answer, he half-turned, raising a hand, signaling someone across the room. A second later, Milo, the same guy from earlier, the one who'd been at Alex's side all night, jogged over, breathless.

"Milo," Alex said, not missing a beat, "tell her about the job."

Milo blinked. "What job?"

Alex turned to him, and for a moment he stilled while he gave this Milo guy a look that said, "Just play along."

I blinked, shaking off the weirdness.

Milo gave Alex a long-suffering look, then turned to me with a smile that looked like it hurt. "Right. The job. You'd be...assisting. With things."

"Things? What kind of things?" I raised a challenging eyebrow at them.

"Things like smoothies," Milo nervously said.

"Smoothies," I echoed, deadpan.

"And lunch. Alex needs lunch," Milo added, nodding. "Packing his lunch. It's a very important job. Underappreciated, honestly."

I looked between the two of them—Alex, too self-assured; Milo, clearly making it up as he went along. The whole thing was ridiculous, and yet, for some reason, I found myself wanting to know what exactly I'd be getting into.

Maybe I was just that desperate for a way out. Or maybe, for once, I wanted to see what happened if I said yes.

Chapter 4: Agree to Not Agree

Ivy POV

"Why the hell did I agree to this again?" I muttered to myself, stopping in front of a student house just outside campus. It was fairly quiet out here, but I could hear movement inside and voices, the clatter of something metal, and someone laughing too loud. My nerves did a little dance in my stomach, like they knew something I didn't.

The door opened before I even found the courage to knock.

"Ah, good, you're here," Alex said, stepping back to let me in. "I was wondering if you'd be on time."

"I'm never late," I said, probably too defensively for eight in the morning. My words snapped out, sharper than necessary, and I knew it, but whatever... mornings weren't my specialty, and neither was being questioned.

He just stared at me blankly for a beat, like he wasn't sure whether to argue. "Right," he said finally, opening the door wider. "Come on in. Milo was just about to start on the smoothies."

I rolled my eyes at him. If my job now entailed making smoothies for triple the wage I was making at the bar, who was I to complain? The thought alone made me want to laugh, or maybe scream, but I settled for clamping my jaw shut and following him inside. The inside of the house was nothing like I expected. Nothing, and I mean nothing, was out of place. Not a stray shoe, not a jacket slung over a chair, not so much as a dish in the sink. Every surface gleamed like they kept an invisible housekeeper on retainer. The air itself even smelled faintly of lemon, like someone had gone a little too hard with the cleaning spray. I almost checked my shoes for dirt, just in case I was about to ruin the illusion.

That made me nervous. Was I walking into the world's tidiest lion's den? Was this guy a neat freak? A murderer? In my experience, murderers were disturbingly clean people. I'd seen the documentaries. I could practically hear that one true crime podcast narrator in my head: "She never suspected a thing, not until it was too late."

Yeah, well. I was suspecting everything.

"How many of you live here?" I asked, trying to sound casual and definitely not like I was mentally mapping exits. Eyes drifting to the narrow hallway, the shiny stairs, the closed doors. Easy enough to bolt if things got weird.

"Eight others. Excluding Milo and me."

Ten guys. Living together. Not a single crumb on the counter. Either they were some kind of cult, or I'd stumbled into an alternate universe where twenty-year-old guys actually knew what a vacuum was for. In all my years bouncing through foster placements and shared houses, I'd never once met guys this age capable of this level of cleanliness. It defied the laws of nature. I could almost hear my foster mom cackling in disbelief.

Alex steered me toward the kitchen, where Milo already had an arsenal of protein powders lined up on the counter like he was prepping for battle. Seriously, there were more tubs and scoops than at the supplement aisle at the gym.

"Ah, just on time." Milo grinned at me, entirely too pleased with himself for someone about to explain a job he'd invented on the spot less than twelve hours ago. "Smoothie duty. This is where the magic happens."

"The magic," I repeated flatly. My voice could have curdled milk.

"Big magic." He held up a scoop of something chalky and beige. "Alex needs six hundred grams of protein a day, minimum. It's a whole process."

"Six hundred grams," he said, and I looked between the two of them. "Are you training for the Olympics or recovering from surgery?" Sarcasm was my superpower, and right now I needed it.

"Hockey," Alex said, like that explained everything.

"Right, hockey." I picked up one of the containers and read the label with deep suspicion, mostly to have something to do with my hands that wasn't gesturing wildly at how insane this entire morning felt. "And you couldn't make this yourself because...?"

"Time management," Alex said smoothly.

"He's terrible at delegating regular tasks to himself," Milo added, earning a sharp look from Alex that he completely ignored. "It's a whole thing. Anyway... banana, protein, almond milk, ice. Blend. Repeat approximately four times a day. You'll get the hang of it."

"Four times a—" I stopped myself, pinching the bridge of my nose. "You know what, fine. Whatever. It's still better money than dodging drunks at the bar."

"See?" Alex said, far too satisfied with himself. "Win-win." Like this was some big victory, like employing me as his personal smoothie minion made him a genius.

I shot him a look that I hoped conveyed exactly how unconvinced I still was by this entire arrangement, then turned my attention to the blender like it might explain itself to me. The blender, for the record, looked like it cost more than my last three grocery runs combined.

I'd barely gotten the lid off the protein powder when the kitchen door swung open and two more guys wandered in, shirtless, mid-conversation about something that sounded suspiciously like last night's game. Both of them stopped dead the second they saw me, eyes flicking to Alex with an expression I couldn't quite place: surprise, maybe? Or something closer to disbelief?

"Uh," one of them said. "Alex. You brought a girl. Into the kitchen. Before noon."

"She's my assistant," Alex said, in a tone that dared either of them to comment further.

The two of them exchanged a look loaded with more meaning than I could translate, then both burst out laughing like he'd just told the funniest joke either of them had heard all year.

"Assistant," the second one repeated, wiping an actual tear from his eye. "Right. Sure. That's what we're calling it."

I glanced at Alex, who looked like he was seriously reconsidering every decision that had led him to this exact moment, jaw tight, ignoring both of them with the practiced patience of a man who'd clearly dealt with this exact brand of nonsense before. I almost felt bad for him. Almost.

"Ignore them," he said to me. "They're idiots."

"We're hilarious," the first one corrected, still grinning as he grabbed an apple from a bowl on the counter and sauntered back out, his friend trailing after him, still laughing.

I stood there, blender in hand, protein powder dust settling over the counter, and had exactly zero clue what I'd just walked into, only that whatever this "assistant" job actually was, it clearly meant something very different to everyone in this house than it did to me. If this was the start of some new chapter in my life, it was one hell of a weird opening paragraph. But, hell, at least it wasn't boring.

Chapter 5: Practice

Ivy POV

"Why did I agree to this?" I muttered, hugging my jacket tighter as I followed Milo through a set of double doors that led into a wall of freezing air. The cold hit me like a slap, seeping straight through denim and resolve. Goosebumps everywhere. I could already tell my fingers would go numb before this was over.

The rink stretched out in front of me, all white ice and looming boards, and it hit differently than watching hockey on some bar TV with the sound muted. This was loud. This was violent, even before anyone had started playing. Every scrape of skate and echo of laughter ricocheted around the cavernous space, chipping away at any idea that this would be a chill morning.

"You said that about the smoothies too," Milo said cheerfully. "And the house. And, if I remember correctly, when you first saw the protein powder."

"I stand by all of it." My voice was sharp, but my teeth were chattering. This place was a refrigerator with better lighting.

A few of the guys were already out on the ice, and the second they spotted me trailing in behind Milo, someone let out a whistle. "Careful, don't lose her under the bench," one of them called. "She's not even the height of a stick."

"I can hear you," I called back, which only made a few of them laugh harder. Whatever. Let them try me. I've survived worse than a bunch of oversized ice nerds.

I found a spot at the boards, arms crossed, trying to look like I belonged somewhere I very clearly didn't. I'd never watched a hockey game in my life, let alone stood rinkside while a pack of overgrown, overconfident boys threw themselves at each other for fun. Within the first two minutes of the practice match starting, someone got checked into the boards hard enough that the entire structure shuddered under my hands. My heart did a weird little jump, and I debated the odds of surviving the rest of the hour without permanent psychological damage.

"Is that... is that normal?" I asked, wincing as another body slammed into the glass a few feet down from me.

"That's Tuesday," Milo said, watching the chaos with the mild interest of someone checking the weather. His breath fogged in the air, totally unbothered.

Someone lost a tooth by the second period — I actually saw it skitter across the ice, followed by a spray of blood that stained a bright, alarming red against the white. I made a small, horrified noise. The guy who'd lost it just spat, grinned with the gap, and skated back into the play like it was nothing.

"Should someone look at that?" I asked, my voice a little higher than I meant it to come out.

"He's fine," Milo said, unbothered. "They heal fast. They're—"

He stopped.

I turned to look at him properly. "They're what?"

"Nothing." Too quick. He kept his eyes on the ice, jaw tight in a way that didn't match the easy tone he'd had a second ago.

"You said something. 'They heal fast, they're...' They're what, Milo?"

"Tough," he said, way too late to sound convincing. "I meant tough."

I narrowed my eyes at him, filing the moment away even as I let it go, mostly because a body slammed into the boards close enough that I flinched backward instead of

pressing the question. When I glanced back at Milo, he'd already plastered his easy grin back on, watching the play like nothing had happened at all.

Something about the way he'd caught himself sat wrong in my chest, small and nagging, like an itch I couldn't quite reach. My instincts rarely failed me, and right now, they were humming like live wires.

Out on the ice, Alex broke away from the pack with the puck, and even I, someone who'd learned the rules of hockey exactly forty minutes ago, could tell he was good. He was fast and controlled, weaving through bodies twice his size like they were standing still. He scored, and the guys on his side erupted, banging their sticks against the ice in some kind of ritual applause. The sound was thunderous and primal. I almost cheered but caught myself.

He skated a lazy circle afterward, and his eyes met mine at the boards before I could pretend I hadn't been watching. He didn't smile, not exactly, but something in his expression shifted, and my stupid traitor heart reacted like he'd done something far more impressive than put a rubber disc in a net. My cheeks burned. I hated it.

"He's showing off," Milo said, following my gaze, smug all over again like the weird moment from before had never happened. "For you, obviously."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, definitely not blushing, definitely not watching Alex skate back into position with his shoulders a little straighter than before.

Milo just laughed, and I let the moment slide, telling myself I'd imagined the whole "they heal fast..." thing entirely.

By the time practice finally ended, I was a total wreck. It had been barbaric, and they called it only a practice. My nerves felt like I'd run a marathon in heels, and my breath kept coming out in little clouds, ragged from the cold and the adrenaline.

"Don't you skate?" I asked Milo as we headed toward the locker rooms, my legs grateful to be moving somewhere warmer.

"I do," Milo said, and something flickered in his eyes.

"Why aren't you practicing then?"

He glanced up and smirked. "I'm on timeout."

I frowned. "Timeout?"

"Coach prefers the term benched. I prefer temporarily underappreciated."

"What did you do?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "The other team had a mouthy winger."

"And?"

"He doesn't anymore."

I stared at him, waiting for more context that clearly wasn't coming. "That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I am giving you for now." He pushed open the locker room door, holding it for me with an exaggerated little bow. "Some things are better left to the imagination."

"That's deeply unsettling."

"I get that a lot."

I was still trying to decide whether Milo was joking or quietly one of the most dangerous people I'd ever met when Alex emerged from the tunnel, hair damp, jersey slung over

one shoulder, looking entirely too pleased with himself for someone who'd just spent an hour getting slammed into boards for fun.

"Well?" he said, stopping in front of me. "First impressions?"

"You're all insane," I said. "Certifiably. All of you."

Something like pride flickered across his face, like that was exactly the answer he'd been hoping for. "You'll get used to it."

"I don't think I want to." I meant it, but it came out lighter than I'd intended, almost teasing.

"You will," Milo said cheerfully, already halfway down the hall. "Give it a week. She'll be diagnosing everyone's injuries like a pro by then."

I opened my mouth to argue, then thought better of it, mostly because some small, traitorous part of me suspected he might actually be right. And as much as I hated to admit it, the thought didn't feel half as bad as it should.