

MT

Where You Lead

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*This is fiction.*

*But Sophie? Oakley?*

*They're real.*

*They just go by a different name.*

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*for the ones who stayed, even when it hurt.  
and for the ones who never stopped choosing love—again, and  
again, and again.*



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# 1

## Sophia

There's something about the art studio on campus that feels like breathing. Not the shallow kind I do when I'm anxious or trying not to cry—*real* breathing. The kind that fills your chest, stretches your lungs, makes space where everything else in life feels like it's pressing in too tight. Like finally, finally there's room to just *be*.

It's my favorite place on campus—not because it's quiet, because it's not. The windows are tall and cracked open at the top, letting in the late afternoon sun and a breeze that smells like dust and fall leaves, so there's always the hum of wind or footsteps outside. The pipes rattle sometimes. But it's mine. It smells like turpentine, old coffee, and dried paint. There are streaks of color on the floor from people who were here long before me, and something about that makes me feel *less alone*.

My headphones are in. A playlist I've listened to a hundred times plays softly in my ears—one of the old ones I made years ago and barely ever update, because somehow the songs still feel like me.

I sit cross-legged in front of my canvas, strands of blond hair

falling across my face, sleeves of my hoodie pushed up, jeans already streaked with smudges of blue, sienna, and violet. My knee's bouncing again. I didn't notice until my brush flicked the wrong way.

I pause. Lean back. Tilt my head.

"Still not right," I murmur under my breath.

The canvas stares back at me like it's daring me to keep going. I sigh, wipe the back of my hand across my forehead, and reach for a thinner brush. Something lighter. Gentler. I dip it into a pale yellow and paint another petal, slower this time—more careful, more hopeful.

Then I sit back again. Wait. Watch.

I want it to feel different now. I want something in me to exhale and whisper, *yes, this is it.*

But it doesn't.

The canvas stays quiet. Still. Unmoved.

The flower is technically fine. The shape is there. The shadows make sense. The colors... work. But it doesn't *feel*. No emotion. No ache. No softness. Just paint and brushstrokes and a vague sense of failure.

I've been staring at it for 15 minutes, trying to figure out what it's missing, and all I've come up with is... *everything*.

It's wrong. Off. Like it doesn't belong to me at all. Like it belongs in the hands of someone who knows what they're doing. Someone who can make colors speak. Someone who doesn't have to second-guess every line.

I sigh and reach for a thinner brush. Switch to a lighter yellow. Try again.

It still doesn't feel right.

The door creaks behind me, and I lower my headphones to rest around my neck.



“Yo,” Theo says as he walks in, like he’s announcing himself to keep from startling anyone.

Theo. Med student, caffeine addict, sleep-deprived angel who takes care of everyone except himself.

He walks in holding two iced coffees, dressed like someone who got ready in the dark and hasn’t slept in days. His lanyard is half-stuffed into his hoodie pocket, and his med school ID peeks out just enough to remind us all he’s smarter than the rest of us. His light hair falls messily over his forehead, softening the exhaustion on his face.

He hands one of the coffees to Maya—without looking, without speaking—and drops his bag beside her chair like it’s heavier than usual.

Maya’s already sketching. She walks in drawing, always. My best friend since freshman year. Quiet, steady, emotionally intuitive in a way that feels like gravity.

She crouches beside me and scans my painting with her usual two-second assessment that always feels more accurate than anything I could see myself.

“You’re overcompensating,” she says softly. “Too many warm tones on the left.”

I let out a breath. “You’re always right and I kind of hate it.”

She smiles a little. “You love it.”

Then I feel it.

The shift.

It’s not dramatic. It’s not even loud. But the air changes—like the room *knows* he’s here.

Oakley.

He leans in the doorway like he’s part of the architecture. His hoodie is half-zipped. His brown hair is a disaster—sleep-tousled, wind-swept, somehow perfect in the most chaotic way.

He's smiling, just barely. But his dimples are showing so I know it's real.

He doesn't say hi.

He never does.

He just walks over like it's the most natural thing in the world. Because it is.

"That flower looks like it gave up halfway through," he says, crouching beside me.

I smirk. "So... you."

"Wow," he mutters, placing a hand over his chest like I shot him. "That flower wishes it had my charm."

"You cried during a Disney movie last week."

He shrugs. "It was *Big Hero 6*. Baymax almost died."

"You cry every time."

"It's called emotional maturity, Soph."

And just like that, the ache in my chest softens.

He glances down at my hands and his smile fades into a small frown—so subtle no one else would see it, but I do. There's dried paint on my fingers, smeared across my knuckles, caught in the lines of my palms. I didn't even notice.

But he does. Of course he does.

Oakley always notices the little things. The way my leg bounces when I'm overwhelmed. The way I twirl a strand of hair when I'm lost in thought. The way I stare too long at unfinished paintings like they've personally disappointed me.

He doesn't say anything. Just reaches into his hoodie pocket and pulls out a pack of wet wipes like he knew I'd need them.

He takes my right hand, gentle and quiet, and starts wiping away the paint.

Then the left.

His touch is soft. Familiar. Like it's just another thing he does

for me—like it doesn't mean anything.

Except it always does.

He's always touching me. Always anchored to me somehow. A hand on my waist when we're walking. His pinky looped through mine when we're sitting on the curb. His fingers brushing the back of my neck when I'm cold. It's not loud. Not performative. Just quiet, constant contact. Like I'm the place he always returns to, even when he doesn't know he's left.

The soft part of his world he doesn't have to earn.

The one that stays even when the rest of it gets loud.

And around us, the studio keeps buzzing.

Sienna bursts through the door like a storm in boots. "If one more guy tries to *critique* my sculpture while staring down my shirt, I will personally superglue his eyelids shut and sculpt that for my final."

She drops her bag, kicks off her shoes, and climbs onto a stool like she's claiming territory. Her dark curls bounce with every movement.

Asher follows right behind her and tosses a paper bag—fries, I think—at her head. "You're welcome, dumbass."

She catches it without blinking. "I could kiss you."

"You say that every time and then threaten to burn my apartment down."

"Balance, Ash. Keeps you humble."

They're chaos and combustion—Sienna with her fire, Asher with his smirk.

Jamie arrives last, of course. Hood up, camera slung around his neck, skateboard tucked under one arm—same as always. He doesn't speak. Just pulls out his lens cloth, wipes the glass like the world goes blurry if he doesn't keep it in focus. Then lifts the camera and snaps a photo of Asher and Sienna mid-argue.

“That one’s going on the wall,” he mutters with a smile, then sits cross-legged on the table and starts sanding the underside of his board like the rest of the world doesn’t exist.

Theo leans toward Maya. “That’s new,” he says, nodding to her sketchbook.

“You inspired it,” she replies, not looking up. “You look like you haven’t slept.”

He brushes a wavy strand of her brown hair back and takes a long sip of his coffee. “I haven’t.”

I smile to myself, letting their voices fill the space like background music. It’s loud, sure. But not the kind of loud that overwhelms. It’s layered—safe. Familiar.

I glance at my canvas again.

Still not right.

But this?

This feels like breathing again.

## Oakley

Her hands are still in mine.

I should probably let go.

But I don't.

Not yet.

Not when they're soft and warm and *so fucking safe*, not when she hasn't pulled away either. Not when it's the one thing grounding me more than I realized.

I'm still holding a crumpled wet wipe in my left hand, and my fingers have stopped moving, but I haven't said anything. I'm just... here. Sitting on the floor of the art room, holding Sophia's hands like it's normal.

Because I guess, for us, it is.

It's stupid how familiar this is. Not in a bad way. Just... this is what we do. We orbit each other without trying. She paints and forgets her body needs rest. I sit close enough to catch the moment when her breath gets too tight. She frowns at her canvas like it insulted her. I hand her something—water, a bite to eat, a hair tie, a paintbrush, a wipe—anything. Before she even asks.

We move like this all the time. Like it's been rehearsed.

But it hasn't.

And right now, she's wearing my hoodie again.

*Hers is still sitting in my dorm—paint-stained and folded across my desk, from last week when she spilled ochre all over it and gave up halfway through cleaning it.*

She never asked for mine. Just pulled it on like it belonged to her. Like it always did.

The sleeves are too long on her arms, the collar stretched from being tugged on and off during long studio days. She's always cold, but she never says it.

So I just start bringing hoodies on purpose.

The others are buzzing around now, loud and restless in the way only our group can be. Sienna's arguing with Asher over something ridiculous—probably the fries, probably nothing. Jamie's wiping his camera lens like it personally offended him. Theo's halfway into a rant about coffee ratios and brain function, and Maya's sketching in the middle of it all like peace is still an option.

It's chaos. But it's ours.

The light outside is soft now—low and gold and fading. I can feel the shift in the air. That quiet stretch of time before evening hits. Everything's slowing down except my head.

I love these people. I really do.

Even when they're too much.

*Especially then.*

But even when they're all here—loud, messy, and real—*she's* still the one I find first.

Not because I mean to. It just happens.

It's like some part of me checks for her before anything else. Like a habit. Like breathing.

Sienna laughs too loud at something Asher says, and it echoes weird against the concrete wall. It's not sharp. Not even aggressive. But it cuts through the moment just enough to make something *stir* beneath my ribs.

My leg starts bouncing again.

Not on purpose. Not from nerves this time—just too much energy and nowhere to put it.

My fingers move to the string of my hoodie—*her* hoodie, actually. Tugging tighter. Loosening. Tugging again. It's stupid. Small. But I feel it. That shift. That ache. That *thing* I can't name pressing against my chest.

It doesn't take much these days. One flicker of memory, one wrong kind of noise, one beat of silence that lasts too long. And suddenly it's all under my skin again—like I never really learned how to carry it.

And she notices.

Of course she notices.

She *always* does.

She doesn't ask if I'm okay. Doesn't tilt her head or give me that worried look that makes me want to lie and say I'm fine. She just... reaches.

She lets go of my hand and gently reaches for the back of my neck, like it's instinct.

Like it's always been hers.

Her thumb brushes beneath my hairline—slow, steady.

*Comfort in motion.*

Right over where our tattoos are.

The semicolon and heart.

Seventeen. Ink still fresh. Breath still shaky. Hope still fragile.

We said it was for the pain we didn't talk about.

But it was always more than that.

The semicolon meant we weren't finished.  
Not with life.  
Not with each other.  
Hers—for her mother.  
For the grief she still doesn't have words for.  
For how we would never end.  
Mine—for... everything.  
The nights I didn't want to keep going.  
The mornings I did anyway.  
The fact that somehow, we're still here. Still breathing. Still trying.  
And the heart?  
That was hers.  
That was mine.  
The part that kept beating when everything else didn't.  
It meant stay.  
It meant survive.  
It meant she's not letting go.  
It means I'm not letting go—not of this life, not of her, not of the kind of love that keeps choosing you even when it hurts.  
The back of my throat tightens, but not in a bad way. Just the kind that comes when something matters *more than you can say*.  
I exhale slowly.  
She doesn't speak. Doesn't look at me.  
She just keeps her hand there—fingers tangled in the short hair at my nape, thumb moving in slow, lazy circles. Still sketching with her other hand. Still painting petals. Still half-focused.  
But somehow—*fully here*.  
And just like that, I stop fidgeting.  
Just like that, I can *breathe* again.



"Can you all not be feral for one night?" Theo mutters, rubbing his eyes like he regrets every friend decision he's ever made.

"You chose us," Asher shrugs. "This is your fault, man."

"I was tricked," Theo says flatly. "You all had cute baby faces and trauma. I didn't stand a chance."

Sienna launches a wad of paper towels across the room—it unravels mid-air like a tragic little flag.

Theo doesn't flinch. Just raises an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

Maya laughs softly, still sketching.

And next to me, Sophia chuckles under her breath—low and warm. It slips out against my shoulder as her thumb keeps brushing the back of my neck, calm as ever.

I don't say anything.

But I smile. Quiet.

And maybe a little selfishly.

Because even with the noise, even with the mess—*her hand never leaves.*

"You love us and you know it," Sienna grins.

"I tolerate you out of guilt and habit," Theo deadpans.

Jamie lifts his camera. "Say that again. Slower. For the album."

"You're not even photographing the art," Maya says.

"I am," Jamie shrugs. "You guys are the art. Look at you. Chaos. A masterpiece."

"I'm gonna chaos-punch you," Asher mutters.

Sienna grabs a fry from his bag. "Too slow, Ashy."

"Touch my food again and I'll tell that guy from bio you cried during that sea turtle documentary."

"HE WAS STUCK."

Theo groans. "I'm gonna start charging you assholes for

emotional labor.”

Everyone laughs. Loud. Overlapping. *Ours*.

They’re still going—Asher playing with Sienna’s curls, Jamie filming, Maya smiling quietly.

But I don’t say anything.

I don’t even try to join in.

Because her hand is still on the back of my neck.

Still right there.

Like it’s meant to be.

Like it *always* is.

I don’t think she even realizes what she’s doing.

It’s not loud.

Not dramatic.

Not even intentional.

But it’s *everything*.

### 3

## Oakley

I left, but it didn't feel like leaving.

Not really.

Not when her hand was still warm on the back of my neck.

Not when I could still feel the gentle circles she traced with her thumb—soft and slow, like she didn't want to let go.

Like she never wanted to.

Now I'm on the edge of my bed.

Elbows on my knees.

My fingers are curled tight into each other—nails pressing into palms, like if I just hold still enough, I won't fall apart.

The dorm is quiet except for the faint hum of Jamie's music through the wall and Theo's footsteps in the kitchen.

It's always just the three of us here—me, Theo, and Jamie.

Asher still lives with his family ten minutes away, close enough that he never needed a dorm. He likes it that way—close to his siblings, his mom, that little messy house he's always trying to fix up.

Theo's family's farther. I think that's why he clings to this place the way he does. Why he always has one foot in

responsibility and the other in our chaos.

And Jamie... Jamie's always just *been here*. Steady, quiet, a little outside the noise but never really gone. I think he likes having people around. He never says it, but he always drifts into whatever room we're in.

It's not late. Not really.

But the silence feels heavier at this hour. Like it knows things. Like it's waiting for me to crack.

I shift forward slightly.

Try to breathe.

Try not to feel how empty the room is without her in it.

And then—

**slam.**

A door in the hallway—too fast, too loud, too sharp.

Before I can stop myself, my back hits the corner wall.

I don't think.

I just... fold.

My body moves on its own until I'm curled into the farthest edge of the bed, knees tucked in tight, chest locked up.

"No no no no no—"

It slips out before I even know it's there.

Small. Cracked. Barely a whisper.

But it's meant.

My heart slams against my ribs like it's trying to outrun something—like it remembers every scream, every slammed door, every time he looked at me like I wasn't worth the noise I made.

I don't even know what I'm bracing for anymore.

It's just reflex.

A sharp, ugly reflex that never really went away.

My fingers dig into my sleeves, pulling the fabric so tight I

think it might tear.

My breath shakes. My chest folds in on itself like it's trying to protect something already broken.

I know exactly where I am.

But it doesn't feel like now.

My jaw locks. My eyes squeeze shut.

Like if I shut the world out hard enough, maybe the past won't get back in.

But it always does.

All I can hear is noise.

All I can feel is that god-awful silence that came *after*.

When no one came looking.

When I had to teach myself how to disappear inside a house that didn't want me.

My body remembers.

It curls up tighter, back pressed into the wall.

The kind of posture that says *please don't yell this time*.

The kind that learned early how to take up less space.

I breathe out—slow, shaky.

Shake my hands once. Then again.

I learned young that noise makes things worse.

That boys who cry get broken faster.

That flinching only makes you easier to hit.

So I stopped flinching out loud.

But inside?

I never stopped.

I try to ground myself.

Five things I can see. Four I can touch—

That trick Sophia taught me, years ago.

The one where she sat across from me, pressed my palm to her chest, whispered:

*“Just try, Oak. Just breathe.”*

And I do.

Barely.

My breath shudders out like it’s relearning softness.

Because maybe I’ve always known—

She’d be the one to undo me.

Not in the way that shatters.

In the way that saves.

And once I knew what it felt like to have her—*really* have her—  
there was no going back.

No living without it.

Without her.

And I think that’s what scares me the most.

Because if I mess this up—

if I need her too much,

if I ask her to hold pieces of me she was never meant to carry,

if she looks at me and decides I’m too much—

I don’t think I’d survive that kind of silence again.

Because she’s not just comfort.

She’s not just home.

She’s the reason I stayed.

The reason I still do.

I don’t think I’d know how to start over.

Not again.

Not this time.

And I’m so tired of pretending I would.

*Fuck.*

I miss her.

I miss her.

God, I miss her.

And I saw her a few hours ago.

That's not normal.

That's not healthy.

But it feels like breathing to me.

Because I've been missing her since we were kids.

Even when she was right next to me.

Even when she was laughing into my shoulder, tracing circles on my skin like I wouldn't fall apart beneath her hands.

To the nights she stayed on the phone when I couldn't sleep.

To the mornings she looked at me like I was worth loving.

To the space she carved out in me where nothing bad could reach.

And if I ever lose that—

If I ever lose *her*—

I don't think I'd survive it.

Not from that.

Not from her.

My fingers find the raised edges of our tattoo again—  
semicolon, heart.

It's not small. Not forgettable.

It's there. Always. Like her.

She said it was for the pain we didn't talk about.

But that was never the whole truth.

She told me we'd never be finished.

That this life doesn't get to end when it still has people who need us.

That she'd stay.

And God, I need her to keep meaning that.

Because this? This ink?

It's the part of her that never leaves me.

The version that stayed on the days I couldn't.

It's proof.

That she saw me.  
That she stayed anyway.  
It's the only softness I've never had to apologize for.  
I press my fingers to it.  
Breathe through the tightness in my throat.  
The door creaks.  
Not sharp like the last one—just soft. Careful.  
I don't jump this time.  
But I look up as Theo passes with a mug in hand.  
Hair flopped, glasses sliding down his nose.  
He pauses in the doorway. Eyes soften when he sees me in the corner.  
He doesn't say anything at first.  
Just waits.  
Like he knows I haven't come back into my body yet.  
"You good?" he asks quietly.  
I nod.  
He doesn't buy it.  
"You flinched again," he says, softer now.  
"I'm fine."  
I try to make it sound real. I even unclench my shoulders.  
He doesn't argue.  
Just holds up the mug.  
"I made tea. It's probably shit. But I didn't want coffee."  
"Since when do you drink tea?" I ask.  
He shrugs. "Since today. It was that or scream into a pillow."  
I huff a quiet laugh.  
He takes it as a win. Steps into the room, leans against the frame.  
"Jamie's editing photos on the couch," he says. "Pretending not to hear everything."



"He's always listening."

"Yep." Theo sips his tea. Winces. "Still tastes like regret and cardboard."

He watches me for a long second. Then:

"You know sitting in the dark doesn't count as processing emotions, right?"

"I thought that was your thing."

Theo exhales like he's carrying all of us. Because he is.

He stays a moment longer than necessary.

"You know you can talk to me," he says. "You don't have to say the heavy shit. Just... anything."

"I know."

He starts to leave, but pauses again.

"You deserve soft things, too, Oak. Even if you don't know what to do with them."

A beat.

"Ten minutes. Or I'm dragging your ass out myself."

"You always do," I whisper.

He disappears down the hall. Then:

"Make sure you eat something, yeah?"

"You sound like Sophia."

"She texted me." He doesn't miss a beat. "Said, and I quote: *'Tell him I'm not above using threats of physical affection to make him eat.'*"

That gets a real laugh out of me. Quiet. But real.

I glance over at my desk.

My extra hoodie's still there—folded and untouched.

Not hers. Not the one she's wearing now.

But still warm. Still mine.

And right now, maybe that's enough.

I pull it into my lap.

Not because it fixes anything.  
Just because it makes the cold a little quieter.  
The hallway settles.  
Theo didn't close my door all the way. He never does. Just  
leaves it cracked—like he's still here.  
Jamie walks past. Light from the hall shifts.  
He pauses. Doesn't knock. Just stands there.  
Two soft taps against the doorframe—like a question.  
I tap the wall beside me.  
Once. Quiet.  
*I'm here.*  
And maybe I'm not okay.  
But I'm here.  
I stay still. Let the silence settle.  
Let myself feel that she's not touching me anymore.  
That I miss her in the kind of way that dulls the world.  
I tilt my head back.  
She was still touching me when I left.  
Her thumb in my hair. Her laugh tucked against my shoulder.  
Like it belonged there.  
Like I did.  
I let out a long, steady breath.  
It doesn't fix anything.  
But it reminds me I'm still here.  
And then I get up.  
Because I know I'll see her tomorrow.  
Because Theo made shitty tea.  
Because Jamie's probably waiting with ten silent observations  
he'll never say out loud.  
But mostly—  
Because I still carry tonight like it means something.

Because it does.

Because *she* does.

## 4

### Sophia

I'm at the house tonight.

Not the dorm with Maya and Sienna and the chaos we call home—just the real one. The one I grew up in.

My room still looks the same. Too neat. Too quiet. Like it's waiting for someone who isn't coming back.

I don't stay here often. But sometimes, I do. Sometimes I need it.

And I always bring the hoodie with me. The playlist. The sketchbook. The softness I built somewhere else. I let it fill the corners this room forgot how to hold.

The house is quiet.

Too quiet.

My tea's gone cold on the nightstand, and my sketchbook is open in my lap, but I haven't touched it in nearly an hour. I've been sitting here in Oakley's hoodie—drawstring curled around my finger, sleeves past my wrists—waiting for the silence to settle.

But it doesn't.

It just presses harder.

I don't mean to call him.

Not really.

My fingers just move—like they've done this before.

Like they know something my mind hasn't admitted yet.

So I call.

And now—he's here.

His voice in my ear.

His breath soft against the static.

I shift under my blanket, phone cradled to my cheek. "So... tea with Theo, huh?"

Oakley huffs a laugh, sleepy and scratchy. "He said it'd realign my soul."

"Did it?"

"It tasted like tree bark and disappointment."

I smile, warm and quiet. "Should've let me make you something."

"Oh, believe me, I thought about it the whole time. Could practically taste that honey you always put in."

My chest pulls in that way it always does when he says things like that—casual but intimate, like he doesn't realize how much space he takes up in my heart.

"Wow. You miss my tea or me?"

"Both," he says. "But mostly you. Tea doesn't tuck my hair behind my ear when I'm falling apart."

My heart flips. I let out a soft chuckle. "That's because tea doesn't love you back, Oak."

He exhales, barely above a whisper. "Good thing you do, then."

There's a quiet that follows. But it's not heavy. It's soft, like a blanket pulled over both of us.

"You okay?" I ask.

He doesn't answer right away. Just breathes a little easier than before.

"I am now," he says, and I know it's true.

"I'm drawing you, by the way."

Oakley groans. "Sophia."

"It's a good one," I promise. "You're not even making a weird face this time."

"Last time I looked like a haunted Victorian child."

"You blinked."

"You caught me mid-sneeze."

"You're dramatic."

"Accurate."

I grin, flipping the sketch slightly toward the light. "This time, you're lying on your stomach. Book open in front of you. Chin in your hand."

He hums. "Classic tortured genius pose. I respect it."

"Your face is too close to the page," I say, voice softening. "Like you're trying to live inside the story."

Oakley's quiet, but I can hear him listening. Really listening.

"You've got that look," I go on, "the one you always get when the chapter's hurting but you refuse to put it down."

"Mm," he murmurs. "Stubborn and emotionally compromised. That tracks."

"You feel everything, Oak."

"And you always notice," he says, not teasing now. Just quiet. "Even when I don't know how to say it."

"You don't have to."

He sighs softly, but it's not heavy—it's almost warm.

"You're too soft with me," he says after a moment.

"You make it easy."

There's a smile in his breath when he says, "I miss you."

I nuzzle deeper into my pillow. "I figured."

"You always get a little quiet when you leave," I say.

He's quiet for a second. "Even when I was holding your hand?"

"Especially then."

Another hush, but it doesn't ache. It lingers like something known.

Then, softer: "You didn't have to stay."

I blink. "What do you mean?"

"In the studio. When I stopped talking. When I kind of... froze."

"Of course I stayed," I say, like it's obvious. "You really think I'm the kind of person who leaves?"

"No," he murmurs. "That's the thing."

His voice dips lower. "I get scared sometimes. That I'll need you too much."

I don't let the silence stretch. I just say it, soft and sure:

"You don't make me carry you, Oak."

"You just let me catch you."

And he doesn't say anything back, but I know he's still there. Still listening.

Still holding my voice in his hands like it means something.

"Also," I add, "you do that for me too. You probably don't even know it, but you do."

"Oh, I know," he says, teasing again. "You're emotionally attached to my sleeve tugs and forehead kisses."

"Gross," I say. "I liked you better when you were shy."

"You liked me better when I wasn't talking."

"Still true."

He laughs—warm and uneven—and I feel it settle in my chest like a weight I want to carry.

Then:

"If I fall asleep mid-sentence, you're not allowed to make fun of me."

I grin. "You say that like I haven't heard you snore before."

"Lies," he mumbles. "I sleep beautifully."

"You sleep like a Victorian orphan recovering from pneumonia."

He lets out a sleepy breath. "Good. I was going for tragic and endearing."

"You nailed it."

"You should sleep," he murmurs.

"So should you."

A pause.

"Will you hang up first?"

"No."

"Then we're staying on the line again?"

"Looks like it."

A soft, sleepy laugh.

"I like this," he whispers, already fading. "Just you. On the other end of everything."

"Always," I whisper.

And we don't say goodbye.

We never do.



## Sophia/Oakley

### Sophia

The rain hasn't let up all afternoon, drumming against the dorm windows like it's personally offended we had plans today.

Not that anyone's complaining. Oakley's dorm has somehow become the official hangout spot—which makes sense, considering half of us practically live here anyway.

We *said* we were gonna bake cookies.

What we're doing is... not that.

Sienna and Asher are arguing over baking sheets like they're auditioning for a cooking show gone wrong. Jamie's filming it like it's a nature documentary. Theo looks like he's one sigh away from walking into the sea. Maya, unbothered, is sketching something quietly from the floor like the world isn't on fire behind her.

And me?

I'm the idiot who volunteered to measure ingredients.

"I got this," I said, with way too much confidence and zero

baking experience. "I am woman. I bake."

"I give it ten minutes before we call the fire department," Theo muttered from the couch, not even looking up.

Somehow, I got the dough to look *semi* normal.

Which is exactly why Oakley—brave, stupid, beautiful Oakley—grabs a spoon, scoops up a bite, and stops chewing almost immediately.

I blink. "Well?"

His face contorts slowly. Like the truth is trying to kill him.

"It's... complex," he manages, strained.

"Complex," I repeat, narrowing my eyes. "Is that a new word for *terrible*?"

"It's like... if the ocean had opinions. Salty ones."

I taste it.

And nearly gag.

"Oh my God."

Oakley coughs. "What did you *do*?"

"I used salt instead of sugar," I groan. "Like, a lot of it."

From across the room:

"YOU *WHAT*?"

Asher, naturally.

"Don't yell at me!" I shoot back. "You left me unsupervised."

"You were *supervised*, I was standing right *there*!"

"Clearly not close enough!"

Sienna swoops in like a food critic with a grudge. She peers into the bowl like it personally betrayed her. "This is inedible, babe."

I hand it to her. "Tag you're it. You're in charge now."

Jamie's camera zooms in. "And here we witness the downfall of the common cookie. A tragedy in three acts."

Theo finally looks up, sighs like a disappointed father. "If one

of you burns this place down, I swear I'm making you call your actual parents—and I'll stand beside you while you explain."

Jamie pans dramatically to him. "Ah yes, the dorm's natural predator. A wild Theo in his habitat—chronically unimpressed and painfully overqualified for this friend group."

Sienna and Asher start over. I hop up onto the counter, swinging my legs, stealing chocolate chips straight from the bowl I am *definitely* not sharing.

Oakley plants himself in front of me.

Between my knees.

His arms brace against the counter like he's got something to prove.

His eyes flick to the chocolate chips, then to me. "Sharing is caring."

"You hoard popcorn like state secrets. You don't get to talk."

"That's called *strategy*."

I lift one chip between my fingers. "You want this?"

He nods solemnly. "Desperately."

I lean in, just enough to let the moment thrum. And then I press it to his mouth—slow, deliberate. My fingertips brush his lips.

He doesn't break eye contact as he takes it from my hand with his teeth. His lips graze my fingers—just enough to make my stomach dip.

Then he smiles.

That smile.

Lazy confidence. Dimples deep enough to drown in.

"You're lucky I like you," he says, voice low, still chewing.

I grin. "You *love* me."

He tilts his head. "Semantics."

So I lift the same finger.

And lick it.  
His breath catches.  
Just for a second.  
But I see it.  
His eyes drop to my mouth—brief, instinctual.  
Like he didn't mean to.  
Like it slipped out of him.  
Like I reached somewhere inside he didn't mean to hand me.  
And then—  
*ding.*  
The oven.  
A moment.  
He looks away.  
Quick.  
Too quick.  
Hands busy with nothing, like the silence between us wasn't suddenly louder than the rain.  
He doesn't look back.  
And somehow, that hurts more than if he had.  
Smoke.  
And just like that—  
It's gone.  
Sienna screams. Asher's already laughing. Jamie's filming like this is the best content he's ever captured.  
Maya opens the oven and lifts the tray of cookie corpses like it's no big deal. She takes a bite, chews thoughtfully.  
"Mm. Tastes like trauma."  
Jamie clicks his camera into black and white. "In the aftermath of ambition... we find resilience."  
Theo's fanning the smoke alarm with someone's hoodie. "I'm too young to die in a cookie fire."

The kitchen's still foggy with disaster. Jamie's laughing. Asher's dramatically coughing like the smoke betrayed him personally. I'm still perched on the counter, legs swinging, chocolate chips half-spilled in my lap.

Oakley looks at me like he's about to make another joke—but doesn't. Just shakes his head, amused and a little wrecked.

I smile. Small. Warm. Still buzzing from the almost-moment we never really had.

The room finally settles. Everyone catching their breath. The kind of quiet that follows *just enough* chaos to feel like a win.

And then—

Sienna claps her hands like she's calling a kindergarten class to attention. "Alright, bitches. It's sticker time."

"Absolutely not," Oakley starts.

Too slow.

She slaps a turtle sticker on his forehead.

I get a sun. Jamie gets a raccoon. Theo tries to escape but ends up with a very grumpy frog.

"You're all five years old," he mutters.

"And yet," Jamie says solemnly, zooming in, "here you are."

The smoke's fading, but the laughter still lingers. Theo's muttering to himself, Sienna's licking frosting off a spoon like it betrayed her, and Oakley passes behind me just close enough that our shoulders touch.

I don't say anything. Neither does he.

And then—

Someone goes, "Blanket fort?"

Silence.

Then pure, immediate chaos.

Maya claps like she's been training for this moment since birth. "Structural integrity. Center weight distribution. Let's

go.”

Theo’s already dragging a bookshelf like he’s laying the foundation for a fortress. “We need anchor points and safety zones.”

“She’s gonna draft blueprints,” Oakley whispers, eyes wide beside me.

Jamie’s tangled himself in fairy lights and is muttering something about “mood lighting and cinematic angles.” Sienna’s flinging a duvet across two chairs with the flair of a war general. Asher salutes her with a spatula.

I just sit still for a moment—watching the chaos unfold like it’s art.

Messy, ridiculous, *ours*.

Then Oakley nudges my knee with a pillow.

“You in?”

He holds it out like a peace offering. Or maybe like he’s daring me to say no.

I grin, grabbing it. “You even have to ask?”

He starts handing me more—one at a time.

Every pillow comes with a deliberate brush of his fingers.

Every brush comes with an innocent: “Oops.”

“You’re unbelievable,” I mutter.

“Unbelievably charming,” he corrects.

“Unbelievably annoying.”

“Same thing, really.”

I roll my eyes. He looks far too pleased with himself.

“You’re not slick.”

“You like it.”

“You wish.”

“I dream about it.”

“You’re a menace.”

“And yet,” he says with a wink, “I thrive.”

Jamie, still dragging a blanket behind him like a dramatic ghost, takes one wrong step and completely vanishes into a pile of pillows and fairy lights.

There’s a muffled thud.

Then, weakly: “Tell my story.”

“Leave him,” Asher calls. “He lived with honor.”

“I did not!” Jamie’s voice yells from under the pile.

“We move forward!” Maya commands, adjusting a lamp with terrifying precision.

And somehow, impossibly, it all comes together.

The fort.

The chaos.

The warmth.

It’s lopsided. Glowing. Held together with ambition and bad tape.

And it’s perfect.

I already know I’m falling asleep in it.

Preferably right on top of Oakley.

But first—

movie time.



,

## Oakley

We never agree on movies.

It's chaos. Actual war.

Soph suggests continuing our sitcom—aka our comfort show.

Jamie insists on some obscure indie flick that probably has subtitles and emotional trauma.

Sienna just yells "Pixar!" like a battle cry.

Theo votes for "literally anything without singing animals."

And somehow, we land on a Pixar short.

Because, and I quote Jamie: "Nobody cries during those."

He's a fucking liar.

Ten minutes in, the room is quiet except for the screen... and Sienna sniffing into Maya's sleeve.

Asher coughs suspiciously loud.

"I've got allergies," he says.

"Sure," Theo mutters, patting his back. "It's the pollen in the emotional devastation."

Sophia shifts closer beside me.

Her leg brushes mine.

I already feel her eyes on me—even before my vision starts to blur.

I blink. Once. Twice.

And then her hand slips into mine.

She doesn't say anything.

Doesn't tease.

Doesn't even glance over.

Just weaves our fingers together like it's *nothing*.

Like it's *everything*.

Like she knows I'm holding myself together with duct tape and willpower and the last breath of the day.



I swallow hard.

It's a short film. Like... really short.

But it says too much in too little.

Love.

Loss.

Letting go.

And the worst part?

It's about a dog.

I don't even *like* dogs that much, but God—

The way it looked for its person.

I bite the inside of my cheek.

And before I can fall apart, she moves.

Sophia gently tugs me toward her.

Like it's nothing.

Like it's always been allowed.

My head rests against her shoulder. Her fingers slide into my hair, soft and slow, scratching lightly at my scalp like she knows exactly how to quiet the noise.

I melt.

There's no other word.

I melt into her.

Close my eyes.

Breathe.

Theo's still pretending not to watch while patting Asher's back like a grumpy emotional support dad.

Maya's got her arms around Sienna now, murmuring something soft while Sienna wipes her cheeks with her hoodie sleeve.

Jamie's not saying anything.

His camera's in his lap—forgotten.

He's just... watching.

Eyes softer than I've ever seen them.

Like he's afraid to move and mess up the stillness.

And for once, it's quiet.

Not just around us.

*In me, too.*

A silence I don't want to run from.

A silence I want to *stay* in.

The screen fades to black.

The credits roll.

Nobody moves.

Jamie shifts forward like he's going to say something, fumbles with the remote. "Okay, well... I didn't say *I* wouldn't cry. I just said nobody *usually* does. That's science. I didn't make the rules."

I laugh softly into Sophia's collarbone.

She doesn't let go.

Her hand stays in my hair.

Not to fix me.

Not to make a statement.

Just to remind me I'm okay.

That I'm still here.

Jamie clicks around on the remote again. Trying to change the mood, probably.

Trying to move us forward.

But the screen flickers—

Glitches—

And suddenly, it's not a Pixar short anymore.

It's *us*.

*a video from a few years ago.*

Blurry. Shaky. Loud.

We're outside.

Late afternoon. Someone's laughing—

The camera is bouncing like someone's running with it.

Jamie.

The sun's low and warm. That golden kind of light that makes even the worst ideas look beautiful.

Theo's laughing with his whole body—arms open wide, head tipped back like joy lives somewhere in his spine.

Sienna's got whiskers drawn on her cheeks and a Sharpie in her hand, full sprint across the grass after Asher, yelling, "I just wanna give you little whiskers, Ash!"

Asher yells, "SISI, NO—"

He tries to duck behind Maya, who's doubled over laughing, hands full of wildflowers, *zero help whatsoever*.

Sophia's next to her, laughing so hard she's bent in half, leaning on Maya's back, hair flying everywhere in the wind.

And then—

Theo sticks a leg out.

Asher goes down.

Crashes into the grass, groaning dramatically.

"You *motherfucker*," he laughs, already surrendering.

Theo just grins. "Team whiskers."

Sienna pounces, marker in hand, climbing halfway into Asher's lap to draw little lines on his cheekbones like it's her life's purpose.

He lets her.

Doesn't flinch.

Just grins through it.

The camera zooms—closer, quick, playful.

And catches me.

Laughing.

Real and unguarded and *bright*.

But I'm not looking at the camera.

I'm looking at Sophia.  
Like I didn't know I was being watched.  
Like I forgot there was a world outside of her.  
Jamie's voice, behind the camera:  
"Earth to Kingsley."  
I blink.  
Smile.  
Dimples full on display.  
But I don't look away in shame.  
I just grin like I know I was caught.  
And I don't care.  
The sound is loud.  
Laughter.  
Yelling.  
Everything spinning in sunlight and softness.  
Like none of us knew the weight we'd one day carry.  
Like we hadn't learned what it meant to break yet.  
The screen flickers.  
Glitches.  
And goes **black**.  
The dorm is quiet again.  
No one speaks.  
Sienna's hand slips into Maya's. Her throat bobbing like she's  
swallowing a sob.  
Maya's thumb moves in small, steady circles.  
Asher's smile fades. His shoulder bumps into Theo's like it's  
something he doesn't even think about. Theo doesn't say a  
word—he just rests his hand on Asher's arm.  
Jamie lowers the remote. Quiet. Still.  
And me?  
I'm still tucked into Sophia.

My cheek against her shoulder.  
Her hand still in my hair.  
I feel it when she breathes in—  
That sharp, small tremble.  
The way her fingers curl tighter into mine.  
Like she needs the reminder.  
That I'm still here.  
That *we* are.  
And I don't even think.  
I just press a kiss to her shoulder.  
Soft. Quick. Safe.  
And I don't care if anyone sees.  
Because watching that version of us?  
That messy, laughing, golden version of us?  
It hurts.  
In a way I didn't expect.  
Like realizing how much we've survived.  
And how much we're still trying to.  
The screen stays black.  
Nobody asks to play something else.  
Nobody moves to change the moment.  
We just sit there.  
All of us.  
Wrapped in quiet.  
Wrapped in each other.  
Wrapped in everything we were—  
and everything we still are.

## 6

### Sophia

We're almost at my building when it happens.

"Hey, Sophia!"

The voice slices through the morning like it was waiting for this moment.

I turn—

And of course, it's him.

Hunter.

Rain-swept hair. Steel-blue eyes. Smile sharp around the edges.

He walks toward us like he's rehearsed the whole scene.

Like we're the checkpoint before something bigger.

Oakley doesn't move.

But I feel the shift.

His presence pulling in—quiet, dense. Like instinct.

"Didn't think I'd catch you this early," Hunter says, like he didn't plan every second of this.

I force a smile. "Hey."

"Heading to class," he says. "Figured I'd say hi."

Then, with that same too-easy smile:

"You free later?"

I blink. "What?"

"Coffee. Lunch. Something simple."

I try to laugh. Light. Dismissive. "I've got a lot going on today."

"No worries," he says, waving it off like it's nothing.

"Didn't expect a yes."

His smile tightens. Eyes flick to Oakley—then back to me.

"Just figured I'd ask before Kingsley beat me to it—again."

The shift is instant.

Oakley's still beside me, but it's different now.

Stillness like held breath.

Like he was waiting for the shot to fire.

And then—

"She's taken."

His voice is low.

Even.

Undeniable.

Hunter stares.

Then lets out a laugh—too sharp, too loud for how close we're standing.

"By you?" he says. "Of course it's you."

His eyes move over me—not soft. Not kind.

Measured. Like I've failed some test.

"You always did like the ones who finish first."

And just like that—

I realize this was never about the coffee.

Never about me.

It's always been about Oakley.

Their rivalry never stayed on the track.

My breath wavers. I step back, just slightly.

Oakley doesn't.  
He shifts forward.  
Not a threat.  
But not nothing.  
Hunter scoffs. "You know what? Whatever."  
His voice is quieter now. Bitter in a way he doesn't bother  
hiding.  
"Hope he's worth it."  
But it doesn't sound like he's talking to me.  
It sounds like he's talking to someone he's never been able to  
outrun.  
He turns and walks off. Shoulders tight.  
Like leaving is the last thing he wants to do.  
I don't move right away.  
I just... stand there.  
Still wrapped in Oakley's hoodie.  
Still shaking from a moment I didn't know would matter this  
much.  
Then I feel it—  
His hand.  
A soft ruffle in my hair.  
Like nothing just cracked open between us.  
"I've got an exam," he says, too gentle. Too quiet.  
He offers a smile.  
But his dimples don't show.  
And that's how I know.  
That smile isn't real.  
He walks away.  
Doesn't look back.  
And I just stand there.  
In his hoodie.



With something in my chest I can't name.  
Not yet.

## Oakley

Fuck.

It's the only word that fits. Everything else feels too small for the storm I just started.

I don't stop walking. Can't. My steps are too fast, too loud against the pavement, but I don't slow down.

Because if I do, I'll have to sit with what I just did.

With what I said.

I said it like it meant nothing.

Ruffled her hair. Walked away.

Like I dropped something between us and didn't stick around to pick it up.

*She's taken.*

I said that.

Out loud.

Like it was mine to say.

And for a second after, she didn't move.

Didn't laugh.

Didn't smile.

Just watched me.

Still. Quiet.

Like the words hit—but she didn't know where they landed.

And now I can't stop thinking about it. That stillness. That space. That *silence*.

It's not what she said. It's what she didn't.

That silence between us still hasn't stopped ringing.

The air's colder than it should be, and it cuts sharper than usual. I barely notice until I look down and realize the hoodie's still with her.

I gave it to her without thinking. Like I always do.

But now it feels like I left behind something I can't get back.

I tug at my sleeves. Try to rub the chill out of my arms like I can pull the warmth back in.

It doesn't work.

Why does it feel like she took more than the hoodie with her?

My fingers twitch. I shove them into my pockets. Focus on walking. Counting steps. Anything but the echo of what I said.

*She's taken.*

She didn't say I was wrong.

She didn't say anything at all.

Was she surprised? Hurt?

Does she think it was a joke?

Because it wasn't.

By the time I get to the exam building, my skin feels like it's inside out. Like everyone can see everything I never meant to say scrawled across my chest.

The desk feels like ice. The paper already waiting.

My name printed in the corner like it belongs to someone braver than me.

I trace the same question five times and still don't know what it says.

*Sophia.*

*Hoodie.*

*Taken.*

*Hunter.*

*Hoodie.*

*Sophia.*

*Taken.*

*Taken.*

I said it.

*I fucking said it.*

Out loud.

In front of her.

In front of him.

And now I don't know if she's breathing easier... or not at all.

I rub my knuckles against my chest, like I can press the panic out.

It stays.

The pencil slips. I grab it again. Try to breathe. Try to care. Try to forget the way her eyes held mine—like she heard something she wasn't ready to carry.

Eventually, I finish. I think. My hands move. I fill in bubbles. Write things that look like answers.

But it's like trying to thread a needle underwater.

When I leave, the light stings. The world is too sharp.

And I don't want it to be.

Asher's waiting outside, leaning against the railing like he's known I'd need him.

He holds out a water bottle. "Here," he says. "Hydration. Or distraction. Whichever works."

I take it. Try to smile. "Thanks."

He tilts his head. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You're a terrible liar."

I laugh, kind of. "It's fine. Just tired."

"You're always tired," he says. "But you don't usually look like you're about to throw up."

I stare at my shoes like they've got answers I don't. "It's just... been a weird day."

There's a pause. Then, quietly:

"Is it about her?"

And I don't even nod. I just... breathe. Barely.

He bumps my shoulder. "You don't have to talk about it, dude. Just... whatever it is, I'm here, okay?"

I nod. Swallow.

"Even if it's my fault?"

He doesn't blink. "Especially then."

And that—God—that gets me.

He means it.

He always has.

We walk.

Quiet. Steady.

Asher doesn't fix the storm.

But he makes it *less lonely*.

Then—

As we pass the quad, someone grins at me in passing and says it like it's the weather:

"So you and Sophia, huh?"

I freeze.

"What?"

The guy shrugs, smiling. "Didn't think you'd actually make it official. Kingsley and Calloway, huh? Took you long enough."

My mouth opens.

Closes again.  
I can't speak.  
Can't breathe.  
And then it hits me.  
*Hunter.*  
Of course.  
Of course he didn't waste a second.  
Of course he spun it into something bigger.  
Now everyone thinks we're together.  
*Now everyone thinks I said it because it was real.*  
And Sophia—  
God. She's going to think I wanted that.  
My chest clamps tight. My throat dries up. I can feel the panic  
starting to shake loose in my ribs.  
I keep walking. Fast.  
Asher says something behind me—I don't hear it.  
I duck behind the library, hands locked behind my neck, pacing  
tiny desperate circles into the grass.  
What if I messed this up?  
What if she's upset?  
What if I made her carry something she didn't ask for?  
What if she didn't even want people to know we're close, let  
alone—  
*She's taken.*  
I said it like it was nothing.  
Like it was mine to say.  
Like she was mine to claim.  
And now she has to deal with it.  
I check my phone.  
Nothing.  
I check again.

Still nothing.

No “hey.”

No “what was that?”

No “you’re an idiot.”

I open her contact. Type:

**Me:** *I’m sorry.*

Delete.

**Me:** *Didn’t mean to start anything.*

Delete.

**Me:** *I meant it.*

Delete.

I shut my eyes.

Let the cold settle in.

I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.

I just know I want to fix it.

I’m about to go find her.

Ready to run if I have to.

When—

*Buzz.*

I stop breathing.

My fingers curl around the phone like it might anchor me.

I read it once.

Twice.

Again.

I told the world she was mine.

And now she wants to talk.

God.

*What did I do?*



## Sophia

It starts like a joke.

A nudge.

Jamie's voice cutting through the air as we leave the building after class.

"So... you and Oakley?"

I blink. "What?"

He shrugs, casual as ever, but there's something knowing in his eyes. "Didn't realize you two made it official."

*Official?*

My stomach flips.

Maya glances at me over her shoulder, brows raised. "Wait, are you actually—?"

She doesn't finish the sentence.

She doesn't have to.

Because I freeze.

Because they know.

Because it's already *out there*.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. My pulse is everywhere. My ribs can’t contain it.

Jamie laughs, teasing. “Don’t act surprised—you two basically share a soul at this point.”

I can’t answer.

I can barely think.

Just—

*I didn’t even correct him.*

“I didn’t even say anything. And now it’s everywhere.”

My voice cracks. It barely escapes.

Maya steps closer. “Soph?”

I feel the words piling in my chest—too many, too fast. Like I’m already losing control of the story, and I didn’t even get to tell it.

“I have to go.”

I don’t wait for a response. I’m already moving—walking too fast, breath catching and catching and not settling at all. The wind cuts colder now, and Oakley’s hoodie is too warm and not warm enough.

Everyone thinks I’m his girlfriend.

But I don’t even know what we are.

What am I supposed to do with that?

I pull out my phone. My hands are shaking.

My thumb hovers. I type:

**Me:** *We need to talk.*

Send.

Before I can breathe.



,

I find him near the quad.

He sees me instantly—and everything changes.

His whole body straightens.

Eyes wide.

Chest already bracing, like he knows what's coming and *wants to take the hit for me.*

I walk up fast—too fast.

“I—I don’t know what’s happening,” I say, breath ragged, words sharp and spiraling. “Everyone thinks we’re together, Oakley.”

My voice lifts. I can’t help it. “They’re looking at me like I lied. Like I wanted it. Like I made it up.”

His face falls.

Like I just punched the air out of him.

“Soph—”

“And I didn’t stop you,” I whisper, the words slipping out too fast, too raw. “I just stood there. And now it’s everywhere.”

I can’t stop shaking. My throat is tight and raw and I feel like I’m *unraveling right in front of him.*

He doesn’t speak right away.

He just steps forward—slow, quiet—and reaches for my hands.

Like he's asking permission to hold the damage.

He holds them between both of his—firm, grounding, warm.

"Hey," he murmurs. "Look at me."

I can't. But I try.

"Breathe," he says softly. "Please, baby. Just breathe for me."

I try.

It breaks.

A sharp, shuddering breath leaves me. I feel a pang in my heart, like everything I've been holding in just cracked wide open.

His thumbs rub soft circles into my knuckles—steady and warm.

"You didn't do anything wrong," he says, voice low, raw. "Hunter was never gonna leave you alone, Soph. Not unless someone made it clear."

I blink, hard.

A tear slips loose.

His hand leaves mine just long enough to brush it away with the back of his fingers.

Gentle. Careful.

Like he's sorry the world touched me first.

"So you made it clear?" I ask, voice breaking.

"Yeah," he breathes. "Because I couldn't stand watching him push you around like that—but..."

He hesitates. The words sit heavy in his throat.

"I shouldn't have said it like that," he murmurs. "Even if I meant it. I didn't get to choose how it landed on you—and I'm sorry if it felt like I took something."

His guilt is written all over him—etched into the way he watches me, the way his thumbs haven't stopped moving against my skin.

And mine?

It's carved into the silence I never filled.

The part of me that stayed quiet, even when everything inside me screamed.

There's a long pause. Just us.

The air is heavy—but not sharp.

Just suspended.

"I don't want the attention," I say quietly. "I don't want to explain it to everyone."

I glance down at our hands.

*But I also... don't want to erase what it was.*

"I don't want to undo it either."

He watches me. Something in his chest shifts—*breaks and stitches itself back together all at once.*

"Okay," he says gently. "Then we won't."

I blink. "What do you mean?"

He shrugs, quiet. "We just... let them think what they want."

I nod slowly.

My chest still aches, but something eases.

Like his words handed me a rope when I was still drowning.

"I can do that," I whisper.

And it's not fake.

It's not fully real either.

It's messy. Quiet. Scared. Wanting.

But it's something.

His thumbs keep rubbing over my skin—like he doesn't know how to stop caring.

Then he says, so quietly it nearly breaks me:

"Hunter wouldn't have left you alone either way. Not after today. He was going to make your life hell whether I said it or not."

My heart stutters.

“And if people are going to talk...”

Oakley’s voice dips—soft, tired, honest.

“I’d rather it be with me standing next to you than him chasing you down.”

I look up at him, blinking fast. Another tear slips.

“I just didn’t want to make you deal with it,” I whisper. “I didn’t want this to land on you.”

His grip tightens—not hard, just *certain*.

“You don’t have to deal with it alone.”

My chest twists—warm, aching, confused.

I don’t have the answers.

I don’t even have the questions.

But right now?

He’s holding the pieces of me I didn’t know were slipping.

His eyes search mine. And then—

“How about you come over?” he says softly. “We can talk about it. Or not. Just... breathe together for a bit.”

I nod.

Because my legs are already moving.

Because the ache hasn’t left—but he’s holding it with me now.

Because maybe, for the first time since Jamie said “So... *you and Oakley?*”—

I’m not afraid to fall.

## Oakley

I open the door before she knocks.

She's standing there in the hallway, arms tucked into her sides, eyes wide in that way she gets when the world's been too loud.

She doesn't say anything.

Neither do I.

I just step back.

She walks in slowly, like she's not sure the air inside my dorm is any different. Like she's still carrying all of today in her chest, unsure where to set it down.

I let the door click shut behind her.

Jamie's not here. Theo's somewhere in the kitchen pretending to study, giving us space the way he always does when it matters. The lights are low. The rain's still tapping at the windows like it never learned how to stop.

And Sophia's in my room.

Not saying a word.

She just stands near my desk, arms folded in. Not cold. Just unsure.

But I know why she's here.

She came to breathe.

I pull the blanket off my bed and toss it toward the couch. Then I grab one of the pillows and drop down first, giving her the space to choose—me or not-me. Closeness or not.

She follows.

Of course she does.

Sits beside me without looking over, like we're trying not to notice how close our knees are.

Like this doesn't mean everything.

Her hair is damp from the walk. She smells like rain and lavender. My hoodie's still on her—loose around the sleeves, collar slightly stretched, like it remembers I wore it before her.

I glance at her. She's not crying. Not speaking. Just here.

And somehow, that hurts more.

"You don't have to talk," I say finally, voice low. "I know today sucked."

She nods. Once. Small.

The silence stretches between us—not heavy, but unsure. Like a pause that doesn't know if it's the end of a sentence or the middle.

Her fingers are still looped around mine.

My hoodie swallows her frame like it's trying to protect her—the way I don't know how to.

Even with her hand still in mine, it feels like I'm holding something I never earned.

Like the universe lent me this moment and forgot to ask for it back.

My hands twitch in my lap. I curl them into fists.

"I didn't mean to mess it all up," I whisper.

She looks over, finally. Eyes soft. Curious.

I shake my head. "I just... saw the way he looked at you. Like



you were a game. And I couldn't—"

My voice cracks, just a little. "I couldn't watch him corner you again."

Her lips part like she wants to say something. But she doesn't.

Instead, she leans forward, rests her elbows on her knees, and stares at the floor.

And I can't take it anymore.

I shift. Close the space between us. Not with words. Not with hands. Just... presence. Just *here*.

My knee brushes hers.

She doesn't move away.

I think that's the moment I let myself breathe again.

"I keep replaying it," I admit. "The way I said it. How you didn't say anything after. I thought maybe I crossed a line that can't be uncrossed."

"You didn't," she whispers.

It's the first full thing she's said.

I don't move. I don't speak.

I just wait.

She exhales, long and quiet. "I didn't know what to say. That's all. I didn't know if I wanted it to be true. Or if I was scared because it already kind of was."

Her voice cracks on the last word. She folds her hands, fingers curling into her palms.

"I wasn't trying to make a statement," I say. "But... I meant it."

And god, I did.

I meant it in the way your chest stumbles when someone threatens something you love. I meant it in the way someone says *home* without realizing it's a person.

Guilt settles behind my ribs like glass—sharp, waiting.

It whispers:

*You crossed a line.*

*You said too much.*

*You handed her your heart like it was something safe—like it wouldn't cut her on the way in. Like it wasn't already cracked down the middle and bleeding all over the place.*

Her shoulder sinks toward mine.

Not touching.

But close.

She exhales. "I didn't correct you," she murmurs. "And I think that scares me more."

My heart tightens.

She's not mad.

She's not running.

She's just *overwhelmed*. And still here.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to carry this," she adds, eyes still low. "Like it's yours to explain to everyone. Because it's not fair."

I shake my head. "You're not something I have to explain."

Her eyes flick toward mine. There's something soft there—something raw.

I don't move.

She does.

Her shoulder leans into mine, and this time, she stays.

No words.

Just warmth.

We sit like that for minutes—or maybe hours. Her eyes flick to my window. The rain hasn't stopped. The world's still gray and soft and barely breathing.

I pull the blanket up over both of us, gently. No questions.

She doesn't flinch.

Doesn't hesitate.

She just folds into me like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Like I'm something she's allowed to lean against.

Her head drops to my shoulder.

My arm wraps around her without thinking. Hand soft at her waist. Not gripping. Just holding.

Her fingers brush my wrist,

and my pulse stumbles like it forgot how to move without her.

And I stay still.

Because maybe loving someone isn't about saying it.

Maybe it's just *this*.

Just sitting through the quiet.

And choosing to stay.

She shifts. Not away. Just closer.

And I rest my cheek against the top of her head.

Her breath is soft now. Steady.

And I think maybe this is what it means to be forgiven—not in words. But in *presence*.

In stillness.

In staying.

Eventually, she curls in closer. Her head slips against my chest like she belongs there. Like this is the safest place she knows.

One hand clings gently to my side, like letting go might shatter whatever we've built between us.

And I just hold her.

Like I've memorized scenes like this from every book that broke me—

and now she's rewriting them with my name in the margins.

The moment settles between us slow, like sugar dissolving in tea—warm and quiet and softer than I ever thought I could

have.

And I want to cry.

Not because she's asleep.

But because she trusted me enough to fall asleep here—  
against me, on me, with her heart still beating somewhere near  
mine.

She trusted me to hold her steady when the rest of the world  
didn't.

And I don't know how I got that kind of grace.

But I swear to God, I'll never forget it.

I close my eyes and let the weight of her settle deeper against  
me.

*One heartbeat at a time.*

And if this is a mistake,  
it's one I'll never regret making.

Please.

*Don't take her away from me.*

## Sophia

The first few moments are thick with sleep.

Warmth settles against me that isn't mine—familiar, slow, quiet. Oakley's hoodie is still wrapped around me, the fabric worn soft from too many nights and something gentler than comfort. My cheek is pressed to a chest I know too well, rising and falling like his body's memorized how to breathe for two.

For a second—just a second—I let myself believe this is real.  
That we're real.

But the second passes.

And with it, the safety.

My eyes blink open, light trickling through the window in a slow, gray hush. It's still early. The world hasn't caught up yet. The quiet wraps around us like it's trying not to break anything.

His breathing doesn't change. But I know he's awake.

I feel it in the way he doesn't move. Like if he does, he'll ruin something fragile. Like we're still suspended in the moment before morning decides what we are.

I shift a little, just enough to glance back.

His eyes are open.

Still soft. Still sleepy. Still him.

He doesn't speak. Neither do I.

But the quiet feels heavier now. Like it's waiting to be named.

So I move again, slow. Careful. Let the silence stretch like a blanket someone's about to pull away.

"We should probably talk about it," I whisper, voice barely more than breath. "About... what this is."

He nods once. Barely.

We sit up together, quiet and cautious, like we're afraid to wake something we won't be able to put back to sleep. His arm falls away from my waist like it didn't want to go. Like it left a part of him behind anyway.

I stay beside him—not across. Our shoulders still touch. Our knees are still close. And it shouldn't matter, but it does.

"Okay," he murmurs.

And just like that, the hush of morning starts to ache.

"How long do we keep this up?" I ask softly. "Until it fades? Until people stop asking?"

Oakley exhales slow. "Until people stop talking?"

"Or until Hunter backs off?"

He doesn't answer at first. Just looks down, jaw tight. "No. He won't."

There's a pause. I pull my sleeves over my hands.

"Then we stop when it stops feeling safe," I say gently. "Or when it starts to hurt."

He nods slowly. "The second we're hurting each other more than we're helping—we stop."

"Promise?" My voice is fragile.

"Promise," he echoes, quieter.

A small breath passes between us, and it feels like the kind of silence you wrap up in, not the kind that pulls you apart.

He shifts slightly. "Should we... post something? To make it believable?"

I shake my head. "People already believe it."

The words land strange. I don't mean them to sound sharp, but something shifts in his face anyway.

He nods once, jaw tight again. Says nothing.

"We should probably set rules," I say, gently. "So it doesn't get... confusing."

He gives a small, careful nod. "Yeah."

"Physical stuff?" I ask, and my throat tightens. "What... what counts?"

"We've always held hands," I whisper. "You've always... reached for me."

His voice is so soft it barely lands. "I don't know how not to."

My heart aches at that. "It never meant anything before."

"Now it might," he finishes.

His hand rests between us, palm up—open. Like a question he's too afraid to ask out loud.

And it's stupid, how much I want to take it.

I reach out anyway, just enough to brush my fingers against his. "But if we're faking this," I whisper, "we can't let ourselves forget what's real."

He swallows. Nods. "So we keep the touches in public."

"And only when it makes sense," I add.

A pause.

Then—my voice catches in my throat. I hesitate. But I say it anyway.

"No kissing," I whisper. "Not even to sell it. We've never—"  
*My face burns.* "It would feel wrong."

He doesn't look at me. Not at first.

But I feel it in the way his breath catches.

Then, quiet: "Yeah. No kissing."

Another long pause.

"We don't pretend when it's just us," I murmur. "We don't blur the line in private. No sleepovers unless it's... really needed."

"Like last night," he says softly. "Only if it's an emergency."

I nod. "Right."

The ache doesn't settle, but it softens. A little.

"And the group?" I ask, hesitating. "Do we tell them?"

He thinks about it.

"I think they already know," he says. "Or at least... believe it."

"Maya suspects everything," I murmur. "Jamie definitely knows."

"He always does," Oakley says with a small smile. It doesn't reach his eyes.

"And Theo?"

"He won't ask," Oakley says. "But he'll know."

We fall quiet again.

Then he says, more firmly, "We don't owe anyone a story. Only each other."

I nod. Swallow the lump in my throat.

"If either of us wants out," he says, "we say it. No guilt. No explaining."

"Okay."

I whisper the next part.

"And when this ends... what happens then?"

He looks at me.

And then, so softly it breaks something in me, he says: "We let it go. Unless you want something else."

I don't answer.

Because I don't know how to.



Because my chest feels too full and too empty at once.

He doesn't press.

We leave his dorm in silence. Shoulders brushing. Steps falling  
into rhythm like they always have.

But this time, we don't hold hands.

And somehow, that's what hurts the most.

And underneath it all, I feel it rising—

*How do you set rules for something your heart already broke open  
for?*

## Oakley

I wake up to an empty bed.

No soft breath against my chest.

No warmth tucked into my side.

Just quiet. Just space. Just cold.

The first thing I notice is the hoodie.

Mine. Folded. Set at the edge of the bed.

Like it didn't mean something.

She came to drop it off.

And now she's gone.

I sit up slowly, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. The blanket still smells like her—like shampoo and sleep and quiet safety. I let it settle over me even though it makes the ache worse.

I thought waking up with rules would make this easier.

I thought lines would help me breathe.

But all it did was teach me how to miss her without a reason.

The dorm is still. Jamie's gone. Theo left a note on the fridge that just says, "*Good luck today, Oak. —T*"

I don't know what he meant.

Maybe he saw it in my face last night when I came back.

Maybe he let her in while I slept so she could return the hoodie without saying goodbye.

My chest feels heavier when I step outside.

And every step I take feels like I'm walking away from something I can't name.



,

I see her across the quad.

She's laughing softly with Maya.

Hair pulled back. Eyes bright in the morning light.

She looks fine. Better than fine.

Like last night didn't happen.

And for the first time—I can't read her.

Not the way I used to.

Not the way I've always been able to.

Her smiles don't reach me now.

And I feel like a stranger watching from too far away.

We used to move like breath and exhale.

Now it feels like I forgot how to breathe.

Asher falls into step beside me. "You're not holding hands today."

It's said like a joke. But it doesn't land like one.

"I thought you two were a thing."

I shrug. "We are."  
He raises an eyebrow but doesn't press.  
Still, the words settle heavy.  
We always held hands.  
Even before.  
Now we don't.  
And the space between our fingers feels louder than anything  
else.



,

Class is a blur.

My notes are useless. Scribbled words and lines that don't  
connect.

Every page looks like a conversation I forgot how to finish.

My brain's still back in her voice. Her breath. Her silence.

Back in the moment when she said, *No kissing*.

I keep hearing it.

The way her voice got small.

The way she looked away like it might hurt me.

And the worst part is—it did.

Not because I expected more.

But because I didn't know how badly I'd want it until she said no.

By the time I get back to the dorm, I'm shaking with words I can't say.

Thoughts I can't land.

I open her contact. I type.

**Me:** *Are you okay?*

Delete.

**Me:** *Do you still feel safe with me?*

Delete.

I stare at the blinking cursor like it'll tell me what to do.

Then I just write:

**Me:** Sophia

No punctuation. No explanation.

Just her name.

Because it's all I can say without falling apart.

It means *please*.

Please still be there.

Please still want this.

Please tell me I didn't lose you before I got to keep you.

I let my phone fall onto the bed beside me.

And the silence doesn't answer.

It just stays.

Like maybe this ache in my chest wasn't just passing through.

WHERE YOU LEAD

Like maybe it's learning how to live here.

## Sophia

The message comes at 11:17 a.m.

Just one word.

No punctuation.

*Sophia.*

That's all it says.

And still—it knocks the air out of me.

Because I know what it means.

I know exactly what Oakley is asking for. Not an answer. Not really.

He's asking *am I still safe?*

*Did I mess it up?*

*Are we still okay?*

He's done this before—asked me with silences and glances and one-word texts. Like if he makes it small enough, it won't hurt when I don't answer fast enough.

And every time before, I always did.

A soft reply. A dumb emoji. A *yes, I'm here.*

But not today.

Because today, I don't know what would hurt more—

answering too softly or not answering at all.

So I don't touch it.

Not yet.

I'm already holding my phone when the text comes in. Sitting on the floor, still in the clothes I slept in, legs pulled to my chest like I'm trying to hold myself steady.

My thumb brushes the screen.

And then stops.

I don't open it.

I don't reply.

I just stare.

And then, slowly, I flip the phone over—place it screen-down on the edge of my bed like it's made of glass. Like if I'm not gentle, the silence between us will crack too loud to bear.

And I breathe.

Or try to.

Because I know if I answer him, I'll start lying.

I'll tell him we're okay. That last night didn't change anything. That I'm not terrified of how much I wanted to stay.

But that wouldn't be fair.

Not to him.

Not to me.

So I leave it.

Just this once.

And I let the quiet say what I'm not brave enough to.



,



I walk home alone.

The path feels longer somehow, like the sidewalk's stretching just to ask me if I'm sure.

The air's heavy.

The sun is out, but it doesn't reach me.

And when I push open the front door, it creaks the way it always does—but today, even that feels loud.

The house is still.

Too still.

I don't say hello. Don't drop my bag. I don't even pause.

I walk past the kitchen, through the hallway, and straight upstairs.

To the classroom.

It's always been mine—sort of.

Mom painted here before she got sick. It used to smell like lemons and oil paint. Now it just smells like dust and something unfinished.

I open the door carefully, like the room's still holding its breath for her.

The light filters in soft and pale, slanting across cracked tiles and stacked canvases. And in the far corner—the flower painting.

The one I made before everything.

Before rules.

Before pretending.

Before Oakley said *she's taken*.

I walk toward it slowly, like it might disappear if I move too fast.

The colors look different now.

Too soft. Too unsure. Too... *safe*.

It's beautiful, in that almost kind of way.

But it doesn't feel like me anymore.  
So I pick it up.  
And I slide it behind the others.  
Carefully. Gently. Like tucking away a memory you're not  
ready to destroy—but can't keep looking at, either.  
And just like that—it's gone.  
I sit on the floor, my back against the cold wall.  
I don't cry.  
I just... start to draw.  
Not because I want to.  
Because I *have to*.  
Because if I don't put these feelings somewhere, they'll tear  
holes through my chest.  
So I pull a sheet of paper close and let my pencil move.  
Lines first.  
Then shadows.  
A shoulder I know too well.  
A hand that always trembles before it reaches for mine.  
The curve of a back that's carried more than it should've.  
I draw Oakley without meaning to.  
The boy who sat beside me and didn't touch me, even when I  
wanted him to.  
The boy who kissed my shoulder so gently it ached.  
The boy who whispered *she's taken* and didn't take it back.  
Every stroke feels like a secret I don't know how to say out  
loud.  
Every mark is a memory I'm not ready to call love—but can't  
call anything else.  
I don't stop.  
Not even when my fingers ache.  
Not even when my throat tightens.

Because I need to see him.

Because I *miss* him.

And not just today.

Not just since the text.

I think I've been missing him since the first moment I realized  
he'd always been there.

I draw and draw until the whole page hums with quiet grief.

And then I stop.

Let the pencil fall from my hand.

Let my eyes drift to the windowsill.

That's where my phone is now.

I'd set it there the second I walked in.

Far enough away to avoid.

Close enough to feel it staring at me.

The message is still there.

Just my name.

*Sophia.*

And maybe I'm imagining it, but it feels like it's waiting for  
me to soften.

Waiting for me to say something kind.

I walk over.

Pick it up slowly.

Turn it over.

I don't open the message.

Don't reply.

But I hold the phone to my chest.

Just for a second.

Like maybe that counts for something.

Like maybe he'll feel it, wherever he is.

Because I want to answer.

God, I do.

But I don't know how to answer without opening a door I  
promised we wouldn't walk through.

So I don't.

Not yet.

But I press my palm to the screen—gently.

Like maybe love doesn't always need words.

And in the silence, I whisper—just to myself—

“I miss you.”

Even if he can't hear it.

Even if I'm still too scared to say it out loud.

## Oakley

*I thought this would feel better.*

The quad is loud today. But not in a way that touches me.

Maya's laughing across the lawn. Someone's tossing a frisbee too hard. The breeze is just warm enough to feel like spring.

And yet—

I can't hear anything but the message I didn't get.

No reply.

Twenty-two hours since I sent her name.

*Sophia.*

One word. No punctuation. No context. Just the softest kind of plea.

And she didn't answer.

I walk slower than usual, the weight of silence settling behind my ribs. My hoodie's back in my closet now—folded exactly the way she left it. Neat. Careful. Like she was trying not to leave a trace.

But it still smells like her.

And I'm still looking for her in places she isn't.

I spot her across the lawn, next to Maya. She's laughing—

soft, easy—and her braid is tight. She only does that when she's overthinking. When her hands need something to do so her brain doesn't spiral.

I almost smile.

Almost.

But she doesn't look at me.

And I don't know if she didn't see me—or chose not to.

I pause behind a tree, letting a group pass. The ache in my chest doesn't spike. It just *stays*. Constant. Familiar. Like it's learning how to live there.

I used to be able to read her without trying.

Today, she's unreadable.



,

I drift through the day without anchoring to anything.

In class, I try to focus—but all I write are her initials in the margins.

I scribble them out.

Rewrite them.

Then just stare.

I miss her.

Even though it hasn't been long.

Even though we said it would be easier this way.

It's not.

I keep thinking about yesterday. The rules. The way she looked when she said *no kissing*.

How her cheeks flushed. How she looked down.

I didn't say anything. But something in me cracked open.

Because that rule?

That was the one that hurt the most.



,

Asher finds me after class. He doesn't say hi—just walks beside me until we find a bench in the shade. The kind we always end up at without planning to.

He doesn't ask anything. Just sits there, ankles crossed, waiting for me to say it.

Eventually, I do.

"I think she's pulling away."

He looks at me. Quiet. Gentle. "And you're scared you pushed her first?"

I nod, throat tight. "I didn't mean to. I just... I thought protecting her meant saying something."

Asher leans back, his voice slow and steady. "You're not wrong for wanting to keep her safe."

"I just don't know if I'm still the one who makes her feel that way."

He doesn't say anything for a second. Then, softly:

"Sometimes people don't need space from you. They need space from how much they feel."

I glance at him. "What if I'm not the kind of person you're supposed to feel too much for?"

Asher snorts quietly. "Then she wouldn't have fallen asleep in your arms, Oak."

I blink. He shrugs.

"I've seen her. She doesn't trust people easily. But she trusted you. Still does. Even if it's quiet right now."

I breathe in. Let it settle somewhere softer. "Thanks."

He nods once, then stands. Squeezes my shoulder before heading off, muttering something about protein bars and emotional support snacks.

And I sit there for a long time.

Long enough for the quad to start emptying.

Long enough for the ache to settle into something manageable.



,



I check my phone again before bed.

Still nothing.

The ache doesn't flare—it just tightens. Familiar now.

But I don't send another text.

Because she knows where to find me.

And tomorrow, I have nowhere to be.

No classes.

No rules.

Just hours I don't know how to fill.

I stare at my calendar, then at the photo beside it—one of me and Jamie after our first win. Sophia took it. Her thumb was in the corner.

It's blurry.

Perfect.

I look back down at the calendar.

There's a small circle around the date—Soph's doing. She said she liked to mark the quiet days. The ones that didn't hold anything except possibility.

Maybe I need one of those.

Maybe I need noise and speed and something that drowns out the thinking.

So tomorrow?

I'll go to the track.

Not to run from her.

Not to forget.

Just to remember how to move forward.

*To let my body lead where my heart can't.*

Even if it's just for a little while.

Even if it's just in circles.

Because right now?

*That's the only kind of movement that doesn't hurt.*

## Oakley

Jamie's door is cracked open when I wake.

He's sprawled sideways across his bed, one arm dangling off the edge like he gave up mid-sentence. His alarm has gone off twice already—soft and relentless—and still, he hasn't moved. His hair's a mess. His face is smushed against the pillow. He looks peaceful.

And for a second—just a second—I almost wish I could crawl into that kind of quiet. That kind of forget.

But I can't.

Because the second thing I see is my phone, screen-up on my chest.

Still blank.

Thirty-seven hours. Four minutes.

Still nothing.

No "I saw it, just needed space." No three dots. No *hey*.

Just silence. From the girl who used to answer before the message even finished sending.

I scroll down slowly.

Past her voice note—laughing, breathless, saying my name

like it tasted sweet.

Past the selfie she sent in my shirt. Eyes bright, captioned:  
*“Am I pulling it off or did you curse it?”*

And then I stop.

Right on the one that breaks me a little more every time.

*“I feel safest when I’m with you. You know that, right?”*

I shut my eyes, like that’ll soften the blow.

What if I broke the only place she ever felt safe?

I open Notes. Type out a message I’ll never send.

*just tell me if i ruined it.*

I delete it.

Because I already know.

Theo’s gone. Left a note on the fridge.

I don’t read it.

I don’t eat.

I don’t think.

I just move.



,

The roads are quiet. My duffel’s in the passenger seat, the hoodie

she folded stuffed inside like an ache I don't know where else to put.

I drive to the track.

Because I need motion. Noise. Burn.

The kind of ache that drowns the other one out.

The world is still waking when I pull into pit lane.

Fog still clings to the tarmac like a whisper.

The sky is pale. Gentle. Nothing like the war inside me.

I suit up slowly.

Fireproofs. Zip. Gloves. Snap.

Helmet down. Everything tight.

My hands are already shaking.

Good. Let them.

The car hums under me—familiar. Steady.

One of the only things that still knows what to do with me.

The pit radio crackles in my ear. I don't answer.

I pull out.

I don't ease in.

I *launch*.



,

First lap—tight.

Brakes cold. Tires stiff. Gearbox jerks like it forgot my rhythm.  
Second—faster.

I find the apex, but it takes effort. My wrists scream at every  
adjustment.

Third—reckless.

The speed climbs.

**280.**

**297.**

**303**

**317.**

I hold it.

My chest feels like it's caving in from the inside out.

My neck pulls with the weight of every turn.

My back cramps. My legs cramp. I don't blink.

Sweat pools in the curve of my spine. Soaks the collar of my  
fireproofs.

The harness digs into my ribs so tight I think it might bruise.

And I still don't slow down.

Because this—*this*—is the only place I still make sense.

Where every ache is earned.

Where silence doesn't mean distance. It means discipline.

But today...

The track feels like a cage.

Turn 12.

The memory hits too hard to dodge.

Sophia—

Up on her toes behind the pit wall. She couldn't see over the  
barrier. So I lifted her, arms slung around my neck, her laugh

pressed into my shoulder.

*"Don't crash," she whispered. Soft. Serious. "I really don't feel like crying today."*

Her hand on my chest. Right over my heart.

*"You don't have to win. Just come back safe."*

No one ever said that before. Not about the race. Not about me.

Just her.

I take the turn too sharp.

Slam the brakes too late.

The tires scream. My chest hits the belts. My ribs flash pain.

I don't care.

I keep going.

Because maybe she wasn't just my safety.

Maybe she was my finish line too.

Another corner. Another lap.

My body shifts with the weight of the turn—muscle, breath, memory.

And before I can stop it, she's there again.

Sophia.

In my cap.

Backwards and crooked, nearly falling off her head.

She twirls once in the center of the garage, arms out like she's trying to catch the whole world. Her laugh catching in the rafters, too bright for a place built for engines and sweat.

*"Relax, Kingsley," she calls, hands on her hips. "I look better in it anyway."*

I blink at her.

She grins wider.

Then runs.

Full sprint—around the car, behind the stacks of tires, past Theo who's halfway through a protein bar and doesn't even flinch.

*"This is character development, Oakley!"* she yells. *"I'm you now. Where's my tragic backstory and commitment issues?"*

I start after her.

*"You've got three seconds before I tackle you."*

She gasps. *"Oh no. Not the golden boy. Whatever shall I do?"*

She ducks left. I cut right.

I catch her at the waist just before she slips behind the pit wall.

She squeals—louder than necessary—and it hits me square in the chest.

I spin her once, her laugh tucked into my neck.

When I set her down, she doesn't move away.

Just stands there—breathless, pink-cheeked, glowing.

*"You're ridiculous,"* I say softly.

*"And you love it,"* she whispers, teasing—then quieter, like it slipped out too honest.

I glance down at her.

The cap's slipping sideways on her head. My cap.

So I reach up. Gently fix it.

Brush the loose curl behind her ear while I'm there.

And then, just—

I press a kiss to her forehead.

Quick. Soft. Not a joke. Not a tease.

Just real.

Her fingers curl into my shirt like she's trying to hold the moment in place.

*"Promise you'll never stop letting me steal from you."*

I hold out my pinky.  
She links it.  
And now—now the turn's too sharp.  
The tires scream.  
And my hands shake on the wheel.  
Because I'd give anything to be caught again.  
To be stolen from.  
To be hers, just a little longer.



,

I don't know how long I stay on the track.  
Three hours. Maybe more.  
By the time I pull back into pit lane, I can't lift my arms.  
My gloves feel soaked. My neck's burning. My thighs locked.  
I sit in the cockpit, helmet still on.  
Breathing too fast. Vision tunneling.  
Like my heart kept racing long after the wheels stopped.  
And all I want—  
Is to tell her I didn't crash.  
But I did.  
Just not the kind that shows up on x-rays.





,

I don't go back to the dorm.

I drive straight to campus. Still in my overalls—tied low around my hips. Sweat drying on my collarbone. Hands still trembling.

And then I see her.

Across the quad.

Not laughing.

Not with anyone.

Just walking. Head low. Sleeves pulled over her hands.

Her hair's braided. The way she does when she's thinking too much.

Her eyes lift.

She sees me.

And for one beat—one heartbeat—it's like everything inside me stills.

Her gaze softens. Just slightly. Like maybe she still sees me underneath everything I've turned into.

But I look away.

Because if I don't, I'll fall apart.

We used to find each other without trying.

Now I don't know if she's even searching.

Or maybe—

She is.

And I'm the one who turned away.



,

Jamie's the one who finds me when I finally make it back to the dorm.

I don't say anything.

Just drop my bag and slide down the wall. Sit on the floor, knees bent. Head heavy.

My body feels bruised from the inside out.

My heart louder than it should be.

Jamie kneels beside me.

Checks my forehead like I'm a fever he doesn't believe.

Then disappears.

Comes back with a cold water bottle.

Drops it in my lap.

"Fake dating and reckless driving," he mutters. "Solid coping strategy."

It's a joke. But not really.

I whisper, "She hasn't answered me."

And Jamie doesn't joke again.

He just sits.

Right beside me.

Shoulder pressed to mine.

Not waiting for me to say more.

Not asking me to explain.

Just staying.

That's Jamie's love language.

He won't ask how I feel.

He'll just sit with it. Carry some of the weight if I let him.

I rest my head against the wall. Let the ache breathe.

"Didn't wake up when you left," he says eventually.

"Didn't want you to," I admit. "You'd have told me not to go."

He shrugs. "Yeah. But I would've gone with you."

I shut my eyes.

Swallow.

"I tried to outrun it."

He doesn't speak.

"Did you?" he asks quietly.

I think of her silence. Her hoodie. The bruise her absence left behind.

"No."

And that's the truth.

He lets his head fall back too. Eyes shut.

"You're not as alone as you think."

And I believe him.

Even if it still hurts.

I take a sip of water.

Let the cold burn down. Let it stay.

"I don't think I know how to be okay anymore."

Jamie's voice is low.

Steady. Familiar.

"Then don't try yet. Just breathe. I've got you."

I nod.

And we sit like that.

Me—in sweat-damp overalls.

Heart cracked open.

Nothing fixed.

And him—beside me.

Quiet. Present. Solid in the way I forgot people could be.

And I let myself finally feel it.

Not the adrenaline.

Not the hurt.

Just the weight of loving someone who might not be able to  
love you back the same way.

And if she's pulling away to protect herself—  
then maybe loving her means I let her.

## Sophia

I wasn't looking for him.

Not really.

But then... there he was.

Across the quad, backlit by the afternoon sun, half out of breath—his overalls tied around his waist, shirt clinging to his chest like he hadn't even changed after racing. His curls stuck to his forehead. His shoulders were tense. He looked like the world had taken a little too much from him and forgot to give any of it back.

And then he saw me.

Eyes wide. Breath still uneven.

For just a second, he looked like he might stay.

Like he might walk toward me. Say something. Do something.

But his eyes dropped.

And he turned.

No words.

No pause.

Just gone.



,

Back at the dorm, it's quiet in the way only safe places are.

The kind of quiet you don't notice until you realize your shoulders have dropped.

Maya's curled up on her bed, fingers wrapped around a chipped mug of tea. Sienna's draped upside down over hers, her hair a dark waterfall trailing to the floor as she hums *Cinnamon Girl* under her breath.

No one says anything at first.

But I feel it—their eyes, the softness in the air. The way you feel seen even before you're ready.

Then—

"You saw him," Maya says gently. Not a question. Not an accusation. Just something true.

I nod.

Once.

Sienna flips upright with a groan and a hair toss worthy of a drama series. "And I'm guessing he looked like roadkill that forgot to hydrate?"

Maya glares. "Sisi—"

"I mean it lovingly," she defends. "The boy has that 'I've been emotionally collapsed for three business days' look. It's tragic. And hot. But mostly tragic."

I almost smile. It tugs at the edge of my mouth before fading again.

Maya sets down her tea and scoots to the edge of her bed. Her

voice softens. "What happened?"

I curl tighter into myself. Legs pulled up. Chin resting on my knees.

"He looked like he'd been running," I whisper. "Like... like he didn't know how to stop moving. And when he saw me... he didn't say anything. Just turned around and walked away."

Silence.

Sienna tilts her head. "Did you want him to come over?"

I don't answer.

But Maya does, quietly. "You wanted to know he still cared."

My throat tightens.

I nod.

"Part of me still does," I admit.

And that's all I say. That's all I need to say.

The room wraps around me. Soft. Steady.

No one pushes. No one pries.

Sienna sighs dramatically, flopping back into her pillows. "You know, for a fake couple, you two are doing a really terrible job at faking."

That makes me laugh. Quiet. Real. It bubbles up without asking for permission.

Maya reaches out and squeezes my hand.

"It's okay to feel it," she says softly. "Even when it hurts."

Later that night, I lie awake in the dark.

The room is quiet. Still. The kind of stillness that feels like it might shatter if you breathe too loud.

My phone is on my pillow, screen dim, Oakley's name still sitting at the top of our chat.

Two days ago, he texted me. Just one word.

*Sophia.*

I didn't reply.

Not because I didn't want to.

Because I didn't know how.

Because everything inside me still feels too raw. Too full. Too scared.

But now?

I pick up my phone.

And this time, I don't hesitate.

**Me:** *Was that on purpose?*

The reply doesn't come right away. But it comes.

**Oak:** *Seeing you?*

**Oak:** No.

**Oak:** *But I think some part of me was hoping you'd be there.*

My chest pulls tight. My fingers shake.

**Me:** *You looked so tired.*

There's a pause. Just a beat.

Then—

**Oak:** *Not tired of you.*

**Oak:** *Never that.*

I read it again.



And again.

And then I press the phone close to my chest.

Not to cry.

Just to feel.

Because somehow, even in silence, even in this almost... *he's still here.*

And maybe that's enough.

Just for tonight.

## Oakley

She's sitting on the ledge outside her building when I see her.

Knees pulled up. Chin resting on them. Hair tucked behind one ear, messy in a way that makes her look like herself.

There's a pencil in her hand. She's not drawing. Just... turning it over and over between her fingers. Like she doesn't know what else to do with her hands.

She hasn't seen me yet.

And I could walk away.

But I don't.

She looks up when I stop a few feet away.

It's quiet for a second—longer than it should be.

But it's not heavy.

It's us.

She doesn't smile. But she doesn't look away.

"Hey," I say, like it doesn't mean anything.

*Like I haven't been waiting two days for her to look at me again.*

"Hey," she echoes, soft.

Her voice is tired. But not cold.

We just... stand there.

Like neither of us is sure who's allowed to speak first.  
Then I scratch the back of my neck and say,  
"I wasn't trying to make it weird. Back then. Or... now."  
Her head tilts slightly. I brace for a shrug.  
But she surprises me.  
"You didn't," she says quietly.  
"It's just... everything else did."  
That hits harder than it should.  
There's a bench tucked under one of the trees nearby. She  
glances at it. I follow her gaze.  
Neither of us says "*want to sit?*"  
We just walk toward it at the same time.  
The air smells like old books and spring trying too hard.  
She sits first. I leave space between us—but not too much.  
She hugs her arms loosely around her waist. Looks down at  
the concrete. Then up at the clouds.  
*I can't stop looking at her.*  
"I've been thinking a lot," I murmur.  
She hums.  
"I've been trying not to."  
A small smile twitches at her mouth.  
We both look forward again.  
It's a kind of quiet we used to be good at.  
The kind that didn't need filling.  
Then, as she adjusts her sleeve, her hand drops beside mine  
on the bench.  
Her pinky brushes mine.  
Not on purpose.  
I don't think.  
But I don't move.  
And she doesn't either.

That tiny touch—barely there, barely real—feels like a thousand words we're both too scared to say.

I hold my breath. She doesn't pull away.

We stay like that.

Just... there.

Eventually, she checks her phone.

"I should go. Maya's probably hunting me down."

I nod. But I don't stand yet.

She hesitates.

Like maybe she wants me to say something.

Like maybe she'd stay if I asked.

But I don't.

And then she smiles.

Soft. The kind of smile that doesn't hurt anymore.

"See you around, Kingsley."

My chest aches. Not from the name.

From the way she says it.

Like she means it.

And when she walks away, I don't try to stop her.

But I keep my hand where hers had been.

Just for a little longer.

## Oakley

She's at the café before me.

Standing near the chalkboard menu, head tilted like she's weighing complex philosophical questions instead of deciding between almond and oat milk.

I know what she's going to order.

She knows I know.

Still, I wait.

"Still pretending you don't always get the same thing?" I ask, sliding up beside her.

She glances at me with that soft, unimpressed expression that's somehow become one of my favorite things to look at.

"Excuse me," she says, "I am unpredictable and mysterious."

I nod solemnly. "Of course. The most elusive woman to ever get the exact same iced vanilla oat milk latte five times in a row."

"You stalk my drink order?"

"I stalk your everything," I say before I can stop myself.

She pauses.

Then smirks. "Still better than anything Hunter ever said."

And just like that, I can breathe again.

We take our drinks to a table outside—shady, quiet, familiar.

She tucks her feet under her on the chair like she always does when she's comfortable, like the world softens under her without asking.

I place a tray of fries between us.

She doesn't wait for an invitation. Just reaches over and grabs one like it belongs to her.

I raise an eyebrow. "Excuse you."

She blinks, all innocent. "What?"

"Those fries were earned with sweat, trauma, and at least four hours of cardio."

"Then I'm stealing them as reparations."

"That's not how reparations work."

"That's how these work," she says, and takes another.

I narrow my eyes at her, but my mouth twitches.

"You've stolen two."

"You stole my sanity in ninth grade," she says without blinking. "I'm still behind."

I laugh.

Out loud.

She looks surprised. Like she wasn't expecting to pull it from me.

I wasn't expecting it either.

She grins like she won something.

Maybe she did.

"You're not even denying it," she says.

"I'm just impressed you remember ninth grade."

"Oh please," she says, biting into another fry, "you had floppy hair, a weird obsession with wearing your backpack on one shoulder, and the world's most tragic lowercase 'a' in your handwriting. Unforgettable."

"That was a style choice."

"That was a war crime."

I laugh. Loud. Like I mean it. Like I forgot how easy it is with her when we're like this—when nothing's breaking.

She steals more fries. I let her. We talk.

About nothing. About everything.

She tells me Sienna fell off her desk chair last night while trying to plug in fairy lights.

I tell her Jamie tried to make a romantic meal for someone but accidentally used salt instead of sugar in the pasta sauce.

She laughs. Like really laughs.

And I forget that things ever felt broken.

Theo walks past, coffee in one hand, his phone in the other. He glances at us, then pauses.

"Look at you," he says to me, smiling. "All grounded and shit."

Sophia lifts an eyebrow. "Grounded?"

Theo shrugs. "You just haven't looked like you wanted to punch a tree in a while. That's all."

Then he keeps walking.

She watches me after he leaves. Doesn't say anything.

But I think she's seeing it too.

She leans forward again to steal another fry and bumps my hand.

She doesn't move. Neither do I.

Our fingers rest beside each other. Close.

Not touching. But close.

My heart stutters. My throat does that soft, aching thing.

"You say something dumb again," she says, "and I'm taking the whole tray."

I grin. "I was gonna say you look pretty."

She stares at me for a second.

Rolls her eyes.

But she's smiling.

"So dumb," she mutters.

Still doesn't pull her hand away.

When we finally get up, she falls into step beside me, sipping the last of her drink, straw squeaking gently against the ice.

She doesn't reach for my hand. Doesn't lean in.

But she stays close. Her shoulder brushing mine every few steps.

And when she says, "See you tomorrow, Oak,"

*Oak.*

I think I actually believe her.



## Sophia

It's late, and we're still pretending the night is light.

Sienna's sprawled across my bed, legs up the wall, dramatically recounting how Oakley looked at me earlier like I'd personally set fire to his entire bloodline just for stealing one fry. Maya's curled beneath her blanket, eyes closed but still listening, smiling quietly into her pillow like she's memorizing the warmth of this moment before it slips away.

"You saw it, right?" Sienna says, eyes wild. "Like, the man *gasp*ed. He looked at you like he just witnessed God and betrayal at the same time."

I laugh, soft and tired. "He always overreacts."

"He always looks at you like that," Maya murmurs.

It goes quiet after that.

Not awkward. Not sharp.

Just the kind of quiet that wraps itself around the truth.

I sit up slowly. My chest is already too full.

And then, without even opening her eyes, Sienna whispers, "Go."

I don't even tie my laces. I just leave.

The hallway outside Oakley's dorm is dim and hushed, the world muffled like it's holding its breath.

I knock gently.

Theo opens the door in a faded old band t-shirt and plaid pajama pants. His eyes flick to mine, and his whole face softens like this isn't the first time he's imagined this exact moment.

He doesn't ask anything.

He just steps back and says,

"He'll sleep better if you're here."

Then he disappears back inside his room like this is normal.

Like I belong here again.

Oakley's asleep.

His back is half-turned toward me, one arm curled under the pillow— or hugging it, as if he needed the physical touch to feel like he isn't sleeping alone. Holding on? Or being held. The other stretched across the bed like maybe he reached out for someone who never came. The blanket's twisted around his legs, hoodie bunched at the elbows, skin visible at his waist where it's ridden up.

He looks... young like this.

Younger than he should.

Like no one ever gave him permission to stop being afraid.

Like childhood was something taken from him before he even knew how to ask for more.

Like no one ever really let him rest.

And somehow, that's what undoes me.

Not the hoodie. Not the stillness.

But how *used to it* he looks.

I sit on the edge of the bed. Slow. Careful. My hands press into the mattress like I need to ground myself before I can decide what I'm doing here.

Then I lie down—on top of the covers, facing him, not touching.

Just near. Just breathing in the same space.

And then...

He moves.

Still asleep. Still dreaming. But his body knows.

His arm slides across my waist.

His hand settles between my shoulder blades.

He pulls me in—not rough, not sudden. Just like he never unlearned how to hold me.

His forehead brushes against mine.

And he lets out the softest exhale—like his lungs forgot how to do that until now.

He doesn't wake up.

He just lets me be there.

And I let him hold me like he never stopped wanting to.

I don't speak. Don't move. Don't even blink too hard.

I just stay.

Because something in us still fits. Because I didn't want to leave in the first place. Because even now—wrapped in silence and sweatshirt cotton and half-shed grief—he feels like home.

And in the dark, with his arms around me, I let myself believe it—

*We're okay now.*

## Sophia

The text comes in at 6:07 p.m.

**Oak:**

*so are we like... going together to this thing?  
as fake couple duties demand*

I stare at the message for a second longer than I need to. Then I type:

**Me:**

*i guess we probably should, right?*

**Oak:**

*yeah  
you should send me a pic of what you're wearing  
so i can match  
(or pretend i tried to)*

I hesitate, flipping the camera and angling just right. The bow, the mirror, the flush in my cheeks.

*Send.*

**Me:**

*photo attached*

A full minute goes by. Then—

**Oak:**

*i was gonna say i'd try to match*

*but now i think i'll just black out the second i see you*

I bite my lip. Toss the phone face-down. Try not to smile like a complete idiot.

Maya's laid out dress options across my mattress, and Sienna's standing in the doorway like my personal stylist-slash-menace.

I end up in the black dress. The one I didn't plan to wear.

Black halter-neck. Deep V. Ties at the neck in a soft bow that rests right at the base of my spine. The bodice hugs like it was stitched for me, ruching gently at the waist. Simple. Short. Powerful.

Sienna whistles when I turn around.

"Yeah, you're gonna kill him."

"Shut up," I mumble, tugging at the hem.

"You shut up," she says sweetly. "You're not even denying it."

I tie the bow at the back of my neck, and for a second—just as the fabric shifts—my fingertips brush the matching semicolon

tattoo behind my neck.

Maya's curling my hair. Sienna's adjusting the straps. But that tiny touch stops me cold.

He has it too. Same ink. Same place.

*I don't know why it hits so hard tonight.*

Maya just smiles and hands me her silver clutch.



,

We meet at the steps.

I'm pretending I'm not nervous when he turns around—mid-conversation, drink in his hand, sleeves rolled to his elbows, black button-up hanging open over a white fitted tee. His chain catches the light, his hair a little messy like he didn't even try.

And then he sees me.

And stops.

"Jesus," he breathes, eyes dragging over the bow at the back of my neck, the curve of the dress, my face.

"I saw the photo but—"

He stops.

Looks at me like I'm gravity.

"You're actually gonna make me malfunction."

His dimples show a second later.

And then he steps closer.

He doesn't say anything else—just takes my hand.

Then lifts it to his lips.

And kisses it.

Slow.

Warm.

Like he's not faking a thing.

Theo leans in with a grin.

"Ten bucks says he trips over his own feet before the night ends."

My cheeks burn, but I don't look away. I just squeeze his hand a little tighter, like that'll keep me steady.

He leans in, eyes soft and so, so sure. "What?" he asks—like he didn't even hear Theo, like I'm the only thing in the room.

— — —

The party's loud. Gold streamers hang half-falling from the ceiling. The music's too heavy in the walls, lights shifting colors like they don't know what they want to be.

But Oakley stays near me. Always close enough to touch. He makes me laugh three times. I elbow him twice. He pretends to be offended. I catch him watching me when I'm not looking.

We sit on the edge of someone's couch. I drink half a soda. He steals the rest.

At some point, someone calls out:

*"They look real, right? Like actually dating?"*

Oakley just grins and sips my drink.

I roll my eyes. But I don't move away.

Later, I wander down the hall just to breathe. Oakley had disappeared a few minutes ago, and I can't find the others. The party noise is starting to blur together—too many voices, too much heat.

The door at the end of the hall is cracked open. Just slightly. Just enough to let sound bleed through—music muffled, laughter fading into something softer.

I step closer, hesitating only a second.

And then I slip inside.

Only to catch my breath.

He's already there.

He doesn't move.

Not when he sees me. Not when the door clicks shut behind me. He just turns away from the window and watches *me*.

And suddenly, everything feels louder.

My pulse.

My breath.

The silence between us.

He turns, slow and deliberate, and closes the door the rest of the way. It clicks into place like a secret being sealed.

Then it's just us.

The air thickens.

He looks at me.

But not just *at* me—*through* me.

His eyes drop once—slowly—to the bow tied at the base of my neck. Then lower. The hem of the dress. The shape it leaves behind.

And then back to my face, like he's trying not to let it show just how *badly* he's losing this moment.

I step back. Barely. But it's enough.

My spine meets the wall without meaning to.

His feet carry him closer, one soft step at a time. Not rushing. Not hesitating.

Just drawn.

The kind of drawn that hurts.

His hand lifts, slow and measured, like he's giving me every chance to stop him.

He presses it to the wall beside my head. Not touching me—but close. So close my skin sparks anyway.

His chest is nearly brushing mine now.



The space between us has never felt smaller.

Or more dangerous.

We don't touch.

But I feel him *everywhere*

Then—his other hand rises. Pauses just below my chin.  
Hesitant. Careful.

I don't move.

His fingers gently tilt my chin up, just enough that our eyes  
fully meet. It's not possessive. It's not forceful. Just... reverent.

Like he's asking permission without a single word.

His thumb doesn't even graze my skin. But the nearness alone  
is enough to make my knees feel unreliable.

I think I forget how to breathe.

He leans in just a breath more, like he's trying to memorize  
this angle. His chain catches the low light. His breath fans  
against my cheek.

One shift and we'd be there.

One shift and this would stop being pretend.

He looks at me like he's holding something back so sharp it  
might cut him open. And I think I might be looking at him the  
same way.

My throat tightens.

His eyes flick to my mouth.

My hand twitches at my side.

Neither of us moves.

But everything does.

The tension wraps around us like a second skin—hot and  
electric and real.

My breath shakes, and he notices.

His eyes soften. Just barely.

But it's enough to ruin me.

Then his gaze flickers back to mine.

And it holds.

Longer than it should.

Longer than it's safe.

My breath catches. So does his.

And then—

“Sophia?”

A voice. Muffled. Distant. But it's real.

We both freeze.

I blink.

He blinks.

His hand drops first.

The moment splits open.

He runs a hand through his hair—messy, flustered, like he forgot how to exist for a second. I notice his cheeks blush even in the dim light and I laugh, soft and under my breath, trying to breathe like I wasn't seconds from losing my mind.

We don't speak.

Not yet.

But the air between us has changed. Shifted. Deepened.

I brush past him as I leave.

His hand barely grazes my wrist. Maybe by accident. Maybe not.

And for one stupid, aching second—

I wish they hadn't called my name.

## Oakley

Sophia's still laughing.

She's holding onto my arm, loose and light, head tilted back just enough to show the bow at the base of her neck. Her perfume's still clinging to her, and now it's in the air around me—warm and soft and hers.

We're walking toward the car. Her heels click gently on the pavement, and her fingers brush mine like she's not thinking about it—like she *wants* to touch me and just doesn't know what it means yet.

She's glowing.

And for one second, I forget.

I forget about everything.

And then I hear it.

*"Didn't think a girl like that would go for someone so broken."*

Hunter's voice. Low. Deliberate. Sharp like a knife he's been waiting to slide between my ribs.

He says it like she's a prize I never deserved.

Like I *should've known better* than to think someone like her could ever choose someone like me.

Sophia doesn't hear it.  
She's still walking. Still laughing.  
Still safe in the world where this night is just soft and okay.  
But I stop.  
Dead still.  
The sound cuts through my chest like it belongs there.  
My jaw clenches. My fists curl. I turn before I can even think.  
Hunter's standing a few feet behind us, hands in his pockets,  
pretending like the words didn't fall out of his mouth on purpose.  
Like he didn't mean to hit where it hurts the most.  
Theo's faster than me—he always has been. He catches my  
arm with just enough force to ground me.  
“Don't,” he says low. Firm. “Not here.”  
But he doesn't let go.  
And I don't walk away.  
I stare at Hunter.  
Every inch of me is screaming to do something—say more,  
shout, swing.  
Something.  
But I don't.  
I just take a step forward.  
Lean in just enough.  
And say it quiet. Final. Like a truth I know will stick.  
*“You never did handle not being chosen well.”*  
Hunter doesn't answer.  
But I see the way his eyes flicker. The split second of some-  
thing that looks too much like fear and not enough like regret.  
And that's enough.  
Barely.  
I turn back around. Shoulders tight. Jaw aching from how  
hard I'm holding it all in.

Sophia's at the curb now. She's still talking—something soft about Maya and tons of glitter and how Asher kept trying to spike the punch and failed miserably.

She didn't hear it.

She didn't see the way I almost *let go* of the part of me that's been holding on so tight to staying calm for her.

But I'm not calm now.

I'm shaking.

Hands tucked into my pockets, knuckles still curled, breath shallow like it hasn't come all the way back.

We walk the rest of the way to the car without her noticing.

But the silence in me isn't silence anymore.

It's thunder. Coiled and waiting.

And I know—if he says something like that again, when she *can* hear it?

I won't be this quiet.

## Oakley

There are days that feel like breathing doesn't take effort.

Today is one of them.

We're spread out on the grass behind the dorms—blankets under our backs, snacks half-eaten in bags that keep rustling every time someone moves. Someone brought peanut butter cups. Someone brought too many sour gummies. Someone (Asher) already dropped two soda cans, and they both exploded.

The sun's high, but the breeze cuts it soft. Everything feels... weightless. Like even my ribs forgot they were supposed to stay tight.

Sophia's sitting cross-legged, sipping from a apple juice box like it's some rare imported treasure. Her hair's down, curling a little at the ends, and there's this tiny glitter sticker on her cheek—Sienna's doing, probably. She has this faint sunburn on her nose that she hasn't noticed yet.

I'm stretched out beside her, one leg bent, arms behind my head.

And then, without saying anything, I shift and rest my head in her lap.

She stiffens for maybe half a second. Then relaxes.

Her fingers find my hair like they were meant to.

No hesitation.

No pretending.

“You’ve been too quiet,” she says eventually, twirling a strand at the crown of my head.

I hum. “Just enjoying the view.”

Sienna groans loudly from across the blanket. “If this turns into a romantic moment, I swear to god I will throw myself into the nearest recycling bin.”

“Recycle yourself, coward,” Asher adds, already halfway through a bag of sour gummies, lying facedown like the sun offended him.

Jamie, already filming, pans his phone toward her. “Day seven of observing the mating habits of university couples. The female initiates touch. The male submits.”

Theo tosses a grape at Jamie. “Let them have their delusional honeymoon phase.”

Sophia glares at them but doesn’t stop stroking my hair.

“You two are disgusting,” Sienna adds, plopping a chip into Maya’s mouth like a communion wafer.

“Thank you, baby,” Maya mumbles.

“You’re welcome, my emotionally constipated angel.”

“STOP feeding her like I’m not right here,” Asher groans tossing the empty bag of gummies on Sienna. “I’m starving and in a committed relationship with air.”

“You’re in a committed relationship with being dramatic,” Sienna mutters, then shoves a fruit roll-up into his mouth. “Say ‘thank you,’ peasant.”

“I—*mmghff*—” Asher tries, nearly choking.

Theo squints at the sun and lies dramatically across the

blanket. "Can we normalize group cuddling again? I'm tired of only witnessing affection from afar."

Maya deadpans: "This isn't theater, Theo."

"Everything's theater if you're dramatic enough."

"I have a degree in suffering," Theo adds, hands to the sky.

"Bachelor of Emotional Turmoil, minor in Passive Aggression," Sophia offers.

"Full ride scholarship," I say, eyes still closed.

"Valedictorian of emotional repression," Jamie mutters.

Asher complains. "Can someone please tell Oakley to stop looking like a man in a shampoo commercial?"

Sienna flops onto her side. "He's literally getting his hair stroked like a Victorian house cat. What do you expect?"

"I expect some self-respect idiots."

"I expect snacks," Jamie mutters. "Why does this blanket feel like it only feeds the emotionally entangled?"

"We're not emotionally entangled," Sophia says too quickly.

Sienna lifts a brow. "Aww, babe. You think we believe you."

Sophia throws a grape at her. "Choke on it."

"You'd miss me," Sienna sings.

Maya hums thoughtfully. "I'd maybe hesitate. Once."

The banter spirals. It's constant. Wild. Dumb.

It feels like someone pressed pause on everything else.

I tune them out for a second, letting Sophia's fingers keep moving.

She's barely touching me—just brushing behind my ear, tracing the edge of my hairline like it's nothing.

But my chest is so full I might choke on it.

I open my eyes and look up at her.

She's laughing at something Sienna said. Her head tipped back. That glitter catching the light. She looks happy.



Not just smiling.

Happy.

And I want to hold it. All of it. Long enough to feel like I belong here.

"Stop looking at me like that," she mutters when she notices I'm staring.

"Like what?"

"Like you're about to say something fake-boyfriendly and make my brain short-circuit."

I grin. "I wasn't. But now that you mention it..."

She groans, grabbing a grape from the container beside her and dropping it directly into my mouth.

I chew. Swallow.

Then: "You'd make a terrible grape-thrower."

"You'd make a terrible boyfriend."

"Too late," Sienna calls. "He's already doing suspiciously okay."

"He's like... if emotional repression were kind of hot," Maya adds.

"I'd still keep you, though," Sophia says, quieter, eyes flicking away like it slipped out.

And I swear to fucking god, the world tilts a little.

Jamie, from somewhere behind his camera, murmurs:

"Oakley.exe has fully shut down."

Theo chokes on a chip.

Sienna wheezes.

I don't even flinch.

Because he's right.

My brain is white noise. My chest? Useless. Her words are still echoing—and I would've stayed in that silence forever—

But then Asher, oblivious and loud as ever, declares:

"Jamie. Arm-wrestle. Right now."

He loses in five seconds. Claims it was "emotional sabotage."

"Best of three," he says.

"You already lost three," Theo answers without looking up from his phone.

"I didn't lose," Asher huffs. "I was distracted by Sophia threatening my snack supply."

"Valid," Jamie says. "Terrifying."

Sienna suddenly declares herself the queen of the blanket.

Maya throws a mini cookie at her in response.

"Mutiny," Sienna gasps, betrayed. "I hope the ants get you."

The group keeps spiraling—loud, laughing, alive.

And somehow, in the middle of it all,

I end up lying on my side, my hand on her leg, watching Sophia talk to Maya about constellations and movie scores and the way she paints silence like it's color.

My head is still in her lap.

I think my heart might be, too.

Theo leans over, voice low. Low enough for only *me* to hear.  
"You good?"

I nod. "Too good."

He raises an eyebrow.

"You look relaxed. Like... actually relaxed."

"Maybe I am."

He smiles. "You always look for her first."

I glance up at Sophia.

She's not looking at me.

But her hand is still in my hair.

Later, when the sky starts turning that gold-pink blend like it's trying to show off, Sophia brushes something off my cheek. A piece of grass maybe. Or nothing at all.

Her fingers linger.

"I like you better like this," she says softly.

I look up. "Like what?"

She shrugs. "Sunlight. Soft. Unbothered."

I laugh. "You're the only person who's ever said I'm unbothered."

"You fake it well."

She pauses.

Then adds: "Maybe that's the problem. It's not fake anymore."

I want to kiss her.

I don't.

I want to tell her this feels like something we never actually agreed to start.

I don't.

Instead, I close my eyes— open them again, just to gaze into hers.

Feel her thumb brush the edge of my jaw.

And I stay exactly where I am.

## Sophia

It's ridiculous how big his jersey looks on me.

Ridiculous how much I love it.

I keep tugging at the sleeves, but they won't stay up. The hem nearly skims my thighs. His last name—**KINGSLEY**—is bold across my back in white, like a banner I didn't know I was waiting to wear.

Maya zips up her jacket beside me, smirking.

"You nervous?"

I nod.

"About the race?"

I shake my head. "About the fact that this might be the cutest I've ever looked."

She laughs. "You're not wrong."

A crew member passing by slows when he sees me. He grins.

"You look like an actual racer's girlfriend now."

I blush.

Maya leans in with the biggest smile and whispers,

"You're not even denying it."

Before I can respond, a shout echoes from the parking lot.

"WE'RE NOT LATE, YOU'RE JUST EARLY."

Sienna comes striding down the path with sunglasses on like she owns the track, holding a massive plastic bag full of chips in one hand and a half-melted slushie in the other.

Asher trails behind her, arms full of snacks and completely out of breath.

*"Tell them we fought traffic!"* he yells.

"You drove over one speed bump, Asher."

*"It was an aggressive bump!"*

They sit beside us behind the sidelines. Sienna tosses a bag of popcorn in my lap like she's handing over a bouquet.

"Snack queen. We bow to you."

"Are we pretending I'm calm?" I ask.

"Nope," Maya answers. "We're just pretending you didn't look like you wanted to marry that jersey."

I open my mouth to protest—

But then I see him.

He's mid-conversation with Theo, zipping up his gear, half-squinting at the sun. He's in full focus mode—the one he slips into before a race—but the second his eyes find mine?

Everything shifts.

He smirks.

Like the sun showed up just for him.

His dimples cut deep. And he walks straight toward me.

He kisses my forehead like it's instinct.

Like he'd do it even if no one else was here.

I freeze, blinking up at him, and he just gives me that tilted, lazy grin before walking off.

Theo, walking beside him, turns back for half a second and says with the calmest face in the world:

"He hasn't stopped checking the mirror for your reflection

since you put that jersey on.”

And then he’s gone.

And I just stand there, *melting*.

The track buzzes. Roars. Vibrates.

People rush around us in every direction—mechanics, team crew, fans in Oakley merch. But I don’t hear any of it. Not really.

We find a spot behind the pit wall. Maya and I settle in, Sienna laying out like she’s at a beach. Asher tries to bribe a crew guy for a branded hat and fails.

Jamie? He’s already set up *just behind the camera guys*, a lanyard around his neck with *Oakley’s team pass* hanging off it.

He’s got his own mini tripod, headphones in, and this look on his face like he’s filming a critically acclaimed indie film and not a high-speed death sport.

Someone asks him who he’s with.

He just says,

“Oakley Kingsley,”

and adjusts his lens.

I barely glance away from Oakley.

He’s in his zone. Helmet in hand. Laughing at something Theo said. Adjusting his gloves with that familiar, rhythmic motion like it keeps him grounded.

He doesn’t look nervous.

But *I am*.

I shift closer to Maya and grab her hand.

She squeezes it tight.

“You okay?” she asks.

I nod.

But my heart’s in my throat.

He climbs into the car.

Everything slows.

He's in the black and red gear now—his number on the side, the semicolon heart sticker on the hood. I remember when he showed it to me. Told me it was for *us* since the tattoo wont show.

My fingers tighten in Maya's.

Just before his visor goes down, he looks straight at me.

And he nods.

It's small. Barely there. But I know what it means.

I whisper it without thinking:

*"Be safe."*

He can't hear me.

But maybe he does anyway.

The flag drops.

Engines scream.

And Oakley *flies*.

I can barely keep up.

He cuts the first turn with brutal precision, falling into line behind the lead car before slipping right, overtaking with impossible grace.

My heart's in my ears.

I barely breathe.

And even though it's *terrifying*, there's this part of me—deep and quiet and *so in love*—that watches him like he's art.

This is who he is.

The boy who barely looks steady anywhere else.

But here? He *belongs*.

Halfway through the race, Maya whispers,

"He's holding back— fuck this isnt Oakley."

I frown. "Why?"

She shakes her head faintly as if shes trying to figure out a

mystery. "Could be strategy. Could be nerves. Could be—."

I nod like I understand.

But then I see it.

*Hunter.*

His car drifts just a little too wide. Too aggressive. His turns sharper than they should be.

Something about it makes my stomach twist.

He's behind Oakley. Closer than he should be. *Too close.*

And suddenly the joy in my chest cracks.

The cheering fades.

The noise is still there, but it's like I'm underwater.

I grip Maya's hand again. Harder this time.

*"No no no no—"*

And she doesn't ask.

She just holds on.



## Oakley

The track hums beneath me like it remembers.

Like it knows I'm finally racing without weight for the first time in weeks.

Because she smiled.

Because she wore my name on her back.

Because she told me to be safe.

I can still hear her voice.

Not loud. Not urgent.

Just *there*, tucked behind every shift of the gears.

*"Be safe."*

Not *"Win."*

Not *"Don't crash."*

Just that.

Two words. Soft as breath. And I clung to them like they'd hold the whole world steady.

The engine roars.

The first few laps go by clean—sharp turns, clean lines, focus so deep it drowns the crowd.

Every corner hugs just right. Every overtake lands.

It's like the car breathes with me.  
I know every inch of this track.  
Know when to let go and when to hold.  
Where the pavement curves like memory.  
She's in my head.  
Her fingers in my hair. Her laugh.  
The way she looked in my jersey like it was hers all along.  
The way she didn't look scared for once.  
I'm racing better than I have in weeks.  
Third lap.  
I clock Hunter in my mirrors—  
two cars back, then one.  
Too close. Too fast.  
He's not taking corners the way he should. He's pushing his  
luck.  
And I know what that means.  
He's not here to win.  
He's here to ruin something.  
It's not just aggression.  
It's personal.  
And the thing that burns more than the heat off my tires—  
he waited for this moment.  
Waited until I was *finally* okay to try to *break* me.  
But I don't flinch.  
I don't give him the reaction he wants.  
My hands stay calm.  
Eyes forward.  
Jaw tight.  
You're okay, I tell myself.  
You're okay. You're okay. She told you to be safe.  
I grip the wheel tighter.

Shift gears clean.

Feel the car lean into the track like it trusts me more than I  
trust myself.

Final lap.

Last turn.

I hear the tires before I feel them.

The scream of rubber.

The shift in pressure.

The second where time cracks.

Hunter swerves.

Not by mistake.

Not by accident.

*Right into me.*

It's surgical.

Timed.

Like he waited for the softest part of the lap—  
when I'm not guarded, not braced, because I thought maybe,  
*just maybe*, I was finally safe.

**Everything goes sideways.**

Everything goes sideways.

My chest slams into the belt.

My shoulder jerks hard.

The wheel rips from my grip.

The sound is pure violence.

Metal screams.

The world lurches.

There's a sickening twist in my gut—like my whole body's  
trying to stay upright when the world refuses.

The car skids.

Tires scream.

The spin catches—

then breaks.  
The side panel caves before I register the sound.  
There's a hiss—like pressure snapping loose—and for a second I think it's just the engine releasing tension.  
But then—heat.  
A flicker.  
A scent.  
Burned rubber. Hot oil. Metal bending the wrong way.  
Something sparked.  
The fuel line must've caught somewhere in the spin.  
It's not a blaze—just a glow near the back tires, growing fast.  
I smell it more than I see it.  
Heat licks up the left side.  
My shoulder sears against the seat strap.  
And still—  
I'm more afraid of the stillness.  
The silence that follows when you can't feel the ground anymore.  
The sky flips.  
And then—  
*silence.*  
Everything is light and dark at once.  
Like blinking underwater.  
Like falling without ground.  
Her voice is still in my head.  
“Be safe.”  
I try to open my mouth.  
I think I do.  
But there's nothing.  
I don't know if I hit the wall or the ground or both.  
I don't know if my eyes are open.

I don't know if I'm bleeding.  
Everything is buzzing.  
Then floating.  
Then nothing.  
Somewhere in the noise, I think I hear shouting.  
Maya.  
Asher.  
Sienna.  
Jamie.  
Theo's voice, panicked but firm.  
Sophia. God. *Sophia*.  
Footsteps.  
A door.  
Someone calling my name.  
I want to answer.  
I want to tell her I'm okay.  
That I heard her. That I tried.  
That I didn't see it coming. That I didn't think he'd actually—  
But the world doesn't care.  
The world just stays quiet.  
And I'm gone.

## Sophia

Maya's hand is tight in mine as we walk down the corridor. Neither of us speaks.

We don't have to.

Asher is ahead of us, shoulders rigid, walking like he's marching into a war zone.

Jamie's behind me, quiet, not filming anything for once. Just holding his phone like it might crack if he lets it go.

Theo's by the desk, asking questions with a voice so calm it almost sounds rehearsed—like if he stays perfectly still, none of this will be real.

And Sienna?

Sienna is pressed against the far wall, arms crossed over her chest, mouth pinched. She hasn't said a word.

But I know her enough to see what silence means.

She's scared.

We all are.

I don't know if my feet are even touching the ground anymore.

Everything feels half-submerged, like I'm walking underwater. Every sound is muffled like I'm not really here—like I'm

watching it all happen to someone else.

Each step sounds like it shouldn't be real.

Like hospitals shouldn't echo.

My fingers ache from how hard I'm gripping Maya's. Her palm is warm but trembling. She keeps squeezing mine every few seconds—I'm here. You're here. He's here.

But the world?

It feels like it's folding in.

"Room 1108," the nurse says softly.

That's all.

And it still feels like the world moved beneath my feet.

I walk in last.

I see him last.

I need to.

I don't think I can handle it unless I've already seen that everyone else made it inside without falling apart.

He's in the bed.

IV in his arm.

Bandage on his temple.

Messy hair. Bruised cheek.

Chest moving—*thank god*, his chest is moving.

There's a faint crease between his brows, even in sleep.

Like his body can't fully let go. Like even unconscious, he doesn't know how to rest.

The monitor is beeping steadily.

It's the only thing keeping me from crumbling.

Theo's at his side, sitting so still it almost looks unnatural. His hands are folded in his lap, but one of them keeps twitching like he's trying not to reach out.

Asher's trying to sit still but failing. His legs bounce. His fingers tap the edge of the chair. His mouth keeps opening like

he wants to say something—but doesn't. His knuckles are red, and I wonder if he punched something. Or someone.

Jamie stands with his arms crossed, face unreadable, like he's holding the camera in his head instead of his hands. His jaw keeps shifting like he's chewing down panic. He blinks more than usual.

And Sienna's near the window, pretending she's not watching him breathe like it's the only thing anchoring her.

Oakley turns his head slowly as his eyes flutter open.

And when he sees me, he smiles—just barely.

"Tell me I still look hot with hospital lighting."

And I—

I *shatter*.

"Stop acting like this is fine."

I don't mean for it to come out like that—sharp, cracked, *broken*. But it does.

And then everything in the room stills.

Theo's hand falters on the bedrail.

Jamie lowers his head.

Asher stops tapping the arm of his chair mid-motion.

Even Sienna—sharp, loud, immovable Sienna—freezes where she's been pacing by the window.

Oakley blinks once. Then twice.

His mouth parts to speak, but I get there first.

"No." My voice trembles. "No more pretending."

I take a step forward. My hand shakes so badly I curl it into a fist just to keep it from showing.

"You don't get to make jokes like that. Not after—"

My voice catches. I swallow. Try again.

"I didn't know if you were okay. If you were breathing. If you'd ever say something stupid again—"



I break.

Not loudly. Not dramatically.

Just... *break*.

Because this isn't about now.

It's about every breath I held in that waiting room.

It's about every hour I sat in a hospital watching another body I loved hooked up to machines—watching it *fade*.

And suddenly, Oakley lying there with bruises on his cheek and a bandage on his temple—it's *too close*.

Too much like the last time.

Too much like *her*.

"Because it's you," I whisper, the words barely holding shape. "It's always been you."

He doesn't answer.

No one does.

The silence isn't cold—it's full. Heavy. Honest.

Sienna's head turns sharply. Her jaw tightens. Her eyes glisten. She looks at me like she might explode, might cry, might tear the whole world apart just to make this easier for me.

But she doesn't.

She stays.

And she understands—because everyone in this room knows me well enough to know *how much I hate this*.

*The hospital bed. The IVs. The too-quiet breathing. The what-ifs clinging to every second.*

They know what it did to me last time.

What it's *still* doing now.

So Sienna stays still, eyes locked on Oakley like she's daring him to promise he won't put me through this again.

Theo doesn't move.

Jamie blinks too slowly.

Asher bites the inside of his cheek like he's trying to swallow whatever instinct he has to fix it.

And me?

I stand there.

Watching him breathe.

Realizing just how close I came to losing the only person who's ever made the silence feel less lonely.

And knowing I can't pretend this doesn't hurt.

Not anymore.

And it's Maya—gentle, quiet Maya—who moves first.

She walks to me, brushes a hand down my back like I'm glass. Then she turns to Theo and murmurs, "Give them a minute?"

Theo nods.

Asher squeezes Oakley's ankle, once, and walks out behind Maya.

Jamie gives me a soft smile and follows them.

Sienna lingers.

Her eyes are wet—but she just nods, no words, and slips out too.

Then it's just me.

He shifts slightly in the bed.

"You're okay," I whisper.

"Barely," he breathes back.

I sit down next to him.

My fingers reach for his without thinking.

He laces them through mine like he's been waiting to.

His hand is colder than I thought it would be.

But it fits mine perfectly.

"I thought I lost you."

"You didn't."

"You scared me."

"I know."

"You don't get to scare me like that."

"I didn't mean to."

"You always say that."

He smiles again. This time it doesn't reach his eyes.

And my tears fall silently.

One by one.

Onto his blanket.

Into the quiet.

"I don't want to do this without you," I say.

"You don't have to."

"But I could've."

"But you didn't."

His hand squeezes mine.

"Still here," he says softly.

And for the first time since the race, I breathe.

The silence after that is heavy.

But it's not the wrong kind.

It's a silence that holds. That lets us sit there, fingers tangled,  
not saying the things we're too scared to say yet.

His eyes flutter shut.

His fingers don't let go.

I don't move. I don't want to.

His breathing slows. Steady.

I count each inhale like I'm scared they'll stop.

Later, when he's asleep again, I slip out.

The hallway is cold. The bathroom colder.

The mirror unforgiving.

I lock the stall door. Slide to the floor. Fold into myself.

I cry.

Not softly.

Not gently.  
I cry like my lungs forgot how to function.  
Like every inch of me is grieving something I didn't lose—but almost did.  
I don't even try to stop it.  
I press my hands to my mouth and sob.  
Everything I didn't let out during the race.  
Everything I didn't let Maya see.  
Everything I bit back when I saw him awake.  
It crashes through me now.  
I think about my mom.  
The hospital. The bed.  
The IVs. The way she used to whisper "it's okay, Sophie baby" even when it wasn't.  
The way her voice faded long before her heart did.  
The way her hand used to hold mine, even when she was too weak to speak.  
How I watched the color leave her cheeks long before I was ready.  
How no one asked if I was ready.  
I think about the first time Oakley told me about his mom.  
How he looked at his hands like they held the memory wrong.  
How his voice cracked and he didn't try to stop it.  
I think about the time he said "*She loved this flower. I don't even know why. She just... did.*"  
And how I painted it anyway, even though I never thought it was good enough.  
And now it's like I'm holding both of them inside me.  
My grief and his.  
My fear and hers.  
It's too much.

I sob harder.  
I can't breathe through it.  
I lean against the wall, forehead to tile, hands shaking so hard  
I dig crescents into my palms just trying to stay grounded.  
I think about all the things I never said to her.  
And all the things I'm still afraid to say to him.  
I cry until I'm numb.  
Until my body gives out.  
Then I sit.  
Quiet.  
Breathing.  
Eventually, the sobs soften.  
I sit in silence my hand finding its way to the back of my neck.  
*Semicolon. Heart.*  
Breathing. Slowly.  
One inhale. One exhale.  
I whisper to no one:  
*He's okay.*  
*You still have him.*  
*You still have him.*  
When I return to his room, he's still asleep.  
Jamie is back by the window.  
Maya sits curled on the couch with her head on Theo's shoulder.  
Asher is slumped in a plastic chair, and Sienna is on the floor  
beside Oakley's bed, arms wrapped around her knees.  
She looks up when I walk in.  
Gives me a look that says *I'm mad at him too*, and *I love him*  
*anyway.*  
I nod.  
Sit beside him.

His hand twitches in his sleep—  
and finds mine.

Like it never forgot the way.

## Oakley

The second time I wake up in that hospital room, the light's softer and the silence feels heavier.

There's no beeping panic. No shouting. No crash behind my eyes. Just... dull pain. And stillness.

My head pounds. My ribs throb. My left arm is stiff like someone tried to fold me and gave up halfway.

It's weird how quiet the world is after a crash.

Everything that mattered feels far away.

Except the pain. And her.

I turn my head slowly—too slowly—and the bed creaks beneath me.

She's not there.

My chest pulls tight.

I thought—

No. She was here. I remember her voice. Her hand. I remember *her*.

I look down— her hoodie.

She probably covered me with it before i came here—  
and then, the door clicks.

She steps in.

Her eyes land on mine and the softest breath leaves her lungs, like she's been holding it since she left the room.

She doesn't say anything at first. Just walks to the side of the bed and sinks into the chair like it's where she was always meant to be.

"You're awake," she whispers.

I nod. My throat's dry, but I find the words anyway.

"Didn't want to miss you."

Her mouth pulls into something that almost looks like a smile—but doesn't quite make it. She looks tired. Not messy-tired. Not sleepy-tired. *Worn*.

"I didn't go far," she says, voice gentler than anything I deserve.

I don't know what to say back. So I don't.

She doesn't seem to need me to.

But then I notice it.

Her eyes are a little red. Not puffy. Not obvious. Just... *off*.

Like maybe she cried. Quietly. Alone.

The kind of crying you do with your hand over your mouth so no one hears.

My gaze drops to the jacket she's wearing.

It's mine.

It's the one I always keep in her car in case it gets cold.

I know it instantly—not just by the color or the way it hangs off her shoulders, but by the way she's holding it.

Like it's a tether.

Like she needed something that smelled like me, something *real*, just to get through the hours I was gone.

The sleeves are pushed up, but the cuffs are damp.

I don't think from water.



And I don't ask.

Because if she wanted me to know how much she broke over this, she'd tell me.

And if she can't say it, then I'll just hold the knowing for both of us.

Eventually, she shifts, leans forward a little.

"Do you want to try walking?"

She says it like an offering. Not pressure. Just... something quiet.

I nod again. She rises slowly, careful hands sliding beneath my elbow, wrapping lightly around my wrist.

I hiss softly when I stand. She hears it, of course.

"You okay?"

She's frowning, already shifting closer like she could catch the pain herself if I handed it to her.

"Yeah," I rasp. "Just... forgot my bones hated me."

Her lips twitch. "Mine are suing me too, in solidarity."

And just like that, it's a little easier to stand.

The hallway's bright, too bright.

My body's heavy. But she's next to me. One hand hovering just behind my back, the other curled lightly around my fingers.

We walk slow.

The kind of slow that makes the air feel thick and every sound sharp.

Neither of us talks for a while. The silence between us is real, but not wrong. It's the kind that settles in your bones, not your chest.

She doesn't ask what I'm thinking.

Maybe she already knows.

I want to say: *I thought I wasn't gonna make it.*

I want to say: *I was scared.*

I want to say: *I'm still scared.*

But instead, I glance down at her, and say, "Thanks for not leaving."

She doesn't flinch. Doesn't pause.

Her thumb brushes against the back of my hand. "You don't get to crash and then make me leave."

Her voice cracks slightly on *crash*. But she doesn't pull back.

When we get back to the room, I'm shaking. Not visibly, not really. But my knees feel like water and my head is starting to spin.

Sophia helps me sit on the bed again. She kneels in front of me, unties my shoes like I can't, and when her fingers brush my ankle, I swear I could cry.

She looks up at me.

"You okay?"

I nod, but my chest caves a little.

And I think she sees it, because she climbs onto the bed without asking, curls beside me, her head near my shoulder.

Her hand rests lightly over my chest, right where my heart still stutters from adrenaline and fear and whatever the hell this is between us.

And I think—*maybe this is the softest I've ever been held.*

Not physically. Emotionally.

She lets me close my eyes. Lets me be silent.

Doesn't fill it with questions or reassurances or empty hope.

Just presence.

And I didn't know I needed that until now.

She brushes a finger lightly across my arm, where a bruise is already forming.

"You don't notice the bruises until the adrenaline fades," I murmur.

Sophia hums. "That's how it always goes."

I open my eyes, slowly.

Her head is tilted toward me, lashes brushing her cheeks, and there's something so... *steady* about her presence. Like even if the whole world shifted, she'd still be here. Still be this calm storm wrapped around me.

"You scared me," she whispers suddenly.

I swallow. "I scared me too."

She shifts, her hand lifting to gently press over my arm again.

"I wanted to scream at you," she murmurs. "But you were unconscious, so I just held your hand and told you not to die. Figured that was a decent compromise."

I laugh softly. "Thanks for compromising."

Her lips curve.

For a second, I forget the bruises.

And the pain.

And the crash.

And everything but the girl lying beside me in a hospital bed, like she was always meant to belong here—right next to all the broken parts I never wanted to show anyone.

## Sophia

I hear them before I see them.

Asher's voice echoes down the corridor like a siren, the crinkle of chip bags loud enough to wake a coma patient. It's the kind of chaos that shouldn't belong in a hospital—but it's them. It's us. And for the first time since everything fell apart, it doesn't feel like too much. It feels like coming up for air.

The door flings open with all the grace of a thunderstorm.

"Asher," Jamie mutters, already exasperated. "It's a hospital. Not a rave."

"I brought salt and vinegar chips," Asher declares, waving them like a peace offering. "That's better than any get well card."

"You also almost sat on his foot," Sienna snaps, dragging him away from the bed like she's the designated Oakley bodyguard.

I smile before I even mean to. "You guys are so bad at playing it cool."

"We're not cool," Theo sighs, entering behind them with his usual dramatic flair. "We're emotionally stunted young adults clinging to friendship as a coping mechanism."

Sienna hands him a juice box. "You're deflecting."

"I'm thirsty," he says, sipping like it's wine and not some cartoon animal fruit blend.

Jamie doesn't say anything right away. He walks to the window, and when he sees Oakley sitting up—awake, alive—he exhales like it knocked the breath out of him. His camera's in his hand, but he doesn't raise it.

He doesn't need to.

Some things don't need to be filmed to be remembered.

Maya's the last one in. She doesn't speak. She just reaches the foot of Oakley's bed and lays her hand on his ankle—light, steady, grounding. It's simple, but it's everything.

"Don't say anything," Oakley warns, narrowing his eyes at Asher.

"I brought snacks," Asher says. "I get to say one dramatic thing."

"Fine," Oakley sighs. "One."

Asher tosses a chip in his mouth and grins. "You can't just scare us like that and expect snacks, Kingsley."

Oakley blinks. "You're literally the one bringing the snacks."

"Out of spite," Asher says proudly.

Sienna leans in, already tugging Oakley's blanket straighter. "He looks like he hasn't slept in a day."

"Because I haven't," he mutters, voice a little hoarse.

She narrows her eyes. "Okay, but your cheekbone is still doing things. It's annoying."

Then she checks his IV like she's been certified by the hospital.

I haven't said anything yet. Not really. But I reach for him without thinking—fingers brushing the edge of the blanket, then curling softly around his hand.

I sit beside him.

Not because I have to. Not because it's part of the story we're telling the world.

Because I want to.

I tuck myself under his arm, like I've always belonged there.

He doesn't question it.

Theo climbs onto the bed on Oakley's other side, legs swinging like he's back in kindergarten. "I have so many questions."

"No interviews," Oakley mumbles.

"Fine. Just a vibes check. Scale of one to concussion—how bad?"

"Mildly dying," he deadpans.

A grape flies across the room, bouncing off Oakley's chest. "Too soon," Asher says.

"Too real," Theo replies.

I feel Maya watching me.

When I look up, she mouths across the room: *He looks okay because you're here.*

I don't reply.

But my thumb moves on instinct—slow circles on the inside of Oakley's wrist.

He closes his eyes and leans his head on top of mine. Just for a moment. Just enough to be here.

Jamie drops to the floor near the window, legs folded beneath him, and finally starts filming. Not just Oakley. The group. The space. The quiet.

I keep my hand in his.

And then... I reach for his hair.

Soft, careful, slow.

I run my fingers through it like I've done it a hundred times before.

Like it's normal. Like it's mine.

He shifts—leans into it—and his head settles on my shoulder.  
No one calls it out. No one teases. Not right away.

Theo's still joking with Asher, Maya's passing out cookies, Sienna's pretending to critique Oakley's socks like they personally offended her.

But all I can focus on is this—

The weight of him on my shoulder.

The feel of his breath steadying.

The way his hand still holds mine like letting go isn't an option.

And then I see it.

Near his temple—just under the hairline.

The scar from the crash.

My hand stills.

My eyes follow the curve of his jaw, then lower—beneath the collar of his gown.

Another scar.

Smaller. Older.

My stomach twists.

Without thinking, I tilt his head up by cupping his chin and I lean down. Press a kiss to the scar by his temple.

Everything stops.

I kiss another. Just below his jawline.

His eyes open, just barely.

I don't stop.

"How many of these did he leave you with?" I whisper, so low it's barely breath.

He doesn't answer.

I don't expect him to.

Not really.

I look down at him—and my chest aches.

“I want to kiss every one,” I say. “So none of them win.”

His breath catches.

And for a second, I swear it’s just us.

Not the bed. Not the monitors. Not the laughter in the room.

Just him.

And me.

And all the parts he never asked anyone to love.

And I love them anyway.

Sienna, from across the room, suddenly gasps, “Am I witnessing a moment? Is this a moment? Do I need to remove myself or document it for historical purposes?”

Asher leans toward Jamie. “If she kisses one more scar, Oakley’s gonna short-circuit.”

Jamie smirks, repeating what he always says: “Oakley.exe has fully shut down.”

Theo chokes on a cookie. Maya hands him water without blinking.

I don’t even look up.

Because I’m not laughing.

Not yet.

I’m too busy falling.

Theo starts whispering to Maya about hosting an “Oakley Kingsley recovery roast” where every joke has to include a word that starts with ‘s’—Sienna suggests “snapped spine,” Jamie quietly whispers “sentimental sap,” and Asher nearly yells “sugar daddy” before getting smacked with a pillow.

I smile into Oakley’s hair.

Because somehow... this is joy again.

Because somehow... he’s still here.

Later, when it’s quiet and Oakley’s breathing slows, when Theo’s dozing against the headboard and Maya’s head has found



Sienna's shoulder... I stay where I am.

Oakley's head is still in my lap.

His fingers twitch in sleep, still tangled with mine.

I brush his hair back from his face, memorize the rise and fall  
of his chest, and wonder—

how I'm ever supposed to go back to pretending again?

## Oakley

Three days surviving on the memory of her hands.

My body aches—every breath reopening bruises.

I think I'm still waiting for her to come back. But saying it out loud would make it real.

Her hoodie's still there. Untouched. Like if I move it, I'll lose the last thing that felt like comfort.

Theo sits beside me—quiet, resigned, like he already knows what's coming.

And maybe I do too.

Then my phone buzzes.

*Unknown number.*

I swipe to answer. "Hello?"

Silence. Then—

"You're on the news."

My stomach knots—tight, cold, like a hand I never escaped.

I don't answer.

He exhales—sharp, disgusted—like I've let him down just by surviving.

"Throwing yourself into walls doesn't make you a man. It

makes you a fucking joke.”

Theo sits up straighter.

But I just stay still, waiting for it to sting less.

“You called because your name might get dragged—not because you cared if I was breathing.”

Then—flat, final:

“Come. home.”

My grip locks around the phone like I could strangle his voice through it.

I want to say no. But my tongue staples itself to my throat.

I hang up. And say nothing. Not to Theo. Not to myself.

I pull the hoodie over my head like it might shield me from what’s next.

Theo’s already on his feet.

“You sure?”

I nod—too fast, too brittle.

Like if I pause, I’ll break in half.

He doesn’t press. Just grabs the keys.

We drive in silence. Same road. Same cracks.

The house appears, and everything inside me recoils.

I clutch the hoodie tighter—like maybe it remembers safety better than I do.

The porch light flickers. The door sticks.

Every instinct begs me to run.

But I don’t.

Because something’s ending.

I just don’t know if it’s him or me.



,

The moment I step inside, the house exhales every bruise I tried to forget.

Same smell—old wood, cigarettes, and the cologne he soaked into the walls.

Theo stays outside.

The door creaks shut behind me like it remembers who I used to be.

And there he is—back turned, pouring rot into a glass.

Doesn't ask if I'm okay.

Doesn't care.

I stay in the doorway. My chest aches like it never stopped.

He sips like silence proves the story he always told himself—one where I never fought back.

"You took your time."

No hello. Just disappointment.

"I didn't owe you this," I whisper, barely holding together.

He turns slowly, eyes dragging over my bruises, my shaking hands.

"You look just like her," he murmurs. "Same weak eyes. Same scared little silence."

My jaw tightens. I say nothing.

He tilts his head slightly, studying me. "She always stood exactly where you are—like being quiet might save her."

My fists clench.

"But it never did," he continues softly. "And it won't save you either."

"You don't get to talk about her."

His lips twitch cruelly. "She wasted years convincing herself you were worth saving. But she knew the truth—you were drowning her long before I ever could."

My throat locks, vision blurring slightly.

"Stop," I whisper.

He steps closer, his voice lower. "When I saw your face on the news, I thought maybe you'd finally figured it out—decided to follow her lead."

My heart stutters painfully. "That's not—"

"What?" he interrupts softly. "Not what she did? Not why she left?"

I can't breathe. He leans closer, voice calm, almost gentle.

"She looked at you and knew staying would kill her slower than any bullet could."

"Stop," I choke, the word breaking apart.

He ignores me, voice softening cruelly. "And this new girl—Sophia. How long before she realizes the truth? That you're nothing but broken pieces no one can fix."

Instinctively, my hand touches the semicolon tattoo. Hers. Still mine.

He sees the gesture and smiles bitterly. "You inked her into your skin, hoping it would keep her around. But tattoos don't stop people from leaving, Oakley."

"She won't," I whisper—just a plea now.

He leans closer. "I hope she does. Right when you've finally convinced yourself she's different. I hope she leaves slowly, quietly—just like your mother did."

My vision swims. My chest hurts.

"Stop," I breathe, barely audible.  
Suddenly—he grabs my arm.  
Hard. Sudden.  
The kind of grip that doesn't warn you first.  
Pain lights up my shoulder—white-hot, blinding—  
like something tearing loose on instinct.  
"Not strong," he growls in my ear. "Just a coward. Just like  
her."

*Coward.*

It cuts somewhere deep. Somewhere that never healed right.  
And then—  
he rips through everything Sophia ever stitched back together.  
He yanks me forward—brutal, fast—  
my ribs slam straight into his elbow.  
A crack shoots through my chest.  
My lungs seize.  
No air. No sound. Just hurt.  
Then he throws me.  
I twist mid-air. Something inside me follows—hot, wrong.  
Not a break. A tear.  
Slow. Final.

White fire climbs my arm like a fuse,  
and my throat clamps shut—like the scream isn't allowed out.  
"Not a legacy," he hisses, breath hot on my skin.  
"You're a fucking coward."

*Coward.*

The word lands where fists can't.  
He grabs again, faster—  
slams me back, ribs first, into the counter edge.  
Pain explodes through bone like a fracture that was waiting.  
Then—

my shoulder hits the fridge handle.  
A pop.  
A rip.  
Then nothing.  
Just silence, and the sickening hum of my body failing to hold  
me.  
The pain is white. Then nothing.  
Then white again.  
My chest forgets how to move.  
For a second, I forget what a body is.  
Just heat.  
Then shatter.  
Then blood.  
The fridge jerks open from the hit.  
Barely. Just enough.  
Then—glass.  
It crashes.  
Bottles, jars, something sharp.  
I go with it.  
Down.  
My back slams into the floor.  
Glass explodes beneath me.  
A shard slices clean—just under my neck.  
Not deep enough to kill.  
But deep enough to mean it.  
One piece stays.  
Lodged.  
Close to the artery.  
Just enough to whisper: *not yet*.  
Cold air from the fridge kisses the wound.  
The sound I make isn't a scream.

Just a sob—gasping, soft, wrong.  
And everything tilts.  
This time—I don't stop it.  
It's warm.  
Quiet.  
Gone.  
I think I'm safe. Just for a little.  
I think maybe she's here.  
But then—  
fingers.  
Wrong ones.  
Rough. Cold. Not hers.  
I blink, slow. Dizzy.  
I don't say her name.  
But I think it.  
He crouches—slow. Deliberate.  
Drags his thumb through my blood

*like it belongs to him.*

“You think looking like her made you worth saving?”  
His whisper grazes my cheek—soft. Too soft.  
Like it should be love.  
But it isn't.  
It's power.



And he knows it.

"It just made it easier to break you. Like I broke her."

Something in me stills—too quiet.

Not fear.

Something older. Shame-shaped.

"What—" I breathe, barely.

He smiles. Calm. Almost kind.

"You really thought it was her?"

My stomach twists. *No. No, please—*

"She never held the gun."

A pause.

"Not once."

Everything inside me stops.

And still—

some stupid, desperate part of me waits.

For him to laugh. To say *she made me*.

To say *it wasn't like that*.

But he doesn't.

He never does.

No flinch. No smirk.

Just silence.

And it's the silence that breaks me.

Not the gun.

Not the blood.

*The silence.*

"She cried your name," he says.

And then—

like it means nothing—

"I shot her."



,

He doesn't blink.  
Doesn't flinch.  
Doesn't take it back.  
The words don't echo.  
They land.  
Hard. Flat. Final.  
She didn't leave.  
He made sure of it.  
She called for me.  
Begged.  
And I didn't come.  
Because I was just a kid.  
Still drawing monsters on the floor—  
while she was living with one.  
And now I know which one of us didn't survive it.  
He watches me fall apart—smiling like it proves something.  
Like he won.  
“And the saddest part?” he murmurs.  
“You still think she died loving you.”  
He crouches.  
Presses his thumb to the glass in my neck.  
Twists.  
Like he's digging her out of me.  
Then he yanks me upright by the ribs—  
by what's left—  
and throws me down like I'm just another thing she couldn't

save.

I hit the floor hard.

But what breaks isn't bone.

It's the part of me that still believed she might come back.

And I just lie there.

Small. Quiet.

Too quiet to save myself.



,

"You're everything I never wanted to become," he breathes.

My chest lurches—like a sob got trapped halfway out.

Because part of me believes he's right.

"That girl?" He scoffs. "She's not staying because she sees something in you. She's staying because she pities you. You're just another broken thing to fix."

My fingers twitch—still reaching for her.

He leans in, quieter now, voice low and certain.

"How long until she gets tired, Oakley? How long until she sees the mess underneath—the panic attacks, the nightmares, that pathetic tattoo—and decides you aren't worth it?"

I flinch. He notices—he always does.

"If she knew you were still crying for the woman I put in the ground, she'd run."

I open my mouth, but every word feels like begging.

"The truth?" He smiles faintly. "You were never meant to be

loved. Not by your mother, and definitely not by her.”

Something inside me folds. Small again. Stuck.

For a moment, I’m caught in the echo of my mother’s voice—the softness of her last goodbye:

*You’re good, baby. I know you are.*

“She didn’t want to leave,” I whisper, voice small, childlike.

I don’t know if I’m saying it to him, myself, or her.

“No,” he says simply. “She didn’t.”

A beat of silence. “I made that choice for her.”

Then he leans even closer, voice dropping, savoring the way I fracture:

“I didn’t just kill her, Oakley. I killed the last person stupid enough to believe you were worth saving.”

And just like that, I lose my words completely.

I don’t scream. I don’t cry.

I just listen—to silence, to my pulse, waiting for something to say her name back to me.

Somewhere far from this floor—

where the pain eases just enough to breathe—

I think of Sophia.

My sunshine girl.

She’d hold me like Mama used to.

Whisper it’s okay.

I’d tell her: *I don’t feel good. Please come get me.*

But no one’s coming now.

Just him.

“Now get out,” he murmurs, voice low, dismissive.

“Go crawl back to whatever’s left of you.”

A pause.

“Just remember—when she died, she took your last bit of light with her.”

I stay still. Cheek pressed to cold tile, sticky with blood.  
If I move, it'll hurt.  
If I don't, the world tips anyway.  
So I do.  
One arm curls under. Push.  
My ribs scream.  
I collapse, swallow the sound, refuse him the satisfaction.  
My shoulder hangs useless, neck still bleeding warmth down  
my chest.  
I press my fingers against it—not to stop the blood, just to  
feel how quickly it's leaving.  
“Oh fuck,” I whisper—barely sound.  
The floor shifts. Legs buckle.  
Try again.  
Left arm first. Crawl.  
My right side won't help. Every breath carves deeper, every  
movement a test of survival.  
Fingers reach for the wall. Not for balance—just proof I'm  
still here.  
Then—I pull myself up.  
Knees. Feet.  
One breath at a time.  
Every inhale cuts like glass. Every step threatens collapse.  
But if I crawl out, he wins.  
So I stand.  
I fucking stand.  
The world tilts sideways. Vision blurs—white, then red, then  
darkness again.  
But I don't fall. Not yet.  
I know the second I'm alone, I'll break. But not here—not in  
front of him.

Somehow, I walk on legs that barely remember how.  
I don't look back. Don't give him the satisfaction.  
"I'd rather carry her death," I whisper,  
"than ever carry your name."  
He doesn't respond.  
Just watches, waiting for me to collapse again.  
But I don't.  
For one second—God, just one—my knees almost give out.  
Then I keep moving.  
Not strong. Not steady.  
Just forward.  
The door shuts quietly behind me.  
Cold air hits like a ghost—not loud, just present.  
I never got to say goodbye.  
Didn't hold her hand.  
And now the silence?  
It's louder than her voice ever was.  
Louder than the blood.  
Louder than anything.



,

His voice breaks apart.  
"Oakley."  
Just my name—cracked and shaking.  
I don't look up. Don't speak.  
I just walk, like I never really stood.

I barely make it off the porch.  
Every step drags what's left of me across the concrete.  
And still—it's the kindest pain I've felt all night.  
Warmth spills from my neck, staining her hoodie.  
Quiet. Steady. Like it's learning how to carry pain.  
My ribs scream.  
My shoulder burns.  
My legs barely hold.  
Theo's already moving—like he felt it before he saw it.  
And when he sees my face, something in him breaks.  
He runs.  
And I try—God, I try.  
But halfway there, my legs give out.  
The street tilts sideways. Or maybe it's me.  
I blink once. Twice.  
The world doesn't come back.  
But Theo's there.  
Catching me.  
His arm slides under my uninjured side.  
The other hovers, careful not to touch what's broken.  
He doesn't grab—he catches.  
Like if he moves too fast, I'll fall apart worse.  
One hand lifts, hesitant.  
He doesn't touch the blood.  
Just tilts my head, thumb brushing under my jaw, guiding me  
into the light.  
“Jesus Christ, Oakley,” he breathes.  
“What the fuck did he do to you?”  
I can't answer.  
Theo lowers me—slow, steady—cradling me like I'll crack in  
his hands.

His hand stays at my neck, feather-light.  
His eyes trace every wound.  
The shoulder—unmoving.  
The gash—slow and angry.  
The hoodie—paint-stained no more. Just red.  
“I should’ve gone in,” he whispers. “I stood out here like a fucking coward—”  
I flinch.  
And it destroys him.  
“No—fuck. Oakley...”  
He kneels, hands hovering—my cheek, my ribs, everywhere I’m hurting.  
“I swear to God,” he breathes, “if I go in there... I won’t come back out.”  
Then he moves.  
Lifts me like I’m something sacred.  
One arm beneath my legs, the other behind my back.  
Gentle. Like even the air might bruise me worse.  
“I’m sorry,” he whispers.  
For seeing too late.  
For not going in.  
For not stopping it.  
He doesn’t ask if I can walk.  
Doesn’t wait for words I don’t have.  
He just carries me.  
Quiet. Steady.  
He eases me into the seat, one hand still behind my head.  
I fold into it—too broken to know what isn’t.  
He doesn’t let go.  
His fingers slide softly into my hair.  
Just holding. Just checking. Just *there*.



Then his hand finds mine.

The other wipes blood gently from my temple.

“God, Oakley...”

His voice cracks.

Then softer:

“I thought I lost you.”

I lean into his hand—because I don’t know how to breathe without it.

Something in him breaks.

“You don’t have to hold it in for me,” he says quietly.

His thumb brushes beneath my eye, reverent.

“Not with me. Okay?”

I don’t speak. Just stay close.

And maybe that’s what breaks him for real.

He leans in—slow, careful—  
and presses a kiss to my temple.

Soft. Shaking.

Like an apology.

Like a promise: *don’t go where I can’t follow.*

And for just one breath—

I don’t feel broken.

Just held.

His hand rests over my ribs.

Not fixing. Not pressing.

Just holding.

“You’re safe now, Oak,” he whispers. “I swear.”

I want to believe him.

Like a kid begging the dark not to win.

It hurts to trust soft things.

But maybe I don’t have to survive this alone.

Not with Theo’s hand in mine.

Still here. Holding even the parts that bled.

Maybe safety isn't a word.

Maybe it's someone who stays.

Theo's hand squeezes mine—steady, sure.

And for now?

That's enough.

## Sophia

I'm folding laundry—something quiet, something normal—when my phone buzzes face-down on the bed.

**Theo.**

My stomach drops before I even touch it.

I answer on the first ring. "Hello?"

His voice doesn't crack—it *shatters*.

"Sophia."

A pause.

Too long.

His breathing is uneven. Harsh. Like he ran here from somewhere far too close to hell.

"Are you home?."

My chest tightens. "What happened?"

His answer comes low. Wrecked. Like it's breaking him just to say it.

"It's Oakley. He... he needs you."

A pause. A breath. Shaky, like it's the only one he's managed in minutes.

"I'm going back to take care of it—but he can't be alone right

now.”

He swallows, and then:

“Please.”

My phone buzzes face-down on the bed.

Theo.

My stomach drops before I even touch it.

I answer on the first ring. “Hello?”

His voice doesn’t crack—it *shatters*.

“Sophia—are you home?”

My chest tightens. “Yeah. Why?”

“Is your dad there?”

I blink. “No. He’s in Spain for work. Why? Theo, what—”

“I’m on my way.”

His words are rushed. *Urgent*. Like they’re pushing past a scream.

“It’s Oakley. He... he needs you.”

A pause. Just long enough for my heart to start breaking.

“I’m bringing him to you now. He can’t go to the dorms. He... he can’t be alone right now.”

Another breath. This one shaky. Cracked down the middle.

“Please.”

That’s what undoes me.

Not the urgency.

Not the way he said *Oakley*.

It’s that *please*.

I don’t ask questions.

I don’t even remember hanging up.

The phone slips somewhere onto the bed, forgotten.

I just... stand there.

Frozen.

Breath stuck somewhere between my chest and my throat.

Then I move.

Not far.

Not fast.

Just to the door.

Just to *wait*.

Barefoot. Breathless. Breaking.

Because *he's coming to me*.

Because *he needs me*.

I just... stand there.

Frozen.

Breath caught somewhere between my ribs and my throat,  
like it's too heavy to let out.

Then I move.

Not far.

Not fast.

Just to the door.

Just to *wait*.

Barefoot. Breathless.

*Small.*

Like a little girl waiting for something she doesn't know how  
to face.

Because he's coming.

Because he needs me.

Because no one else is going to put him back together.

And then —

I hear it.

The soft hum of a car engine, low and slow, like it's trying not  
to scare anything away.

Like it knows something fragile is about to break.

A quiet door click.

Footsteps.

I open the door—

and *there he is*.

Theo.

He's walking toward the curb, but not like he's arriving.

Not like someone coming to knock.

Like someone *guarding* something.

Like he's the only wall left standing between now and collapse.

His shoulders are drawn tight—almost caved in.

His hoodie is stained with something dark, something that makes my chest go hollow.

And his hands...

they're shaking.

There's blood on his fingers.

And his jaw—

his jaw is clenched so hard it looks like it might splinter.

But it's his eyes that break me.

They're already gone.

Empty in the way someone's eyes get when they've seen something they can't unsee.

And then I look past him.

And I see Oakley.

Not in the backseat, where someone small might've curled up to disappear.

He's in the passenger seat.

Head leaning against the window.

Still.

Too still.

Like his body gave up on the idea of moving.

And I swear—

I stop breathing.

I don't mean to. I just—

can't.

Because that isn't him.

That isn't the Oakley I know.

That's a silhouette. A shadow of him, folded and bruised and silent.

And the way he's sitting—

like the glass is the only thing holding him upright—

like if it weren't there, he'd collapse inward—

it does something to me I don't have words for.

My knees nearly buckle.

I take one step. Just one.

Theo intercepts me like he knew I would fall.

"I'm going back," he says. His voice isn't loud.

It isn't angry.

It's raw. Like something stripped down to the bone.

I grab his wrist with both hands, like it'll keep him from vanishing.

"Theo... *please*. Not you too." My voice is shaking. His arm is shaking.

*Everything* is shaking.

His eyes flash—not with rage.

With something worse.

"He hurt him, Sophia."

He swallows, and his whole body stutters with it.

"He hurt Oakley so fucking bad he couldn't even talk."

Theo's voice wavers like he's trying to stay strong for just one more second—just long enough to get this out.

"And then..."

He blinks. Once. Sharp. But his face crumples for the first time.

"He said your name."

A pause.

"But it didn't even sound like a word. It sounded like something he was trying to remember just so he wouldn't pass out."

I flinch.

It hits me in the chest like something physical.

Like the syllables of my own name have been turned into a lifeline—and he barely reached it.

Not Oakley.

Not like this.

*Not my Oakley.*

Theo sees me stagger. He sees all of it.

He takes a step back, like the weight is too much, like the night is pressing in on both of us.

"I stood there," he says, voice ragged, shaking his head. "I stood there like a fucking idiot while he went in alone. And now look at him."

I see it now—the blood on Theo's sleeves, the way he's trembling, not with rage but with grief.

He's falling apart in the quietest way.

A slow collapse from the inside out.

"I should've gone in," he chokes. "I should've *fucking* gone in."

"Theo—"

"I *heard* the silence through the walls, Sophia. And I knew. I knew something was wrong. But I kept thinking—'he's strong. He'll be fine. He's got this.'"

He looks at me then.

Really looks.

And I swear—I see a tear. Just one.

Balanced in his lashes like it doesn't know if it's allowed to fall.



"He's not fine," Theo whispers. "And that's on me."

I reach for him before I can stop myself.

Both hands now. Holding his. Not to stop him—but to anchor him.

Gently, but firm. Like I'm trying to press my own steadiness into his bones.

"He's alive," I whisper. "And he's here. Because of you."

Theo shakes his head slowly, like the words don't fit in the world he's living in.

"No. He's here because of you. Because even in the worst moment of his life, the only name he could hold onto was yours."

I can't breathe.

The words gut me—slow and deep—like a blade that's gentle, but still slices.

"I'm going to end him," Theo says again, quieter now.

The fury is still there. But it's quieter. Deeper. Like a promise to himself.

I grip his hands harder.

"Then let me start by putting him back together."

And something in him—*finally*—breaks.

Not violently. Not loudly.

Just a breath.

Just a sag of his shoulders.

Just the kind of break that says, *I can't carry this alone anymore.*

His eyes close.

He nods once.

"Take care of him."

"I will," I whisper. "I swear."

I step toward the passenger door, but something in me pulls back.

And I turn around.

Theo's still standing there.

Still splintered.

I step back to him—just for a second—and reach up.

I kiss his cheek.

Not hard. Not loud. Not anything that would shake him more.

Just a thank you.

*A please come back safe.*

*A thank you for keeping him breathing.*

He exhales, and it stutters.

"Tell him I'll be back soon," he murmurs. "Tell him... tell him I'm sorry."

My voice is barely a breath. "He knows."

The moment Theo nods, I step past him.

But my body moves without me.

My legs are walking, but my heart is still somewhere behind—crumpled and gasping on the front step.

It's in my throat.

In my ribs.

In the shaking of my hands as I round the car.

And then I see him.

Oakley.

Still leaning against the window.

Still not moving.

His forehead is pressed to the glass like it's the only thing keeping him upright.

His breath has fogged the surface, just barely, like he's only half here.

His shoulders are hunched—curled in too tight for someone his size.

Like he's trying to vanish.

And baby...

*he looks so small.*

I stop.

Frozen.

Everything inside me folds.

Because I knew he was hurt.

I knew Theo said *bad*.

But nothing—*nothing*—could've prepared me for this.

Not for how *quiet* it is.

Not for how *utterly still* he is.

Not for the way my brain is trying to convince me that if I  
don't move, this won't be real.

My hand wraps around the door handle—then stops.

Because I see it now.

My hoodie.

Still on him.

Still stained.

Still torn along the seam from where someone yanked him  
too hard.

It's soaked in blood.

*His* blood.

And it hits me all at once—

That he left it at the hospital.

Folded neatly. Like he didn't want it ruined.

That he wasn't wearing it this morning.

That he chose it when everything fell apart.

*Chose me.*

In whatever broken way he could.

And now he's here.

Wearing it.

Crushed inside it.

Bleeding inside it.

Gone, inside it.  
My breath trembles so hard I taste metal.  
My chest feels like it's splitting open.  
I open the door.  
Slow.  
Quiet.  
Like if I breathe too hard, he'll dissolve.  
The door creaks softly.  
He doesn't flinch.  
He doesn't even *blink*.  
His head stays tilted against the glass, like it belongs there.  
Like he doesn't know where else to go.  
And up close, it's worse.  
So much worse.  
His lip is split.  
His temple is bandaged, but the blood's already bled through.  
There's a bruise spreading under one eye—deep and violent,  
the kind that stains the soul beneath the skin.  
His hands rest limp in his lap.  
Knuckles raw.  
Fingers twitching—like they're still fighting something he  
can't see.  
And all I can think is:  
*He looks like a boy.*  
Not a man.  
Not the strong, fast, untouchable boy the world sees.  
Not the boy who grips a steering wheel like it's the only thing  
tethering him to the earth.  
Just... a kid.  
A kid who's been hurt too many times.  
A kid who's too quiet.

Too still.  
Too far.  
My hands are shaking.  
So hard it takes everything in me just to lift one.  
I pause.  
Hovering.  
Not because I'm scared to touch him—  
But because I *don't know how* to touch something that's  
already shattered.  
I hover, fingers aching in the space between us.  
And then I reach out—  
Slow, so slow—  
and cup the side of his head, because it's leaning too hard on  
the window.  
And I do it like it might break him.  
Like it might break *me*.  
So gently it feels like prayer.  
He flinches.  
So weakly.  
Just the smallest twitch.  
But it feels like watching something sacred *break*.  
I choke back a sob.  
“Shh,” I breathe, thumb brushing his cheek like I'm trying to  
wipe the hurt away.  
“*It's me, baby. You're safe now.*”  
He doesn't speak.  
But his forehead shifts.  
Leans into my palm.  
Just barely.  
And I crumble.  
My other hand joins the first, and I cradle his head like I'm

holding something made of glass.

Like he might slip right through my fingers if I'm not careful.

"You're okay," I whisper, even though I know he's not.

"You're okay. I've got you."

Still nothing.

No words.

No sound.

But his breath hitches.

And his whole body twitches—

like my voice pulled something out of him he couldn't keep buried anymore.

I stroke his hair back from his face, and it's damp.

Warm.

Sticky with sweat and blood.

His skin is too hot.

Too fragile.

And his pulse—

it jumps under my fingers like a bird trapped in a cage.

Behind me, Theo doesn't move.

He just stands there.

At the open door.

Watching.

And the look on his face—

the way his shoulders sink just seeing me touch Oakley—

it breaks something in *both* of us.

When I finally ease Oakley upright—

when I slip my arm beneath his and begin to guide him out of the seat—

Theo steps forward.

But he doesn't touch.

Not at first.

Not until Oakley's weight gives out.

Not until he collapses into me like his body forgot how to stand.

Only then does Theo reach out.

One hand hovering behind Oakley's back.

The other braced near his ribs, so gently it barely registers.

Theo looks at him—then at me.

And his voice breaks again, quieter this time.

Like the truth finally caught up to him.

"He picked your hoodie when he got the call."

Oakley doesn't speak.

Doesn't even open his eyes.

But his fingers—

they find the edge of my sleeve.

Tangle in it.

Hold on.

Not tight. Not strong.

Just enough.

Like he's trying to hold onto something real.

To something safe.

To *me*.

Theo doesn't move again until we're clear of the door.

Until Oakley is in my arms.

Until I've *got him*.

Only then does he speak—

soft and furious and broken.

"I'm going back."

And I don't stop him.

Because the only thing I need right now...

is here.

Pressed against my chest.

Still breathing.  
But barely.



## Sophia

The stairs to my room feel impossible.

He wouldn't make it up two steps, let alone all the way up to the bed I know would be safer, softer.

So I lead him to the couch instead.

Step by step.

Whisper by whisper.

Like I'm walking with a shadow that still remembers how to bleed.

His legs are barely holding.

His head dips against my shoulder, like the weight of it is too much.

Like even upright is asking too much.

And still—he moves.

Still—he stays.

“Almost there, baby,” I whisper. “I’ve got you. Just hold on.”

His fingers curl weakly into the edge of my sleeve.

Not gripping. Just *resting*.

Like even that little bit of contact says: *I’m trying*.

When we reach the couch, I ease him down like he might break

apart from gravity alone.

And maybe he might.

Maybe he already has.

He sinks into the cushions with a soft, aching exhale.

The sound is so raw it doesn't sound like him.

And I drop to my knees in front of him.

Not thinking.

Just moving.

Because he's here.

And he's hurt.

And I don't know what else to do but *care*.

"I'm gonna clean you up, okay?" I whisper. "Just let me... let me make it a little better."

His head tips slightly toward me. His lips part like he wants to say something, but the words don't come.

He just nods.

The smallest motion. But it means everything.

I leave only for a second—run water in the sink until it's warm and soft, then soak the towel until it's perfect.

I wring it out, testing it on my wrist like he's a baby and I'm making sure it won't sting.

When I return, I kneel in front of him again and press the cloth to his forehead.

His skin is burning.

Clammy.

Like fever and fear and everything else he hasn't said out loud.

"You're safe now," I whisper. "It's just me."

He leans into my touch.

Not much.

Just enough.

Like a child remembering how to be comforted.

I stroke his hair back—sticky and matted with blood.

And that's when I see it.

The bandage above his brow.

It's soaked through.

Red, wet, angry.

Blood trails from beneath it in a sluggish line, painting his temple.

I sigh, barely more than a sound.

I reach for it. Carefully. Slowly. Like I'm unwrapping something sacred.

The bandage lifts—and underneath, the skin is cracked open again. Not wide. But deep enough to hurt. Deep enough to bleed.

His breath catches when the cloth touches it.

"Sorry," I whisper, wiping slow and gentle. "Sorry sorry sorry—."

"You're not hurting me," he murmurs cutting me off. "You're the only thing that doesn't."

I almost drop the towel.

I blink fast. My vision blurs.

I can't cry yet. I *can't*.

Breathing deeply, I shift to the side, sitting on the couch beside him, my breath catching as I notice the thin, angry cut just below his jaw—along the side of his neck.

At first, it just looks like dried blood.

But when I lean closer, I see it.

A shard of glass.

Small. Clear. Wedged into the skin just above his collarbone like it *wanted* to disappear there.

Like it thought maybe he wouldn't notice.

My fingers shake as I reach for the clean tweezers beside the cloth.

He watches me. Doesn't move.  
Just lies there—so quiet. So still.  
And I realize he knew.  
He *knew* it was there.  
And he didn't say anything.  
“Why didn't you tell me?” I whisper.  
He blinks slowly. Swallows like it hurts.  
His voice is soft. Hoarse.  
“I forgot.”  
Then quieter—like he's ashamed of even that.  
“There were other parts that screamed louder.”  
My heart breaks so quietly I barely feel it.  
I take a breath. Then another. Then reach.  
“This might sting,” I murmur, “but I'll be so gentle. I  
promise.”  
And I am.  
So careful it feels like a prayer.  
I grip the shard and pull—slow, steady—until it slips free with  
a thin line of red.  
He flinches, but only barely.  
More of a breath than a jolt.  
I drop the glass into the tissue beside me and press the cloth  
gently to his skin.  
My other hand cups the back of his neck—right over our  
tattoos.  
“It's out,” I whisper rubbing my thumb over the ink. “It's  
gone.”  
His eyes flutter closed, just for a second.  
And for the first time, his whole body softens—like maybe,  
just maybe, he believes he's safe.  
Like the pain doesn't have to fight anymore.

Like my hands are enough to let him rest.  
I exhale, shaky.  
But I'm not done.  
My gaze drifts up, and I shift closer—gently, carefully—until  
I'm facing him again.  
His cheekbone is swollen.  
The skin beneath it still wet, torn open at the edge.  
A wound that looks like it came from something blunt—too  
fast, too cruel.  
I wipe it slowly. Feather-light.  
And he flinches—barely. Like it's more reflex than pain.  
His jaw tightens. His eyes squeeze shut.  
“It's okay,” I breathe. “It's okay. I'm going slow.”  
I kiss his temple.  
“I'll go even slower.”  
My hand moves to his lip. Split. Cracked open at the corner.  
I dab at it gently, holding his chin with trembling fingers.  
“I'm gonna clean the rest now,” I whisper.  
He doesn't speak.  
But his hand moves.  
Not toward me.  
Toward himself.  
I blink.  
Then I realize—he's shifting his shoulder.  
“No—Oakley, don't—”  
But it's too late.  
A sharp jerk. A deep inhale. A pop.  
So quiet. But so *wrong*.  
He resets it like it's nothing.  
Like it's just part of the routine.  
His breath stutters after. A twitch of pain. A tremble he tries

to hide.

My heart *tears*.

"You've done that before," I whisper. Not a question. Just grief in the shape of a sentence.

He doesn't look at me.

Doesn't need to.

His silence answers everything.

I want to scream.

I want to fall apart.

But instead, I take his hand in both of mine and press it to my chest.

"I see you," I whisper. "I see all of it. All the parts you've hidden. You don't have to fix yourself anymore. You don't have to do it alone."

He finally looks at me.

Eyes glassy. Shaky. Exhausted.

And then he says it.

So quiet. So broken I almost miss it.

"I didn't think I'd make it."

The world stills.

My breath collapses.

The cloth slips from my fingers.

My hands cradle his face. My thumb brushes his cheek.

"You did," I whisper, tears spilling now. "You did make it okay? You made it to me."

He blinks. One tear falls. And then, with a trembling hand, he lifts his fingers and—

He wipes *my* tear away.

With fingers that can barely hold still.

Like his own pain doesn't matter if *I'm* crying.

Something in me breaks so quietly I don't even hear it.

But I feel it. In every part of me.

"You're here," I whisper again. "You're here, Oakley. And I'm not letting go."

I press another kiss to his forehead.

One to his temple.

My hands settle against his waist again, just holding. Just feeling the rise and fall of him—proof that he's still here.

And then, softer than before, like I'm asking to open something sacred—

"Can I...?" I whisper.

Not rushed. Not clinical.

Just careful. *Loving*.

Like I'm asking if it's okay to see what he's been hiding.

He nods. Barely.

And I lift it.

One side swollen so badly the skin rises like a wave. Deep purple. Blue. A shade of pain I don't have words for.

I choke on a breath.

My whole body stutters.

I drop the towel.

"Oh my God," I whisper. "Oh, Oakley—"

My hands go to my mouth. I'm crying now. *Truly crying*.

Big, quiet tears that fall straight into his lap.

And he—

He reaches up. Again.

His hand cups the back of my head. Weak. Gentle. Shaking.

And he just whispers,

"Don't cry, Sophia."

But I do.

Because his ribs look like something tried to erase him.

Because I almost lost him.

Because I can still feel his pulse under my fingers, and I'm so scared it's going to stop.

"I've got you," I cry. "I've got you. You're okay. You're okay."

And I kiss every inch I can reach.

His forehead. His hair. His temple. His trembling hand.

Like I can stitch him back together with my mouth.

With my love.

With the sheer desperation not to lose him.

I pull the blanket over his chest—gently, softly—like covering a child.

Then I lay my head beside his ribs—barely—, ear resting against his heart.

And I just *breathe*.

With him.

For him.

Because right now, we're both still here.



,

We're quiet now.

The kind of quiet that only comes when there's nothing left to say—

Just breath.

Just warmth.

Just the soft hum of being here.

I stay curled beside him on the couch. One arm tucked beneath his head, the other gently brushing through his hair.

He doesn't speak.

Doesn't cry.

Just breathes.



And I think maybe—maybe—we’ve made it through the worst of it.

Until his breath catches.

Just once.

So faint I almost miss it.

But I feel it.

A tremble beneath my palm.

A hitch in his chest that doesn’t belong to pain.

I lift my head slowly.

“Oakley?” I whisper.

He doesn’t answer.

His fingers curl weakly into the blanket.

His lips part.

And then, so quietly—so heartbreakingly—he lets out a sound.

A soft, shaking sob.

It’s small.

So small.

And yet, it feels like it’s coming from somewhere deep.

Like a child who has finally been told the truth after holding a thousand broken pieces in his chest.

I freeze.

His body shakes, barely.

But the *tremble* of it doesn’t stop.

It’s quiet, but it’s there. So loud, it fills the space between us.

I can’t move.

My hand moves to his cheek, so soft. I let my fingers trace the wetness of his tears.

“Talk to me, baby,” I whisper.

“Please.”

His eyes open. Barely.

They're glassy.  
Not like him. Not like Oakley, strong and stubborn.  
Just a boy. A *scared little boy*.  
And then his voice breaks.  
"My mom."  
My breath catches.  
"What, baby?"  
His lips tremble. So quiet I almost can't hear it.  
"She didn't..."  
I stay still, waiting for the rest.  
But I already know.  
He swallows.  
"She didn't do it. It wasn't her."  
My stomach flips.  
"What do you mean? What wasn't her, love?"  
He just blinks at me—like he's still not sure if he can trust the words.  
"I thought it was her. For so long." His voice cracks.  
"I thought she..." His words falter. And then, barely above a whisper—  
"It wasn't suicide."  
I stop breathing.  
The room stills.  
I can't move.  
I want to speak, but the words don't come.  
"Who told you?" My voice is hoarse.  
He shuts his eyes for a moment, the silence stretching too long.  
"He said it."  
He lifts his hand, just barely.  
"While he... was hurting me. He smiled. Like it was a joke.

Like it was funny.”

My chest hurts. It tightens. Something sharp cuts into my lungs.

“He *killed* her.”

I choke on my breath.

And then it hits me—so suddenly I don’t even know where the *pain* comes from.

It wasn’t just his mother.

It was *my mom’s best friend*.

It was the woman who showed me how to braid flowers into my hair.

The one who made cakes for birthdays.

Who laughed with my mom when we all sat on the porch at night.

*Her...* taken by him.

I want to scream. I want to shout, but I don’t.

I just pull him closer.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whisper, not angry. Just lost.

His body shakes. His arms tremble as they clutch my shirt.

“I didn’t know.” His voice cracks. “I didn’t know it was real. Not until now.”

I hold him harder.

So close. So tight. I press my forehead against his. I can’t stop the tears, but I don’t care.

“We both lost her, Oakley,” I murmur. “We both lost her.”

His breath shudders.

His hand reaches up, trembling. Weak.

And then he wipes a tear from my cheek.

“Don’t cry, sunshine,” he whispers. His voice cracks with the weight of it. But it’s *his voice*, still. And he’s trying.

He’s *trying* to comfort me.

But it only shatters me more.

I don't even think. I pull him into me.

Like I'm holding on to the last thing that makes sense in this world.

"I'm so sorry, baby," I breathe into his hair. "I'm so, so sorry. I'm here. I'll always be here."

And he sobs again. Quiet. Small.

Like a child who's trying to hold it together for the first time in his life.

But I'm holding him now.

And I won't let him go.