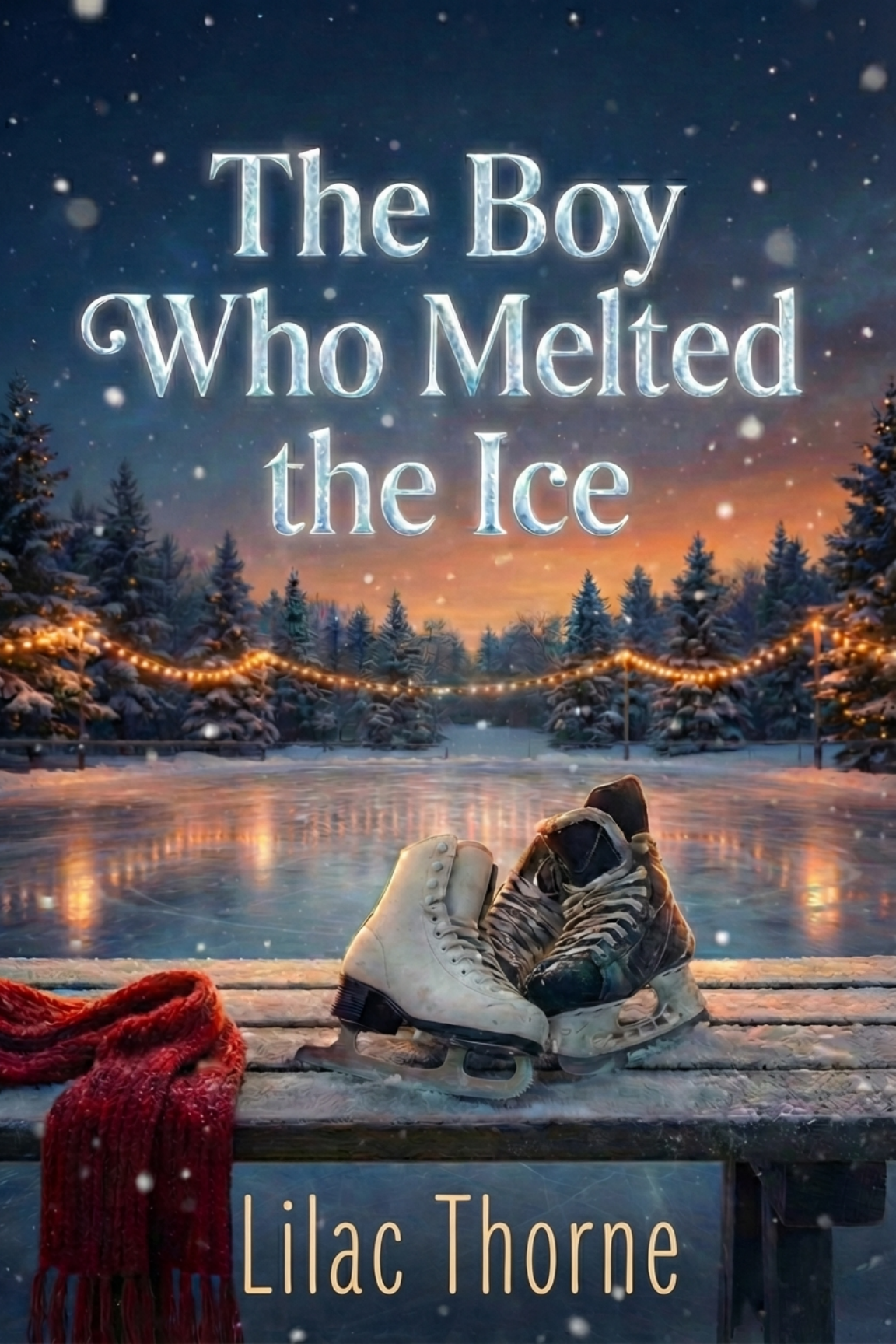


The background of the entire image is a serene winter night scene. In the foreground, a wooden bench sits on a snowy ground. Resting on the bench are a pair of ice skates: one is white with black laces, and the other is dark with white laces. To the left of the skates, a thick, red, knitted scarf with long fringe is draped over the bench. In the background, a frozen pond reflects the warm, golden light of a string of small, glowing lights that stretch across the middle ground. The lights are strung between snow-laden evergreen trees. The sky is a deep, dark blue, speckled with falling snowflakes. The overall atmosphere is cozy and magical.

The Boy Who Melted the Ice

Lilac Thorne

Act 1: Homecoming

Chapter 1: Mia arrives home

"You have until January first to decide, Davis."

Coach Martinez's voice crackled through my phone as I stood at the window of my childhood bedroom, watching the Hendersons' mechanical Santa wave with manic enthusiasm. Wave. Reset. Wave. Reset. Like some festive Sisyphus trapped in eternal cheer.

"That's three weeks," I said carefully. "The holidays."

"Stanford doesn't wait for holidays. Their program is elite. Your tape impressed them. But they need an answer." A pause. "You're one of the best keepers I've seen in ten years, Mia. This transfer could be your path to the national team."

The national team. Those words used to light me up like stadium floods. Now they just made me feel hollow, like I was defending a goal I couldn't even see anymore.

"Can we talk after Christmas? I promise I'll have an answer by New Year's."

"Fine. But Mia?" Coach's sigh rattled through the speaker. "Don't let fear make this decision for you."

After she hung up, I sat there staring at my phone. My hands—steady enough to stop penalty kicks in overtime—were shaking.

Fear. Right. Because fear was definitely my problem.

Not the fact that I'd spent the last semester going through the motions like my body knew every drill but my heart had stopped showing up. Not the fact that last week's final game, the one we won, had felt like nothing. I'd made seven saves, including a diving stop that made the highlight reel, and afterward in the locker room while my teammates screamed and sprayed champagne, I'd sat in my gear staring at the wall, wondering when I'd stopped feeling anything at all.

I'd been home for exactly four hours, and already the walls of this room were closing in. Same soccer trophies gathering dust on the shelves. Same team photos where I still smiled like the future was a goal I could defend. Same view of the same street in the same small town I'd spent four years trying to escape.

My eyes caught the old bulletin board above my desk, half-hidden by a Stanford pennant Mom must have hung. Underneath, barely visible: a faded photo of me at twelve, holding up a first-place ribbon from the county science fair. My project had been on the physics of projectile motion—how to calculate the perfect angle for a goalkeeper's dive. I'd been so proud of that, the way I could

make numbers explain the magic of what my body did on instinct. Somewhere along the way, I'd stopped caring about the why and just focused on the dive.

Next to the photo, a small stack of paperbacks gathered dust—fantasy novels I used to devour, dog-eared and spine-cracked from multiple readings. I couldn't remember the last time I'd read anything that wasn't a playbook or a scouting report.

My phone screen still showed my last text to my roommate Brianna: *Home safe. Kill me.*

Her response: *Is it the mom? The memories? Or the boy you never talk about?*

I hadn't answered.

Twenty-four days until January first. Twenty-four days to decide if Stanford was my future or just another goal I was defending out of habit. Twenty-four days trapped in Frozen Peak while everyone I'd left behind at school was celebrating, bonding, becoming a team without me.

I missed my team. Missed the brutal simplicity of practice, where the only thing that mattered was the next save. Missed the bus rides and the inside jokes and the way everything made sense when I was between the posts. Here, nothing made sense. Here, I was just Mia Davis who used to be something, and everyone wanted to know what came next.



"Mia! Sweetheart! Come down here, please!"

My mother's voice carried up the stairs with the kind of aggressive cheer that meant she'd been Pinterest-ing again. I groaned, pulled on jeans and an old Frozen Peak High hoodie that smelled like pine and memories, and trudged downstairs.

Through the hallway window, I caught a glimpse of Main Street below—the old clock tower rising above the shops, its face illuminated against the gray December sky. A light snow had started falling, dusting the rooftops like powdered sugar. Frozen Peak looked exactly like a Hallmark movie, which was probably why I'd spent four years running from it.

The living room looked like a Christmas store had exploded. A tree that definitely violated some kind of fire code dominated the corner, branches sagging under the weight of approximately nine thousand ornaments. Mom had arranged the nativity scene so

Baby Jesus appeared to be crowd-surfing the wise men. Cinnamon candles burned on every surface, their sweetness almost cloying, and somewhere Bing Crosby was crooning about white Christmases from a speaker I couldn't locate.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Mom spun around, her reindeer sweater blinking with actual LED lights sewn into its nose. "I want this to be our best Christmas ever!"

"Mom, it's December seventh."

"Exactly! We're behind schedule." She thrust a clipboard at me—an actual clipboard with color-coded tabs and what appeared to be a laminated timeline. "Now, I have plans for us."

My stomach dropped. Mom's "plans" were legendary. The summer she decided we'd learn pottery together had ended with a kiln fire and a lifetime ban from the community center.

"What kind of plans?"

"Well, you know I'm on the Christmas Festival committee." She said this like it was breaking news, not the third time she'd mentioned it since I'd walked through the door. "Actually, I'm on three committees this year. The decorations committee, the events committee, and the community outreach committee."

"That sounds... thorough."

"Organization is next to godliness." She flipped to a pink tab on the clipboard. "And I've volunteered you to help with the festival! Mother-daughter bonding!"

For a moment, her enthusiasm flickered, and I caught something underneath—the same tiredness I'd seen in my own reflection. Mom had been alone in this house for four years. Every committee, every clipboard, every over-decorated corner was her way of filling the silence I'd left behind.

I stared at the clipboard like it might bite me. "I'm only here for three weeks."

"Perfect! The festival is December twenty-third." Her eyes sparkled with dangerous enthusiasm. "And I've already assigned you to the ice rink renovation team."



Ice rink.

The words hit me like a ball to the sternum. Frozen Peak Ice Rink. The place where I'd learned to skate at eight years old. The place where someone had taught me that power comes from your core, not your arms. The place where I'd learned that some people teach you to fly just so they can watch you fall.

"The rink's been closed for years," I said carefully, my voice steadier than my heartbeat. "Why would anyone—"

"The town bought it! Grand reopening at the festival. Isn't that exciting?" Mom was already back to rearranging garland, completely missing the way all the blood had drained from my face. "Such a special place. You practically lived there as a kid."

Yeah. With him.

I gripped the edge of the counter hard enough to feel the wood grain bite into my palms. "I don't think—"

"Oh, it'll be wonderful! The whole community coming together. You know how much this town needs something to celebrate." She turned back to me, her expression softening slightly. "I know you're stressed about the Stanford thing, sweetheart. But maybe a little small-town Christmas spirit is exactly what you need. Sometimes you have to stop running to figure out which direction to go."

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed. I glanced down, grateful for the interruption.

Tyler Brooks.

MIA DAVIS. THE LEGEND RETURNS.

Coffee tomorrow? I need to hear about Stanford while I humble-brag about Michigan hockey. It's tradition.

Also my mom will literally kill me if I don't invite you within 24hrs of you being home. She's scary. Help.

Despite everything, I smiled. Tyler had always been able to make me laugh, even senior year when laughing felt impossible. He'd been there with stupid jokes and uncomplicated friendship when everything else fell apart. When someone else disappeared without explanation, leaving me to wonder what I'd done wrong.

"Tyler wants to get coffee," I told Mom, who immediately lit up like her personal Christmas tree.

"Oh, Tyler! Such a nice boy. Did you know he's playing for Michigan's hockey team now? His mother and I have lunch every Tuesday." She clasped her hands together. "He asks about you, you know. Every time."

"Mom."

"I'm just saying! He's handsome, he's athletic, he's pre-med..." She ticked off qualities on her fingers like she was running down a shopping list. "And he's always been so sweet on you."

"We're friends. That's it."

"Mmm-hmm." The sound was loaded with maternal skepticism. "Well, friend or not, you should know he's volunteering for the festival too. On the ice rink team, actually."

Great. At least there'd be one friendly face while I confronted a building full of memories I'd spent four years trying to bury.

I texted Tyler back: *Coffee sounds good. But I'm not humble-bragging about anything. Stanford is... complicated.*

His response came immediately: *Complicated how? Spill. I have hot chocolate and zero judgment.*

Then: *Okay maybe a little judgment. But only the supportive kind.*

Then: *Is it weird that I'm genuinely excited you're home? That's not weird right? Asking for a friend.*

I was still smiling at my phone when Mom's voice pulled me back.

"Oh! I almost forgot." She turned to the tree, fussing with an ornament that didn't need fussing. Her voice had gone carefully casual in that way that meant she was about to drop something significant. "I ran into Linda Mitchell at the grocery store yesterday."

My whole body went still.

"Poor thing's been through so much." Mom kept her back to me, adjusting the same ornament over and over. "The divorce and everything."

"What divorce?"

The question came out before I could stop it, before I could pretend I didn't care.

Mom paused, finally looking at me properly. Something flickered across her face—concern, maybe, or that mother-vision that could spot emotional damage through concrete. "Oh, you

didn't—well, it was quite the situation. Richard had an affair with his business partner. Everything fell apart around prom time your senior year. The whole family just..." She made a vague gesture. "Imploded. Linda had a really rough time of it. She's been recovering from surgery recently—nothing too serious, but she could use the support."

Prom time. Senior year.

Right when Jace had—

No. I wasn't doing this. I wasn't going to stand in my Christmas-bombed living room and rewrite history based on town gossip. Jace Mitchell had made his choice. He'd asked me to prom with that stupid, perfect equation—scrawled across three pages of graph paper, each problem's answer forming a letter until "PROM?" emerged from the math like some kind of love letter to the nerdiest parts of me. I'd kept that proof in my backpack for two weeks, reading it during boring classes, tracing the elegant solutions with my finger.

And then—nothing. Took Ashley Coleman instead. Left me standing in the hallway like an idiot still believing in boys who saw the world in formulas.

He'd broken me down to my component parts and decided I didn't add up to enough.

Whatever had happened with his family wasn't my problem. Wasn't my story. I'd built four years of walls, and I wasn't about to let a piece of gossip knock them down.

"That's sad," I said, keeping my voice neutral. "For Mrs. Mitchell, I mean."

"Mmm." Mom studied me for a long moment, then turned back to the tree. "Anyway. The committee meeting is tomorrow at ten. Town hall. Don't be late." She adjusted another ornament, her reflection in the window looking tired. Sad, even. The kind of sad she always tried to hide behind Christmas cheer and color-coded committees. "We're assigning the renovation teams."

"Great. Can't wait."

I was halfway up the stairs when Mom's voice drifted after me, light and casual as a grenade.

"Oh, and Mia? Linda mentioned the Mitchell boy is back too. Jace. From MIT, apparently." A pause. "Small world, isn't it?"

I froze with my hand on the banister.

Jace. Here. In Frozen Peak.

The boy who'd solved calculus problems to spell out "prom?" and then vanished from my life two weeks later like I'd been the wrong answer all along.

My heart kicked into overdrive like I was defending a shootout.

"That's nice for him," I managed, voice steady as a goalkeeper's hands. "I should get some sleep. Early meeting tomorrow."

I made it to my room before my legs gave out. Sank onto the edge of my bed, the ancient springs creaking in protest, and stared at the ceiling I'd memorized during all those sleepless nights four years ago.

Jace was back.

Jace was back, and we were both being assigned to work on the ice rink—the place where we'd first met, the place where he'd taught me to skate, the place where I'd started to fall for a boy who calculated paths to my heart and then subtracted himself from the equation without showing his work.

Twenty-four days until January first.

Twenty-four days to figure out Stanford.

Twenty-four days in a town that suddenly felt very, very small.

My phone buzzed. Emma Rodriguez, my best friend and saving grace in this tinsel-covered nightmare.

Heard you're back. Heard HE'S back too. Scale of 1-10, how screwed are we?

I stared at the message, then typed my reply.

11. Maybe 12.

*Meet me at the bakery tomorrow after the committee meeting.
Bringing emotional support pastries.*

Em, did you know about his family? The divorce?

The typing bubbles appeared and disappeared three times. My chest tightened. Emma only did that when she was editing herself, holding something back.

Let's talk tomorrow. In person.

That's not an answer.

I know. See you tomorrow, mija.

I tossed my phone aside and pulled my pillow over my face.

Jace Mitchell was back.

And tomorrow morning, I was going to have to walk into that committee meeting and face him for the first time in four years.

I was supposed to be figuring out my future. Stanford or stay. Soccer or something else. The national team dream I'd chased since I was ten, or whatever came after you stopped wanting what you'd always wanted.

Instead, I was lying in my childhood bedroom, heart racing, thinking about a boy who'd looked at me once like I was the answer to every equation he'd never solved.

Small world, Mom had said.

Small world. Small town. Nowhere to hide.

Tomorrow was going to be a disaster.

Outside my window, the Hendersons' mechanical Santa kept waving. Wave. Reset. Wave. Reset.

I closed my eyes and tried very hard not to dream about dark hair and calculus and the way some equations never quite balance, no matter how many times you check your work.



Twenty-four days.

What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 2: The Run-In

The town hall smelled exactly the same as it had during every mandatory school assembly—old wood, lemon pledge, and the ghost of a thousand potlucks. I stood in the doorway clutching Emma's emergency coffee like a shield, watching the Christmas Committee bustle around tables covered in color-coded binders that would make my mother weep with organizational joy.

"You can do this," Emma whispered beside me, her hand warm on my back. "It's just a meeting. He might not even be here."

Famous last words.

Because there he was, bent over a table in the corner, doing what Jace Mitchell did best—solving problems with mathematical precision. His fingers traced columns on a spreadsheet, lips moving slightly as he calculated something in his head. The same tell he'd had in AP Calc, when the numbers sang to him in frequencies the rest of us couldn't hear.



Four years of carefully buried feelings hit me like a truck doing ninety on black ice.

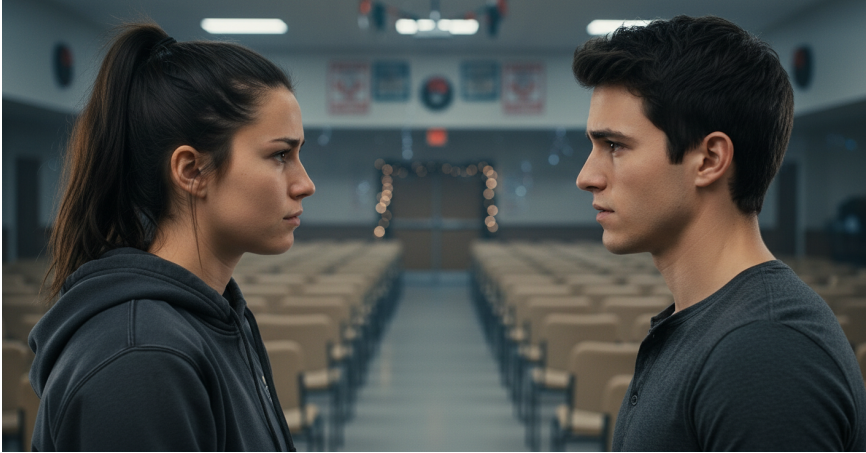
He looked good.

No—that was too simple. Too generic. Tyler looked good. Random guys at Stanford looked good. Jace looked like my specific weakness translated into human form—dark hair that still fell across his forehead when he concentrated, shoulders that had broadened from boy to man but still hunched slightly when he was deep in thought. His hands moved across the paper with the same elegant precision I remembered, long fingers that used to trace equations on my palm, making mathematics feel like poetry.

The kind of casual perfection that made my goalkeeper instincts scream *danger* while my stupid, stubborn heart whispered *home*.

"Breathe," Emma hissed, but I couldn't. My lungs had forgotten their job, along with my legs and possibly my brain.

He looked up.



Our eyes met across twenty feet of folding chairs and Christmas chaos, and the world tilted off its axis. Those brown eyes—the ones that used to see straight through my defenses—widened for a fraction of a second before his face smoothed into careful neutrality. But I caught it. That flash of... something. The same something that had made him follow me on Instagram at midnight.

"Mia?" His voice carried across the room, still precise, still measured. Still capable of turning my name into a calculation where x equaled everything I'd tried to forget.

I forced my feet forward, each step a small betrayal of my better judgment. My hip caught the corner of a table, sending a stack of flyers cascading to the floor. Perfect. Nothing says "I'm totally over you" like sudden-onset clumsiness.

Emma's grip on my arm tightened—a goalkeeper's hold, protective and ready to pull me back from the edge—as I knelt to gather the papers. Of course Jace knelt too, because the universe had a twisted sense of humor.

Our fingers brushed reaching for the same flyer. Electric. Still electric after four years, like my body had stored the memory of his touch in some cellular database I couldn't delete.



"Jace." The word came out steady despite my internal chaos. Years of penalty kicks had taught me to fake calm even when my insides were performing their own personal earthquake. "Didn't know MIT had relocated to Frozen Peak."

I stood, he stood, and suddenly we were too close. Close enough to see the faint scar above his left eyebrow from when he'd tried to teach me hockey stops and we'd collided instead.

Something flickered across his face—pain maybe, or recognition of the barb. "Still there. Computer Science and AI research." A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Though home has... complications."

Home has complications. The boy who'd solved differential equations for fun, who'd been accepted early admission, whose future had been mapped in perfect mathematical precision—that boy was standing in a small-town committee meeting looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

"Well," I said, hating how my voice wanted to soften, "some things don't change, right?"

"Yeah." The word hung between us, heavy with four years of unspoken everything. "They really do."

Sophie materialized out of nowhere like some Christmas elf on steroids, practically vibrating with excitement. "Mia! Oh my God, you're here!" She bounded over, all bright eyes and barely contained energy, throwing her arms around me before I could dodge. "You look exactly the same! Well, no, that's stupid, you look better. More... goalkeeper-y? Is that a word? God, I'm being weird —"

"Sophie," Jace said quietly, but there was fondness in his warning.

"Right, right." She mimed zipping her lips, then immediately unzipped them. "Totally chill. So chill I'm basically frozen." She winked at me with all the subtlety of her mother's LED reindeer sweater. "I'm just really excited about the rink reopening. So many memories there, you know?"

I knew. God, I knew. The smell of zamboni exhaust and hot chocolate. The particular acoustics that made our laughter echo off the rafters. The way the ice looked at dawn when Jace would open early just for us—pristine, untouched, like a blank page waiting for our story.

"Attention everyone!" Mrs. Chen, the committee chair, clapped her hands like we were still in high school. "Please take your seats so we can begin assignments!"

Emma steered me to chairs in the middle—strategic positioning, not too eager, not too avoidant. But Jace ended up two rows ahead, and I had a perfect view of the back of his neck, that vulnerable spot where his hair curled slightly. The spot I used to—

No.

"As you know," Mrs. Chen continued, "the crown jewel of this year's festival is the reopening of Frozen Peak Ice Rink. The building's been closed for years—" she paused, looking at her

notes, "—and frankly, it needs work. We're talking cobwebs in the rafters, dust an inch thick, possibly some structural issues with the boards."

My throat tightened. The rink, neglected and forgotten. Just like—no. I wasn't going there.

"We need our best people on this project." Her eyes found me with laser precision. "Mia Davis, your mother says you're excellent at project management."

"My mother says a lot of things," I muttered, earning a snort from Emma.

"And Jace Mitchell, with your engineering coursework, you're perfect for the technical aspects."

My stomach dropped faster than a misfired penalty kick.

"So I'm assigning you both as co-coordinators for the rink renovation. You'll oversee the contractors, manage volunteers, and ensure we're ready for the December 23rd opening."

"Both of us?" The words escaped before I could stop them.

Mrs. Chen beamed like she'd just solved world hunger. "Yes! You'll need to work closely together. Daily meetings at eight AM, site inspections, the works. Isn't it perfect? You two always worked so well together in high school."

Emma's hand found mine under the table, squeezing hard enough to leave marks.

Jace turned in his chair, and our eyes met again. Something passed between us—memory maybe, or recognition of the cosmic joke being played at our expense.

"Actually," Tyler's voice cut through the moment as he stood from his seat near the back, flashing that easy smile that had charmed half of Stanford's female population. "I'd like to volunteer too. For the rink project." His eyes found mine, warm with something uncomplicated. "Could use the extra hands, right?" He caught the tension in my expression and his voice gentled. "Plus, I actually know which end of a hammer to hold. Four years of Habitat volunteering at State. Built houses in Guatemala last summer—figured an ice rink can't be that different from a roof, right?"

The contrast was immediate—Tyler's open enthusiasm against Jace's brooding intensity. Light versus shadow. Simple versus everything complicated I'd been trying to escape.

"Wonderful!" Mrs. Chen clapped again. "The more the merrier. Sophie Mitchell, you're on the team too since you've been helping at the rink already."

Sophie actually bounced in her seat. "This is going to be just like old times!"

"Moving on to other assignments..." Mrs. Chen's voice faded into background noise as I stared at the back of Jace's head, watching him return to his spreadsheet. His shoulders were tense,

fingers gripping the pencil too tightly. He was calculating again—I could tell by the slight tilt of his head, the way his left hand tapped out rhythms on the table.

His phone buzzed on the table—a brief vibration that made him glance down sharply. Something flickered across his face, something troubled, before he silenced it and shoved it into his pocket without responding. His jaw tightened, and for a moment he stared at nothing, lost somewhere I couldn't follow.

Binary. He was counting in binary when stressed. Some things hadn't changed.

He also pressed his thumb to his middle finger in a specific pattern—new since high school. A habit developed in my absence, during years I hadn't been there to recognize his tells.

"The old Frozen Peak rink?" I heard myself say, too loud in a sudden lull. "That place has been closed since—"

"Since sophomore year." Jace turned again, and this time his careful control cracked just enough for me to see underneath. "I know."

Since sophomore year. Since our Saturdays ended. Since the last place we'd been purely happy, before senior year complicated everything with feelings and prom proposals and promises that turned to smoke.

The memory hit me sideways—that last morning at the rink, a week before prom. He'd been teaching me backward crossovers, his hands steady on my waist. "Trust me," he'd said, and I had. I'd trusted him with my balance on the ice, with my secrets, with everything. Right up until the moment he chose MIT over us, chose equations over emotions, chose a future that didn't include the girl who'd been counting on forever.

"First meeting is tomorrow, eight AM sharp at the rink," Mrs. Chen announced. "We'll start with structural assessment in the main building. Bring work clothes—from what Sophie tells us, we'll need them. Don't be late!"

The meeting dissolved into chaos as people grabbed coffee and cookies, voices rising with holiday excitement. Tyler was suddenly beside me, his presence warm and uncomplicated.

"Hey," he said, that dimple appearing. "You okay? You look like someone just asked you to perform surgery with a spoon."

Despite everything, I laughed. "That might be easier than this."

"The rink thing?" He glanced at Jace, then back to me with understanding that surprised me. "Well, good news is I'll be there. I'm excellent at defusing tension. Ask anyone who's seen me mediate between my mom and her book club when they disagree about wine choices."

Emma appeared at my other side. "We should go."

But before I could move, Jace was there, too close, smelling like winter air and something achingly familiar—that same soap he'd used in high school, the one that used to linger on my skin after he'd held me.

"We need to—" He stopped, visibly recalculating his approach. "There are variables here we need to address. Parameters for the project."

"Variables?" I heard the edge in my voice. "Is that what we're calling it now?"

"Mia—"

"Tomorrow," I said sharply. "Eight AM. We can discuss all the parameters you want."

His hand moved toward me, stopped, fell back to his side. The gesture was so small, so defeated, it made my chest ache.

"About MIT," he said quietly, and for once the mathematical precision cracked. "About why—"

"Jace!" A woman's voice called from across the room. "I need you to look at these electrical permits."

He closed his eyes, just for a second, and I saw exhaustion written in the lines around them. When had he started looking tired? The boy who used to stay up all night solving problems for fun now looked like he was being solved for x and coming up indefinite.

"Tomorrow," he said, and it sounded like both a promise and a threat. "We can't keep avoiding the calculations that matter."

I escaped, Emma right behind me, but not before Sophie caught us at the door.

"I'm so glad you're back," she said, quieter than before, her manic energy dimmed. "He's been—" She glanced over at her brother, who was bent over permits with the contractor, his thumb again finding that new pattern against his fingers. "It's been hard. The last four years. But seeing you here... he actually smiled this morning. First time in weeks."

"Sophie—"

"I know, I know, I'm interfering." She grinned, but there was something sad underneath. "It's just—the rink, you know? Where everything started? Maybe it's where things can start again."

She bounced off before I could respond, leaving me standing in the doorway with Emma's arm through mine and my heart doing complicated gymnastics in my chest.

Outside, the December air bit sharp and clean. "He looks different," I said, watching my breath cloud. "Tired. Like something's weighing on him."

"Don't." Emma's voice was firm. "Don't you dare start feeling sorry for him."

"I'm not." But I was. I was feeling everything I'd trained myself not to feel for four years, and it was terrifying.

My phone buzzed. Instagram notification.

Jace Mitchell liked your photo—the one from this morning's run, where I'd captured the sunrise over the high school track. Nothing special. Nothing that should make my pulse jump.

But there was a comment too: *Still running at dawn? Some things don't change.*

Four words. Sixteen characters. One boy who still knew my habits after four years of silence.

I shoved my phone in my pocket and turned back toward the town hall. Through the lit windows, I saw him. Jace was standing now, one hand pressed against the glass, watching us leave. Watching me leave. His shoulders were drawn up tight, defensive, but his face—God, his face. The careful mask had slipped completely. His jaw was clenched like he was physically holding words back, his free hand opening and closing in that pattern I'd once known meant he was working through an impossible proof. But it was his eyes that gutted me—dark and desperate, the same look I'd seen once before. The night he'd stood in my driveway with an MIT acceptance letter in one hand and my heart in the other, trying to solve an equation where choosing one variable meant losing another.



The same look he'd had the last time we'd talked at the rink, when he'd promised things would never change between us.

Twenty days until Christmas. Twenty days of working side by side at the place where we'd begun. Twenty days of pretending four years of silence didn't matter, that I didn't still know his tells, that he didn't still look at me like I was an equation he'd never quite solved.

Emma pulled me toward her car, but I couldn't look away from that window. From him. From the way he stood there like he was trying to solve an impossible equation where x equaled us and there was no solution that didn't hurt.

Tomorrow. Eight AM. The ice rink where we'd begun.

The word felt like both a promise and a threat.

Chapter 3: Carved in Ice

The Frozen Peak Ice Rink smelled like memory and decay.

I arrived twenty minutes early, telling myself it was professionalism. But standing alone in the entrance, breathing in the musty cocktail of old ice, zamboni fuel, and forgotten dreams, I knew the truth. I needed to face this place without an audience.

Morning light filtered through gaps in the roof, creating golden spotlights that illuminated dust motes dancing in the frozen air. The boards were warped, several sections of glass missing entirely, and the penalty box door hung at an angle that defied physics. The scoreboard was dark, frozen at some long-ago score: HOME 3, VISITORS 2.



I walked slowly toward center ice, my footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. The cold bit through my jacket, sharper inside than out. My breath clouded in front of me as I traced the familiar path we'd skated a thousand times.

Eight years old, falling on my butt for the twentieth time. Jace's mittened hand reaching down. "Come on, Davis. Goalkeepers don't give up."

Twelve, racing him around the rink, my legs burning, his laugh echoing off the rafters when I finally beat him.

Fifteen, the Saturday before Christmas, hot chocolate from the ancient machine, talking about everything and nothing until the zamboni kicked us off.



I pressed my palm against the boards, feeling the rough, splintered wood. Someone had carved something here once. I couldn't read it anymore, worn away by years and weather.

Some things disappeared. Some things didn't.

"You're early."

I spun around. Jace stood in the doorway, toolbox in hand, watching me with an expression I couldn't read. How long had he been there? How much had he seen of my pathetic nostalgia tour?

"So are you," I said, straightening. Pulling the goalkeeper mask back into place.

"Had to check the electrical panel before the contractor arrives." He set down the toolbox and walked toward me, stopping at a careful distance. "The wiring in this place is probably older than both of us combined."

"Probably older than the town."

We stood in the frozen silence, neither of us acknowledging the elephant on the ice. The last time we'd been here together. What we'd said. What we hadn't.

"We should get started," I said. "The equipment storage needs inventory. Contractors want to know what's salvageable."

"I'll take the mechanical room. Check the refrigeration system."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Neither of us moved.

"Mia—" he started.

"Don't." The word came out sharper than I intended. "We're here to work. That's all."

Something flickered across his face. Pain, maybe. Or recognition. He nodded once and turned toward the mechanical room.

I headed for the storage area, but my traitorous feet carried me past it, toward the old locker rooms. Just to check them. For inventory purposes.

The women's locker room door groaned when I pushed it open. The smell hit me first: rust, mildew, and underneath it, a ghost of the cheap vanilla body spray Emma and I used to drown ourselves in. My old locker still had the Stanford sticker I'd put on it freshman year, back when California had been a dream instead of an escape route.

And there, on the door frame leading to the showers, my heart stopped.

J + M.



The carving was exactly as we'd left it. The edges had softened with time, the wood darkened around the letters, but they remained clear. Permanent. Like a scar that refused to fade.

"This is vandalism," I'd said, watching him etch the letters with my car key.

"It's history," he'd corrected, his tongue between his teeth in concentration. "Fifty years from now, someone's going to find this and wonder about us."

"Wonder what?"

He'd looked at me then, something unreadable in his brown eyes. "Wonder if we made it."

I traced the letters with my finger, feeling the grooves he'd carved. My chest ached with something I couldn't name. We hadn't made it. We'd crashed and burned so spectacularly that I'd fled three thousand miles to escape the wreckage.

But the carving was still here. Waiting.

"You found it."

I jerked my hand back like I'd been caught stealing. Jace stood in the doorway, his face half in shadow. He looked at the carving, then at me, and his careful composure cracked.

"I knew it would still be here," he said quietly. "I checked. Last week, when we got the assignment."

"You checked."

"I had to know." He stepped into the locker room, closer than he'd been all morning. "Some things don't change, Mia."

"Everything changes." The words tasted bitter. "You taught me that."

He flinched, but didn't retreat. "I deserve that."

"You deserve worse."

"Probably." He was close enough now that I could see the dark circles under his eyes, the tension in his jaw. "But we can't keep—"

"Keep what?" I demanded. "Pretending? Avoiding? What exactly is the alternative, Jace? We have a heart-to-heart about how you destroyed me and then go back to inventory?"



"I didn't want to destroy you—"

"Well, congratulations, you did it anyway." The anger I'd been suppressing all morning erupted. "You asked me to prom with a math equation, Jace. An *equation*. And I thought it was the most

romantic thing anyone had ever done. I solved it in the library with my hands shaking because I couldn't believe—" I stopped, horrified by how much I'd revealed.

"Mia—"

"And then you just... stopped. No explanation. No goodbye. You took someone else and let me stand there in a dress I couldn't afford, waiting for a boy who never showed up."

"There were reasons—"

"I don't want your reasons!" My voice echoed off the tile walls. "I wanted you to show up. That's all I wanted. And you couldn't even do that."

He stood there, absorbing every word like they were punches he'd earned. His hands hung at his sides, fingers twitching in that binary pattern I remembered from high school. Counting. Processing. Trying to solve an equation that had no solution.

"You're right," he said finally. "I couldn't do that. I couldn't show up that night. And I've spent four years knowing it was the worst decision I've ever made."

"Then why—"

"Sorry I'm late!" Tyler's voice shattered the moment like a puck through glass. He appeared in the doorway, all golden retriever energy and movie-star smile, completely oblivious to what he'd interrupted. "Traffic was crazy."

There was no traffic in this town. There was barely a traffic light.

"Tyler." I stepped back from Jace, too fast, too obvious. "What are you doing here?"

"Volunteering." He held up his hands, wiggling his fingers. "These babies aren't just for slap shots. I helped build houses in Guatemala last summer. Figured a rink couldn't be that different."

"Great," Jace said flatly. "We need to move the old equipment to the storage shed. Mia can show you which pile is salvage."

Tyler looked between us, and something sharpened in his expression. He wasn't stupid. Oblivious to the weight of our history, maybe, but not stupid.

"Actually," I said, seizing control of the situation, "Tyler, you can help me with the equipment. Jace, the contractor should be here in thirty minutes. Someone needs to be in the mechanical room when he arrives."

Jace's jaw tightened, but he nodded. "Sure. Whatever you need, *boss*."

He walked out without looking back. I told myself I was relieved.

Moving the old equipment was exactly the mindless physical work I needed. Tyler proved surprisingly competent, lifting rusted goal frames and stacks of ancient hockey pads with easy strength.

"So," he said, dropping a pile of mildewed jerseys onto the salvage heap, "you and Mitchell have history."

It wasn't a question.

"Ancient history," I said, dragging a broken bench toward the trash pile.

"Ancient like dinosaurs, or ancient like that carving I saw in the locker room door?"

I stopped. "You saw that?"

"Hard to miss. J plus M." He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Let me guess. Jace and Mia?"

"Like I said. Ancient."

Tyler was quiet for a moment, lifting a stack of broken sticks and tossing them with more force than necessary. "My parents used to bring me here when I was a kid. Before it closed."

"You skated here?"

"Learned to skate here. I was terrible at first. Worse than terrible. This rink taught me everything." He looked around at the decay, something almost fond in his expression. "I remember

watching the older kids practice sometimes. There was this one pair who were always here on Saturdays. A boy teaching a girl to skate backwards. They made it look easy."

My throat tightened. "Tyler—"

"I didn't know it was you until yesterday." He turned to face me, his expression uncharacteristically serious. "When Mrs. Chen announced the project. Sophie Mitchell wouldn't shut up about how you and her brother used to practically live here."

"That was a long time ago."

"Was it?" He moved closer, not threatening, just... present. "Because the way you two look at each other doesn't feel like ancient history to me."

Before I could respond, Emma burst through the doors carrying a tray of coffee and a box from her family's bakery. "Special delivery for the martyrs!"

The interruption was so perfectly timed I could have kissed her. Tyler stepped back, that easy smile sliding back into place like nothing had happened.

"Coffee!" I grabbed a cup, letting the warmth seep into my frozen fingers. "Em, you're a lifesaver."

Emma's eyes swept the room, cataloging Tyler's presence, the tension in my shoulders, and notably, Jace's absence. Her gaze landed on Tyler and hardened into something protective.

"Brooks," she said, her tone cool. "Didn't know you were on the volunteer list."

"Last minute addition." He grabbed a coffee, unbothered by her hostility. "Couldn't let Mia do all the heavy lifting."

"Right. Because she definitely needs a hockey player to save her." Emma positioned herself between us like a particularly stylish bodyguard. "Where's Mitchell?"

"Mechanical room. Waiting for the contractor."

"Good. Hope he stays there." She handed me a pastry with pointed emphasis. "So, Mia, I hear Tyler's been asking about the Christmas Gala."

Tyler's ears reddened slightly. "Emma—"

"Black tie, fancy dinner, dancing under twinkle lights." Emma's smile was sharp enough to cut glass. "Very romantic. The kind of event you take someone special to."

"Actually," Tyler said, meeting my eyes, "I was hoping to talk to you about that. Would you want to—"

"She's busy!" Sophie Mitchell practically skipped through the door, her enthusiasm a stark contrast to the growing tension. "Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, but Jace says the contractor's here and he needs—oh!" She stopped, seeing our group. "Everyone's here! It's like a reunion!"

Her eyes landed on me, and her face lit up. "It's so good to see you again, Mia. Jace never stopped—"

"Sophie." Jace appeared behind her, and I hadn't even heard him approach. His voice cracked like a whip. "The contractor needs you to find the original building permits."

Sophie's mouth snapped shut, but her eyes darted between her brother and me with obvious interest. "Right. Permits. On it."

She bounced toward the office, leaving an awkward silence that even Tyler's charm couldn't fill.

"The contractor wants to see the locker rooms," Jace said, not looking at me. "Both of them. He needs to assess the plumbing situation."

"I can show him," I offered. "I was just in there."

"No." Something flickered across his face. "I'll handle it. You have... other things."

He meant Tyler. He meant Emma's death glares. He meant everything we'd left unfinished in that locker room.

"Fine," I said. "Handle it."

He walked away, and I watched him go, hating how my chest ached at the distance between us.

An hour later, Sophie found me organizing salvageable equipment into piles, my hands raw from work and my mind refusing to quiet.

"I'm sorry about earlier," she said, biting her lip. "I didn't mean to—I know I talk too much when I'm nervous, and seeing you here, it's just—" She stopped, took a breath. "It's been weird. These last four years."

"Sophie, you don't have to—"

"He keeps your picture." The words tumbled out in a rush, like she'd been holding them back for years. "In his desk drawer. The one from state championships. You're covered in ice cream because Emma dropped her cone when you made that impossible save. You're laughing so hard you can barely stand."

My throat tightened. I remembered that day. The save. The celebration. Emma's dramatics over her ruined dessert.

"And he's looking at you," Sophie continued, quieter now. "In the picture. Like you're the only thing in the world worth seeing."

"That was a long time ago."

"Was it?" She picked up a hockey puck, turning it over in her hands. "Because the way he still looks at you... it's the same."

"Sophie—"

"He gave up things, you know. For the family. For me." She glanced toward the door where Jace had disappeared with the contractor. "MIT had complications. That's what he tells everyone. But the complication was us. Mom needed him. I needed him. And he stayed."

I didn't know what to say. The Jace I'd known had been headed for greatness, for MIT, for a future mapped in mathematical precision. The idea that he'd given that up...

"Why are you telling me this?"

Sophie set down the puck. "Because everyone else is too scared to. And because he won't." She started toward the door, then turned back. "He's in the women's locker room. The contractor left twenty minutes ago, but Jace is still in there. I think—" She hesitated. "I think he's looking at something."

She left before I could respond.

I stood there for a long moment, surrounded by the ghosts of equipment and the echoes of what we'd been. Then I walked toward the locker room.

Jace was standing in front of the door frame, his back to me, one hand pressed against the carved letters. He didn't turn when I entered, though he must have heard my footsteps on the tile.

"I remember the day we did this," he said quietly. "You were worried about getting caught. About vandalism charges."

"You said it was art."

"I said it was history." He finally turned, and his face was open in a way I hadn't seen since high school. Raw. Unguarded. "I said fifty years from now, someone would wonder about us."

"Wonder if we made it."

"Yeah." He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Guess we gave them their answer."

I moved closer, drawn by something I couldn't name. "What happened, Jace? What really happened?"

"Mia—"

"Not excuses. Not 'it was complicated.' What actually happened that made you decide I wasn't worth showing up for?"

He closed his eyes, and for a moment I thought he would shut down again. Retreat into the careful distance he'd maintained all morning. But when he opened them, there was something desperate there.

"It wasn't about you not being worth it. It was about me not being—" He stopped, jaw tight. "There were things happening. With my family. Things I couldn't—" Another stop. Another restart. "I thought if I let you in, I'd drag you down with me. I thought pushing you away was protecting you."

"Protecting me from what?"

"From everything I was going through. From the mess I was living in. From—" His voice cracked. "From having to watch me fall apart."

The words hung between us, heavy with everything he wasn't saying. I thought about Sophie's revelations. About the picture in his desk drawer. About MIT and complications and a family that had clearly been through something terrible.

"You don't get to make that choice for me," I said. "You don't get to decide what I can handle."

"I know that now. I knew it then, somewhere. But I was seventeen and drowning and I thought—" He pressed his hand harder against the carving, like he could absorb the memory through his skin. "I thought I was saving you."

"You weren't saving me. You were destroying me."

"I know." His voice was barely a whisper. "I've known that every day for four years."

We stood there, inches apart, the carved letters between us like a monument to everything we'd lost. I could feel the heat of him despite the cold, could see the pulse jumping in his throat.

"Jace—"

The mechanical room door slammed. Voices echoed through the rink. The contractor was back, demanding attention, and the moment shattered like ice under too much pressure.

Jace stepped back first, his mask sliding back into place. "The contractor needs approval on the new boards. We should—"

"Go," I finished. "Yeah. We should."

But neither of us moved. We stood there, the carving at our backs, the weight of four years pressing down on us like snow on a failing roof.

"This isn't over," Jace said quietly.

"No," I agreed, though I didn't know if it was a promise or a threat. "It isn't."

He walked out first. I stayed behind for a moment, pressing my palm against those carved letters one more time.

J + M.

Some things, I realized, couldn't be erased. The question was whether we could build something new on the foundations of what remained.

Sophie appeared in the doorway, looking apologetic. "The contractor says the pipes need more work than expected. Major repairs. He wants to meet with both coordinators about the timeline."

"How bad?"

"Bad enough that you'll probably have to work late. Together. For the foreseeable future." She bit her lip, not quite hiding her smile. "Just the two of you. Every night until the deadline."

I stared at her. "Did you plan this?"

"Me?" Sophie's innocent expression was about as convincing as a hockey player claiming they didn't mean to trip. "I'm just the messenger."

She bounced away, leaving me alone with the carving and the cold and the terrifying knowledge that I was about to spend every night trapped with Jace Mitchell in the place where we'd begun.

Some things couldn't be erased.

And apparently, some things couldn't be escaped either.

Chapter 4: Small Town Pressure

The thing about small towns is that everyone knows your business before you do.

I discovered this at 7:43 AM in the Mill Creek Coffee Shop, where I'd made the tactical error of thinking I could grab a latte without becoming the morning's entertainment.

"Mia Davis!" Mrs. Henderson's voice carried across the entire shop, which was impressive considering she was supposed to be recovering from hip surgery. "I heard you and the Mitchell boy are working together at the rink."



Every head in the place swiveled toward me. I felt like a goalkeeper facing a penalty kick with no gloves.

"Just committee stuff," I managed, accepting my drink from the barista who was trying not to smile.

"Weren't you and the Mitchell boy...?" Mrs. Henderson let the question hang, her eyes bright with the particular hunger of someone who'd been collecting gossip since before I was born. "Back in high school? Such a lovely couple at all those skating competitions."

"That was a long time ago." I edged toward the door.

"Not so long." She lowered her voice to what she probably thought was a whisper but was actually audible to everyone including the tourists at the back. "Especially considering what that poor family's been through. The divorce and all."

My hand froze on the door handle. The coffee shop had gone quiet, that particular small-town quiet that meant everyone was pretending not to listen while absolutely listening.

"Right," I said, because what else could I say? I escaped into the December morning, but I could feel the weight of their stares through the window.

The divorce. Mom had mentioned it at dinner, Jace had started to tell me something that day at the rink before Tyler interrupted, but nobody had given me the full story. In a town where everyone knew when you changed your breakfast order, how had I missed this?

Two hours later, I was at Thompson's Grocery, sent by my mother to get more ribbon for the committee (because apparently we were going to ribbon this town into submission), when I turned into the pasta aisle and nearly crashed my cart into Mrs. Mitchell.

She looked smaller than I remembered. Not just thinner, but somehow compressed, like she was taking up less space in the world on purpose. Her cart contained the saddest collection of single-person meals I'd ever seen.

"Mia." Her smile was fragile, the kind that might shatter if you looked at it too hard. "I heard you're helping with the rink."

"Mrs. Mitchell. Yes, I—Jace and I are working on it together."

Something shifted in her expression. "He's been happier since you've been back. He tries to hide it, but a mother knows."

Before I could respond, my own mother appeared at the end of the aisle like some kind of festive ambush predator, her committee badge gleaming.



"Linda!" Mom's voice was bright, aggressive in its cheer. "How are you managing? The holidays must be so difficult, being on your own now."

Mrs. Mitchell's knuckles went white on her cart handle. "I'm managing fine, thank you."

"Of course you are. And Jace has been such a help with the rink. Though I have to say, that Tyler Brooks has been quite attentive to our Mia. Such a successful young man. Made the NHL farm team, you know."

I wanted to dissolve into the floor. Or maybe use one of the pasta boxes as a projectile weapon.

"Mom—"

"Success isn't everything," Mrs. Mitchell said quietly. "Sometimes the best people are the ones who choose to stay when things get difficult."

The two mothers faced off over the linguine, and I suddenly understood that this wasn't about pasta or committees or even me. This was about something deeper, older, a judgment that had been passed and couldn't be taken back.

"We should go," I said, grabbing Mom's arm. "The ribbon, remember?"

As we left, I heard Mrs. Mitchell say, so soft I almost missed it: "He never stopped loving you, you know."

"That woman," Mom fumed as we loaded the car. "Acting like we're the ones who should feel guilty. After what her husband did —"

"What did he do?" I interrupted.

Mom stopped mid-rant. "You don't know?"

"Nobody tells me anything in this town, they just talk around it."

She glanced around the parking lot, then leaned in conspiratorially. "Richard Mitchell had an affair. With his business partner's wife. The whole thing exploded senior year—the business, the marriage, all of it. There was some kind of financial scandal too, something about embezzled funds. It was all over the local news."

Senior year. When Jace had started pulling away, when his texts got shorter, when he stopped meeting me at our bench.

"Poor Linda tried to keep it together," Mom continued, loading grocery bags. "But the humiliation... Well. The Mitchells used to be one of the best families in town. Now look at them."

"Mom, that's—"

"I'm just saying, honey, you dodged a bullet. Can you imagine if you'd stayed with Jace? You'd be tangled up in all that mess instead of at Stanford making something of yourself."

I thought about Jace at seventeen, trying to hold his family together while everyone in town watched and whispered. No wonder he'd pushed me away.

Emma was waiting on my porch when I got home, armed with hot chocolate and determination.



"Spill," she ordered. "The whole town is talking about you and Mrs. Mitchell having some kind of moment in the grocery store."

"This town needs cable TV," I muttered, but I told her everything.

Emma listened, her expression growing more serious with each detail. When I finished, she set down her mug with unusual care.

"Mia, there's something I need to tell you."

My stomach dropped. "Please don't tell me you're secretly married to Tyler or something."

"What? No. Gross." She took a breath. "It's about Jace's dad. The divorce."

"Mom told me. The affair, the scandal—"

"Do you know why it all came out when it did?"

I shook my head.

"Sophie let it slip once, when she was drunk at a college party." Emma picked at her sleeve, not meeting my eyes. "Mrs. Mitchell tried to overdose. Pills. Jace found her."

The world tilted. I gripped the porch railing.

"When?"

"May of senior year. Right before—"

"Right before prom." My voice sounded distant, hollow. "He found his mother—"

"And called 911. Saved her life. Then dealt with the police, the hospital, the gossip, everything. While his dad was off with his mistress and the whole town was watching."

I thought I might throw up. All this time, I'd hated him for abandoning me, for choosing MIT over us, for breaking my heart. But he'd been drowning, and instead of dragging me down with him, he'd pushed me toward shore.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I whispered.

"It wasn't my secret to tell. And honestly? You were so angry, and that anger got you to Stanford. It made you become this incredible person. Would you have left if you'd known the truth?"

She was right. I would have stayed. Would have tried to fix everything, save everyone, and probably destroyed myself in the process.

"You know about his dad, right?"

I turned to find Tyler standing at the bottom of my porch steps. I hadn't even heard him approach.

"Tyler—"

"The divorce?" He climbed the steps, his Michigan Hockey jacket making him look like exactly what he was—successful, uncomplicated, from a world where scandals were handled by lawyers and publicists, not small-town gossip. "Everyone knows about it. My dad actually tried to hire Mr. Mitchell after everything fell apart. Felt bad for him. Guy made one mistake and lost everything."

"One mistake?" Emma's voice was sharp. "He destroyed his family."

Tyler shrugged. "People mess up. Anyway, that's not why I'm here." He turned to me, and his smile was the one that probably worked on every girl who didn't have a Jace Mitchell-shaped hole

in her heart. "The Christmas Gala is Saturday. Black tie, dinner, dancing, the whole thing. My parents already bought a table. I'd really like you to be my date."

The Christmas Gala. The committee's biggest event, where the whole town pretended to be fancier than we were for one night. I'd gone with Jace junior year, worn his grandmother's bracelet, danced to every slow song.

"Tyler—"

"I know there's history with Mitchell." He stepped closer. "But Mia, history is just that—history. I'm offering you a future. No complications, no scandal, no small-town drama. Just us."

He made it sound so simple. So clean. No mothers in hospital beds, no families falling apart, no boys who pushed you away because they loved you too much to let you drown with them.

"Can I think about it?" I asked.

His jaw tightened slightly, but he nodded. "Sure. But Mia? Don't think too long. Sometimes the best opportunities don't wait."

After he left, Emma and I sat in silence for a while.

"He's not wrong," she finally said. "Tyler would be easier."

"Since when do I do easy?"

"Since never. Which is why you're going to do something stupid like fall for Jace Mitchell all over again."

"I never stopped falling," I admitted.

Emma sighed. "I know, babe. I know."

That night, I lay in bed staring at my phone. Tyler had texted twice more about the gala. Mom had sent three links to dresses "just in case." And Jace... Jace had sent nothing, which somehow said everything.

I opened Google. Typed: "Richard Mitchell scandal Mill Creek."

The articles loaded slowly, each headline worse than the last:

"Local Business Owner Accused of Embezzling \$500K"

"Mitchell Industries Files for Bankruptcy Amid Scandal"

"Affair Rocks Mill Creek's Business Community"

But it was the last article that stopped my heart:

"Mitchell Family Tragedy: Wife Hospitalized After Suicide Attempt"

The date was May 15th. Three days before prom. The article was clinical, just facts, but between the lines I could read everything. A seventeen-year-old boy finding his mother unconscious. Paramedics in the driveway. Neighbors watching from windows. And then, three days later, that same boy was supposed to take me to prom, pretend everything was fine, celebrate our future.

No wonder he'd said we should talk after graduation. He'd been planning to tell me everything, to let me choose with all the facts. But I'd been so angry about MIT, so hurt by what I thought was rejection, that I'd never given him the chance.

I scrolled to the last article, dated just two weeks ago:

"Richard Mitchell Relocates to Tokyo for International Finance Position"

Tokyo. The phone call at the rink, Jace's troubled expression, the business cards Sophie almost mentioned.

His father was in Tokyo, starting over with a clean slate while his ex-wife shopped for single-person dinners and his son tried to save a rink that everyone wanted to tear down.

I closed my phone, but the words stayed burned in my mind. All these secrets, all these wounds, and here we were, pretending to organize a Christmas festival while the whole town watched and waited to see if history would repeat itself.

The thing about small towns is that everyone knows your business. But sometimes, sometimes, they don't know the whole truth.

And sometimes, neither do you.

Chapter 5: Forced Proximity Locks In

I hadn't looked at my phone in thirty-six hours.

It sat on my nightstand like a grenade with the pin pulled, screen dark, full of messages I couldn't answer. Tyler had texted twice. Emma had sent three. My Stanford coach wanted to "touch base about the timeline." But every time I reached for it, I saw that article headline burned into my retinas:

Mitchell Family Tragedy: Wife Hospitalized After Suicide Attempt

May 15th. Three days before prom.

He'd found his mother. He'd been seventeen years old, and he'd found her, and then he'd had to stand next to me at graduation pretending everything was fine while I silently hated him for breaking my heart.

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes until I saw stars.

The worst part wasn't even the anger. The worst part was that I understood. If my mother had tried to--if I'd walked in and found--

No. I couldn't think about it.

I'd spent two days avoiding the rink, claiming a stomach bug, while my brain tried to reconcile the boy who'd shattered me with the boy who'd been shattering himself the whole time. But today was Tuesday, and the pipes weren't going to fix themselves, and hiding in my childhood bedroom wasn't going to change anything that had happened four years ago.

So I got dressed. I drove to Frozen Peak. And I walked into the utility room to find Jace Mitchell hunched over a voltage meter, muttering about electrical loads.

He looked up when I entered. Dark circles under his eyes. Jaw tight. He'd been here alone for two days because I'd been too much of a coward to face him.

"The auxiliary system is pulling too much power," he said, like I hadn't vanished on him. Like we were just coworkers discussing infrastructure. "If we run the Christmas lights and the ice resurfacer at the same time, we'll blow the main breaker."

I crossed my arms. "Then we stagger them. Lights during public hours, resurfacing after close."

"That's what I said. Sophie thinks we should just buy a bigger generator."

"Sophie thinks we should solve everything by throwing money at it."

"Sophie doesn't understand we don't have money to throw."

We were arguing. This was good. This was normal. This was so much easier than the conversation we actually needed to have.

"Show me the readings," I said, moving toward the panel.

The groan started low, somewhere in the walls. A shudder ran through the pipes overhead.

Jace's head snapped up.

"That doesn't sound--"

The pipe burst.



Freezing water erupted from the ceiling, drenching us both instantly. The roar was deafening, violent, like the building itself was screaming.

"Shut it off!" Jace was already moving, boots slipping on the wet concrete. He lunged for the main valve, fighting against the spray.

I grabbed a wrench from the workbench and followed him. "It's rusted! I tried it yesterday!"

"We have to force it!"

Water pooled around our ankles, soaking through my jeans, numbing my skin. Jace grabbed the wheel with both hands, his muscles straining against his wet shirt, and I added my hands next to his. Our fingers slipped over cold metal. Water streamed down our faces, into our eyes, making it impossible to see.

"On three!" he shouted. "One, two--"

We pulled together. The wheel groaned. Protested.

Turned.

The roar subsided to a trickle. Then silence.

We stood there, chests heaving, water dripping from our hair into the spreading puddle. Jace pushed wet strands out of his eyes, looking at the damaged pipe with a mixture of relief and despair.



"Well," he said, voice rough. "That sets us back at least three days."

Three days we didn't have.

"We can fix it." I looked at the puddle spreading toward the compressor, already calculating damage. "Dry everything out. Replace the section. Pray the compressor didn't short."

"The compressor's probably fine. The bigger problem is the ice bed." He was already cataloging, prioritizing, his engineer brain spinning up. "If water got into the refrigerant lines--"

"Then we'll check the refrigerant lines."

He looked at me then. Really looked at me. Water dripped from his nose. His shirt clung to his chest. He looked exhausted, cold, and--for the first time since he'd come back--completely unguarded.

"Mia," he said quietly. "I'm sorry."

For the pipe. For senior year. For his mother's breakdown and his father's affair and the four years of silence between us. The apology could have meant any of it. All of it.

"Pretty sure you didn't build this place in the eighties," I said.

He almost smiled. Almost. "We need dry clothes. And we need to call the plumber. And we probably need to accept that we're going to be living here for the next four days if we want to open on time."

Living here. The words hung in the damp air like a threat. Like a promise.

"Okay," I said. "Let's get to work."

Day one, I learned that Jace Mitchell welded like he did everything else: with quiet, focused intensity that made it impossible to look away.

We'd managed to isolate the damage to a six-foot section of pipe near the compressor housing. The good news: the compressor itself had survived. The bad news: the welding job required someone to hold a flashlight at exactly the right angle while cramped into a space roughly the size of a coffin, and that someone was me.

"Angle it left," Jace said from beneath the compressor unit. His voice echoed weirdly in the enclosed space.

I adjusted the beam. "Here?"

"Little more."



I shifted, and my shoulder pressed against his. The space was so tight that I could feel his body heat through my still-damp flannel shirt. We'd both changed into dry clothes, but the cold had seeped into everything, and the warmth radiating off him was almost unbearable.

"There. Hold that."

I held. The torch flared blue-white, and I watched his face in profile: jaw set, eyes narrowed in concentration, the scar on his temple silver in the firelight. He smelled like cold air and industrial soap and something underneath that was just him, unchanged after four years. I'd buried my face in his hoodie once, junior year, after he'd lent it to me at a football game. I'd kept it for three months before forcing myself to throw it away.

The torch hissed. Metal glowed orange, then cooled to gray.

"One more seam," he said. "Then we're done with this section."

My arm was starting to shake from holding the awkward position. I braced my elbow against the concrete floor and noticed his hand--the one not holding the torch. There was a scar on his knuckle I didn't recognize. Fresh enough to still be pink. New, from his MIT years, from a life I knew nothing about.

I almost asked. The question sat on my tongue like a stone.

Where did you get that? What happened? Who were you when it happened?

But asking meant caring. Caring meant vulnerability. And I wasn't ready to be vulnerable with someone who might leave me again.

The torch went out. Jace exhaled, rolled his shoulders.

"Done," he said. "Let's test it."

We crawled out from under the compressor, careful not to touch more than necessary. The distance felt like a lie.

Day two broke something loose.

By 9 PM, we'd been working for twelve hours straight. The pipe was fixed. The compressor was tested and running. The ice bed was holding temperature, and the refrigerant lines had survived intact. We should have been celebrating.

Instead, we were slumped in the tiny rink office, surrounded by blueprints and takeout containers, too tired to maintain our walls.



"Pizza's here," Sophie announced, dropping a box on the desk between us. She'd been in and out all day, running errands, charming contractors, and very obviously engineering moments where Jace and I ended up alone together. This was the third time she'd disappeared after delivering food.

"I'm going to check on the Zamboni oil levels," she said, already backing toward the door. "Might take a while. The manual is really... dense."

"Sophie, the manual is eight pages--"

"So dense! See you in an hour!"

The door clicked shut.

Jace rubbed his face with both hands. "She's not subtle."

"Subtlety isn't a Mitchell family trait."

He flinched. The words had come out sharper than I'd intended, loaded with everything I now knew about his family. I watched him absorb the hit, watched him decide not to acknowledge it.

"Eat," he said instead, pushing the pizza box toward me. "You haven't had anything since that protein bar at noon."

"You're tracking my meals now?"

"Someone should."

I didn't have a response to that. I grabbed a slice and took a bite, and the cheese was perfect, and I was so tired that even my jaw ached.

Jace ate in silence across from me. The office heater hummed. Outside, snow was falling, visible through the high windows, soft and relentless.

"Remember that time we stayed here past midnight?" The words escaped before I could stop them. "When we were fifteen and the blizzard hit and your mom had to come get us?"

Something shifted in his expression. "She was so mad. Then she made us hot chocolate and let us stay up watching movies."

"She let *you* stay up. She made me call my parents and explain why I was at a boy's house at 1 AM."

"You told them we were studying."

"We *were* studying. Kind of."

His mouth twitched. Not quite a smile, but close. "You were failing algebra."

"I was not *failing*. I had a B minus."

"For you, that's failing."

I threw a napkin at him. He caught it, and something cracked open between us--some wall neither of us had noticed building. He laughed. A real laugh, rusty from disuse, like he'd forgotten how.

I found myself laughing too, and for a moment we were just us again, two people who'd known each other since before hormones and heartbreak had complicated everything.

Then my hand moved without permission, reaching across the desk toward his pizza slice.

"Did you just steal my pepperoni?"

"You weren't eating it fast enough."

"That's theft, Davis."

"Sue me, Mitchell."

He fake-glared at me, and I popped the pepperoni in my mouth with exaggerated satisfaction, and his expression did something complicated that I couldn't read.

"Remember when we--" he started, then stopped.

The air changed. Whatever he'd been about to say, whatever memory he'd been about to invoke, he'd swallowed it back down. I watched him rebuild his walls in real time, brick by brick, and I hated it.

"Never mind," he said.

"Jace."

"We should finish the inventory sheets. Sophie's not actually checking the Zamboni."

The moment was gone. I didn't know how to get it back.

Day three, I almost kissed him under the Zamboni.

He'd found an issue with the blade assembly--something about uneven pressure distribution that I pretended to understand--and fixing it required someone underneath the machine while someone else handed tools through the access panel.

"Wrong wrench," he said, his voice muffled by metal.

I looked at the collection spread around me. "You said nine-sixteenths."

"I need the socket wrench. Nine-sixteenths socket."

"There are eleven wrenches here, Jace. Be more specific."

"The one with the--here, just--"

His hand appeared through the access panel, gesturing vaguely. I grabbed what I thought he wanted and pressed it into his palm. His fingers closed around it, then around my wrist.

"No, that's-- come here, I'll show you."

He tugged gently, and I found myself crawling partway under the Zamboni to see what he was pointing at. The space was dim, smelled like motor oil and cold metal. Our faces were inches apart.

"See this bolt?" He was pointing at something above his head. "I need to-- Mia, you're in my light."

I shifted, and my hand landed on his forearm to steady myself. His skin was warm under my palm. I felt him inhale sharply.

"You always were better with your hands than me," I said, and immediately wanted to disappear into the concrete.

"Mia."

"I meant tools. With tools. You were always better at--"

"I know what you meant."

His voice was low. Rough. His eyes were very dark in the dim light, fixed on my face with an intensity that made my stomach flip. I was suddenly aware of everywhere our bodies were almost touching: my hand on his arm, my hip against his side, our faces close enough that I could count his eyelashes if I wanted to.

If I leaned forward two inches--

"Hey! Jace!"

The voice came from somewhere above us. One of the volunteers, probably Marcus.

Jace jerked like he'd been burned. I scrambled backward, cracking my head on the underside of the Zamboni.

"Down here!" Jace called, his voice not quite steady. "Be right up!"

I crawled out from under the machine, my face burning, my pulse pounding in my throat. Jace followed a moment later, carefully not looking at me.

Marcus appeared around the corner, oblivious. "Got the extra hydraulic fluid. Where do you want it?"

"Storage room," Jace said. "Back shelf."

Marcus nodded and disappeared.

We stood there in the garage, both breathing harder than the situation warranted. Neither of us mentioned what had almost happened. Neither of us needed to.

Sophie's interference had been escalating all week.

Instance one: she'd "accidentally" locked us in the supply closet while looking for extension cords. Fifteen minutes of standing shoulder to shoulder in the dark, neither of us speaking, both of us very aware of the other's breathing.

Instance two: she'd brought lunch for both of us--a single container of pasta and two forks, with a note that said "Share! It's romantic!"--then vanished before we could protest.

Instance three happened on day four, when she dropped a box of Christmas decorations in the hallway outside the office and announced she needed to fetch a broom "from the other building."

"There is no other building," I said to the closed door.

Jace didn't look up from the blueprints. "She's eighteen. She thinks she's helping."

"She's eighteen and she knows exactly what she's doing."

"That too."

My phone buzzed. I glanced at the screen and felt my jaw tighten.

Tyler: Can't wait for the gala. My mom wants to meet you at the pre-dinner. That cool?

I didn't answer. But Jace had seen. I watched his hand go still on the blueprint, watched his jaw tighten in a way that was becoming familiar.

"Problem?" I asked.

"No."

One syllable. Classic Jace.

The silence stretched between us, full of things neither of us was willing to say. Full of Tyler and Tokyo and four years of choices we couldn't unmake.

His phone rang.

Not his usual ringtone. A sharp, insistent trill I'd never heard before.

He looked at the screen, and all the color drained from his face.

"I have to take this."

He was up and moving before I could respond, not toward the main entrance but toward the back loading dock. The door swung shut behind him, but not all the way--propped open with a brick to let in fresh air.

I shouldn't follow.

I knew that. His privacy was the one thing he had left, and eavesdropping was wrong, and whatever conversation he was about to have was none of my business.

But I was a goalkeeper. My job was to anticipate the angle, to see the threat before it arrived. And something about the way he'd looked at that phone screamed *threat*.

I walked to the doorway.

From here, I could see him through the loading dock window. He was pacing on the gravel outside, phone pressed to his ear, shoulders hunched against the cold. His free hand was pressed against his forehead, fingers white-knuckled.

"Hello?" His voice was tight. Professional. "Yes, this is Jace Mitchell."

A pause. I watched his reflection in the dark glass, watched his face as he listened.

"Thank you. I... yes, I understand the timeline is tight."

He turned, and I could see his expression now: strained, desperate, like someone offering him something precious and terrible at the same time. He stopped pacing. Pressed his palm flat against the loading dock wall.

"January fifteenth," he said. "That's... soon. Very soon."

January fifteenth.

Two weeks after my Stanford deadline.

My hands curled into fists at my sides.

"No, I understand. It's an incredible opportunity. The AI research division is... yes. I've read Dr. Tanaka's work. All of it."

AI research. Tokyo. The future he was supposed to have, the one his father had taken from him by blowing up their family. I watched him through the window and saw the boy who'd found his mother unconscious, who'd given up everything to hold his family together, who was now being offered a chance to escape.

"I need to check on a few things here." His voice cracked slightly. "Family obligations. But... yes. I'll confirm by the twenty-sixth. Thank you."

He hung up.

Through the window, I watched him slump against the wall. His head dropped forward. His shoulders shook once, hard, and I realized he might be crying or laughing or both.

The twenty-sixth. The day after Christmas. The day after the gala.

He was leaving.

Again.

He was standing in the cold making plans to leave while I was inside trying to figure out if I should stay. He was doing exactly what he'd done senior year--making big decisions, building a future that didn't include me, all without saying a word.

I backed away from the doorway. Made it to the desk. Sat down and stared at the budget spreadsheet until the numbers blurred and swam.

When he came back inside two minutes later, I'd arranged my face into something neutral. He smelled like cold air and something that might have been grief.

"Everything okay?" My voice came out level. Steady. The hardest performance I'd given since the state championship.

"Yeah." He sat down, picked up his pencil. He didn't meet my eyes. "Just... spam call. Telemarketer."

A lie.

A smooth, easy lie, delivered without hesitation.

"Jace."

"Hmm?" He was already pretending to work, his thumb tapping that pattern against his finger. Tap-tap-tap. His tell since we were fourteen.

"If you had to leave," I said slowly, "would you tell me?"

His hand froze.

"Leave?" He looked up, and I saw panic flare in his eyes before he smothered it. "What do you mean?"

"I mean hypothetically. If you got an offer. A reason to go." I held his gaze, refusing to look away. "Would you tell me, or would you just disappear again?"

"Mia." He put the pencil down. His face was very carefully blank. "I'm not going anywhere. We have to finish the rink."

"And after the rink?"

"After the rink..." He swallowed. "We'll see."

We'll see.

Not a no. Not a promise. A deflection. The same deflection he'd used four years ago when I'd asked if we were going to make long-distance work.

Something cold and hard crystallized in my chest.

"January fifteenth," I said quietly.

The color drained from his face like water running out of a sink. His mouth opened, but nothing came out. He looked like I'd hit him.

Good.

I stood up.

"Where are you going?" His voice was strained.

"Home. I need to think."

"Mia, wait. I can explain--"

"Can you?" I grabbed my coat from the back of the chair. "Because from where I'm standing, this looks pretty familiar. Opportunity. Silence. Decision made without me." I shoved my arms into the sleeves. "At least this time I won't be surprised when you vanish."

"That's not fair--"

"Neither was finding out from Google that your mother tried to kill herself three days before you took someone else to prom."

He flinched like I'd slapped him. I should have felt guilty. I felt nothing but cold.

"I was going to tell you," he said. "I was trying to find the right time--"

"There's never going to be a right time, Jace. That's what you still don't understand." I shouldered my bag. "You don't get to protect me from things. You don't get to make choices for me. And you definitely don't get to lie to my face while planning to leave."

"I haven't decided anything yet."

"Haven't you?"

He didn't answer. That was answer enough.

I walked out. Past the repaired pipe. Past the Zamboni we'd fixed together. Past the ghosts of the kids we used to be.

Behind me, I heard him say my name. I didn't stop.

Two weeks until the opening. Two weeks until my Stanford deadline. Two weeks until he had to confirm Tokyo.

The snow was still falling outside, soft and relentless, covering everything in white. By morning, it would look like nothing had ever been disturbed.

I wished forgetting worked the same way.

Act 2A: Thawing

Chapter 6: Working Together

The morning light filtered through the high windows of Frozen Peak, casting long rectangles of gold across the concrete floor. The air carried that particular ice rink smell: cold metal, old wood, and the lingering sweetness of yesterday's donuts mixing with fresh paint from the repaired boards. I'd been here since seven, organizing the volunteer sign-up sheets and coordinating the arrival of donated supplies. My clipboard was already covered in notes, phone numbers, and a suspicious coffee stain that definitely wasn't there an hour ago.

Jace had beaten me here. Of course he had.

When I'd pulled into the parking lot at 6:45, thinking I'd get a head start, his truck was already parked in the spot closest to the side entrance. The same spot he'd claimed every day this week. The same spot he probably claimed four years ago when we used to come here together, back when everything was simple and we were just two kids who loved the ice.

I pulled my jacket tighter against the perpetual chill that leaked from the ice preparation area and pushed that thought away.

The burst pipe had been a disaster, but somehow, impossibly, we were still on track for the Christmas Festival opening. And I had to grudgingly admit that Jace's systematic approach to the repairs had been nothing short of brilliant.

He'd created a master spreadsheet. An actual color-coded spreadsheet that tracked every repair, every volunteer, every delivery down to the minute. When I'd first seen it on the shared drive he'd set up, I'd rolled my eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck. But watching it in action was like watching a perfectly executed defensive formation. Every person knew exactly where to be and when. No wasted motion. No duplicated effort.

Not that I'd ever tell him that.

"Heads up!"

I ducked instinctively as a box sailed past where my head had been, caught neatly by Marcus Chen, one of the volunteers who'd shown up yesterday and hadn't left since. He'd been Jace's teammate for three years, apparently, and had the kind of quiet competence that came from years of reading plays before they happened.

"Sorry, Mia!" Sophie appeared at my side, brushing sawdust off her sleeves. "I miscalculated the trajectory."

"You miscalculated by approximately three feet and my entire skull."

She flashed a grin, completely unrepentant. "But Marcus caught it. Teamwork!"

I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. Sophie Mitchell was strategic chaos wrapped in a ponytail. She'd appointed herself my unofficial assistant two days ago, which mostly meant she followed me around, handed me things before I asked for them, and dropped comments about her brother like precisely aimed arrows.

"Where do you want the extra extension cords?" she asked, already rummaging through another box.

"Station three, with the new lighting rigs."

"On it." She grabbed the cords and headed off, pausing only to wave at someone behind me. "Jace! I'm handling station three!"

I didn't turn around. I felt him approach anyway, the way you feel a change in air pressure before a storm.

"She's been here since six," Jace said, stopping beside me. Not too close. Never too close anymore. "Brought donuts for everyone."

"She's been a huge help."

"She likes you."



His voice carried something I couldn't identify. I finally looked at him, and immediately wished I hadn't. He was wearing a worn gray henley that did nothing to hide the way he'd filled out over the past four years. His hair was slightly damp, probably from a shower after his morning workout, and there was a smudge of grease on his jaw from the equipment repairs.

I looked back at my clipboard. Safety in paperwork.

"The volunteer rotation is working," I said, keeping my voice professionally neutral. "We've got full coverage through the weekend."

"I saw. You coordinated them like a team captain."

The compliment caught me off guard. I glanced up again, searching for sarcasm, but his expression was earnest. Almost soft.

"Yeah, well." I cleared my throat. "That's kind of my job at Stanford. Goalkeeper means knowing where everyone should be."

"I remember."

Two words, weighted with four years of silence.

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed. Tyler.

Hey beautiful. How's the rink coming? Want company later?

I typed back quickly: *Super busy today, sorry!* Then I tucked the phone away.

When I looked up, Jace's jaw was tight, his eyes fixed on something across the rink.

"Problem?" I asked.

"No."

One syllable. Clipped. Classic Jace.

"Great talk." I turned back to my clipboard, but Sophie had materialized beside us again, holding two steaming cups. My breath fogged in the cold air as I turned to face her.

"Hot chocolate break!" she announced, pressing one into my hands before I could protest. "Jace, here's yours. Black coffee, boring, just how you like it. Mia, yours has—"



"Extra marshmallows," I said, staring at the small mountain of white puffs floating on top. My throat tightened. "Sophie, did you —"

"Nope." She watched me with knowing eyes. "Jace made it. He was very specific about the marshmallow count." She lowered her voice, though clearly not intending privacy. "He said you always liked exactly seven. I counted. There are seven."

The cup was warm against my cold fingers. Seven marshmallows. He remembered.

Remembering doesn't mean anything, I told myself. Lots of people have good memories.

Jace suddenly found the far wall fascinating.

"I should check on the Zamboni repairs," he said, already moving away.

"You checked twenty minutes ago!" Sophie called after him. He didn't slow down. She turned to me, her expression shifting from amusement to something more calculated. "He's so obvious."

"Sophie."

"What? I'm just observing."

"Don't."

She studied me for a moment, and I saw the woman she'd become—someone who'd watched her family shatter and learned to read people like survival depended on it. "You know, he never talks about what happened between you two. But he kept that picture. And he makes sure we always have extra marshmallows in the house, even though nobody else likes them." She shrugged like she hadn't just dropped another emotional grenade at my feet. "Anyway, I'm gonna go help Marcus with the lighting. Try not to overthink the hot chocolate."

She headed toward the lighting station, leaving me holding seven marshmallows worth of complicated feelings.

By early afternoon, the rink had transformed from a construction zone into something that almost resembled its former glory. The new boards were in place along the damaged section. The ice resurfacing equipment had been serviced and tested. The concession stand had been cleaned, restocked, and decorated with enough tinsel to be visible from space.

Sophie's doing, probably.

I was sorting through a box of donated ice skates—checking sizes, testing blades, separating the usable from the unsalvageable—when she appeared again, this time with a photo album. She settled onto the bench beside me, leaving a clear sightline to where Jace was helping Marcus adjust a spotlight twenty feet away.

"Oh no," I said immediately.

"Oh yes." She opened the album with the satisfaction of someone who'd planned this exact moment. "I found this in the storage room. Mom must have left it here years ago."

"Sophie, whatever you're planning—"

"Did Jace ever tell you about the time he tried to impress a girl by doing a triple axel?" She was already flipping pages. "He was fourteen. Ended up flat on his back in front of the entire junior league team. There's a picture."

Despite myself, I laughed. "He tried a triple axel at fourteen?"

"He was showing off. He'd just hit a growth spurt and hadn't figured out his new center of gravity yet. Hold on, it's in here somewhere—"

"What are you doing?"

Jace's voice cut through the ambient noise of the rink. He'd crossed the distance silently and was staring at the album in his sister's hands with something approaching horror.

"Sharing memories!" Sophie said. "It's called bonding, Jace. Some of us enjoy human connection."

"That's—give me that."

He lunged for it, but Sophie was faster, pulling the album behind her back. "Oh, you definitely want to hide this one." She managed to flip it open while fending off her brother. "Mia, look—this is from that time he decided to dye his hair for playoffs—"

"Sophie, I swear to God—"

"—and it came out orange instead of blonde—"

"It was copper! The box said copper!"

I was laughing now, actually laughing, the kind that came from somewhere deep and surprised me with its existence. Jace stopped trying to grab the album and just stared at me like he'd forgotten what that sound was.

"Orange," Sophie confirmed, showing me a photo of a fifteen-year-old Jace with hair the color of a traffic cone. "He wore a hat for two weeks straight."

"I was going through a phase."

"You were going through a lack of reading comprehension. It clearly said semi-permanent."

"Semi should mean it washes out!"

"After six to eight washes, Jace. You tried to remove it with dish soap."

The mental image was too much. I doubled over, clutching my sides, while Sophie held up the photo album like a trophy. Jace's face was red, but when I looked up, catching my breath, I caught myself enjoying this—actually enjoying being here, with him, like nothing had changed.

I pulled back. Something had changed. He'd made sure of that.

But Jace was smiling. Not the careful, controlled smile I'd seen him give other people. A real one. The kind that crinkled the corners of his eyes and made him look like the boy I used to know instead of the complicated stranger he'd become.

"I hate you both," he said, but there was no heat in it.

"You love me and you tolerate her," Sophie corrected. Then, with practiced precision, she pressed the album into my hands. "I'm going to check on the concession inventory. Back in twenty." She stood and walked toward the concession stand, unhurried, leaving us alone.

Jace sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry about her. She's—"

"Amazing," I finished. "Terrifying, but amazing."

"Yeah." He sat down on the bench, leaving a careful gap between us. "She's been through a lot. We both have. But she just... keeps going. Keeps being herself."

I heard what he didn't say. That he hadn't kept going the same way. That whatever had happened in the years since he'd cut me out of his life had changed him in ways that went deeper than a failed hair dye job.

I set the album aside carefully. "Must be nice. Having someone who knows you that well."

"You had that once."

The words landed like a stone in still water.

"Did I?" My voice came out sharper than I intended.

Jace looked away.

The box of donated skates sat between us, momentarily forgotten. I reached for the next pair, more to give my hands something to do than because I cared about inventory. The cold leather bit into my fingers.

My hand closed around something smaller. Older.

"Oh," I breathed.

The skates were tiny. Children's size, worn and scuffed, the white leather yellowed with age. But I knew them instantly. Would have known them anywhere.

"Are these—" I turned them over, looking for confirmation.

There it was. On the inside of the left skate, in faded Sharpie: *M.D.*

"They kept them," Jace said, his voice rough. "I saw them in the storage donation when we were cleaning out the back room. I didn't... I wasn't sure if I should say anything."

I ran my thumb over the initials. My mother's handwriting. From when I was eight years old and couldn't remember which skate went on which foot. She'd marked them *M.D.* for Mia Davis, but also so the *M* would face out when I looked down, pointing me forward.



"My first pair," I said. "After the rentals."

"I remember."

Jace reached into the box and pulled out another pair. Slightly larger, blue where mine had been white. He turned them over. *J.M.* in the same careful Sharpie.

"Mom marked mine the same way after yours. Said it was a good system."

We sat there holding childhood relics, time collapsing strangely around us. The faint smell of Zamboni fuel drifted from somewhere behind us, mixing with old leather and memory.

"These are from that day," I said softly. "That day you taught me to skate backwards."

He broke a promise, I reminded myself. He disappeared. Why should any of this matter?

But my hands wouldn't let go of the skates.

Jace's fingers stilled on his old pair. The silence stretched between us, filled with snow and nine-year-old laughter and the memory of him holding both my hands while I slid helplessly across the ice, terrified and exhilarated and absolutely certain he wouldn't let me fall.

"You were so scared," he finally said. "But you wouldn't quit."

"You promised I could do it. You said—"

"I said I'd catch you if you fell."

The words hung in the air, heavier than they should have been.



My throat ached. Jace was looking at me now, really looking, and his expression had cracked open just enough to show something raw underneath.

"Jace—"

"We should get back to work." He placed his old skates carefully back in the box. Whatever had been visible was locked away again behind polite neutrality. "The volunteers will need direction for the afternoon shift."

He stood up and walked away before I could say anything else.

I stayed on the bench for a long moment, holding my childhood skates and trying to remember how to breathe normally.

Seven marshmallows. Orange hair dye. A promise to catch me if I fell.

The wall between us had cracked, just for a second. Just enough to let something through.

I wasn't sure if I was ready to find out what was on the other side.

My phone buzzed. Tyler.

Can't wait for tomorrow night. Picking you up at 7 for the pre-gala dinner with my parents.

Tomorrow night. The gala. Where I was supposed to show up as Tyler's date while Jace watched from across the room.

I wasn't running out of time to decide. Time had already run out.

Chapter 7: Cracks in the Walls

The work lights turned Frozen Peak into a cathedral of shadows.

Everyone else had gone home hours ago. Sophie had left at eight with a look that said she knew exactly what she was doing by leaving us alone. Marcus had ducked out at nine after finishing the penalty boxes, his goodbye a careful nod that carried weight I didn't want to examine.

Now it was just us. Me and Jace. The hum of the ice-making compressor. And the new scoreboard, still in pieces, waiting to be installed.



"Hand me the socket wrench?"

Jace's voice echoed in the empty space. He was balanced on a ladder, arms stretched toward the mounting bracket, the muscles in his shoulders straining against his thermal shirt. I grabbed the tool from the box at my feet and climbed the smaller ladder beside him, close enough to pass it over.

"Thanks."

Our fingers brushed. Neither of us acknowledged it.

The scoreboard was massive--a donation from the high school after they'd upgraded to digital displays. It was older, mechanical, the kind where you had to flip the numbers manually. Sophie had insisted it was "vintage charm." Jace had calculated the exact weight distribution needed for the old ceiling beams to support it.

I watched him work, his movements precise and efficient. The same hands that used to help me with calculus equations now tightened bolts with practiced ease.

"You're staring."

Heat flooded my cheeks. "I'm supervising."

"From three feet away?"

"Quality control."

He almost smiled. Almost. The corner of his mouth twitched before he caught it and focused back on the bracket.

We worked in silence for another twenty minutes, the only sounds the clink of metal and the distant hum of the ice-making equipment. The cold had seeped through my jeans hours ago, numbing everything below my knees. But I didn't want to leave. Couldn't explain why, even to myself.

"MIT has these tunnels," Jace said suddenly.

I looked up from the wiring diagram I'd been pretending to study. He was still focused on the scoreboard, not meeting my eyes.

"Underground," he continued. "Connecting all the buildings. So you never have to go outside in winter."

"Sounds efficient."

"It is. Incredibly efficient." His hands stilled on the bolt he was tightening. "You can go weeks without seeing the sky. Longer if you're working on a project. Just... tunnels and labs and the same fluorescent lights at three in the morning."

Something in his voice made my chest ache. This was the most he'd said about college since we'd started working together.

"That sounds..."

"Lonely." The word escaped him like a confession. He finally looked at me, and in the dim work lights, his eyes held something I hadn't seen before. Vulnerability. Raw and unguarded. "There's this moment--I remember it so clearly. I was in the main tunnel at

3 AM, walking back from the lab. The lights were buzzing, that specific frequency that gets into your skull. And I looked down this endless corridor, completely empty, and I thought..."

He stopped. Swallowed hard.

"I thought, if I disappeared right now, how long would it take anyone to notice?"

The words hit me like a physical blow. I gripped the ladder rung, suddenly unsteady.

"Jace."

"Everyone there is brilliant," he continued, his voice taking on a bitter edge. "Driven. Exactly where they're supposed to be. And somehow that makes it worse. Because if you admit you're struggling, if you admit that maybe being the smartest kid in your high school doesn't mean anything when everyone around you is just as smart or smarter--"

His voice cracked. Actually cracked, and something inside me cracked with it.

"You're not supposed to need people. That's the unspoken rule. Needing people is a weakness."

I thought about the Jace I'd known at seventeen. The one who'd stayed after school to help me with calculus, who'd sit with me in the emergency room when I sprained my wrist at sectionals, who'd known exactly how many marshmallows I liked in my hot chocolate.

"That's a stupid rule," I said quietly.

"Yeah." His laugh was hollow. "I know that now."

The silence that followed wasn't awkward. It was the kind of quiet that happens when two people stop pretending, even if just for a moment. The compressor hummed its steady rhythm. Somewhere in the rafters, a pipe groaned against the cold.

I climbed down from my ladder and grabbed the thermos I'd left on the players' bench. The hot chocolate inside was still warm--Sophie had made it before she left, and she'd remembered the marshmallows. I poured some into the thermos cap and held it up toward him.

"Break?"

He descended his ladder and took the offered cup, his fingers wrapping around it like a lifeline. We sat on the bench together, not quite touching, staring out at the half-lit rink.

"Soccer isn't everything anymore."

The words escaped before I could stop them. Jace turned to look at me, and I forced myself to keep going.

"I mean..." I searched for the right words, but they kept slipping away. "The game. I love the game. That moment before a save, when everything slows down and it's just you and the ball and the angle--there's nothing like it. But after..."

My voice caught. I stared at my hands, at the calluses that had built up over years of diving for shots.

"After our championship game last week. The one we won." I took a breath. "I made seven saves. Including this diving stop that made the highlight reel. And afterward, in the locker room, everyone was screaming and celebrating, and I just..."

I couldn't finish.

"Felt nothing?" Jace asked softly.

I looked at him, startled. "How did you--"

"Because I know that feeling." He set down the thermos cap. "That emptiness when you've given everything to something and there's nothing left. When winning doesn't fill the hole you thought it would."

"Being amazing at something isn't the same as loving it," I said. "Everyone acts like talent and passion are the same thing, and they're really, really not."

The words tumbled out faster now, messier. Things I'd never said to anyone. Things I'd barely admitted to myself.

"I've been playing since I was eight. My mom put me in rec league because I had too much energy. I didn't choose it--it chose me. And I just kept going because I was good at it and people expected me to be good at it, and what else was I supposed to do?"

Jace was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was careful.

"Is that why Stanford?"

My heart stuttered. Of course Sophie had mentioned something.

"There's an opportunity," I said, choosing my words like steps across thin ice. "A different kind of program. I haven't decided anything yet."

"What kind of program?"

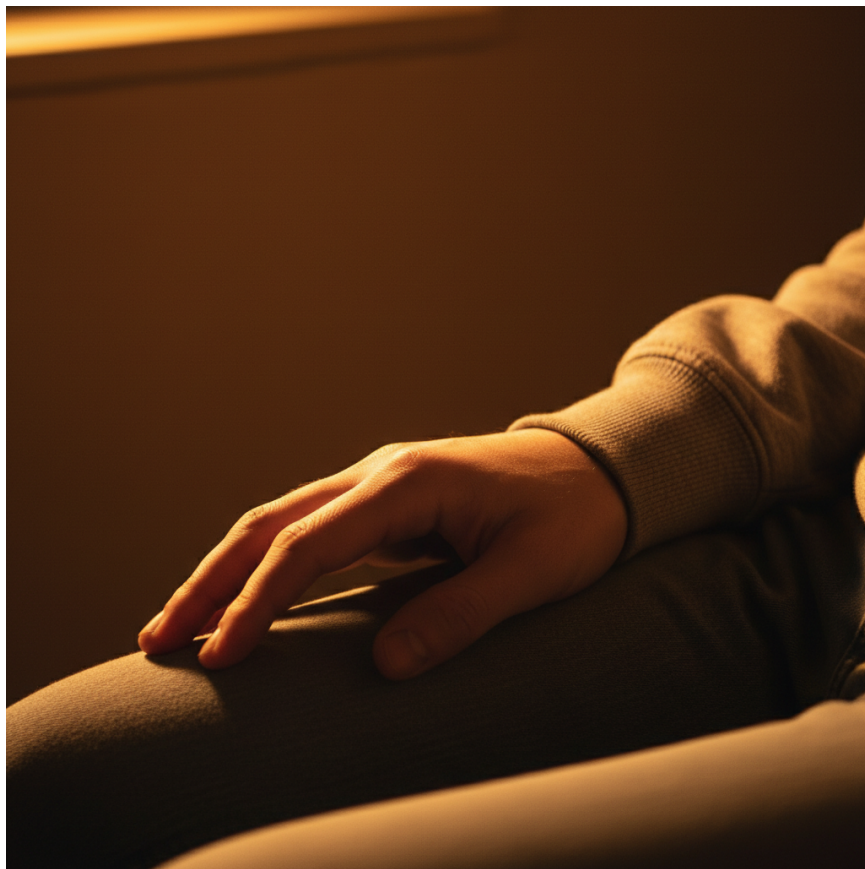
I hesitated. The truth sat heavy on my tongue--the transfer offer, the deadline, the terrifying possibility of walking away from everything I'd built. But saying it out loud would make it real.

"Something that's not just soccer," I finally said. "Something that might be more... me."

Jace nodded slowly. His knee shifted on the bench, almost brushing mine, and neither of us moved away.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think you should do whatever feels right. Even if everyone else thinks you're crazy. Even if it means walking away from something you're supposed to want."

I turned to look at him fully. In the dim light, the shadows softening his features, he looked younger. More like the boy who'd held my hands on this very ice, who'd promised he'd catch me if I fell.



"What about you?" I asked. "What do you want?"

Something flickered in his expression. His jaw tightened, and for a second I thought he was going to deflect, throw up another wall, retreat into the careful distance he'd been maintaining all week.

Instead, he opened his mouth like he was about to say something important. Something that mattered.

"I've been offered--"

He stopped. Closed his eyes. Shook his head.

"Never mind."

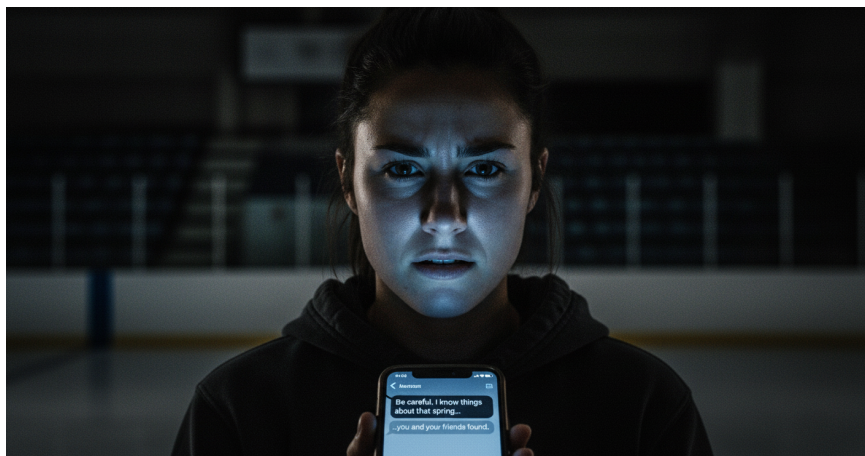
"No, what? You've been offered what?"

"Nothing. It's not--it's complicated."

The moment had passed. Whatever he'd been about to say was locked away again, and I felt its absence like a door slamming shut.

My phone buzzed on the bench between us.

I glanced at the screen. Emma.



Be careful. I know things about that spring...

The cold that ran down my spine had nothing to do with the temperature. I stared at the message, reading it twice, three times. That spring. She'd said it so casually, like a warning wrapped in concern.

"Everything okay?" Jace asked.

"Fine." I shoved the phone in my pocket, but my hands were shaking. "Emma being cryptic."

He tensed beside me. Barely perceptible, but I'd spent too many years reading his body language not to notice.

"What did she say?"

"Nothing specific. Just..." I pulled the phone back out, showed him the screen. "This."

He read it. His expression went carefully blank--that controlled neutrality he'd perfected somewhere in the last four years.

"She's just looking out for you," he said, but his voice had gone flat.

"Does she have a reason to?"

The question hung between us. Jace didn't answer.

The scoreboard above us was half-installed, dangling from its brackets like a question mark. The ice stretched out before us, glossy and dark in the limited light. We'd been here for hours, and somehow the distance between us had shrunk without either of us noticing.

Or maybe we'd both noticed. Maybe that was the problem.

"Why did you really come back, Jace?"

The question surprised us both. I hadn't meant to ask it--not like this, not now, when we'd just started to find something that felt almost like the friendship we used to have.

But Emma's text was burning a hole in my pocket. That spring. The spring when everything fell apart. The spring he'd disappeared without explanation, without warning, without even a goodbye.

Jace looked at me. Really looked, and in his eyes I saw the same war I felt--the push and pull between old hurt and whatever this new thing was growing between us.

"My mom," he said slowly. "She needed me home. The surgery, the recovery--"

"No."

The word came out sharper than I intended. He flinched.

"Why did you *really* come back?"

The compressor hummed. The cold pressed against us from all sides. My heart was pounding so loud I was sure he could hear it.

Jace's hands clenched on his knees. His throat worked like he was trying to swallow something painful.

"Mia..."

"Please." My voice cracked. "I've spent four years not knowing. Four years wondering what I did wrong, what was so broken about me that you couldn't even say goodbye. And now you're here, making me hot chocolate with the right number of marshmallows and looking at me like--"

I stopped myself before I could finish that sentence.

"Like what?" he asked quietly.

"Like you actually see me."

The silence stretched between us, filled with everything we weren't saying. The scoreboard swung slightly in its brackets, creaking against the old ceiling beams.

Jace turned to face me fully. His expression had cracked open, and beneath the careful control I saw something raw. Something terrified.

"My mom--" he started again.

"No." I held his gaze. "Why did you *really* come back?"

His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

The work lights flickered once, casting strange shadows across his face. When they steadied, he was looking at me like I was a problem he'd spent four years trying to solve.

Like I was the answer to a question he was afraid to ask.

The compressor hummed. The cold pressed against my back. My phone was heavy in my pocket, Emma's warning sitting there like a ticking bomb.

And Jace Mitchell, who had broken my heart without explanation four years ago, looked at me with something close to desperation and didn't say a word.

The moment stretched.

And stretched.

Until I couldn't take it anymore.

"Fine." I stood up, grabbing my jacket from the bench. "Don't tell me. Keep your secrets. I'm sure they're very important."

"Mia, wait--"

"I've been waiting, Jace. For four years. I'm done."

I walked toward the exit, my boots echoing on the concrete. Behind me, I heard him stand. Heard him take a step in my direction.

"Mia."

Something in his voice made me stop. Made me turn around.

He was standing in the pool of light beneath the half-installed scoreboard, his hands at his sides, his face stripped of every defense he'd built.



"The truth is complicated," he said. "And messy. And it involves people you trust. And I've been trying to figure out how to tell you without..."

"Without what?"

"Without losing you again."

The words hit me like a wave. I gripped my jacket, my knuckles white against the fabric.

"You never had me to lose," I said, but even I could hear the lie in it.

Jace smiled, but it was sad. The kind of smile that knows too much.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I did. And I threw it away to protect you from something you never needed protecting from. And I've regretted it every single day since."

The rink was silent except for the eternal hum of the compressor. The cold air burned my lungs. Emma's text sat in my pocket like a grenade with the pin half-pulled.

I should leave. Should walk away, go home, pretend this night never happened.

Instead, I heard myself ask:

"Will you tell me? Eventually?"

Jace held my gaze across the empty ice.

"Yes," he said. "When I figure out how to do it without destroying everything you believe about the people you love."

The words should have scared me. Maybe they did. But standing there in the half-light, looking at the boy who'd broken my heart and the man who was slowly putting it back together, I felt something I hadn't felt in four years.

Hope.

"Then I'll wait," I said. "But not forever."

I walked out into the December night, leaving him standing beneath the scoreboard with its zeros and its promises and its mechanical heart waiting to count down to something neither of us was ready for.

My phone buzzed again.

Emma: *We need to talk. Tomorrow. It's important.*

I stared at the message until my screen went dark.

Whatever secrets Jace was keeping, whatever Emma knew about that spring, it was all connected. I could feel it now, the threads pulling tighter, drawing me toward a truth I wasn't sure I wanted to find.

But I'd asked the question. I'd cracked open the door.

And some doors, once opened, can never be closed again.

Chapter 8: Vulnerability

The text came at 6:47 AM.

I was already awake, staring at the ceiling, replaying last night's conversation in my head. The way Jace had looked at me when I'd asked why he really came back. The crack in his armor when he'd admitted MIT was lonely. The promise in his voice when he said he'd tell me the truth eventually.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Jace: Car won't start. Mom has her checkup at 9. I hate to ask, but is there any chance you could drive us? Sophie has work and I don't want to make her late.

I stared at the message. Mrs. Mitchell. The woman who'd raised the boy who broke my heart. The woman Emma had mentioned was "in and out of the hospital" during that awful spring I still didn't fully understand.

Part of me wanted to say no. To stay wrapped in my blankets and avoid whatever fresh emotional landmine this day had in store.

But another part--the part that had seen something raw in Jace's eyes last night--couldn't refuse.

I'll be there at 8:30.

His response came immediately.

Jace: Thank you. I owe you.

You can buy me coffee after.

A pause. Then:

Jace: Deal.

The Mitchell house looked smaller than I remembered.

When we were kids, it had seemed enormous--the kind of house with a finished basement where we'd have movie nights, a backyard perfect for summer barbecues, a kitchen that always smelled like Sophie's attempts at baking. But now, pulling into the driveway in the gray December morning, I could see the paint peeling near the gutters. The cracked window in the garage door. The dead shrubs that no one had bothered to replace.

Four years of struggle, written in the details.

Jace was waiting on the porch, his mom beside him, and my breath caught when I saw her.

Linda Mitchell had always been elegant. Put-together. The kind of mom who wore actual clothes to school pickup while the rest of our moms lived in yoga pants. But the woman leaning on Jace's arm was a ghost of that person. She was thin--too thin, the kind that made her joints look swollen by comparison. Her hair, once glossy brown, had gone gray at the temples, and her skin had that papery quality that spoke of too many hospital stays, too many medications, too many hard years.

She was fragile. Genuinely, heartbreakingly fragile.

And Jace was holding her like she might shatter if he let go.

"Mia Davis." Linda's voice was warm despite everything, her smile genuine as Jace helped her down the porch steps. "Look at you. All grown up and saving the day."

"Mrs. Mitchell." I got out to open the passenger door for her. "It's good to see you."

"Linda, please. You're not thirteen anymore." She squeezed my hand as she settled into the seat, and I felt how thin her fingers were. How cold. "Thank you for this. Jace's car has been on its last legs for months. He keeps putting off getting it fixed."

"Because the car can wait," Jace said quietly, climbing into the back seat. "Other things can't."

The words carried weight I didn't fully understand. I caught his eye in the rearview mirror, but he looked away, his jaw tight.

The drive to the hospital was twenty minutes of careful small talk.

Linda asked about my parents, about soccer, about college life. She remembered details I'd forgotten she knew--my favorite position (goalkeeper), my high school jersey number (seventeen), the time I'd scored an own goal at the regional championship and cried in the locker room for an hour.

"You were always so hard on yourself," she said, turning slightly to look at me. "Even as a kid. I remember telling Jace, 'That Mia Davis is going to do something incredible someday, if she can just learn to forgive herself for being human.'"

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. In the rearview mirror, I saw Jace watching me.

"Still working on that," I admitted.

"Aren't we all."

The hospital appeared on the right, a sprawling complex of beige buildings and crowded parking lots. I found a spot near the entrance and helped Jace get his mom out of the car, holding her elbow while he grabbed her purse.

"I'll wait in the cafeteria," I said. "Take your time."

"You don't have to--" Jace started.

"I want to." I wasn't sure why that was true, but it was. "I brought a book."

Linda reached out and patted my cheek. Her palm was papery-soft, but the gesture was warm.

"You're a good girl, Mia. I always thought so."

She let Jace lead her toward the entrance, and I stood in the parking lot watching them go. The way he adjusted his pace to match hers. The way he kept one hand on her back, ready to catch her if she stumbled. The way he bent down to hear something she said, and smiled--a real smile, not the guarded one he'd been wearing around me.

This was Jace with his walls down. Jace as a caretaker. Jace as the person holding his family together with nothing but stubbornness and love.

Something in my chest ached.

The hospital cafeteria smelled like industrial coffee and despair.



I found a table by the window and pretended to read, but the words blurred on the page. I kept thinking about Linda's face. The gray in her hair. The way she'd leaned on Jace like he was the only solid thing in her world.

What had happened to that family?

I knew pieces. Emma's cryptic warnings. The divorce I'd discovered online. The "awful spring" that Sophie had mentioned. But the full picture kept slipping away, like trying to remember a dream after waking.

My phone buzzed.

Coach Martinez.

Davis. Stanford's getting anxious. Call me when you can.

I shoved the phone back in my pocket without responding.

"Mind if I sit?"

I looked up. Sophie Mitchell was standing beside my table, still in her ice rink staff polo, a coffee cup in each hand.

"Sophie? I thought you had work."

"Switched shifts." She slid into the seat across from me, pushing one of the cups in my direction. "Figured you might need this. Hospital coffee is basically hot brown water."

I took the cup, wrapping my hands around its warmth. "Thanks."

"Thanks for driving them." Sophie's eyes--the same hazel as Jace's--studied my face with an intensity that made me uncomfortable. "Jace hates asking for help. Like, physically incapable of it. So the fact that he texted you..."

She trailed off, but the implication hung in the air.

"His car broke down. It made sense."

"Sure." Sophie smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You know, Mia, I've wanted to talk to you. Alone. Ever since you got back."

My stomach tightened. "About what?"

Sophie looked down at her coffee, her fingers tracing the rim of the lid.



"About my brother. About what he did for us."

"Sophie--"

"He gave up so much." Her voice was quiet but fierce. "After Dad left, after everything fell apart--Jace was the one who held us together. He turned down scholarships, deferred his admission, worked two jobs the summer after graduation. He put off his whole life so Mom could get better and I could finish high school."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "What do you mean, he turned down scholarships?"

Sophie's expression flickered with something like guilt. "I shouldn't--he doesn't want people to know. But I think you deserve to know. I think you're the one person who really deserves to know."

"Know what?"

She met my eyes.

"He had a full ride to Stanford. Early admission. And he gave it up. For us."

The words hit me like a physical blow. Stanford. He'd had Stanford, and he'd--

"He told them he needed to defer," Sophie continued. "But then a year turned into two, and by then MIT was offering him the same deal, and Mom was finally stable enough that he could leave. But Stanford was his dream, Mia. He'd been planning to go there since middle school."

I thought about our late-night study sessions. The way Jace's eyes would light up when he talked about artificial intelligence, about research possibilities, about the professors at Stanford's computer science department. I'd assumed he'd chosen MIT because it was better for his field.

But he hadn't chosen it at all. He'd taken what was left after everything else burned down.

"Why are you telling me this?" My voice came out rough.

Sophie set down her coffee. "Because he looks at you the way he used to look at that acceptance letter. Like you're something precious he's afraid he doesn't deserve." She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. "He made a lot of choices back then. Some of them were wrong. But he made them trying to protect the people he loved. Even when protecting us meant losing you."

I couldn't speak. My throat was too tight.

"Thank you for driving my mom today," Sophie said, standing. "It means more than you know. To both of them."

She walked away before I could respond, leaving me alone with my cold coffee and a heart full of questions I wasn't sure I wanted answered.

By late afternoon, I was back at the rink.

The checkup had taken longer than expected--additional tests, doctor consultations, a pharmacy run that required waiting forty minutes for medications. By the time I dropped Jace and Linda back at their house, it was past two, and I'd barely said a word.

Jace had noticed. I'd seen him watching me in the rearview mirror, his brow furrowed with concern. But he hadn't pushed, and I hadn't volunteered.

Now I stood alone in Frozen Peak, checking the Zamboni installation we'd finished yesterday. The grand opening was in two days. Two days until everything we'd been building came together.

Or fell apart.

The rink doors opened behind me, and I turned, expecting Sophie or one of the other volunteers.

It was Tyler.



He was carrying two takeout bags, his Michigan hockey jacket zipped against the cold, that easy smile firmly in place.

"Heard you had a rough day." He held up the bags. "Thought you might need sustenance."

"Tyler, how did you--"

"Sophie texted me." He walked toward me, setting the bags on the players' bench. "Said you drove Mrs. Mitchell to the hospital this morning and have been MIA ever since. Figured you might be stress-cleaning the rink or something equally Mia Davis-ish."

I almost laughed. It felt weird in my mouth, like I'd forgotten how.

"Italian?" I asked, eyeing the bags.

"That place on Fifth you like. Extra garlic bread."

My stomach growled before I could stop it, and Tyler's grin widened.

"Sit. Eat. Doctor's orders."

"You're not a doctor."

"Pre-med adjacent. Close enough."

I sat. The bench was cold through my jeans, but the food was hot, and Tyler's presence was... easy. Uncomplicated. The opposite of everything else in my life right now.

"So." He twirled spaghetti around his fork, watching me with those warm brown eyes. "Want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Cool. We can eat in companionable silence. I'm very good at silence."

He wasn't. Tyler Brooks had never met a silence he didn't want to fill. But true to his word, he kept quiet while we ate, and I found myself relaxing despite everything. The garlic bread was perfect. The pasta was warm. For ten minutes, I didn't have to think about Jace or Stanford or any of it.

Then I heard the rink door open again.



I looked up, and there was Jace.

He stood in the doorway, his eyes moving from me to Tyler to the cozy dinner spread between us. His expression went through about fifteen different emotions in the space of a heartbeat--surprise, hurt, understanding, and then something carefully blank.

"Sorry." His voice was flat. "Didn't realize you had company."

"Jace--"

"I just came to check on the sound system for the gala. I'll come back later."

He was already turning away.

"Jace, wait--"

But he was gone, the door swinging shut behind him. Through the windows, I watched him cross the parking lot to his truck--the one that supposedly wouldn't start this morning--and drive away.

The look on his face.

God, the look on his face.

Like I'd reached into his chest and squeezed.

"Well." Tyler's voice was carefully light. "That was dramatic."

I set down my fork. The pasta had turned to lead in my stomach.

"I should go."

"Mia." Tyler caught my wrist as I stood. "Stay. Finish dinner. Whatever's going on with you and Mitchell, it can wait an hour."

"I don't think it can."

He studied me for a long moment, something shifting in his expression.

"You're still hung up on him." It wasn't a question. "After everything."

"Tyler--"

"It's fine." He released my wrist and leaned back on the bench. "I mean, it's not fine, but it's not surprising either. You've been in love with that guy since we were kids. I just thought maybe..." He shook his head. "Never mind."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He stood, gathering the takeout containers. "Just-- be careful, okay? Mitchell's got a lot of baggage. And you're not exactly traveling light either."

He left the garlic bread on the bench and walked out, leaving me alone with cold pasta and the ghost of Jace's wounded expression.

I found him three hours later.

The sun had set. The rink was dark except for the emergency lights, casting long shadows across the ice. I'd checked everywhere--his house, the coffee shop, the park where we used to study. Finally, on a hunch, I'd come back here.

He was sitting in the bleachers, staring at the scoreboard we'd installed together. 00:00 - 00:00. Zeros across the board.

"Jace."

He didn't turn around. "You should go home."

"We need to talk."

"About what? Your date with Tyler?"

"It wasn't a date." I climbed the bleachers, my footsteps echoing in the empty space. "He brought dinner because Sophie told him I had a hard day. That's all."

Jace laughed, but it was bitter. "Sophie's quite the matchmaker."

"She was trying to be nice."

"She's always trying to be nice. It's exhausting."

I sat down beside him, leaving a careful foot of space between us. Up close, I could see the tension in his jaw, the way his hands were clenched in his lap.

"Sophie told me," I said quietly. "About Stanford."

He went still. Completely, utterly still.

"She had no right."

"Maybe not. But she did."

Silence stretched between us. The emergency lights hummed. Somewhere in the building, a pipe groaned against the cold.

"It doesn't matter now," Jace finally said. "It was four years ago. Ancient history."

"Is it?"

He turned to look at me, and in the dim light, his eyes were unreadable.

"What do you want me to say, Mia?"

"I want you to tell me the truth. About senior year. About why you disappeared. About everything."

The words hung in the air between us. I watched his expression shift--fear, guilt, longing, all of it flickering across his face before he could lock it down.

"I owe you an apology," he said slowly. "For how I handled things back then."

"Don't." The word came out sharper than I intended. "It was four years ago. We were kids. Whatever happened, we were different people."

"No, you deserve to know--"

"Jace." I held up my hand. "I've spent four years being angry. Four years wondering what I did wrong. I'm not sure I have the energy for another round of self-flagellation, from either of us."

He was quiet for a long moment. Then, softly:

"It wasn't anything you did."

"Then what?"

He opened his mouth to answer.

And that's when the rink door slammed open.

"Mia? You in here?"

Tyler's voice echoed through the empty space. Footsteps on the concrete. The beam of a phone flashlight cutting through the darkness.

"Mia, your mom called me. She said you weren't answering your phone and--" The flashlight found us in the bleachers. Tyler stopped. "Oh. You're here. With... him."

Jace stood, his face shuttering closed again. All the openness, all the almost-confession, locked away behind his careful walls.

"I was just leaving," he said.

"Jace, wait--"

But he was already moving down the bleachers, past Tyler, toward the door.

"We can finish this conversation later," he said without looking back. "Or not. Maybe some things are better left in the past."

The door closed behind him.

I sat in the bleachers, Tyler's flashlight still pointed at my face, my heart pounding with frustration.

He'd been about to tell me. Finally, after four years, he'd been about to explain everything.

And now the moment was gone.

"Sorry," Tyler said, lowering his phone. "Your mom was worried. I didn't mean to interrupt..."

"It's fine." The lie tasted bitter on my tongue.

"You want a ride home?"

I looked at the door Jace had disappeared through. At the scoreboard glowing 00:00 in the darkness. At all the zeros waiting to be filled in.

"Yeah," I said finally. "Sure."

But as I followed Tyler out of the rink, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd just lost something important. Something I might not get another chance to find.

No, you deserve to know--

What? What did I deserve to know?

The December wind cut through my jacket as we stepped outside, and I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering.

Two more days until the grand opening.

Two more days until the gala.

And somewhere in this town, Jace Mitchell was carrying a secret he'd almost trusted me with.

I just had to figure out how to make him try again.

Chapter 9: Physical Tension

The equipment room smelled like old rubber and forgotten ambition.

I hadn't planned to be here. I'd spent most of the morning avoiding Jace, which was nearly impossible when we were co-ordinating a grand opening happening in less than forty-eight hours. But every time I'd caught his eye across the rink, he'd looked away. Every time I'd opened my mouth to restart last night's conversation, someone had interrupted.

Sophie. Volunteers. My own cowardice.

Now it was nearly four in the afternoon, and I'd retreated to the depths of Frozen Peak's storage area with a clipboard and a mission: inventory the old rental equipment for the gala's "vintage skating" display.

The room was a time capsule. Rows of ancient skates hung from ceiling hooks, their blades dulled by years of disuse. Wooden hockey sticks leaned against the walls, their tape yellowed and peeling. And in the back corner, behind a mountain of orange safety cones, sat an entire rack of goalie gear.

I was photographing a pair of skates that had to be from the 1970s when the door creaked open behind me.

"Sophie said you were back here."

Jace's voice sent a jolt through my nervous system. I fumbled the clipboard, catching it against my hip before it could clatter to the floor.

"She's got a real talent for tracking people down." I kept my eyes on the skates. "Must run in the family."

He stepped into the room, and I heard the door swing shut behind him. The space immediately felt smaller. More intimate. The bare bulb overhead cast long shadows across the concrete floor, and the December cold seeped through the walls, making my breath visible in small white puffs.

"The committee chair called." Jace moved along the opposite wall, examining the hockey sticks with apparent fascination. "They want to add a demonstration to the gala program. Former players showing off the old equipment."

"And you're telling me this because...?"

"Because you're the only person here who actually knows how to skate."

I snorted. "Barely. You taught me, remember?"

"I remember."

Something in his voice made me look up. He was watching me now, his expression unguarded in a way I hadn't seen since before Tyler had interrupted us last night.

"Jace--"

"We should test the gear." He crossed to the goalie rack, pulling out a chest protector that looked like it belonged in a museum. "Make sure it's still functional. For the demonstration."

"That's insane. This stuff has been sitting here for six years."

"Seven." He ran his fingers along the leather straps. "The rink closed in March of sophomore year. Seven years ago next spring."

March of sophomore year. Three months before everything between us started to build. Before those late-night study sessions where we pretended we needed the extra help.

"Fine." I set down the clipboard. "Test away."

But Jace didn't move. He just stood there, holding the chest protector, looking at me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"You'd need to try it on."

"Me?"

"You're closer to the size of the volunteers we'd have wear this. I'm too tall."

It was a reasonable argument. It was also going to involve him touching me. My stomach tightened at the thought.

"Okay." The word came out steadier than I felt. "Show me how this works."

The chest protector was surprisingly easy.

Jace handed it to me, and I slipped my arms through the loops, adjusting the fit over my sweater. His fingers brushed mine during the handoff, and I pretended not to notice the way my skin tingled at the contact.

"Feels fine," I said, doing an experimental twist. "A little stiff, but functional."

"That's just the leather. It'll soften up with movement." He was already reaching for the next piece of equipment--a pair of massive leg pads that looked like they belonged on a medieval knight. "These are the tricky part."

I took one look at the maze of straps and buckles and felt my confidence waver.

"That's like seventeen different attachments."

"Twelve." The corner of his mouth twitched. "Goalies are complicated."

"Is that a metaphor?"

"If you want it to be."

He knelt on the concrete floor, leg pads spread in front of him, and gestured for me to come closer. My heart rate picked up as I stepped toward him, hyperaware of the way his eyes tracked my movement.

"Left leg first," he said. "Slide into this part."

I braced my hand on his shoulder for balance--a mistake, because I could feel the warmth of him through his flannel shirt, the solid muscle beneath the fabric. He went very still at the contact, his jaw tightening almost imperceptibly.

I positioned my leg into the pad.

"Now this one--" His hands found my calf, adjusting the leather band with practiced efficiency. But his touch lingered a moment longer than necessary, his thumb brushing against the back of my knee.

I bit my lip.

He secured the lower straps in quick succession, fingers moving from ankle to calf with methodical precision. Then he paused, reaching higher, his palm sliding along my thigh to fasten the upper buckle.

His hands were on my thigh. Through my jeans, through the padding, I could feel every point of contact like a brand. The equipment room seemed to shrink around us, the cold forgotten in the heat building between us.

"Other leg." His voice had gone rough.

I shifted, and his hands moved with me, guiding my right leg into the second pad. Faster this time, more urgent--ankle, knee, thigh--each buckle cinched with controlled intensity, like he was racing against his own restraint.

When he stood, we were close. Too close. I could see the flecks of gold in his hazel eyes, the slight part of his lips, the way his chest rose and fell with quickened breathing.

"Waist straps," he said, but he didn't move away.

"What?"

"There's a belt. It connects the pads to..." He gestured vaguely at my midsection. "May I?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

His hands found my waist.

The touch was light at first, almost businesslike as he threaded the strap through the loops on the leg pads. But then his fingers pressed more firmly, adjusting the fit, and I felt the warmth of his palms against my hipbones through the thin fabric of my sweater.

"Breathe," he murmured. "The strap needs to be snug but not too tight. You should be able to move."

My lungs wouldn't cooperate. His face was inches from mine now, his hands still on my waist, his thumbs tracing small circles against the curve of my hips.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

"Yes." The word came out like a prayer.

He adjusted the buckle at my left side, then the right, his fingers lingering on the straps. The position pulled him closer, his body nearly pressed against mine, the cold concrete floor beneath our feet but everything else burning.



"There's a mirror."

I blinked. "What?"

He stepped back, just slightly, and gestured toward the far corner of the room. A full-length mirror was propped against the wall, its surface dusty but serviceable. The kind goalies would use to check their stance.

"So you can see the full effect," he said. "Of the pads."

We both knew he wasn't talking about the pads.

I turned, awkward in the bulky equipment, and caught our reflection in the glass. Me in vintage goalie gear that was at least two sizes too big, looking like a kid playing dress-up. And Jace behind me, close enough that I could feel his breath on my neck, his hands still raised like he'd forgotten to lower them.

Our eyes met in the mirror.

The room went very, very quiet.

"You look ridiculous," he said softly. But his expression said something else entirely.

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly tight. "Lucky me."

"Mia."

"What?"

His hands found my waist again, this time from behind. He adjusted a strap that didn't need adjusting, his fingers sliding along my ribcage. In the mirror, I watched his jaw clench, watched his eyes go dark with something that made my knees weak.

"Do you remember how you broke your wrist freshman year?"

I did. The memory hit me before I could brace for it--the crack of the puck against my glove, my body twisting wrong, the ice rushing up to meet me. The sickening snap I'd felt more than heard. How I'd cradled my arm against my chest and refused to cry, even as the pain turned my vision white at the edges.

"I wanted to try goalie," I whispered. "You were running that clinic, and I showed up and demanded to learn."

"Didn't tell anyone you'd never worn pads before." His thumb traced the edge of my hipbone, and I shivered. "The first shot knocked you down, and you caught yourself wrong."

My wrist ached in phantom sympathy, the old injury ghosting across my bones. I could still feel the cold of the ice, the embarrassment burning hotter than the pain.

"You remember that?"

"I remember everything." His voice dropped lower. "The way you looked when you fell. The sound you made when you realized something was broken. How hard you tried not to cry." His grip on my waist tightened. "I wanted to kill whoever took that shot. Even though it was just a drill. Even though you'd insisted."

My reflection in the mirror was flushed, my lips parted, my eyes wide. And behind me, Jace looked like a man barely holding himself together.

I turned.

Now we were face to face. Inches apart. The goalie pads made movement awkward, but suddenly I didn't care about the equipment or the demonstration or any of the reasons we'd come into this room.

"You drove me to the hospital," I whispered. "In your mom's car. You held my hand the whole way."

"You kept apologizing for bleeding on the upholstery."

"It was a nice car."

"Mia."

"Yeah?"

"I really want to kiss you right now."

The words hung in the air between us. I felt them land in my chest, felt them spread through my bloodstream like wildfire. His hands were still on my waist, warm even through all the padding, and his eyes were fixed on my mouth like it was the only thing in the world that mattered.

I should stop this. The thought flickered through my mind even as my body swayed toward him. This was dangerous. This was the boy who'd broken my heart, who'd chosen silence over me, who I'd spent years trying to forget. Kissing him wouldn't fix anything. It would just make the inevitable hurt worse.

But I was so tired of being careful.

I reached for him first.

My fingers curled into the front of his flannel shirt, pulling him closer, and I watched his eyes widen with surprise before darkening with want.

"Then kiss me," I breathed.



He leaned in.

Our noses brushed. I felt his exhale against my lips, warm and shaky, and my eyes fluttered closed--

Voices. Outside the door. Getting closer.

We sprang apart so fast I nearly toppled over in the goalie pads. Jace caught my arm, steadying me, but his face had gone pale, his breathing ragged.

"Someone's coming," he said. Unnecessarily.

"I noticed."

The doorknob turned.

--supposed to be in the back somewhere. Sophie said--"



The door swung open, and there was Sophie herself, mid-sentence, her phone in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. She stopped dead in the threshold, her eyes going wide as she took in the scene.

Me, still in goalie pads, looking like I'd just run a marathon.

Jace, standing two feet away, looking like he'd been caught committing a felony.

The charge between us, humming like a live wire.

"Oh!" Sophie's face split into a grin that was entirely too knowing. "Am I... interrupting something?"

"We were testing equipment," Jace said, his voice carefully flat.

My follow-up sounded weak even to my own ears: "For the demonstration."

Sophie's grin widened. "Equipment. Right. Uh-huh." She leaned against the doorframe, making absolutely no move to leave. "The demonstration that requires my brother to have his hands on your waist?"

"The straps need two people to adjust." His jaw was tight.

"I'm sure they do."

The silence stretched. Sophie looked between us like she was watching the best show of her life. Jace was developing a muscle tic in his jaw. And I was standing in the middle of a dusty equipment room, dressed like a hockey goalie, my body still humming from how close I'd come to kissing a boy I'd sworn I was over.

"Did you need something, Sophie?" Jace's voice was dangerously flat.

"Oh, just looking for the extra zamboni keys. But don't let me interrupt your... equipment testing." She waggled her eyebrows. "Take all the time you need."

She disappeared back through the door, but left it wide open behind her. I could hear her footsteps retreating down the hallway, followed by what sounded suspiciously like muffled laughter.

"I'm going to kill her," Jace said.

"Get in line."

We looked at each other. The moment was broken, shattered into a thousand pieces by Sophie's perfectly timed entrance. But something had shifted between us. Something fundamental.

He'd almost kissed me.

I'd almost let him.

No--I'd pulled him toward me. I'd chosen this.

"We should..." I gestured vaguely at the pads. "I should probably take these off."

"Right. Yeah." He stepped closer, reaching for the waist strap, then stopped himself. "You can do it yourself if you want."

"The buckles need two people."

His eyes held mine for a long moment. Something flickered there--acknowledgment of what we weren't saying, of what was still crackling in the air despite the interruption.

"They do."

His hands found my waist again, more careful this time, but when his fingers brushed the bare skin above my hip where my sweater had ridden up, we both froze. His gaze dropped to my mouth. My breath caught.

Then he exhaled slowly and focused on the straps.

He unfastened them with deliberate movements, his touch controlled but not distant. When he knelt to remove the leg pads, his palm pressed warm against my calf for just a moment. When I stepped out of the equipment, his hand found the small of my back to steady me, and his thumb traced one small circle there before he let go.

When I looked at his face, I saw the same thing I was feeling reflected back at me.

Want. Frustration. And something deeper, something that scared me more than it should.

"Jace," I started.

"Don't." He stacked the pads on the rack, not meeting my eyes. "Not yet. Not here."

"Then where? When?"

He finally looked at me. In the dim light of the equipment room, with his walls half-down and his heart on his sleeve, he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

"After the gala," he said. "When all of this is over. We'll talk. Really talk. I'll tell you everything."

"You've said that before." The words came out quieter than I intended, carrying the weight of every promise he'd made and broken.

"I mean it this time." He stepped closer, close enough that I could feel his warmth, and for a moment I thought he might kiss me anyway, Sophie and the open door be damned. "I'm tired of running, Mia. Tired of pretending I don't feel--" He stopped, his hand rising to cup my jaw, his thumb brushing my cheek. "But it's complicated. More than you know. And I can't... not like this."

"Jace?" Sophie's voice echoed down the hallway. "Mom's on the phone. She needs to talk to you about the gala tickets."

He closed his eyes. Let out a long breath.

"After the gala," he repeated.

"After the gala," I agreed.

He walked out of the equipment room without looking back. I stood alone among the vintage skates and dusty memories, my heart pounding, my lips still tingling from a kiss that never quite happened.

Two days until the gala.

Two days until we talked.

Two days that stretched before me like a tightrope over an abyss. Part of me wanted to run--to protect myself from whatever complicated truth he was holding back. But a larger part, the part that had reached for him first, that had pulled him close and said *kiss me*--that part was already falling.

I touched my waist, where his hands had been. Where his warmth still seemed to linger.

Forty-eight hours. I could survive forty-eight hours of wanting something that might break me.

I'd survived worse.

Hadn't I?

Chapter 10: The First Kiss

The snowstorm warning had come through at three in the afternoon.

By five, most of the volunteers had packed up and headed home, their cars disappearing into the swirling white that had begun to blanket the parking lot. Sophie had been the last to go, casting meaningful looks between me and Jace as she zipped up her jacket.

"You sure you two don't need help finishing up?" She'd asked it innocently enough, but her eyes were anything but innocent.

"We've got it." Jace's voice had been clipped, professional. The same tone he'd been using with me all day--polite, distant, like we were strangers who happened to share the same workspace. Like he hadn't almost kissed me in the equipment room yesterday. Like I hadn't pulled him toward me and whispered *kiss me* against his lips.

"The zamboni installation's almost done," I'd added, not looking at either of them. "We just need to run the final calibration."

Sophie had lingered in the doorway, clearly hoping for more drama. When none materialized, she'd sighed dramatically and headed into the storm.

That was two hours ago.

Now it was just us. Me and Jace and the half-lit rink and the wind howling against the windows like it was trying to get in. The power had flickered twice already, the overhead lights stuttering and casting strange shadows across the ice.

We worked in silence. He adjusted something on the zamboni's control panel while I checked the pressure gauges, and neither of us mentioned the conversation we were supposed to have. *After the gala*, he'd said. But the gala was tomorrow, and the weight of everything unspoken was pressing against my chest like a physical thing.

"Pass me the wrench?"

His voice made me jump. I grabbed the tool from the workbench and held it out, careful to keep space between us during the handoff.

"Thanks."

"Mm-hmm."



More silence. The wind screamed. The lights flickered again, and this time they stayed dim for a full three seconds before brightening.

"We should probably--" I started.

The power cut out.

Complete darkness. The emergency lights kicked on a moment later, casting the rink in a dim red glow that made everything look like a scene from a horror movie. The zamboni's control panel had gone dark, and somewhere in the building, an alarm started beeping.

"Generator should kick in," Jace said from somewhere to my left. "Give it a minute."

I stood perfectly still, suddenly hyperaware of every sound. The storm outside. The beeping alarm. His breathing, closer than I'd realized.

"How long does the battery backup last?"

"Hour, maybe two." His voice was moving; he was walking somewhere. "I'm going to check the breaker panel."

"I'll come with you."

"You don't have to--"

"I'm not standing alone in the dark, Jace."

A pause. Then: "Fine. This way."

I followed the sound of his footsteps, my hand brushing the boards as I made my way around the rink. The emergency lights cast just enough glow to avoid tripping, but the shadows were deep and disorienting. When my shoulder bumped his back, I realized he'd stopped.

"Breaker's here." I heard him fumbling with something, then a metallic click. "Everything's tripped. The surge must have--"

The generator roared to life outside, and half the lights came back on. Not the overheads, but the lower fixtures along the boards, the ones that lit the ice for late-night skating. The rink glowed soft gold now, intimate somehow, and when I turned to look at Jace, I found him already watching me.

We stood there for a moment, neither of us moving.

"The main power's still out," he said. "This is just backup. Enough to keep the pipes from freezing."

"So we're stuck here."

"Until the storm passes or the power company fixes whatever went down." He glanced toward the windows, where snow was piling against the glass. "Could be a while."

I pulled out my phone. No signal. Of course.

"Great." I shoved it back in my pocket. "This is great."

"Mia--"

"Don't." The word came out sharper than I intended. I walked toward the rink entrance, putting distance between us. "Let's just... wait it out. Separately."

"We're alone in a building with no heat and a storm outside. Separately isn't really an option."

He was right. I hated that he was right.

"Fine." I dropped onto the nearest bench, the one by the penalty box where I used to sit and watch him practice back when we were kids. "Then we wait it out together. In silence."

Jace didn't argue. He walked to the opposite end of the bench and sat down. The golden light caught the angles of his face, the tension in his jaw, the way his hands gripped his knees like he was holding himself in place.

The silence stretched.

One minute. Two. The wind howled and the building creaked and neither of us said a word.

Then my phone buzzed.

I grabbed it, surprised--the signal must have flickered back for a moment. A text notification lit the screen, and even from three feet away, I knew Jace could see the name.

Tyler: *Hey, still on for tomorrow night? I'll pick you up at 7 for the gala. Can't wait to see you in that dress.*

I should have locked my phone. Should have tucked it away and pretended I hadn't seen it. But some petty part of me, some wounded, angry part that was still smarting from yesterday's almost-kiss and today's cold shoulder, tilted the screen so it was clearly visible.

"You should answer him."

Jace's voice was flat. Controlled. But I heard the edge beneath it.

"I will."

"He's probably worried about you. With the storm."

"Tyler's sweet like that." The words tasted wrong in my mouth.
"He actually shows up when he says he will."

Jace went very still.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." I started typing a response to Tyler, my fingers clumsy on the screen. "Just that some people keep their promises. Some people don't vanish without explanation and expect you to--"

"I didn't vanish."

"Really?" I looked up, and the anger that had been simmering all day, all week, all *four years*, surged to the surface. "Because that's exactly what it felt like, Jace. One day you were asking me to prom with that stupid math problem, and the next you were gone. No calls. No texts. Nothing."

"You know I had reasons--"

"No. I don't know." I stood up, phone forgotten, fists clenched at my sides. "Because you never told me. You just disappeared and took someone else to prom and left me looking like an idiot who couldn't take a hint."

He stood too, and now we were facing each other across the bench, the golden light catching the storm in his eyes.

"You think I wanted that? You think any of that was what I wanted?"

"I don't know what you wanted, Jace! That's the whole point! You never told me anything!"

"Because I couldn't!" His voice cracked, and something in his carefully controlled expression fractured. "My whole life was falling apart. My dad, my mom, Sophie--everything was a disaster, and I couldn't drag you into that. I couldn't--"

"So you made the choice for me." The words burned coming out. "You decided I wasn't strong enough to handle it, and you just... left."

"I was trying to protect you."

"From what?"

The question hung in the air between us. From somewhere outside, I heard a branch snap under the weight of the snow, the crack echoing through the empty rink.

"From me," Jace said quietly. "From my mess. From watching someone you care about turn into someone you don't recognize. My mom tried to--" He stopped, swallowed hard. "She was in the hospital. Sophie was fourteen and terrified. My dad had taken everything and disappeared. And I was supposed to be strong enough to hold it all together, but I wasn't. I was barely holding myself together."

My anger faltered. I'd suspected something like this--Emma had hinted, Sophie had let things slip--but hearing it from him, seeing the raw pain on his face, was different.

"You could have told me," I said, but softer now. "I would have understood. I would have helped."

"You had a future." He took a step closer, then stopped himself. "Soccer scholarship, everything ahead of you. You were going to get out of this town and do something amazing, and I was sinking. I couldn't let myself pull you down with me."

"That wasn't your choice to make."

"I know." His voice was rough.

The anger was still there, but it was tangled now with something else. Grief, maybe. For the kids we'd been. For the years we'd lost.

"You broke my heart," I whispered. "Do you know that? You broke my heart, and I never got over it. I tried. I dated other people, I threw myself into soccer, I pretended you didn't exist. But you were always there. This ghost I couldn't shake."

"Mia--"

"And now you're back, and you're looking at me like..." I gestured helplessly. "Like yesterday never happened. Like you didn't almost kiss me and then spend all day pretending I don't exist. And tomorrow you're going to watch me walk into that gala on Tyler's arm, and--"

"Don't go."

The words came out harsh. Desperate.

"Don't what?"

"Don't go with him." Jace closed the distance between us in two strides, and suddenly he was right there, close enough that I could see the rapid pulse in his throat.

"Why do you even care?"

"You know why."

"No, I don't! You keep almost saying things and then stopping. You keep looking at me like you want something and then pulling away. So tell me, Jace." I stepped closer, until we were inches apart, until I could feel the heat radiating off his body despite the cold. "Why do you care if I go to the gala with Tyler?"

"Because I should be the one taking you."

The words seemed to surprise him as much as they surprised me. His eyes widened slightly, like he hadn't meant to say them out loud, and for a moment neither of us breathed.

"Why did you say yes to him?" His voice was barely above a whisper now. "You knew what was happening between us. You felt it too. So why him?"

"Because he actually shows up!" The anger roared back, familiar and hot. "Because when he says he'll be somewhere, he's there. Because he doesn't make promises he can't keep or ask me to a dance and then ghost me for four years!"

"I told you why--"

"And I'm supposed to just accept that? You were *protecting* me?" I laughed, the sound bitter in the cold air. "You left me, Jace. You left me alone and confused and heartbroken, and I spent years wondering what I did wrong. What was so bad about me that you couldn't even send a text."

"It was never about you being bad." He grabbed my arms, not hard, but firm enough to hold me in place. "It was never about you not being enough. You were *everything*, Mia. You were the only good thing in my life, and I was terrified I would destroy you too."

"You don't get to decide that!"

"I know!"

We were both shouting now, our voices echoing off the empty rink, bouncing back at us like accusations. The golden light flickered, and the wind screamed, and four years of suppressed emotion came pouring out like a flood.

"You left me!" The words ripped from my throat, raw and wounded. "You left me, and you never came back, and I waited. For weeks, I waited for you to explain. To apologize. To give me *something*. But you just disappeared."

"I was protecting you!"

"From *WHAT*?"

"From losing someone else!" He released my arms, but he didn't step back. If anything, he moved closer, his breath coming fast, his eyes wild. "My mom almost died that spring. She took pills, Mia. Sophie found her. And I couldn't... I couldn't be the reason someone else I loved got hurt. I couldn't drag you into that darkness. I was so broken, and you were so bright, and I thought..."

His voice cracked.

"I thought if I let you hate me, at least you'd be safe."

The anger drained out of me so fast it left me dizzy. I reached for him without thinking, my hand finding his chest, pressing flat against his racing heart.

"Jace."

"I'm sorry." The words came out broken. "I'm so sorry. I should have told you. I should have trusted you. I was young and stupid and scared, and I made the worst decision of my life, and I've regretted it every single day since."

"Why didn't you tell me this before? When you came back?"

"Because I'm a coward." His hand came up to cover mine, pressing my palm harder against his heart. "Because every time I looked at you, I saw what I'd thrown away, and I couldn't stand it. Because I told myself if I could just get through this Christmas, just finish the rink and go back to MIT, I could keep pretending I was over you."

"Are you?" My voice was barely a whisper. "Over me?"

"I have never been over you." He cupped my face with his free hand, his thumb brushing my cheekbone. "Not for one second. Not for one day. You are the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing I think about when I fall asleep, and being this close to you again has been the best kind of torture."

"Then why--"

"Because I'm leaving again." The words came out anguished. "In three weeks, I'm supposed to be in Tokyo. A six-month internship that could change my whole career. And I can't... I can't start something with you just to leave again. I can't do that to you. I can't do that to myself."

"So you were just going to--what? Kiss me in an equipment room and then disappear?"

"I wasn't going to kiss you at all. I was going to keep my distance and let you go to the gala with Tyler and pretend I didn't feel like dying every time I saw you together."

"But you couldn't."

"No." His forehead dropped to mine, and I felt the surrender in his body, the collapse of all his carefully constructed walls. "I couldn't. Because you reached for me first. Because you looked at me like you wanted me too. And I am too tired of fighting this."

The wind howled outside. The lights flickered.



And I kissed him.

It wasn't soft. It wasn't sweet. It was angry and desperate and consuming. My hands fisted in his shirt, dragging him down to me, and his arms wrapped around my waist, lifting me onto my toes. He kissed me like he was drowning and I was air. Like he was trying to pour four years of apology into the press of his lips.

I kissed him back the same way.

All the hurt, all the confusion, all the nights I'd lain awake wondering *why*--I channeled it into this. My teeth caught his bottom lip and he groaned, his hands tightening on my hips, pulling me flush against him. I could feel the pounding of his heart against my chest, could taste the salt of tears I wasn't sure belonged to him or me. His breath was ragged against my mouth, warm and urgent in the cold air. He tasted like coffee and something darker, something that was just *him*, and I wanted to drown in it.

It was too much. It wasn't enough.

He walked me backward until my back hit the boards, the impact vibrating through my spine, and I gasped into his mouth. His hands were everywhere--in my hair, on my waist, sliding under the hem of my sweater to find bare skin. I shivered at the contrast--his cold fingers, my burning skin--and arched into his touch, my fingers digging into his shoulders, trying to pull him closer even though there was no space left between us.

"Mia." My name came out broken against my lips. "God, Mia."

I answered by kissing him harder, deeper, like I could erase the years if I just held on tight enough. He trembled against me--or maybe I was the one trembling, I couldn't tell anymore--and when his thigh pressed between mine, I made a sound I'd never made before, something raw and wanting that echoed in the empty rink. The cold air bit at my exposed skin where my sweater had ridden up, but everywhere he touched burned.

Then the lights came on.



Not the soft golden glow of the backup system--the full overheads, harsh and bright and brutally revealing. We broke apart like we'd been electrocuted, both breathing hard, both blinking against the sudden brilliance.

The power was back.

Jace stumbled back a step, then another. I watched the shift happen in real time--the way the harsh light seemed to strip away everything we'd built in the darkness. His expression went from dazed to stricken, his eyes darting around the rink like he'd just woken up somewhere he didn't recognize. His hand rose to his mouth, touching his lips like he could feel the evidence of what we'd done.

"That was..." I started.

"A mistake." The words came out strangled, almost panicked. He ran a hand through his hair, still not meeting my eyes, his whole body rigid with something that looked like fear. "That was a mistake. We can't--I can't--"

The word hit me like a slap. After everything he'd said, after everything we'd just done, he was calling it a *mistake*?

"A mistake," I repeated flatly.

"Mia, that's not what I meant--"

"No, you're right." I straightened my sweater, smoothed down my hair. Put my armor back in place, piece by piece. "It was a mistake. The second one I've made with you."

He flinched. I saw it, and some vicious part of me was glad.

"The storm's probably passing." I was already walking away, toward the exit, toward anywhere that wasn't here. "You should finish the zamboni calibration. I'll see you tomorrow. At the gala. With Tyler."

"Mia, wait--"

I didn't wait. I pushed through the doors into the hallway, then through the lobby and out into the parking lot, where the snow had finally stopped falling. The cold hit me like a wall, but I welcomed it. Anything to cool the fire still burning under my skin.

My car was buried under six inches of snow. I started brushing it off with my bare hands, not caring about the cold, not caring about anything except putting distance between me and that rink and the boy who kept breaking me in new and creative ways.

A mistake.

I'd let myself believe it meant something. I'd let him in again, and he'd called it a mistake.

My hands were numb by the time I got the car clear enough to drive. I climbed in, started the engine, and sat there for a long moment, watching my breath fog in the air. My lips still tingled. I could still taste him. And somewhere behind me, in that building full of golden light and broken promises, Jace Mitchell was probably hating himself.



Good.

The thought made something twist inside me—a flicker of guilt that I immediately shoved down. He deserved to hate himself. He'd hurt me. He'd called our kiss a mistake. I wasn't being cruel; I was being realistic. Protecting myself the way he'd pretended to protect me all those years ago.

Except the guilt didn't quite stay shoved down.

In my pocket, my phone buzzed.

Tyler: *Power's back. Everything okay over there? Can't wait to see you tomorrow.*

I stared at the message. Thought about the boy inside the rink. Thought about the way he'd kissed me like I was everything. Thought about the word *mistake* and how it had shattered something I'd only just let myself rebuild.

My thumb hovered over the keyboard. Tyler was safe. Tyler was kind. Tyler actually showed up.

But my lips still burned with someone else's kiss.

I closed my eyes, and for one moment let myself feel all of it--the anger and the wanting and the grief and the stupid, stubborn hope that wouldn't die no matter how many times Jace Mitchell tried to kill it.

Then I typed out a response.

My hands shook as I pulled up the text thread. I had to delete and retype twice, my fingers fumbling over the keys, my mind insisting on replaying the kiss even as I tried to focus on the words. This was the right choice. Tyler was the right choice. So why did my hands betray me?

Can't wait either. See you at 7.

I hit send before I could overthink it, before my head and heart could tear me apart again.

I put the car in gear and drove away, leaving Jace Mitchell and his mistakes behind me.

At least until tomorrow.

Act 2B: Falling

Chapter 11: Giving In

The next morning arrived too soon and not fast enough.

I lay in bed watching gray winter light creep across my ceiling, replaying the same ten seconds on repeat. His hands in my hair. My back against the boards. The way he'd said my name like it was breaking something in him.

A mistake.

I threw off the covers and forced myself into the shower, turning the water as hot as I could stand. Steam filled the bathroom, and I pressed my forehead against the cool tile, trying to wash away the memory of his mouth on mine.

It didn't work.

By the time I came downstairs, Mom had already left for the festival committee meeting, leaving a note about leftover pancakes and a reminder that Tyler was picking me up at seven for the gala tomorrow. I crumpled the note and tossed it in the trash, then pulled it out again, smoothing the paper flat on the counter.

Tyler. The gala. Normal, uncomplicated things.

My phone sat on the kitchen table like an accusation. No messages from Jace. Not that I expected any. Not that I wanted any.

I checked it anyway. Three times.

The fourth time, it buzzed. My heart lurched--but it was Tyler.

Can't wait to pick you up at 7 tomorrow. Wear something that moves. We're definitely skating.

I stared at the message, at the easy enthusiasm in those words, and felt the weight of two different futures pressing against my chest. Tyler, who wanted to dance with me. Jace, who had kissed me like I was oxygen and then called it a mistake.

Sounds good, I typed back. The lie tasted like ash.

The rink looked different in daylight. Less magical, more practical--just a building full of equipment and deadline pressure and the ghost of everything that happened twelve hours ago. I arrived at ten, hoping to beat the other volunteers, hoping for a few minutes of solitude to put my armor back in place.

Jace was already there.

Of course he was.

He stood near the zamboni, tablet in hand, making notes. His shoulders were tense beneath his MIT sweatshirt, and he didn't look up when I walked in. Didn't acknowledge my presence at all.

Fine. Good. This is what I wanted.

"The calibration's complete." His voice was professional. Distant. Like we were strangers who happened to share a workspace. "I finished it last night after you left."

After I left. Such a neutral way to describe me fleeing into a snowstorm with his taste still on my lips.

"Great." I matched his tone. "What's left for today?"

"Sound system needs final testing. Lighting for the gala. The caterers are coming at two for the--" He stopped. Swallowed. Started again. "Two. For the walkthrough."

"I can handle the caterers."

"Fine."

"Fine."

We stood there, ten feet apart, speaking in fragments that kept breaking apart. Like colleagues who'd never seen each other naked--not that we had, but the way he'd touched me last night, hands sliding under my sweater, fingers tracing paths along my spine... we'd been close. Closer than I'd let anyone in years.

And he'd called it a mistake.

Sophie arrived at eleven, bringing coffee and chaos. She looked between us--me painting touch-ups on the rental booth, Jace rewiring speakers on the opposite side of the rink--and her face fell.

"Oh no." She set the coffee carrier down on the nearest bench. "What happened?"

"Nothing." We said it simultaneously, which was somehow worse than either of us saying it alone.

Sophie's eyes narrowed. "You're on opposite sides of the building."

"We're working," I said.

"You're *hiding*," she corrected. "From each other. In the same room." She picked up her phone. "I'm texting Emma."

"Don't--"

But she was already typing, and I knew better than to try stopping Sophie Mitchell once she'd decided to meddle.

Tyler arrived at two-thirty, right as the caterers were wrapping up their walkthrough.

He brought flowers. Actual flowers--a small bouquet of red roses wrapped in cellophane, presented with that easy Tyler smile that made everything seem simple.

"Thought you might need a pick-me-up." He handed them to me, his fingers brushing mine. "Final countdown, right? Tomorrow's the big day."

"The gala." I looked at the roses, tried to feel something. "Yeah. Tomorrow."

"You okay, Davis?" He tilted his head, studying me with those clear blue eyes. "You look like you didn't sleep."

"Just tired. Long night." The words caught in my throat. I glanced across the rink, where Jace had stopped pretending to check speaker cables and was watching us with an expression I couldn't read.

Tyler followed my gaze. Something shifted in his face--understanding, maybe, or resignation. He stepped back slightly, creating a pocket of space between us.

"You sure about tomorrow?" His voice dropped, meant only for me. "Because you look like you're already somewhere else."

I forced my attention back to him. To the roses. To the easy, uncomplicated future he represented.

"I'm sure."

He studied me for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Okay." But he didn't sound convinced. "I'll hold you to that."

He raised a hand toward the rink. "Mitchell. Looks like the sound system's coming together."

"It works." Jace's voice was flat. "Thanks for the assessment."

The tension was thick enough to skate on, Sophie had said. She was right. Tyler stepped closer to me, casual but deliberate, and I watched Jace's jaw tighten.

"So, tomorrow night." Tyler turned back to me, effectively dismissing Jace from the conversation. "Seven o'clock. I'll pick you up. Wear something comfortable under the formal stuff--we're definitely skating after the speeches."

"Sounds good."

"You remember how to skate, right?" He grinned. "Or do you need a refresher lesson?"

"I remember."

"Good. Because I have plans, Davis. Big plans."

I laughed, but it came out hollow. Tyler's smile flickered--he'd noticed. But he pressed on, leaning in to kiss my cheek, slow and deliberate. I felt Jace's gaze burning into my back.

"See you tomorrow," Tyler said.

He walked away, leaving me with roses I didn't want and a cheek that felt branded by a kiss that meant nothing--unlike the one still burning on my lips.

Across the rink, Jace had disappeared into the equipment room. The door closed with more force than necessary.

Sophie appeared at my elbow. "So that was... a lot."

"It was nothing."

"Mia." She grabbed my arm, her grip surprisingly strong for someone who looked like a strong wind could knock her over. "Whatever happened between you and Jace--"

"Nothing happened."

--you need to fix it. Because I've seen him like this before. Senior year. When he thought pushing people away was the same as protecting them."

"Sophie--"

"He cares about you. Like, really cares. The kind of caring that makes boys do stupid things like call kissing someone a mistake because they're terrified of what it means."

I froze. "How did you--"

"I'm not blind." She released my arm. "And his car was still here when I drove past at midnight, but yours wasn't. And this morning he looked like he hadn't slept, and you look like you've been crying, and the two of you can barely stand to be in the same room." She shrugged. "I can do math too, you know. Not as well as Jace, but well enough."

The equipment room door opened. Jace emerged, grabbed his jacket, and headed for the exit without looking at either of us.

"I'm taking a break," he said to no one in particular. "Be back before the lighting test."

The door slammed behind him.

Sophie sighed. "Okay, that's definitely not good."

I made it through the rest of the afternoon on autopilot. Testing lights, adjusting decorations, confirming final details with vendors. Sophie stayed close, chattering about college and Christmas and her holiday plans, filling the silence I couldn't seem to fill myself.

Jace came back at four, and we finished the lighting check together in terrible, excruciating silence. Every time I looked at him, I saw his face in that golden light. Felt his hands on my waist. Heard that desperate sound he'd made when my teeth caught his lip.

A mistake.

At six, I drove home, ate dinner without tasting it, and went to my room to stare at the ceiling again.

The gala was tomorrow. Tyler would pick me up at seven. We'd walk in together, dance together, maybe kiss at midnight under the lights. It would be easy and uncomplicated and absolutely nothing like the storm that had torn through me twelve hours ago.

My phone buzzed.

Emma: *you alive?*

Me: *barely*

Emma: *sophie told me. want me to come over?*

Me: *no*

Me: *yes*

Me: *I don't know*

Emma: *omw*

Emma arrived twenty minutes later with a bottle of wine she'd stolen from her parents' restaurant and a look that said she'd already heard everything.

"Spill." She climbed onto my bed, kicking off her shoes. "All of it."

So I did. The snowstorm, the fight, the kiss that felt like the end of the world and the beginning of something I couldn't name. The way he'd pulled back when the lights came on, terror in his eyes, calling it a mistake like the word could undo what we'd done.

"And now he won't look at me." I pressed my palms against my eyes. "It's like senior year all over again."

"Because he's scared." Emma poured wine into two mismatched mugs. "Boys like Jace--smart, careful, terrified of their own feelings--they run from the things they want most."

"So maybe he was right. Maybe it was a mistake."

Emma handed me a mug. "Was it? A mistake?"

I thought about his hands in my hair. The way he'd said *you were everything*. The four years of silence that suddenly made sense in the context of his mom's hospital stay, Sophie's fear, everything falling apart.

"No." The word came out broken. "It wasn't a mistake. Not to me."

"Then maybe you should tell him that."

"He doesn't want to hear it."

"He does." Emma's voice was soft. "He's just scared. And probably hating himself right now for hurting you again."

"He should hate himself."

"Maybe. But you don't hate him."

I didn't answer. Couldn't.

Emma left at ten, and I spent another hour staring at my phone, willing it to buzz, dreading the silence, caught between wanting to hear from him and wanting to forget he existed.

At eleven, I gave up trying to sleep.

I got dressed in the darkness--jeans, sweater, boots--and grabbed my car keys before I could talk myself out of it. The Mitchell house was ten minutes away. Sophie had mentioned their mom was at her sister's for the night, some pre-Christmas tradition.

Jace would be alone.

The thought made my heart pound for reasons I didn't want to examine.

His car was in the driveway. The house was mostly dark except for a light in the living room, visible through the curtains. I sat in my car for what felt like hours, engine running, hands gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles went white.

This was stupid. He didn't want to see me. He'd made that clear.

But what if you're wrong?

The voice in my head sounded treacherously like hope. I crushed it down, then watched it rise again.

Five minutes passed. Ten. The engine hummed, and the heater blew warm air against my cold fingers, and I couldn't make myself turn off the car. Couldn't make myself leave.

What was I so afraid of?

The answer came swift and brutal: *That he'll say it again. That he'll look at me with those walls in his eyes and tell me I'm a mistake. That I'll finally have proof that I was never enough--not four years ago, not now, not ever.*

I'd spent so long building armor against that wound. The scholarship applications, the volunteer work, the carefully constructed future that depended on no one but myself. All of it designed to prove that I didn't need Jace Mitchell, didn't need anyone who could look at me and decide I wasn't worth keeping.

But Emma's words kept echoing: *He's just scared.*

And Sophie's: *The kind of caring that makes boys do stupid things.*

I'd spent four years thinking he didn't want me. Thinking I wasn't enough. And now I knew the truth--that he'd pushed me away to protect me, that he'd carried the weight of his family's destruction alone because he thought that was what love meant.

If he was going to run again, at least this time I'd make him say it to my face.

I turned off the engine. The sudden silence was deafening.

The walk to his front door felt like miles. Each step gave my fear time to grow teeth, to whisper all the ways this could go wrong. He could refuse to open the door. He could tell me to leave. He could look at me with pity or anger or--worst of all--nothing.

I knocked before I could change my mind.

Silence.

The seconds stretched like taffy, each one giving me time to imagine his face on the other side. Was he looking through the peephole? Deciding whether I was worth the effort? Maybe he'd seen my car in the driveway and had already decided--

The lock clicked.

The door opened.

And there he was.

Jace looked like a sleepless night made flesh. Dark circles carved shadows under his eyes, turning them into something that hurt to look at--not tired, but haunted. His hair was a disaster of finger-raked chaos, and he was wearing the same MIT sweatshirt from earlier like he hadn't bothered to change. Like changing required energy he didn't have.

His expression when he saw me was unguarded for exactly one second--shock, longing, something like hope--before the walls slammed back down.

"Mia." His voice was rough, scraped raw. "What are you--"

"You shouldn't be here." He said it even as his hand tightened on the doorframe, knuckles going white. "It's late. You should go."

"No."

The word surprised us both. I watched something flicker in his eyes--fear, maybe, or its hungry twin.

"I can't stop thinking about it." The words tumbled out, unstoppable now. "Last night. You. I keep telling myself to be angry, to move on, to go to the gala with Tyler and forget you exist. But I can't." I took a step closer, watching his breath hitch. "I can't stop thinking about the way you kissed me. The way you said my name. And I know you're scared, Jace. I know you think pushing me away is some kind of noble sacrifice. But I'm standing here anyway."

Silence.

It stretched between us, heavy and terrible, and for one agonizing moment I thought I'd miscalculated. Thought he'd close the door in my face and I'd have to live with this rejection forever, another scar to add to my collection.

Then he pulled me inside.

The door closed behind us, and suddenly I was pressed against it, his body warm against mine, his hands cupping my face with a gentleness that contradicted the desperation in his eyes.

"I shouldn't have called it a mistake." His forehead dropped to mine, his voice cracking on the words. "It wasn't. God, Mia, it was the opposite of a mistake. It was the most right thing I've done in four years, and I--" He stopped. Started again. "I shouldn't have said that. I couldn't sleep. I shouldn't have called it a mistake. That was me being a coward. Being so fucking terrified that I--"

"Then why--"

"Because I'm leaving." The words came out ragged, torn. "Because you have Stanford and Tyler and a future that doesn't include me screwing it up again."

He paused, pulling back just enough to look at me. His eyes were wet.

"Because every time I try to do the right thing where you're concerned..." Another pause, his jaw working. "I just make everything worse."

"The right thing isn't pushing me away."

"I know." His thumb traced my cheekbone like he was memorizing the shape of it. "I know that now. But last night, when the lights came on and I saw your face, I panicked. I thought--if I let myself have this, have you, I'll destroy it. I'll destroy you. The same way I destroy everything."

"You don't destroy things, Jace. You protect them. Too much. Even when they don't need protecting."

"Maybe."

"Definitely."

We stood there, foreheads touching, breathing each other's air. His hands were still on my face, and mine had somehow found their way to his chest, feeling his heart pound beneath the worn cotton.

"So what now?" I whispered.

"I don't know."

"That's not very mathematical of you."

He laughed--a real laugh, rough and surprised. "Some equations don't have clean solutions."

"Some equations are worth solving anyway."

His eyes met mine, and I saw it all there--the fear, the wanting, the same desperate hope I felt burning in my own chest. His hands slid from my face to my waist, pulling me closer, and this time when he kissed me, it was different.

Not angry. Not desperate. Slow.

Intentional.

His lips moved against mine like he was memorizing the shape of them. His hands were steady on my waist, anchoring me, holding me like I was precious but not fragile. I kissed him back the same way, pouring everything I couldn't say into the press of our mouths, the tangle of our breath.

This was the kiss I should have gotten four years ago. The one that said he was sorry. The one that promised something neither of us could name yet.

But I didn't want to just receive anymore.

I fisted the front of his sweatshirt and pulled him harder against me. Took control. Deepened the kiss until we were both gasping, and when he made a surprised sound against my mouth, I swallowed it.

"Mia--"

"Don't stop." I pulled at the hem of his sweatshirt, my fingers finding the warm skin beneath. "Please don't stop."

He didn't.

His hands found the curve of my spine like he was solving for X, and I shivered at the contrast--cold air, warm touch. My back hit the wall, and he pressed into me, and I could feel exactly how much he wanted this.

Wanted me.

I arched into him, fingers sliding into his hair, pulling his mouth down to my neck. He groaned against my throat, and the sound vibrated through me like a tuning fork.

I missed you. I never stopped missing you. Even when I hated you, I missed you.

The words stayed trapped in my throat, but my body said them anyway. When his teeth grazed my bottom lip, I made a sound I'd never made with anyone else--soft, wanting, completely undone.

"Mia." My name was a prayer in his mouth. "God, Mia."

"Jace?" A voice from upstairs. Sophie's voice. "Who's at the door?"

We sprang apart like we'd been electrocuted.

Jace's chest was heaving. His hair was a disaster--my fault, definitely. His lips were swollen and his eyes were dark and he looked at me like he wanted to devour me and save me in equal measure.

"Nobody!" His voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "Just... someone from the committee. About tomorrow."

Footsteps on the stairs. We had maybe thirty seconds.

"You should go." He was already reaching for the door handle, but his other hand was still on my waist, fingers digging in like he couldn't let go. "Sophie can't know--she'll tell Mom, and then--"

"I know."

But I didn't move. Neither did he.

The footsteps got closer.

Then stopped.

Sophie appeared in the doorway at the bottom of the stairs. Her eyes went wide, taking in the scene--me pressed against the door, Jace's hand on my waist, both of us looking like we'd been caught committing a crime.

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then Sophie's face split into a slow, knowing smile. "Midnight?" she whispered. "The rink?"

Jace looked like he wanted the floor to swallow him whole. "Sophie--"

"Go." She was already retreating up the stairs, but her grin was visible even in profile. "I saw nothing. I know nothing. But you're both idiots, and I expect details later."

The door at the top of the stairs closed.

I looked at Jace. He looked at me.

"I guess we've been found out," I said.

"Apparently." But he was almost smiling now. His hand was still on my waist.

"So. Midnight?"

His eyes searched mine. Whatever he found there made something in his expression shift--from fear to something that looked almost like hope.

"The rink," he said quietly. "Midnight." He pulled me close one more time, his lips brushing my ear. "And this time--no running. No calling it a mistake. Just... be there."

"I'll be there."

I slipped out into the cold, and this time when the door closed behind me, it felt like a beginning instead of an ending.

I drove home with my lips still tingling and my heart pounding and the memory of his hands on my skin burning like a brand.

Midnight.

The rink.

This time, we weren't going to call it a mistake.

Chapter 12: Secret Nights

The clock on my nightstand read 11:47 when I finally stopped pretending I was going to sleep.

I'd been staring at the ceiling for two hours, replaying Sophie's words on a loop. *Midnight. The rink.* Like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Like sneaking out to meet the boy who'd broken my heart was just standard Christmas break activity.

Like I had any choice but to go.

I was already dressed--had been since I got home from his house. Same jeans, same sweater, same heartbeat that wouldn't slow down no matter how many times I told myself this was a terrible idea. I grabbed my keys and slipped out the back door, the December cold hitting me like a wake-up call I wasn't ready to hear.

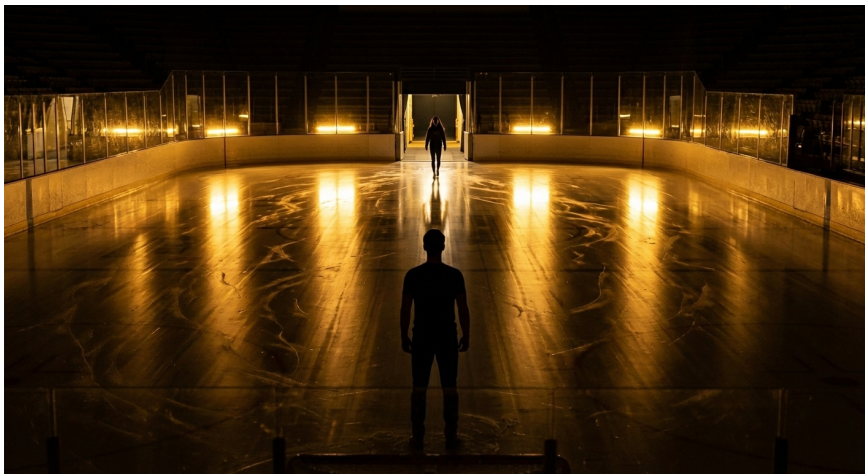
The drive to Frozen Peak took seven minutes. I drove it in five.

The side entrance was unlocked. Of course it was.

I stood in the darkened corridor for a moment, letting my eyes adjust. The building hummed with the low vibration of the refrigeration system, the ice surface somewhere beyond the walls already whispering that strange singing sound it made when it was perfect. When we'd made it perfect, hour after hour of work side by side.

I followed the sound.

The rink opened up before me in the darkness, lit only by the emergency lights along the boards--that same golden glow from the night of the snowstorm. The night of the first kiss. The one he'd called a mistake.



But I didn't call it a mistake, I reminded myself. He did. And then he took it back.

Jace was already there.

He stood at center ice, hands in his pockets, watching me approach through the entrance tunnel. The emergency lights caught the angles of his face, the tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes tracked my every step like I might disappear if he looked away.

"You came." His voice carried across the empty rink, rough and relieved.

"I said I would."

"Yeah, but..." He pushed a hand through his hair--that nervous tell I'd catalogued a hundred times. "After everything. After today. I thought maybe you'd change your mind."

"I thought about it." I walked toward him, my boots echoing on the rubber matting. "But then I realized something."

"What?"

"I've spent four years changing my mind about you. Telling myself I was over you. Telling myself you didn't matter." I stopped at the edge of the ice, the cold radiating up through my boots. "I'm done lying to myself."

The words hung in the air between us. I watched something shift in his expression--hope, maybe, or its hungry twin.

"Come on the ice with me." He held out his hand. "I found our old skates."

He had found them. The box from the equipment room, the one with the faded "HOLD - Paid Monthly" label. My white figure skates with their rainbow laces. His black Bauers with the Maple Leafs guards.

"You kept paying for them," I said, sitting on the bench to lace up. "All these years."

"I couldn't let them throw them away." He sat beside me, working on his own skates with practiced efficiency. "It felt like... like throwing away the only good thing from that time."

"That's the most pathetic and romantic thing I've ever heard."

"Yeah, well." He smiled, just a little. "I never claimed to be good at this."

"At what?"

"Feelings. Communication. Basic human interaction." He finished lacing and stood, holding out both hands to help me up. "But I'm trying. If you'll let me."

I took his hands. Let him pull me to my feet.

"No more running?" I asked.

"No more running."

"No calling this a mistake?"

His hands tightened around mine. "Never again."

We stepped onto the ice together.

The rink felt different at midnight. Smaller somehow. More intimate. Like the whole world had shrunk down to just this--the smooth ice beneath us, the golden light above us, and the four years of unspoken words finally demanding to be heard.



Jace skated backwards, pulling me forward, exactly like he'd done when we were kids. Except we weren't kids anymore. And the look in his eyes had nothing to do with teaching me crossovers.

"I spent so long thinking about this," he said quietly. "About what I'd say if I ever got the chance."

I felt the hesitation in his hands, the way his grip loosened slightly. He was pulling back, retreating into that fortress he'd built.

"Whatever it is," I said, "it's not going to change how I feel."

He didn't respond, just kept skating us in slow circles.

"Jace." I squeezed his hands. "It's not going to change how I feel. I promise."

"What did you decide?" I asked finally.

"That I should start with the truth. All of it." He pulled me closer, his hands sliding to my waist to steady us both. "I need you to understand what happened. Why I left."

"Sophie mentioned something. About that spring."

"Sophie knows pieces. Emma knows pieces. Nobody knows all of it." His jaw tightened. "Because I never told anyone. Not completely."

We were gliding now, slow circles near center ice, our breath making clouds in the cold air. His hands were warm through my sweater, anchoring me while the ice tried to pull us apart.

"My dad was having an affair." The words came out flat, practiced--like he'd rehearsed them a thousand times in his head. "Business partner. Classic cliché. My mom found out the week before prom."

"Jace--"

"Let me finish." His fingers pressed into my hips, not hard, just... grounding. Like he needed the contact to keep talking. "She found out, and she fell apart. Like, really fell apart. I came home from school and found her in the bathroom with an empty pill bottle."

The ice seemed to tilt beneath me. I gripped his arms, steadying myself against a reality I hadn't been prepared for.

"She survived," he continued, his voice cracking. "Obviously. But she was in the hospital for two weeks. Then outpatient treatment. Then months of therapy. And Sophie was fourteen and terrified, and my dad had already disappeared with half our savings, and I was the only one left to hold it together."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you were the one good thing I had." His forehead dropped to mine, his breath warm against my cold lips. "And I was drowning in so much darkness, Mia. I was scared that if I pulled you in, I'd drag you down with me."

"That wasn't your choice--"

"I know. I know that now." His hands slid up my back, pulling me closer until there was no space between us. "But I was seventeen and my mom had just tried to kill herself and I couldn't see straight. The only thing I knew for sure was that you deserved better than my mess."

We had stopped moving. We stood in the center of the rink, the face-off dot beneath our feet, surrounded by the golden glow and the memories of everything we'd lost.

"I never stopped thinking about you," he whispered. "Not for one day. Not for one hour. You were the mistake I was most proud of and the choice I regretted most."

"I'm not a mistake."

"No." His hand came up to cup my face, his thumb tracing my cheekbone. "You're... God, you're everything I wasn't supposed to want. Everything I kept trying to calculate my way out of."

"That's very mathematical."

"I'm very mathematical." But he was almost smiling now. "It's one of my many flaws."

"I don't think it's a flaw."

"No?"

"No." I rose onto the toes of my skates, closing the last inch between us. "I think it's kind of endearing. In a nerdy, emotionally repressed, completely frustrating way."

"High praise."

"The highest."

I kissed him.

This kiss was different from the others. Not angry like the snowstorm. Not slow and intentional like his living room.

This was hungry.

My fingers found his hair, pulling him down to me, and he made a sound against my mouth that vibrated through my whole body. His hands slid under my sweater, finding the bare skin of my back, and I gasped at the contrast--his warm fingers against my cold spine.

"Someone could see," I managed, even as I arched into his touch.

"I don't care anymore." His teeth grazed my bottom lip, and I forgot how to breathe. "I spent four years caring about what could happen. About protecting you from things that weren't mine to protect you from." He kissed down my jaw, his breath hot against my ear. "I'm done being careful."

We were skating again without meaning to--his momentum carrying us backward toward the boards, his hands guiding my hips, my fingers tangled in his hair. When my back hit the cold plexiglass, I gasped, and he swallowed the sound with his mouth.

"I never stopped wanting you." The confession came out broken, whispered between kisses. "Every girl I tried to date. Every time I thought maybe I could move on. I'd close my eyes and see your face."

"Good." I pulled him harder against me, feeling exactly how much he meant it. "I hope you suffered."

He laughed against my throat--a real laugh, rough and surprised. "I deserved that."

"You did."

"I probably deserve worse."

"Definitely." My head fell back against the boards as his mouth found that spot below my ear that made my thoughts scatter. *This is insane. This is reckless. This is--* "But I'm feeling generous."

His hands were everywhere--tracing the curve of my waist, sliding up my ribs, mapping the territory of the body he'd never gotten to know four years ago. And I was letting him. More than letting him. I was guiding his hands, showing him exactly where I wanted to be touched.

Stop thinking. Stop calculating. Stop--

"Mia." My name was a prayer in his mouth. A question. A promise.

"Don't stop," I said again. "Please don't stop."

He didn't.

We ended up in the locker room.

I'm not sure how exactly. One minute we were against the boards, his hands under my sweater, my fingers working at the hem of his shirt. The next, we were stumbling down the corridor, mouths still connected, bouncing off walls and laughing between kisses.

The visitor's locker room was cold and dark and smelled like new paint. Jace found the light switch without looking, then changed his mind and turned it off again.

"Better in the dark?" I asked.

"Better when I can't see you." He pulled me against him, his back hitting the lockers. "Because when I see you, I think--and I talk myself out of everything."

"And you don't want to talk yourself out of this?"

"I want to stop thinking entirely." His hands found the hem of my sweater, his fingers sliding up my stomach, tracing the lines of my ribs. "I want to just... feel."

"Then feel."

He tugged the sweater over my head, and the cold air hit my skin at the same moment his eyes found mine in the darkness. Then his hands were on me again, and heat bloomed everywhere he touched--his warmth radiating into my cold skin, melting the chill until I couldn't remember what cold felt like.

"God, Mia."

"Your turn."

He pulled off his own shirt, and then we were skin against skin, his chest warm and solid against my palms. I could feel his heart hammering beneath my touch, racing as fast as my own.

"I thought about this," he admitted, his mouth against my hair. "More times than I want to admit."

"What did you imagine?"

"Everything." His hands slid up my back, finding the clasp of my bra. He hesitated. "Is this--"

"Yes."

He released it with fumbling fingers, and I shrugged out of the straps, letting the fabric fall. For a moment, neither of us moved. Just stood there in the darkness of the locker room, breathing the same cold air, our hearts pounding against each other's chests.

"I imagined this exactly," he whispered. "And it's better. You're better. Everything about you is--"

I kissed him to shut him up. To stop the words that were making my chest too tight to breathe. To feel instead of think, the same way he'd asked.

We sank onto one of the benches, his back against the lockers, me straddling his lap. His hands mapped every inch of skin I'd exposed while mine did the same--the planes of his chest, the ridges of his stomach, the way his breath hitched when my fingers traced down to his belt.

His hips tilted up involuntarily, pressing into me, and a groan escaped his throat.

"Wait." His hands caught mine, trembling slightly. "Not--we should stop."

I went still. "What?"

"Not like that." He kissed my forehead, my cheeks, the corner of my mouth. "I want this. God, Mia, I want this so much it's physically painful. But not here. Not in a locker room. Not our first time together."

"What's wrong with a locker room?"

"Everything." He laughed, pulling me tighter against him. "You deserve better. We both do. I want..." He trailed off, his forehead dropping to mine.

"What do you want?"

"More than this. More than a locker room. More than just..."

I understood. I did. But my whole body was aching for him, and the thought of stopping now felt like its own kind of violence.

"Can we at least..." I rocked against him, and his groan echoed off the lockers.

"Mia."

"What?"

"You're making it very hard to be noble."

"Maybe I don't want you to be noble." I kissed down his neck, feeling his pulse pound against my lips. "Maybe I want you to be desperate."

His hands tightened on my hips, fingers pressing hard enough to leave marks--not stopping me, grounding himself. His whole body was taut, every muscle straining against his own restraint.

"Then stop fighting it."

But he shook his head, even as his body responded to every movement of mine. "Not tonight. Tonight I just want to hold you. Is that pathetic?"

"Extremely."

"Can you live with it?"

His eyes were dark with want in the dim light filtering under the door. His chest heaving, his hands still gripping my hips like I might disappear. He could have pushed. Could have given in to what we both wanted. Instead, he was asking for permission to just... be with me.

"Yeah," I said softly. "I can live with it."

We stayed in that locker room for another hour.

Not doing what my body was screaming for. Just... together. Talking in whispers, sharing secrets like currency. He told me about the years after that spring--the double shifts at the hardware store, the community college classes, the way he'd rebuilt his family one careful day at a time.

"The worst was when Mom finally came home from the hospital," he said quietly, his fingers still tracing patterns on my bare shoulder. His voice caught, and he cleared his throat. "I'd kept the house exactly like she left it. Thought that would help. But she just... stood in the doorway and cried for twenty minutes."

I didn't say anything. Just pulled him closer, my arms tightening around him.

I told him about Stanford and the soccer scholarship and the pressure that was starting to feel like a cage.

"You could transfer," he said at one point.

"To where?"

"Anywhere. MIT has a good program." He paused, and I felt something shift in his breathing. "Or there are schools near Tokyo. Really good ones. I've been looking at them, actually."

The words hit me like cold water.

"Tokyo?" I pulled back just enough to see his face. "You've been looking at schools in *Tokyo*?"

"I have an offer," he said quietly. "January. Six months. And I started thinking--what if it didn't have to be just me? What if there was a way for us to..." He trailed off, jaw tight. "Forget it. It's stupid."

"It's not stupid." My heart was pounding now, for entirely different reasons. "Jace, are you saying--"

"I'm saying I don't want to do this alone anymore." His arms tightened around me. "I'm saying maybe I was looking for a reason to believe this could work. A future where I don't have to choose between you and everything else."

The confession sat between us, heavy with implications neither of us was ready to unpack. He'd been planning. While I'd been avoiding my Stanford letter, he'd been researching universities on the other side of the world, looking for a way to make *us* possible.

But for now, wrapped in his arms on a wooden bench in a freezing locker room, it was enough. More than enough.

"What are we doing?" I asked eventually, my head resting on his chest.

"I don't know." His arms tightened around me. "But I don't want to stop."

"Even though you're leaving? Even though I'm leaving?"

"Even though." He kissed the top of my head. "We can figure out the logistics later. Right now, I just want this. Is that okay?"

I thought about Tyler, waiting for an answer I kept not giving. About Stanford, waiting for a decision I kept avoiding. About all the ways this could go wrong, all the reasons I should protect myself.

Then I thought about the way Jace said my name. Like it was precious. Like it was the answer to every question he'd ever asked.

"Yeah," I said. "That's okay."

We skated again before leaving.

Just a few laps around the rink, hand in hand, our breath making clouds in the golden light. It felt like being kids again--except for the way his thumb traced circles on my palm. Except for the way he kept pulling me close to steal kisses against the boards.

"Same time tomorrow?" he asked as we unlaced our skates. "After the gala?"

Reality crashed back in. The gala. Tyler. The formal dress hanging in my closet, the corsage he'd probably already ordered.

"That's going to be..." I searched for the right word. "Complicated."

"I know." His jaw tightened. "You'll be there with him. I'll be there watching you with him. And we'll both have to pretend this"--he gestured between us--"doesn't exist."

"Just for a few hours."

"Just for a few hours," he repeated, but his voice was rough. "And then midnight. After everyone goes home. After you've danced with him and smiled for the pictures and done whatever you need to do to keep up appearances."

"Jace--"

"I'm not asking you to choose. Not yet." His eyes met mine, dark with promise. "But the way you were moving against me in there--"

"Shut up."

--suggested you might be interested in a repeat performance."

"I said shut up." But I was smiling. Couldn't help it. "Midnight. After the gala. Don't be late."

"I'm never late."

"You were late to our first date."

"That was traffic."

"It was nerves."

He kissed me one last time--slow and sweet and full of things neither of us was ready to say.

"Tomorrow," he said against my lips.

"Tomorrow."

I drove home with my sweater inside out and his cologne on my skin, the phantom pressure of his hands still warm on my hips. The Stanford letter sat unopened on my desk--had been sitting there for three days now. Tomorrow was the gala. Tyler would be there, waiting for the answer I still hadn't given him. And Jace would be there too, pretending we were still just old friends.

The thought should have terrified me. All those colliding worlds, all those impossible choices.

But as I pulled into my driveway at 2 AM, I wasn't afraid.

I was just thinking: *again*.

Chapter 13: Getting Real

I woke to sunlight streaming through curtains I didn't remember closing, my body still humming with phantom electricity.

9:47 AM. Maybe four hours of sleep after driving home at two in the morning, and yet I felt more awake than I had in years. My skin remembered everywhere Jace had touched me--my back against the locker room wall, his hands sliding under my sweater, the rough scrape of his stubble against my neck.

I reached for my phone before my eyes fully adjusted to the light.

Three texts from Tyler: *cant wait for tonight. pick u up at 7? and wear something that moves and miss you davis*

One text from Jace, sent at 3:14 AM: *cant stop thinking about you. midnight. after.*

I read his message four times, each time feeling the words settle deeper into my chest like stones dropping into still water. After. After the gala. After Tyler. After we spent an entire evening pretending we were just old friends while my lips still burned from his kiss.

The Stanford letter sat unopened on my desk, exactly where it had been for four days now. The envelope looked smaller somehow in the morning light.

"Mia!" Mom's voice floated up from downstairs. "You're finally awake! I need you to try on that dress before the gala. And Tyler called--said he's picking you up at seven sharp."

"Got it, Mom."

I typed back to Tyler first--*see u at 7*--because that was the safe message. The uncomplicated one. Then I opened Jace's text and stared at the cursor blinking in the empty reply box.

midnight, I finally typed. *ill be there*

His response came in seconds: *dont be late this time*

I smiled at my phone like an idiot, then threw it across the bed and went to shower off the ghost of his cologne that still clung to my skin.

The rink looked different in daylight.

Same building, same equipment, same half-finished gala decorations--but something had shifted. Maybe it was knowing that in twelve hours, I'd be back here in the dark, Jace's hands finding all the places they'd mapped last night.

I found him in the equipment room, checking the sound system one final time. He turned when he heard my footsteps, and for a moment we just looked at each other--really looked--and the space between us crackled with everything we weren't saying.

"You came." His voice was rougher than usual. Sleep-deprived.

"You doubted me?"

"Never." But his eyes dropped to my mouth, and I watched his jaw tighten. "We should probably... work. On the gala stuff."

"Probably."

Neither of us moved.

"Jace." I stepped closer, and he took a breath like I'd touched him. "We have twelve hours before tonight. Tell me something real."

He laughed--a short, surprised sound. "You want real? Here?"

"Here. Now. Before we have to go back to pretending."

He studied me for a long moment. Then he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his phone, scrolling to a saved email.

"MIT's program in Tokyo isn't the only thing I've been looking at." He handed me the phone. "There are partner universities. Joint programs. Some of them are... really good."

I looked at the screen. A list of programs, all in Japan, all with English-language tracks. Engineering. Computer Science. International Relations.

"You researched universities for me?"

"I researched options." He took the phone back, not meeting my eyes. "For both of us. If we wanted. I'm not saying--I know you have Stanford, and I'm not trying to--"

"Jace."

"--pressure you into anything, because I know how that sounds, and the last thing I want is for you to think I'm trying to derail your--"

"Jace." I grabbed his hand. His rambling stopped. "Breathe."

He did. In, out. His fingers laced through mine.

"Stanford feels like a cage," I admitted. The words came easier than I expected. "The scholarship, the soccer team, all of it. Everyone acts like I won the lottery, but I feel like I'm being handed a life I didn't choose."

"Why haven't you opened the letter?"

"Because I'm scared of what it says. Or maybe I'm scared of what I'll do when I read it." I squeezed his hand. "Your turn."

He was quiet for a moment, his thumb tracing circles on my palm. "MIT was supposed to be everything. The dream. The goal. But these past two years..." He shook his head. "It's lonely, Mia. Really lonely. I worked so hard to get there, and then I arrived and realized I'd forgotten why I wanted it in the first place."

"Why did you want it?"

His throat worked. When he spoke, his voice came out rough and raw.

"Because I thought if I was smart enough--if I could just be *good enough*--I could fix everything that went wrong." His eyes went somewhere far away. "I sat in the hospital while my mom was unconscious, and I kept thinking: *I should be able to solve this. That's what I do. I solve things.* But I couldn't save her with algorithms. Couldn't rebuild my family with engineering principles. All that intelligence, all those years of being the smart kid, and I still couldn't figure out how to make the people I love stop breaking."

The rawness in his voice made my chest ache. I pulled him closer. His forehead dropped to mine, and I felt his exhale warm against my lips.

"We're a mess," I whispered.

"A matched set."

"Jace--"

Footsteps in the corridor. We sprang apart just as the door opened.



Emma stood there with a pink bakery box balanced on one hip, her expression freezing mid-smile as she took in the scene--me flushed, Jace disheveled, standing way too close for "just talking."

"Oh." She blinked. "Oh my God."

"Emma, it's not--"

"I brought pastries for the gala setup crew." She set the box down slowly, her eyes never leaving my face. "But I'm thinking maybe I actually brought them for something else."

"We were just talking," Jace said, his voice too even.

"Sure. Talking." Emma's gaze dropped to our hands--still close, almost touching. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

"Em--"

"Mia." Her voice shifted like a blade being unsheathed--teasing one second, sharp the next. The transformation was so sudden I felt it in my spine. "We need to talk. Alone."

Jace stiffened beside me. "Emma--"

"Not you." She held up a hand. "This is between me and Mia. You've got sound equipment to check, right?"

Something passed between them--a look I couldn't read, weighted with history I wasn't part of. Then Jace nodded, squeezing my hand once before releasing it.

"I'll be in the main rink," he said quietly. "Take your time."

The door closed behind him. The room felt smaller without him in it.

Emma waited until Jace's footsteps faded, then sank onto the equipment room bench. Her hands were trembling--I'd never seen Emma's hands tremble.

"Do you know why Jace is really going to Tokyo?"

The question threw me. "The MIT program. The engineering work."

"That's part of it." She was picking at a loose thread on her jacket, winding it around her finger until the tip went white. "But mostly? It's because of his dad."

"His dad?" My stomach tightened. "Richard's in Tokyo?"

"For two years now. Working for some international finance firm." Emma finally looked up, and I saw something like fear in her eyes. "He's been reaching out. Making promises about reconciliation. Family dinners. Starting over."

I tried to process this. "And Jace is... considering it?"

"Jace is *going* to Tokyo because it's the one place where he might have both. A career and a family." Her voice went hard. "Even if that family destroyed him once already."

"Emma, I--"

"Wait." She held up a hand. "I'm not done. There's more, and you need to hear all of it before you decide anything."

I nodded, my fingernails digging into my palms.

She took a shaky breath. "Remember when I dated Marcus Chen? Freshman year?"

The subject change disoriented me. "That summer after prom?"

"Everyone thinks it was just a summer fling. Two weeks before we realized we were better as friends." She laughed, but there was no humor in it. "That's not what happened."

"What do you mean?"

"I dated Marcus because he was Jace's best friend." Her eyes met mine, and I saw tears threatening. "I wanted information. About Jace. About why he'd pushed you away. About what happened that spring."

My mouth went dry. "You *used* Marcus?"

"I'm not proud of it." Her voice cracked. "But I was desperate, Mia. You were destroyed, and my brother wouldn't talk to anyone, and I needed to understand why."

I sat down beside her, my pulse loud in my ears. "What did Marcus tell you?"

She didn't answer right away. Her jaw worked like she was trying to swallow something bitter.

"Emma. What did you find out?"

"Everything." The word came out strangled. "The stuff about his mom--I told you that. But there's something I kept back. Something I thought would just make everything worse."

My stomach dropped. "Tell me."

"Sophomore year of college." She turned to face me fully. "A year after you two broke up. Marcus told me one night--we were studying, and he let it slip."

"Let *what* slip?"

"Jace spent six months looking at schools in California."

The air left my lungs.

"What?"

"UC Berkeley. USC." Emma's voice was barely above a whisper now. "Stanford. He was researching transfer requirements to every school within driving distance of you."

"That's not--" I shook my head. "He never said anything."

"He had applications filled out, Mia. Essays written." A tear slipped down her cheek. "He was going to give up MIT--his dream, everything he'd worked for--just to be in the same state as you."

My vision blurred. "Then why didn't he--"

"His mom had a setback. Another hospitalization." Emma grabbed my hands, her grip almost painful. "So he stayed. Again. Because that's what Jace does. He sacrifices. He gives up what he wants because he thinks that's what love means."

I pulled my hands back, pressing them against my eyes. "Why didn't anyone tell me this?"

"Because by then, you were thriving. Stanford, the soccer team, this whole new life." Emma's voice sharpened. "And Jace made Marcus promise. He didn't want to mess that up for you."

I stood up, pacing the small room. My chest felt like it was being crushed.

"So you're saying he's done this before. The sacrifice thing."

"I'm saying it's a *pattern*." Emma stood too, stepping into my path. "His mom needed him, so he gave up MIT applications his senior year of high school. Sophie needed stability, so he worked three jobs instead of internships. His dad wants reconciliation, so he's going to Tokyo. And now you're back, and he's already making new plans, researching schools for you--"

"That's not the same."

"Isn't it?" Her eyes were fierce now. "You're the only person who's ever made Jace fight for what *he* wants. The only one he couldn't talk himself out of. But if you let him keep doing this--if you just accept it--"

"He's going to hollow himself out," I finished quietly.

"The same way he's hollowed himself out for everyone else."

I leaned against the wall, feeling the cold concrete through my sweater. Everything I thought I knew about the last four years was rearranging itself into a different shape. A more painful one.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

Emma walked to the door, then paused with her hand on the frame.

"Figure out what you actually want. Not what's easy." She looked back at me. "And then make him fight for it too. Otherwise you're just going to keep taking turns destroying yourselves."

The door closed behind her.

I sat in the equipment room for a long time, Emma's words echoing.

Real love isn't letting someone destroy themselves for you.

My phone buzzed.

Tyler: *running late for setup. save me a croissant?*

Then, a moment later:

Jace: *you ok? emma looked upset when she left*

I stared at both messages. The gala was in eight hours. Tyler would pick me up in seven. And somewhere between now and midnight, I had to decide what I actually wanted--not what was safe, not what was expected, but what I was willing to fight for.

I started typing to Jace: *im fine*

Deleted it.

we need to talk

Deleted that too.

Then I set the phone down. Opened the drawer where I'd stored my backup charger. And underneath it, the paper I'd shoved there three days ago--the printout about Tokyo's International Christian University, the one with the English-language global studies program that Jace didn't know I'd already researched on my own.

I'd found it before he showed me his list. Before I knew about his dad or the transfer applications or any of the rest of it. I'd found it because I'd been googling "universities near MIT Tokyo program" at two in the morning, unable to sleep, unable to stop thinking about what it might look like to choose something for myself for once.

I smoothed out the creases in the paper.

Then I pulled out my phone and typed a new message to Jace:

tonight. after midnight. we're making a deal. you tell me what YOU want--not what you think i need--and ill do the same. no sacrificing. no protecting each other from the truth. just real.

I hit send before I could second-guess myself.

His response came fast: *youre scaring me*

I almost smiled. *good. you should be a little scared.*

midnight, he sent back. *dont be late.*

I stood up, tucking the university printout into my back pocket. The Stanford letter was still unopened on my desk at home. The gala was tonight. And for the first time in months, I knew exactly what I wanted.

I wanted someone who would fight for himself as hard as he fought for everyone else.

And tonight, I was going to make damn sure he did.

Chapter 14: Feelings Hit

The soft opening was supposed to be a test run. A few dozen kids, some parents, hot chocolate from the concession stand Emma had stocked overnight. Nothing major. Just making sure the ice held and the rentals worked before tonight's gala transformed this place into something magical.

But watching Jace Mitchell crouch down to help a four-year-old with her skates, his voice gentle and patient as he explained how to tie the laces just right, I realized I was in serious trouble.



"You want them snug but not tight," he said, demonstrating with careful fingers. "Like a hug for your feet."

The little girl--pigtails, pink jacket, gap-toothed smile--giggled. "Feet don't need hugs."

"Sure they do. Everyone needs hugs." He glanced up, caught me staring from across the rental counter, and something flickered in his eyes. "Even people who pretend they don't."

I looked away first. Busied myself with organizing the already-organized stack of rental forms while my pulse went uneven in my chest.

This was ridiculous. I was twenty-one years old. I had a Stanford decision waiting, a life to figure out, a boy I was supposed to be going to the gala with tonight. I did not have time to fall apart watching Jace Mitchell teach children to skate.

But there he was, holding the little girl's hands and skating backwards--slowly, carefully, the way he'd done with me when I was eight and terrified of falling. She wobbled. He steadied her. She laughed. He smiled.

And something in my chest that I'd kept carefully frozen for four years splintered.

"You're staring."

Sophie appeared at my elbow, holding two cups of hot chocolate. She pressed one into my hands with the casual authority of someone who'd been watching this disaster unfold all week.

"I'm supervising," I said. "It's my job."

"Uh-huh." She sipped her hot chocolate, eyes never leaving my face. "That's why you've been 'supervising' my brother specifically for the last twenty minutes."

"There are a lot of kids on the ice. He's helping most of them."

"And you're watching all of them equally."

"Exactly."

"Liar."

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped. Sophie had always been like this--too observant, too willing to call people on their nonsense. At fourteen, she'd been annoying. At eighteen, she was terrifying.

"How's your mom?" I asked, desperate to change the subject.

Sophie's expression softened. "Better. The surgery was harder than they expected, but she's recovering. Having Jace home helps." She paused, swirling her hot chocolate. "Having you around seems to help too, weirdly."

"Me? I barely see her."

"No, but Jace talks about you." A sideways glance. "A lot. More than he's talked about anything in years."

My grip tightened on my cup. "Sophie--"

"I'm not fishing. Just stating facts." She turned to face me fully, her expression suddenly serious. "He's different when you're around, Mia. More like himself. More like the Jace I remember from before everything went wrong."

Before everything went wrong. Such a simple phrase for the catastrophe that had swallowed their family whole. The affair, the divorce, the suicide attempt Sophie was too young to fully understand but old enough to remember. The boy who'd carried all of that alone because he thought it would protect the people he loved.

"I should check on the concession stand," I said.

"Emma's got it covered." Sophie blocked my escape with her slight frame. "You should stay. Watch. Let yourself feel whatever you're feeling."

"That's terrible advice."

"It's honest advice." She smiled, but there was something sad in it. "My brother spent four years trying not to feel things. Didn't work out great for him." Her eyes drifted to the ice, where Jace was now helping a boy around six execute something that might generously be called a hockey stop. "Or for anyone else."

She wandered off before I could respond, leaving me alone with my hot chocolate and my inconvenient feelings and the sight of Jace Mitchell being exactly the person I'd fallen for at seventeen.

Patient. Kind. Willing to go slowly. Willing to catch people when they fell.

Why hadn't he let me catch him?

The soft opening wound down around four. Parents collected their kids, rental skates returned to their racks, the ice cleared for tonight's zamboni run. By five, only the setup crew remained, stringing the last of the fairy lights and arranging centerpieces for the tables that lined the rink's edge.

Tyler found me by the sound booth, pretending to check cables.

"Hey." He was dressed nicer than usual--button-down under his coat, hair actually styled instead of hockey-tousled. "You ready for tonight?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

He leaned against the booth, and I noticed his hands weren't quite steady. He kept adjusting his sleeves, then stopping himself. Something clean and woodsy drifted from him--cologne he'd clearly put thought into. The kind of effort that made my stomach tighten with guilt before he even spoke.

"I've been thinking," he said. Then stopped. Started again. "Okay, I practiced this, but now it's weird."



"Tyler--"

"No, let me just--" He turned to face me fully, and his expression was so earnest it hurt. "This has been the best break I've ever had. Coming home, seeing you again. Working on this project together. Watching you boss everyone around and somehow make them love you for it."

I tried to smile. It came out wrong.

"I know we're both leaving after New Year's," he continued, the words coming faster now, like he was afraid he'd lose his nerve. "And I know long-distance is complicated. My parents tried it for a semester before they got married. It sucked, but they made it work." He reached for my hand, his fingers warm but trembling slightly. "But I don't want to lose you when we go back. I keep running the numbers in my head, and every equation comes out the same."

"What equation?"

"The one where you and I make sense." He squeezed my hand. "We're both athletes. We both get the training schedules, the travel, the sacrifice. We both want careers that let us actually help people. We could visit each other during breaks. FaceTime every night. I'd fly out for your tournaments when I could."

He'd thought about this. Really thought about it. The logistics, the sacrifices, the way our lives might actually fit together.

"Tyler, I don't know what to--"

"I want to be your boyfriend," he said, the words coming out in a rush. "Officially. Not just holiday dates and maybes. The real thing."

The words hung in the air between us. Behind me, I heard the scrape of a shovel on ice--someone clearing the last of the snow from the walkway. A fairy light flickered. The zamboni hummed to life.

And for one terrible moment, I almost said yes.

Because Tyler was safe. Tyler was present. Tyler had shown up, communicated, made plans. Tyler looked at me like I was something he'd worked hard for and won fair and square. And part of me--the exhausted, hurt, tired-of-waiting part--wanted so badly to just let that be enough.

"I could make you happy." His voice dropped, and something cracked in it. "I know I could. I know I'm not... whoever it is you keep looking for when you think no one's watching. But I'd show up. Every time. I'd never make you wonder."

The guilt hit me like a physical blow. He knew. Maybe not the specifics, but he knew.

"Tyler..."

"You don't have to answer right now." His smile was too bright, the kind people use when they're trying not to fall apart. "Think about it. We'll dance tonight, have fun, and then... whatever you decide, I'll respect it."

He leaned in and kissed my cheek--soft, quick, careful. Like he was afraid of startling something that might run.

Then he walked away, shoulders a little too straight, and I watched him stop at the edge of the rink to steady himself before rejoining the setup crew.

I stood there for a long moment, hand pressed to my cheek where his lips had been.

I should say yes. Everything about Tyler made sense on paper. He was kind and steady and he'd never make me feel like I was chasing something that didn't want to be caught.

But Tyler had never made me feel like he saw the parts of me I was afraid to show anyone. Tyler made me feel safe.

Jace made me feel like I actually mattered.

I found a quiet corner in the locker room to sit with my thoughts. The same locker room where Jace and I had nearly crossed every line two nights ago. The same bench where his hands had found my skin and mine had found his, both of us wanting more than we were ready to take.

My phone buzzed.

Jace: you disappeared. everything ok?

I typed and deleted three different responses.

tyler asked me to be his girlfriend

Delete.

i watched you with those kids and i think im in love with you again

Delete.

what are we doing?

Delete.

Finally: fine. just needed a minute. see you tonight.

His response came fast: *midnight still on?*

I thought about Tyler's face when he'd admitted he knew I was looking for someone else. About the gala tonight, the dress hanging in my closet, the way my mother would beam when she

saw me on Tyler's arm. About how easy it would be to just accept what was offered instead of fighting for something that might destroy me.

This was what I always did. Found someone safe. Let them take the lead. Told myself it was enough.

The same pattern. Over and over.

My thumbs hovered over the screen. Then, before I could talk myself out of it:

yes. midnight. but youre going to have to prove you actually want this. no more hiding. no more sacrificing for my sake. if you want me, you fight for yourself too.

A long pause. Then: ?

youll see.

I pocketed my phone and pressed my palms against my eyes.

I had a choice to make tonight. Not between Tyler and Jace--that decision had already made itself somewhere between the ice skating lessons and the almost-kiss and the way my heart had reorganized itself around him without permission.

The choice was whether to keep accepting what was safe. Whether to keep letting boys make decisions for me--even when those decisions were meant to be kind.

I'd spent four years dating people who protected me from having to want anything too much. Easier to be the one who was chosen than the one who chose.

But I was done being careful. Done being grateful. Done letting other people decide what I deserved.

Tonight, I was going to make a decision for myself. And I was going to make damn sure Jace understood that loving me meant showing up for himself too.

Sophie found me twenty minutes later, still sitting in the locker room, still staring at the wall.

"There you are." She slipped inside, closing the door behind her. "Emma said you'd probably be hiding."

"I'm not hiding. I'm... processing."

"Same thing." She sat down on the bench across from me, tucking her legs underneath her. "Can I tell you something? Something I probably shouldn't?"

My stomach dropped. "Sophie, whatever you think you know--"

"You remember that summer? Before senior year?" Her voice wavered in a way I'd never heard from her. "The one where you went to California for that training academy?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

"Jace was... different after you left." She was picking at her cuticles, not looking at me. "Like, actually different. He barely talked. Barely ate. I was only fourteen, but I remember thinking something was really wrong."

"Sophie--"

"And then you came back, and he was Jace again. Smiling. Making jokes. Looking at you like--" She stopped. Swallowed. "I found out later that he'd applied somewhere. Early decision. I wasn't supposed to know, but I heard him talking to our guidance counselor."

The pieces started clicking together in my head. Slowly. Horribly.

"Where?" My voice came out strange.

Sophie finally looked at me. "Stanford."

The word hit like a physical blow.

"He--what?"

"Full ride. Early admission." She was crying now, just a little. "He got in, Mia. Before any of this happened. Before Dad. Before everything."

I couldn't breathe. The walls were closing in.

"That doesn't make sense. He was always going to MIT. That was his dream--"

"Stanford was his dream." Sophie's words came out ragged. "MIT was the backup. He chose Stanford because you were going to be in California. Because of that scholarship you'd gotten for the summer program. He was going to follow you."

"He never said--"

"He was going to tell you at prom." She wiped her face with her sleeve. "That was the whole plan. Ask you to be his girlfriend officially, then tell you he'd be there when you got to California. But then--"

"Your dad."

She nodded. "Two weeks before prom. And suddenly nothing else mattered."

I was shaking. Actually shaking. Seventeen-year-old Jace, standing in this exact rink, asking me to prom with three pages of math problems while his entire world burned around him.

"He withdrew the acceptance," Sophie continued. "Took the gap year. Applied to MIT because it was far away, because he thought you'd moved on--"

"Because he thought he wasn't good enough." The words ripped out of me. "Because he thought California was my dream and he'd only drag me down."

"He thought he was protecting you." Sophie's voice cracked. "That's what he always does. Sacrifices what he wants because he thinks that's what love looks like."

I was crying now too. Ugly crying. The kind where you can't breathe and your face twists up and you don't even care who sees.

"He never told me any of it," I said. "He just disappeared."

Sophie crossed to sit beside me. Her hand found mine.

"I know." She squeezed. "But he's trying to be different now. With you. I can see it."



I thought about Jace's face last night, when he'd let me see the guilt he'd been carrying. The way he'd finally told me about Oliver. The way he kept almost-telling me things before pulling back.

He was trying.

But trying wasn't enough.

"He's going to Tokyo," I said. "Another sacrifice. Another choice made alone."

"Then don't let him."

I looked at her--eighteen years old, wise in the way only kids from broken families can be.

"The gala's in three hours," she said. "Midnight's in eight. Figure out what you want, Mia. And then make him fight for it too. Actually fight. Not sacrifice. Not protect. Fight."

She left me alone in the locker room, surrounded by ghosts.

I sat there for a long time, letting the anger build alongside the heartbreak. Stanford. He'd given up Stanford. For me. And then he'd walked away like I was something fragile that couldn't handle the truth.

I wasn't fragile. I was furious.

Because loving someone didn't mean protecting them from yourself. It meant trusting them to handle the hard stuff. It meant letting them in.

And tonight, I was going to make sure Jace Mitchell finally understood that.

The drive home was a blur.

I kept thinking about Stanford. Not my Stanford--the decision still waiting on my desk--but his. The one he'd gotten into early. The one he'd chosen because I was supposed to be there.

He'd rearranged his entire future around me.

And then he'd walked away without saying a word.

I parked in my driveway and sat there for a long moment, hands still on the wheel.

The tragedy wasn't that he'd left. The tragedy was that he'd left thinking it was the only way to love me.

What had Emma said this morning? *Figure out what you actually want. Not what's easy.*

I wanted Jace. That part was simple. Had been simple since the moment I saw him crouching on the ice, telling a four-year-old that feet need hugs.

But I didn't want the version of Jace who would sacrifice everything and call it love. I wanted the version who would stand next to me and let me help carry the weight.

Tonight at midnight, I wasn't going to ask him to choose me. That was too easy. Too safe.

I was going to ask him to choose himself. To stop running. To stay not because I needed saving, but because we both deserved someone who showed up completely.

And if he couldn't do that--if he still thought love meant disappearing for someone else's good--

Then at least I'd finally know.

Even if it broke me.

I got out of the car and headed inside to get ready. The gala started in three hours. By midnight, everything would be different.

One way or another.

Chapter 15: The Calm Before

Two days until the gala. Two days until everything we'd built would finally be on display.

I stood at the edge of the rink, coffee warming my hands, and watched the morning light filter through the skylights we'd cleaned last week. The ice gleamed like polished silver. The fairy lights Sophie had strung along the rafters caught the sun and scattered tiny rainbows across the boards. Even the old locker rooms smelled fresh--paint and pine and possibility.

We'd done it. Against every odd, every setback, every burst pipe and late delivery and moment where I'd wanted to strangle either Jace or myself--we'd actually done it.

Frozen Peak looked like magic.

"You're here early."

I turned. Jace was walking toward me with two paper bags from Emma's bakery, his breath making clouds in the cold air. He was wearing that old MIT hoodie again, the one that was soft from a thousand washes and made him look younger than twenty-one. Made him look like the boy who'd taught me to skate backwards on this very ice, patient and kind and so certain I could do anything.

"Couldn't sleep," I admitted.

"Me neither." He handed me one of the bags. "Emma sent these. Said you'd need the calories for the final push."

Inside: a chocolate croissant, still warm. My favorite. Emma always remembered.

"She's too good to us."

"She's too good, period." Jace settled beside me at the boards, close enough that our shoulders almost touched. "I remember when we were kids and she'd sneak us extra cookies during skating practice. She always said--"

"Growing bodies need fuel." I laughed. "She used that excuse until we were seventeen."

"She tried it on me last week. I think she's just looking for reasons to feed people."

We stood there in comfortable silence, eating pastries and watching the rink slowly fill with light. Sophie arrived around eight, arms full of table linens for the gala. A crew of volunteers showed up at nine to finish the sound system installation. By ten, the rink was a hive of controlled chaos--everyone with a job, everyone working together like a machine we'd spent two weeks calibrating.

And through all of it, Jace and I moved in perfect sync.

He'd start a sentence; I'd finish it. I'd reach for a tool; he'd already be handing it over. When a volunteer couldn't find the extra extension cords, we both pointed to the same storage closet without even looking at each other. Sophie started calling us "the hive mind" and making buzzing noises whenever we did something particularly in tune.

"This is kind of creepy," she announced at lunch, watching us unwrap identical sandwiches. "Did you two practice being telepathic, or...?"

"Natural talent," Jace said.

"Years of trauma," I countered.

He snorted into his turkey on rye. Our eyes met, and something warm spread through my chest--something that had nothing to do with the space heaters we'd finally gotten working.

This was what we could have been. What we almost were, before everything fell apart. Partners. A team. Two people who fit together so seamlessly it was almost scary.

I wondered if he felt it too.

By three o'clock, most of the volunteers had headed home. Sophie had disappeared to run errands for her mom, leaving Jace and me alone in the rink for the first time all day.

"We should test the sound system," he said, scrolling through something on his phone. "Make sure the speakers are balanced before the gala."

"You're the tech expert."

"And you're the one with the musical theater background. I need someone who'll notice if the treble's off."

"I did one production of Grease sophomore year. That doesn't make me an expert."

"You were the best Sandy Westfield High ever had."

"I was the only Sandy Westfield High ever had. We did Guys and Dolls every other year."

He grinned, that rare unguarded grin that made my heart do stupid things. "Still counts. Come on."

I followed him to the sound booth--a fancy name for the corner we'd converted into a control station with borrowed equipment and a lot of duct tape. He started pressing buttons, adjusting sliders, doing technical things I didn't understand.

"Stand at center ice," he said. "Tell me when the levels feel right."

I kicked off my shoes and stepped onto the ice in my socked feet. The cold was immediate, seeping up through the thin material, grounding me in my body. I skated carefully to the face-off dot and turned to face the booth.

"Ready," I called.

Music flooded the space.



Not the test tones I expected, or the generic background music the town had requested for the gala. This was something different. Something old. A song I hadn't heard in years--the one that had played at the last school dance before everything fell apart. Before Jace stopped answering my texts, before he took someone else to prom, before I learned to armor my heart against wanting too much.

I recognized it in the first three notes. My chest went tight.

"Jace--"

"Is the sound okay?" His voice came through the speakers, mixing with the melody. "I need to check the balance from center ice."

He was walking toward me. Onto the ice in his sneakers, not caring about the cold or the awkward way rubber gripped the surface. His eyes never left mine.

"The sound is fine," I said. "Why are you playing this?"

"Because I never got to dance with you to it." He stopped a few feet away, and I could see the nervous jump of his pulse in his throat. "Junior year. The winter formal. This song came on and I spent the whole thing trying to work up the courage to ask you. By the time I did, it was over."

"I remember." I'd spent that dance pretending not to watch him. Pretending my heart wasn't breaking a little bit every time he almost walked over and then didn't. "You were with that group from the basketball team."

"And you were with Emma and the soccer girls. You were wearing that blue dress with the sparkly things."

"Sequins. It was covered in sequins."

"You looked like starlight." His voice dropped. "You always looked like starlight. I was just too scared to get close in case I burned up."

The music swelled. That old, romantic song, echoing through the empty rink we'd rebuilt together. Fairy lights glinting off the ice. The afternoon sun slanting through skylights. And Jace, standing in front of me with four years of regret written across his face.

"Dance with me," he said. "While there's no one watching."

"We shouldn't."

"We've been doing a lot of things we shouldn't." He held out his hand. "One dance. No expectations. Just... finishing something we started a long time ago."

I should have said no. Should have kept my careful distance, remembered all the reasons I couldn't trust him, couldn't let myself fall again when I didn't know if he'd catch me.

Instead, I took his hand.

Dancing on ice isn't like dancing on a floor.

Every movement requires trust. You have to lean into your partner, let them guide you, surrender just enough control that you move as one instead of fighting against each other. There's no room for walls when one wrong step could send you both sprawling.

Jace held me close, one hand at the small of my back, the other clasped in mine. We weren't really dancing--more swaying, shuffling, finding our balance together. The ice was cold beneath my socked feet. His body was warm against mine.

"I missed this," he said quietly. "Not just the dancing. All of it. Being around someone who gets me. Who doesn't need everything explained."

"Sophie seems to get you pretty well."

"Sophie's my sister. It's different." His thumb traced circles on my back, barely perceptible through my sweater. "With you, it's like... I don't have to try. I can just be whatever I am, and you're still there."

My throat tightened. "Even when who you are is someone who disappears without explanation?"

A pause. The music continued, soft and romantic, filling the silence between us.

"Even then," he said. "Although I hope I'm becoming someone better than that."

I pulled back enough to look at him. His eyes were dark, serious, more open than I'd seen them since that night in the locker room. Whatever walls he usually kept up, they were down now. Just Jace, raw and real and terrified.

"After the gala," he said, "we need to talk about what this is."

My heart slammed against my ribs. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." He stopped. Started again. "I mean I'm tired of pretending I don't feel this. Whatever we're doing--the midnight meetings, the almost-kisses, the way we fit together like we never stopped--I want to figure out what it means. For real. No more hiding."

"Jace--"

"You don't have to answer now." His hand tightened on mine. "I know there's Tyler, and Stanford, and a hundred reasons this is complicated. I'm just asking you to think about it. After the gala, when everything's calmed down, can we sit down and actually talk? About the future? About what we want?"

The future. Such a simple word for such a terrifying concept.

What did I want? A week ago, the answer was easy: my soccer career, my carefully planned life, a safe distance from anything that could hurt me. Now, standing on the ice with Jace's heartbeat steady against my palm, I wasn't sure I knew anything anymore.

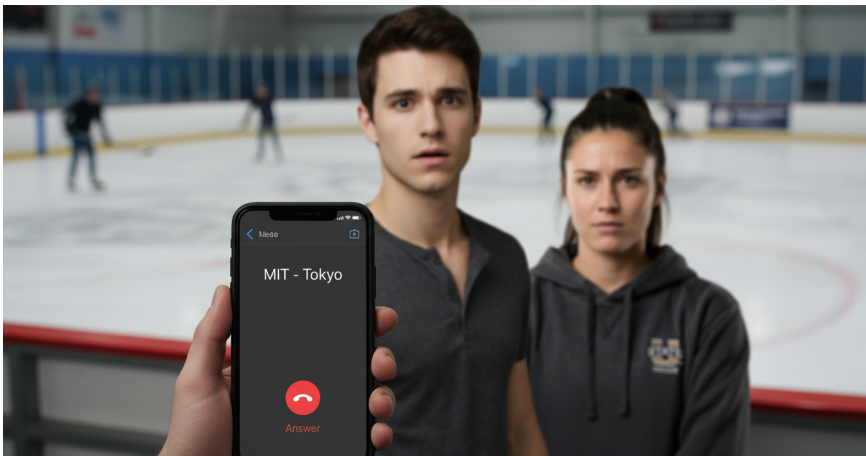
"After the gala," I agreed. "We'll talk. Really talk."

His whole body seemed to relax. "Promise?"

"Promise."

We swayed in silence for another moment, the song winding toward its end. His forehead dropped to rest against mine. His breath was warm on my lips. Everything in me wanted to close the distance, to stop talking and start doing, to let this moment become something we couldn't take back.

His phone buzzed.



The sound cut through the music like a knife. He pulled back, fished the phone from his pocket, and I watched his expression shift--a flicker of something that looked almost like fear before his face went carefully blank.

"Who is it?"

"Nobody important." He silenced it without answering, shoved it back in his pocket. But I'd seen the screen before he'd managed to hide it. Three letters and a city: *MIT - Tokyo*.

The cold suddenly felt sharper. The magic of the moment tilted, just slightly, toward something else.

"You can take it if you need to."

"I don't need to." His jaw was tight. "It can wait until after the gala."

"Jace--"

"After the gala," he repeated, and there was something desperate in it. "Please, Mia. Just give me two more days. Then I'll explain everything."

Everything. The word hung between us, heavy with implications I couldn't quite parse. What was he hiding? What was in Tokyo that made him look like a man facing a firing squad?

But I'd asked for time too, hadn't I? I had my own secrets, my own decisions pressing against my chest. Maybe we both needed these last two days of pretending before reality came crashing in.

"Okay," I said softly. "After the gala."

The relief on his face was almost painful to witness. He pulled me close again, wrapped his arms around me, and for a moment we just stood there, holding each other in the middle of the ice. The song had ended. The rink was silent except for the hum of the refrigeration system and our own quiet breathing.

"Thank you," he murmured into my hair. "For giving me another chance."

I didn't answer. I just pressed my face against his shoulder and let myself have this--this fragile, beautiful moment before everything changed.

We finished the sound check in near-silence. The earlier ease was gone, replaced by something heavier--an awareness that we were both holding back. Both waiting. Both terrified of what the waiting would end.

Sophie returned around five, arms full of last-minute supplies.

"You two look serious," she observed, dropping her bags near the entrance. "Did someone die? Did the zamboni break again?"

"Everything's fine," Jace said, too quickly. "Just tired."

She looked between us with that unnerving perceptiveness she'd inherited from their mother. "Uh-huh. Well, mom wants you home for dinner. She's making her famous lasagna to celebrate the almost-gala."

"Tell her I'll be there in an hour."

Sophie's eyes lingered on me for a moment longer, then she shrugged. "Don't be late. You know how she gets."

After she left, Jace turned to me. "You should come. For dinner. My mom would love it."

"I should probably get home. My mom has her own pre-gala plans."

"Right. Of course." He shoved his hands in his pockets, suddenly awkward in a way he hadn't been all day. "I'll see you tomorrow, then? Final prep in the morning?"

"I'll be here at seven."

"Seven. Good." He started to turn away, then stopped. "Mia?"

"Yeah?"

For a long moment, he just looked at me. Something complicated moving behind his eyes--hope, fear, the same desperate wanting I felt every time we were in the same room.

"These last two weeks," he said quietly. "Whatever happens next... I'm glad I got this time with you."

My chest ached. "Me too."

He nodded, just once, and walked out into the early evening darkness. I watched through the window until his car pulled away, brake lights disappearing around the corner.

Then I was alone.

I sat in my car for ten minutes before starting the engine.

My phone sat in the cupholder, the notification light blinking steadily. I'd been ignoring it all afternoon, too caught up in speakers and playlists and Jace's hands on my waist. Now, in the silence of the parking lot, I couldn't avoid it anymore.

Three missed calls from an unknown California number.

Two voicemails.

One email with a subject line that made my stomach drop:
Stanford Soccer - Decision Required.



I opened the email with numb fingers.

Dear Ms. Davis,

We are reaching the deadline for roster confirmations for the spring semester. As discussed, we are prepared to offer you a full scholarship and starting position on the Stanford Women's Soccer team, contingent on your transfer being processed by January 15th.

However, I must stress that this offer has a time limit. We have other candidates on our list, and I need your final answer by December 26th. Please call me at your earliest convenience to discuss.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Coach Williams

December 26th. Two days after the gala. Two days after Jace and I were supposed to have our big conversation about the future.

I thought about Jace's phone call from Tokyo. The fear on his face before he'd hidden it. The desperation in his voice when he'd asked for two more days.

We were both hiding things. Both pretending we had time when time was exactly what we didn't have.

What happened after the gala, when all our secrets came spilling out?

I listened to the voicemails without really hearing them. Coach Williams, professional and friendly, reiterating what the email had said. Call her. Make a decision. The clock was ticking.

The clock was always ticking.

Dinner with my family was torture.

Mom had made her famous pot roast in honor of the gala being almost ready. Dad opened a bottle of the good wine. Everyone was celebratory and proud, and I sat there pushing food around my plate, unable to shake the feeling that I was living in the eye of a hurricane.

"You've been quiet tonight," Mom observed. "Everything okay?"

"Just tired. Long day."

"Well, you can rest after tomorrow. Once the gala's done, you'll have the whole rest of break to relax."

Relax. Like I could relax when my entire future was hanging by a thread. When Jace and I were both keeping secrets that could shatter whatever fragile thing we'd built.

"The rink looks amazing, by the way." Dad refilled his wine glass. "I drove by earlier. You and the Mitchell boy did good work."

"He has a name," I said, more sharply than I'd intended.

Dad's eyebrows rose. Mom's face did that careful neutral thing it did when she sensed trouble.

"Sorry," I muttered. "I'm just... it's been a lot."

"We know, sweetheart." Mom reached over to squeeze my hand. "We're proud of you. Whatever's going on, we're proud."

Whatever's going on. If only she knew.

I excused myself early, claiming a headache, and retreated to my room. Lay on my bed staring at the ceiling. Tried to imagine what life would look like in a month.

Stanford. Sunshine. A fresh start away from everything complicated.

Or here. Cold winters. Jace. The terrifying possibility of something real.

My phone buzzed again. A text this time.

Jace: thank you for today. for the dance. for not pushing when I couldn't explain.

I stared at the words for a long time.

Me: thank you for asking me.

Jace: two more days.

Me: two more days.

A pause. Then:

Jace: whatever happens, Mia... im done running. i know i have to prove that. but i need you to know it.

I wanted to believe him. Every part of me that still remembered the boy who'd taught me to skate, who'd looked at me like I was made of starlight, who'd held me on the ice today like I was something precious--that part believed him completely.

But there was another part. The part that remembered sophomore year. The ghost. The silence. The way he'd vanished when I needed him most.

He was hiding something. Something connected to Tokyo, to the phone calls he wouldn't answer, to the fear in his eyes when he'd asked for two more days.

And I was hiding something too. Stanford, pressing against my chest like a weight I couldn't set down.

We were both terrified. Both keeping secrets. Both pretending we had more time than we did.

Me: two more days. then we tell each other everything.

Jace: everything. I promise.

I set the phone on my nightstand and closed my eyes.

Two more days of this beautiful, fragile peace.

Two more days of dancing on the edge of something that could be wonderful or catastrophic or both.

Two more days.

And then the truth would come out, and we'd find out if what we'd rebuilt was strong enough to survive it.

I fell asleep with his words echoing in my head: *I'm done running.*

I hoped he meant it.

I hoped we both did.

Outside my window, snow started to fall. Soft and silent, blanketing the world in white, making everything look clean and new and full of possibility.

Two days until the gala.

Two days until we couldn't hide anymore.

Two days of calm before whatever storm was coming.

I watched the snow fall until my eyes drifted closed, and my last thought before sleep took me was of Jace's hands on my waist, his breath warm against my temple, and the fragile promise we'd made on the ice:

After the gala, we talk. Really talk.

After the gala, everything would change.

I just didn't know if we were ready.

Act 3: Resolution

Chapter 16: Collision

The day before the gala started with snow.

I woke to the soft hush of it falling past my window, the world outside muffled and white and deceptively peaceful. For a few seconds, I just lay there, watching the flakes drift down, trying to hold onto the fragile calm of yesterday--the dance on the ice, Jace's arms around me, the promise we'd made.

After the gala, we talk. Really talk.

Twenty-four hours. I just had to get through twenty-four more hours, and then everything would finally be out in the open. Whatever he was hiding about Tokyo, whatever I was hiding about Stanford--we'd face it together.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Emma: *Coffee? I need to talk to you. It's important.*

I frowned at the screen. Emma usually texted in paragraphs, full of exclamation points and emojis. This was terse. Almost ominous.

Me: *Everything okay?*

Emma: *Just come to the bakery. 10am. Please.*

The "please" was what got me. Emma never said please when she wanted something--she demanded, she wheedled, she guilt-tripped. Asking politely meant something was seriously wrong.

Me: *I'll be there.*

Rodriguez Family Bakery smelled like cinnamon and fresh bread, the same way it had since we were kids stealing cookies from behind the counter. Emma was waiting in the back booth--our booth, the one where we'd spent countless hours doing homework and gossiping and dissecting every detail of our teenage lives.

She looked up when I walked in, and my stomach dropped.

Her eyes were red-rimmed. She'd been crying.

"Em?" I slid into the seat across from her. "What's going on? You're scaring me."

She wrapped her hands around a mug of coffee that had clearly gone cold. For a long moment, she didn't say anything, just stared at the table like she was trying to find the right words.

"I should have told you everything years ago," she said finally. "Not just the pieces I shared that night on your porch. The whole truth. But Jace made me promise, and I thought--I don't know what I thought. That I was protecting you, maybe. That it was his story to tell."

A chill crept up my spine. "Emma. What are you talking about?"

She looked up at me, and there were tears in her eyes again.

"I've been thinking about what I told you. About Jace's mom. About what he found in that bathroom. There's so much more I held back."

I felt my jaw tighten. "What do you mean, more? You told me about the suicide attempt. About him finding her. What else is there?"

Emma wiped her eyes. "Sophie told me something yesterday. I told you he found his mom, that he called 911. But I didn't tell you he rode in the ambulance with her. That he spent three days in the hospital, alone, because his dad was in Arizona with his mistress and Sophie was staying with neighbors who didn't know the truth. Three days, Mia. He was seventeen years old, sitting in a hospital room, not knowing if his mother was going to live, and he had nobody."

The world tilted. I gripped the edge of the table, trying to anchor myself to something solid.

"Three days," I whispered. "He was alone for three days?"

"Marcus knew. He was dating me back then, remember? And he was Jace's best friend." She swallowed hard. "But Jace made everyone promise not to tell you. He was so scared you'd give up everything to stay and help him."

I pressed my hand against my chest, trying to breathe through the tightness.

"He begged me not to tell you the full truth," Emma continued, tears streaming down her face. "He said you had your whole future ahead of you--the scholarship, Stanford, everything. He didn't want to drag you into his family's mess. And I thought... I thought if you knew everything, you'd try to stay. You'd give up everything to help him."

"That was my choice to make!" The words exploded out of me, louder than I'd intended. A few customers glanced our way. I lowered my voice, but the fury was still there, hot and bright. "You let me think I wasn't good enough. For four years, Emma. Four years of wondering what I did wrong, why he just--vanished. And you knew the whole time?"

"I'm sorry." She was sobbing now. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to tell you a hundred times, but the longer I waited, the harder it got. And then you seemed like you were moving on, and I thought maybe it was better if you never--"

"Never what? Never knew the truth?" I laughed, and it came out harsh and broken. "Do you have any idea what that did to me? I thought I was unlovable. I thought there was something fundamentally wrong with me, that I wasn't smart enough or interesting enough or--"

"Mia--"

"Sophie was fourteen." The realization hit me like a wave. "She was just a kid, and she was watching her whole family fall apart, and Jace--he was trying to hold everyone together by himself. And I was sitting at home crying over prom, having no idea--"

I pressed my hands against my eyes, trying to breathe through the tightness in my chest. So many things suddenly made sense. The way Jace had looked at me sometimes, like he was carrying the weight of the world. The guilt in Sophie's eyes whenever she mentioned that spring. The careful way his mother talked about "the hard times."

Everyone had known. Everyone but me.

Emma wiped her eyes. "That's not all Sophie told me. She said Jace almost transferred to Stanford sophomore year. Berkeley too. He had everything ready--applications, essays, recommendations. But then his mom had another setback, and he stayed."

"He was going to come to California?"

"He was going to follow you. But every time he tried, something happened with his family, and he couldn't leave them." She reached across the table, grabbed my hand. "He's been trying to get back to you for four years, Mia. But he kept choosing his family over himself."

I stared at our joined hands. My mind was spinning, trying to reconcile everything I'd believed with everything I was learning. The Jace I'd known senior year--the one who'd asked me to prom with a math problem, who'd looked at me like I was made of starlight--he hadn't left because he didn't care.

He'd left because he cared too much. Because he was seventeen and drowning and trying to protect everyone, even if it meant destroying himself in the process.

"I have to talk to him," I said.

"I know." Emma squeezed my hand. "But Mia--there's something else you should know. About Tokyo."

My heart stopped. "What about Tokyo?"

"It's not just an internship. It's the top AI research position in the world. They only take one undergraduate a year, and they picked him." Her voice was soft, almost reverent. "It's the opportunity of a lifetime. And I think... I think he's going to turn it down. For you. Again."

The words hit me like ice water.

Again.

He was going to sacrifice his future. Again. Make the choice alone. Again. Decide what was best for me without ever asking what I wanted.

The anger that had been building all morning suddenly crystallized into something cold and sharp.

"He told you about Tokyo?"

"His mom mentioned it to my mom. Everyone's been talking about it--the whole town is so proud of him." Emma hesitated. "I thought you knew."

"I didn't." My voice was flat. "I found out two days ago when I overheard a phone call. And when I asked him about it, he said he'd explain after the gala."

Emma's face fell. "Mia--"

"He's doing it again." I pulled my hand back, pressed it against my chest. "He's making decisions without me. Keeping secrets. Planning to give up everything and not even--"

My voice cracked. I couldn't finish.

Four years. Four years of wondering why I wasn't enough, and the whole time he'd been trying to protect me. But protection wasn't love--not the way he did it. Protection was just another word for control, for making someone else's choices for them because you didn't trust them to handle the truth.

"What are you going to do?" Emma asked.

I didn't have an answer.

The rest of the day passed in a haze.

I went home. Showered. Stood in front of my closet for twenty minutes trying to decide what to wear to the Mitchell family dinner--a holiday tradition that my mom had somehow gotten us invited to this year. "Both families together," she'd said excitedly. "Won't that be lovely?"

Lovely. Right.

I picked a green sweater dress that I'd always liked and didn't let myself think about why. Did my makeup on autopilot. Smiled at my reflection and watched it look completely unconvincing.

Twenty-four hours. I just had to get through this dinner, get through the gala tomorrow, and then--

And then what?

I didn't know anymore.

The dinner was at Emma's bakery--neutral territory, her mom had insisted, since neither the Davis nor the Mitchell kitchen was big enough for both families. The Rodriguez family had decorated the back room with fairy lights and red tablecloths, and it looked warm and inviting and absolutely nothing like the disaster that was brewing under my skin.

I walked in with my parents, and the first thing I saw was Jace.

He was wearing a navy sweater that brought out his eyes, and he was laughing at something Sophie had said, and for a moment--just a moment--I let myself watch him. Let myself remember the boy who'd taught me to skate, who'd held me on the ice yesterday, who'd asked for two more days.

Then he looked up and saw me, and his whole face changed.

Relief. Hope. Something that looked dangerously like love.

I looked away.

The evening was agony. Small talk with the Mitchells. Compliments on the rink from everyone who'd seen it. Sophie chattering about the gala decorations while Emma's mom brought out course after course of holiday food.



Jace kept trying to catch my eye. I kept not letting him.

At some point, the conversation turned to futures. College plans. Career ambitions. Normal things families talked about at holiday dinners, except nothing about this dinner felt normal.

"Jace has been so focused," Mrs. Mitchell said, beaming at her son. She looked healthier than she had at the hospital--more color in her cheeks, more light in her eyes. "Always working so hard at MIT. We're so proud of him."

"He's brilliant," my mom agreed. "I always told Mia, that boy is going places."

"Speaking of which--" Mrs. Mitchell's smile grew even wider. "We just got the most wonderful news."

Something cold slid down my spine.

"Oh?" My dad leaned forward, genuinely interested. "What's that?"

"Jace got accepted to the most prestigious AI research internship in the world." Mrs. Mitchell was practically glowing. "In Tokyo! He'll be working with the top minds in artificial intelligence. They only take one undergraduate a year, and they chose our Jace."

The room erupted in congratulations. My parents were impressed. Emma's mom was asking questions about Japan. Sophie was grinning, clearly delighted that the secret was finally out.

I sat frozen.

Tokyo.

Not "I'll explain after the gala." Not "we need to talk." Not any of the careful, cautious hints he'd been dropping for weeks.

His mother knew. The whole town knew. Everyone knew except me.

"Tokyo?" The word came out strangled. Too quiet for anyone else to hear, but Jace heard it. His head snapped toward me, and I watched the color drain from his face.

"Mia--"

"When does it start?" My mom was asking, completely oblivious to the way my world was crumbling. "That must be so exciting!"

"January fifteenth," Mrs. Mitchell said happily. "Just a few weeks away. We're going to miss him terribly, of course, but it's such an incredible opportunity--"

January fifteenth. Three weeks. He'd known for--I tried to calculate--at least a month, probably longer. Long enough to tell everyone who mattered.

Everyone but me.

"How long have you known?" I asked, and this time my voice was loud enough to cut through the chatter. The table went quiet. Everyone turned to look at me.

Jace's face was a study in panic. "Mia, I was going to--"

"How long?"

A beat of terrible silence.

"Six weeks," he said quietly. "I got the offer six weeks ago."

Six weeks. We'd been working together for two. Dancing around each other, kissing in the dark, making promises about the future--and the whole time, he'd had a plane ticket to the other side of the world.

"You've known for six weeks," I repeated. "And you never thought to mention it?"

"I was trying to figure out what to do--"

"Figure out what to do?" I was on my feet before I realized I'd moved. My chair scraped against the floor. Everyone was staring. "You knew for six weeks, and instead of telling me, you let me think--you let me believe--"

I couldn't finish. The words jammed in my throat, too big and too sharp to get out.

"Mia, please." Jace was standing now too, his face desperate. "Can we talk about this somewhere else?"

"Talk about what? The fact that you're leaving in three weeks and I had to find out from your mother at a dinner party?"

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this--"

"It never is with you, is it?" The bitterness in my voice surprised even me. "There's always an excuse. Always a reason you couldn't tell me the truth. Always something more important than letting me know what's actually going on."

I was aware of our families watching, of Emma frozen in the doorway with a tray of desserts, of Sophie's stricken face. I didn't care.

"I can't do this." I grabbed my coat from the back of my chair. "I need air."

"Mia, wait--"



But I was already moving, pushing past the tables, heading for the door.

The cold hit me the moment I stepped outside, December snow falling in thick, heavy flakes. Behind me, I heard the bakery door start to open again.

I didn't look back.

Chapter 17: The Truth

The cold hit me like a wall the moment I stepped outside.



December snow was falling in thick, heavy flakes, coating the sidewalk, the cars, the string lights the town had hung along Main Street. Everything looked like a Christmas card--picture perfect, postcard beautiful--and I had never felt less festive in my life.

I heard the bakery door open and close behind me. Heard footsteps crunching through the fresh snow.

"Mia, please." Jace's voice cracked on my name. "Please don't walk away."

I spun around. He was standing there in his navy sweater, snow already catching in his dark hair, looking at me like I was the one who'd hurt him. Like I was the one who'd been keeping secrets for six weeks while we kissed in the dark and made promises about the future.

"When were you going to tell me about Tokyo?"

The words came out sharper than I'd intended. My voice echoed off the brick buildings, the closed storefronts, the empty street. Anyone watching would have seen a girl in a green dress and a boy in a sweater, standing five feet apart in the falling snow, looking like the final scene of a movie where nothing ends well.

Jace flinched. "I was going to--"

"When?" I stepped closer, my heels sinking into the slush. "After the gala? After Christmas? After you'd already gotten on the plane?"

"I was trying to figure out what to do."

"Figure out what to do?" The laugh that escaped me was bitter, broken. "You've had six weeks. Six weeks of working next to me, kissing me, telling me you wanted a future with me. And the whole time you had a plane ticket to Tokyo that you never once mentioned."

"I didn't know how to tell you."

"So you just... didn't?" I was aware that I was crying now, hot tears freezing on my cheeks. I didn't care. "You let me fall for you again, let me think we were finally being honest, and this whole time you were planning to leave?"

"I was planning to stay." His voice broke. "That's what I've been trying to figure out. How to turn it down. How to tell them I wasn't going."

"Without asking me what I wanted?"

He stopped. Just stood there, snow falling around him, his breath coming out in visible clouds.

"You were going to give up the opportunity of a lifetime," I continued, my voice shaking, "and you were never going to tell me? You were just going to sacrifice everything and hope I never found out?"

"That's not--"

"It's exactly what happened before!" The words tore out of me. "Senior year. You decided what was best for me. Made choices without me. Left me wondering what I did wrong for four years. And now you're doing it again--the same thing, the same pattern, just in the opposite direction."

Jace's face crumpled. "Mia--"

"What really happened?" I stepped closer, close enough to see the tears forming in his eyes. "Senior year. What really happened? I know about your mom--I found the articles weeks ago, and Emma filled in the rest tonight. I know about the divorce, about your dad, about--" my voice caught-- "about what you found in that bathroom. But I need to hear it from you. All of it. Every piece you've been hiding. Why you never let me help you."

The silence stretched between us. Snow kept falling. Somewhere in the distance, church bells were ringing--some holiday service letting out, families heading home to warm houses and normal Christmases.

Then Jace took a deep breath.

"My dad had an affair."

The words fell between us like stones dropped into still water.

"With his business partner. A woman named Laura who used to come to our house for dinner parties. Who bought Sophie birthday presents." His jaw tightened. "He'd been seeing her for three years. I found out when I was seventeen."

I didn't say anything. Just waited.

"The divorce was..." He exhaled, a shaky cloud of breath in the cold air. "Explosive doesn't cover it. My dad didn't just leave. He cleaned out the accounts. Every dollar we had--college funds, savings, everything. He took it all and moved to Arizona with Laura, and we never saw a cent of it again."

My stomach dropped. "Jace--"

"I'm not done." His voice was flat now, mechanical. Like he'd rehearsed this speech a thousand times in his head but had never actually said the words out loud. "My mom fell apart. Completely. She stopped eating. Stopped getting out of bed. Sophie was fourteen and terrified, and I was trying to hold everyone together, and I was failing. I was failing at everything."

He looked up at the sky, blinking against the snow.

"Two weeks before prom, I came home from school and found my mom in the bathroom." His voice cracked. "She'd taken pills. A lot of pills. I called 911. I rode with her in the ambulance. I sat in the hospital for three days, not knowing if she was going to live."

Hearing him say it--actually say it, not just reading it in an article or hearing it secondhand from Emma--was different. The raw pain in his voice, the way his hands shook, the devastation in his eyes. This wasn't just information anymore. This was his wound, finally exposed.

"You went through all of that alone." My voice broke. "You were seventeen, and you carried all of that by yourself, and you never--you never let me help you."

"I couldn't." His eyes met mine, and they were devastated. "I was seventeen, Mia. I was drowning. And you..." He swallowed hard. "You had everything ahead of you. The scholarship. Stanford. Your whole future. And I looked at myself--at the mess

my family had become, at the hospital bills we couldn't pay, at my mother who needed round-the-clock watching--and I thought, she deserves better than this."

"That wasn't your choice to make."

"I know." His voice broke. "I know that now. But back then, I was a stupid seventeen-year-old kid who thought he was protecting you. I thought if I pushed you away, if I made you hate me, you'd move on. You'd go to Stanford and have this amazing life and never have to deal with my broken family."

"So you ghosted me."

"I couldn't look at you without wanting to tell you everything. And I was so terrified that if I told you, you'd stay. You'd give up your scholarship and your future to help me, and I couldn't--" His voice cracked. "I couldn't be the reason you didn't become everything you were supposed to be."

I stared at him. Four years of anger, of hurt, of wondering what I'd done wrong--and it had never been about me at all.

"The prom date," I whispered. "The girl you took instead of me."

"Family friend. Her parents were friends with my mom from church. They offered to help us, financially, if we kept up appearances. If we pretended everything was fine." He laughed, bitter and broken. "My mom begged me to go. Said it would look

normal. Said people would stop asking questions. So I put on a tux and smiled for pictures with a girl I barely knew, and the whole time I was thinking about you."

"I saw the photos." The words came out thick. "On Facebook. You looked happy."

"I was dying inside." His voice was raw. "Every day since then, Mia. Every single day, I've regretted it. I've tried to find ways to make it right. Sophomore year, I applied to Stanford. And Berkeley. I was going to transfer--to follow you, to finally explain--"

"What stopped you?"

"My mom had another setback. Sophie was struggling in school. The medical bills kept piling up." He spread his hands. "Every time I tried to leave, something happened. And I kept choosing my family over myself. Over you. Over everything I wanted."

The tears were streaming down my face now, freezing in lines on my cheeks. All this time. All these years of thinking I wasn't good enough, smart enough, interesting enough--and the truth was so much worse and so much better than anything I'd imagined.

"You should have told me." My voice shook. "You should have let me choose."

"I know."



"I would have understood. I would have--"

"I know." He stepped closer, close enough that I could see the tears on his own face. "I was wrong. I was so, so wrong. And I've spent every day since then trying to find a way to fix it. To get back to you."

"But you didn't tell me about Tokyo."

He stopped. The snow kept falling between us.

"I was going to turn it down."

"Without asking me."

"I thought--" He stopped, ran a hand through his hair. "I thought if I stayed, if I gave up Tokyo and stayed here, we could finally have our chance. We could finally be together without all the distance and the complications and the--"

"You're doing it again." The realization hit me like a physical blow. "You're making the choice for me. Again."

"No, I'm--"

"You were going to sacrifice the opportunity of a lifetime, and you weren't even going to tell me about it. You were just going to stay, and I was supposed to--what? Be grateful? Feel special that you gave up everything without ever asking what I wanted?"

Jace's face went pale. "That's not--"

"It's exactly what you did before!" My voice cracked. "Four years ago, you decided I couldn't handle the truth. You decided what was best for me. And now you're doing the same thing--you just flipped the decision. Instead of pushing me away to protect me, you're staying to protect me. But it's the same pattern, Jace. The same broken, stupid pattern of making choices without me."

"I was trying to give us a chance--"

"By lying to me about Tokyo?"

He flinched like I'd hit him.

"It's just an internship," he said weakly.

"That starts in three weeks!" I threw my hands up. "Three weeks, Jace. That's not just an internship--that's the top AI research position in the world. They only take one undergraduate a year, and they picked you. And you were going to throw it away without even having a conversation about it?"

"I didn't want to lose you again."

"So you made the choice alone. Just like before." I shook my head, tears still streaming down my face. "Do you even hear yourself?"

He was silent.



"And when were you going to mention Stanford?" His voice came out strangled.

I froze.

"What?"

"I saw the letter on your desk. Two weeks ago, when I came to pick you up." His eyes met mine, and there was something broken in them. "Full scholarship. Spot on the team. Transfer by spring semester. And you never mentioned it."

My stomach dropped. "That's different."

"How?" He stepped closer, and now there was anger mixing with the pain. "How is that any different? You've been hiding it too. Making your own decisions about our future without ever telling me what you were planning."

"I haven't decided anything--"

"But you weren't going to tell me until you had. Were you?" His voice cracked. "You were going to wait until you'd made up your mind, and then inform me. Just like I was doing with Tokyo."

The silence stretched between us. Snow fell. The church bells had stopped ringing.

"We're the same," I whispered. "We're exactly the same."

"We're both terrified." His voice was thick. "Both so scared of hurting each other that we've stopped actually talking. Stopped trusting. Stopped letting the other person in."

"And every time we try, something like this happens." The tears were coming faster now. "You keep secrets. I keep secrets. We think we're protecting each other, but we're just... pushing. Over and over."

"So what do we do?"

I looked at him--at this boy who'd broken my heart four years ago, who'd spent every day since trying to find his way back, who was standing in the snow outside a bakery on the night before Christmas Eve, asking me to give him another chance.

And I didn't have an answer.

"I don't know." The words felt like surrender. "I don't know how to break this pattern. Every time we get close, one of us runs. One of us makes a choice without the other. And then we're right back here--hurting, confused, alone."

"We could choose to stop."

"Could we?" I laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I'm looking at Stanford, Jace. My dream school. The soccer program I've wanted since I was fifteen. And you're looking at Tokyo--the research opportunity of a lifetime, the thing that could launch your entire career. We're not just choosing between each other. We're choosing between our futures."

"They don't have to be mutually exclusive--"

"Don't they?" I stepped back. The distance between us felt like miles. "Boston to Stanford. Tokyo for January. We could try long distance, sure. But for how long? How many months of video calls and text messages before we're right back here? Before one of us decides to give something up without telling the other?"

He didn't answer. Because he knew I was right.

"Maybe this is just who we are." The words came out flat, defeated. "Maybe we're too good at keeping secrets. Too used to making choices alone. Too scared to actually let each other in."

"I don't believe that."

"You don't have to." I wiped my face, but the tears kept coming. "But look at us, Jace. Really look. Four years ago, you made a choice without me and it destroyed us. And now we're standing here, and we've both been hiding things, and nothing has actually changed. We're still the same two people who can't figure out how to trust each other with the truth."

"That's not fair--"

"None of this is fair!" My voice broke. "You think I wanted to find out about your mom from Emma? You think I wanted to learn about Tokyo from your mother at a dinner party? I've been falling in love with you all over again, and the whole time, you've been keeping secrets. The whole time, I've been keeping secrets. And I don't know how to stop."



The snow was falling harder now. His sweater was soaked. My dress was clinging to my legs, cold and damp. We probably looked ridiculous--two people freezing to death on a sidewalk, too stubborn to go inside.

"I love you." His voice was raw. "I've loved you since I was seventeen. I've loved you through every year, every mistake, every stupid choice I made trying to protect you. And I'll love you even if you walk away right now. Even if we never figure this out."

"I love you too." The words hurt coming out. "That was never the question."

"Then what is?"

I looked at him. At the boy I'd loved half my life. At the future we'd been trying to build out of broken pieces and good intentions.

"Whether love is enough." My voice was barely a whisper. "Whether we can actually change. Or whether we're just going to keep doing this--hurting each other, hiding things, making choices alone--until there's nothing left to save."

He stood there, snow in his hair, tears on his face. Waiting for an answer I didn't have.

"Maybe we're just destined to leave each other."

The words hung in the air between us. Final. Devastating.

Jace's face crumpled. He opened his mouth to say something--anything--but no words came out.

I turned away. Started walking toward my car, my heels slipping in the slush, the cold biting through my dress. Behind me, I heard him call my name once, twice.

I didn't turn around.

The snow kept falling as I drove away, and somewhere in the rearview mirror, I saw him standing alone on the sidewalk, watching me go.

Just like four years ago.

Just like always.

The tears came harder then, blurring the road, making it impossible to see where I was going. But maybe that was fitting. Maybe that was the whole problem.

I'd never been able to see clearly when it came to Jace Mitchell.

And now I wasn't sure I ever would.

Chapter 18: The Betrayal

The morning of December 23rd arrived with a silence that felt like suffocation.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror at 6 AM, staring at the girl who had sobbed herself to sleep the night before. Red-rimmed eyes. Pale skin. Hair that I had not bothered to brush since walking out of that bakery in the snow.

Maybe we're just destined to leave each other.

My own words echoed back at me, sharp as glass. I had meant them last night. Standing in that snow, watching Jace's face crumble, I had believed with every broken piece of my heart that we were caught in an endless loop. Hurting each other. Running. Repeating.

But now, in the cold light of morning, I was not sure what I believed anymore.

I had one day left. One day to finish the rink. One day to host the gala. One day before Christmas Eve, before everything we had built together became someone else's celebration.

And somehow, I had to spend that day working beside the boy who had shattered me four years ago and who I had shattered right back last night.

My phone buzzed on the counter.

Mom: Breakfast is ready. Tyler texted - he's picking you up at 8 for the rink setup.

Tyler. Of course Tyler was picking me up. Because the universe had a sick sense of humor, and because his mom and my mom had been texting all week about how "nice" it was that we were spending time together.

I typed back a quick acknowledgment, then stared at my reflection.

One more day. I could survive one more day.

Tyler's truck pulled into the driveway at exactly eight o'clock.

He was wearing a Michigan Hockey sweatshirt and a cautious smile, and when I climbed into the passenger seat, he handed me a coffee without a word.

"Thanks," I said, wrapping my frozen fingers around the cup.

"You look..." He trailed off, clearly reconsidering whatever adjective he had been about to use. "Tired."

"Didn't sleep well."

"I heard." He pulled out of the driveway, eyes fixed on the road. "Emma called Sophie. Sophie called me. There's a whole network apparently."

I closed my eyes, letting the warmth of the coffee seep into my hands. "What did they tell you?"

"That something happened at the bakery last night. That you and Mitchell had it out." A pause. "That things aren't good."

The understatement of the century.

"Things aren't good," I confirmed quietly.

Tyler drove for a moment in silence. The snow-covered streets slid past my window, Christmas lights twinkling on every house, every tree, every lamppost. The whole town looked like a holiday postcard.

I had never felt less festive in my life.

"For what it's worth," Tyler said carefully, "I'm here. Whatever you need today."

I turned to look at him. Really look. He was handsome in that easy, uncomplicated way. Strong jaw, kind eyes, the confidence of someone who had never had to question whether he was enough.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" The question came out before I could stop it. "You know there's... you know Jace and I have history."

"History." Tyler's mouth quirked. "That's one word for it."

"Tyler--"

"Look." He pulled into the Frozen Peak parking lot, put the truck in park, and turned to face me. "I'm not blind. I've seen the way you two look at each other. The way you stop talking whenever I walk into a room." He shrugged, but something flickered in his eyes. "I kept hoping maybe I was wrong. Maybe there was room for something else."

My stomach twisted with guilt. "I should have been honest with you."

"Yeah. You should have." He held my gaze for a moment, then sighed. "But I also kept showing up even when the signs were pretty clear. So we're both idiots, I guess."

"I'm sorry."

"I know." He reached over and squeezed my hand once, briefly. "But today's not about us. Today's about finishing this rink and making sure tomorrow goes off without a hitch. So let's focus on that, okay?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

We climbed out of the truck and walked toward the rink together. The building looked beautiful in the morning light, all the work we had done over the past two weeks finally visible. Fresh paint. New boards. Fairy lights strung along every surface.

And standing by the entrance, checking something on a clipboard, was Jace.

He looked up when we approached. Our eyes met for one burning second.

Then his gaze dropped to where Tyler's hand rested on my lower back, and his whole face went blank.

"Morning," he said flatly. "There's a list of final tasks inside. We need everything done by four."

No hello. No acknowledgment of last night. No indication that we had stood in the snow outside a bakery and ripped each other's hearts out just twelve hours ago.

Just business.

"Got it," I said, matching his tone. "Where do you need us?"

"Tyler, you're on the sound system with Marcus. Mia--" He hesitated, and I saw something crack in his careful mask. "You're with Sophie on decorations."

Not together, then. He was making sure we would not have to work side by side.

I should have been grateful. Instead, I felt something hollow open up in my chest.

"Fine," I said. "Let's get started."

The morning passed in a blur of icy silence and forced professionalism.

I hung garlands with Sophie, who kept shooting worried glances between me and her brother. I helped Emma arrange the refreshment tables, both of us carefully not talking about anything that mattered. I avoided every corner of the rink where Jace was working, mapping his movements in my peripheral vision like a soldier tracking an enemy.

We did not speak. Not directly. Every time we needed to communicate, we went through Sophie or Emma or one of the other volunteers. The whole room felt the tension, the way the air feels before a thunderstorm.

But we got the work done.

By noon, the rink was transformed. Red and gold ribbons draped the boards. The new scoreboard gleamed. The ice surface was pristine, waiting for tomorrow's grand reopening.

"It looks incredible," Sophie said, coming to stand beside me. "You two really did it."

I stared at the rink we had rebuilt together. All those late nights. All those memories unearthed. All that careful, painful work of restoration.

And for what? So we could stand in the same room and pretend we were strangers?

"Yeah," I said quietly. "We did."

Across the rink, Jace was adjusting something on the sound board. Tyler appeared at his side, asking a question about the equipment. Jace answered without looking up, his movements stiff, mechanical.

Then Tyler clapped him on the shoulder--a friendly, casual gesture--and Jace flinched like he had been struck.

"Hey." Sophie touched my arm. "You okay?"

"No." The word came out flat, honest. "I'm really not."

"Do you want to talk about--"

"I can't." I shook my head. "Not yet. Not here."

Sophie studied my face for a long moment. Then she nodded.

"Tonight," she said. "After we finish here. I'm coming to your house."

"Sophie--"

"No arguments." Her voice was unexpectedly firm. "There are things you need to know. Things my idiot brother should have told you himself."

Before I could respond, she was walking away, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the rink we had rebuilt from ruins.

The afternoon was worse.

Tyler stayed close, fetching me water, bringing me food from the concession stand, cracking jokes that I could not quite bring myself to laugh at. He was trying to help. I knew he was trying to help.

But every time he touched my arm or leaned in to whisper something, I saw Jace watching. Saw his jaw tighten. Saw his hands clench at his sides.

At three o'clock, I was testing the fairy lights near the sound booth when Jace appeared.

"We need to go over the gala program," he said. His voice was flat, professional. "Make sure we're aligned on the schedule."

"Fine."

We stood three feet apart, reviewing the timeline like colleagues who had never met. Opening remarks at seven. Ribbon cutting at seven-thirty. First skaters on the ice at eight. Live band until midnight.

It was torture. Being this close to him, smelling his cologne, watching his hands move as he pointed at the schedule--the same hands that had traced patterns on my skin just days ago.

"Any questions?" he asked when we finished.

Why didn't you tell me about Tokyo? Why do you keep making choices for me? Why can't we break this cycle?

"No," I said. "I think we're good."

He nodded once. Turned to go.

"Jace."

He stopped. Did not turn around.

"What happens after tomorrow?" The question escaped before I could stop it.

Silence stretched between us. I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his hands had curled into fists at his sides.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I guess we figure that out."

Then he walked away, and I was left standing alone with the fairy lights blinking around me like mockeries of celebration.

By four o'clock, everything was done.

The rink looked perfect. The schedule was finalized. The volunteers had been briefed. Tomorrow's grand reopening would be a success, assuming nothing went catastrophically wrong in the next twenty-four hours.

I drove home in silence, my head pounding, my heart in pieces.

Mom had left a note on the kitchen counter: *Dinner in the fridge. Dad and I are at the Hendersons' party. Love you.*

I ate alone, not tasting any of it. Then I went upstairs, changed into sweatpants and an old t-shirt, and crawled into bed.

I was not going to cry again. I had cried enough last night.

But the tears came anyway, hot and silent, soaking into my pillow.

The knock on my bedroom door came at eight o'clock.

"Mia?" Mom's voice, confused. "Sophie Mitchell is here to see you. And Emma."

I sat up, wiping my face. "What?"

"They're in the living room. They say it's important."

I stumbled downstairs in my sweatpants, not caring what I looked like. Sophie and Emma were sitting on the couch, both of them looking like they had been crying too.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Sophie stood up. In her hands was a crumpled piece of paper.

"I found something," she said. "In Jace's room. I wasn't snooping, I was looking for the aux cord, and it was just sitting on his desk."

She held out the paper.

I took it with trembling hands.

It was a letter. Addressed to Dr. Watanabe at the Tokyo AI Research Institute.

Dear Dr. Watanabe,

Thank you for the incredible opportunity you have offered me. After careful consideration, I must respectfully decline the internship position for January.

While I understand this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, there are personal circumstances that require me to remain in the United States. I hope you will consider me for future positions when my situation allows.

*With sincere gratitude,
Jace Mitchell*

The words blurred as I read them. Once. Twice. Three times.

He was going to turn it down. Tokyo. The internship of a lifetime. The position that only one undergraduate in the world was offered each year.

He was going to say no.

For me.

"He hasn't sent it yet," Sophie said quietly. "But it was dated today. He was going to send it tomorrow, after the gala."

I stared at the letter. At the careful handwriting. At the words *personal circumstances and remain in the United States*.

"He's doing it again," I whispered.

Emma moved closer. "What?"

"He's doing it again." My voice cracked. "Senior year, he pushed me away to protect me. He made the choice alone. And now he's doing the opposite--he's giving up everything to stay--but it's the same pattern. The same stupid, noble, self-destructive pattern of making choices for both of us without ever asking what I want."

Sophie's face crumpled. "I know. That's why I brought it to you. Because he's about to make the same mistake all over again. He's going to sacrifice Tokyo and never tell you, and eventually you'll find out, and then--"

"Then we'll be right back here." I sank onto the couch, the letter clutched in my hands. "Hurting each other. Keeping secrets. Making choices alone."

Emma sat down beside me. "Mia, I know you're angry. I know last night was horrible. But--"

"He's going to turn down Tokyo." I stared at the letter. "For me. And he was never going to tell me."

"Because he's terrified," Sophie said. "He's been terrified for four years. Of losing you again. Of being the reason you give something up. Of repeating what his dad did to his mom."

"His dad?"

"Mom gave up everything for him. Her career. Her dreams. And then he left anyway." Sophie's voice was bitter. "Jace watched her fall apart because she'd made herself small for a man who didn't deserve it. He's terrified of doing the same thing to you."

The pieces clicked into place. All of Jace's behavior. All of his pushing away. All of his desperate attempts to protect me from a sacrifice I never asked him to make.

"He's going to resent me," I said slowly. "If he turns down Tokyo. Maybe not now, maybe not even next year. But eventually. He's going to wake up one day and realize what he gave up, and he's going to hate me for it."

"That's not--" Emma started.

"That's exactly what will happen." I cut her off. "Because that's what happens when you make choices for someone else. When you sacrifice things they never asked you to sacrifice. The resentment builds. The what-ifs pile up. And one day you look at the person you love and all you can see is everything you lost."

The room went silent.

"So what do you do?" Sophie asked.



I looked at the letter in my hands. At the words *personal circumstances* and *remain in the United States*.

And suddenly, with devastating clarity, I understood what I had to do.

"I break the cycle," I said.

Emma's eyes widened. "What does that mean?"

"He's about to make a choice for both of us. Again. And I've been sitting here, waiting for him to decide, making him feel responsible for my future." I stood up, pacing. "But that's not fair either. That's me doing the same thing--putting all the weight on him, making him choose between his dreams and mine."

"Mia--"

"If I don't make a choice, he will. He'll turn down Tokyo. He'll stay. And we'll be trapped in the same cycle forever." I grabbed my phone from the coffee table. "Someone has to break it."

"What are you going to do?" Sophie asked.

I stared at my phone. At the text thread with Jace that ended two days ago, before everything fell apart.

"I'm going to make the choice for him," I said. "Just this once. I'm going to take myself out of the equation so he can actually choose what he wants without worrying about me."

Emma's face went pale. "Mia, that's exactly what he did to you. Senior year. That's the same--"

"I know." My voice cracked. "But maybe that's the only way to break the pattern. Maybe one of us has to actually let go so the other one can stop holding on so tight."

Sophie was crying now. "You're going to tell him to go to Tokyo."

"And I'm going to Stanford." I typed the words before I could lose my nerve. "I'm taking myself out of the equation. No more waiting. No more making him choose."

The text stared back at me from the screen:

Take the internship. I'm going to Stanford. We both need to stop sacrificing our futures for each other.

My finger hovered over the send button.

"Mia." Emma's voice was urgent. "Think about what you're doing. You're making a choice for both of you. You're doing exactly what--"

"I know what I'm doing."

I pressed send.

The message went through. Delivered. Read.

I waited, my heart pounding, for the response that would never come.

Across town, at Frozen Peak Ice Rink, Jace Mitchell sat alone in the dark.

He had come back after everyone left. Said he needed to check the Zamboni one more time. Make sure everything was perfect for tomorrow.

The truth was, he could not go home. Could not sit in his room and stare at that letter on his desk and think about everything he was about to give up.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

He pulled it out. Saw Mia's name on the screen. His heart lurched.

Take the internship. I'm going to Stanford. We both need to stop sacrificing our futures for each other.

He read the message once. Twice. Three times.

Then something broke inside him.

She was doing it. The same thing he had done four years ago. Making the choice alone. Deciding what was best for both of them without asking, without discussing, without giving him any say.

She was leaving him. Again. Only this time, she was the one walking away.

"No." The word came out strangled. "No, no, no--"

He was on his feet, walking toward the ice, still staring at the phone. The words blurred as his eyes filled with tears.

Take the internship.

Like it was that simple. Like Tokyo meant anything without her. Like any of it meant anything if she was three thousand miles away, building a life that did not include him.

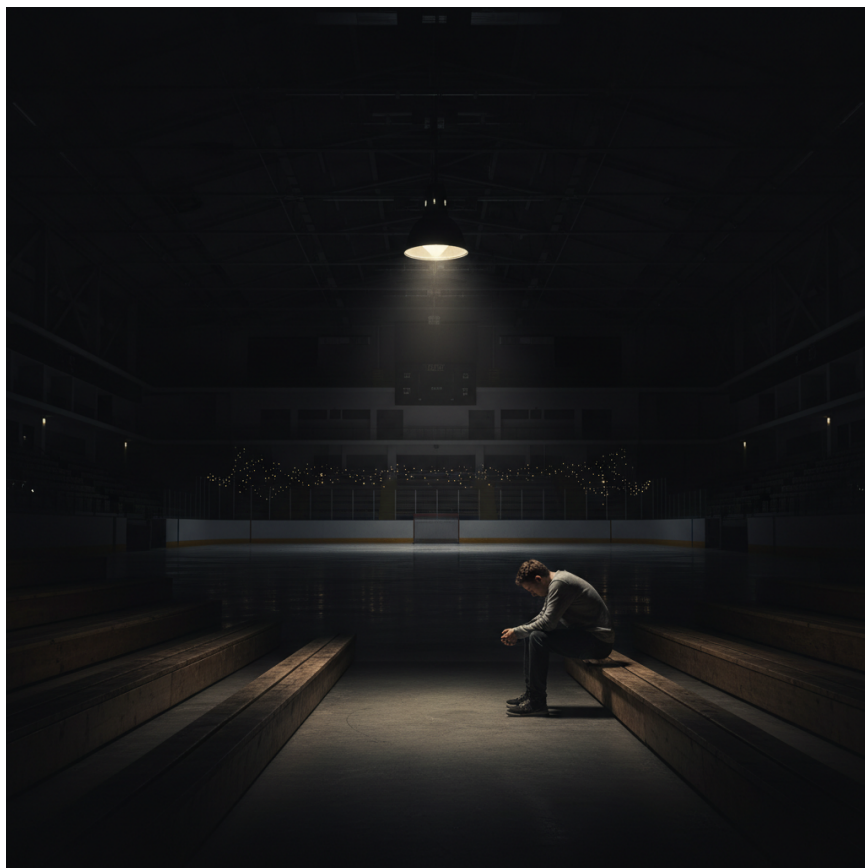
I'm going to Stanford.

The dream she had talked about for years. The program that would make her one of the best soccer players in the country. The future she deserved.

The future that did not have room for him.

His hand tightened around the phone. The anger built--at her, at himself, at the universe that kept putting them in the same impossible positions.

She had made the choice. Without him. Just like he had done to her.



And now he was standing alone in the dark, holding a phone full of words that felt like goodbye.

"DAMN IT!"



The scream tore out of him. He pulled back his arm and hurled the phone as hard as he could.

It arced through the air, hit the ice with a sharp crack, and skidded across the surface. The screen shattered on impact, sending fragments of glass spinning across the frozen surface.



Jace stood at the edge of the rink, breathing hard, watching the ruined phone come to rest near the center of the ice.

The fairy lights blinked around him. The sound system hummed quietly in the background. Everything was perfect, ready for tomorrow's celebration.

And he had never felt more alone in his life.

He sank down onto the boards, his head in his hands, and let the tears come.

Tomorrow was the grand reopening. Tomorrow was the gala. Tomorrow he would have to stand beside her and smile for the cameras and pretend that everything was fine.

But tonight, in the dark of the rink they had rebuilt together, Jace Mitchell fell apart.

The shattered phone glinted in the fairy lights, its cracked screen still displaying her final message.

Take the internship. I'm going to Stanford.

She had made the choice for him.

Just like he had made the choice for her, four years ago.

And somehow, that made it worse. Because now he understood exactly how it felt to be on the other side. To have someone you love decide your future without asking. To be told what to do with your own heart.

He had done this to her. And now she had done it to him.

The cycle was complete.

But it did not feel like freedom. It felt like destruction.

Jace pressed his palms against his eyes until he saw stars, and in the silence of the empty rink, he whispered the only truth that mattered:

"I can't lose her again."

But it was already too late.

She had made sure of that.

Chapter 19: Grand Gesture

The Christmas Eve Gala dress was the color of champagne.



Mom had picked it out two weeks ago, back when the biggest problem in my life was whether to choose Stanford. Back before Jace Mitchell had systematically dismantled every wall I had spent four years building, only for me to tear down the last of his in a single devastating text.

Take the internship. I'm going to Stanford.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, watching a stranger adjust the delicate straps of a dress that no longer fit the girl wearing it. My hair was pinned up in loose curls. My makeup was

flawless--Emma had come over to help, filling the silence with chatter about the bakery and her brother's latest girlfriend disaster. She had not mentioned Jace. Neither had I.

"You look beautiful." Mom appeared in the doorway, her own gala dress a deep burgundy that made her look younger than her years. "Tyler will be here in twenty minutes."

Tyler. Right.

He had texted this morning, a simple *I'll pick you up at 6* that I had answered with a thumbs-up emoji. We had not talked about yesterday. About the way I had shown up at his truck with red-rimmed eyes and asked him to still be my date tonight. About the way he had looked at me like he was seeing something break in real time.

"Thanks, Mom."

She crossed to stand behind me, adjusting a curl that had fallen loose. In the mirror, our eyes met.

"Whatever happened," she said quietly, "whatever is going on with you and that Mitchell boy--you don't have to tell me. But I want you to know I'm proud of you. For showing up tonight. For seeing this through."

This. The rink. The gala. The grand reopening of Frozen Peak, the project Jace and I had spent two weeks rebuilding together. The project that was supposed to prove we could work side by side without falling apart.

Look how well that turned out.

"I'm fine," I said.

Mom's reflection smiled sadly. "I know, sweetheart. That's what worries me."

Tyler's truck pulled into the driveway at exactly six o'clock.

He was wearing a suit--dark navy, well-fitted, the kind of thing his hockey teammates probably mocked him for owning. When I climbed into the passenger seat, he handed me a corsage without a word. White roses. Simple. Nothing like the elaborate arrangements his mom probably wanted him to buy.

"You look incredible," he said, and his voice was carefully neutral. "Really."

"Thanks. You clean up pretty well yourself."

We drove in silence for three blocks before he spoke again.

"I know what you're doing."

I stiffened. "What?"

"Using me as a buffer." He kept his eyes on the road, but I could see the tension in his jaw. "A shield. Something to hide behind when you have to face him tonight."

The denial died on my lips. He deserved better than that.

"Yeah," I admitted quietly. "I am."

"I figured." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Look, I'm not going to pretend I understand whatever's happening between you two. And I'm not going to pretend it doesn't sting, knowing I was never really in the running."

"Tyler--"

"But I like you, Mia. As a person. And I can see that you're hurting." He glanced at me briefly. "So if you need someone to stand next to you tonight while you fall apart, I can be that. No expectations. No agenda."

My throat tightened. "Why would you do that for me?"

"Because that's what friends do." A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "And because if I'm being honest, I kind of want to see how this whole thing plays out. The tension between you two has been better than any reality TV I've watched all year."

Despite everything, a laugh escaped me. Broken and watery, but real.

"You're a surprisingly good guy, Tyler Brooks."

"Don't tell anyone. It'll ruin my hockey player reputation."

Frozen Peak was transformed.



The parking lot was already half-full when we arrived, cars lining the street in both directions. The building we had spent two weeks renovating now glittered with lights--fairy lights along the roofline, spotlights illuminating the new sign, a red carpet leading from the entrance to the main doors.

Inside was even more spectacular. Gold and silver streamers hung from the rafters. The ice gleamed under the new lighting system, pristine and waiting. The bleachers had been covered with white fabric, and small tables dotted the perimeter, each one bearing centerpieces of winter flowers and candles.

It was everything we had planned. Everything Jace and I had imagined during those late nights bent over sketches and spreadsheets.

And there he was.

Standing by the sound booth in a charcoal suit that made his eyes look darker than I had ever seen them. His hair was styled differently than usual--pushed back, almost formal--and he was talking to one of the town council members with the kind of polished professionalism that made my chest ache.

He looked good. He looked composed. He looked like he had not spent last night destroying his phone on the ice because I had ripped his heart out through a text message.



Our eyes met across the rink.

For one second--just one--I saw it. The devastation beneath the mask. The same hollow emptiness I saw in my own reflection every time I looked in the mirror.

Then his jaw tightened, and he looked away.

"You okay?" Tyler's hand found the small of my back, steadying me.

"Fine." The lie tasted like ash. "Let's get this over with."

The next hour was an exercise in professional detachment.

Jace and I had responsibilities. We had spent two weeks planning this event, and now we had to execute it, regardless of the crater where our relationship used to be. So we moved through the crowd in careful parallel lines--greeting guests, directing volunteers, solving the thousand small crises that arose when you tried to throw a party for an entire town.

We did not speak directly. When we needed to communicate, we went through Sophie or Emma or whichever volunteer happened to be nearby. The whole room felt the tension, that electric charge in the air that made people's conversations trail off when either of us walked past.

"This is painful to watch," Emma muttered, appearing at my elbow with a glass of sparkling cider. "Like, actually physically painful. The two of you are doing that thing where you pretend the other person doesn't exist, except everyone can tell you're hyperaware of exactly where they are at all times."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You just flinched because he walked past the photo booth."

I had. But I was not about to admit that.

"The ribbon cutting is in twenty minutes," I said instead. "Is the mayor here yet?"

"Sophie's handling it." Emma studied my face. "You know you don't have to do this, right? The polished hostess act. Nobody expects you to be perfect tonight."

"I'm not being perfect. I'm being professional."

"Same thing, in your world." She sighed. "Look, I know things are complicated right now. I know you sent that text and I know he saw it. But Mia--"

"Not now." My voice came out sharper than I intended. "Please. I can't fall apart right now. I just need to get through tonight."

Emma's expression softened. "Okay. But after--"

"After," I agreed. "We'll talk after."

She squeezed my arm and disappeared back into the crowd, leaving me alone with my champagne-colored dress and my carefully constructed composure.

Across the rink, Jace was adjusting something on the sound board. Sophie appeared beside him, saying something that made his shoulders tense. He shook his head sharply. She argued. He turned away.

I wondered what they were fighting about. I wondered if it was me.

Then the mayor arrived, and I stopped wondering about anything except survival.

The ribbon cutting ceremony was scheduled for seven-thirty.

By seven-fifteen, the rink was packed. The whole town had turned out--families with children in their Christmas best, elderly couples who remembered skating here decades ago, teenagers taking selfies in front of the renovated boards. Mrs. Mitchell was there, wrapped in a cream-colored coat, dabbing her eyes every time someone congratulated her on how beautifully the rink had turned out.

Tyler stayed close, his hand a steady pressure on my back whenever I started to waver. He did not try to talk, did not try to fill the silence. Just stood there, solid and present, while I slowly fell apart inside my perfect dress.

"Ready?" Sophie appeared beside us, clipboard in hand. She looked at me with something complicated in her expression--guilt, maybe, or sympathy. "The mayor wants to say a few words, then you and Jace cut the ribbon together. Three minutes, tops."

Together. The word landed like a blow.

"I'm ready."

Sophie hesitated. "Mia, I need to tell you something. About what happens after--"

"Speech time!" The mayor's voice boomed across the rink, cutting her off. "Everyone gather round!"

Sophie shot me an apologetic look and hurried toward the main stage that had been set up near the entrance gate. Tyler and I followed, weaving through the crowd until we reached the front.

Jace was already there. Standing on the opposite side of the ribbon, scissors in hand, looking anywhere but at me.

The mayor launched into his speech--something about community spirit and the importance of preserving local landmarks. I barely heard it. All I could focus on was Jace, three feet away, the muscle in his jaw ticking like a countdown.

"And so," the mayor concluded, "it is my great pleasure to invite our two volunteer coordinators to officially reopen Frozen Peak Ice Rink!"

Cameras flashed. The crowd applauded. Jace and I stepped forward, each holding one handle of the oversized ceremonial scissors.

Our hands brushed.

I felt the contact like electricity--a shock that ran up my arm and lodged somewhere in my chest. He flinched, almost imperceptibly, but kept his eyes fixed on the ribbon.

"Ready?" I asked, and my voice came out steadier than I felt.

"Ready." His was rougher. Strained.

We cut the ribbon together.

The crowd erupted. Confetti cannons fired. The first skaters poured onto the ice, their laughter echoing off the newly painted walls. It was everything we had worked for, everything we had dreamed of during those late nights surrounded by paint cans and schedules.

It felt like ashes in my mouth.

An hour later, the gala was in full swing.

The band was playing classic Christmas songs. Couples were skating lazy circles on the ice. The refreshment tables were being demolished by enthusiastic children, much to their parents' theatrical dismay. It was perfect. Picturesque. A postcard come to life.

I was hiding in the equipment room, trying to remember how to breathe.

The door creaked open. I tensed, expecting Tyler, or maybe Emma.

It was Sophie.

"There you are." She slipped inside, closing the door behind her. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright with something that looked almost like excitement. "I need to tell you something, and you're probably going to be really mad at me."

"Sophie, I'm not in the mood for--"

"He made a video."

I stopped. "What?"

"Jace. He made a video for the gala. A montage of the rink through the years--old photos, the renovation footage, testimonials from people who grew up skating here." Sophie was

talking fast now, the words tumbling over each other. "It was supposed to be a surprise for the town. A celebration of what this place means to everyone."

"That's... nice." I did not understand why this required a private confession. "Why would I be mad about that?"

Sophie's face did something complicated. "Because of how it ends."

Before I could ask what she meant, the lights in the equipment room flickered.

Then, outside in the main rink, everything went dark.

The crowd gasped, then fell into murmuring confusion.

"What's happening?" someone called out.

"Power outage?"

"No, look--the screen!"

I pushed out of the equipment room, Sophie on my heels. The main rink was dark except for the massive projection screen that had been set up behind the bleachers--the one we had planned to use for displaying the event sponsors.

But the sponsors were not on screen.



Instead, a video was playing. Old footage of Frozen Peak, grainy and warm with nostalgia. Children learning to skate, their parents hovering nearby. Hockey teams celebrating victories. Figure skaters practicing routines in the early morning light.

The crowd made soft sounds of recognition as familiar faces appeared. Someone's grandmother, decades younger. A little league team from the eighties. The building looking fresh and new, before time and neglect took their toll.

Then the footage shifted.

Recent images now. The renovation--Jace and I covered in paint, arguing over the placement of the new boards. Me laughing at something off-camera. Jace carrying supplies, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The two of us bent over blueprints, heads close together, looking for all the world like...

Like we belonged together.

My throat tightened. The crowd was murmuring, glancing between the screen and me. I could feel Tyler's presence behind me, his hand hovering near my shoulder but not quite touching.

The video continued. More renovation footage. Sophie interviewing volunteers about what the rink meant to them. Mrs. Mitchell talking about how watching her son pour his heart into this project had been the best medicine she could have asked for.

And then the footage changed again.

The timestamp read 12:17 AM.

Security camera footage.

The blood drained from my face.

On screen, in grainy black and white, two figures skated slow circles around an empty rink. The emergency lights cast a golden glow over everything, making the ice look like something from a dream.

The figures drew closer. Stopped at center ice.

Kissed.

The crowd gasped.

The footage continued--the same two figures against the boards now, their bodies pressed close. Their heads tilting, hands moving, the kind of intimacy that left nothing to interpretation.

I could not breathe. Could not move. Could only watch in mounting horror as our midnight secrets played out for everyone to see.

Someone in the crowd said, "Is that--?"

Someone else: "Oh my God."

And then Tyler's voice, behind me, quiet and resigned: "Well. That explains a lot."

The video ended. The screen went black. The lights came back on with a sudden, blinding brightness.

The entire town was staring at me.

And there, standing at the edge of the crowd, was Sophie Mitchell with a microphone in her hand.

"Before anyone says anything," Sophie's voice rang out across the stunned silence, "I have something to share."

She climbed onto the small stage, her cheeks flushed but her expression determined. Behind me, I could hear the crowd's whispers building into a roar of speculation.

"Most of you know my brother," Sophie continued. "Jace Mitchell. Straight-A student. MIT sophomore. The guy who spent every summer since he was sixteen working double shifts to keep our family afloat." Her voice wavered slightly. "What most of you don't know is why."

The whispers grew louder. Someone shushed them.

"Four years ago, our dad left. Took half our savings and disappeared. Our mom..." Sophie's breath hitched. "Our mom didn't take it well. She was sick for a long time. And Jace--my brilliant, stubborn, self-sacrificing brother--decided that holding our family together was more important than his own happiness."

I was frozen. Could not move, could not speak, could not do anything but stand there while Sophie laid bare every secret Jace had spent years protecting.

"He gave up a lot," Sophie said. "Scholarships. Friendships. A girl he was falling in love with." Her eyes found mine across the crowd. "He pushed her away because he thought he wasn't good enough. Because he thought his mess would ruin her life."

The crowd was completely silent now. Even the children had stopped chattering.

"This rink is where they met." Sophie gestured at the space around us. "This rink is where they fell in love at fifteen, and where they found each other again at twenty-one. And this rink--" Her voice cracked. "This rink is worth rebuilding. Just like some relationships are worth fighting for."

She held up a small remote.

"So I'm sorry if this is an invasion of privacy. I'm sorry if you're both going to kill me later. But someone had to say it." She pressed the button. "Some love stories are worth telling."

The video started again.

But this time, it was not security footage.

This time, it was Jace. Sitting in front of a camera, his face raw with exhaustion and something that looked terrifyingly like hope.

"This is stupid," video-Jace muttered, running a hand through his hair. "I don't even know if she'll see this. But Sophie said--" He laughed bitterly. "Sophie says a lot of things. Most of which end up being right, even when I don't want to admit it."

He looked directly at the camera. Directly at me.

"Mia Davis. I have loved you since we were fifteen years old. Since you showed up at this rink in rented skates and a bad attitude, determined to learn hockey skating for some soccer

agility training that made absolutely no sense. I loved you when you made me explain crossovers seven times because you were too stubborn to admit you were scared of falling. I loved you when you fell anyway, and when you got back up, and when you told me I was an arrogant show-off who probably couldn't even dribble a soccer ball."

A sob escaped me. I pressed my hand to my mouth.

"I loved you through four years of silence. Through every girl I dated who wasn't you. Through every MIT lecture where I'd zone out thinking about your laugh. And I love you now--" His voice broke. "I love you now, even though I'm terrified. Even though you told me to go to Tokyo. Even though you're probably going to Stanford and I'm probably never going to see you again."

He leaned forward, his eyes fierce.

"But here's the thing about running the numbers, Mia. I've done it. A hundred times. A thousand. And every equation, every calculation, every variable I account for--they all lead to the same conclusion." He took a shaky breath. "I'm better when I'm with you. Everything is better. And I'm done pretending that's not worth fighting for."

The video ended.



The crowd erupted.

I was moving before I consciously decided to--pushing through the bodies, searching for him. He had to be here. He had made this video, he had let Sophie play it, he had to be--



"JACE MITCHELL!"

My voice echoed across the rink, cutting through the chaos. People parted around me, creating a clear path from the stage to the sound booth where I had last seen him.

But the sound booth was empty.

I spun around, scanning the crowd. Tyler was there, watching me with something like relief in his eyes. Emma was there, her hand pressed to her mouth. Mrs. Mitchell was there, tears streaming down her face.

Sophie was there, her expression crumpling as she realized the same thing I was realizing.

Jace was gone.

"Where is he?" I demanded, grabbing Sophie's arm. "Where did he go?"

"I don't--I thought he would--" She shook her head, panic dawning in her eyes. "He was supposed to be here. He was supposed to see your reaction and finally--"

"Where. Is. He?"

Sophie's face went pale. "The back entrance. He must have-- Mia, wait!"

But I was already running.

Through the crowd. Past the refreshment tables. Down the corridor toward the back of the building where the emergency exit led to the parking lot.

I burst through the door into the December night.



The parking lot was full of cars, their windows frosted over. Christmas lights from the building cast long shadows across the snow. My breath came out in white clouds, my heels sinking into the ice as I stumbled forward.

"Jace!"

No answer.

I ran to the edge of the lot, scanning for his car. For any sign of movement. For anything.

Nothing.

"JACE!"

The word tore out of me, desperate and raw. My voice echoed off the surrounding buildings, bounced back to me empty.

He was gone.

After everything--after the video, after Sophie's speech, after four years and two weeks and a thousand almost-moments--he was gone.

And I had no idea where to find him.

The door behind me opened. Sophie appeared, her face stricken.

"His car's not here," she said. "He must have left before the video even finished playing."

"Why would he--" My voice cracked. "Why would he leave? After all that?"

Sophie's eyes filled with tears. "Because he doesn't know you saw it. He recorded that video three days ago, Mia. Before your text. Before everything fell apart." She stepped closer, her voice dropping. "He thought you were choosing Tyler. Choosing Stanford. Choosing a life without him. He probably couldn't bear to watch you reject him in front of the whole town."

The words hit me like physical blows.

He had poured his heart out on camera. Confessed everything, finally, after four years of silence. And then I had sent that text--*take the internship, I'm going to Stanford*--and he had assumed the worst.

He had assumed I was letting him go.

"I have to find him." I was shaking now, from cold or fear or both. "Where would he go? Think, Sophie. Where does he go when everything falls apart?"

Sophie's brow furrowed. "I don't--he usually just--" Her eyes widened. "The pond."

"What pond?"

"Our old house. Before everything went wrong. There was a pond in the backyard that froze over every winter. He used to skate there for hours when he needed to think." Her voice quickened. "We sold the house, but the new owners--they're in Florida for Christmas. The house is empty."

"Where?"

"2847 Maple Ridge Drive. It's twenty minutes from here."

I was already moving toward Tyler's truck before she finished speaking. Then I stopped, remembering--Tyler had the keys. Tyler had driven me here.

I turned back to Sophie.

"I need a ride."

Sophie was already pulling out her phone. "Emma has her car. She's faster than me anyway." Her fingers flew across the screen. "Go. Find him. Fix this."

I ran back inside, found Emma by the entrance, and grabbed her hand.

"I need you to drive me somewhere. Right now."

Emma took one look at my face and nodded.

"Let's go."

We pulled out of the parking lot as the gala continued behind us, the sounds of confused celebration fading into the winter night.

My heart was pounding. My hands were shaking. Every second felt like an eternity as Emma navigated the icy roads toward Maple Ridge Drive.

Please be there. Please, Jace. Please don't do what you always do. Don't run. Don't disappear. Let me find you.

"Mia." Emma's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. "Whatever happens--you know you love him, right?"

I stared at the road ahead, watching the headlights illuminate the falling snow.

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

"Good." Emma pressed harder on the accelerator. "Then let's go tell him."

The snow kept falling as we drove into the darkness, toward an empty house and a frozen pond and the boy who had never stopped waiting for me to choose him.

If he was even there.

If I was not already too late.

Chapter 20: HEA

The house at 2847 Maple Ridge Drive sat dark against the snow.

Emma's headlights swept across the driveway as we pulled up-- a driveway that hadn't been shoveled, leading to a porch where the Christmas lights hung dark and unplugged. The new owners were in Florida, Sophie had said. The house was empty.

But there, at the side of the property, a faint glow flickered between the trees. The frozen pond. Someone had lit something-- lanterns, maybe, or flashlights propped against the snow.

Someone was out there.

"Go." Emma's voice was firm. "I'll wait here."

"What if he's not--"

"He's there." She grabbed my hand, squeezed hard. "I can feel it. And Mia? Whatever you're about to say to him? Say all of it. Don't hold back. You've both spent four years holding back, and look where it got you."

I nodded, my throat too tight for words.

"Now go get your boy."

I was out of the car before she finished the sentence, my heels sinking into the snow as I stumbled toward the tree line. The champagne dress was not made for this--for trudging through a winter night, for the cold that bit through the thin fabric. But I didn't care. I couldn't care about anything except the glow through the trees and the boy who might be waiting at the end of it.

The path was narrow, half-buried in drifts. I remembered it vaguely from a summer years ago--a barbecue at the Mitchell house, back when everything was still intact. Jace had shown me the pond, had told me about winter mornings skating before school, about his dad teaching him crossovers on this ice before everything fell apart.

His dad.

The same dad who'd destroyed everything. Who'd left his family in ruins and his son to pick up the pieces.

The trees opened up, and there he was.



The pond was smaller than I remembered--a perfect oval of ice nestled between snow-covered banks. Someone had hung battery-powered lanterns from the low branches, their warm light casting golden shadows across the frozen surface. And at the center of the ice, sitting with his back to me, was Jace Mitchell.

Still in his suit from the gala. Still wearing the charcoal jacket that had made my heart stutter when I'd first seen him tonight. His head was bowed, his shoulders hunched against the cold.

He looked wrecked.

I kicked off my heels and stepped onto the ice.



My stockinged feet found purchase on the frozen surface, muscle memory from a thousand skating lessons guiding me forward. The cold bit into my soles immediately, but I barely felt it. All I could feel was the pounding of my heart and the desperate need to reach him.

He didn't turn around.

"I knew you'd come here." My voice echoed across the empty pond. "Sophie told me. About the pond, about this place. About how you used to skate here when everything got too hard."

His shoulders tensed, but he still didn't move.

"You missed the end of the video, you know." I was closer now, maybe ten feet away. "The one Sophie played. Your confession. The whole town saw it."

"I know." His voice came out rough, broken. "I made it three days ago. Before your text. Before I knew you were choosing Stanford. Choosing Tyler. Choosing a life that doesn't include me."

"I didn't choose Tyler."

"You went to the gala with him."

"As friends. Because I was too much of a coward to admit what I really wanted." I took another step. "Because I was so scared of getting hurt again that I almost let the real thing slip away."

He finally turned.

The lantern light caught his face--the red rims of his eyes, the tears he'd tried to hide. He looked like a man who'd laid his heart bare for the whole world to see and then had to watch it get trampled.

Except it hadn't been trampled. He just didn't know that yet.

"Mia--"

"You don't get to leave again without letting me choose."

The words came out fierce, stronger than I felt. I closed the distance between us until I was standing right in front of him, close enough to see the snowflakes catching in his hair, close enough to feel the warmth radiating off him despite the cold.

"You made the choice for me four years ago. You decided I wasn't strong enough to handle your mess, so you pushed me away. And I spent years thinking it was my fault. Thinking I wasn't smart enough, or interesting enough, or just--not enough. Period."

"You were always enough." His voice cracked. "You were more than enough. You were everything."

"Then stop deciding for me!" I grabbed the lapels of his jacket, forcing him to look at me. "Stop running. Stop assuming you know what I want. Stop leaving without giving me the chance to choose you."

His hands came up to cover mine, cold fingers wrapping around my wrists. Not pulling me away--holding on. I could smell pine and something warm beneath it--his soap, maybe, or just *him*, that familiar scent that had haunted me through four years of trying to forget.

"Your dad," I said quietly. "That's why you thought you had to run. You were afraid of becoming him."

His whole body tensed. "Don't."

"Not the cheating. But the making decisions for other people. Thinking you knew best."

The silence stretched between us, broken only by the soft creak of ice and the wind through bare branches.

"I'm not my father." The words came out like they'd been scraped from somewhere deep.

"I know." I loosened my grip on his jacket, my hands sliding up to rest on his shoulders. "But you needed to know it too. You've been running from his shadow for four years, Jace. Making choices you thought would protect everyone else, when really you were just proving to yourself that you weren't him."

He closed his eyes. A single tear escaped, tracking down his cheek before he could stop it.

"He left because he was selfish," Jace said, his voice barely audible. "He made choices without thinking about anyone else. And I thought--if I could be the opposite. If I could put everyone else first, sacrifice what I wanted--"

"That's still making choices for other people." I wiped the tear away with my thumb. "Just with different math."

A broken laugh escaped him. "God. I really am an idiot, aren't I?"

"The biggest." But I said it gently. "A well-meaning idiot who I've been in love with for half my life, but still an idiot."

His eyes flew open.

"Tokyo's incredible," I said, before he could respond. "Take it. It's an amazing opportunity, and you'd be stupid not to."

Something fractured in his expression. "Mia--"

"But don't you dare pretend it's for me." I tightened my grip on his shoulders. "Don't you dare use me as an excuse to run from something you want. I'm not a sacrifice you need to make. I'm not a problem to be solved."

"I never thought you were a problem."

"Then stop treating me like one!" The words echoed across the frozen pond, bouncing off the trees and coming back to us like witnesses. "Stop protecting me from choices I want to make. Stop deciding what's best for both of us without asking what I actually want."

"What do you want?"

The question hung in the cold air between us. The one he should have asked four years ago, before everything fell apart.

"You." The word came out like a prayer. "I want you, Jace. I've wanted you since I was fifteen years old and you taught me to skate backwards on this ice. I wanted you when you asked me to prom with a math problem. I wanted you through all four years you were gone, even when I tried to hate you. Even when I convinced myself I was over you."

His breath caught. His hands trembled against my wrists.

"Stanford's your dream," he said, but his voice was uncertain now. Hopeful.

"No." I shook my head, and something clicked into place--a thought I'd been circling for weeks, maybe months, that finally landed. "Soccer at the highest level *was* my dream. Being the best goalkeeper in the country, making the national team--that was what seventeen-year-old Mia wanted because she didn't know what else to want."

"And now?"

"Now I want *more*." I released his shoulders, my hands sliding up to cup his face instead. His skin was cold beneath my palms, but his eyes were burning. "I want a future that's about more than just one thing. I want to figure out who I am beyond soccer. And I want to do it with someone who sees me--really sees me. Not the goalkeeper, not the scholarship athlete, not the girl everyone expects me to be. Me."

"I see you." His voice was barely a whisper. "I've always seen you."

"I know." I smiled, and it felt like the first real smile in weeks. "That's why I'm standing on a frozen pond in a gala dress at midnight, with no shoes, probably getting hypothermia."

A choked laugh escaped him. "We should probably--"

"We should probably figure out how to make this work," I interrupted. "Boston to Stanford. Tokyo for January. Long distance calls and video chats and missing each other like crazy." My thumbs traced the lines of his cheekbones. "It's going to be hard. It's going to require actual communication, which we both suck at."

"I'm working on that."

"I know. So am I." I took a breath. "But here's the thing I finally figured out, standing in that gala watching the whole town see our midnight kisses on a giant screen."

"What's that?"

"We can choose each other *and* our dreams. It's not either-or. It never was." I pressed my forehead to his, our breath mingling in the cold air. "You going to Tokyo doesn't mean you're leaving me. Me going to Stanford doesn't mean I'm choosing something over you. We can be ambitious and in love at the same time."

He went very still. "In love?"

The words hung between us. I felt my heart slamming against my ribs, felt the cold finally registering on my skin, felt everything narrow down to this moment and this boy and the question in his eyes.

"Yeah." My voice came out smaller than I intended. "In love. With you. For a really, embarrassingly long time."

He didn't say anything. Just stared at me with an expression I couldn't quite read--wonder, maybe, or disbelief, or something between the two.

"This is usually the part where you say something back," I whispered. "Unless I completely misread everything, in which case I'm going to need Emma to drive me somewhere far away where I can die of embarrassment in peace--"

His hands slid up my arms, over my shoulders, into my hair. One palm cradled the back of my head while the other pressed against my lower back, pulling me closer. And then he was kissing me.

Not soft. Not gentle. Desperate and hungry and full of every word he hadn't said yet. His lips were cold from the winter air but his mouth was warm, and I felt heat bloom through me despite the freezing night. My heart slammed against my ribs so hard I was sure he could feel it through our layers of formal wear.

When he finally pulled back, we were both breathing hard, our breath coming out in visible puffs that mingled between us.

"I love you too." The words came out reverent. Certain. "I've loved you through every calculation I ever made, every equation I ever solved. You're the one variable I could never account for. The one factor that always threw off my results."



"That's the nerdiest declaration of love I've ever heard."

"Get used to it."

And then he kissed me again.

This kiss was different from all the others.

Not angry like the snowstorm. Not desperate like the locker room. Not stolen like the midnight meetings at the rink.

This kiss was a promise.

His arms wrapped around me, pulling me close against the cold, and I melted into him the way I'd been wanting to for four years. His mouth moved against mine with a tenderness that made my chest ache, and I felt something shift between us--ice finally cracking after years of freeze, letting light through.

When we broke apart, we were both breathing hard, our foreheads pressed together, our breath making clouds in the winter air.

"Boston to Stanford," he murmured against my lips. "Tokyo for January. We can make this work."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure I'm not losing you again." His arms tightened around me. "I'm sure I'm done running. I'm sure I want to wake up every morning and figure out how to be with you, no matter how complicated it gets."

"Even if it means video calls at weird hours because of time zones?"

"Even if it means that."

"Even if it means I'll probably get jealous of every attractive person within a fifty-foot radius of you in Tokyo?"

"Even if it means that." He was smiling now, really smiling, and the sight of it made warmth bloom in my chest. "Will you be jealous?"

"Probably. I'm working on it."

"I'll send you pictures of every meal so you can verify I'm eating alone."

"That's... actually kind of sweet in a paranoid way."

"I'm learning." He kissed my nose. "We're both learning."

We stood there for a long moment, wrapped in each other, the lanterns flickering around us like witnesses. The cold had seeped through my dress, and my feet had gone numb on the ice, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I was exactly where I wanted to be.

"We should probably go back," I said eventually. "Emma's waiting in the car. And the gala is probably wondering where we both disappeared to."

"Sophie's handling it." Jace smiled ruefully. "She'll have spun some romantic narrative that makes us look like heroes instead of emotional disasters."

"She's good at that."

"She's the best." He paused, something flickering in his expression. "She's also definitely going to say 'I told you so' for the rest of our lives."

"Probably deserved."

"Definitely deserved."

We skated to the edge of the pond together, our hands intertwined, and I remembered suddenly the first time we'd done this--fifteen years old, my ankles wobbling, his patience endless as he taught me to find my center of gravity. Back then, I'd thought the ice was the hardest thing to master. I hadn't known yet that the real challenge was trusting someone enough to catch you when you fell.

"Hey Mia?" Jace's voice was soft as we stepped off the ice.

"Yeah?"

"I know we said no more running." He bent down, picking up my discarded heels from the snow. "But if you want to run back to your gala dress and not die of hypothermia, I'd support that decision."

I laughed--a real laugh, the kind that came from somewhere deep and warm. "Race you to Emma's car?"

"On ice? In dress socks?"

"Scared?"

His eyes sparked with challenge. "You're on."

We ran.

Emma drove us back to the gala.

The whole way, I sat in the backseat with Jace, our fingers intertwined, my head on his shoulder. Emma kept glancing in the rearview mirror with an expression that suggested she was barely containing herself.

"So," she said finally, as we pulled into the Frozen Peak parking lot. "I'm assuming we're not doing the sad break-up emergency ice cream run I had prepared?"

"Rain check," I said. "But thank you. For the backup plan."

"Always." Her eyes met mine in the mirror. "You two figured it out?"

"We're figuring it out," Jace corrected. "It's an ongoing process."

"Good answer." Emma pulled into a spot near the entrance. "Now go. Sophie's been texting me every thirty seconds asking if you're dead."

The gala was still going when we walked back in.

Not in full swing--it was past eleven now, and most of the families with children had gone home. But a core group remained, clustered in small groups around the rink, and the band was still playing soft Christmas music. The lights had been dimmed, and a few couples were skating lazy circles on the ice.

Sophie spotted us first.

She was standing by the refreshment table with Tyler, of all people, and when she saw us walk through the door hand in hand, her entire face transformed.

"Oh my god." The words came out half-shriek, half-sob. "Oh my GOD."

She was already running toward us, her heels clicking against the floor, mascara already starting to smear.

"Four years," she said, throwing her arms around both of us. "I have been dealing with you two idiots for four years. Do you know how exhausting that is? Do you have any idea how many times I had to listen to one of you mope about the other while pretending I didn't want to lock you both in a room until you figured it out?"

"Soph--"

"No. Shut up. I'm having a moment." She pulled back, wiping her eyes. "You're together. Like, actually together. Not doing that weird almost-something dance you've been doing for the past two weeks. Together-together."

I looked at Jace. He looked at me.

"Yeah," I said. "Together-together."

Sophie made a sound that probably qualified as a screech. Several people at nearby tables turned to look.

"You know what you have to do now, right?" She grabbed both our hands, her grip surprisingly strong for someone in six-inch heels. "You two rebuilt this rink. Both of you. Blood, sweat, and--well, mostly passive-aggressive tension, but still. You should be the first ones to skate on it together. Properly, this time. Not sneaking around at midnight."

"Sophie, we're not even wearing skates--"

"There are rental skates right there." She pointed toward the booth. "And the whole town is still here. The whole town who just watched your entire romantic history on a screen." Her eyes gleamed. "Don't you think they deserve to see the ending?"

Jace squeezed my hand. "She's not going to let this go."

"She never lets anything go."

"That's how I got you two together in the first place." Sophie was already pulling us toward the skate rental booth. "Call it my superpower. Now go. Skate. Be disgustingly romantic. Give these people the happy ending they stayed past midnight for."

The ice felt different with people watching.

The rink was still mostly empty--just a few couples skating near the edges, giving us a wide berth as word spread through the remaining crowd. I could see faces pressed against the windows, people stopping their conversations to watch.

"This is mortifying," I muttered, gripping Jace's hand as we glided toward the center.

"This was your best friend's idea."

"She's your sister."

"Adopted."

"Still counts."

But even as I complained, something else was bubbling up beneath the embarrassment. We *had* rebuilt this rink. Together. Through all the tension and confusion and almost-moments that had defined the past two weeks, we'd put our hands on the same boards, sealed the same cracks, made something new out of something broken.

Just like us.

Jace must have felt it too, because he slowed as we reached center ice, turning to face me. The scoreboard lights made his eyes glow, and I could see our reflection in the plexiglass--two figures in formal wear, holding hands on the ice we'd rebuilt together.

"Remember what you said?" he asked quietly. "About the video of us from the first time we skated here?"

"I try not to think about the fact that the entire town saw that."

"Not the kissing part." His thumb traced circles on my palm. "The skating part. You said I looked so focused. Like I was trying to solve you like a math problem."

"And I said you never figured out the answer."

"I did, though." He pulled me closer, one hand settling on my waist, the other still holding mine. Like we were about to dance. Or maybe like we were about to start skating together the way we should have years ago. "The answer was always the same. It was always you. I just kept second-guessing my work."

"Jace Mitchell admitting he second-guessed something? Mark the date."

"I'm serious." His voice dropped lower, just for us, even though a hundred eyes were watching. "I wasted four years being scared. I'm not wasting anymore."

He kissed me.



Right there, at center ice, with the whole town watching through the windows. His hands settled at my waist, fingers splayed against the small of my back, steadying me on the ice even as he made my knees go weak. I gripped the front of his shirt and felt his heartbeat thundering beneath my palm--just as fast as mine, just as overwhelmed.

Not hidden. Not stolen. Not something to be ashamed of or explained away.

Just us.

I heard Sophie's muffled scream through the glass. Heard scattered applause from the couples skating nearby. Heard what might have been Mrs. Mitchell crying again.

But mostly I just heard my own heartbeat, and his, and the soft shush of our skates on the ice we'd saved together.

When we finally broke apart, Jace was grinning.

"Well," he said. "That's going to be on the town Facebook page by morning."

"Probably already is."

"My mom's definitely crying."

"Both our moms are crying."

"Worth it?"

I looked at him--this boy who'd taught me to skate, who'd broken my heart, who'd spent four years running from something neither of us could outrun. This boy who'd finally stopped.

"Worth everything."

The gala wound down around midnight.

The next hour was a blur of handshakes and hugs and congratulations.

Mrs. Mitchell found us first. She didn't say anything at first-- just pulled me into an embrace so tight I could barely breathe, her whole body shaking with tears that had nothing delicate about them.

"I always knew," she finally managed, her voice thick. "Even when everything fell apart. Even when I thought I'd lost him to all that anger and fear. I knew you two would find your way back." She pulled back, cupping my face in her hands. "Thank you for not giving up on him."

"He didn't make it easy."

"He never does." She laughed through her tears. "Gets that from his father--" She stopped, caught herself. "Gets the stubbornness from somewhere. But the heart? That's all him."

My mom appeared from somewhere, looking smugly unsurprised, and I heard her mutter to Mrs. Mitchell something about "knowing all along." The two of them drifted off together, probably already planning a wedding that wasn't going to happen for years.

And then Tyler.

Tyler found me near the hot chocolate station, while Jace was trapped in conversation with someone's grandmother.

"So," he said, leaning against the counter. "I'm guessing this means you're not going to be my New Year's Eve date."

"Tyler, I'm so sorry--"

"Don't be." He smiled, and it was genuine. A little sad around the edges, but genuine. "I knew, Mia. I think I always knew. I just hoped..." He shrugged. "But seeing you with him? The way you look at each other?" He shook his head. "I never stood a chance."

"You're going to find someone amazing."

"Obviously. I'm a catch." He straightened his jacket with exaggerated dignity. "D1 hockey player, pre-med, excellent jawline--"

"Modest, too."

"The most modest." His smile softened. "But seriously, Mia. I'm happy for you. Both of you. And if he ever hurts you again, I know where he lives."

"Noted."

He gave me a brief, fierce hug, and then he was gone--disappearing into the crowd with the kind of easy grace that would break hearts for years to come.

I felt someone come up behind me. Warm hands on my waist.
A familiar voice in my ear.

"Everything okay?"

I leaned back into Jace's chest. "Everything's good."

Epilogue: Three Months Later

The Tokyo skyline glittered outside Jace's apartment window.



I'd been here for two days--spring break, the first chance I'd had to visit since he'd left in January. Two days of exploring the city, of eating food I couldn't pronounce, of waking up next to him in a bed that was too small for two people but worked just fine for sleeping tangled together.

Two days of making up for three months apart.

"You know," I said, flopping onto the futon that served as his couch, "this apartment is approximately the size of my closet at school."

"Tokyo real estate." Jace emerged from the tiny kitchen with two cups of coffee. "Also, MIT grad student salary."

"I'm not complaining. Just observing."

"Mmm-hmm." He handed me a cup and settled beside me, pulling my legs into his lap. "How's the jet lag?"

"Brutal. I think my body is currently somewhere over the Pacific."

"You should nap."

"I have forty-eight hours left in Japan. I refuse to spend any of them sleeping."

He laughed, and the sound still made warmth bloom in my chest. Three months of video calls, of texts at weird hours, of missing him like a phantom limb--and here he was. Real and solid and *here*.

My phone buzzed. Sophie, of course--she'd been checking in daily since I landed.

How's Tokyo?? Also I take full credit for everything. FOUR YEARS I waited. You're welcome.

I smiled and typed back a quick *love you too* before setting my phone aside.

"I have a surprise," Jace said.

"Another one? Yesterday's surprise was already too much."

Yesterday's surprise had been a sunset viewing at Tokyo Skytree, followed by dinner at a restaurant where the chef had looked personally offended by my chopstick technique. It had been wonderful.

"This one's different." He set down his coffee and pulled something from his pocket. "Close your eyes."

"Jace--"

"Just do it."

I closed my eyes.

I felt him take my hand, felt something cool and metallic slip over my finger. Not a ring--too long for that. A key.

"Open."



The key was small and silver, attached to a keychain in the shape of a hockey skate.

"What is this?"

"A key." His voice was deliberately casual, but I could see his jaw tighten. "To an apartment. In Boston."

My heart stuttered. "What?"

"I'm coming back." He ran a hand through his hair--nervous, I realized. He was nervous. "After Tokyo. There's this position at an AI research lab, and they work with MIT, so I could finish my degree, and I know it sounds like I'm just--" He stopped, shook his head. "I'm not trying to follow you. That's not what this is. Or maybe it is? I don't know. I just..." He trailed off, then tried again. "Boston's central. Easy train rides to New York. Reasonable flights to California if Stanford is still..." He was rambling now, words tumbling out faster. "God, this sounded better in my head. What I'm trying to say is--"

"Jace--"

He took my face in his hands, steadying himself as much as me. "It's about being somewhere I can build a life with you in it. Whatever that looks like. Whatever you decide. That's all. That's the whole thing."

I stared at the key in my hand. A key. To an apartment. In a city that was a train ride from wherever I ended up.

"I made a decision," I said slowly. "About Stanford."

He went very still. "Yeah?"

"I'm not transferring." The words came out certain, final. "I've been thinking about it for months, and... it's not right. Not because of the program, not because of the soccer. It's just not where I'm supposed to be."

"Where are you supposed to be?"

"I don't know yet." I smiled. "But I've got time to figure it out. And I want to figure it out with you."

He kissed me then--soft and sweet and full of promise. When we broke apart, he was grinning.

"Best Christmas ever?"

I laughed. "That was three months ago."

"I'm still counting it."

I pulled him back to me. "Then yeah. Best Christmas ever."



Outside, Tokyo hummed with life. In three months, I'd be back at school, figuring out my next steps. In six months, he'd be in Boston, building something new. In a year, in five years, in ten--who knew? The future was unwritten, full of variables neither of us could calculate.

But for the first time in a long time, that didn't scare me.

Because whatever came next, we'd figure it out together.

The boy who melted the ice.

The girl who learned to fall.

And the frozen pond where they finally stopped running.

The End

