

THE HOCKEY STAR NEXT DOOR

Team Sweet

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Oceanfront Books

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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Art Painter

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

To my fellow hockey fans. May your team set the tone.

Chapter One

Alicia stared out onto the San Jose skyline. From her vantage point, thirteen stories above the busy streets, she could see the Hemmings Arena lit up.

A sudden cheer from the television snapped her attention back to the broadcast—Game Four of the NHL’s Western Conference Finals.

There he was. Matt LaRue.

The line changed, and the camera panned across the ice. Her breath caught in her throat. She could pick the frame of his body out of a crowd of hundreds, even without seeing his number, she knew. She knew his posture, his speed, and how his body moved on and off the ice. Having memorized every part of his body and how it moved long before he became a household name to millions of hockey fans around the world.

She watched San Jose lose control of the puck. San Jose was playing with the desperation of a team teetering on the edge of elimination. Likewise, with three minutes left in the game, Colorado was on the relentless attack.

“Lasa, back out to the right. Lasa picks the puck out along the wall and shoots- deflected, Dawes to LaRue, and LaRue scores! With less than two minutes left in the third period, LaRue has put Colorado up four to two.”

Alicia’s phone buzzes against the nightstand as the camera focuses on Matt’s face. She doesn’t need to look at her phone to know it was one of her brothers. She could’ve been there. If she’d said the word. Matt would’ve made it happen.

He always did.

From an early age, Alicia knew Matt was destined for greatness. As kids, he had been the first to master the monkey bars, the first to ditch their training wheels, climb a tree, and break a bone. Long before, he had become extraordinary to an entire league and a devoted fan base—he had been extraordinary to her. He had always been a gifted hockey player, and years ago, he had been a wonderful boyfriend—until he wasn’t.

She turns her attention to the game, watches as Matt charges up the ice, barely slowing down—he sets up his shot and sends another puck screaming into San Jose’s now empty net. Five to two with less than twenty seconds on the clock. She can feel a tightening in her chest. Tears of longing mix with the tears of joy at his accomplishment. She loves him, and not like thousands of Colorado fans across the nation love him at that minute. No, after years of denying it, she knows—she is still in love with her ex.

Chapter Two

Less than an hour after the game ends, Alicia finds herself across town, seated on the patio of the hotel bar where their families are staying. The electrifying buzz from the game still echoes around those assembled. Beside her, her niece Lindsey sits crayons in hand, completing a word search printed on a kid's menu.

She hadn't planned to be here—not in San Jose, not surrounded by both their families—but a last-minute business trip had brought her to California. As the youngest and only female head of programming in her company's history, Alicia had jumped at the opportunity. Yet, now, nerves fluttered in her chest, more from the possibility of seeing Matt than from tomorrow's client pitch.

Being with her niece helps. Looking around at the makeshift party, Alicia couldn't help but smile. When was the last time they had all been together? She decides it must have been her younger brother Mark's wedding two years ago.

Her and Matt's parents had been friends and business partners for over forty years. Growing up, over school breaks and holidays, they often blended into one large family.

But as often happens as kids grow up and leave home, the families spend less time together. Matt's sister Amber moved to Oakland after college and was now an orthodontist with two kids and a hockey obsessed husband Joe. Meanwhile, Alicia's brother Mark had settled in San Jose where he had met his wife Macie and had recently welcomed a baby who was, to Alicia's dismay, at home with a sitter. Matt's series against San Jose had been the perfect reunion for the families now spread between Colorado and California.

Alicia's oldest brother, Marshall, hands her another beer before settling in beside her. Despite being Matt's best friend, he is protective of her and her feelings.

Alicia's blissful family moment ends as the patio erupted in cheers with the arrival of Matt—and his girlfriend who clings to his side like a designer handbag. Alicia swears she sees Amber's nose crinkle at the sight of Natalie, although it could be her own projections and wishful thinking.

She hadn't wanted this — wasn't ready.

Shock spreads across his face and for a brief second, he freezes before recovering. He smiles before pulling her into a hug that is warm, familiar, and dangerous. Alicia could have stayed in that embrace for the rest of her life, but as it ends, she catches an annoyed look from Natalie.

"I didn't think you were coming." He speaks softly.

Still reeling from the feeling of their bodies pressed together, words fail her.

"She wasn't," Marshall cuts in with a grin. "Work dragged her into town last minute. Missed your game, though... subpar as it was." He teases as the two break into a ridiculously elaborate handshake created way back in the fifth grade, which eventually ends in a man hug.

Matt turns and looks directly at her. "I'm really glad you are here," he shares before being pulled away by his father, David.

Later, as she stands at the bar, Matt approaches "So," he says, drawing out the word. "How have you been? How is Alec?"

"I am good. Busy," she keeps it light, avoiding his second question. "Caught your game against Seattle."

"You were there?" he asks, surprised. "Why didn't you tell me? We could've met up. Did Alec like it?"

Meeting his gaze, she answers the question he really wants. "We broke up a couple of months ago. No drama, it just- wasn't working."

Matt's hazel eyes soften. "Guess he wasn't the one, huh?" Matt questions while looking a little too long into her eyes.

She meets his gaze. "I guess not." She can feel him studying her-his eyes lingering.

“And Natalie?” She asks without really wanting to know the answer.

Matt gives a tired-half smile. “She says we need to move in together and work on my brand” He rolls his hazel eyes at this. Of course, thinks Alicia. Natalie was an inspiring influencer, and Matt was her latest brand campaign.

“You have been together for a year. Moving in together doesn’t seem too far-fetched.” She tries to sound neutral while questioning how she is defending Natalie’s idea? “But...” she adds quickly, “Only do it if it’s right, and for what it’s worth... I think your brand is fine.” Alicia considers excusing herself and making a beeline to her own hotel, but she doesn’t.

Instead, Matt beats her to the retreat. “I should say my goodbyes and call it a night,” he says, gently squeezing her hand. “It was really nice seeing you, Alicia.”

And just like that, he is gone again.

Chapter Three

Ten Years Ago

The Nationwide Arena in Columbus Ohio goes silent as the management team of the Los Angeles Kings takes the stage. This could be it. Every pundit had said this would be it. “With the first pick of this year’s National Hockey League Draft, the Los Angeles Kings select Matthew LaRue.”

Long after the interviews, handshakes, and congratulations from strangers, Matt and Alicia sit in the hotel restaurant. Matt is too excited to go to sleep, and despite having attended an elaborate dinner earlier, is still hungry. Matt wears a LA Kings jersey over his gray suit. Her purple dress costs more than the prom dress she wore only months before to his senior prom. Part of her feels ridiculous, they are teenagers dressed in formal wear, eating a lavish dessert, pretending their parents are not sitting at a table across the room enjoying cocktails, cocktails that her and Matt aren’t even old enough to drink, and yet he has just been drafted into the NHL.

None of this changes anything, she reminded herself. He is still the same Matt- *your Matt*, the Matt you have known your entire life, the same Matt who has already committed to the University of Denver, where if things go according to plan, she will join him next fall.

Chapter Four

It is lightly raining as Alicia jogs to a stop in front of her apartment building. Alicia's apartment in the Highland neighborhood of Denver is considered luxury, which means it is new-ish. The building caters to mostly single professionals in their late twenties and early thirties drawn to nearby bars, restaurants, and stores within walking distance. After a quick elevator ride to the fourth floor and a shower, she blows dry her long wavy blonde hair. As she finishes her phone alerts her to a new message.

Matt: I am down the block. Lunch?

I just got home from a run. You and Natalie enjoy.

Matt: Just me. Please come out. You can order dessert as an appetizer, and I will not say a word. Please.

She sighs and thinks before responding. *Fine, but you better not say a word.*

Matt: It is a promise

As she gets ready, Alicia tries to not overthink things. Not that long ago, it had not been uncommon for them to hang out, share a meal, or escape to the mountains for a morning hike. In fact, for a while, they would get together at least once a month. Of course, all that had changed a year ago. Since then, she had only seen him twice, and never alone.

Without time to get ready, Alicia resigns herself to simple makeup and slips on her favorite pair of jeans and a cream blouse. Matt is waiting for her at a table at the back of the restaurant. He stands as she nears the table and the usual sensation races throughout her body at the sight of him. His brown hair is grown out- no haircut until after playoffs. Matt is about as rational as it comes, except for playoff superstitions. He is casually dressed in a black hoodie and gray shorts.

"Maybe your brand does need some work," she quips playfully as she sits down across from him.

“Do not even joke about it. Natalie wanted me to hire a stylist friend of hers.” He rolls his eyes. “As if anyone cares what a hockey player wears” He slides the basket of bread and a dish of oil and vinegar that he had clearly been working on towards the middle of the table.

“So, what brings you to my neighborhood?” She asks desperately, trying to sound casual.

“Practice ended, and I had some things I needed to do.” He offers no further explanation, and she does not push. Silence falls as they look over their menus. It has been two days since San Jose and Alicia has been unable to stop thinking about Matt, and not just because the city is abuzz with the Finals coming to Denver.

“I passed a billboard with your face on it.” She shares. “Pretty wild, everything you have worked and wanted for so long. I am happy for you.”

“Not everything,” Matt says quietly.

“Just four more wins.”

Tension fades into comfortable shared jokes over food. Lunch ends too quickly. Outside, the smell of perception hangs in the air. A few storefronts away, they stop for ice cream before strolling slowly through the neighborhood, taking an indirect route back to her building.

Chapter Five

University of Denver- Nine Years Ago

Alicia was finishing fitting her mattress with a sheet when she heard a knock on her door. “It’s open.” She called, flinging her pillows into place on her bed.

“What would your mom say about you leaving your door unlocked?” Matt asks, stepping into her dorm room.

“A good long lecture. Though, I suspect she would not like me having a boy in my room, either.”

“Oh, yeah?” He grins, pulling her close, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her. “Your mom loves me.”

She kisses him back, slow and longing, then gently pulls away before things could go any further. “We’re going to be late for dinner with Marshall,” she pauses, considering kissing him again, canceling dinner. But she knows she can’t. “He’s bringing that girl, Hannah—he seems really into her. So be nice.”

Matt lets out a groan before giving her another quick kiss and leading her out of the room.

Chapter Six

Alicia pulls open her mailbox. Junk mail, a magazine, more, her latest book splurge, more junk mail, and a manilla envelope hand addressed to her. She opens it and pulls out a ticket for game three of the Stanley Cup finals and a note. She recognizes Matt's handwriting.

"Hope you can make it. Your seat is with my parents, Marshall, and Heather."

Chapter Seven

DENVER- 7 Years Ago

“This is the one, right?” Matt questions as Alicia opens the bathroom closet.

“I think so. It is perfect.” After an exhaustive search for an apartment near campus, this one feels right. It is small, but shouldn’t all first apartments be small? It is a short drive to the campus, or a 10-minute walk in pleasant weather. The kitchen has been newly updated, and utilities are included. The best part? No more dorm rooms across campus from each other, no more having to schedule in time together. From here on out, after classes and practices, they will come home to each other.

Chapter Eight

Game Three

The excitement within Ball Arena is palpable. Fans clothed in navy and burgundy stream through the entrances and down the walkways. Alicia makes her way to her seat; Marshall and his wife Heather are already there, along with Mr. and Ms. LaRue. Pleasantries exchanged; Alicia settles into her chair with a beer and soaks in the scene playing out in front of her. Thousands of fans hoping for victory. Lights dim and spotlights move around the arena, settling onto the ice. The Avalanche logo projects onto the ice and the music rises, sending the crowd into a frenzy. High above the rink, a large screen counts down from ten, 17,000 plus voices count down to zero. The announcer introduces the home players. As Matt skates onto the ice, his name and number flashes on the big screen and the crowd erupts in appreciation for their native son. The game begins and for the next twenty minutes, Alicia can barely contain her nerves. Each second Matt spends on the ice she feels throughout her body. Anticipation building. With six minutes left in the period, New York gets the puck past Colorado's goalie and goes up one to zero. The energy within the arena shifts. The volume from the stands lowers as the home crowd gets worried.

Colorado wins the faceoff, and Matt moves the puck down the ice towards New York's net. He passes the puck and sets himself up to the left of the goalie. The puck moves from stick to stick as The Rangers try to defend. The puck finds Matt; he shoots. Blocked, but they are quick to recover. Matt gets the puck again and skates it behind the net. This time he sends it sailing to an awaiting teammate who knocks it into the goal. All at once everyone is on their feet and a buzzer sounds. The clock runs down at the end of the first period. Tied one-one.

Colorado finds its legs in the second period. Quickly going up two-to-one. Rejuvenated, the home crowd seems to be willing their team to victory. Three-to-one.

Alicia wants to relax, to let herself get lost in the rhythm of the game without the constant undercurrent of tension. She grew up on hockey—she loves it—but playoff hockey is a different beast entirely. The atmosphere is electric, the stakes impossibly high.

And now, with Matt in the race for the Cup, everything feels amplified. Watching the man she's spent years loving—through the heartbreak, distance, and everything in between—fight for something he has dreamed of since childhood is terrifying.

Looking at Ms. and Mr. LaRue, she recognizes the same look of tension on their faces that she feels. She can't imagine what they are feeling. She briefly thinks about how much their contributions have gotten Matt to this point. She tries to liven the mood and ease the atmosphere before the third period by making small talk. Ms. LaRue's body relaxes and her demeanor changes as she happily fills her in on Amber and her family, showing off the newest pictures of them at the zoo. Amber's oldest son, Asher, reminds Alicia of what Matt looked like as a kid. She feels the familiar feeling of loss swell in her heart. It has been years. She should not still be grieving the loss of a future she had dreamed up as nothing more than a lovesick teenager. Some dreams are just not destined to be. As if reading her mind, "You know dear, Matt and Natalie broke up." Patti mentions.

Alicia is stunned. "We had lunch last week, and he didn't say anything."

"All he told me was that he thought it was for the best. That he didn't see a future there."

The start of the third period ends their conversation.

Alicia tries to focus on the third period but cannot stop thinking about what Ms. LaRue said. He had dumped Natalie; he had dumped Natalie after they had seen each other in San Jose.

The clock runs out on the game and the crowd counts down the seconds. They get louder with each second: ten-nine-eight-seven-six-five-four-three-two-one! Colorado takes a two-to-one lead on the series.

Afterwards, they wait with the families of other players as they change and speak to the press. When Matt finally emerges, he looks positively beside

himself as he walks towards them. Alicia knows he has to play it cool with the press, but she can feel the happiness radiating off him. He lifts his mom up for a hug. For one moment, he lives in the present — he has accomplished one childhood dream by scoring a goal in a Stanley Cup final at *home*. Tomorrow, he will refocus on the bigger goal — the ultimate goal.

He smiles at Alicia before getting swept up in conversation with his dad and Marshall.

Later, as they walk his parents to their car, Matt slows his pace and settles in beside her. “I am too pumped to go home. Can we go somewhere and talk?”

She nods.

Despite the game ending over two hours ago, the streets along the arena still buzz with excitement. Matt pulls his hat farther down on his head and looks at the ground as they make their way through the crowds. As they walk towards the state capital building, the crowds fade. They find a coffee shop that is mostly empty and free of any noticeable Avs fans.

At first, they talk about the game, he replays what he can remember. She tells him what she remembers. It was a blur to them both.

Finally, Alicia works up the courage to ask what has been on her mind.

“Why didn’t you tell me you and Natalie had broken up?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you and Alec had broken up?” He counters.

“Because it happened months ago, and besides, you two were just talking about moving in together.”

He shrugs. “It just wasn’t working out. And she was the one who was talking about moving in together — and I doubt it was because she loved me, she was with me because of what I do — not because of who I am. Besides, it was never supposed to be serious, just someone to have fun with.”

“I am sorry Matt; you deserve someone who wants to be with you for you and not for your job.” She says, wanting to say more, to say she loves him

for him— the inner and outer scars included.

He just nods.

She regrets asking. Regrets the feeling hanging between the two of them now. She shifts the conversation back to hockey as they walk back towards the arena.

They stop in front of her car, and she realizes she wants him to kiss her. She wants to feel the heat of his mouth on hers and to get a taste of what kissing him feels like again. She shifts in her shoes and feels much like the awkward girl she was way back in middle school crushing on her big brother's best friend.

He steps forward and for a moment she thinks he is going to, but instead he takes her hand and squeezes it. "Well, I should get going, I need to pack and get ready. You may have not heard, but I have a plane to catch to New York." He laughs,

"Oh, I had not heard." She plays along. "Something important?"

"I guess you could say that." He laughs a little. "It's a work thing. I really should be going." He drops her hand and walks away.

"Hey, Matt?" she calls

He turns "Yeah?"

"Good luck in New York."

Chapter Nine

Los Angeles - Three And A Half Years Ago

Alicia had tried to feel at home in Los Angeles. While Matt was living out his dream, she often felt like a passenger along for the ride. She'd sent out hundreds of job applications—without a single interview in return.

She knew breaking in was tough, and that it wouldn't necessarily be any easier back in Colorado. But that didn't make it any less frustrating. At least there she had a network of her former cohort from school, connections *she* had made for herself in the community. She hated relying on him, hated how so much of her identity in LA was based on *him*—and was funded by his success. And the more time passed, the more lost she felt.

Meanwhile, Alicia knew that Matt loved Los Angeles. He loved the pace of the city; loved the food, the weather. He loved the nightlife and the financial freedom his contract afforded them. He kept reassuring her. And yet, he knew Alicia was unsettled. They both were growing distant. He could tell she was pretending everything was okay. They both knew she wanted a life outside of being a hockey player's girlfriend; she wanted a career, her own money. But there was also a part of Matt that resented her attitude towards their life. He had worked endlessly to achieve a dream very few athletes get, a dream she had encouraged.

Neither of them liked the state of their relationship. They spent more time fighting and eventually more and more time apart. When he wasn't on the ice or working out, he had taken to spending time with his teammates. Hitting bars, going out. Some nights Alicia would go along but never felt like she belonged.

Chapter Ten

Game Five

Marshall and Heather's house was filled with shouting and the thump of little feet across the hardwood floors. Alicia helped her brother clean up after dinner and fill the dishwasher.

Any visit to Marshall and Heather's house came with a little chaos courtesy of their three young kids: twin two-year-old boys, and a four-year-old girl.

Alicia looks at Marshall, wiping her hands on a yellow dish towel. "How have you been?" genuinely curious, given the balance he and Heather face between two busy careers and three adorable but highly energetic kids.

"We are surviving. Lindsey starting kindergarten in the fall will be a help." He places a plate in the dishwasher and looks up at her. "How are you doing?"

"I am good. Work is keeping me busy."

"I meant, *how* are you doing? With Matt?" he asks, his voice dropping slightly.

Alicia pauses for a moment. She knows Marshall means well. But she is not ready to give a truthful answer to herself, let alone her big brother, who is also *his* best friend.

Marshall persists, glancing over at her. "I saw the way he looked at you at the game. It was clear he was glad you were there." He presses on "Look, whatever happened with the two of you last year, I don't need to know. I am just glad there seems to be a thawing of the ice."

Alicia lets out a quiet sigh as she makes her way over to the oversized navy-blue sectional that dominates Marshall and Heather's living room. "We are friends." She says, her voice firm but calm. "And I'm thrilled for him, with how his career's going. I just... I don't want to complicate things."

Marshall turns on the game. “Kids, Uncle Matt’s game is about to start!” He yells upstairs.

Three insanely adorable kids come running down the stairs screaming “Uncle Matt!”

Heather follows the tail of chaos and cuddles up beside Marshall. One of the twins climbs in between them. “Okay, kids, but you only get the first period, so make it count!” Heather warns, and so for the next twenty minutes of the game, the kids cheer their hearts out for Matt from thousands of miles away.

It is one-one at the end of the first period. Heather nudges Marshall off the couch. “I bathed them. You get to put them down.” He leans over and gives her a kiss before scooping up the twins.

“Fair is fair,” he says as he ushers them back upstairs and into bed.

Heather turns to Alicia. “He is only worried about you because he loves you.”

“I know, but I am fine.”

“Are you though? Look, Alicia, you are thriving at work. You have a kick ass apartment that I am jealous of, but it has been three years since you and Matt broke up, and a year from whatever happened that made you two stop being friends, and you have mostly closed yourself off to love.”

“That is not true. I dated Alec!”

“Yes, you *dated* Alec. For two years you went on dates, but never got serious, and that is fine. Casual is good, but Alec was safe, and you know it. Alec was the rebound from Matt, who hung around too long.”

Heather’s words stung more than she cared to admit. “Wow, okay, so Alec was not the great love of my life, but not every relationship is going to end in wedding bells and three kids.”

“But—”

Alicia interrupts, “No, there is no but, we are friends.” Although even as she says the words, she misses him.

The Rangers dominate the second period, taking a commanding four to one lead. Try as they might, Colorado could not get back into the game. And as Colorado's frustration mounted, so did their penalties. At the final buzzer, the score was five to two. New York was threatening, but the series was coming back to Colorado for Game Six.

Chapter Eleven

Los Angeles - Three Years Ago

Alicia's body slumped to the floor. The weight of shock and devastation weighing her down. Her breathing was too fast, her stomach churned, and she thought she might pass out or be sick—maybe both. Alicia closed her eyes and tried to calm her breathing. Only it did not work. When she closed her eyes, all she could see was the video posted to social media for anyone to see. Matt on a dance floor, touching and being kissed by a stranger-kissing that stranger back before breaking off the kiss and walking away. Sure, he had ended it- he had walked away, but *after*. After 3 agonizing seconds that she had replayed over and over.

All Alicia wanted to do was to cry, but the tears didn't come. What was the matter with her? Instead, waves of intense anger, disbelief, and loss flooded over her. She opened her eyes and was bombarded with signs of their life together. Furniture they had picked, a rug from his grandmother's house that, as kids, they had built Legos on. She was dumbstruck. In a moment, their entire friendship, relationship, years together, were all devalued. She pulled herself up off the floor and made her way to the bedroom.

Alicia pulled her phone from her pocket and opened the link back up. She clicked the share option and sent it to Matt. Then she turned her phone off and started packing.

Chapter Twelve

Game Six

Alicia is in Manhattan for a two-day conference. She tries to focus on the conversations taking place at her table, but her eyes keep drifting to the television over the bar. Colorado is playing shakily on home ice, but Matt is keeping them in the game. In the first two periods he has two goals and an assist, but they are still trailing five to three.

Despite Matt getting a rare playoff hat trick, Colorado loses six to four. At the buzzer, the restaurant goes crazy. Alicia considers texting Matt but decides against it. The series is now tied three games apiece, heading to game seven in New York. After she settles back in her hotel room for the night, she pulls out her phone and sends Matt a picture of a hat and *“Tough loss, but you pissed off some folks here in NY.”*

He writes back *“Thanks, but did not matter, we still lost. Fairly sure folks here hate us too.”*

Nobody hates you. She writes, but he doesn't respond.

Chapter Thirteen

Los Angeles - Three Years Ago

Matt apologized repeatedly. He said all the usual things people say in that situation. He was drunk. It meant nothing. That would never happen again. But try as she might, she just could not bring herself to swallow her pride or his bullshit and forgive him. All their friends, their families had seen or at least heard about the video about what happened. She did not want to become a cliché. That did not mean she stopped caring. Instead, even after moving back to Denver, she would wake up every morning for months and instinctively reach for him. Then one day she stopped reaching.

Chapter Fourteen

New York takes the series and the Cup in game seven. Alicia turns off her television and makes herself a cup of mint tea. She tries to distract herself with a new fantasy novel, but while ordinarily she would have got lost in the mythical world, tonight she couldn't focus. Her mind continued to return to the lack of devastation on Matt's face as his team skated off the ice.

She picks up her phone and opens her messages. She drafts a text to him, but before she can send it, she sees three dots appear. He is writing to her. She waits, but the dots disappear. She waits another second before hitting send.

"I am so sorry. You were brilliant. Everyone is saying you are a breakout star. You will get it next year. Lunch when you are back and ready?"

The message status changes to read. The dots appear again, but then disappear. She gives up and sets her phone down and tries to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Denver- Two Years Ago

Alicia was running late. “If you are not early, you are late,” her dad had taught her. She had a presentation in an hour. It was her first as a junior partner, and she wanted it to go well. Despite waking up early, she was now sitting at a dead stop in traffic less than a mile from her office. Alicia fidgeted in her seat. The morning news provided little hope in the traffic front.

“In sports news, local hockey star Matt LaRue is returning to Colorado. Last night the Colorado Avalanche acquired Matt LaRue in a trade from the Los Angeles Kings, signing him to a six-year, thirteen-million-dollar contract. LaRue was drafted by the LA Kings four years ago in the first round, before leading the University of Denver Pioneers to back-to-back NCAA National Hockey Championships. LaRue is a native of Colorado, growing up in Green Mountain Falls. Sources say LaRue preferred not to stay with LA, desiring a return to Colorado. Our congratulations go out to the LaRue family.”

Alicia turned off the radio.

Chapter Sixteen

It is after midnight, and someone is pounding on her door. Alicia jumps out of bed, adrenaline flowing through her body. She looks out the peephole. Matt.

She opens her door. “Matt?! It is midnight!”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Okay, well then come in, because I can guarantee you that my neighbors don’t want to talk to you.”

“Alicia, I lost, and all I could think of was you.”

“Matt, have you been drinking? Are you okay?”

“What? No, Alicia, please listen to what I am trying to say. I am trying to tell you that no, I am not okay. Without you, I am lost. I have been trying to move on for a long time, but when I saw you in San Jose, something snapped, and I knew how broken I was without you. I tried to push you out of my mind, to focus on the game, and when I was on the ice I could, but then when I got home, I just felt empty, and so I found reasons to see you, because even though you still hate me, every second near you is better than a lifetime away from you.” He moves towards her.

“Matt. Losing sucks, but you cannot just come here in the middle of the night and expect me to make it better. You cannot put that on me.” She gestures towards the door, and he gets the message and moves to the door.

“You are right Alicia; I cannot put this on you. I should not have come here, I just made it worse.”

“Thank you, but my anger faded a long time ago, okay?”

“Really?”

“Yes, now if you want to sit down and have a glass of water and calm down, we can call you a ride, okay? I do not think you should be driving.”

He nods. "I am not drunk."

"Okay, Matt," She is not sure she believes him. "Maybe not, but water and a few minutes before driving is still a good idea."

She fills two glasses of water and gestures for him to sit at her small kitchen table.

"I cannot pretend to relate to what you have been through the last week. I know what a rollercoaster the last month has been for you. The highs and lows, but maybe you should talk to someone?" She suggests.

"Yeah, maybe you are right. I am a big mess, aren't I?"

"No comment." She gives him a slight smile.

"Alicia, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, but I may or may not be able to answer your question."

He nods. "If I hadn't cheated, do you think we would still be together?"

"For a long time, I thought so. I placed all the blame on you for us ending, but with some distance, time, and a little therapy of my own, I see we had bigger issues. We both know I was not happy in LA. I have questioned that too. If I had been more willing to embrace living there, and your world—maybe we might not have grown apart. Maybe you wouldn't have found yourself in that situation that night? But that is not a fair or easy question either." She can feel the emotion in her voice, and she refuses to cry in front of him. "We were young, Matt; it was a long time ago. We are good now. We are friends, right?"

"Yeah, friends." He finishes his water. "Well, I should get out of here and let you get back to sleep. I am sorry, Alicia, really for everything."

She walks him to the door and then watches him from a window as his car pulls out onto the street. After she takes a long time to fall back asleep. She sits in bed replaying what happened, what was said, how it was said, and she realizes it really is time to leave the past behind, holding on to what happened is not helping her, and punishing him is not doing either of them any good.

Chapter Seventeen

Denver Two Years Ago

It was bound to happen. They had avoided each other for a year. So why wouldn't they bump into each other at the airport headed to her brother Mark's wedding? At first, she had wanted to run, catch a later flight. But no, that was ridiculous. Besides, wasn't it better to get this out of the way now, instead of when they landed or when they were at the wedding?

They sat at the gate, skirting around the one topic that hovered between them—their breakup, or whether either of them was seeing someone new. Instead, they stuck to safer ground: hockey, Matt's signing with Colorado, her job, their families, and Mark's upcoming wedding. Eventually, even the weather. Just when Alicia thought the small talk couldn't get any more painful, the gate attendant announced the boarding of their flight and Matt left with the other first-class passengers.

The rolling green hills of California's wine country made a beautiful backdrop for Mark and Macie's wedding. As dusk settled in, twinkle lights wound through the branches of the coastal oak trees flickered to life. To Alicia, the effect felt nothing short of magical. She looked out onto the dance floor where her parents were dancing. Despite having come face to face with Matt for the first time since their breakup, the weekend had been beautiful and full of love.

"Can I sit down?" She had not noticed Matt come up behind her.

"Sure."

Matt handed her a piece of wedding cake.

"Thank you." Of course, he knew Alicia's sweet tooth.

"You look beautiful, Alicia."

Macie had selected blush pink floor length bridesmaids' dresses. The color went well with Alicia's natural tan. Even she had to admit she felt beautiful.

"Thanks. As far as bridesmaids' dresses go, I cannot complain."

"It is not the dress." He offered.

"Matt..."

"I know. It is not the right place, but I just had to tell you."

"Thanks, it's just that I just started seeing someone."

His face changes slightly, but he recovers quickly. "Oh, well, I am happy for you, Alicia, really. Hopefully, he is better than that last jerk of a boyfriend you dated. Could not stand that guy, he was the worst."

"Yeah, the worst." She agrees, not fully meaning it.

"So, what is the new guy's story?"

"Matt, we don't need to do this." But he looks at her expectantly. "Fine, his name is Alec. We met at a programming conference. He is a huge fan of yours—thinks you are going to change Avalanche hockey."

Matt laughs. "I like him already."

Chapter Eighteen

A little over a year ago

The trail opened into a wide meadow dotted with purple wildflowers. They had gotten up early, meeting for a quick coffee and breakfast before heading into the mountains. This time of year, Maxwell Falls was one of Alicia's favorite day hikes away from Denver. Today was just the two of them. Marshall and Heather were busy with the kids, Alec was visiting his family in Fort Collins, and Matt was between girlfriends. It did not matter though, in the last year, they had settled into a renewed friendship that, and so long as they steered away from talking about their past relationship, had been working for the two of them.

They were almost back to the trailhead and Matt's car, but the sun was now intense, and they were tired from their four-mile hike. Alicia stopped for water.

"Ready?" Matt asks as Alicia slipped her water bottle back into its pocket on her backpack. "Ready!" She says as she begins up the trail again. Pushing ahead of him, wanting to set the pace and show Mr. NHL up. About a quarter mile later, her hiking boot hit a tree root wrong, twisting her foot. A burning sensation spread over her ankle and up her leg.

Matt bent down, examining her ankle. "I think it is a goner, definitely going to lose the leg." He quips, incapable of being serious for too long. "I am going to have to carry you back."

"No! I just sprained it; I can walk it off." She took a few shaky steps before realizing the pain was worse than she had first thought. She stopped and looked at him, not wanting to admit defeat or ask him for help.

"That's it. I am carrying you." Before she could protest further, he picked her up and began walking again.

Embarrassment spread throughout her. She felt ridiculous, and with each passing step, a little more uneasy in his arms. Her brain felt warm; her entire body tingled. She could still remember what it felt like to lose herself

in his touch and was certain her face was now flush. “I am good. I can walk.” She squeaked out as she turned to look at him. His eyes looked into hers, their mouths so close. He sat her down, but he did not try to separate their bodies, instead he placed a hand behind her neck and pulled her mouth to his. She forgot all about the pain as she shifted her weight and kissed him back. Her brain screams “Stop!” but her body was hungry for his kiss. He ran his hand along her lower back, moving her even closer to him, their bodies now pressed against each other. She felt his longing and answered with her own. Alec’s face flashed in her mind, and she pulled away, instantly regretting her actions.

She was mad, mad at herself, mad at him, mad that in an instant she had done to Alec what she had never forgiven Matt for.

“Wow, Alicia, that was...”

“That was a mistake.” She interjected. “I am with Alec, and I cannot believe I did that to him.”

“I know, but come on, this, us, tell me honestly Alicia, didn’t that feel right? Because by God to me that felt right, and it felt like a long time coming.”

Part of her agreed. Part of her wanted to say screw it and throw caution and Alec to the wind and kiss Matt again; to fall back into the attraction- to the love she had never been able to fully deny. But that was not who she was.

“No, that was a mistake, and it is not happening again,” and with that she spun, sending bolts of pain throughout her body as she limped back to the car.

The drive back to Denver was uncomfortable. Anger boiled throughout her body. She rested her head against the passenger side window and scorned herself. How could she have done that? She had to tell Alec she had to tell him about the kiss. Oh, that kiss, though. Kissing Alec was never like that. No, she could not entrain thoughts of it.

Matt pulled his car up in front of her apartment.

“Alicia, you can hate me all you want, but maybe now you can see how easy it is to get lost in lust and, in an instant, screw up.”

She wanted to scream at him, to defend herself, and figure out how his actions years before were nothing like this, but she couldn't, because he was right.

That night, she cried and felt even worse. When Alec did what she could not bring herself to do years ago, he stayed. A few weeks later, she heard Matt had a new girlfriend—Natalie.

Chapter Nineteen

Matt is calling. It's been weeks since he showed up at her door in the middle of the night and since then she has sent at least a half dozen unanswered texts and at least one call accompanied with a cheery voicemail. Her resolve to move forward, towards maybe a new chance, is fading.

"Hello."

"Alicia, my dad had a stroke." Matt's voice trembles. "I am headed there now." His voice trails off as her phone beeps. It is her mother.

"Do you want me to go with you?" she offers, unsure of if she wants him to take her up on my offer, but she knows either way she will need to head to the hospital.

"Um. Yes, that would be good." He pauses. "It wouldn't be too awkward for you?" He asks. Now her dad is calling.

"Only if you sing the entire way." She retorts, remembering one memorable road trip when they were in elementary school where he, his dad, and Marshall sang made up songs all the way to Mount Rushmore. Amber and Alicia had sat in the back of the LaRue's minivan, mortified as they made up song after song about farting, burping, and armpit sweat.

He chuckles a little. "Deal, that was one glorious trip, though." He offers. "My dad made that special for us, didn't he?" She laughs a little and agrees.

"I can be ready in thirty minutes." She offers. "Want me to drive?"

"No, driving will give me something to focus on. I will call you when I get closer. And Alicia, thanks for coming with me. I can't lose him."

Less than an hour later, Matt eases his car into the southbound entrance of interstate twenty-five. Her hastily packed duffle bag sits in his back seat next to his much nicer piece of actual luggage.

Thankfully, traffic is light, and they make good time. Mr. LaRue is being transferred from their small mountain hospital to a larger hospital in Colorado Springs. The radio offers little reprieve from the awkward silence that exists between them and of their emotions for his father. She takes a shallow breath and jumps into the awkwardness.

“Matt, it is going to be okay. He is a fighter; you got your fight from him.” She offers. He does not look at her, instead he is glaring at the road.

“Amber and Dan dropped the kids off at Mark’s. The kids are excited to see the baby. And my mom and dad are with your mom.” Alicia realizes Matt has likely heard all this before, but it helps her to say it aloud to digest all the moving parts of what is happening right now across their families.

Miles pass in silence. They leave Denver behind, and pass patches of suburban houses, open spaces, and tree filled hillsides. As they near Colorado Springs, Matt lets out a “Shit.”

“What?” Alicia questions.

“Amber, what is she doing with the kids and who is picking her up? Is Dan coming?”

So much for driving, focusing him— or him listening to her. “The kids are with Mark and Macie. Amber and Dan are on their way to the airport, and Marshall will pick them up when they land and will drive them down.”

“You told me that already, didn’t you Livy?”

Mark hadn’t called her Livy since the breakup. Matt had been sixteen months old when she was born and could not say Alicia, and so for the first few years of her life he had called her baby Livy. Eventually, the nickname became a part of their connection. There was no time for her to digest the return of his special name for her.

“It is okay, Matt.” She reaches over and squeezes his right hand. “It will be okay.”

Chapter Twenty

“The clot traveled from his heart to his brain, lodging itself into an artery and blocking the flow of blood.” Her mom speaks quietly but quickly as they huddle in the waiting room. “They took him back to perform some kind of treatment. I have it written here somewhere.” Her mother begins to dig through her purse. “It is called a carotid endarterectomy.” Her dad pipes in, “It is supposed to remove the plaque lining and help with the blood flow.”

Mark is with his mother and a patient care worker. She can tell both her parents have been crying. Despite only seeing her parents weeks before, they both look like they have aged years with worry. Parents' aging sneaks up on us, though we know it is an unpleasant fact—it is one we ignore until it is too late.

Alicia sits with her mother while her dad goes to find coffee. Like most people, she dislikes hospitals; she finds them to be sterile and somber. Too filled with regret and not enough hope. She passes the time staring at her laptop, trying to work and drinking the not-too horrible coffee her father had found.

Matt returns. The stroke was massive. His dad is in surgery, and it would be hours until they will know anything. While Alicia's mother takes Ms. LaRue to the hospital chapel, Matt paces the room. Patience is one skill he never mastered, ever the take charge, move forward type she can tell Matt is struggling with the wait.

He comes and sits by her for a minute, but then he bolts from the chair and the room. Alicia puts down her computer and follows him. She finds him standing at the end of an empty hallway. His back is to the wall and his eyes closed. Trying to avoid disturbing him, she stops, but he opens his eyes, and they lock on to hers. On instinct, she goes to him and wraps his muscular frame into a hug. For once, the pain of the past does not matter. They stay there for a long time, interlocked. When he loosens the hug, she takes his hand, and they walk back to the waiting room.

Their hands are still intertwined, hours later when Marshall, Amber, and Dan arrive. She can tell Marshall and Amber notice because a surprised reaction passes across both their faces before shifting their attention towards Ms. LaRue. It is nothing; she tells herself. The hug and the hand holding are friendly. They are comforting.

Another hour passes before the surgeon arrives and takes Amber, Dan, Ms. LaRue, and her own mother to a conference room to discuss the situation. Ms. LaRue's scream is heard down the hallway.

Chapter Twenty-One

Later, Alicia follows a nurse down the hall, past pictures of local Colorado landscapes. His room is in a corner and filled with the machines sustaining his fading life. Much of the color has drained from his body. Matt is sitting at his bedside. Marshall stands behind him. He notices Alicia and trades with her. She places a hand on Matt's back. She means it to be reassuring, but she is uncertain how much assurance she or anyone can provide at this moment. Matt stands up and motions for Alicia to sit down. Uncertainty fills her. What does she say? Before her lies one of the most prominent figures in her life. A giant of a man. A man who treated her like a daughter. Gazing at his face, tears well up in her eyes. It is too soon; he is too young. He had so much left to see and do, his grandchildren, Matt's career, retirement with Patti, their plans to eat their way across the European continent.

Alicia takes his hand in hers, bows her head. She silently thanks him for being her second father, for all that he taught her. She tells him she loves him, that she loves his family, and will be there for them. Finally, she says goodbye.

She stands and hugs Matt. "I am so sorry, Matt." Gasping between tears. She is sorry for everything, for the amazing life that was being stolen from them. Sorry she could not ease Matt's pain. But in addition to that, now confronted with the frailty of life, she is sorry she wasted so many years hiding her true feelings. "I will give you some time," she says and walks towards the door. Pausing at the doorway, she watches as Matt sits back down to say his own goodbye to his father.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It is past midnight when they leave the hospital. It's close to 1 a.m. when Matt pulls on to their parents' street. Alicia looks to the right towards her parents' house. The lights are on and through the windows she can see their mothers along with Amber and Dan. On the other side of the street and two houses up on the left sits Matt's childhood home. Dark and empty. Alicia feels at a crossroads that she cannot fully understand or appreciate at this moment. If she goes to the right, she and Matt can maintain their shaky status quo. She could curl up in her bed and cry and grieve and be near her parents. But she also knows she shouldn't leave Matt alone. But does going with him change anything, maybe even everything?

Her phone vibrates. It is Marshall, informing her that Amber and Ms. LaRue are taking her room. Patti does not want to go home yet and doesn't want to be alone. Marshall offers to sleep on the couch so she can have his. Dan is in Mark's room.

And so she goes left.

She does not know when they finally fell asleep; they lay there for hours. She knew she could have stayed in Amber's old room, but as they had walked into the house, she had felt Matt's hand squeeze tighter around her own. When she wakes up she finds Matt is still asleep, arm flung across her chest- lightly snoring. She moved as quietly as she could, so as not to disturb him. The clock by his bed read 7:16 am. She grabbed her duffle bag from his floor and crept to the bathroom. After changing, and brushing her hair and teeth, Alicia checks on him before walking across to her parents' house.

Dan is in the living room on the phone. She finds her father in the kitchen making breakfast. She helps herself to some coffee and sits down on her usual barstool.

"How is Matt?" her dad asks without a hint of anything beyond genuine caring.

“Sleeping took a while last night but he finally fell asleep.”

“Same with Patti and Amber,” her dad says as he flips blueberry pancakes onto a pale blue platter. “I do not know how hungry people will be, but I want to be prepared.” His face falls as he looks out the large window across the room. “Usually in the mornings I can look out there and see David and Patti drinking their coffee and reading the paper. Some mornings we would join them.” His voice trails off. Alicia is unaccustomed to seeing such sadness on her father’s face. Her dad has lost his best friend of four decades, his business partner, and she can tell he is struggling to maintain his composure. He places platters of pancakes, bacon, and eggs on the kitchen table and looks at her. “I am going to take a shower; people can help themselves when they wake up.” As he walks away, she realizes he is crying.

She pulls out plates and silverware and sets them on the table for when the others wake up, then she drinks her coffee and stares out the window. She thinks about what her dad had said, and how Mr. LaRue should be sitting there now. The door opens across the street and Matt emerges. He is wearing basketball shorts and a T-shirt. He stretches, and she suspects he is about to go for a run, but then he stops and looks at her through the window. She gets up and meets him outside.

“Going for a run?” She asks, feeling stupid at the obvious nature of her question.

“Yeah, I was. But how about we go for a walk instead?” Matt propositions.

Despite the early hour, it is already warming up. They walk down the street and towards a hiking trail they frequented as kids and teens. Wildflowers dot the trail. The air smells of pine.

“Thanks for being there for me last night.” Matt says.

“Of course.” She says nonchalantly, adding, “I am always here for you.”

The rest of the wooded mile loop they complete in silence before heading back to her parent’s house. Matt pauses as they near the driveway.

“Livy, whatever this is,” he gestures between them, “It is up to you. I will not press. If this is just you being here for me as a friend, I will take it, but if it can be the start of something new, I am ready.” Before she can respond, he bounds up the driveway and into the house.

The next few days played out in sporadic bursts of activity, followed by hours of nothing. Dan flew home to get the kids and flew back with Mark, Macie, and the baby. Amber and her mom spend hours with Ms. LaRue at their families’ church making funeral arrangements. Her dad meets with the business lawyer and accountant. Alicia suspects those meetings could have waited, but she also knew he felt protective of what their families had built, and of Patti’s future.

Matt kept busy with their families and trail running. Sometimes Alicia joined him on his runs. Mostly, she helped with the kids, and at night fell asleep beside Matt. Nights were getting easier, but sometimes in the middle of the night she would wake to find him staring at the ceiling.

Their small community church was full for the funeral. Matt’s team had sent flowers and a few of the guys he was closest to had made the trip into town for the day. Her dad gave a heartfelt eulogy.

“I met David a few months into our first year at Boulder. He was a lightning rod of energy and confidence. All the girls in our first-year seminar course tried to sit next to him. Most of the guys glared at him behind his back. Though to his face, they wanted to be his friend. Everyone wanted to be his friend. David had that charm that put even those who did not like him or know him at ease. One day while I was studying in the library, he came up to me and started talking. I could tell he had an angle, but I let him work towards it and by the time he got around to telling me what it was that he wanted, we were friends. He wanted a date with Patricia, only she would not go out with him alone. She insisted on it being a double date, so he wanted me to ask out her best friend, her roommate. After that first date, we were both smitten with the girls, he with Patti and me, her sharp-witted friend Abigail. A few months into dating, he loudly announced that one day he was going to marry Patti and I was going to be his best man. We had only been friends for months at this point and he was hitting me up to be a best man for a wedding he was sure would happen. That was David, bold,

assured, living life in every moment.” Her dad takes a second and a couple of breaths before continuing.

“I beat him down the aisle, marrying Abigail three months before he and Patti eloped, with Abby and I serving as their witnesses. Now, most college friends may see each other a few times a year before drifting apart. Not Dave. He talked me into starting a nursery together, then later he talked me into branching out into landscape design. He helped me jumpstart every important milestone of my adult life, from finding my wife, to my career, buying our homes, and growing our families. David, sincerely from the bottom of my heart I grieve your passing but will remain eternally grateful for your decades of friendship and brotherhood.”

Her father takes another break and looks out at the crowd in front of him. *“Now that Dave is gone, and I am looking out at this packed church I am reminded just how many lives he touched. He left a lasting mark on my life, he was my best friend and brother for forty years, but he was something special to everyone he knew.”*

Following the funeral, close friends and family come back to her parent’s house for a reception. Patti went to lie down.

She finds Matt sitting outside on a wooden bench in the backyard.

She sat down beside him and leaned her head against his shoulder. He took her hand and pressed it against his lips.

“I could not have made it through this week without you, Livy.” His voice is barely a whisper.

She lifts her head, leaning her forehead against his. “We will get through this together.” And she knows she means it

Chapter Twenty-Three

Matt pulled into a spot in front of her apartment building and cut the engine. “Let me carry your bag up,” he says, already reaching into the backseat. The bag wasn’t heavy, but Alicia didn’t argue. After a week and a half by his side, she wasn’t in any rush to be alone. She knew now they were back a conversation about *them* was inevitable—about whatever this was between them. But it seemed small compared to such an enormous loss.

It had been two days since the funeral, and it was not getting any easier to accept. Patti had yet to return to her house and Amber and Dan had approached Matt about bringing her home with them, an idea he agreed had merit.

Alicia unlocks her apartment door, wondering if this is where he leaves? “Want a drink?” asks, hoping he says yes.

“Water would be great.”

She pours two glasses of water, and they settle onto the couch.

“I actually don’t drink anymore,” he confesses casually.

“What? Since when?” Alicia asks, trying to recall the last time she’d seen him with a drink in hand.

“Three years, four months,” he replies, offering no further explanation. None needed.

He hadn’t had a drink since that night. Could that really be true? How had she not noticed?

“It’s not a big deal,” he adds, shrugging slightly. “I just thought you should know.”

Alicia shifts her body, so that she is laying her head on his chest. Her feet rest on the side of her couch. He stopped drinking after that night. This revaluation runs through her head. Despite what he says, it is a big deal.

“Want to watch something?” she offers, hoping he will stay and too proud to ask him to.

When the movie is over, Matt stands and stretches. She notices his frame, the muscles in his arms, and how, despite the fatigue and the scruff on his face, how insanely handsome he looks.

“Well, it is late, I guess I should get going,” He bends down and gives her a brief kiss.

“Or you could stay.” She counters.

“Or I can stay.” He laughs a little. “I was hoping you would offer.” He blushes as the words pass between us. “Not that I expect or... I did not mean it like that. It is just... I have gotten used to you being there with me at night.” Alicia stands and kisses him in return. “I know what you mean.”

Life slowly returns to normal, but they do not. They stay locked together. He talks to his mom and Amber daily. She goes into her office, and he goes to the gym or trains. Some days he does community outreach. But every night they find their way back to each other, sometimes at her apartment, sometimes at his house.

After three weeks of this dance, Alicia finally works up the courage to initiate *the* talk.

They had gone to dinner and were walking back to her apartment hand in hand, cutting across a park, when they stopped to watch a group of kids playing a game of soccer. “Matt LaRue!” one kid shouts, and within seconds people are swarming around them. Kids and parents alike ask him questions, want selfies, autographs. Thankfully, she has a pen in my purse.

“They love you,” Alicia says as they walk away. “I love you.” She adds without thinking.

Matt stops and takes her face in both of his hands; this is not the polite soft kisses they had gotten into the habit of exchanging. This was enthusiastic and made her entire body warm. “I love you too Livy. I never stopped. I will never stop.”

That night when they go to bed, it is different.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Can you zip up the rest of my dress?” She asks Matt, stepping into his bedroom. They are finishing getting ready for a gala being thrown by the owner’s group of his team. Alicia is dreading the idea of having to mingle, and suspects Matt is too. It has been two months since his dad’s passing, two months of healing on multiple fronts.

“Take off the dress? Got it.” Matt jokes and begins kissing the side of her neck, pulling her zipper back down.

“Later there LaRue. You were the one who talked me into going to this thing.” She says, even though her willpower is fading.

He groans and zips up the dress. She checks herself in the mirror one last time.

“You look beautiful.” He says, as he looks at her. Even Alicia had to admit she was happy with what she saw in the mirror. Her wavy blonde hair was up in a loose bun. A long navy strapless v neck dress. Meanwhile, Matt looks like a muscular demi-god in a tuxedo.

They are about to walk out the front door when Matt pulls out his phone and lets out a sigh as he reads the message “Shit, um Livy, we need to talk.” She can’t read his face, but can see that he is suddenly tense. “Natalie is going to be there tonight. It is not a big deal, but I just found out and, well, I didn’t want you to be surprised.”

“You two still talk?” She asks, her brain suddenly feeling ridiculously hot.

“I swear I did not know until just now. Look, you can see my phone.” He holds his phone out for her to take.

It takes Alicia a second to process what she is seeing. A string of numbers is displayed at the top. He deleted her contact details; she realizes. Under the number are a few texts. A text from Natalie the day of the funeral offering her condolences, which was acknowledged, a few days later, a selfie of Natalie paired with a message of her “checking in” on him. His

message back was curt and informed her he was back with Alicia and while he appreciated her checking-in, it was unnecessary and that he expected her to respect his relationship.

Alicia was stunned. Relieved. Proud.

The last message made Alicia's stomach twist into knots. It was another selfie, Natalie, in a plunging gold dress, standing in front of the venue. Just moments ago, Alicia had felt confident in how she looked, even excited. But now, a wave of self-doubt crashed over her. Every insecurity she had about her body rushed to the surface, blurring her thoughts until she realized Matt was talking.

"Livvy, really, it's nothing," he says, his tone calm but firm. "She still works in PR. She's probably just there for work. And you know her—she needs attention. I'll block her."

Alicia drew a steady breath. She was with Matt. They were happy; they were secure. Who cared if his ex was going to be at the same event? They'd broken up. *He* had broken up with *her*. And somewhere in the back of her mind, a voice whispered, *He dumped her because he was still in love with you.*

You have nothing to worry about, she told herself. Or at least she wanted to believe that.

But when she looked at Matt, she couldn't read his expression.

"If my dad hadn't died," he asks quietly, "would we even be together right now?"

The question hit her hard. Clearly, the message had stirred something in him, too. She didn't like the question. She didn't like the vulnerability in his voice. And most of all, she didn't want to fight.

"Of course we would be." But even she had doubts.

"Damn, Livvy... just tell me the truth. Was that it? Was I finally broken enough—hurt enough—for you to want me again?" Pain spreads across his face at the words.

“Matt,”

“No, please do not bullshit me. For years I apologized. I wanted you back, us back together, and you wanted nothing to do with me, but then when my dad died, suddenly, what? Was I worth loving again?”

“How dare you! I have always loved you.” She now wavers between her anger and fear of losing him. “Yes, I was mad at you for a long time. I was hurt, but then my anger at you faded and if I am being honest, I wanted nothing more than to pick back up, but I was scared, okay? I was too scared to give us another chance. So yes, I dated Alec to get over you, only it did not work. I kept you at an arm’s length to protect myself. I hid, okay? I hid because I did not want to get hurt again.” Alicia is crying now; she slumps down, sitting on the bottom edge of his bed. “I hid in my relationship with Alec, and that was fine, and you were with Natalie, and that was fine.”

“I should have kept my distance, but I was stupid. I thought...” She stops and closes her mouth, placing her head in her hands, trying to breathe. Trying to slow down the moment. Slow the words pouring out of her. This is not about her; it is not about what happened years ago. This is about them now.

She looks at him and calms her breathing.

“I was too wrapped up in the past, in our mistakes that I made even more mistakes myself. Yes, your dad’s passing finally forced me to live in the present and to lower my defenses enough to act on what I wanted all along. So yes, I guess we are here now because of him, but you are wrong about me not loving you. I always loved you.” He sits down beside her.

They sit there next to each other, both unnerved by what just happened. There is a lot to unpack from it. But Alicia realized it did not end them and did not break her. Sure, there was fighting, but there was also an unburdening of truths. Maybe it needed to be said so they could move forward.

She picks herself up off the bed and goes to put herself together again. They will salvage the night.

Epilogue

Confetti fell from the sky. “AVS WIN!” flashes on the big screen above the ice. White, blue, and burgundy spotlights chased each other around the arena. From her seat two rows up from center ice, Alicia can make out the grin on her husband’s face as he hoists the Stanley Cup above his head.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C J Auer

The Quick Story

The woman behind Oceanfront Books grew up and was educated in Southern California. When her university creative writing teacher at Cal State San Marcos encouraged her to pursue a career in writing she did not listen and instead joined the United States Air Force.

From childhood, she filled notebooks with stories. As a working mother to two, she struggled to find time to get lost in a good book. That's why Oceanfront Books was created—not to publish the next great American novel, but to offer short stories and novellas that fit into the busy lives of readers.

She takes her penname C.J. Auer from the character of C.J. Cregg, the sometimes sarcastic, often assertive and independent thinking White House Press Secretary turned Chief of State in *The West Wing*. While Auer honors her great-grandmother's legacy.

“C.J. Auer” lives in the Temecula Valley of Southern California with her husband and their two kids. When she is not at Disneyland, she is a program manager, avid reader, writer, and sports fan.