

# PROLOGUE

Jordan



I WALK OFF THE soccer field at North Sydney Oval. Dried sweat coats every inch of my skin from a bout of training I'd rather forget. I'm the best damn player this team has, better than all of them, and they know it. Yet I'm not wanted here.

Distrust glares back at me from my teammates eyes as they make their way towards the waiting bus. Their open hostility should hurt but I can't feel it. It's an odd feeling I think. Numbness. Like being injected with anesthetic. I wonder how long it will last.

My brother is propped in front of the bleachers, leaning against the fence behind him. He looks like he always does—honey-colored curls peek out from beneath a grey beanie, skin tanned no matter what the season, and cheeks tinged pink from the cool air. His clear blue eyes stare back at me, solemn and resigned, beautiful, yet always so damn sad.

He's here to watch me train. I've been contracted to play for the Australian women's soccer team in the upcoming FIFA Championships. It's a huge honor and one I don't take lightly, but I'm tired. My mind is elsewhere right now, which means my focus is shot.

Forcing a smile, I wave and make my way towards him. It's a cool night and my cleats crunch loudly in the crisp grass, the rich scent of dirt rising up and teasing my senses. I breathe it in deep, feeling it lodge inside my lungs. It gives me no satisfaction. No sense of achievement. Tonight it gives me nothing.

He waves back. Nicolas, or Nicky as I call him, is my safety net. Being older by three minutes has given him a sense of responsibility and he wields it like a weapon. Perhaps I'm selfish because I let him. How can I not? My brother's given up his own future so I can have mine. I owe him everything.

"You call that soccer?" he shouts as I get closer.

“What do you call it?”

He shakes his head. “A fuckin’ train wreck.”

My breath huffs out sharply, fogging the air in front of me. “Don’t sugar coat it or anything.”

Nicky tucks his hands inside his pockets and shrugs. “Sugar is for girls and spice and all things nice.”

I laugh but the sound isn’t a happy one. I’m not any lighter for it. It only weighs me down further because Brody’s gone and I’ll never laugh again. Not on the inside.

“And I’m none of those?”

“Nope,” he says simply, his voice firm and matter-of-fact.

Reaching his side, I take a seat on the bench with a deep, exhausted sigh. Bending over, I begin untying my laces. “What am I then?”

“A fighter. Fearless. A fuckin’ thing of raw beauty out there on the field. No one can catch you,” he says, and I pause my task to look at him. Pride shines from his eyes, lighting him up from the inside, but when they begin to harden my stomach sinks like lead. “Some of those girls out there play with heart, and some play just because they’re good at it, but you? You bleed the game.” He looks away, fixing his gaze on the field in front of us. “You play with a fire so bright it hurts my eyes. This game is a part of you. It’s a part of you that no one should be able to take away, and out there you were letting them do just that.”

“Nicky—”

“Don’t.” His voice is sharp and cuts right through me. Shaking my head, I return to my laces, unable to look at him anymore. “Don’t let them.”

One of the ties tangles in my fingers. I give up on them and rest my elbows on my knees, letting my head hang low. “They’ll get over it, and tomorrow it will just be yesterday’s news.”

“Bullshit, Jordan.” Nicky jerks to his feet. Facing me, he crouches so I can’t avoid looking him in the eye. “This kind of crap doesn’t wash off after a hot shower. It sticks like fuckin’ tar.”

I force a chuckle. “Don’t be such a drama queen, Nicky.”

A strangled, angry sound rises from his throat. I know he’s only five seconds from losing his shit but I can’t help it. I know what he’s asking me to do and the very thought squeezes all the air from my lungs. I won’t do it. “I love him.”

“You *loved* him,” he corrects me. “And now you have to let him go. He wants you to, honey. What happened out on the field tonight, teammates shunning you, hating on you, do you think he wanted that for you?”

*No. He didn’t.*

My jaw locks tight in a desperate battle to hold back the tidal wave of pain. I lose and it crashes over me, ripping away my blanket of numbness. My body begins to shake and I tense every muscle hard so Nicky doesn't see.

"Jordan?"

He says my name but I don't hear him. My eyes close and the world drops away around me. All I see is Brody in its place. He's wrapped around me, his naked skin pressed against mine, our bodies tangled in bed sheets. It's suffocating but I love it. I'm warm and safe, and his lips kissing along my brow are heartbreakingly tender. He speaks to me, but my breathing is deep and even and he thinks I'm asleep.

"Don't go," he whispers, and his voice cracks with so much pain it squeezes my chest to hear it. "You made me want you and need you, and now I can't live without you anymore. Not for a single second."

I draw a deep scratchy breath and open my eyes. My brother is standing now, rubbing a hand over his face like he has no clue what to do or say. I rise to my feet with purpose. What happened is my fault. I know it is. Brody needed me and I wasn't there. *I was never there.*

"What, Nicky?"

His eyes turn hard. "Cut him loose."

"I can't." There's no letting go. Not ever.

"You have to."

My chin juts out, stubborn to the core. "I don't have to do anything except what's right for me."

"Goddammit!" Nicky growls his frustration. Ripping the beanie from his head, he tugs fingers through his hair. "What are you going to tell them at the press conference in the morning?"

"The truth."

I begin the walk towards the sheds to collect my training bag. The majority of the team is already on the bus. They'll be waiting for me if I don't get a move on. Nicky doesn't follow.

"Which is what exactly?" he calls out.

I turn, walking backwards. "I'll figure it out."

But I already have. I'm just not prepared to argue about it with my brother any longer.

Head bowed, I make my way inside the locker room, water bottle dangling from my hand. Finding my cupboard, I pull out my bag and shove the bottle inside. After taking out my team jacket, I shrug it on, all the while holding myself together when I feel ready to fall apart.

Changing out my cleats for a pair of slip-on shoes, I zip up the bag and carry it out towards the bus, my head held high.

My brother wants the truth? It's that I once believed being the best was all you had. So did Brody.

But we were both wrong.