



Falling for the Hockey Superstar

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Description: Small town life in Elmwood is simple and predictable—until Beckett Hayes skates into my heart.

To the public, he's a hockey legend.

To those closest to him, he's a man with a heart as big as his hidden billion-dollar fortune, longing for something money can't buy—family, love, and belonging.

I never expected to fall for anyone. My world revolves around my son, Jake.

But Beckett is a whirlwind I never saw coming. He's kind, patient and completely irresistible.

His broad shoulders, messy blonde hair and gorgeous green eyes would make any woman swoon.

I promised myself that I would never love again after the tragic death of my first husband.

But when this persistent hockey hero says he's "all in" for me, I think he just might be my happily-ever-after.

Maybe love is worth the risk.

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Chapter one

Abby

“Mom, he’s right there! Look!” Jake’s little hand grabs mine, his fingers sticky from the cotton candy he devoured five minutes ago. His blue eyes, wide with awe, lock on Beckett Hayes as he skates past. “Did you see that move? That was sick!”

“Totally,” I murmur, but my gaze drifts more to Jake’s face than the action on the ice. His cheeks flush with excitement, and his smile stretches ear to ear. The pure joy radiating from him tugs at my heart.

The roar of the crowd echoes around us as the Irondale Ice Hawks dominate the third period. Beckett Hayes—Jake’s idol—skates effortlessly, commanding the rink like he owns it. Every pass, every shot, every calculated move seems perfectly timed.

“Mom, I think Beck’s going for a hat trick!” Jake’s voice rises with anticipation, practically bouncing off the walls of the packed arena.

“Maybe,” I reply with a smile, ruffling his hair. I might not know all the hockey lingo, but I’ve learned enough to keep up with my son’s obsession. Ever since Jake discovered hockey, life has been a whirlwind of practices, early morning ice times, and endless stats recited at the dinner table. So, I know that, according to my son, a hat trick is when one player scores three goals in a single game.

But it’s worth every second. Especially after everything we’ve been through.

“Spotty agrees!” Jake grins as he pats Spotty’s head. Our Dalmatian, Sir Lotsaspots—appropriately named by a six-year-old with a love for both knights and animals—sits dutifully by Jake’s side, his tail thumping against the floor. The arena’s pet-friendly nights are a godsend for families like ours. Jake wouldn’t dream of leaving Spotty at home, and honestly, neither would I.

“Easy, Spotty.” I chuckle as the pup tries to sneak a lick of Jake’s face. “We don’t need slobber all over the jersey.”

“Mom, he’s a good luck charm!” Jake beams and wipes his face with the sleeve of his Ice Hawks hoodie. “Right, boy?”

Spotty barks softly, as if agreeing, and Jake grins even wider.

My heart swells as I take in the moment. These little pockets of happiness remind me why I work so hard to keep life steady for Jake. Three years after losing his dad in an accident, I’m still figuring out how to navigate single motherhood. But moments like this? They make it all worth it.

CRASH!

The sound of bodies slamming into the boards jolts me out of my thoughts. The crowd erupts as Beck rips the puck away from the opposing forward and speeds toward the goal. My stomach tightens as I watch Jake practically hold his breath.

“Come on, Beck,” Jake whispers, his eyes glued to the ice. “You’ve got this.”

And then it happens. Beck winds up, his powerful shot slicing through the air.

GOAL! The arena explodes as the puck hits the back of the net.

“YES!” Jake jumps up, nearly knocking over his popcorn. “Hat trick! Hat trick!” He waves his arms wildly, and Spotty joins the celebration with a series of excited barks. Fans are throwing their hats onto the ice while wildly screaming. It’s bedlam for at least five minutes while the officials have the hats picked up and the ice brought back to some semblance of normal.

I laugh, scooping up the popcorn before it ends up everywhere. “Okay, buddy, calm down before Spotty starts doing laps around the arena.”

But it’s too late. Spotty’s wagging tail knocks over Jake’s drink, sending soda cascading onto the concrete floor.

“Oops.” Jake looks down sheepishly. “Sorry, Mom.”

I sigh but can’t help but smile. “It’s okay. I packed extra napkins.”

As I mop up the mess, I notice a few fans nearby chuckling at the commotion. One of them, a woman with a soft smile, leans over. “Your little guy’s got a lot of spirit. And that pup? Adorable.”

“Thanks,” I reply, flashing a quick smile before turning my attention back to Jake. He’s still bouncing with excitement, his eyes glued to the ice where Beck skates by, acknowledging the crowd.

And that’s when it happens.

THWACK!

A rogue puck deflects off a player’s stick and hurtles toward the stands—straight toward us.

My heart leaps into my throat. “Jake, watch out—”

But before I can react, Beck skates toward the boards, eyes locked on the puck. In a blur of motion, his gloved hand snatches it out of midair, just before it reaches our section.

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The crowd gasps, then bursts into applause.

Jake's jaw drops. "Mom... did you see that?" His voice is barely above a whisper, pure awe in every syllable.

"I saw," I breathe, my pulse still pounding.

Beck's eyes lift toward the stands, searching for the puck's intended target. When his gaze finds Jake—and me—his expression softens.

Our eyes meet.

I freeze.

A spark of something—recognition? Curiosity?—flickers in his eyes. Or maybe I'm imagining it. I blink, and the moment's gone. Beck skates back toward the bench, puck still in hand.

"Mom, he looked at us!" Jake's excitement is off the charts. "Do you think he saw me?"

"I... think he did," I murmur, trying to steady my breathing.

Minutes Later...

With just over a minute left in the game, Beck circles back to our section, puck in hand. My heart hammers as he stops right by the glass and gestures toward Jake.

“Whoa... is he—” Jake’s eyes are as wide as saucers.

“Go ahead,” I nudge him gently.

Jake inches forward, his little hand pressed to the plexiglass. Beck leans closer, his smile warm and genuine as he taps the glass lightly with the puck.

“For you, buddy,” Beck mouths.

Jake’s face lights up as he accepts the puck from the arena staff who delivers it to us. His smile is pure joy. “Thank you, Mr. Hayes!” he shouts, his voice carrying over the din of the crowd.

Beck gives a small salute before skating away, but not before his eyes meet mine one more time. This time, there’s no mistaking it. There’s curiosity in his gaze.

Thirty Minutes Later...

And everything ... everything that could go wrong ... does.

Spotty, who had been a model of perfect behavior during the game, turns into a whirlwind of chaos the second we step into the designated meet-and-greet area. His leash slips from Jake’s hand, and he bolts toward the players, tail wagging like a propeller.

“Spotty, no!” I lunge after him, but it’s too late.

The next few seconds unfold in slow motion. Spotty barrels straight toward Beck.

And Beck?

He bends down, laughing as Spotty practically tackles him.

“Well, hello there, buddy,” Beck says, scratching Spotty’s ears like they’re old friends. “You trying to take me down?”

My heart pounds as I catch up, breathless. “I’m so sorry! He’s usually better behaved, I swear.”

Beck looks up, and for the second time tonight, our eyes meet. This time, there’s no mistaking it. Amusement dances in his gaze, but there’s something else too.

“Don’t worry about it.” His smile is easy, genuine. “I like dogs. And this guy’s got good taste.”

I bite my lip, trying to calm my racing heart. “Well, he’s definitely a fan.”

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“Just like his owner, I’m guessing?” Beck’s eyes twinkle as he stands, his full six-foot-three frame towering over me.

My breath catches. Why does he have to be even more attractive up close?

“I’m Abby,” I manage, extending my hand. “And this is Jake.”

Jake, who’s been unusually quiet, steps forward, his eyes as wide as saucers. “You’re...you’re Beckett Hayes.”

Beck grins, crouching down to Jake’s level. “I sure am. And you must be Jake. I saw you cheering out there. Best fan in the house.”

Jake beams. “Really?”

“Really.” Beck’s sincerity is palpable, and my heart melts a little more.

“Mom’s writing an article about the Ice Hawks,” Jake blurts out, and my stomach drops.

“Jake—”

“That’s awesome,” Beck says, standing again and meeting my gaze. “I’d love to read it when it’s done.”

My cheeks flush. “It’s...a work in progress.”

“I’ll bet it’s great.” His smile is warm, making my pulse do an embarrassing little flip.

And before I realize it, Jake continues. I’m sure he’s just enamored that his hero is talking to him and doesn’t want it to stop. To my horror, Jake pulls out another tidbit to share.

Jake nods enthusiastically. “Mom knows all about hockey! She writes lots of stories about it.”

Beckett arches a brow at her. “Really? Where do you—?”

“I write for Sports Weekly,” she cut in smoothly, watching for any flicker of recognition.

Nothing.

She tried again. “I was at your last post-game presser. You answered one of my questions.”

Still nothing. His expression was open, friendly, but utterly clueless.

Abby stifled a laugh. Of course. One face in a crowd of reporters? No wonder he had no idea.

Before I could say anything else, Jake pipes up, “Mom also wrote about how you skated right into the goalpost last season.”

Beckett groans. “Oh man, that story? You’re that reporter?” He gives her a playfully wounded look. “Brutal.”

Abby smirks. “To be fair, I did say you recovered gracefully.”

Beckett crosses his arms, eyeing her as if trying to place her all over again. “And yet, I only remember the part about the goalpost.”

Abby chuckles, shaking her head. “Selective memory.”

He flashes her a crooked grin, then turns back to Jake. “Hey, buddy, I think your mom’s trying to make me look bad.”

Jake giggles. “You made yourself look bad when you crashed.”

Beckett gasps in mock offense. “Wow. Tough crowd.”

Abby laughs, warmth spreading through her.

“Come on, Jake,” I say, gently steering him back. “We should let Mr. Hayes get back to—”

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“Actually,” Beck interrupts, his tone casual but curious, “I’d love to show you both around the arena sometime. If you’re interested.”

Jake’s eyes widen. “Really?”

“Really.” Beck’s gaze flickers to mine, and for a moment, the world tilts.

I swallow hard, nodding. “That...would be great.”

“Cool.” Beck grins. “I’ll make it happen.”

As we walk away, Jake bounces with excitement, and I can’t help but wonder what I’ve just gotten myself into.

And why does part of me already want more?

Chapter two

Beck

I should be heading out by now. We just won another home game, so all is well. My usual post-game routine is clockwork—quick media interviews, a cool-down stretch, a shower, and I’m out of here before the arena empties. But tonight?

I’m still here.

Because Jake and Abby Price are still here.

I glance over to where they're standing by the player benches, waiting patiently while Spotty sniffs every square inch of the rubber matting. Jake's animatedly recounting Beck's third goal to his mom—complete with dramatic reenactments—and Abby's eyes are glued on him, her smile soft and full of love.

They're different.

Most of the fans I meet fall into two categories—starstruck superfans or parents dragging their kids through meet-and-greets while checking their phones. But Jake? He's all heart. And Abby...

I can't quite put my finger on it, but something about her has me hooked.

Maybe it's how she watches Jake with such quiet devotion, or the way her laughter feels unfiltered and real. Or maybe it's the way her eyes—warm hazel flecked with gold—linger on me when she thinks I'm not looking.

Whatever it is... I'm not ready to say goodbye yet.

"Hey, Jake!" I call out, my voice carrying over the low buzz of post-game cleanup. "You ever seen the players' locker room up close?"

Jake's head snaps up, his eyes going wide. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." I grin. "Want a tour?"

"YES!" Jake practically jumps out of his skin, and Spotty barks his approval.

I glance at Abby, raising an eyebrow. "What do you think? Up for a behind-the-scenes tour?"

Abby hesitates, her lips tugging into a half-smile. “As long as Spotty doesn’t destroy anything.”

“Eh, the place has survived worse.” I flash her a reassuring smile. “Come on. I’ll make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble.”

“Famous last words,” she murmurs, but there’s a flicker of warmth in her eyes as she nods.

“Alright then.” I clap my hands. “Let’s go.”

The moment we step into the locker room, Jake’s eyes go as wide as saucers. “Whoa...” He spins around, taking in the rows of wooden stalls lined with gear, the team’s logo emblazoned on the walls, and the scent of leather, sweat, and fresh tape hanging in the air.

“This is... awesome,” he breathes, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Glad you think so,” I say with a chuckle. “Come on, I’ll show you where the magic happens.”

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As I guide them toward the stalls, Spotty trots ahead, his nose twitching as he investigates every corner. Jake follows close behind, his energy practically vibrating off him, while Abby keeps a wary eye on her enthusiastic Dalmatian.

“Just wait until he finds the tape rolls,” I murmur to Abby with a grin. “Dogs love those things. Something about the smell.”

Abby arches an eyebrow, her lips quirking. “Good to know. I’ll add that to the list of things Spotty loves to destroy.”

“I’ve got a list like that for my cats. One of them shredded a vintage jersey once. I still can’t talk about it.”

“Oh no. A jersey tragedy?” she teases.

“The stuff of legends,” I say with a mock-serious nod. “Biscuit the Cat is still on thin ice.”

She laughs, and it settles something in me.

We’re halfway through the tour when I hear the familiar sound of voices and footsteps approaching.

Abby’s watching Jake take in every detail like it’s Disney on Ice. Her expression shifts between amused and awed, like this moment is something she’ll tuck away in her heart.

And suddenly, I want to be part of more moments like that. I'm not the guy who lingers after games. I don't give tours. I don't... crave this kind of quiet connection.

But tonight? I'm all in.

Uh oh.

"Yo, Hayes!"

I know that voice. Griffin.

Before I can warn Abby, Griffin Shaw—one of my best friends and the team's biggest prankster—rounds the corner with Wes Archer right behind him. Both are still in their workout gear, towels slung around their necks and grins plastered across their faces.

"Look who's giving VIP tours after hours," Griffin says, his grin widening when he spots Jake and Abby. "And here I thought you were allergic to socializing."

"Shut up, Griff," I mutter, but it's too late.

"Wait, is this the kid who was louder than the announcer tonight?" Wes asks, his eyes landing on Jake with a playful grin.

"Yep," I reply, ruffling Jake's hair. "Meet Jake Price. And his mom, Abby."

Griffin's eyes flick to Abby, and his grin turns downright wicked. "Ahhh. So that's why Beck's still hanging around. Now it all makes sense."

Abby's cheeks flush, but she recovers quickly, offering a polite smile. "Nice to meet you both."

“Pleasure’s ours,” Wes says with an easy nod. “Beck doesn’t give private tours to just anyone. Must be special.”

“Real special,” Griffin adds with a wink, and I swear I’m going to tape his mouth shut.

“Alright, that’s enough,” I cut in, shooting him a warning glare.

“Relax, Hayes,” Griffin laughs, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “Just making an observation.”

“Ignore them,” I tell Abby, giving her a sheepish smile. “They’re harmless.”

“Mostly,” Wes adds with a chuckle.

Jake, oblivious to the teasing, points excitedly at the wall of sticks. “Whoa! Beck, is that your stick?”

“Sure is,” I say, grateful for the distraction. “Want to hold it?”

Jake’s eyes light up. “Can I?”

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“Of course.” I grab my backup stick and hand it to him. “Just don’t let Spotty think it’s a chew toy.”

Jake giggles as he grips the stick, holding it like a pro. “I’m gonna practice my slapshot with this!”

“You’ve got a killer wrist shot, kid,” Wes says, ruffling Jake’s hair. “Keep it up, and maybe you’ll be out here with us someday.”

“Really?” Jake’s eyes widen with pure excitement.

“Absolutely.” Wes winks. “We could use someone with that kind of enthusiasm.”

“See, Hayes?” Griffin smirks, leaning casually against the stall. “This kid’s already got a spot on the team. You better watch your back.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I roll my eyes, but I can’t help but smile.

Just as I’m about to steer the conversation back on track, Spotty decides that now is the perfect time to wreak havoc.

With his nose buried in one of the team gear bags, he snags a sock and takes off like a rocket, weaving through the stalls with a victorious bark.

“Spotty, no!” Jake cries, but it’s too late.

Griffin’s laughter echoes through the room. “Oh man, we’ve got a thief on the loose!”

“Get back here, Spotty!” Abby calls, her voice laced with a mix of exasperation and amusement.

But he’s having way too much fun to listen. He zigzags around benches, narrowly avoiding a collision with Wes, who’s doubled over laughing.

“Don’t worry,” I say, already moving to intercept. “I got him.”

I crouch low, waiting for the perfect moment... and pounce.

“Gotcha. Nice try, buddy,” I say, holding Spotty firmly but gently as I wrestle the sock from his mouth. “But I don’t think this is regulation gear.”

Spotty gives me a slobbery lick across the face in response, his tail wagging furiously.

“Gross,” I laugh, wiping my cheek. “You’re lucky you’re cute.”

The entire room erupts with laughter, and when I glance at Abby, her eyes are sparkling with amusement.

We finish the tour a few minutes later, and as I’m walking them toward the exit, I lag behind, giving Jake and Abby a little space.

That’s when I hear it.

“Mom,” Jake whispers, his voice barely carrying over the hum of the empty hallway. “Are you really gonna interview Beck for your article?”

I stop in my tracks, my brows furrowing.

Interview? Abby's response is quiet, but I catch enough to make my pulse skip. "Yes, honey... but I'm a little nervous about it."

Why wouldn't she tell me that herself? And why would she be nervous?

My curiosity sharpens, and for the first time all night, I feel a twinge of something I can't quite name.

Abby's hiding something— and for reason I don't fully understand, it matters more to me than it should.

Chapter three

Abby

"Come on, Jake!" I call, my voice barely carrying over the sound of skates slicing the ice.

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Jake zips past me, his little frame bundled up in his hockey gear, weaving through his teammates with growing confidence. His focus is laser sharp as he lines up for another shot, sending the puck sliding straight toward the net.

Clang! The puck smacks the post and ricochets wide, but Jake doesn't miss a beat. He skates after it as his determination never wavers.

“Good hustle, buddy!” I cheer, warmth spreading through my chest.

Jake's been practicing harder than ever since our nights at the Ice Hawks games. Meeting Beckett Hayes has left a lasting impression on him. It's all he's talked about for the past two weeks—reliving every moment of the games, the meet-and-greet, and the locker room tour like it was a fairy tale come to life.

And honestly? It kind of was. For both of us.

“Nice work, Jake!” His coach gives him a thumbs-up, and Jake beams as he circles back toward the bench.

“Did you see that, Mom?” Skating over, breathless but grinning he says: “I almost nailed it!”

“I saw,” I say, matching his excitement. “You're getting better every practice.”

Jake's eyes sparkle. “Beck said I had a good wrist shot. I bet if he saw me now, he'd say I'm even better!”

My heart clenches at the mention of Beck's name.

Jake hasn't stopped talking about him. And if I'm being honest... I haven't stopped thinking about him myself.

That evening I sit at the kitchen table; my laptop's open but the blinking cursor on the blank document taunts me. My notes for the feature article on Beck sit neatly organized, but I'm no closer to figuring out how to approach this piece.

Professionally, it should be easy. I've interviewed countless athletes, coaches, and team owners. But Beck? Beck's different.

My fingers hover over the keys as I stare at the questions I've prepared. They're solid—direct, probing, and insightful. But none of them capture what I really want to ask.

What's beneath the surface, Beck?

I rub my temples, sighing.

Jake's admiration for Beck is understandable. But me? I should know better. I'm supposed to stay objective—keep my feelings out of my work. I cover multiple teams and players. Favoritism isn't an option. And yet...

Beck Hayes is making it impossible.

His easy charm, his quiet kindness, and the way he genuinely connected with Jake that night—none of it felt forced. And that's the problem.

It felt real.

Get a grip, Abby. I'm muttering to myself, but the words ring hollow. It's obvious that I'm no closer to my interview plan than I was two hours ago. I'm staring at the screen hoping an idea will write itself, I think.

I'm in this silent inner debate when I hear: "Earth to Abby!"

I blink, startled out of my thoughts as my sister Quinn's voice snaps me back to the present.

"Hmm?" I look up from my laptop to see my sister standing in the doorway, arms crossed, eyebrows raised.

"You've been staring at that screen for ten minutes." She steps closer, peering at my notes. "Oooh... I see. We're back to Mr. Hockey Superstar."

"Quinn..." I groan, closing my laptop with a sigh. "Don't start."

"Oh, I'm definitely starting." She plops down across from me, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "So, how's the big article coming along? Or is it more like The Secret Diary of Abby Price and Her Hockey Crush?"

"Stop." I laugh despite myself. "It's just... complicated."

Quinn leans back, her expression softening. "Abby. You know I'm just teasing. But... is it complicated because of Jake? Or because of you?"

My stomach twists. "Both," I admit quietly. Quinn's playful demeanor fades, replaced by that familiar protective sister vibe. "Talk to me, Abs."

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I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. “It’s just... Jake’s already so attached. He talks about Beck all the time. And Beck’s been amazing with him. I just...”

“Don’t want Jake to get hurt,” Quinn finishes softly.

“Exactly.” I glance down at my hands, my fingers nervously twisting together. “He’s been through so much already losing his dad in that auto accident. It’s been a lot, even though he was so little, I don’t think he has any vivid memories of that time. I don’t want to bring someone into his life who might not stick around.”

Quinn’s quiet for a moment. “And what about you?”

I look up, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Are you protecting Jake... or are you protecting yourself?”

Her words hit me square in the chest. I open my mouth to protest, but nothing comes out.

“Abby,” Quinn says gently, her eyes full of understanding. “You deserve to be happy too.”

My throat tightens. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“And that’s okay,” she says softly. “But don’t push something away just because you’re scared. Beck seems like a good guy. And Jake... well, he already adores him.”

“I know,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

“And maybe,” Quinn adds, a glint of mischief returning to her eyes, “you’re just as smitten as Jake is.”

“Quinn!” I groan, but the heat rising to my cheeks gives me away.

Later that night, as I’m settling into bed, my phone buzzes on the nightstand. When I glance at the screen I feel my stomach flip.

Beck: Hope Jake’s keeping that wrist shot sharp. Let me know if you’re still up for that article. I promise not to make it too easy on you.??

My pulse quickens.

I should wait to respond. Be cool. Professional. But my fingers have a mind of their own.

Me: He’s practicing like a champ. And I’m ready whenever you are. Just don’t expect me to go easy on you either.??

Beck: I’d be disappointed if you did.

I bite my lip, warmth spreading through me in ways it shouldn’t.

This is dangerous. I set my phone down and curl up under my covers, but sleep doesn’t come easily.

What am I doing?

Beck is... dangerous. Not in the usual way. He's not a player. I don't think he's after some fleeting thrill. He's the kind of man who sneaks past defenses and makes you feel like you want to trust again.

And that's terrifying.

My heart's been locked away for so long that I'm not sure I even know how to open it again. And if I let Beck in—really let him in—what happens when he realizes I'm not the carefree woman I used to be?

What happens when he realizes I'm still broken?

I sigh, rolling onto my side and pulling the covers tighter around me.

Jake's heart isn't the only one at risk here.

Mine is too.

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A few days later, Beck suggests we meet at Jake's practice for a casual chat. Nothing formal, nothing intimidating—just two people talking about hockey.

At least, that's what it's supposed to be.

But as I watch him approach from across Jake's rink, his easy smile making my heart race, I know there's nothing casual about the way my pulse reacts to him.

"Hey," Beck greets me, his gaze lingering just a beat too long. "How's Jake doing?"

"Better every day." I smile, but my nerves tangle with anticipation.

Beck's eyes warm. "Kid's got potential. You should be proud."

"I am," I murmur, but my throat feels dry.

We walk along the edge of the rink, talking easily about Jake, his practice, and the article. Beck answers my questions with thoughtfulness and humor, making it impossible not to be drawn in.

But then... he says something that stops me cold.

"People think I've got it all," Beck says softly, his gaze fixed on the ice where Jake skates with pure joy. "But... sometimes it feels like I'm still searching for what really matters."

My breath catches.

What does that mean? Is he hinting of a secret or what?

I open my mouth to ask, but Beck's expression shifts—guarded, almost as if he didn't mean to say it aloud.

“Anyway,” he says quickly, flashing a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. “Enough about me. What else do you want to know about the Ice Hawks?”

But I don't want to ask about hockey stats or career highlights.

I want to know what he's hiding.

And worse? I want to know why I care so much.

Chapter four

Beck

“Jake's got a solid wrist shot for his age.”

Wes's comment pulls me back to the present, and I glance across the booth at him. We're at The Hawks' Nest, a trendy bar just a few blocks from the arena where the guys like to unwind after home games. The place is buzzing tonight—fans still riding the high from our last win, music pulsing through the speakers, and laughter echoing off the walls.

“Yeah, he's got good instincts,” I say, taking a sip of my water. “Kid's hungry to learn.”

“And totally starstruck by you,” Griffin adds with a grin, leaning back in the booth. “Pretty sure that kid’s ready to nominate you for sainthood.”

I chuckle, but the sound feels hollow. “Nah. I’m just a guy who caught a puck before it hit him.”

“Right,” Griffin drawls, shooting me a knowing look. “And I’m just a guy who breaks hearts everywhere he goes.”

Wes snorts, almost choking on his drink. “You’re not wrong about that, Griff.”

“Hey, what can I say?” Griffin smirks, flashing his signature charming grin. “I’m a giver.”

“More like a tornado,” I mutter, but I can’t help smiling.

Griffin might be a pain sometimes, but he’s loyal. Both of them are. We’ve been through a lot together—on and off the ice. They’re the only ones who know how much I’m wrestling with what’s happening in my head right now.

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“So...” Wes leans in, his sharp gaze locking onto mine. “What’s the deal with Abby?”

I tense, my fingers tightening around my glass. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, Beck.” Griffin raises an eyebrow. “You’ve been quieter than usual all night. That’s not like you.”

Wes nods, his expression softer but just as probing. “We saw how you looked at her today.”

I sigh and lean back against the booth, rubbing the back of my neck. “It’s... complicated.”

“Complicated how?” Griffin asks, his curiosity piqued. “She’s gorgeous. Smart. And she’s raising a kid who clearly adores you.”

“Exactly,” I mutter, my throat tightening.

Wes’s brow furrows. “Is that what’s holding you back?”

“No.” I shake my head, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. “It’s... more than that.”

I hesitate, but these two know me better than most. If anyone can help me make sense of this mess, it’s them.

“Jake’s a great kid,” I say quietly. “And Abby...” My voice trails off, but her image is already crystal clear in my mind—her guarded smile, the way her eyes soften when she looks at Jake, the strength she tries so hard to hide.

“She’s different,” I admit softly.

“Different how?” Wes asks, his tone careful.

“She’s not like anyone I’ve ever met.” I exhale slowly, running a hand down my face. “She’s doing everything for Jake. Every decision, every sacrifice—she’s all in for him.”

“Sounds like someone else we know.” Wes’s voice is gentle, and I glance up to see his knowing smile.

I swallow hard, memories of my mom flashing through my mind. “Yeah,” I murmur. “She reminds me of Mom.”

The silence that follows is heavy, filled with unspoken understanding. Wes and Griffin know what both my mom and dad went through to keep me in skates. The endless hours at two jobs for her and the night shift for my dad. They sacrificed so I could chase my dream.

“Abby’s had it rough,” I add, my voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t know the full story yet, but I can see it in her eyes. She’s been hurt. And she’s not going to let anyone get close enough to hurt her again.”

Griffin’s smirk fades, replaced by rare seriousness. “And you’re afraid if you get too close, you’ll be the one to hurt her?”

I nod, my jaw tight. “Or worse... I’m afraid if she finds out who I really am, she’ll

walk away.”

Wes frowns. “What do you mean? She knows you’re Beck Hayes, hockey superstar.”

“Yeah,” I say, but my voice feels hollow. “But she doesn’t know about... everything else.”

Griffin’s eyes narrow. “You mean the billions?”

I wince. “Don’t say it like that.”

“It’s the truth, man.” Griffin shrugs, but his expression is serious. “You’re not just a hockey player, Jake. You’re a walking Fortune 500.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “And that’s what scares me.”

I lean forward, elbows on the table, and stare down at my hands. “I’ve seen what happens when people find out. They change. They want things. They expect things. And I can’t...” I trail off, my throat tight.

“You think Abby’s like that?” Wes asks softly.

“No,” I say immediately, shaking my head. “She’s not. But that doesn’t mean it won’t change things. I don’t want her to see me differently.”

And that’s the problem.

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I've already let her see the real me: the guy who jokes around with Jake and trips over a rambunctious Dalmatian. The guy who loves hockey more than anything and who wants—no, needs—something real in his life.

But if Abby finds out about the rest... the money?

"I should've told her from the start." My voice is barely above a whisper, the weight of the truth pressing down on me. "But now... it feels too late."

"Too late?" Wes's eyebrows draw together.

"Yeah." I lift my gaze, meeting his. "The longer I wait, the harder it's going to be. She trusts me now. If I tell her the truth... she'll wonder why I kept it from her. And I can't..." I pause, swallowing hard. "I can't lose that."

I can't lose her.

"Beck," Wes says gently, but I already know what he's thinking.

"If I tell her now," I continue, my voice rough, "she's going to think I was lying before. That I was hiding who I really am on purpose." I shake my head, frustration burning in my chest because that's just what I have been doing. "She won't trust me after that."

"And if you don't tell her?" Griffin asks quietly.

The weight in my chest grows heavier. "Then I'm lying by omission. And when she

eventually finds out—and she will—it'll hurt her even more.”

Griffin leans back, crossing his arms. “So... you’re darned if you do, darned if you don’t.”

“Pretty much,” I murmur.

The silence that follows feels suffocating. I know I’m running out of time. Every moment I spend with Abby and Jake, I’m falling deeper. And if I don’t figure out how to tell her the truth soon...

I’m going to lose them before I ever really have them.

Chapter five

Abby

“Whoa, this place is huge!” Jake’s voice echoes through the spacious corridor as we step inside the Irondale Ice Hawks’ training facility. His eyes are wide with awe, taking in every detail like he’s just entered hockey heaven.

Spotty trots beside him, tail wagging furiously as he sniffs every corner.

“Welcome to where the magic happens,” Beck says with an easy grin, walking ahead of us. He’s dressed casually—well, as casually as Beckett Hayes can look. Fitted jeans, a trendy soft gray collarless shirt that hugs his broad shoulders a little too perfectly, and loafers. It all says “effortless confidence” and makes it impossible not to notice him.

Focus, Abby.

I remind myself that I'm here to gather information for my article, not to gawk at Beck's biceps.

"Check this out." Beck gestures toward the rows of gear lined up against the wall—sticks, helmets, pads, and jerseys neatly organized. Jake practically vibrates with excitement.

"Can I...?" Jake points at one of the sticks, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Go ahead, buddy," Beck says with a grin. He reaches for one of his personal sticks, handing it to Jake. "That one's a little heavier than what you're used to but give it a try."

Jake's eyes go wide as he grips the stick. "Whoa... this is awesome!"

Beck kneels down next to him, adjusting Jake's grip with practiced ease. "Feel that balance? This one's custom-made. Perfect weight, curve, and grip for my shot."

Custom-made. The detail slips past me, barely registering at first. Of course, Beck would have custom gear. He's a professional athlete. But something about the way he says it...

"Custom, huh?" I murmur, trying to sound casual.

Beck's eyes flick to mine, a hint of amusement dancing in their depths. "Yeah. I've got a guy who designs them specifically for my shooting style. Makes a difference when the game's on the line."

Of course he does.

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Jake doesn't care about the subtlety I'm picking up on. He's too busy swinging the stick like he's already scoring in the Stanley Cup finals.

"This is so cool!" Jake beams, and Beck's laughter fills the space—rich, warm, and completely disarming.

As we move through the facility, Beck effortlessly balances guiding Jake through the space and keeping an easy conversation going with me. He's comfortable here, in his element. But there's something softer about him now, something more than just the hockey star everyone sees on the ice.

"So... you live in Elmwood full-time, right?" I ask as we pass the team's lounge area. "Not just during the off-season?"

Beck nods, a fond smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Yeah. Elmwood's home. Always has been."

"Even with your career taking you to Irondale?"

"Especially with that." His expression shifts, his tone softening. "I love the game, but... after everything's said and done, I need somewhere that feels real. Elmwood's that place for me."

I glance at him, curiosity tugging at me. "Why stay in a small town when you could live anywhere?"

Beck's gaze drifts, a distant look clouding his usually bright eyes. "My parents are

there. And... I guess I just like the quiet. I can walk down Main Street, grab coffee at Joe's Diner, and people know me because I grew up there—not because I'm Beckett Hayes, the hockey star."

His words hit me harder than I expect. There's something raw in the way he talks about Elmwood: it's not just a town, but a part of who he is.

"How much of your time is spent there?" I ask softly.

Beck smiles, but it's different this time. Softer. More genuine. "I'm there most days, actually. I commute to Irondale for games and practices, but I spend my nights in Elmwood. My parents still live in the house I grew up in, and... I like being close."

"Wow," I murmur, surprised. "You're really that tied to it?"

"Yeah." Beck's voice is quiet, almost reverent. "Elmwood's where I learned to skate. Where I had my first goal. It's where I feel that I can breathe."

He continues: "And my folks and some other friends are available to watch over the cats where we have out-of-town games. It makes me feel good that they are being cared for by people I trust.

Besides that, I've told you about the personalities of those three almost-monsters. Like me, my folks think they are totally adorable and can do no wrong, even when the breakables hit the floor now and then."

I'm stuck a few sentences back. Breathe. He said it's where he can breathe.

The word lingers, and for a moment, I wonder if Beck's life is more complicated than I realized.

“But you do more than just live there, don’t you?” I say softly, watching him closely.

Beck hesitates, then shrugs, as if trying to downplay it. “I help out where I can. Little things, mostly. Sponsoring youth hockey leagues, helping fix up the rink, stuff like that.”

“Little things?” I arch an eyebrow, sensing there’s more he’s not saying. I hear that you do a lot more to help Elmwood continue to thrive, Mr. Hayes.”

Beck shifts, his jaw tightening slightly. “It’s not a big deal.”

It sounds like a big deal.

But I let it slide. For now.

We move toward the players’ lounge, and Jake’s excitement spikes again when he spots framed photos of the team. But it’s not the hockey shots that catch my eye.

“Wait...” I squint at a picture tucked off to the side. “Are those... cats?”

Beck’s laughter is immediate and unguarded. “Yeah.” He rubs the back of his neck, looking almost bashful. “Biscuit, Mitts, and Hat Trick.”

“Seriously?” I grin, unable to hold back the giggle bubbling up. “You named your cats hockey terms?”

“Of course.” Beck’s grin is unapologetic. “Biscuit’s the diva. She rules the house. Mitts is the scrappy one—always ready to throw down. And Hat Trick...” His voice softens, and his eyes warm. “He’s just... happy to be around. Loves everyone.”

“Will they get along with Spotty?” Jake pipes up, clearly invested.

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Beck chuckles. “We haven’t introduced them yet, but I have a feeling Biscuit would put Spotty in his place.”

“My dog’s not scared of anything!” Jake declares proudly, and Spotty barks on cue, wagging his tail like he’s agreeing.

“I don’t know...” Beck smirks. “Biscuit’s been known to take down the best of them.”

“Wait...” I narrow my eyes playfully. “You’re telling me these cats have a reputation?”

Beck leans closer, his grin conspiratorial. “Let’s just say they’ve got their own Instagram account with a pretty loyal following.”

“Of course they do.” I laugh, shaking my head. But something about the way Beck talks about his pets... the affection in his voice, the softness in his expression... it’s enough to make my heart flutter.

As the tour winds down, Jake and Spotty find a stray puck and start an impromptu game of fetch near the rink. Jake’s laughter echoes around us, and Spotty’s playful barks fill the space.

Beck and I stand off to the side, watching the scene unfold, and sharing a few quiet moments.

“He’s really good with Spotty,” Beck murmurs, his voice warm. “Jake’s a natural.” I

smile, but my heart feels a little too full as I watch them. “I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

Beck’s eyes flick to mine, something unreadable swirling in their depths. “You’re doing a great job, Abby. Jake’s lucky to have you.”

The sincerity in his tone hits me harder than I expect. I glance away, my throat tightening. “Thanks.”

“So...” I glance at him, keeping my tone light. “What’s next for you, Beck? Beyond hockey, I mean.”

His smile falters for just a moment.

There it is. That hesitation.

Beck’s eyes shift and his jaw tightens as he runs a hand through his hair. “That’s... complicated.”

Complicated.

The word hangs between us, thick with unspoken meaning.

“For now...” Beck’s easy grin returns, but this time, it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’m just focused on the game.”

But I’m not buying it. There’s more.

As Jake’s laughter echoes around us, I can’t shake the feeling that Beck’s hiding something, something bigger than just his future in hockey.

What is he not telling me?

And why do I suddenly care so much?

Chapter six

Beck

Itossmyphoneonto the kitchen counter and rub the back of my neck. I've been staring at the screen for the past five minutes, rereading Abby's latest email about the interview. She thanked me for being open and promised to send over a draft for my approval soon. Her words were polite, professional, and exactly what I expected from her.

So why do I feel like I've been blindsided?I pace the length of my kitchen, my socks sliding slightly on the cool marble floor. Biscuit sits by the fridge, flicking her tail with mild irritation as she watches me go back and forth. Mitts sprawls on the counter, while Hat Trick stretches lazily by the window. My cats don't seem concerned that I'm spiraling.

I open the fridge, stare blankly at the contents, and then close it again. Food isn't going to fix what's eating at me.

What did I do? I let my guard down with Abby today. More than I intended. That's what I did.

When she asked about my past: how I got into hockey, what kept me grounded, I could've given her the usual rehearsed answers. I've done enough interviews over the years to know how to keep things at surface-level. But with Abby... I didn't want to hide.

Her eyes, so full of genuine curiosity, made it impossible to deflect. And before I knew it, I was telling her about my childhood. The endless drives from one city to another for more and more hockey training were hard, especially on my parents. Hockey became my escape—my safe place when everything else was falling apart.

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I told her about my dad working the night shift at the post office and mom working two jobs to keep me and my brother in skates. How they sacrificed everything to make sure we both had a shot. Well, actually I didn't bring my brother up. That might be for another time, I'll see.

I never talk about that stuff. Not to reporters. Not to anyone.

But with Abby, it felt... natural.

Too natural.

I lean against the counter, staring out the window at the city lights beyond. Elmwood looks peaceful from here, the distant glow of streetlights making the night seem calm and quiet. But inside me? It's anything but.

"Why'd I tell her all that?" I murmur aloud, and Biscuit flicks her tail in response, clearly unimpressed.

"Yeah, I know," I mutter, rubbing my face. "I'm an idiot."

But it wasn't just the things I said. It was how I felt saying them. Vulnerable. Exposed. Like I was giving Abby a piece of myself I wasn't sure I could get back.

What happens if she sees the real me?

Not just the guy who grew up with nothing and clawed his way to the top. But the man who now has more money than he knows what to do with.

It's not who I am. Not really.

The guy Abby met at the arena? That's me. The hockey player. The guy who loves the game, who's good with kids, and who enjoys teasing a seven-year-old about his dog's antics.

But the Beck with multiple businesses, investments, and a portfolio that Forbes loves to analyze? I'm not sure if Abby—or anyone—could ever look past that.

What if she pulls away when she finds out?

I rub a hand down my face, frustration building in my chest. I've been down this road before. Women who see dollar signs instead of a person. Friends who suddenly have 'business opportunities' they want me to invest in.

Abby's not like that. I know she isn't.

But will she still look at me the same when she finds out?

I replay the interview in my mind, especially her smile when I talked about the Ice Hawks' youth programs. How her expression softened when I mentioned how my folks' sacrifices shaped who I became. She wasn't faking that compassion. It was real.

And I...I'm already in too deep.

I push away from the counter and head to the living room, where I sink onto the couch. Hat Trick jumps up beside me, his rumbling purr filling the quiet space. I stroke his fur absently, my mind still tangled in thoughts of Abby.

"I like her," I admit softly. Saying it out loud makes it feel more real—and more

dangerous.

Because liking Abby means risking everything.

Jake's already attached. He looks up to me. If I screw this up... if Abby pulls away... I'm not the only one who gets hurt.

"Why does this feel so complicated?" I whisper, more to myself than to the cats.

Hat Trick headbutts my hand in response, clearly demanding more attention.

"I know, buddy," I murmur, giving him a scratch behind the ears. "I just don't know what to do."

I'm not sure if I'm ready to risk my heart. But honestly, I think I already have.

Chapter seven

Abby

I stare at the blinking cursor on my laptop, my fingers hovering over the keys, but my mind is nowhere near the article I'm supposed to be writing. I've rewritten the opening line three times, and each version sounds worse than the last.

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Beckett Hayes, hockey superstar and philanthropist...Nope. Too formal. Beckett Hayes, the heart and soul of the Ice Hawks...Ugh. Too cheesy. Beckett Hayes, a man who...A man who, who what?

I groan, leaning back in my chair and rubbing my temples. How do I sum up Beck? He's not just another arrogant athlete with a pretty face. He's kind. He's generous. He's great with Jake. And he has three cats who, despite being named after hockey terms, are apparently absurdly lovable.

And therein lies the problem. I'm supposed to be writing a professional, objective piece for Sports Edge, not daydreaming about the man behind the jersey.

"Focus, Abby," I mutter, sitting up straighter and shaking my head.

However, my mind refuses to cooperate. Instead, it takes me back to the way Beck's eyes light up when Jake grins at him after catching that puck. Or how his hand brushes against mine during the tour, sending a jolt of awareness through me.

I'm in deep.

"Mom?" Jake's voice pulls me from my thoughts. He's sprawled on the living room floor, building an elaborate Lego fortress while Spotty lies next to him, tail wagging lazily.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"Are we going to Beck's game on Saturday?" His eyes are hopeful, and I can already

feel my resolve weakening.

“We’ll see,” I say carefully, trying to sound neutral.

Jake’s face falls slightly, but he doesn’t press the issue.

Oh, Abby. Who are you kidding?

I sigh, saving the disastrous draft and slamming my laptop shut. I need a break. And maybe... I need advice.

“He’s a walking contradiction, Quinn,” I say, pacing my tiny kitchen while my younger sister listens patiently on the other end of the phone. “He’s charming and thoughtful, but I can’t figure out what’s going on in his head.”

Quinn chuckles softly. “Sounds like someone’s falling for the guy.”

I stop mid-step, gripping the phone tighter. “I’m not falling for him.”

“Mmhmm. Sure.”

“I’m serious.” I sigh, leaning against the counter. “I can’t let myself go there. Jake’s already attached, and I...” My voice trails off.

“You’re scared,” Quinn finishes softly.

“Of getting hurt. Again.” I swallow hard. “What if Beck isn’t who I think he is? What if—”

“What if he is?” Quinn’s voice is gentle but pointed. “You deserve to be happy, Abby. And so does Jake.”

I blink back unexpected tears, my heart twisting at her words.

“It’s not that simple.”

“It never is.”

Quinn doesn’t push any further, giving me the space I need to process. But her words linger long after we hang up. I don’t know how long I stand there, staring at the wall while Spotty paces near my feet, his nose twitching as if he senses my inner turmoil.

“What do you think, Spotty?” I ask softly, running my fingers through his fur. “Is Beck too good to be true?”

Spotty tilts his head, his big brown eyes filled with quiet understanding.

“You’re no help,” I murmur with a weak smile, but the gentle wag of his tail tells me he disagrees.

The next day, I take Jake to the local ice rink where he practices on weekends. The familiar chill in the air hits me as soon as we step inside, stirring up memories I’m not ready to confront.

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Ethan.

I glance toward the corner where he used to stand, cheering Jake on with that proud, easy smile. The ache is instant, raw, and familiar. I blink quickly, pushing the pain aside.

“Come on, Spotty!” Jake tugs on the leash as our energetic pup pulls us toward the stands. Spotty’s tail wags like a metronome dialed to overdrive, his excitement mirroring Jake’s.

“Easy, buddy,” I murmur, tightening my grip just enough to keep Spotty from dragging me across the ice.

As Jake skates onto the ice, my heart swells with pride—and a touch of sorrow. He’s getting better, faster, more confident with each practice. Ethan would’ve loved this. He’d have been right here beside me, shouting encouragement and grinning from ear to ear.

You’re doing great, Jake.

I hear Ethan’s voice in my head, a ghost of the past that still lingers no matter how much time has passed. My throat tightens, and I glance down at Spotty who’s sitting at my feet, watching Jake with the same intensity I feel.

His tail thumps softly against the floor, his warm, soulful eyes meeting mine.

I force myself to focus on the present, but memories continue to sneak in—our

Sunday afternoons after church at the rink, Ethan teaching Jake how to skate, and the laughter echoing off the ice. Jake was little more than a toddler at the time, but he was already skating better than he walked it seems. Ethan was so proud.

I thought I'd buried these emotions, but being back here brings everything to the surface.

Move forward, Abby.

Easier said than done.

It's been a lazy day. After Jake's practice we spent time picnicking at the park and enjoying Jake's break from school. I'm not sure where the day went, but it's already evening and time to settle in.

After Jake is tucked in and Spotty is curled up at my feet, my phone buzzes. I almost ignore it, assuming it's another email from my editor, but something tells me to look.

Beck: Hey. I was wondering... Would you and Jake like to come for a private skate tomorrow? I'd love to show him a few pointers.

My heart skips a beat. His words are casual, but I can feel the hope laced between the lines. I stare at the screen for a moment, my thumb hovering over the keyboard.

Say no, Abby. Keep things professional.

But then I think about Jake's face lighting up on the ice. About Beck's quiet patience and easy smile.

I also think about the guarded look in Beck's eyes when I mentioned my article. He's been burned before by the media. If I say yes, I'm not just agreeing to a private skate—I'm opening a door that might be impossible to close again.

"What do I do, Spotty?" I whisper, running my fingers through his fur. His tail gives an encouraging thump, almost as if he's saying, "Take the chance."

Before I can talk myself out of it, I type back a quick reply.

Me: We'd love to. What time?

As soon as I hit send, my stomach flips a little. I'm blurring the lines. And I'm not sure how to stop.

The next morning I wake up earlier than usual, unable to shake the mix of excitement and anxiety swirling in my chest. My mind keeps circling back to Beck—his easy smile, the way he looks at Jake like he genuinely cares, and the hint of vulnerability he tries so hard to hide.

I know I should be cautious. I know I should keep this strictly about Jake and the article. But my heart... my heart is already tiptoeing across dangerous territory.

By the time Jake bounds into the kitchen, Spotty on his heels, I've made a pot of coffee and gone over a million scenarios in my head.

"Mom! Beck texted me this morning!" Jake beams, holding up my phone. "He said he's excited to skate with me today!"

My heart squeezes at the joy on Jake's face. "I know, buddy. We'll head there after

lunch.”

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“Can we bring Spotty?”

“We’ll see.” I glance down at the enthusiastic Dalmatian, whose tail thumps in agreement. “If Beck says it’s okay.”

Chapter eight

Beck

EarlierinthemorningI’m already halfway through my second cup of coffee when my phone buzzes with a familiar name.

Dexter Stone, the team Manager.

I sigh, knowing this conversation is long overdue. “Dex. What’s up?”

“Checking in, Beck.” His voice is all business, but there’s a thread of concern underneath. “Haven’t heard from you in a while. I figured you were keeping busy, but... you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” I glance toward the window where Biscuit is perched on the sill, watching the world go by. Mitts and Hat Trick are curled up on the couch, blissfully unaware that I’m about to get an earful. “Just... taking some time to breathe, you know?”

“Breathing doesn’t make the Ice Hawks millions, Beck.” Dexter’s tone is half-joking, half-serious. “You’ve got a lot on your plate—on and off the ice. And you’re not

exactly the type to sit still for long.”

“I’m not.” I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. “But maybe that’s the problem.”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end before Dexter speaks again. “This isn’t just about hockey, is it?”

“No.” I hesitate, knowing Dex will see right through any half-hearted excuse I give him. “It’s... Abby and Jake.”

“Ah.” Dexter’s tone shifts, softer now. “The writer and her kid?”

“Yeah.” I run a hand through my hair, leaning against the counter. “I don’t know, Dex. They’re... different.”

“Different how?”

“It’s not just the usual fan interaction. Jake’s got this energy... this passion for hockey that reminds me of me when I was his age.” I pause, feeling that familiar tug in my chest. “And Abby... she’s...”

“She’s got you tied in knots.”

I huff out a quiet laugh. “Something like that.”

“So, what’s the holdup?” Dexter’s voice is practical, but I can hear the unspoken question beneath it. “You’ve got the world at your feet, Beck. Money. Fame. Options. If she’s worth it, go for it.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve worked too hard to keep my life private.” I exhale slowly, feeling the weight of it settle on my shoulders. “I’ve built walls, Dex. Big ones. And letting Abby in... letting Jake in... it means tearing those walls down.”

“Maybe it’s time,” he says quietly. “You’ve spent years building this empire. You’ve got more money than you know what to do with. But what’s it all for if you’re not happy?”

I glance around my penthouse—sleek, modern, and empty. The view of Elmwood and the surrounding hills and lakes is breathtaking, but lately, it feels like I’m looking out at a world I’m not really a part of.

“I don’t know, Dex,” I murmur. “But I think I’m starting to figure it out.”

“Good.” His voice is lighter now. “Just don’t wait too long, Beck. Life doesn’t wait for anyone.”

“Yeah.” I hang up, but his words echo long after the call ends.

Abby and Jake are in my thoughts basically all the time. It’s time to test my heart along with my head again. So, I feed the herd of cats, grab my gear and head to the rink.

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The rink feels different today.

It's quieter, the usual roar of the crowd replaced by the hum of the cooling system and the occasional scrape of skates against the ice. I've been in this arena thousands of times, but standing here with Jake and Abby makes it feel... personal.

I steer them to the outside practice rink where we can skate as long as we want. "Ready, buddy?" I ask, watching Jake's eager eyes widen as he grips his stick with both hands.

"Ready!" His grin is infectious, and I can't help but smile back.

I crouch slightly, giving him a quick nod. "Okay, try that wrist shot again. Aim for the corner this time."

Jake skates forward, his tongue sticking out in concentration as he lines up the shot. His form is getting better, more balanced. He's determined, and I respect that.

"You got this, kid," I murmur under my breath, watching as he pulls back and sends the puck toward the net.

Ping.

The puck hits the post. Close, but not quite.

"Almost!" I call out encouragingly. "You're getting there."

Jake's face twists with frustration, and he starts to skate toward the puck to try again.

"Hey." I glide toward him, keeping my tone light. "Wanna know a secret?"

His eyes light up. "A secret?"

I crouch down to his level, lowering my voice like we're conspirators. "Even the best players miss sometimes. The trick is not letting it mess with your head." I tap my temple for emphasis. "You miss. You reset. You shoot again."

Jake nods, his determination returning as he grabs the puck and lines up another shot.

"That's it," I murmur softly, pride swelling in my chest.

Abby's laugh echoes softly from the sideline.

I glance up to see her standing there, bundled in a cozy coat and scarf, her cheeks flushed from the chill in the air. Spotty sits patiently beside her, his tail sweeping back and forth on the smooth concrete as he watches Jake with unwavering focus.

"You've got a certain way with him," Abby says, her voice warm and filled with something I can't quite name.

"He's a natural," I reply, skating over to her. "You've got a future All-Star on your hands."

Her smile is soft, but I catch the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes before she masks it.

"He loves it," she says softly. "It's all he talks about."

"I can tell." I lean against the boards, close enough to feel the warmth radiating off

her despite the chill of the rink. “He’s got good instincts. And that focus? That’s not something you can teach.”

“Alright, Jake,” I call out after another round of drills. “Why don’t you take a few laps while I talk to your mom?”

“Okay!” Jake doesn’t need to be told twice. He zooms off, Spotty watching intently from the sidelines like a loyal coach.

I turn back to Abby, who’s watching Jake with that same faraway look in her eyes.

“You alright?” I ask gently.

She hesitates for a moment before sighing. “It’s just... sometimes I look at him, and I see Ethan. The way he skates. His determination. It’s like... he’s carrying a piece of his dad with him.” Her voice catches slightly, and I see the flicker of pain she tries so hard to hide.

“That’s not a bad thing,” I murmur softly. “It means Ethan’s still with him. With both of you.”

Abby’s eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I see her walls lower just a little. “I know,” she whispers. “But sometimes... it feels like I’m walking a tightrope. Trying to let Jake hold onto those memories while making sure he doesn’t get stuck in the past.”

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I nod, understanding more than she probably realizes.

“I get that.”

Her brow furrows slightly. “Do you?”

“Yeah.” I glance toward Jake, watching as he skates effortlessly around the rink. “My parents... they poured everything they had into giving me and my brother a better life. But after I made it big, I felt this weight... this pressure to live up to their sacrifices. I still feel it sometimes.”

Abby’s eyes soften, her head tilting slightly. “That’s a lot to carry.”

“Yeah.” I let out a slow breath. “But I wouldn’t trade it for anything. And I’m sure Ethan wouldn’t either.”

Abby’s lips curve into a small, bittersweet smile. “No, he wouldn’t.”

For a moment, we just stand there in comfortable silence, watching Jake glide across the ice, his laughter echoing in the empty rink.

“You’re really good with him, you know,” she says softly, her voice barely above the hum of the arena.

“Jake makes it easy.”

“Still.” Her eyes meet mine again, and this time, there’s no mistaking the warmth

there. “Thank you, Beck.”

“Anytime.”

Just as I’m about to suggest we call it a day I notice Abby’s expression change. Her smile fades, replaced by a tightness around her mouth, and her eyes cloud over as she watches Jake skate.

“Abby?” I ask softly, but her focus is locked on Jake.

I see it then—the flicker of worry, the weight of single parenthood, and the ache of loss she tries so hard to hide.

She’s carrying more than she lets on.

And I’m starting to wonder if I’m ready to carry some of it with her.

Chapter nine

Abby

I close the front door behind me and lean against it, pressing my palm flat against the cool wood. My heart’s still racing since the afternoon. The sound of Jake’s laughter echoes in my mind, and I can’t stop thinking about the way Beck guided him across the ice with such patience. The easy confidence in his movements, the gentle encouragement in his voice...

And the way he looks at me.

My chest tightens. Why does he have to be so... so good?

Spotty bounds toward me, his tail wagging wildly as he nudges my leg, demanding attention. “Hey, Spotty,” I murmur, running my fingers through his soft fur. But even his warm presence isn’t enough to quiet the swirling storm in my head.

I push away from the door, walking toward the kitchen on autopilot. Jake’s already in his room, probably replaying the entire afternoon in his head. I can practically hear him narrating every move Beck showed him on the ice. My son is completely smitten with Beck Hayes.

And I’m afraid I might be, too.

“Get it together, Abby,” I whisper, reaching for a glass of water. But my hand trembles slightly as I set the glass on the counter.

This isn’t just a crush.

It’s more.

The way Beck is with Jake... it’s not just kindness or obligation. He genuinely cares. I saw it today in the way he crouched to Jake’s level, explaining the right way to angle his skates. In the way he celebrated every small victory, making Jake feel like the king of the ice.

And then there’s the way Beck looks at me.

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Like he sees through every wall I've built.

I press my lips together, trying to push away the memories of Beck's smile when I laughed at Spotty slip-sliding across the ice or the brush of his hand against mine when he steadied me after I nearly fell.

I shouldn't be feeling this way.

Not after everything I've been through.

You can't risk your heart again, Abby.

But no matter how much I try to convince myself... it's not working.

I close my eyes, but instead of calming the chaos in my mind, it dredges up a memory I haven't allowed myself to think about in a long time.

Ethan, my lost husband.

Ethan's laugh echoes in my ears, warm and familiar. "Come on, Abs. You're overthinking it," he'd said one night when we were painting Jake's nursery. I was agonizing over shades of blue, and Ethan—ever the optimist—just grabbed the brush and started painting.

"It's just paint. If we hate it, we'll redo it," he'd said with that easy smile of his.

Simple. Confident. Sure.

Ethan had a way of making life feel... steady. Like nothing could ever go wrong as long as we faced it together.

But life didn't play by those rules.

I lost him. Lost him to a drunk driver. Lost him for no other reason than he was at the wrong place at the wrong time.

And when he died, that steadiness—the foundation I built my life on—shattered.

And I've been walking on that broken glass ever since.

Beck isn't like Ethan.

Where Ethan was steady, Beck is a force of nature. His energy pulls me in, shakes up everything I thought I knew, and leaves me breathless.

And that scares me.

Because if I give in... if I let Beck in and everything falls apart again...

I don't think I'll survive it.

After driving myself half mad with these thoughts playing over and over in my head, I figure I need some distraction.

I don't even think about it this time. I grab my phone and press Quinn's name before I can change my mind.

“Hey, Abs!” Quinn’s cheerful voice fills the line, a little burst of sunshine in my otherwise stormy thoughts.

“Hey,” I say softly, curling up on the couch with Spotty by my side.

The silence that follows stretches just a little too long, and I know Quinn’s radar is already up.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, her voice immediately laced with concern.

“Why do you always assume something’s wrong?” I try to keep my tone light, but I don’t quite pull it off.

“Because I know you,” she replies gently. “And that’s your ‘I’m trying to pretend everything’s fine’ voice.”

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I sigh, rubbing my forehead. “It’s Beck,” I murmur, feeling my heart squeeze just saying his name.

Quinn’s silence is deafening for a beat. Then, “I figured.”

“You did?” I blink, surprised.

“Abby.” Quinn’s voice is softer now, more understanding. “You’ve been quieter lately. And I see the way you look at him at the games when Jake is talking his ear off. You’re not as good at hiding your feelings as you think you are.”

I press my lips together, my throat tightening.

“So...” Quinn coaxes gently. “What’s going on?”

I draw in a shaky breath. “Jake’s crazy about him,” I whisper, my voice barely above a whisper. “And Beck... he’s amazing with Jake. So patient, so kind. He treats him like...”

“Like he’s his own,” Quinn finishes softly.

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “Yeah.”

“And that’s a good thing, right?”

“It should be,” I murmur. “But what if...” My voice catches, and I swallow hard.

“What if he leaves?” Quinn says softly.

The ache in my chest deepens, and my eyes burn with unshed tears. “Jake’s already attached,” I whisper. “If this doesn’t work out...”

“He’ll be heartbroken,” Quinn finishes gently.

“And so will I,” I admit softly, the words finally tumbling out of me. “But it’s Jake I’m most worried about. I can’t let him go through that.”

Quinn’s voice is quiet but firm. “Abby, you can’t live your life preparing for heartbreak. That’s not living. That’s... surviving.”

I bite my bottom lip, blinking rapidly. “I don’t know how to do anything else.”

“Yes, you do.” Quinn’s voice is full of quiet conviction. “You did it before. When you fell in love with Ethan.”

I flinch at the mention of my dead husband’s name, but I don’t pull away.

“He wouldn’t want you to close yourself off forever, Abby,” she says softly. “And I don’t think Beck would hurt Jake. Or you.”

Her words hit me square in the chest.

Could she be right?

“Maybe,” I murmur, my throat tight.

“Just... don’t let fear make the decision for you,” Quinn adds gently. “You owe it to yourself—and to Jake—to give happiness a chance.”

The house is quiet. Jake's asleep, and Spotty is curled up at the foot of his bed, his snores so loud I can hear him in my room down the hall.

With sleep evading me, I sit up in bed hugging my knees to my chest as my mind spins with thoughts of Beck.

What am I so afraid of?

Beck isn't Ethan. He's not steady and predictable—he's unexpected, intense, and... real.

And that's what terrifies me. Because falling for Beck means stepping into the unknown, and I've lived in fear of the unknown since the day I lost Ethan.

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But Beck makes me feel things I didn't think I'd ever feel again.

Hope. Possibility. Love.

My heart clenches painfully at that last word.

I'm falling for him.

Hard.

But if I let myself love him—if I let Jake get too close—and Beck walks away?

It won't just be me who's shattered. It'll be Jake, too.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as I bury my face in my knees.

Beck feels like everything I never knew that I was missing.

But maybe that's the problem.

Because I know what it's like to lose everything.

And if Beck leaves, I'm not sure I'll survive that kind of heartbreak again.

And neither will Jake.

Chapter ten

Beck

The scent of fresh-brewed coffee fills my kitchen as I lean against the counter, scrolling through my phone. My eyes land on an email from the team's PR department—details about the upcoming Ice Hawks VIP Kids' Day.

Perfect. The event is a big deal—an exclusive behind-the-scenes experience where a handful of lucky kids get to meet the players, tour the locker room, and skate on the Ice Hawks' practice rink. But this year, there's more to it.

We're turning it into a charity event to support kids from underserved communities—kids who might never get a chance to lace up and experience the magic of hockey.

I scroll down, reading the details again. Donations will fund scholarships for hockey programs, provide gear for kids who can't afford it, and sponsor after-school clinics.

This isn't just an event. It's a chance to change lives.

And Jake should be a part of it.

And maybe... Abby will see how serious I am about being part of their lives.

I sip my coffee, the warmth doing little to chase away the nerves creeping in. Ever since that private skating session with Jake, I haven't been able to stop thinking about them. Abby's laugh, Jake's bright smile, and the way they make my world feel... complete.

But Abby's walls are still up. I see it in her eyes—the hesitation, the fear that letting me in means risking her heart again. And I get it.

But I'm not going anywhere.

My phone vibrates, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance at the screen and smile when I see Abby's name.

"Hey," I answer, leaning against the counter.

"Hi." Her voice is soft, a little hesitant, but there's warmth there, too.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah." She pauses, and I hear the faint sound of Jake chattering in the background.

"Actually... I was wondering if you might want to come over this afternoon. I, uh... I thought I could make lunch."

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A slow grin tugs at my lips. “You’re inviting me over, huh? Are you sure you can handle Spotty and me in your kitchen at the same time? We both seem to be accidents waiting to happen.”

She laughs softly, and the sound sends a warm ache straight to my chest. “I think I can handle it. But... there’s something else.”

“Yeah?”

“Jake’s been talking nonstop about that puck you gave him. He wants to know more about how it works... the tape, the stick, everything.”

“Ahhh.” I chuckle. “A future playmaker in the making. I’d love to talk hockey with him. But...” I glance toward the framed photo of me with my cats on the shelf near the TV, an idea forming.

“How about I have you and Jake over to my place after lunch?” I suggest casually, trying to keep my voice even. “I’ve got all my gear there. He can check out my sticks, my old jerseys... and maybe meet the other important members of the Hayes household.”

“Other members?” Abby sounds curious.

“My cats.” I grin. “Biscuit, Mitts, and Hat Trick. They’re quite the welcoming committee.”

Silence stretches on the line for a beat before I hear her soft laugh. “I do remember

the pictures of your cats. Pretty funny for such a jock as yourself, Mr. Hayes.”

“Yep. Three of them. They’re a handful.” I smile, picturing Jake’s reaction. “I think Jake would love them. I’m not completely sure about Sir Spotsalot or Lotsaspots, or ...”

“Okay,” she says softly, her tone filled with something I can’t quite place. “That sounds... really nice. Let’s just settle on Spotty for the name. And this time I think we’ll leave him behind.” Her grin makes me laugh.

Score.

“Great. I’ll see you both in a bit.”

Her invite to lunch has been a wonderful surprise. Seeing her and Jake in their own home shows me even more what a great mother she is. Their place is warm and friendly. The minute I walk in I feel good being there.

Jake chatters non-stop as I sit at Abby’s kitchen table, polishing off the last bite of her homemade grilled cheese.

I think I complemented her three times, at least. Probably a little overkill but dang, I’m nervous.

“And then I turned my stick just like you said, Beck!” Jake’s eyes shine with excitement as he demonstrates an exaggerated wrist shot with an invisible hockey stick. “Boom! Right past Spotty!”

“Nice form, buddy.” I grin, punching him gently in the arm. “Keep practicing that

wrist shot, and you'll be unstoppable."

"Can we practice at your place?" Jake asks eagerly, bouncing in his seat. "You said you have all your gear, right?"

"Yup." I glance at Abby, who's been quietly watching us with a soft smile that makes my chest ache. "I thought maybe after lunch we could head over there."

Jake's grin stretches from ear to ear. With one knee up, he pumps his arms, elbows bend, fists tight. "Yes!"

"Only if it's okay with your mom," I add gently, my gaze meeting Abby's.

Her eyes soften, and after a beat, she nods. "I think that's a great idea."

"Whoa..." Jake's eyes widen as we step into my penthouse. His gaze sweeps across the open-concept living space—exposed brick walls, modern furnishings, and a massive wall-mounted TV displaying highlights from the latest NHL games.

As I see Abby taking in the view from the wall of windows, I'm immediately wondering. Should I worry that she's afraid of heights? But as she walks toward them with a smile on her face, I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding.

Score one for the living quarters.

My focus turns back as I hear a drawn out "Cool!" Jake's eyes are locked on the framed jerseys hanging on the wall—one from my rookie year, another from my Stanley Cup win.

“Make yourself at home,” I say, setting my keys on the counter. “But Jake, be warned... you’re about to meet the real rulers of this house.”

“Rulers?” Jake’s brow furrows.

“Wait for it...”

As if on cue, Biscuit saunters into the room, her fluffy orange tail held high like she owns the place. Which basically she does. Mitts, my black and white tuxedo cat, follows closely behind, while Hat Trick—a mischievous tabby—peeks around the corner, his green eyes full of curiosity.

“Whoa! Yeah, that’s right! You have cats!” Jake drops to his knees, his face lighting up with pure delight. “Hi, guys!”

Biscuit, ever the diva, sniffs the air and approaches Jake cautiously. The moment Jake sits down and extends his hand, she nuzzles against it, purring loudly.

“She likes you,” I say, amused as Mitts circles Jake, inspecting him like he’s a new recruit on the team.

“Biscuit’s the boss,” I explain, crouching beside Jake. “Mitts keeps the peace. And Hat Trick...”

“Where’s Hat Trick?” Jake asks, glancing around.

“Right... there.”

Before I can finish, Hat Trick pounces—leaping onto Jake’s lap and sending him into a fit of giggles.

“Whoa!” Jake laughs, his hands gently stroking the playful tabby. “Hat Trick, you’re funny!”

“Careful,” I warn with a grin. “He’s a sneaky one. Always looking for an opening.”

Abby watches from the sidelines, her arms folded but her expression soft. Her eyes follow Jake’s every movement, and I can see it—the warmth, the affection, but also the flicker of hesitation.

She’s still afraid.

I get it.

But seeing Jake so happy—so completely at ease—makes me even more determined to show Abby that this...

This could be their home, too.

As Jake continues bonding with the cats, I glance at Abby and motion for her to join me in the kitchen. She follows, her expression guarded but curious.

“I, uh... wanted to ask you something,” I begin, keeping my voice low. “About something special for Jake.”

Her brow furrows slightly. “Special?”

“Yeah.” I pull out my phone and scroll to the email about VIP Kids’ Day. I hand it to her, watching as her eyes skim the details.

“It’s a charity event,” I explain softly. “The team’s hosting it for kids from underserved communities—giving them a chance to experience hockey firsthand. We’re raising money for scholarships, equipment, and after-school programs.”

Her eyes lift to mine, and I see something flicker there—something warm and unguarded. “That’s... amazing, Beck.”

I shrug, but my heart pounds harder than it should. “Hockey gave me everything. I just want to give back. Make sure kids who wouldn’t normally get a chance... get one.”

Her lips part, but no words come out.

“And I want Jake to be part of it,” I continue softly. “I’ve got VIP passes. He’ll get to tour the locker room, skate on the practice rink... meet the whole team.” I know he’s done a little of that already, but this will be a more structured event, and I think he’ll really enjoy being part of a group of kids.

Jake’s laughter echoes from the living room, making both of us glance toward him.

“He would love that,” Abby murmurs, her voice barely above a whisper.

Okay then, here goes.

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“Hey, Jake, can you come in here for a minute? I’ve got something to show you.” I find the pictures from last year’s event and hand my tablet over to Jake who’s now cross-legged on the kitchen floor.

I glance and see Jake’s eyes widen as he scrolls through the photos from last year’s event.

“Whoa...” Jake’s voice is barely above a whisper as he leans closer, his gaze locked on the images of kids skating alongside Ice Hawks players, the wide grins on their faces mirroring pure joy.

“Pretty cool, huh?” I murmur, flipping through the images slowly to let him take it all in.

Jake’s eyes flick to mine, his excitement barely contained. “Is... is that what we’re doing?”

“Even better,” I grin, crouching down so we’re at eye level. “The VIP Kids’ Day is even bigger this year. We’re turning it into a charity event, so kids who wouldn’t normally get a chance to play hockey can experience it for themselves.”

I swipe to the next screen and let Jake and Abby take in the details.

“The event’s happening at the Ice Hawks’ arena,” I explain, pointing to the calendar on my phone. “It’s an all-day experience, starting with a private tour of the locker room.”

“Whoa...” Jake whispers, his eyes practically glowing.

“Yeah, buddy.” I smile, feeling a tug in my chest at how much this means to him. “You’ll get to check out where we suit up before games. You’ll see all the gear—helmets, sticks, skates—and even some of our lucky charms and personal items.”

Jake’s mouth drops open. “Like your stuff?”

“Yup,” I chuckle. “I’ll show you my stall, where I tape my sticks, and where we go over game plans before we hit the ice.”

Since he is so into what I’m saying, I add more. “After the tour, there’s a meet-and-greet with the team,” I continue, watching Jake’s face light up. “You’ll get to meet the guys, ask questions, and take pictures.”

Jake’s jaw drops. “With all of them?”

“Every single one,” I confirm with a wink. “And they’re great with kids. You’ll get to hang out, talk hockey, and maybe even learn a few new tricks.”

“Will Griffin be there?” Jake asks eagerly, referring to my best friend and teammate, Griffin Shaw.

“Of course,” I grin. “And knowing Griff, he’s probably planning to teach you a few fancy dekes.”

Jake’s eyes practically sparkle. He’s breathless when he asks me with even wider eyes what dekes are. His intensity makes me chuckle when I explain that a deke is a type of feint or fake technique where we try to draw an opposing player out of position so we can skate by the opponent and keep control of the puck. It comes from

the word decoy. “Oh, I got it.” he says. “It’s like this” and he jumps up and demonstrates a perfect maneuver.

Oh yeah, this is going to be a blast.

“But that’s not all,” I add, swiping to another photo. “After the meet-and-greet, there’s a station where you get to decorate your own Ice Hawks jersey.”

“Wait, what?” Jake’s eyes widen yet again. I’m afraid they’re going to pop out of their sockets before I’m done.

“Yeah,” I chuckle. “We’ve got white practice jerseys, and the kids get to design them however they want—paint, markers, patches... anything. You’ll even get to add your name and a number.”

Jake’s grin stretches ear to ear. “I can be number nine, like you?”

“Absolutely.” My chest tightens at the excitement in his voice. “You’ll be rocking your own custom jersey by the end of the day.”

“Can you handle any more?” I ask, watching his eyes closely for any hint of unexpected forward movement. At his yes while jumping up and down, I go ahead.

“After that,” I continue, “we hit the ice.”

Jake’s eyes widen again. “We get to skate?”

“Not just skate,” I say with a smile. “There’s an on-ice skills session on our practice rink where some of the Ice Hawks guys will teach you stickhandling, passing, and shooting. You’ll get to practice your wrist shot, just like we talked about. Any kids who don’t have their own skates get some... to keep.”

Jake nods so hard I think his head might pop off.

“And then...” I pause for dramatic effect.

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“What?” Jake leans in, his eyes glued to me.

“We finish with a scrimmage,” I say with a grin. “You’ll get to play a real game with the other kids—coached by me and some of the other players.”

Jake’s mouth drops open. “A real game? With you coaching?”

“Yup.” I tousle his hair affectionately. “I’ll be right there on the ice with you.”

Leaving him looking through the pictures, I turn to Abby. She looks absolutely beautiful as she watches her son, and maybe me too. I lead her to the sofa in the other room where it’s quiet and a bit more private.

“But I also...” I clear my throat, my eyes locking on hers. “I want you to be there, too, Abby.”

Her eyes widen slightly, and I see the hesitation flicker back.

“Beck...”

“I know,” I say softly, stepping a little closer. “I’m not pushing. But... I’d like for you both to be part of it. No pressure.”

“I’ll be working with the kids on the ice and, of course, Jake will be part of the group activities. I was thinking that you might be interested in helping at one of the booths

for the kids. It could be fun. “I have it on good advice that I can get you whatever job you want,” I tell her with a smirk.

“Beck, working with kids is top of my list for volunteer work, so yes, I’d love to help.”

Then her lips press together, and I can see the battle in her eyes—the part of her that’s starting to trust me... and the part that’s still afraid.

“One step at a time,” I murmur, echoing the words I told her earlier.

She nods, her gaze dropping to the floor. But I see it—the tiniest crack in her walls.

It’s a start.

Chapter eleven

Abby

I should’ve known better than to let Jake talk me into coming to another Ice Hawks practice. I swear, that kid has a sixth sense when it comes to sniffing out potential emotional landmines. But the way his face lit up when Beck invited us back? How was I supposed to say no?

For two weeks the VIP Kids’ Day is all Jake has talked about. It’s like I’d given him high caffeine drinks for every meal. If I’m honest with myself, I’ve been feeling the same. Being a part of Beck’s world, seeing him immersed with the kids, knowing that this is the real Beck ...it’s planting seeds that are growing in my heart.

Moment broken. “Spotty, sit!” I whisper-hiss, but the spotted menace is way too busy trying to sneak closer to the stray hockey puck Jake is batting around near the

benches. His tail wags like a propeller, and he's inching forward like a Dalmatian ninja.

"Spotty, no! That's not a chew toy!"

Jake snickers, glancing over his shoulder at me. "He just wants to practice his stickhandling, Mom."

"Stickhandling my foot," I mutter, eyeing the poor puck that's about to meet its slobbery doom.

"Hey, I think he's got a future in the NHL," Beck's voice teases from behind me.

I whirl around, catching Beck mid-grin as he approaches, still in full gear, looking way too good for a guy who just finished an intense practice. His hair's damp and pushed back, a few stubborn strands curling at the edges. He smells like fresh ice and minty shampoo, and it's downright unfair.

"Spotty's aiming to be a power forward," Beck adds with a wink. "I can see it now. Sir Lotsaspots, taking the NHL by storm."

Jake bursts into giggles, and I can't help but chuckle myself.

"Maybe he'll outscore you, Beck," Jake jokes, puffing out his chest like a tiny hockey analyst.

Beck crouches beside Jake, his eyes twinkling. "I don't know, buddy. I've been on a bit of a streak lately. Think Spotty can keep up with that?"

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“Easy,” Jake says with supreme confidence. “He’s got speed and teeth. You don’t stand a chance.”

Beck laughs, and I feel it — that familiar tug in my chest that’s becoming impossible to ignore. Seeing Beck with Jake? It does something to me, something that makes my carefully built defenses feel about as sturdy as wet tissue paper.

Don’t fall for him, Abby. But who am I kidding? It’s a past tense thought.

How am I supposed to keep my heart on lockdown when Beck looks at Jake like he’s the coolest kid on the planet? And the way Jake looks up to him? It’s dangerous. The kind of dangerous I vowed to avoid.

"Alright, superstar," Beck says, ruffling Jake’s hair. "Want to help me pack up?"

Jake’s eyes light up like it’s Christmas morning. "Really?"

“Absolutely. I need an assistant, and you’re my guy.”

As Jake darts off with Beck to gather sticks, Spotty finally gives up on the puck and plops down by my feet, his tongue hanging out in pure puppy satisfaction.

“You’re not supposed to make this so easy,” I mutter to no one in particular, running my hand over Spotty’s head.

But it’s Beck who’s making it too easy.

I keep watching as Beck chats with Jake, explaining how to stack sticks properly while Jake listens with awe. It's like they've formed their own little team, and my heart doesn't know whether to cheer or hide in the locker room.

"How do you do it?" I blurt out before I can stop myself.

Beck looks up, his expression curious. "Do what?"

"Be so..." I wave a hand vaguely, searching for the right words. "Good with him. You're patient. Kind. You make him feel like he matters."

Beck's eyes soften as he straightens, walking back toward me with Jake trailing behind, holding what looks like half the team's equipment.

"It's easy when the kid's as awesome as Jake," Beck says, his voice quieter now. "He's smart. Funny. And he's got a heart bigger than this whole arena."

Oh great. Just go ahead and melt, Abby. Right here. In public.

I swallow, forcing a smile. "Yeah. He's one of a kind."

"And he's got a one of a kind mom," Beck adds, his eyes locking onto mine.

Oh no. No, no, no.

Abort. Abort.

I glance away, focusing way too hard on Spotty, who's now sniffing an abandoned glove like it might be his long-lost sibling.

"I'm just doing what I can." My voice is barely above a whisper.

“Abby...” Beck’s voice is softer now, almost hesitant.

And then I feel it—that slight shift in the air between us. The magnetic pull I’ve been trying so hard to ignore.

I look up, and Beck is closer than I realized. Way too close.

His eyes — that impossible shade of stormy blue — search mine, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe.

"You're amazing," he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper.

My heart pounds as Beck lifts a hand, brushing a stray lock of hair away from my cheek. His touch is gentle, his fingertips lingering just a second too long.

"Beck..." I breathe, but I don't move.

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I should step back. I should create space.

But I don't.

His gaze dips to my lips, and for a heartbeat, I think he's going to kiss me.

And I want him to.

My pulse skyrockets, and every nerve in my body screams for me to lean in. To let go.

But just as Beck starts to close the distance, Jake's voice cuts through the moment like a foghorn.

"Beck! I think I found your glove!"

What is it about kids? They have a Spidey-sense for timing ... bad timing.

I jolt back, heat flooding my cheeks. Beck's hand falls away, and the space between us feels suddenly, achingly empty.

"Thanks, buddy," Beck calls over his shoulder, but his eyes linger on mine for just a beat longer.

And in that moment, I know. If Jake hadn't interrupted...

I don't even want to think about how close I came to crossing a line I don't know if

I'm ready for.

"Mom?" Jake pipes up, unknowingly rescuing me from the emotional quicksand I am sinking into. "Can we come to the game on Saturday? Beck said it's a big one."

"Oh, uh..." I blink, trying to shake off the warm fuzzies threatening to take over. "We'll see, buddy. I've got a lot of work to do this week."

Jake's face falls just a little, and Beck notices.

"I'll leave tickets at will call," Beck offers with a smile that makes it impossible to say no. "No pressure. Just... if you want to come."

Jake's hopeful eyes bounce between me and Beck, and Spotty takes that exact moment to leap up and lick Beck's face, sending Jake into another fit of giggles.

"Spotty! No licking the superstar!" I gasp, mortified, but Beck just laughs, wiping his face.

"Don't worry," Beck says, grinning. "I've had worse. Griffin once dumped an entire protein shake on me as a prank. Spotty's a walk in the park."

I laugh despite myself, but it doesn't do much to calm the swirling mess inside me.

I should say no. I should walk away before this gets any more complicated.

But as I watch Beck and Jake — and even Spotty, who's officially declared Beck his new best friend — I realize something terrifying.

I know that I don't want to walk away.

Chapter twelve

Abby

Ofcoursewecameto the game. Who's kidding who?And now the following weekend we're back at a practice session. I pretend it's only Jake who's making this a routine, yep, only Jake.

"Beck, can I see the stick room again?" Jake's eyes practically sparkle as he tugs on Beck's sleeve. He's been talking about that stick room since the last tour, and I'm pretty sure he's memorized the dimensions of every blade in there.

Beck chuckles and squats down to eye level. "Of course, buddy. But only if you can beat me in a race down the tunnel."

Jake gasps, eyes widening. "A race?"

"Yep." Beck's grin is pure mischief as he leans down, giving Jake a head start. "One, two... go!"

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Jake takes off like a rocket, his laughter echoing through the hallway. I'm trailing behind them, my heart warming at how effortlessly Beck slides into Jake's world. He doesn't just tolerate my son—he genuinely enjoys spending time with him.

And Jake? He's absolutely smitten.

"Go, Jake!" I cheer, but my eyes stay on Beck.

He's all heart and warmth around Jake—encouraging, patient, and effortlessly charming. He slows down just enough to let Jake cross the invisible finish line first, pumping his fists like Jake just scored the winning goal in the Stanley Cup.

"You got me!" Beck pants, pretending to be out of breath.

Jake beams, his cheeks flushed with excitement. "I beat Beck Hayes!"

Beck laughs, crouching down to high-five Jake. "You're faster than some of the guys on my line."

Jake's grin is so wide it could light up the entire arena. But I can't take my eyes off Beck.

"Abby, you okay?" Beck's voice snaps me out of my reverie. I blink, realizing I've been staring at him way too long. Those broad shoulders, muscled arms, athletic build. That chiseled jawline. That scruffy hair.

"Hmm? Oh. Yeah." I clear my throat, but my heart's pounding. "Just... thinking."

“Thinking about what?” His tone is gentle, but his eyes—those intense, unreadable eyes—are locked on mine.

You. Us. The fact that I can’t stop imagining what it would feel like to let you in.

I manage a weak smile. “Just... Jake’s lucky, that’s all.”

Beck’s brow furrows, but before he can press, Jake interrupts.

“Mom! Did you see? I won!”

I latch onto the distraction like a lifeline, flashing a bright smile at Jake. “I saw, sweetheart! You were amazing.”

But Beck isn’t fooled. His gaze lingers on me, a silent question hanging between us. I look away before I say something I can’t take back.

The stick room is just as fascinating as Jake remembers. He’s practically vibrating with excitement as Beck explains the different types of sticks and how players customize them.

“See this curve here?” Beck shows Jake a stick with a slight bend in the blade. “That’s what gives me a wicked backhand.”

Jake’s eyes go wide. “Whoa. Can I try?”

Beck grins. “Next time we’re on the ice.”

Jake looks like Beck just promised him a lifetime supply of ice cream.

I lean against the wall, my arms crossed, watching them. Jake’s admiration for Beck

is so pure, so innocent. And Beck...

He's all in. No walls. No hesitation.

It's like he's already claimed a space in Jake's world—and he fits there perfectly.

“Abby?”

Beck's voice is softer now, and when I meet his gaze, yet again the air between us shifts.

He's watching me like he sees through every defense I've built. Like he knows exactly what I'm feeling but is waiting for me to admit it.

“You're amazing with him,” I whisper.

Beck's eyes soften. “Jake's a great kid.”

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I swallow hard, my throat suddenly tight. “It’s not just Jake.”

His expression shifts, something deeper flashing in his eyes as he turns toward me. “Really?”

My pulse kicks up, my body leaning ever so slightly toward him. I put my hands on his forearms and it feels like an explosion running through my body.

Say it. Just say it.

But then Jake calls out, “Mom! Come look at this!” and the moment shatters.

I blink and whatever just happened between us slips through my fingers. But before stepping back I tighten my grip, then move to hold his face for a moment and nod.

“Be right there, Jake,” I say, forcing a smile.

Beck’s eyes meet mine as he smiles, ever so gently. It’s enough to make my heart pound itself right out of my chest.

As we walk toward the locker room, Beck falls in step beside me, his shoulder brushing against mine. I feel the heat radiating off him, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

Taking my hand, he says: “I meant what I said earlier,” Beck murmurs, his voice

barely above a whisper.

I glance up, but his eyes are focused straight ahead. “About Jake?”

“And about you.”

My steps falter, but Beck steadies me with a light touch on my elbow.

“I don’t know what’s going on between us,” he continues, his tone softer now. “But I know I care. A lot.”

I swallow hard, my heart pounding as I look up at this wonderful man.

“I’m not asking for answers.” His voice is warm, patient. “Just... don’t shut me out.”

My throat tightens, and I can’t find the words. So, I nod, hoping that’s enough for now. His hand loosens and we part slowly and deliciously.

After his second practice session we all move to the locker room where Jake is bouncing with excitement.

I’m hyper-aware of Beck beside me—how his arm occasionally brushes against mine, how his nearness makes my skin tingle.

“Just wait here,” Beck says, guiding Jake toward one of the empty benches. “I’ll grab you something cool.”

Jake nods eagerly, but before Beck can take two steps, Spotty—who’s been quiet this whole time—decides that now is the perfect moment to remind everyone he’s an energetic, oversized puppy.

“Spotty, no—”

Too late.

Spotty barrels toward Beck like he’s trying to check him into the boards.

“Whoa!” Beck barely catches himself, laughing as Spotty’s front paws land on his chest. “Easy, boy!”

I rush forward, mortified. “Spotty! Get down!”

Beck’s laughing, though, rubbing Spotty’s ears like the dog just made his day. “You missed me, huh?”

Spotty responds with an enthusiastic lick, and I groan, covering my face.

“I’m so sorry—”

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“Don’t be.” Beck’s voice is warm, his grin lopsided as he looks at me over Spotty’s head. “I think I’m his favorite now.”

Jake giggles as he singsongs two syllables out of the word Beck. “Spotty loves Beck; Spotty loves Beck; Spotty loves Beck.”

My heart does a funny little flip.

Yeah, sweetheart, I think we all do.

Beck walks us to the parking lot after the tour, Spotty trotting happily beside him. Jake’s chatting nonstop about everything he saw, but my mind is spinning in a thousand directions.

“Thanks for today,” I murmur, glancing at Beck.

“Anytime,” he says softly, his eyes holding mine. “I mean that.”

The air thickens, and for a moment, I forget where we are.

Beck steps closer—just enough for me to feel the heat radiating from him. His gaze drops to my lips, and I swear the world tilts.

“Abby...” His voice is barely above a whisper.

My heart slams into my ribs. I should back away. I should say something, anything, to break this moment.

But I don't.

My breath catches as Beck lifts a hand, his fingers brushing against my cheek.

It's so gentle, so achingly sweet, that I can't breathe.

Just kiss me already.

"Abby..." His thumb grazes my jaw, his touch sending tingles down my spine.

Our eyes lock, and I know—this is it.

I tilt my head ever so slightly, lips parting, ready...

"Beck, can Spotty come back to the rink with us next time?"

And again, Jake's voice cuts through the moment, shattering the delicate bubble around us.

Beck's hand drops, and he shakes his head ever so slightly as he clears his throat. "Of course, buddy."

My cheeks flush, and I step back, my pulse pounding in my ears.

"Goodnight, Beck," I whisper, my voice barely steady.

"Goodnight, Abby."

But as I walk away my heart is aching, and I know this isn't over.

No, whatever "it" is, it's definitely starting, not finishing.

That night, I tuck Jake into bed and linger a little longer than usual, watching the peaceful rise and fall of his chest.

My mind drifts back to Beck—his touch, his warmth, the unspoken words hanging between us.

I almost kissed him.

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I almost told him how I feel.

But almost isn't enough.

And the longer I hold back, the harder it gets to deny what's already happening.

I've fallen for Beckett Hayes. And this time... I don't think I can stop it.

Don't kid yourself Abs, you KNOW you can't stop it.

Jake's long asleep, snuggled up with Spotty in a tangle of sheets and stuffed animals. I'm sitting at the kitchen table, staring at my laptop, but I haven't typed a single word.

Beck's face keeps popping into my head. His laugh. His patience. The way he makes Jake feel special.

And then there's how he makes me feel.

Like maybe... just maybe... I can be brave enough to try again.

I press the heels of my hands to my eyes, willing away the ache that's been building all night.

I can't.

I've barely survived picking up the pieces once. I can't risk it all falling apart again.

But then my phone buzzes on the table.

Beck: Had fun today. Jake's a natural. Hope to see you guys at the VIP Kid's Day.

My heart does a somersault.

I hover over the keyboard, my fingers trembling.

Say something. Say anything.

I type: Thanks, Beck. Jake had a blast.

And then I almost do it. I almost tell him how much today meant to me. How good his hand felt in mine. How seeing him with Jake made me feel things I've tried so hard to bury.

But I delete it.

Instead, I send a smiley face and shove the phone aside, my heart pounding like I've just faced off against the entire Ice Hawks defense.

You're playing defense, Abby.

It's time to stop fearing, to begin a new life. It's time to let Beck in.

Chapter thirteen

Beck

TheVIPKid'sCharityEvent is buzzing with energy, and I'm doing my best not to let my nerves get the best of me.

Jake's practically bouncing on his toes beside me, eyes wide as he takes in the massive indoor facility. Tables lined with sports memorabilia for auction, a photo booth decked out with Ice Hawks gear, and a temporary skating rink where the kids are already zipping around.

"This is awesome!" Jake's grin is infectious, and it's impossible not to smile back.

"I told you," I say, hugging him gently. "Wait till you meet some of the other players."

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Abby's standing a few steps away, looking as radiant as ever in a simple blouse and jeans that somehow make her look effortlessly beautiful. But there's a flicker of hesitation in her eyes. She's here, but...

Is her heart in it?

Quinn jumps in beside her, scanning the crowd with a mix of curiosity and mild disinterest. "Okay, where's the food? I didn't come here to starve."

I chuckle, "Over by the auction table." And Abby adds: "But don't bid on anything while you're there. I don't need you walking out with a signed jersey that costs more than my car."

"Ha!" Quinn smirks. "If it's Wes Archer's jersey, I might make an exception."

I blink. Wait... what?

As if summoned by her words, Wes strolls in from the far side of the room, effortlessly charming in a casual button-down and jeans, flashing that easygoing grin that drives women crazy.

Oh, boy.

"Speak of the devil," I mutter under my breath, watching Quinn's eyes do a quick once-over.

Her expression goes from indifferent to mildly intrigued in point one second flat.

“Wes Archer?” she murmurs, not nearly as casual as she’s trying to sound.

“Yep.” I smirk, fully aware of what’s about to happen.

And I’m not wrong.

“Hey, Hayes.” Wes claps me on the back before his eyes drift toward Quinn. He gives her a reciprocal once-over, his grin widening. “And who’s this?”

Quinn crosses her arms, her expression cool but her eyes giving her away. “Quinn. Abby’s sister.”

Wes’s grin turns downright dangerous. “Ah, so you’re the famous Quinn I’ve heard so much about.”

I’m pretty sure Quinn just forgot how to breathe, but she looks cool as a cucumber

“Famous?” She raises a brow, pretending she’s not affected, but her voice betrays her.

“Beck never shuts up about you,” Wes says, his tone playful but smooth. “Although, I didn’t expect you to be... well...”

Quinn narrows her eyes. “Well, what?”

“So way out of his league.”

Quinn blinks, and for a split second, I see it—the spark.

“You’re awfully confident for someone who just met me,” she quips, but her lips are tugging into a reluctant smile.

“Confidence is one of my better qualities.” Wes winks, and I swear I can almost hear the sizzle in the air.

I clear my throat, watching this play out with mild amusement. I’m one hundred percent going to give Wes hell for this later.

“Okay, lovebirds,” I mutter. “Maybe save the flirting for after the charity event?”

Quinn’s cheeks flush, but Wes? He just looks way too pleased with himself.

The event is in full swing, and Jake’s thriving. He’s tried everything—face painting, shooting pucks, and even a quick meet-and-greet with some of the other Ice Hawks players. His laughter echoes through the space, and I feel a warmth settle in my chest.

But I’m not out of the woods yet. The real chaos starts when Wes decides to crank things up a notch.

“Beck.” Wes sidles up to me while Jake is practicing slapshots. His grin is way too mischievous for my liking.

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“What now?” I ask warily.

“Remember that pie-throwing station the kids set up for charity?”

Oh no.

“Wes...”

“I may or may not have convinced Griffin that you volunteered.”

My eyes widen. “You did what?”

Wes’s grin stretches wider. “Relax. It’s for the kids. And hey, it’s only whipped cream.”

I groan, but before I can argue, Griffin Shaw—a.k.a. the team’s prank king—grins from across the room, waving a can of whipped cream like a weapon.

“Hayes!” Griff calls out, his voice booming over the noise. “Ready to take one for the team?”

A crowd starts gathering—kids, parents, and a suspiciously gleeful Wes included. Jake’s face lights up, and even Abby looks amused. Her guard is slipping just enough for her to let out a soft laugh.

“Come on, Beck,” Wes taunts, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “Unless you’re scared...”

“Scared?” I snort, shaking my head as I walk toward the pie station. “Not a chance.”

But I’m already bracing myself.

Two minutes later, I’m wiping whipped cream off my face as Jake howls with laughter, clutching his sides.

“Mom! Did you see that?” Jake’s eyes are practically sparkling. “Beck got creamed!”

“Literally.” Abby’s laughing too, her eyes shining as she watches me attempt to regain my dignity.

“Okay, okay.” I hold up my hands, chuckling despite myself. “I think that’s enough fun at my expense.”

“Are you sure?” Wes calls out from the sidelines, his grin absolutely smug. You had quite a few super fans watching that round and begging for a repeat. I’m literally fighting them off.

“I owe you for this,” I mutter under my breath, giving him a look that promises payback.

But when I glance at Abby again, her smile is softer now. And maybe... just maybe... she’s letting her walls down.

She’s huddled around the ice cream booth with her sister Quinn and, who’s that? I squint to see the third one in the group. Darned if it isn’t Wes’s little sister Jane Archer. She’s a librarian at the public library here in Elmwood.

I rarely see her around, probably for two reasons. I know she’s shy, or maybe she just holds a gentle demeanor. But the more likely reason is that her older brother Wes

keeps a notoriously strong arm on her and basically scares away any guys. Their parents are gone, and he feels a real responsibility to care for her. So far, she's accepted it all, but when she clicks with the right guy, I figure any interference by big bro will be for naught.

As the evening rolls on, I can't help but notice how natural it feels to have Abby and Jake here. Jake's chatting with some of the other kids, proudly telling them how I'm teaching him to skate. My heart swells watching him—this kid is pure sunshine, and I'm already too far gone when it comes to him.

But my attention keeps drifting back to Abby. She's smiling, but there's a distance in her eyes. She has a guardedness that hasn't quite faded, no matter how much time we've spent together.

Is she still scared?

I can't blame her. After everything she's been through, losing her husband so suddenly when Jake was just a toddler. I know trust doesn't come easy. But I can't deny that the closer we get, the more I feel like I'm tiptoeing around her heart.

And the worst part?

I'm not sure how much longer I can keep doing that without knowing if I'm just setting myself up to fall... hard.

From across the room, I hear Jake. "Beck! Look!"

His voice snaps me out of my thoughts. He's standing near the photo booth, holding up a hockey puck that's been autographed by almost every player on the team.

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“That’s awesome, buddy.” I kneel beside him. “Where’d you get that?”

“Griffin gave it to me, and he signed it, too!” Jake beams. “He said I should keep practicing and maybe one day I’ll be out there with you guys. Then a whole bunch of the team took turns autographing it. Isn’t that super?”

My chest tightens. Jake’s hope, his innocence ... it’s everything I never realized I was missing.

“You keep practicing, and I’ll make sure of it,” I say, my voice softer than I intend.

Jake’s grin lights up his entire face. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

And just like that, I’m a total goner.

Later in the day, while Jake’s busy testing his slapshot skills at one of the activity stations, I spot Wes leaning against the bar, a knowing grin on his face.

“Don’t.” I point at him as I approach.

“Don’t what?” Wes’s eyes sparkle with amusement. “Point out the fact that you’ve got it bad for Abby? Because buddy... it’s written all over your face.”

I groan, rubbing the back of my neck. “Is it that obvious?”

“Painfully.” Wes smirks. “And let me guess... she’s still holding back?”

I sigh, my gaze drifting to where Abby’s talking to one of the event coordinators, her smile warm but her posture guarded.

“Yeah.” My voice is quieter now. “I don’t know if I’m pushing too hard or if I’m not pushing enough. I don’t want to scare her away, but...”

“But you’re falling for her.”

I meet Wes’s gaze, and for once, he’s not joking.

“Hard,” I admit softly.

Wes nods, his grin fading into something more serious. “Beck... she’s been through a lot. Give her space. Let her come to you when she’s ready.”

I exhale slowly. “And if she never is?”

“Then at least you’ll know you gave it everything.”

His words hit harder than I expect. And I know he’s right.

But waiting?

That’s the hardest part.

As the event winds down, I find myself standing by the rink, watching Jake skate with the other kids. He’s fearless, laughing as he races around, and I can’t help but wonder...

What if this is what I'm supposed to be a part of?

But then I glance at Abby, and I sense a moment of clarity coming over me.

She's watching Jake too, her expression soft. I wonder if her heart is still wrapped up in layers that I haven't been able to fully unravel.

Am I doing the right thing by giving her space? Or am I just delaying the inevitable?

The truth hits me harder than a slapshot to the chest. I need to know where I stand with Abby. Before I fall any deeper.

As Jake skates toward me, his grin wide and full of joy, I make a silent promise to myself.

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I won't keep holding back.

After tonight, I'm going to talk to Abby.

I need to know if there's a real chance for us... Or if I'm just risking my heart for something that's never going to happen.

Because I can't keep falling...

If she's not willing to catch me.

Chapter fourteen

Abby

I can't stop thinking about Beck.

Ever since the VIP event, my mind keeps drifting back—not to my usual fears or reasons to keep my guard up—but to how it felt being around him.

It's... easy.

Beck fits into our world effortlessly, like he'd always been there. Jake is happy, laughing more than I'd seen in months. And Beck? He isn't just patient and kind with Jake—he is all in. Every smile, every encouraging word, every playful nudge is genuine.

And for once... I'm not scared.

I'm not analyzing every interaction or trying to convince myself that it is safer to keep him at a distance. Instead, I'm doing something I haven't done in a long time.

I'm yearning.

Yearning for more nights where Jake's laughter echoes through the house. Yearning for Beck's easy smile over dinner. Yearning for the way he looks at me—like I am someone worth taking a chance on.

And that's what terrifies me now.

Because I don't just want Beck.

I'm starting to need him.

The next morning, I wake up with a decision I can't ignore.

I'm done waiting.

For three years, I've hidden behind my grief and fear. I've kept my heart locked up so tight that no one could get close—not even someone as good as Beck. But after everything he's done... everything he's shown me...

Maybe it's time I stop protecting my heart and start listening to it.

So, instead of overthinking it, I grab my keys and tell Jake we're taking a detour before school.

Beck is on the ice when we get to the rink, running through drills with the team. Jake's eyes light up when he sees him, but this time...

This time, it's not just about Jake.

I lean against the boards, my heart pounding as I watch Beck glide across the ice. He moves with such effortless grace, his body perfectly in tune with the rhythm of the game. But it's not just his skill that catches my breath.

It's the way his eyes find Jake immediately, lighting up with warmth.

And then... they find me.

For a moment, Beck's movements falter, his focus slipping as our eyes lock.

And that's when I know.

I'm done hiding.

We watch as the practice winds down.

"Mom, can I go see Griffin?" Jake asks the second Beck skates off the ice. That was sure a perfectly timed surprise.

"Sure, sweetheart." I agree and watch him race toward the locker room.

Beck skates toward me, his hair damp, his smile tentative. "Didn't expect to see you two here this morning."

"Surprise," I murmur, my lips tugging up at the corners.

His smile grows, but there's a flicker of curiosity in his eyes. "Everything okay?"

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding louder than it should. "Actually... I was wondering if you'd like to come to dinner tonight."

Beck blinks, his expression shifting from surprise to something softer... hopeful.

"Dinner?" His voice is careful, but I see the way his eyes search mine.

"Yeah." I glance down, suddenly shy. "Just us. Jake's at a sleepover tonight. And Spotty's staying with Quinn."

Beck's grin spreads slowly, his eyes twinkling with something that makes my pulse quicken. "No interruptions?"

"None."

For the first time, I see something shift in Beck's expression—like he's been waiting for this moment.

"Abby." His voice is low, his gaze never leaves mine. "I'd love that."

The evening feels different from the start.

Beck shows up at my door, casual but still ridiculously handsome in a dark sweater and jeans that fit just right. His broad shoulders and the slightly long blonde hair are enough to make me swoon, no matter how many times I've seen him. His smile is easy, but there's a quiet intensity in his eyes that makes my breath catch.

"Come on in," I say softly, stepping aside.

The house feels... different ... without Jake and Spotty here. Quieter. More intimate.

I lead Beck into the kitchen, where I've set the table with candles that flicker softly, casting a warm glow.

"You didn't have to go all out," Beck murmurs, his voice close behind me.

"I wanted to." I glance up at him, and for a moment, everything else fades.

"His eyes find mine, and the world seems to fade as something unspoken lingers

between us."

"Abby?" His voice is barely a whisper.

"Sit," I say softly, breaking the moment before I lose all control. "Before the food gets cold."

Dinner is warm and comfortable—too comfortable.

We talk about Jake, about hockey, about life. But as the night stretches on, the conversation shifts...

Beck grows quiet, his gaze distant. And I can feel it—the weight of something unsaid.

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“Beck,” I say gently, reaching across the table to cover his hand with mine. “What is it?”

He hesitates, his jaw tightening for a brief moment before he exhales slowly.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

My heart skips. Oh no, another life, a WIFE?

But I just say: “Okay.”

He looks down, his thumb brushing absently over the back of my hand.

“I haven’t been completely honest with you.” His voice is low, almost hesitant. It’s a tone I’ve never heard from Beck before.

I feel my chest tightening. Oh no, a wife somewhere? Another family? “About what?”

“My... situation.” He lifts his eyes to meet mine, and for the first time, I see vulnerability there. “Abby... I’m not just a hockey player.”

“I know,” I whisper, my throat dry, “you’re so much more.”

He swallows; his jaw clenched tight. “No, I don’t think you understand. I’m also... I own a lot of businesses. Investments. Real estate. I’ve built a lot outside of hockey.”

My heart pounds as realization dawns. It's not about a wife or a family or anything that would keep us from having a relationship. I'm shocked, but so relieved.

"I've got a lot of money, Abby. I'm a billionaire." His words hang between us, heavy and filled with uncertainty. "And I didn't tell you because... I was afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Afraid that you wouldn't want to be part of that world. That it would scare you away. Or worse..." His voice softens. "That you'd think I was keeping it from you because I didn't trust you."

I blink, and my throat tightens. "Beck, I begin ..."

"I just..." He shakes his head while interrupting me, his eyes pleading. "I didn't want that to come between us."

For a moment, I don't speak. I just feel.

I feel the weight of his words. His fear. His honesty.

And in that moment... my heart softens.

"I don't care about any money you have, Beck." My voice is barely above a whisper. "I care about you."

His shoulders sag with relief, and for the first time all night, I see the tension leave his body.

"Abby..."

Our conversation continues and we both share more. I feel I know the real Beckett Hayes, more than ever. Then he tells me more.

“I didn’t grow up with money,” Beck starts, his voice soft but steady. “My parents worked hard to give me and my brother a good life, but we weren’t wealthy. My dad worked nights at the post office, and my mom ran a small catering business out of our house. She also cleaned houses – at least four or five each week. Everything I’ve built... it didn’t come from family money.”

My initial contract as a professional hockey player gave me my first real financial cushion. “I got a pretty big sign-on bonus, so instead of a fancy car or house I began to plan for when my knees or shoulders would begin to give out.

I knew hockey wouldn’t last forever,” he says, his gaze locked on Abby’s. “So, I started investing. First in real estate—small properties that I flipped or rented out. Then, I expanded into commercial real estate and started branching out into tech startups.”

“My investments took off, and with the right partnerships, I quickly turned my earnings into something far bigger than I ever imagined. I own several companies now,” he admits, almost reluctantly. “Tech firms. Real estate developments. Even a couple of international ventures.”

I have a private investment firm, Hayes Capital, which manages portfolios for athletes and other high-profile clients, helping them grow their wealth responsibly.

“But I didn’t want all this success to just be about money,” he says softly. “So, I put a lot of it back into causes I care about—youth hockey programs, education, and shelters that support underprivileged kids.”

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Beck's voice grows quieter as he confesses his biggest fear.

"I didn't tell you all this before because... I was afraid. Afraid that once you knew, it would change how you saw me."

"Abby, this is who I am, really. And now... I just need to know if you're okay with stepping into that world."

It takes me a minute or so to take this all in. I think Beck is about to jump out of his seat before I finally find my voice.

"Ok, I have a few things, Mr. Hayes." And I see him gulp. Good! Deep breath, Abs.

"First, why do you think I would tag you as money and not Beckett Hayes, the man?"

"Second, I've never had much money either, but what makes you think I wouldn't enjoy an occasional shopping spree? ... maybe at a car dealer?" That one is meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but I don't think he gets it as a joke yet. He's still too afraid.

"Third, you do wonderful things with your money, I can already see that. I'm not blind, Beck. I know that you were and probably still are, the biggest donor to the kids' day event and more."

"And finally, brother? You have a brother? I think we need to keep that conversation for another day."

I end with a megawatt smile, and he pulls me tight. The pooling tears in his eyes are

overflowing to his cheeks. I finally have met the Actual and True Beckett Hayes.

After dinner, I clear the plates, but Beck's not far behind me.

"You don't have to do that," I murmur as I rinse the dishes.

"Abby..." His voice is softer now, closer.

I feel him before I turn—his warmth, his nearness. And when I finally face him, the intensity in his gaze steals my breath.

"Yes ..."

"Tell me to stop," he whispers, his lips so close I can feel the heat radiating off him.

But I don't.

Because I don't want him to stop.

Instead, I tilt my head, and his lips brush mine—soft, tentative, but filled with something that makes my knees weak.

And then...

The dam breaks.

Beck's hands slide into my hair, tilting my head as he deepens the kiss, his mouth claiming mine with a heat that sends a shiver down my spine.

I press closer, my fingers tangling in his sweater as his arms tighten around me, pulling me flush against him.

The kiss is slow, deep, and filled with pent-up longing. His hands skim down my back, igniting a heat that spreads through me like wildfire.

I don't want this to stop.

Not tonight.

But just when the kiss edges toward something more—when my body starts begging for more—I pull back.

Not because I'm scared.

But because...

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I want to savor this.

As I rest my forehead against his, our breaths mingling, I feel the shift inside me.

I'm not running this time.

I'm not hiding.

"I'm ready, Beck," I whisper, my heart pounding as I finally let the truth settle in. "I'm ready to find out where this can take us, if we are truly meant to be together, to be a family."

And this time...

I mean it.

Chapter fifteen

Beck

I can't stop smiling.

Ever since Abby kissed me—really kissed me—I've been walking around like I just scored a hat trick in Game 7 of the playoffs.

It's more than the kiss, though.

For the first time, I feel like Abby's walls are coming down. She's not running anymore. She's choosing me.

And Jake? That kid's already carved out space in my heart.

This... this feels like something real.

So, I'm making the next move.

"BBQ at my place this Saturday," I tell Wes and the rest of the guys after practice. "Casual. Just friends, family... no pressure. And bring whomever you want."

"BBQ, huh?" Wes raises an eyebrow, his grin widening. "Trying to lock it down with Abby, are we?"

I smirk, not denying it. "Just giving her and Jake more reasons to stick around."

Wes chuckles, but there's warmth in his eyes. "Smart move, Hayes."

"Bring Quinn," I add casually, watching his expression shift.

The corner of his mouth quirks up.

"You think she'll say yes?" I nudge Wes.

"Oh, she'll say yes," he retorts. Unable to resist needling him I add: "The real question is... can you handle her?"

Wes just laughs, but I see the flicker of anticipation in his eyes.

“Challenge accepted. And you know, Hayes, you’re the only person I know who lives in a penthouse and can still invite people over for a picnic. I guess owning the building is a start.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just don’t make a deal out of it, ok?” I hope his snicker means yes.

The week drags by, and Saturday finally arrives. The sun’s dipping lower as I set up the last of the lawn chairs and toss the burgers on the grill. I invited my folks, so Dad’s helping. Jake’s running around the yard, Spotty close on his heels, while Abby’s inside with Mom putting the final touches on the salads.

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I introduced them earlier and it could not have gone better. Abby was a little shocked since meeting my folks was a surprise; I figured I wouldn't give her any time to fret about it and I think I was a good decision. From my end, the introductions went well. At least no one bit anybody was my best takeaway. Mom's been yearning for me to bring home a "sweetheart" as she calls it. She seems smitten with Abby and Jake was an immediate hit as well. Who couldn't love them both?

So all-in-all it's been perfect.

Then Wes shows up... with Quinn.

She looks amazing—casual in shorts and a flowy top—and the way Wes watches her?

Yeah, this guy's in deep.

"Hey, you two!" Abby greets them, her smile widening. She plants a sister kiss and hug on Quinn and an eyeball-to-eyeball motion on Wes as a warning.

"Hope you're ready for some friendly competition," Wes says, his eyes flickering to the cornhole boards I set up earlier.

"Bring it," Quinn fires back, her grin is playful, but her eyes dare him.

Oh boy.

"I hope you've been practicing, Archer," Quinn taunts, picking up one of the bean

bags.

“Practicing? Plul=eeze.” Wes smirks, stepping closer. “I’m a natural.”

“Natural at losing?” Quinn raises an eyebrow, her lips twitching.

Wes grins, but there’s a glint in his eye. “Careful, Quinn. Trash talk only makes me more competitive.”

“Good,” she murmurs, her tone low enough that only he hears. “I like a challenge.”

Holy catfish! Even I’m feeling the heat between them.

Abby catches my eye, her expression somewhere between amusement and concern.

“Should we... do something?” she whispers.

“Nah,” I murmur, leaning closer. “Let’s see how this plays out.”

Quinn and Wes are locked in, and neither of them is backing down.

“Hey, Hayes! Smells good!”

I barely turn before Griffin Shaw strolls onto the deck like he owns the place.

“About time you showed up,” I call out, flipping the burgers.

Griff’s grin is easy as he claps me on the shoulder. “Wouldn’t miss your famous BBQ.”

But then... his eyes land on Jane Archer.

Jane, standing off to the side her arms crossed, watches the cornhole game with quiet amusement.

Jane, who looks every bit the sweet, shy librarian with her oversized sweater and thick-rimmed glasses...

Except, something tells me this librarian is anything but shy.

Griffin's grin falters for half a second, and I catch the flicker of interest in his eyes before he masks it with that signature charm.

"Who's that?" Griffin murmurs, his gaze locked on Jane.

"Jane Archer," I reply casually. "Wes's little sister."

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Griffin's grin returns, slower this time. "Archer's sister, huh?"

I glance toward Wes, who's too busy trying not to lose to Quinn to notice what's happening.

"Careful, Griff," I warn, lowering my voice. "Wes is very protective of her."

Griffin's grin just widens. "I love a challenge."

Oh boy.

So, of course, Griffin strolls over, that easy confidence rolling off him in waves.

"Hi." His grin is all charm. "I'm Griffin."

Jane looks up from her phone, her expression polite but guarded.

"Jane," she says softly, her lips curving into a small smile.

"I don't think we've met before." Griffin leans casually against the railing, but there's nothing casual about the way his eyes are studying her.

"We haven't." Jane's smile is sweet, but her eyes...

Her eyes are sharp.

Griffin's good, but Jane?

She's better.

"Librarian, right?" Griffin asks, clearly thinking he's got her figured out.

"Yep." Jane tilts her head, her tone innocent. "And you're the guy who thinks he's charming enough to get away with just about anything, aren't you?"

Oh... damn.

Griffin blinks. "Excuse me?"

Jane's smile doesn't waver. "Did I get that wrong?"

For the first time in a long time...

Griffin Shaw looks speechless.

I like her already.

It doesn't take long for big brother Wes to notice.

"Hey." Wes's tone is too casual as he steps up beside Jane, his eyes narrowing slightly as he looks at Griffin. "Everything okay over here?"

Griffin's grin returns, but I see the way his jaw tightens ever so slightly.

"Just getting to know your sister, Archer."

Wes's eyes darken, his posture shifting into full-on protective-brother mode.

"Yeah?" His tone is even, but the warning is clear. "Maybe you should get to know

someone else.”

Jane sighs, her eyes rolling slightly. “Wes...”

“Just looking out for you, Janie,” Wes says, his smile tight.

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“I can handle myself.” Jane’s voice is soft but firm, and for a moment... Griffin looks impressed.

But Wes? He looks ready to deck Griffin.

“Relax, Archer,” Griffin says, holding up his hands. “Just making conversation.”

“Make it somewhere else,” Wes mutters under his breath.

This is going to be fun. I look over to Abby and wink, but she just shakes her head. Oh yeah. This is definitely going to be fun.

While Wes and Griffin quietly exchange death glares, I slip away with Abby to the side of the deck, where it’s quieter.

“You okay?” I murmur, running my thumb down the crease in her chin.

Her smile is soft, her eyes warm as they meet mine. “I am.”

“Jake’s having fun,” I say, watching as he runs around with Spotty near the lake.

“He loves being here.” Abby’s voice is softer now, her gaze drifting back to me. “And so do I.”

My heart clenches at her words. “Abs ...” I murmur, leaning closer, my hand

brushing her cheek.

Her voice is barely a whisper as her lips brush mine.

The kiss is slow, tender... but there's heat simmering just beneath the surface.

I deepen the kiss, my arms wrapping around her as I pull her closer.

And for a moment... the chaos fades.

But then...

"Mrow."

I barely have time to register the sound before a familiar weight lands on my foot.

"Biscuit!" Abby gasps, pulling back slightly, her eyes widening as she looks down.

Sure enough, Biscuit—my orange tabby affectionately known as 'the puck' for his tendency to chase anything that moves— is staring up at us with an expression that screams, Don't mind me. Just supervising.

"Buddy, not cool." I groan, but I can't help the laugh bubbling up.

Before I can move, Mitts, my fluffy gray with an attitude to match her name, saunters over like she owns the place and plops down right between Abby and me.

Abby bites her lip, trying not to laugh. "You didn't mention they're possessive."

"They think they run the show, indoors and out." I chuckle, trying to nudge Mitts out of the way, but she just stretches lazily, refusing to budge.

“And where’s...”

Before Abby can finish her sentence, Hat Trick—my sleek black cat with a mischievous streak—darts around the corner, his eyes locked on Spotty.

Spotty, who had been peacefully sitting with Jake, notices Hat Trick’s movement and immediately springs into action.

“Spotty, no!” Abby calls out, but it’s too late.

The Dalmatian bolts toward Hat Trick, who, of course, thinks it’s a game.

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And just like that... Chaos.

Spotty chases Hat Trick around the deck, barking with excitement, while Hat Trick zigzags between the lawn chairs like he's skating on ice.

"Are they always like this?" Abby asks, her voice full of laughter.

"Pretty much." I sigh, shaking my head, but I'm grinning. "They keep things... interesting."

Abby's eyes soften as she watches Jake giggle uncontrollably while Spotty and Hat Trick continue their high-speed chase.

"You're good with him, you know," she murmurs, her voice quieter now. "Jake."

I turn my attention back to her, my chest tightening at the emotion in her eyes.

"He's a great kid," I say softly. "It's easy."

Her lips curve, but there's something deeper in her gaze—something vulnerable.

"Beck..." She swallows, her voice barely above a whisper. "What happens if this... keeps going?"

I blink, my heart pounding. "What do you mean?"

She looks away, her teeth grazing her bottom lip. "If we... if you and Jake and I..."

become something more.”

My throat tightens. “Is that what you want?”

Her eyes meet mine again, and for the first time...

There’s no hesitation.

“Yes, I think I do,” she whispers, her voice trembling just slightly.

My heart pounds harder. “Me too, Abby, me too.”

She bites her lip, her cheeks flushing. “I’m scared. But... I’m not running anymore.”

I take a step closer, cupping her face gently in my hands.

“We’ll take it slow,” I murmur, my thumb brushing over her cheek. “One step at a time.”

Abby nods, her eyes shining with something that looks a lot like hope.

“And what about them?” She gestures toward the chaos unfolding around us, where Spotty is now practically herding Hat Trick toward the door, while Biscuit and Mitts watch with what I can only describe as mild judgment.

I chuckle softly, pressing my forehead against hers.

“They’re part of the package.” I grin. “Full chaos included.”

Abby laughs, her body relaxing against mine.

“Good,” she whispers, her lips brushing mine again. “Because I think I’m ready for all of it.”

Just as I’m about to lose myself in her gaze, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

“Sorry,” I murmur against her lips, reluctantly pulling back.

“No problem.” Abby smiles, but her eyes are clouded with curiosity.

I glance at the screen, and my stomach drops.

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My agent.

I answer, keeping my voice low. “What’s up?”

“Beck,” his tone is serious, cutting through the warmth of the moment. “We need to talk.”

My heart pounds as I glance at Abby, who’s watching me closely.

“What’s going on?” I ask, my gut tightening.

“We’ve got a problem, Beck. We need to talk.”

And it’s as serious as I’ve ever heard Dex.

Chapter sixteen

Abby

It’s scary how easy this feels.

The barbecue was a major hit, and it was nice to get to know more of his teammates in a casual setting. I think I was proper and made Beck proud. But then there was Spotty. Yikes! But the day was such fun.

I lean against the doorframe of Beck’s kitchen, watching Jake chase Spotty through the living room while Beck’s three cats—Biscuit, Mitts, and Hat Trick—observe

from the safety of the couch, their expressions a mix of curiosity and mild annoyance. Spotty, oblivious to their disdain, barrels ahead with Jake right behind him, laughing so hard he can barely breathe.

“Spotty, slow down!” Jake shouts between giggles, but the overexcited Dalmatian isn’t having it. He’s in full zoomie mode, zigzagging between furniture like a furry tornado on skates.

“Careful!” I call out, but it’s too late.

Jake lunges for Spotty just as the dog changes direction. Jake misses and goes sprawling, landing with an exaggerated thud on the plush rug with his arms around the dog’s back legs.

“Gotcha!” Jake exclaims, wrapping his arms fully around Spotty, who immediately starts licking his face like he’s a popsicle.

“Ewww! Spotty!” Jake squeals, laughing uncontrollably as he tries to fend off the enthusiastic assault.

I can’t help but laugh, the sound echoing through Beck’s enormous living room.

This. This is what happiness looks like.

“Need backup?” Beck’s voice rumbles from behind me, and I glance over my shoulder just as he steps into the room, his grin melting what’s left of my heart.

“Only if you’re ready to get slobbered on,” I tease, watching as he walks over and effortlessly scoops Jake off the floor.

“Spotty, down,” Beck commands softly, and the dog, miraculously, obeys—though

his tail wags like a metronome on overdrive.

“Dad powers,” I murmur with a grin.

Beck flashes me a lopsided smile. “I’ve had some practice.”

My heart clenches at his words. He’s not just talking about Jake or Spotty. He’s talking about us.

And that’s the part that excites me and terrifies me.

A few hours have passed and with the energy of youth, Jake jumps on the private elevator and runs out the back door again. We watch him tossing a softball to Spotty, who refuses to return it and instead parades around in triumphant circles. The sky has turned dusky violet, and a soft breeze rustles the wind chimes that Beck has hanging around the pool decking. Jake has great swimming skills and obeys my orders to never go near the pool unless one of us is out there. I’m confident of him being outside for a while especially since we can see him from Beck’s window.

We follow them downstairs, and I lean against the deck railing with a mug of tea, letting the cool air calm the heat still buzzing under my skin from Beck’s smile. He joins me quietly, his tall frame warm and steady beside me as he leans on the rail, watching Jake and Spotty with a soft, half-smile.

“He’s got a good arm,” Beck says, nodding toward Jake.

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“Mm-hmm,” I murmured, sipping. “He’s convinced he’s going pro. In hockey. Baseball. Dog training. Depends on the day.”

Beck chuckles. “The confidence of youth. It’s a beautiful thing.”

I glance up at him, surprised by the edge of wistfulness in his voice. “You sound like someone who misses it.”

He tilts his head slightly, the easy smile still there, but something thoughtful behind his eyes. “I do. Sometimes. I started skating when I was four, chasing my older brother around frozen ponds. We both thought we’d go pro, but... he didn’t make it.”

My brow furrows. “Yes, you did mention a brother. Tell me more?”

“Had,” Beck said quietly. “Well, he’s still alive but neither my parents nor I never hear from him. His name is Greg. He’s living in Denver with his husband and two golden retrievers. He tore his ACL twice in college, career-ending stuff. He coached for a while, but he didn’t love the game the same after that. Walked away. Started a bike repair business and never looked back.”

“That must’ve been hard—for both of you ... and your parents.”

He nods, exhaling. “It was. Still is. I felt guilty. I got the dream he chased longer and harder than I did. Still do, sometimes. I’ve tried to reach out to him over the years. I just can’t understand why he has cut us off so completely. I think that’s why I started the youth charity programs—trying to give other kids a shot at something, whether it’s hockey or just a place to feel safe.”

I stare at Jake, my heart tugging. “You’re really good with kids, not just Jake. I’ve seen how you are at the rink with the little fans. Patient. Genuine.”

“I like the way they see the world. Honest. No filters. You don’t see that much as an adult.” He pauses. “Jake’s lucky to have you.”

The words catch me off guard—gentle and sincere, with no agenda behind them—and they crack something open.

“I don’t always feel like I’m enough,” I admit, staring into my tea. “I try, but sometimes I wonder if I’m doing it right. If I’m screwing it all up.”

Beck doesn’t speak, just stands there beside me with that steady presence that makes it feel safe to say the things I usually keep buried.

“It’s been just us since Jake was four,” I say quietly. “His dad—my husband—died in a car accident. A drunk driver ran a red light. I was texting him to grab milk on his way home, and the next call I got was from the ER.”

Beck’s head turns toward me slowly. “Abby...” His voice broke a little. “I’m so sorry.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak for a moment. “Jake was so little. He doesn’t remember much, just a few bedtime stories and the pancakes he made every Saturday. Sometimes I think that’s a blessing. But for me... I remember everything. The ordinary stuff that turned sacred the second it was gone.”

He reaches over and gently covers my hand with his. His touch is warm, not demanding—just... there. Present.

“I lost someone, too,” he says after a moment. “Not to death, but... I think the grief is

still there. I had a best friend in high school, Eli. We were inseparable. He came out to me after a game one night, and I was the first person he ever told, or so I thought. But he must have told someone else, because a week later, someone on the opposing team outed him in the worst possible way. He got bullied so badly he left school, moved across the country. We kept in touch for a while, but I think the pain swallowed him up. I still wear the wristband he gave me for good luck. It's under my glove every game.”

I blink, surprised by the vulnerability in his voice.

“I don’t talk about him much,” Beck continues. “But I get it—the ache that doesn’t go away. The fear of letting someone in again. You carry it quietly, like armor, until someone sees through it.”

A lump rises in my throat. “I’ve been scared to love again,” I admit. “Not because I don’t want to, but because I’m terrified of what happens if I lose it again. If Jake does.”

“You’re not alone in that,” he responds gently. “But maybe love isn’t about erasing the loss—it’s about having someone beside you while you carry it.”

The tears come slowly, not dramatic, just soft and honest. I don’t wipe them away. Beck doesn’t flinch. He stays, grounding me with his calm, with the safety in his gaze.

“I don’t know what this is yet,” I say. “But... I’m glad it’s you.”

He squeezes my hand. “Me too.”

Out in the yard, Spotty finally returns the ball and bellyflops in the grass with a dramatic groan. Jake falls over beside him, laughing hysterically.

“He’s good at stealing hearts,” I say, watching them.

Beck looks at me, a spark of something tender in his eyes. “He’s not the only one.”

Days like this are becoming the norm—casual dinners at Beck’s, afternoons filled with laughter, movie nights where Jake falls asleep snuggled between us on the couch. It feels... natural. Like we’ve slipped into a rhythm that I didn’t even realize we’d started.

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Jake's thriving. His confidence has skyrocketed, and his constant smiles tell me everything I need to know.

It's more than just happiness—it's stability. Jake finally has something, someone, to look up to. Beck encourages him, pushes him to try harder, but always with the gentlest touch. Jake's joy has shifted into something deeper, something I recognize as security.

I watch the way Jake lights up when Beck teaches him hockey tips in the driveway, how he hangs on every word when Beck talks about teamwork and perseverance.

And Spotty? He's thriving too. Beck's house has become his second home, and while he's not exactly best friends with the cats, he's learned to coexist with them. Well... sort of.

He likes curling up by the fireplace like he owns the place, as if he's decided this is his domain now.

And me? I'm happy.

Happier than I've been in a long, long time.

But happiness this easy? It feels... dangerous.

Because I've been here before. I've known love that felt this right, this effortless—until life ripped it away.

My mind drifts back to those early days with Jake's father—how we fell into a rhythm so quickly, how certain I was that it was forever.

And then...

Gone.

The ache never really goes away. It's just... quieter now. But the fear?

That's louder than ever.

It started subtly.

At first, I thought I was imagining it. The distant look in Beck's eyes when he thought I wasn't watching. The way his smile didn't always reach those piercing blue eyes.

But now?

Now it's impossible to ignore.

"Beck," I murmur softly later that evening, as we sit curled up on the sofa, a worn fleece blanket draped over us. Spotty is sprawled out at our feet, snoring softly, while Mitts, Hat Trick and Biscuit are perch on the armrests, their judgmental gazes trained on the dog.

Beck's arm is around me, his thumb lazily brushing along my shoulder. But his mind...

It's somewhere else.

"Hmm?"

I tilt my head up, studying his profile. The firelight flickers across his features, highlighting the strong line of his jaw and the tiny crease between his brows.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," he murmurs, but the tightness in his jaw tells me otherwise.

"Beck..." I shift slightly, turning so I can look him in the eye. "You've been... distracted."

For a moment, he doesn't respond. His gaze drifts toward the fireplace, his jaw clenched so tight I'm afraid he might crack a tooth.

"Just a lot on my mind," he finally says, but the words are too careful, too measured.

Liar.

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“Is it work?” I press gently, hoping he’ll give me something—anything—to ease this growing knot in my stomach.

He nods, but it’s automatic, his eyes still not meeting mine.

I don’t push. Not yet.

But the knot that is in my stomach tightens. Whatever is going on, it’s coming for us.

A few minutes pass in comfortable silence, broken only by the occasional crackle of the fire. I let myself relax into Beck’s warmth, my head resting against his shoulder.

“Your dog,” Beck murmurs, his voice low and teasing, “is spoiled rotten.”

I glance down at Spotty, who’s rolled onto his back, paws in the air, snoring like a freight train. Biscuit and Mitts watch him with barely disguised judgment.

“Look who’s talking,” I shoot back, a grin tugging at my lips. “Your cats act like they own the place.”

“They do own the place,” Beck says, deadpan. “I’m just a humble servant.”

“Right. A billionaire hockey player who’s a servant to his cats.” I snort.

“Hey.” Beck’s grin is pure mischief now. “Mitts rules this house with an iron paw.”

As if on cue, Mitts flicks her tail and gives us both a look that says finally, some

respect.

I laugh softly, the tension in my chest easing just a little. “We’re a mess, you know that?”

“Yeah,” Beck murmurs, his voice softer now as he presses a kiss to the top of my head. “But I kinda like this mess.”

My heart flips, and for a moment...

I let myself believe this could be forever.

“Okay, spill,” Quinn demands the next afternoon as we sit at my kitchen table. She’s elbow-deep in flour, rolling out dough for what I suspect will be the world’s best batch of cinnamon rolls.

“There’s nothing to spill,” I lie, but the way she arches an eyebrow makes it clear I’m not fooling her.

“Abby.”

I sigh, my hands tightening around the mug of tea in front of me.

“It’s Beck,” I admit softly. “He’s... distant.”

Quinn’s hands still, and she looks up, her expression turning serious. “Distant how?”

“He’s distracted,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “Something’s weighing on him. And I don’t know if it’s... us.”

“Have you asked him?”

I shake my head, my throat tight. “Not yet.”

Quinn’s eyes narrow. “Abby.”

“I know,” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper.

“No.” She points the rolling pin at me like a weapon. “Don’t do this. Don’t shut him out because you’re scared.”

“Quinn—”

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“No.” She cuts me off, her tone gentler now. “You love him, don’t you?”

My throat tightens. “I... I think I do.”

“Then don’t let fear make you lose him.” Quinn’s eyes soften, but there’s an edge of urgency in her voice. “Beck’s not the kind of guy who runs. But if you keep putting up walls... he might not stick around to keep climbing them.”

I blink back the sting in my eyes.

“Abs.” Quinn’s voice is softer now; her hands still dusted with flour as she reaches across the table to squeeze mine. “You’ve already lost so much. Don’t let fear make you lose this too.”

Her words hit harder than I expect, and I swallow hard.

“I’m just... scared,” I whisper.

“Of course, you are.” Quinn’s expression softens. “But sometimes, the scariest things... they’re worth it.”

The breaking point comes later that night. Beck is here to hang out and watch some television.

Jake’s fast asleep, Spotty’s curled up on the rug, and Beck’s beside me on the sofa, his

gaze focused on the flickering flames in the fireplace.

But he's a million miles away.

"Beck."

He doesn't respond at first.

"Beck." My voice is softer now, but insistent.

Finally, he turns to me, and the vulnerability in his eyes nearly undoes me.

"Talk to me," I whisper, my hand reaching for his.

For a moment, he looks like he might pull away. But then... his fingers tighten around mine.

"There's something I need to tell you."

My heart pounds so loudly I'm surprised he can't hear it.

"What is it?"

Beck's jaw clenches, his eyes clouding with something I can't quite read.

"My agent..." His voice is barely above a whisper, and when he finally meets my gaze, the weight in his eyes steals the breath from my lungs.

"There's... been an offer."

My heart drops. "An offer?"

Beck swallows hard. “From another team.”

Oh. OH!

“Beck...” My voice cracks, but I force the words out. “Are you... are you leaving?”

The silence that follows is deafening.

Chapter seventeen

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Beck

I'm not closer to a decision than the night I got that call from Dex. The weight of the decision presses down on me like a lead puck.

It's been a week since that call from my agent, and I have no clarity about the right choice.

I stand by the window in my condo, coffee in hand, watching the snow fall steadily over Irondale. The rink where Jake practices is barely visible through the white haze. It's quiet now, but I know that in a few hours, the place will be filled with kids laughing, skating, and chasing dreams.

That used to be me.

I remember the first time I stepped onto the ice as a kid—barely able to stay upright but loving every second. That's where it all started. The dream. The obsession. The relentless drive to make it to the NHL.

And now...

Now I'm standing at a crossroads, torn between the game I've loved my whole life and the family I never thought I'd have.

I hear the front door open. "Beck?"

Abby's soft voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

I blink, realizing I've been gripping my coffee mug so tightly my knuckles are white. I loosen my hold and turn to see her standing in the doorway, her eyes full of quiet concern.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I murmur, but we both know it's a lie.

Her lips press together, but she doesn't push. Not yet.

"I'm taking Jake to the rink," she says softly, her gaze lingering on me. "You wanna come?"

My heart aches at the hopeful lilt in her voice.

"I can't." The words come out hoarse, heavier than they should be. "I... I have a meeting with Dexter."

Abby's expression doesn't change, but I catch the flicker of disappointment in her eyes before she looks away.

"Okay."

She tries to sound casual, but I hear the weight in her voice as she turns to leave.

I should tell her. I need to tell her. But every time I open my mouth; the words stick in my throat.

Because what if telling her means losing everything?

As the door closes, my heart feels ready to burst. I want to be out there with her and Jake today, but this decision is all I can manage at this moment. Maybe a conversation with my folks can help, so that's where I head.

Mom and Dad are as supportive as I figured they would be, but in the end their advice is to follow my heart. They know I'll make the right decision. Etc. Etc. Etc. So, while I feel their love and know they will always be in my corner, I come away no closer to a decision than before. The only thing I can really take away is the look in Mom's eyes when she talks about Abby and Jake.

Yeah, that's how I feel too, Mom.

The ice has always been home. Not just a place, but a part of me. So that's where I go. I've lived my life one game at a time, chasing championships, measuring my worth in goals and assists, in bruises and banners. But now, for the first time, the silence in the rink is louder than any crowd I've ever faced.

Dexter laid it out plain a few days ago—two paths, one decision. I either hang up my skates at the end of the season and start coaching here in Irondale, or I take the Thunderhawks' deal: three more years playing at full tilt, five million more in my pocket each year, but I'd have to uproot everything.

I lean against the cold railing of the arena mezzanine, watching the Zamboni hum across the ice. The surface gleams, spotless and perfect now with the snow gone. Like a fresh start. Like a blank slate. I used to see that as an invitation to go full throttle. Now, I only see what I'd be leaving behind.

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My mind drifts to Abby's laugh—bright, real, like sunlight in winter. And Jake, that kid's smile could crack through the thickest defensive line. He's got this energy that fills every room he walks into, dragging Spotty behind him like a spotted cyclone. The first time they walked into my life, I never saw them coming. Now I can't picture it without them.

And that's the problem, isn't it? I've spent years chasing a dream I thought I understood. But lately, it feels like the dream is shifting.

Back in the locker room, the sounds are familiar—sticks clattering, skates sharpening, laughter bouncing off the walls. Griffin tosses a towel at Wes, who retaliates by throwing his own wet towel into Griff's locker. Same old chaos. Same old rhythm.

I glance at the wall of framed jerseys from former team legends. I always thought my future was up there—retire a hero, number raised to the rafters. But what's a legacy if you don't have someone to share it with?

I remember my rookie year. Nights on the road. The endless grind. The hunger ... We were all chasing the same thing—victory, respect, a name that meant something. Back then, love felt like a distraction. I kept my distance. Stayed focused. And for a long time, that was enough.

But now?

Now, a quiet evening at home with Abby and Jake, with Spotty trying to sneak food off the counter, sounds like winning.

I need clarity. So, I go to the one person who won't sugarcoat it.

Dexter Stone sits behind his desk like a general in a war room—grizzled, sharp-eyed, and absolutely unbothered by the chaos swirling around him. He doesn't waste time on pleasantries.

"Sit."

I take the seat across from his desk, and he eyes me like I'm a puzzle he's been trying to solve.

"Coffee?" he asks, gesturing to the pot in the corner.

"No, thanks."

"Suit yourself." Dexter leans back, his eyes narrowing. "So. I'm guessing you're not here to talk about the weather."

I try for a smile, but it doesn't come close. "No."

"Right." He steepled his fingers, his expression unreadable. "Let's get to it then."

I nod, my throat tightening.

"As you know, there are two offers on the table," Dexter says, his voice calm but firm. "One keeps you here—with the Ice Hawks. One-year extension, with an option to transition into coaching or management after that."

"You know what the Thunderhawks are offering. They want a superstar. You've got gas left in the tank. But I also know you've been talking to Abby Price a lot lately. And that kid of hers is practically your shadow."

I didn't respond, didn't need to.

Dexter sighed. "Let's break it down. If you stay, you become a foundation piece here. You retire in Irondale. You coach the next generation. Your roots dig deeper. Your life stabilizes."

"And if I go?" I asked.

"You get a final ride. A big payday. You'll have fame that lasts another few seasons. You may even have a chance at the Stanley again. But there's no guarantee of that or what comes after."

I looked at him. "You think I'll regret it?"

He hesitated. "I think you'll miss more than the game if you leave."

That hits harder than I expected.

He added, "What matters most isn't the name on your jersey. It's the names you go home to, Beck."

Leave Abby.

Leave Jake.

Leave them.

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My chest tightens.

“Look.” Dexter’s tone softens, and that’s what scares me the most. “You’re at a point in your career where you need to think long-term. Your body’s not going to hold up forever. You take this deal in Boston... you’re securing your legacy.”

Dexter’s jaw tightens. “You stay... you get another year. Maybe two. Then what?”

Coaching. Management. A different life.

A life where I’m not on the ice... but I’m here.

With them.

I think about Jake.

The way his face lights up when we practice slapshots in the driveway. The way he beams with pride when he calls me his favorite player.

I think about Abby.

The way she looks at me when she thinks I’m not watching. The way her laughter feels like home.

They’re not just part of my life now.

They are my life.

But what if staying means resenting the choice I make? That's what making this difficult.

What if I stay... and one day, I can't look at Abby without wondering what might've been?

What if leaving means breaking Jake's heart?

What if I lose everything?

"Beck. Beck!"

Dexter's voice pulls me back to the present, and I blink, realizing I've been staring at the framed photos on his desk without really seeing them.

"I can't make this decision for you," Dexter says softly. "But whatever you choose... you need to be all in."

All in.

The words echo in my mind, louder than they should be.

"Take a few days," Dexter adds, his expression gentler now. "But don't drag this out too long. Boston's not going to wait forever."

I stand. "Thanks, Dex."

"Take your time," he said. "But don't take forever."

I walk down the hall slowly, passing photos of our championship seasons, past glories and epic moments. My name is etched into that history, sure—but lately, I’ve been asking myself what I want etched into my future.

The truth is, I don’t need the money. Not at all. I’ve played smart, invested smart, and built businesses outside the game. I’m not one of those guys clinging to the game because it’s the only thing keeping me afloat. So why am I even entertaining this Thunderhawks offer like it’s my salvation?

Is it pride? Habit? The idea that if I’m not moving up, I’m falling behind?

Maybe it’s the fear that if I stop playing, I’ll stop mattering.

Whoa. That one hits hard.

I've spent my entire adult life being Beckett Hayes, the hockey star. Captain. Enforcer. MVP. The guy with a wicked slapshot and a highlight reel that got replayed in every season recap. But if I take off the jersey and stop lacing up those skates, who am I then? Just Beck? Just a guy with a lot of money, some business ventures, and a quiet house?

But, no, it's a house that doesn't feel quiet anymore. Not when Abby and Jake are around. Not with Spotty thundering down the hallway, or Jake leaving his action figures under my couch cushions, or Abby brewing coffee in the mornings like she belongs there.

Do I want to matter? Doesn't everyone? But maybe mattering doesn't mean being seen by thousands every night. Maybe it's about being seen by people who really know me. The people who notice when I'm quiet, who stay when I'm tired, who light up just because I walk through the door.

Fifteen million dollars won't change who I am. But walking away from Abby and Jake just might.

The more I think about it, the more absurd my indecision seems. Trading that cupcake memory on my phone, that honest kind of joy, for a busier arena in a city where no one knows me yet? Trading bedtime stories for road trips and hotel rooms? Trading for... one more shot at what? A trophy I'll have to polish by myself.

What am I really trying to prove?

And who am I trying to prove it to?

I walk into the arena and slip into the back row of the stands, letting the quiet settle in. I hadn't realized how much I'd come to crave this stillness, the calm after the storm of a game, the hum of the refrigeration units, and the echo of my own breathing.

I pull out my phone and scroll through my gallery, stopping at a photo Quinn had snapped last weekend. Abby, Jake, Spotty, and me at the rink's charity event. Jake's front teeth are missing in his grin. Abby's cheeks are flushed from laughter. I'm holding a pink frosted cupcake Jake had smashed into my hand. It wasn't posed; it wasn't perfect. But it feels like something real.

A decade ago, I wouldn't have looked twice at that moment. Now, I can't stop looking.

I let the memories wash over me. Early morning practices in junior league. My dad driving me to the rink in the dark. The first time I laced up my skates, the first fight I got into, and the first game I won. I lived for the glory, for the stats, for the roar of the fans.

But the things I remember most vividly lately? The way Jake runs to me with Spotty at his heels. The softness in Abby's voice when she says my name. The sound of laughter echoing through my house after we hosted our first cookout together.

I hear the door swing open at the far end of the hall, followed by quick footsteps and a familiar voice.

"Beck? Are you still around?"

It's Tess, the team's nurse practitioner. She waves when she spots me.

“Abby’s finishing up with her notes,” she says. “She told me to tell you thanks again for the coffee and for keeping Jake entertained while she talked to Dr. Winslow.”

I know him well since he’s our team doctor, basically the surgeon on call who’s present at all games. He’s a good guy and I know for a fact that he has his eye on Tess. And who wouldn’t? She’s not only beautiful, but so kind-hearted. I think Tess has a sense of it; she’s not blind. And what a great match they would be—the medical power team!Oops, what did she just say?Oh, get your head back in the game, Beck.

“No problem.” I smile faintly. “Jake keeps me entertained.”

Tess gives me a long look. “You look like a guy with something big on his mind.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Whatever it is,” her voice gentler now, “Abby’s not the only one who believes in you. That kid adores you, Beck. Don’t take that lightly.”

I don’t.

When she leaves, I make my way back to the locker room, dragging my fingers along the cool wall as I walk. I feel like a man on the edge of something—of change, of clarity, of finally choosing not what would make me famous, but what would make me whole.

As I turn the corner, I hear the muffled sound of small feet shuffling.

Jake sits outside the locker room; his oversized hockey hoodie bunched at the sleeves. Spotty is curled beside him, head resting on Jake’s knee like a guardian angel with spots.

“Hey Beck!” Jake calls out, grinning.

“Hey, buddy.” I crouch beside him. “Was it fun watching the practice?”

“Sure was. Now Mom’s talking to Tess, so Spotty and I are waiting.”

Spotty gave me a low woof and licked Jake’s hand. I scratch behind his ear... the dog’s ear, not Jake’s.

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Jake leaned in a little. “Beck?”

“Yeah, champ?”

His voice drops to a whisper. “Are you gonna leave us?”

The words slam into me like a slapshot to the chest.

“I heard Mom say you might have to go to a different team.”

I stare at him, heart clenching. “I don’t want to leave, Jake.”

He smiles and nods like that settled it.

But it doesn’t. Not yet.

Still, I know one thing at that moment. The question isn’t just about where I want to go anymore.

It’s about who I don’t want to leave behind.

The house is quiet when I get back to Abby’s place.

Jake’s hockey gear is scattered across the living room, his stick propped against the wall. Spotty is curled up near the fireplace, snoring softly.

It feels like... home.

“Hey.” Abby’s voice is soft as she steps out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“Hey.” The way she looks at me—like she’s waiting for something—makes my chest ache.

“Dexter?” she asks softly.

I nod; my throat too tight to speak.

For a moment, the silence stretches between us, thick with everything we’re not saying.

“Beck...” Abby’s voice cracks just a little, and that’s all it takes to undo me.

“I don’t know what to do, Abs.”

The words spill out before I can stop them. “I love this game. I’ve loved it my whole life. But now... I love you. And Jake.” My voice breaks. “And I’m scared I’m going to lose it all—no matter what I choose.”

Abby’s eyes soften, but there’s pain there too. It’s the first time she’s seen me with tears in my eyes, but I just can’t contain them anymore.

“We’ll figure it out,” she whispers, her hand brushing against mine. “But you have to be honest with me, Beck.”

I swallow hard and wipe my eyes.

“Boston offered me a three-year deal,” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper.
“A chance at the Cup. But... I’d have to leave.”

Abby’s grip on the dish towel tightens, her knuckles turning white.

“And the Ice Hawks?”

“One-year extension,” I say softly. “Then... coaching. Or management.”

Her lips press together, but I see the flicker of pain in her eyes before she looks away.

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“And?” Her voice is barely above a whisper.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I add quickly, but the words feel hollow even as I say them.

Because the truth is...

I’m already running out of time.

Later that night, after Jake’s asleep and the house is quiet, I find myself back on the sofa staring at the ceiling while Spotty snores at my feet.

Abby’s beside me, her head resting on my shoulder, but I can feel the tension radiating off her in waves.

“Beck,” she murmurs softly, breaking the silence.

“Yeah?”

Her fingers brush against mine, tentative... but seeking.

“Whatever happens...” Her voice is so quiet I almost don’t hear it. “I don’t want to lose you.”

My chest tightens, and I turn slightly, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“You won’t,” I whisper, but the words feel like a promise I’m not sure I can keep.

Maybe my answer was sitting right in front of me this afternoon in the locker room, wearing a hoodie three sizes too big, with a spotted dog drooling on his shoe.

Chapter eighteen

Abby

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

The words slip out before I can stop them, barely above a whisper.

I’m standing by the kitchen window, staring down at Beck’s backyard where Jake is practicing slapshots with Beck. Spotty is running in circles around them, barking excitedly every time Jake sends the puck sailing toward the makeshift net.

They’re laughing. Carefree. Happy.

And my heart aches at the thought of that happiness slipping away.

“You can’t do what exactly?” Quinn’s voice drifts from the stove behind me, where she’s prepping food for our afternoon cookout.

I don’t turn around. I can’t.

“Move,” I murmur, my throat tightening. “If Beck takes that offer...”

My chest clenches just saying the words.

“Abs...”

Quinn's tone softens, and I hear the rustle of fabric as she abandons the stove and comes to stand beside me.

“Have you told him how you feel?”

I shake my head, blinking rapidly to keep the tears at bay. “I can't.”

“Why not?”

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“Because...” I swallow hard, my voice barely above a whisper. “What if I tell him I’m willing to uproot everything for him... and he still leaves on his own?”

The weight of that fear presses down on me, making it hard to breathe.

“Abs,” Quinn murmurs, her hand resting gently on my arm. “You’re forgetting something.”

I glance at her; my eyes filled with uncertainty. “What?”

She offers a small, knowing smile. “You’re not the only one making a sacrifice here.”

I’ve spent the better part of the morning lost in thought, pacing the length of Beck’s living room while Spotty snoozes on the rug and the cats all eye me like I’m a crazy woman.

“Okay, Quinn.” I mutter under my breath, stopping mid-step and rubbing my temples. “Pros and cons. It’s time.”

I grab a notebook from my bag and settle onto the couch, determined to figure this out.

Pro:I can work from anywhere.Freelance writing gives me the flexibility to move wherever I need to be. Sports and travel articles don’t tie me to Irondale. I’ve built a solid career doing what I love—and that part won’t change, no matter where we end up.

Con: Jake's stability. Irondale is home. It's where Jake's friends are, where his school is, where he's finally started to feel safe and secure again after everything we've been through. My heart aches at the thought of pulling him away from that.

"Mom?"

Jake's voice startles me, and I look up to see him standing in the doorway, his hair damp with sweat and a smile plastered across his face.

"Hey, bud." I tuck the notebook under a pillow, not ready for him to see my scribbled mess. "How was practice?"

"Awesome!" He bounces onto the couch beside me, Spotty instantly lifting his head and plopping into Jake's lap. "Beck says I'm getting better at my wrist shots!"

The pride in his voice makes my heart swell.

"Of course you are," I murmur, gently using my thumb to wipe away some of the dirt on his chin.

Jake leans back against the cushions, a contented sigh escaping his lips as Spotty licks his cheek.

"Mom?" Jake's voice is quieter now, thoughtful.

"Yeah?"

"If Beck goes..." His eyes meet mine, filled with a vulnerability that squeezes my chest. "Will we go too?" My throat tightens, and I force a smile I don't quite feel. I wasn't expecting that particular question.

“I don’t know yet, buddy,” I whisper, brushing his hair back gently. “But no matter what happens... I promise we’ll figure it out.”

Jake nods, but I can see the uncertainty flickering in his eyes.

And it kills me that I don’t have the answers he needs.

I spend the afternoon helping Quinn and Beck finish the food for tonight’s BBQ over at my house. There’ll be quite a crowd packed into my backyard, but I want to host tonight to take some of the pressure off Beck. We each have a lot on our mind, but I know Beck is really struggling.

We’re back at my place later that evening, and first to arrive just after five are his folks and Quinn. Of course, they come early to be useful and to help finish last-minute things. I adore his parents, especially the way they have taken Jake in and treat him like a true grandson. It’s something that Jake has never had, so I really treasure that they want to do things with him, take him places, and even teach him to fish.

I’m surprised that Wes shows up early. That’s definitely not his style. The mischievous glint in his eyes screams at me to not trust him one bit with my sister, but I’m afraid she has a different point of view.

“Okay, so what are we doing? What do you need?” Quinn asks, her arms crossed as she eyes Wes suspiciously.

“Cornhole,” he says casually, setting up the boards in my backyard like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Cornhole?” Quinn arches an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

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“Yep.” Wes flashes her a grin that’s equal parts cocky and playful. “Unless you’re afraid you’ll lose.”

Quinn snorts. “Please. I could beat you with one hand tied behind my back.”

“Prove it,” Wes challenges, tossing her a beanbag.

Quinn catches it easily, her lips curving into a grin that tells me this is about to get interesting.

“I hope you’re ready for a beatdown, Archer.”

“Bring it.” Wes’s eyes glint with anticipation, and I swear there’s something... something more in that look.

For a moment, they just stand there, locked in a silent standoff, the tension between them thick enough to cut with a knife.

“Should we leave them alone?” I murmur to Griffin, who’s standing beside me, watching the scene unfold with amusement. “Nah,” Griff replies, a lazy grin tugging at his lips. “This is too good.”

As Wes and Quinn battle it out in the most intense cornhole game I’ve ever witnessed, I glance over to find Jane standing off to the side, arms crossed, watching Griffin with a mixture of curiosity and guardedness.

“Not joining the fun?” I ask softly, stepping beside her.

“Cornhole isn’t really my thing,” Jane murmurs, her eyes flicking back to Griffin, who’s laughing at one of Wes’s sarcastic remarks.

“Griffin ... he’s not what I expected,” she admits after a moment, her voice quieter now.

“What do you mean?”

Jane’s lips press together, her brow furrowing slightly. “I thought he was all charm and bravado.” She pauses, her gaze softening as she watches him. “But there’s... more.”

I follow her gaze, watching as Griffin’s laughter fades, and for just a moment...

There’s something raw in his expression. Something vulnerable.

“You’re right,” I murmur, a small smile tugging at my lips. “There’s a lot more to Griffin than he lets on.”

Jane’s eyes linger on him a moment longer before she looks away, her cheeks tinged with the faintest blush.

Oh, this is getting interesting.

And just as expected, both of Beck’s two best friends seem to be headed down a rabbit hole of interest and flirtation. If I’m not wrong, Quinn and Jane are quite smitten, and it looks VERY reciprocated.

Later that night, after everyone has left and Jake is asleep in Beck’s spare room, I find

myself standing outside on Beck's deck, the cool night air brushing against my skin.

I wrap my arms around myself, staring up at the stars, my mind a whirlwind of thoughts.

I can't stop thinking about Jake's question.

If Beck goes ..., will we go too? Will me? Now that's a million-dollar question.

My career gives me the flexibility to move. I can write from anywhere. But uprooting Jake? Taking him away from the life we've built here?

I'm not just making this decision for myself. I'm making it for him.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Beck's voice is soft, but it startles me, and I turn to find him standing behind me, his hands tucked into his jacket pockets.

"Jake's asleep and I didn't want to wake him yet for the ride home." I murmur, offering him a small smile.

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He steps closer, his warmth wrapping around me even before his arms do.

“Abby...” His voice is barely above a whisper as he presses his forehead against mine.

“I’m scared, Beck,” I admit, my voice trembling slightly. “Scared of making the wrong choice. Of uprooting Jake. Of losing...”

“Me?” he finishes softly, his thumb brushing against my cheek.

My throat tightens, and I nod.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I whisper, my heart pounding so hard I swear he can hear it.

“You won’t.” Beck’s voice is filled with quiet conviction. “No matter where we end up... I’m not going anywhere without you.”

His words ease some of the tension in my chest, but I know the final decision still looms over us.

“What about you?” I ask softly, my voice barely above a whisper.

“What do you want, Beck?”

For a moment, he doesn’t answer.

And that silence?

It says more than words ever could.

Chapter nineteen

Beck

I've faced some of the toughest defenses in the league. I've stood in front of roaring crowds with seconds on the clock, knowing the outcome of the game was riding on my stick. But none of that compares to the weight pressing down on me now.

This decision isn't about a championship or a contract. It's about them.

Abby. Jake.

My family.

It's the day after our cookout. I run a hand through my hair as I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at the glowing screen of my phone. My agent's number is at the top of my call list.

All it will take is one call. One conversation.

"Beck Hayes signs with Boston in a blockbuster deal."

I can already see the headlines. Hear the buzz. Feel the adrenaline rush that comes with knowing I'd be competing for the Stanley Cup again.

But when I close my eyes...

I don't see the ice.

I see Jake's grin when he scores a goal in the driveway. I see Abby's eyes when she looks at me like I'm her safe place. I see Spotty sleeping at my feet while Biscuit, Mitts, and Hat Trick keep a watchful eye.

I see home.

And darn it... I'm terrified I'm about to lose it all.

"Beck, look!"

Jake's excited voice pulls me out of my thoughts as I step into the backyard. He's practicing his slapshots again, with Spotty acting as his unofficial goalie. The Dalmatian isn't exactly NHL material, but he's enthusiastic enough to keep Jake on his toes.

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“Nice shot, buddy!” I call out, trying to shake off the weight sitting on my chest.

Jake beams at me, his face flushed with excitement. “I’ve been practicing my follow-through like you showed me!”

“You’re a natural.” I squeeze his shoulder as I crouch beside him. “Keep that up, and you’ll be leading the Ice Hawks in no time.”

Jake’s smile falters for just a second, and his eyes drop to the ice-blue puck he’s been using—the one I gave him after my last game.

“Beck?” His voice is quieter now, almost hesitant, as he walks over to the porch.

“Yeah, bud?”

He bites his lip, his eyes wide with something that makes my heart clench. “Are you... are you gonna leave us?”

The question hits me harder than any check I’ve ever taken.

I freeze, my throat tightening as I stare at him.

“Leave?” My voice cracks, and I force myself to stay calm. “What do you mean, buddy?”

Jake’s gaze stays glued to the puck, his little fingers tracing the edges. “If you go to Boston ... will you still be here?”

Oh, Jake.

My heart shatters into a million pieces.

I swallow hard, but the lump in my throat refuses to budge. “Jake...” I gently lift his chin so he’s looking at me. His eyes are full of uncertainty—of fear.

“I don’t want you to go.” His voice is barely above a whisper now, and it’s all I can do to hold it together.

“Buddy...” My voice cracks as I pull him into my arms, holding him close as his little body trembles against mine. “I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

But even as the words leave my mouth, I know they’re not completely true.

Not yet.

But it’s enough to help Jake for the moment, and he runs back to Spotty challenging him to stop his puck one more time. Watching from afar I can see my life caring for him, watching over him, loving him. Swiping my eyes I turn away only to bump directly into Griff.

“Man, you look like heck.”

I glance up to see Griffin walking toward me, his usual smirk replaced with something that looks a lot like... concern?

“Thanks,” I mutter, dragging a hand through my hair. “That’s exactly what I needed to hear.”

Griffin steps closer, eyeing the pile of Jake’s hockey gear I’ve been mindlessly

rearranging for the past hour. “Wanna talk about it, or should I start making jokes about you losing your touch?”

I try to smirk, but it falls flat.

Griff sighs and grabs a hockey stick from the rack, twirling it in his hands like it's second nature.

“So... Boston, huh?”

I nod, my jaw clenched. “Three years. Big money. Big market. Chance at the Cup.”

“And the Ice Hawks?”

“One-year extension.” I pause, my throat tightening. “Then coaching or management.”

Griffin whistles low, his eyes narrowing as he studies me. “Sounds like a no-brainer.”

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“Yeah,” I mutter, but we both know it’s not.

Griffin is quiet for a moment, which is weird. Then he looks up, his expression softer than I’ve ever seen it.

“Look, man,” he says quietly. “I’ve known you a long time. And I’ve seen you fight like hell for that Cup.”

I nod, my throat tight.

“But...” Griffin’s voice drops, and for once, there’s no trace of sarcasm in his tone. “I’ve never seen you fight for something like you fight for them.”

My chest clenches.

“Beck,” Griffin murmurs, his gaze steady. “Sometimes... the biggest wins don’t happen on the ice. That’s the no-brainer I’m talking about.”

There’s another slapshot to the heart. I blink, my vision blurring for a moment. “Griff...”

“I’m serious.” Griffin’s expression is as serious as I’ve ever seen it. “You’re not that guy anymore. The one who lives and breathes hockey like it’s the only thing that matters.”

I swallow hard, my mind flashing back to Jake’s question. To Abby’s eyes when she asked what I wanted.

“I don’t know if I can walk away,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Then don’t.” Griffin shrugs. “But make damn sure you’re not walking away from something better.”

His words stay with me long after he’s gone. I sit on the back deck, watching the sun dip below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink.

Jake’s inside now, upstairs with Abby working on some school project. Spotty is sprawled out beside me, snoring softly.

And all I can think about is what Griff said.

The biggest wins don’t happen on the ice.

He’s right. Because as much as I love this game...

I love them more.

Jake. Abby.

They’re my everything.

And suddenly...

The choice isn’t so hard after all.

I’m up early the next morning, pacing the living room as I stare at my phone like it’s a ticking time bomb.

One call.

That's all it's going to take to change everything.

I inhale deeply, my heart pounding as I finally hit the button.

“Beck.” My agent’s voice is chipper, like he already knows I’m about to sign the deal of the century, and he’ll have a piece of it.

“Hey.” My voice is steady, but my heart feels like it’s about to explode.

“Ready to lock this in? Boston’s eager to—”

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“I’m not taking it.”

Silence.

“Wait, what?” His tone shifts, caught between confusion and disbelief. “Beck, this is—”

“I’m staying in Irondale.” The words come out stronger this time, and I feel the weight fairly lifting from my chest as I say them.

Another beat of silence. “You sure about this?”

“Yeah.” I glance toward the kitchen, where Abby is laughing softly as Jake tells her some ridiculous story.

“More than sure.”

Turning down Boston was the easy part. Now... I need to show Abby that I’m all in.

Words aren’t enough. She needs to see it. Feel it.

And I know exactly how to make that happen.

I spend the next few days making calls, meeting with people, and keeping everything under wraps. It’s not easy, but I want this to be perfect.

Because Abby deserves perfect.

She and Jake were absolutely thrilled when I sat them down to tell them we would all be staying in Elmwood while I continued to work for the Ice Hawks. It was a trio of amazing hugs and kisses and I'm pretty sure a really sloppy dog kiss came into the fray at some point. I did my best to let them know how happy I am to have chosen them over everything.

But I want to go even further. And that is what I've been working on the past few days. When I see the look on her face... and the joy on Jake's ...

I'll know I made the right choice.

Chapter twenty

Abby

"I swear, if I have to untangle one more set of lights, I'm giving up and using candles," I mutter under my breath, wrestling with a stubborn string of lights that has somehow managed to knot itself into an unbreakable web.

Quinn chuckles beside me, her hands expertly stringing lights around the porch railing like she was born for this. "Come on, Abs. Where's your spirit?"

"Buried somewhere under this mess." I blow a stray curl out of my face, glaring at the lights. "Maybe I should just leave it like this. Call it abstract décor."

"Or you could let Beck help," Quinn suggests, a knowing grin tugging at her lips. "I'm pretty sure he'd jump at the chance."

I pause, my fingers stilling for a moment.

Beck.

Even thinking his name makes my heart do that stupid fluttery thing it's been doing ever since he chose us over Boston.

He stayed.

For me. For Jake.

For us.

And I still can't believe it.

"Earth to Abby," Quinn teases, waving a hand in front of my face. "You're smiling like a lovesick teenager. Want to share with the class?"

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“Shut up.” I laugh, but there’s no denying the warmth spreading through my chest, my whole body.

“Fine, keep your secrets.” Quinn’s grin softens, and her eyes take on that protective, little sister look she gets when she’s about to get serious. “But... you deserve this, Abs.”

My throat tightens. “Do I?”

“Yes.” Her voice is firm, leaving no room for doubt. “After everything you’ve been through... it’s okay to let yourself be happy again.”

I blink back the sudden sting in my eyes.

“I am happy,” I whisper, the words feeling more real with every breath.

“Good.” Quinn’s smile widens. “Now, let’s finish these lights before Jake decides we’re taking too long and takes over.”

Beck arrives later that morning and pulls Jake outside for a man to man talk. He loves spending time with Jake, so I figure it’s just to throw some balls around.

But no. Jake comes flying into the porch, yelling through the screen door. He’s breathless and obviously excited to have a duty given to him by Beck. It’s apparently for me to get moving.

“Mom, hurry up!”

Jake's voice echoes from the front yard, his excitement practically vibrating through the air.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" I call out, wiping my hands on my jeans as I follow Jake and Quinn toward the driveway.

When I step outside, my breath catches.

Beck is standing beside his truck, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Get in, both of you. Okay, Spotty you too." Leaving Quinn at my house baking, per her usual, we drive a few miles to the outskirts of Elmwood when he pulls over and takes out two blindfolds.

Jake is all-in for any adventure, so he puts his on without delay. But me? I begin to ask question after question. Where are we going? Why the blindfold? What are we going to see? Will there be animals? What about bugs? When...

"Stop! In the name of everything good in mother nature. Stop!" Beck interrupts. "Remember our discussions about trust and how trust between us will be essential?"

Well, yeah, okay. He's got me there. Okay. I clap my mouth shut, place the blindfold over my eyes and wait. When we stop a few minutes later, I slip out of my seat to the ground and take Jake's hand. With the noise Spotty is making, it's all I can do not to rip the dreaded blindfold off. But I don't.

Beck positions us facing the truck and tells us to take them off. So, we're looking at the same truck as ever. No scrapes, no dents. So, what's the deal?

And then I realize something. It's not the truck, but it's the house behind it that steals the air from my lungs.

A charming farmhouse, nestled just on the outskirts of town. White with blue shutters, a wraparound porch, and a yard big enough for Spotty to run wild.

There's a sold sign in the front yard behind the white picket fence. My heart pounds in my chest.

"Beck..." My voice barely works as I take a step closer; my eyes locked on the house. "What is this?"

Beck's smile softens; his eyes filled with something that makes my knees go weak.

"It's for us," he says softly, his gaze holding mine. "For you. For Jake."

I blink, trying to process the words, but my brain isn't cooperating.

"You bought a house?" My voice is barely above a whisper.

Beck nods, stepping closer until he's right in front of me, his hands finding mine. "I wanted to give us a place where we could build a life. Ahome. It's my wedding gift to you ... but only if you want it, if you like it."

Of course, I need to officially be asked to marry him and say yes. But that's already a given in my heart.

My throat tightens, and I blink rapidly to keep the tears at bay.

"But... Beck..."

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“Shh.” He presses a kiss to my forehead, his touch grounding me. “I know it’s a lot. But I meant what I said, Abby.” His voice drops, and I feel the truth in every word. “I’m all in. Wherever you and Jake are... that’s where I want to be.”

My heart swells, and for a moment, I can’t breathe.

“Beck...” I whisper, my voice trembling.

“Come see it.” His smile is warm and full of hope. “I think you’re going to love it. But remember, this is your decision, not mine. I can and will sell it in a heartbeat, whatever you say.”

He opens the door, all but carrying me across the doorway. Maybe that will come soon?

Walking through the house feels like stepping into a dream.

The farmhouse style kitchen is bright and open, with enough space for Jake to do his homework on the island while I cook. The sink is almost big enough to put Spotty in – not that I would, and not that he would let me. I’m loving the blue walls and white cabinets that make me happy just looking at them. When Jake opens a door I’m totally in awe – what looked like a large cabinet door opens into a room full of shelves and a laundry. Holy cow!

The living room has a cozy fireplace where I already can picture us gathered around

on cold winter nights. The first floor has all the usual rooms but with the addition of a huge office space which will be enough for both of us to share.

Going upstairs I'm just as impressed. There are four bedrooms plus the primary. Now THAT makes me stop and gaze at the big guy next to me. My eyebrows shoot up, and he gets my message. He just shrugs with a looney smirk on his face. Oh yeah, I get his return message loud and clear. And quite frankly I'm all in.

And the one he has already designated as Jake's room? It's perfect.

"Mom, look!" Jake's voice is filled with pure excitement as he races into what he has already figured is his future bedroom. "It's huge! And there's space for all my hockey stuff!" Beck tells him that he can paint it any color he wants – Except! he says, the colors of his team's arch enemy, the Thunderhawks.

I laugh softly, my chest tightening as I watch my son bounce around the room like he's won the lottery.

But when I turn back to Beck...

My heart nearly stops. He's watching me. Not the house. Not Jake.

Me. He's watching me.

"Beck..." My voice catches, but he's already moving toward me, closing the distance between us.

"Do you like it?" His voice is soft, but there's a vulnerability in his eyes that takes my breath away.

"I love it," I whisper, my throat tightening. "But... you didn't have to do this."

“Yes, I did.” Beck’s hands cradle my face, his thumb brushing against my cheek. “Because I’m not going anywhere, Abby. I’m done playing defense when it comes to us.”

My chest tightens, and this time, I can’t hold back the tears. “Beck...”

“I love you.” His voice is steady, full of conviction. “And I love Jake. This... this is where I want to be. Always.” He makes a full circle with his hands and arms raised.

My heart is pounding so hard I swear he can hear it.

“Say something, Abs,” Beck whispers, his forehead resting against mine.

“I love you,” I breathe, my voice trembling. “So much.”

Beck’s lips capture mine in a kiss that steals the air from my lungs and seals a promise that’s been building between us for so long.

After the house we go on a tour of the land and the barn – a real barn! There are stalls for horses. Maybe? Or goats or donkeys. “But no pigs!” I tell the boys who are already talking about what goes where. Or who goes where.

I’m intrigued by the chicken yard with overnight coops for safety. And the garage next to the house for all things boy-toy. I hope I can have a corner for a girly motorbike. I’m thinking of pink and white peppermint stripes. Oh yeah! That will be a test of Beck’s true devotion. I can see the guys from his team now, unmerciful in their teasing.

Then, some serious contemplation sets in. I feel ready for this step, but I still need to protect Jake. Deep in my heart I know that with Beck, he will not need my protection. That is how sure I am of Mr. Superstar Hayes.

This...

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This is going to be a great home for us and for as many little Hayes people as Beck and I want.

Home. Our Home.

Chapter twenty-one

Beck

The grass is freshly cut, the scent of it still clinging to the air as I kick off my shoes and plant my bare feet on the cool earth. The sun's dipping lower now, casting long golden streaks across the fields that stretch beyond the fence line. This land—my land, no our land—feels wide and quiet and good.

The old farmhouse behind me creaks as it always does when the wind shifts. I've lived here for a few weeks now, just me and the three cats who I find sprawled on windowsills or prowling the creaky floorboards like they're patrolling a castle. I'm still getting used to the quiet. The kind that isn't filled with shouting coaches, slamming locker doors, or the buzz of planes and press conferences.

This is the best of both worlds. I love the ice; it's been my world for decades. But now when I get home, I can leave that behind and simply enjoy the quiet.

It's a good kind of quiet to come home to. But it's still lonely quiet.

Today though, the place is alive. Voices float on the breeze—laughing, teasing, clinking glasses, kids shrieking with delight. For the first time since I signed the

papers and moved in, this place feels like a home instead of just a house with potential.

I glance toward the oak tree in the center of the front yard. The picnic table is loaded with food—Quinn’s cinnamon rolls, Abby’s lemonade, a suspiciously overdecorated fruit salad that I’m guessing came from Jane. My mom has taken over the grill, swatting my dad away with a spatula every time he tries to flip something.

Abby’s sitting on a blanket with Jake, pointing out cloud shapes while Spotty tries to crawl directly into her lap. Jake’s already smeared chocolate across his shirt, and I’m pretty sure Spotty got ahold of a hot dog when no one was looking.

I can’t stop looking at them. That’s what a home really looks like.

Across the yard, Wes is pacing the edge of the fence like he’s trying to work up the nerve to go into overtime in game seven. Quinn’s watching him with that no-nonsense stare she reserves for patients and stubborn older sisters.

Then I hear it, her voice, clear and sharp through the early evening hush.

“Are you going to pace there all night, or are you going to say something to me, Wes Archer?”

He freezes like he’s taken a puck to the chest. I can’t hear everything from here, but I can see the tension in his shoulders shift when Quinn steps closer. Their silhouettes soften in the porch light. Then—finally—Wes moves.

The kiss comes like the break of a storm. Long overdue. Quiet at first. Then all-consuming.

I grin and shake my head. About darn time.

Nearby, Griffin whistles low. “Didn’t think Wes had it in him.”

He’s standing with Jane beneath the strings of hanging lights we put up yesterday. She has her arms folded, but there’s a trace of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“People surprise you,” she says.

Griffin nods slowly, then glances sideways at her like he’s trying to memorize her exact profile in this light. There’s something different in his expression—less cocky, more careful. He starts to say something, but then just shrugs and looks away.

Jane doesn’t. She watches him. Really watches.

The slow burn between them flickers brighter for a moment.

The next hour brings scads of others: friends, acquaintances and so many hockey players I can’t keep count. For a few hours it’s bedlam in our house and yard. There are games and impromptu sport challenges, tours of the barns and grounds, a miraculous amount of food consumed, and finally goodbyes from most.

As dusk settles, Jake and I gather blankets and lay them out near the fire pit. I keep a mental checklist running—extra cider warming on the stove, cocoa packets within reach, marshmallows for the kids. I’m not used to playing host for such a huge crowd like this, and I want it to be perfect. For Abby. For Jake.

Because even if they haven’t moved in yet, I want them to know they belong here.

I still live here alone, and the upstairs bedroom has only my things. The guest room is

made up, but empty except for Mom and Dad's overnight things.

The walls still echo more than they should. But when Abby and Jake are here, the place feels full.

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Jake curls up on one of the blankets, sticky fingers tangled in Spotty's fur. The dog lets out a groan and stretches out, tail thumping lazily as Jake drapes a sleepy arm across his back.

As I settle beside Abby, I hand her a mug of cider. The fire crackles gently, sending sparks into the night. The sky above us darkens into a deep velvet, and stars begin to prick through the darkness.

Mom nudges my shoulder as she eases down onto the blanket between me and Dad. "You done good, son," she says with her typical grin.

"Thanks, Mom."

Dad lifts his mug in a mock-toast. "I always told you, kid—family's not about blood. It's about who you'd burn dinner for."

"That explains your cooking," Mom says dryly.

Laughter breaks across the fire circle, warm and real. It makes me so very happy at how my folks have taken to Abby and Jake. They are quite bonkers over having a grandson nearby, one that they get to talk with and invite for sleep overs. And even better, they don't seem to mind the slobbering canine he brings with him.

I glance around. At the people I care about most. I see Jake, fast asleep, and Abby, who smiles like she's holding something fragile and beautiful in her hands. At my friends—some of them are falling in love, some of them are just starting to figure it out.

I turn toward Abby, watching the way the firelight dances in her eyes. Her cheeks are pink either from the breeze or from being so close to the fire. Her curls are wild from chasing Jake earlier. She tucks her legs beneath her and leans into my side without hesitation.

“You okay?” I ask softly.

She nods, sliding her hand into mine. “More than okay.”

And it hits me—hard and simple and sudden.

This is it. Not just the place. This. Is. Home.

The quiet around us, the laughter close by, the feel of her fingers curling around mine.

I don’t just see a future anymore. I feel it.

Right here. Right now. It’s in the sleepy sighs of a boy who trusts me with his heart. It’s in the gentle chaos of a dog who thinks this place is his kingdom. It’s in the soft warmth of a woman whose love I never saw coming.

This farmhouse isn’t just somewhere I escaped to after years of noise and pressure and headlines. It’s home now.

Even if the bedrooms are still empty and there are boxes I haven’t unpacked. Even if Abby hasn’t officially moved in. Even if Jake’s toothbrush is still in her bag and not in the upstairs bathroom.

They fit here. She fits me. And I know I won’t be alone here for much longer.

The fire burns low, casting flickering shadows across the yard as more people begin to gather their things. Quinn is still tucked under Wes's arm like she's always been there. Jane and Griff are helping pack up leftovers, laughing softly about something I don't quite catch.

Abby's tucked her head on my shoulder. Jake mumbles in his sleep and shifts closer to Spotty, who lets out a sleepy huff and guards him like a spotted pillow with a purpose.

"Are you tired?" I whisper.

She hums, not quite a yes or no. "Happy," she says instead.

I nod, brushing a kiss against her temple. "Me too."

The moment stretches. The stars seem closer tonight. Brighter.

I think of the little velvet box hidden in the drawer in my room. I haven't told anyone—not even Wes or Griff. But it's there. Waiting. Burning a hole in my soul every time I walk past it.

I'm not rushing. I want her to feel it too—this certainty. But nights like this? They make it really, really hard to wait.

I glance toward the porch where the others are heading in to get their things, slowly calling it a night.

"Stay," I murmur. "Just a little longer."

Abby's smile is soft and sleepy. "Okay."

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And so, she stays, wrapped in a blanket of stars and firelight, surrounded by people who love us and animals who don't understand personal space. And for the first time in a long, long time... I don't feel like something's missing. I feel full.

This is what it means to come home.

Chapter twenty-two

Abby

I didn't expect to feel like this.

Pulling up to Beck's farmhouse — our someday farmhouse, if I let myself dream that big — my heart gives this ridiculous little kick.

It's peaceful here.

It's quiet in a way that seeps under your skin and settles deep. Fields stretch around us like a soft green quilt, the wraparound porch worn in all the right places, a rocking chair gently creaking in the breeze.

Jake is practically vibrating in the passenger seat.

"Mom, look! Spotty is going to have SO much room to run! Do you think Beck will let me build a hockey net in the yard? Or maybe a whole rink in the winter?"

I laugh, because with Beck, that's not even impossible.

“I think you should probably ask him before you start making blueprints in your head.”

Jake grins, already unbuckling.

And me?

I sit there for a beat longer, staring at the house that Beck Hayes bought with us in mind.

Not just me.

Us.

Inside, the place smells like cedar and fresh paint. But also... faintly like him.

Warm. Familiar.

Jake tears off down the hall with Spotty on his heels, leaving me standing in the open living space — this big, beautiful, slightly empty canvas waiting to be filled.

Waiting for life.

Waiting for us.

It's not fully moved in — like Beck's been holding his breath.

There's furniture, sure. Comfy, worn-in pieces that look like they've been chosen for curling up with a kid or a dog. A big farmhouse table is just begging for pancake

breakfasts. Cozy throws are draped over the couch.

But the walls?

The walls are waiting.

Except for one.

My breath catches.

A framed photo — taken when Beck had skated with Jake at the VIP charity event.
Jake mid-laugh, Beck looking at him like he hung the moon.

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Right next to it... me.

Caught off-guard, smiling at them both.

It guts me.

Rounding the corner into the kitchen there on the island is a note. Beck's handwriting, clean and strong.

This place isn't home until you both are here.

I press my hand to my chest.

Oh, Beck.

I find Jake where I expected to. He's in what can only be his room.

Blue and gray walls. Shelves already holding a few hockey pucks and a mini stick rack. There's even a framed Thunderhawks jersey — but crossed out in Sharpie with "ICE HAWKS FOR LIFE" scribbled underneath.

Classic Beck.

Jake beams at me. "Mom! This is AWESOME."

I ruffle his hair. "It is, isn't it?"

He leans in, suddenly shy. “Do you think Beck really wants us here forever? Or just... sometimes?”

I crouch beside him.

“Jake, if you haven’t noticed, that man pretty much built this place around you. Around us.”

Jake grins so wide it about breaks me.

And then, like magic, the front door creaks. Heavy footsteps. A low whistle.

“I was hoping I’d find you two snooping around.”

Beck.

He’s standing there, looking all casual in jeans, t-shirt, and a baseball cap turned backwards like he forgot he’s supposed to be an intimidating billionaire hockey royal.

“Find anything worth staying for?” he asks, teasing.

Jake barrels into him like a little cannonball. “Everything!”

Beck catches him easily, hugging him tightly.

I hang back, watching them.

This man.

This impossibly good, gorgeous, grounded, real man — who turned down yet more fame and fortune not because it wasn’t enough... but because we matter more.

“You okay over there, Abby Price?” His voice is gentler when it’s just for me.

I nod. Barely.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “Just... taking it all in.”

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Later, after Jake is busy sketching plans for his imaginary backyard rink with Spotty sprawled across his feet, Beck and I end up sitting at the big wooden kitchen table.

Two mugs of tea between us.

The sun slanting low through the window.

He watches me like he already knows every thought spinning in my head.

“When I turned them down, you know,” he says quietly.

His smile is soft. “I didn’t even hesitate.”

“No?”

He leans back, his gaze never leaving mine.

“Because no paycheck, no championship, no front-row glory matters if I’m coming home to an empty house.”

He pauses. “And this place? It was never meant to be just mine. It’s ours, Abby. If you want it.”

Oh, my heart. I swallow hard. “You scare me,” I admit quietly.

His brow furrows. “Me?”

“You,” I nod. “Because you might actually be everything that I had stopped believing in.”

Beck exhales a laugh — a little shaky. “Good.”

My eyes narrow. “Good?”

He reaches across the table, curling his hand around mine.

“Because you scare me too, Abby Price. You make me want forever.”

And I lose it. Right there.

Tears flowing, I round the table and practically fall into his lap, curling into his chest like I belong there — because maybe I do.

Definitely, I do.

By the time Beck suggests we stay for dinner, I’m already undone.

“You okay with grilled cheese and soup?” he asks casually, like he hasn’t just rocked my whole world with this place.

“Perfect,” I manage, though my heart is nowhere near calm.

Jake is thrilled — he and Spotty disappear outside to explore, Beck trailing after them to toss a ball for the dog like he’s been doing this for years.

And me?

I'm left wandering the farmhouse — this space so deeply him— but somehow already yours too.

On the kitchen counter, there's a worn recipe card in Beck's handwriting that reads:

Mom's Sunday Soup — tastes like home.

It undoes me all over again.

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Dinner is easy, unhurried. We laugh when Jake tells Beck about the time Spotty ate an entire PB&J off his plate when he wasn't looking.

We linger over cocoa on the back porch afterward, stars just starting to appear.

And then Beck clears his throat.

“You mind hanging out by the fireplace for a few minutes?” His eyes flick toward Jake. “Got a little something to do.”

Jake's face lights up. “Like a surprise?”

Beck grins. “Like that.”

A while later, Beck calls them to come out to the deck.

Only now? It's transformed.

Soft string lights glow overhead, and some are draped along the railing. The firepit crackles nearby, throwing shadows across the worn wood planks. There's a cozy blanket already waiting on one of the Adirondack chairs. A little tray sits nearby with apple cider and a plate of cookies (probably store-bought, but knowing Beck, that is effort).

Music hums low — some acoustic playlist that feels like home.

Beck stands there, hands shoved awkwardly into his pockets, looking... nervous.

It's like he's facing the biggest game of his life.

"You did all this?" I whisper, ridiculously touched.

He shrugs, a little sheepish. "Had it ready for a while. Just... waiting for the right night."

Tonight.

Oh, Beck.

He gestures toward the chair, but I don't sit.

Instead, I walk straight to him, hands finding the front of his hoodie.

His heart pounds beneath my fingertips.

"I knew I wanted forever with you the day I saw you put me in my place over a flying hockey puck," he murmurs, eyes shining.

"That early?" I tease; my voice barely steady.

"Abby," he says, serious now. "You were never temporary. Not for me."

Beck takes a deep, bracing breath.

"I bought this house for a lot of reasons. Quiet. Space. Room for Jake to build whatever hockey rink he's planning."

I laugh through a snuffle as we both eye Jake who is on the steps watching.

“But mostly?” He pauses. “Mostly because I knew what I wanted my future to look like. And it isn’t bright lights or another trophy. It’s this.”

He gestures around us.

“You. Jake. Spotty probably chewing up the baseboards.”

I laugh again, wiping my eyes.

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“And maybe...” His voice softens. “Three slightly obnoxious cats stealing my pillow.”

As if on cue — I swear, these animals have perfect timing — Biscuit saunters out from inside like he owns the place. Followed, of course, by Mitts and Hat Trick.

All three flop down in varying states of feline disinterest.

“They really add to the ambiance,” I manage.

Beck grins. “Yeah. They’re not going anywhere either.”

His expression turns serious then.

“And neither am I.”

Then he’s reaching into his pocket.

Not rushed.

Not flashy.

Just Beck— solid and sure.

Velvet box in hand.

“I’ve had this longer than I probably should admit,” he says quietly. “Waiting until you felt safe enough to believe I wasn’t going anywhere.”

I can barely see through my tears.

He drops to one knee.

Jake gasps from somewhere behind me, whisper-shouting: “OH MY GOSH.”

Beck’s eyes never leave mine.

“Abigail Price,” he says steadily, voice rough with emotion, “will you marry me? Will you let me love you and Jake for all the days we’re given? Will you build forever with me — here, in this messy, imperfect life we’ve started?”

I’m already nodding before he even finishes.

“Yes,” I whisper. “A million times yes.”

His grin?

Devastating.

Beck slides the ring onto my shaking hand.

It’s perfect. Simple. Classic. Timeless.

Like him.

And then Jake barrels into us, nearly knocking Beck over as Spotty leaps excitedly beside him.

“You did it! You really did it!”

Beck laughs, pulling him into a hug. “Looks like we’re stuck with each other, huh, buddy?”

Jake beams. “Best stuck ever.”

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And just when I think the moment can't get any more...

Biscuit climbs right into Beck's lap.

Flops down.

Purrs like a motorboat.

I burst out laughing.

"Well," Beck says dryly. "Guess that's a yes from everyone."

As the night stretches on, and Beck pulls me close beneath the string lights, I know without a doubt...

This isn't just a house. This isn't just a yes.

This is home.

Our home.

Our forever.

Chapter twenty-three

Beck

The evening has been magical. How could I be this blessed to have these two wonderful people love me as much as I love them?

Abby is snuggled on my lap when I hear her voice, quiet and sweet. “I love you,” she whispers again, her voice barely louder than the crackling of the fire pit in the distance.

Her fingers tighten in my hair as she buries her face against my neck, her tears warm against my skin.

I can barely breathe.

Relief. Joy. Love.

It’s all hitting me at once, knocking the air out of my lungs like I’ve taken a slapshot straight to the chest.

“Abby...” My voice is rough with emotion as I hold her tighter, pressing my lips to her temple. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to hear you say yes.”

She pulls back just enough to look up at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears and more love than I ever thought possible.

“I love you,” she murmurs, her lips brushing softly against mine. “So much.”

“Forever,” I whisper against her mouth, sealing the promise with a kiss that makes the world fall away.

This is everything I’ve ever wanted.

Jake makes his opinion known, loud and clear as we move into the living room. “Did you really say yes, Mom?! Did you?”

Jake’s excited voice echoes from the doorway, and I barely have time to pull back before he’s racing toward us, Spotty bounding after him with his tail wagging like crazy.

“Mom?” Jake’s eyes are wide, his expression a mixture of hope and excitement as he skids to a stop in front of us.

Abby turns, her eyes still glistening with tears, and crouches down so she’s eye-level with him.

“Yes, Jake,” she says softly, her voice filled with so much warmth it makes my heart squeeze. “You heard me when I said yes. Remember?”

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Jake's face lights up like I've never seen before, pure joy radiating from him as his mouth drops open.

"Does that mean..." He glances at me, his little brow furrowing as he tries to piece it all together. "Beck... does that mean... you're gonna be my... forever family?"

Oh, buddy.

My chest tightens as I crouch down beside him, my throat thick with emotion.

"Yeah, Jake," I whisper, my voice barely holding steady. "If that's okay with you..."

Jake's eyes go wide, and for a split second, I swear the world stops.

Then...

"YES!" Jake throws himself at me, his little arms wrapping around my neck so tightly it takes me by surprise. "I always wanted this!"

I hold him close, my heart swelling with so much love I can barely breathe.

"Me too, Jake," I murmur, my voice rough as I blink back the sting in my eyes. "Me too."

Abby's hand brushes gently over my back, and when I look up, the love shining in her eyes undoes me all over again.

I want even more, and I decide that now is the best time, so I squat down to Jake's height. Then I sit down, Indian style and ask him to follow me to the floor. I've spoken with Abby about this, so it won't come as a surprise, but I want her to be a part of the discussion. She comes to sit beside us.

"Jake," I begin. "There is something I want to ask you. It's very important that you think about it rather than just belting out an answer for me. Can you do that? Think about this hard before you answer?" Jake is clearly moved by what I am asking and nods his head an affirmative with wide open eyes.

With a deep breath I begin. "Jake, you know I love your mom as big as anything possible. She is so important to me, and I'll do anything to make her happy." Now he looks ready to burst; he's actually hopping up and down on his butt, of all things.

I go on. "Jake, I also love you very much, and this is why I'm asking if you would allow me to adopt you. I know from your mom that you do remember your dad sometimes, and I would never want that to stop. I know I can never replace him, but I really want to be more than your stepdad.

I want to be your father, legally forever."

I can see him taking this all in, and Abby leaning against my back with tears falling down her cheeks. He begins to talk but I quickly interrupt and continue.

"I know that your dad is and will be a big part of your life. I respect that. And if you don't want me to adopt you, I'm okay with your decision. But if you do, I think that you might like to keep his name if we go ahead. So, I'm proposing that you use Price as your middle name. You could be Jacob Samuel Price Hayes. Or it can be simply Jacob Price Hayes."

"So? What do you think? Does this sound good to you?"

His moments of quiet contemplation are making me fidget myself. He looks more like he is brooding than thinking about my question.

Then he just explodes off the floor throwing his arms around me, kissing me, hugging tightly. “Oh Beck, I’m so happy. Can I call you Dad, maybe Daddy? Can my name be on all my stuff?”

“Breathe, Jake. Slow down and take a deep breath. I’m going to take that as a yes from you, right?” Abby comes in and joins our group, our family!

No, I think. We’re not just a family now.

We’re forever.

We stay like that—our little trio—for a while. Abby’s hand is on my back. Jake is still wrapped around me like a monkey who never plans to let go. And honestly? He doesn’t have to. If I could freeze this moment forever, I would. But life? It has a way of crashing back in. Like now—when I hear footsteps and voices getting closer from the porch. “Hey, what’s going on in here?” Quinn calls, suspicious as ever. Wes follows with that slow, easy grin of his. “Either we’re interrupting a family meeting... or Beck just got suckered into playing Candy Land again.” Jane and Griff follow close behind. I glance at Abby, and we both kind of laugh—because neither of those guesses could be wrong in this house. Abby leans over, kissing Jake’s temple. “Ready to tell them?” Jake’s eyes go comically huge. “Can I?!”

“Go for it, buddy.” Jake spins around so fast he nearly topples over. He plants both hands on his hips like some kind of superhero making a proclamation. “Beck asked Mom to marry him! And she said YES!” The doorway explodes with sound. “Holy—” Quinn’s eyes go wide, her face splitting into a grin as she rushes up the steps.

“Noway!”

“Way,” Abby says softly, her hand still in mine as she leans into me, her smile so bright it rivals the stars overhead. Jane gasps, her hands flying to her mouth. “Oh, Abby...!” Griff whistles low under his breath. “Well, I’ll be—” And Wes? Wes just deadpans, “Took you long enough, Hayes.” I hold up my hands, palms out. “Hey, hey, I had to make sure she liked me first.” Leave it to her sister Quinn who has no filter and says: “So give it up, Sis. Show us the million-dollar ring,” to which I retort that it’s actually from a box of Cracker Jacks, making the guys laugh and the girls scowl.

Abby rolls her eyes but holds out her hand. Quinn lets out another delighted squeal. “GORGEOUS. Oh my gosh, this is straight up Pinterest goals.”

Griffin leans over to Wes and mutters, “That’s a real thing, huh?” Wes grins. “Apparently.”

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Jake, however, is not done as he claps his hands and shouts. “And Beck asked me something too!” Silence. Every head swivels his way. “He asked if he could adopt me! And I said YES!” This time it’s not shrieks—it’s stunned silence, glistening eyes, wide grins, and the kind of hush that feels sacred. Wes clears his throat. “Kid... that’s the best news I’ve heard all year.” Jane wipes her eyes. Even Griffin looks a little glassy-eyed. “Welcome to the team, Jake.” Quinn sniffs and throws an arm around Jake. “You hit the jackpot, buddy.” He beams. “I know.” Later, when the noise dies down a bit, I sneak outside to call my folks. Dad picks up on the first ring. “Well, look who finally decided to check in. We figured you either got traded or abducted by aliens.” “Neither.” I say, grinning like an idiot. “Got engaged.”

Silence. Then to Mom in the background he shouts: “MARY, GET THE CHAMPAGNE!” Dad lets out a low whistle. “You’re serious?” “Dead serious.” “And Jake?” “Asked him if I could adopt him and he said yes.” And now my own tears come. Dad’s quiet for a beat. Then he says, rough and proud, “That boy’s gonna change your life, Beckett. In all the best ways. And our lives too!” “I know,” I whisper. “I know.” Mom gets on the line, giddy and emotional all at once. “Tell Abby we love her already. And tell Jake he’s stuck with us now, whether he likes it or not.” “Pretty sure he’ll love that.” Back inside, all the girls are texting furiously. Abby catches my eye and grins. “We’re getting so many heart emojis I might combust.” Jake’s flopped across my lap, already listing everything he wants to change his name on. “My backpack. My lunchbox. My hockey jersey. My library card. My—” “Slow down, bud,” I laugh. “One step at a time.” But my heart? My heart’s already there.

And just as I think things might settle down... “Mrow.”

The sound is barely a warning before Biscuit launches himself out the front door, his eyes locked on Spotty like a heat-seeking missile.

“Oh no,” I mutter, but it’s too late.

“Spotty, no—”

Yep, too late.

Spotty, clearly thinking this is a new game, takes off across the yard like a bolt of lightning, with Biscuit hot on his heels.

“Here we go.” Wes’s voice is laced with amusement as Mitts and Hat Trick decide they don’t want to be left out and join the chase.

“Why is this our life?” Abby groans, but there’s laughter in her voice as she watches the chaos unfold.

“Because it’s perfect,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her temple.

And it is.

Chapter twenty-four

Abby

Weddings have a funny way of showing you what—and who—really matter.

Case in point? I’m currently standing in Beck’s farmhouse kitchen while Quinn and Jane argue over cupcake frosting colors. Spotty is trying to eat a stray ribbon, and Jake is using a measuring tape to figure out if Biscuit the cat is longer than Spotty’s

tail. (Verdict: barely.)

Me? I'm staring at my closed wedding planner like it holds the answers to life's biggest mysteries. Except I know better.

Because the one thing gnawing at me isn't flowers or frosting or seating charts.

It's Greg. Beck's brother.

He's the missing piece to me. I believe that having Greg back with the family will make a huge difference to Beck and his folks, and for our wedding.

"You okay over there, Abby?" Quinn asks, holding up a cupcake with what can only be described as neon blue icing.

"Uh huh," I mumble.

Jane gives me a knowing look over the rim of her tea mug. "You're thinking about Greg again, aren't you?"

I sigh, dropping my pen. "Is it that obvious?"

Quinn snorts. "Girl, you've got 'journalist-on-a-mission' face written all over you."

She's not wrong.

Beck doesn't talk about Greg much. But that night out on his deck he opened up in a way I'll never forget. "Had a brother. Still alive. But gone from us."

And the ache in his voice? That sticks with me, Jane. It's like a story I'm not done chasing.

Later that night, after Jake's in bed and Spotty is finally worn out, I curl up next to Beck on the sofa. With his arm draped around me, thumb tracing lazy circles on my shoulder, I whisper: "Tell me about Greg."

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Beck hesitates and gives me a look that says: “Where did that come from.”

But then, quietly, he tells me about chasing Greg across frozen ponds when they were kids. About how Greg was the first one to dream of going pro. About the ACL injuries. The heartbreak. The silence that grew between them.

“I’ve tried, Abs,” he says softly. “Texted. Called. Even sent him birthday cards for a few years. But... nothing.”

I press my hand over his heart.

“Maybe he just needs a nudge,” I say.

Beck huffs a soft, humorless laugh. “Yeah? From who?”

My eyes sparkle. “From a tenacious journalist maybe?”

It turns out that Greg isn’t exactly hiding. He’s just... living.

A little digging (okay, a lot) leads me to a bike repair shop in Denver. But that’s not all.

Apparently, Greg now manages a local shoe store downtown named Sole Haven Shoes. He’s married to a man named Daniel, and proud dog dad to two golden retrievers named Murphy and Max.

Normal. Happy. Private.

I stare at his staff profile picture on the store's website for a long time.

He looks like Beck. Older maybe. A little more guarded. But definitely a Hayes.

And something inside me says... he misses them too.

It takes a few days and about eight drafts of a message before I finally reach out.

Hi Greg, I'm Abby Price... soon-to-be Abby Hayes. I know this is out of the blue, but I'm marrying your brother, and I know he misses you more than he can put into words...

I stare at my phone after I hit send like I've just launched it into the universe.

Hours pass. Nothing.

A day. Still nothing.

I'm about to chalk it up to a failed mission when my phone buzzes.

Greg Hayes: This is unexpected...

My heart thuds.

We message back and forth for days. Slowly. Carefully.

Greg is cautious. Kind. Funny, even. But underneath it all? I can feel the walls he's built. He either can't or doesn't want to discuss the reasons he left home, but it really doesn't matter. The only thing I want is for him to come home and fix that little piece

of Beck's heart that is empty and waiting to be filled, not to mention their parents.

I cannot fathom the pain I would feel if Jake left me for no explainable reason. Just up and left. No note, no call, no reason. It would be soul-crushing heartbreak. That is what Mary and Roger have been carrying for these many years.

Why now? He asks at one point.

I want to say "Why Not" but I take a little time to respond, and my answer is simple.

Because family isn't just about the easy parts. It's about showing up, even when it's hard.

There's a long pause after that one.

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And then...

My husband Daniel thinks I should come.

I think I want to.

A week before the wedding, I'm standing on Beck's porch, trying not to vibrate out of my skin while Beck grills burgers and Jake chases Spotty through the yard.

Jane and Quinn are here. Wes and Griff too, along with Beck's parents.

Everyone's relaxed. Everyone but me. Because a car just turned into the driveway.

Beck glances over, casually. "Expecting someone?"

"Actually..." I step closer to him. "Yes, I kinda... invited a surprise."

He raises a brow, and then the car door opens.

Two golden retrievers leap out like furry rockets.

"Whoa!" Jake yelps, laughing. "Spotty, stay!" I call, but it's too late. He's out of the fence like it is invisible. All three dogs collide in a tangle of wagging tails and sniffing chaos.

And then... Greg steps out. Beck goes completely still.

His husband Daniel follows, a warm smile on his face as he looks at Beck, probably questioning the reception he will get.

For one long heartbeat, nobody moves.

Then Beck's voice cracks. "Greg?"

His brother looks older. Softer around the edges. But his eyes ... those are pure Hayes blue eyes.

"Hey, Beck," Greg says quietly. "Been a while."

Beck doesn't say a word. He just crosses the yard in four long strides—and hauls Greg into a hug that looks like it might shatter them both. I've seen Beck tearful a few times, but the ocean just overflowed from his precious eyes. Both brothers are sobbing. And I'll admit, I am too.

And then Roger and Mary come outside seconds later. Mary lets out a sound I can only describe as a sob-laugh. "Gregory Allen Hayes, is that really you?"

Greg glances around—at his brother, his parents, the family he probably thought he'd never see again. "Yeah, Mom," he says, voice thick. "It's me."

The night is a blur of tears, laughter and stories. Daniel fits in like he's always been here.

Jake immediately decides that the golden retrievers are his dogs now too.

Greg and Beck sit on the porch, side by side, long into the night.

No blame.

No anger.

Just two brothers finding their way back to each other.

Later, as stars scatter across the sky, I step outside to find Beck leaning on the railing, watching Jake toss a ball for the dogs.

Spotty's trying to herd them, bless him.

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Beck wraps an arm around me when I step beside him.

“You did this,” he says quietly.

I smile. “We all did.”

But he shakes his head.

“No, Abs. This... this was you.”

His voice breaks a little. “I didn’t know how much I needed this until it happened.”

I lean into him, love spilling through me like sunlight I can’t contain.

Because this? This is pure love.

With all the bedrooms upstairs now ready and waiting, Beck naturally hopes Greg and Daniel will stay here at the farmhouse. It is sohim— wanting to fold his brother right into the chaos and comfort of his life now. Jake is already making grand plans about which dog could sleep where, and Spotty seems entirely ready to share his domain.

But it turns out Beck isn’t the only one with plans.

The moment Mary Hayes catches wind of that idea, she shuts it down with the kind of gentle but unshakable force only a mother could summon.

“Oh no, sir,” Mary announces, hands firmly on her hips. “Gregory Allen Hayes is coming home.”

Roger stands beside her, silent but with that rare glimmer in his eyes—the one I’ve only seen when Beck proposed or when Jake called him Grandpa without thinking.

“Our house has had a hole in it for too long,” Mary adds softly. “Our son belongs under our roof, at least for a little while. And Daniel is very welcome as well.”

And I get it. This isn’t about logistics or spare bedrooms.

This is about the years lost.

It’s about late-night talks over mugs of tea. About Roger getting to shuffle into the kitchen in his slippers and see both his boys in the same room again. About Mary fussing over Greg like she’s been saving up mothering energy for a decade and finally has a chance to spend it.

Greg hesitates. He’s awkward and uncertain, but Daniel just smiles, squeezing his hand.

“I think your mom’s earned this one,” Daniel says gently.

And the look on Mary’s face?

That is all it took.

Beck just chuckles, shaking his head as Greg finally nods.

“Guess I’ve been outvoted.”

“Not outvoted,” Mary says, her voice thick and her eyes glistening with more unshed tears. “Just loved.”

I pull Beck into my best “I love you” embrace and tell him to get his jammies and toothbrush because his momma wants him home now! I’ll clean up the yard and lock up the house, I tell him and off he goes. The newly reunited family of five and two dogs leaves to spend the night together, for the first time. Soon that family will add me and Jake.

And I cannot wait.

Chapter twenty-five

Beck

Six months later...

I’ve faced a lot of high-pressure moments in my life.

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Game 7. Overtime. Penalty shots with the clock ticking down.

But nothing compares to the way my heart pounds as I stand at the front of the beautifully decorated church, doors open overlooking Irondale Lake, waiting for Abby to walk down the aisle.

The summer breeze carries the scent of blooming flowers, and the sound of soft laughter drifts through the air as friends and family gather to witness this moment.

Wes and Griff are standing beside me, looking unusually serious each in a tux that, despite their protests, they pull off better than anyone expected. And my brother Greg is here as well. Until a few weeks ago I thought having him stand with me was an impossible dream. It's all thanks to Abby who convinced him to come, and I am so appreciative.

"Relax, Hayes," Wes murmurs, a rare smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "She's not going anywhere."

"Yeah," I murmur, but my pulse doesn't slow.

Because the moment I see Abby...

My world stops.

She's breathtaking.

Her dress is simple but elegant, flowing around her like she's floating on air. Her hair

is loosely curled, framing her face perfectly. But it's the look in her eyes—filled with so much love and promise—that steals my breath.

Jake walks beside her, his little chest puffed out with pride as he carries the rings, looking every bit the part of the most important person in our lives.

My throat tightens as they get closer, and when Abby's eyes lock on mine...

I know I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

"Hey," she whispers softly when she reaches me, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"Hey," I murmur, my voice rough with emotion. "You ready for this?"

"With you?" Her smile is radiant. "Always."

The pastor welcomes everyone, then begins with scriptures and adds his words of marriage advice. At least that is what he described at the rehearsal last night. Truthfully, I don't remember hearing anything. All my senses were locked on watching Abby.

I'm shocked into a response when I realize the pastor is asking for my vows. I turn to Abby and tell her:

"I, Beckett Hayes, take you, Abigail Price, to be my wife... my heart, my home, and my greatest adventure.

When I met you, I didn't know how much my life was about to change. I thought hockey was everything—until you and Jake showed me that love, family, and

laughter mean more than any championship ever could.

You brought light into my life when I didn't even realize I was living in the dark. You've taught me what it means to open my heart, to trust, and to dream of a life filled with something more than just the next game.

Abby, I promise to stand beside you through every victory and every challenge. I promise to be the man you and Jake can count on—to be your biggest fan, your fiercest protector, and the one who never lets you face life's uncertainties alone.

I vow to love you endlessly, to cherish every moment we share, and to always put our family first. You and Jake are my greatest win... and I promise to spend the rest of my life proving that to you.

Forever and always... I'm all in."

Abby's eyes shimmer with tears as she repeats her vows, her voice trembling but filled with so much love it makes my chest ache.

"I, Abigail Price, take you, Beckett Hayes, to be my husband... my rock, my heart, and the missing piece I never knew I needed.

When Jake and I met you, I was so afraid to open my heart again—to risk losing what I had already lost once before. But you... you didn't just walk into my life. You stayed. You showed me that love doesn't have to be scary, that family isn't just about blood. It's about showing up, day after day, with an open heart and a promise that never wavers.

Beck, you've given Jake the role model he's always needed. And me... you've given

me a reason to believe in forever again.

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I promise to stand by your side through every high and low. I promise to love you with everything I have—to be your anchor when life gets hard and your biggest cheerleader when life gives us reasons to celebrate.

I vow to love you fiercely, to laugh with you endlessly, and to build a life where Jake knows he is surrounded by love every single day.

With you... I'm home. Always."

My breath catches. It's like the whole church disappears, and it's just the two of us—Abby and me, standing in a moment I never dreamed would be mine.

She just said I'm her home.

For a guy who used to think happiness was found in trophies and roaring crowds... there's nothing that's ever come close to this.

I blink hard, trying to hold it together. But even Wes, who's pretending not to tear up, mutters a quiet, "Dang" under his breath.

Jake flashes me a thumbs-up from the side like he just scored a hat trick, and Abby lets out a teary laugh.

"Nice vows," I whisper, leaning in.

“Yours weren’t so bad either,” she says softly, eyes still sparkling.

The officiant nods toward me, and I turn to accept the rings from Jake—who looks ridiculously proud, as if he handcrafted them himself.

I take Abby’s hand in mine, and for a moment, my fingers still. Not from nerves—but reverence. This woman is about to become my wife. My partner. My future.

Slipping the ring onto her finger, I say, “With this ring, I give you my heart, my loyalty, and my forever. Everything I have, everything I am, is yours.”

Her hand trembles slightly as she takes the band meant for me. As she slides it onto my finger, her voice is soft but steady.

“With this ring, I give you my love, my laughter, and every tomorrow we’re blessed to share.”

Our hands linger in each other’s, the rings now glinting in the golden afternoon light filtering through the stained-glass windows.

When the officiant finally announces us as husband and wife... I don’t wait.

I sweep Abby into my arms and kiss her like my life depends on it, laughter and cheers echoing around us. Then we wrap Jake up in our arms and dance down the aisle together

“About time!” Wes calls out, making everyone laugh.

In this moment...

I have everything.

The church bells are still echoing as we step into the sunlit courtyard behind the chapel, where white tents stretch across the lawn and twinkling string lights are ready to glow as dusk settles.

The reception area is everything Abby dreamed of—simple, warm, elegant. Wildflowers in mason jars line the tables, and photos of our favorite memories are strung up on twine, fluttering in the breeze. There's laughter, hugs, champagne toasts being poured, and the smell of grilled food wafting through the air from the big outdoor buffet station Quinn insisted on organizing.

Spotty is here, of course. He's wearing a bowtie and already sniffing out leftover sliders under the kids' table. He's practically the guest of honor there.

Jake's bouncing from table to table, proudly telling everyone how he carried the rings "without even dropping them once." Wes hands him a root beer with a wink. "Job well done, kid."

The music softens as Dexter Stone, our gruff but soft-hearted team manager, steps up with a glass in hand.

"I'll keep this short before I start bawling and ruin my tough-guy reputation," he grumbles, clearing his throat. "I've known Beck since he was a cocky twenty-year-old who thought he could win every game on his own. And in a lot of ways, he could. But the man you see here today?" He pauses, glancing toward me and Abby. "He's grown into someone who understands that life's real victories happen off the ice. When you show up for people. When you love them right. Abby, Jake—you're his Stanley Cup. And Beck? You're lucky as a fox in the hen house."

The crowd laughs and cheers, and I raise my glass in gratitude.

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Then comes Quinn, who's pink in the cheeks and dabbing her eyes with a napkin. "Abby's always been the brave one. She's the one who taught me how to ride a bike, how to sneak cookies without Mom noticing, and how to hold my head high even when things hurt. But today, watching her stand with Beck, I realize she's found someone who holds her heart the way she deserves. Someone who makes her feel safe and wild again. I couldn't be happier for you both."

Abby clutches her hand, and the two of them hug as everyone claps.

Wes steps up next, looking like he might actually behave. "I was going to make a joke about Beck finally being off the market so the rest of us mere mortals can have a chance with Irondale's ladies, but... nah." He grins at us. "All I'm going to say is this—" he gestures toward Abby, Jake, and me. "This is what it looks like when love wins."

Even Griff adds a toast—surprisingly sweet and brief—before disappearing to the dance floor with Jane.

Then I call Jake up to the head table. I can see he's confused, but he trots up smiling and looking at me quizzically. Abby stands up with me as I reach for something on the table. "Jake, I want you to have this memory that we as a family came together in front of all these friends and family members. This paper I'm holding up is the judge's decree of adoption. I've signed it but I would like you to sign it as well. Do you want to do that?" Jake is just overjoyed. After he signs the document, he grabs me around the neck and tells me how much he loves me. Then he calls me DADDY. Talk about my love basket being filled to the top! And off he trots to tell everyone who will listen about me being his "real daddy" now.

Then the festivities resume and the music shifts.

The DJ cues up the song we secretly picked weeks ago. It's not a slow ballad. It's not even traditional. It's an upbeat swing of an old classic "L-O-V-E" by Nat King Cole, but with a modern twist.

Abby raises an eyebrow. "Are you sure you remember the steps?"

"Are you kidding?" I grin. "I practiced with your sister. Jake judged me the whole time."

We step onto the dance floor.

And as the band kicks in, we launch into a choreographed swing routine—twirls, dips, a dramatic spin that ends with Abby laughing breathlessly in my arms. The crowd erupts. Jake is shouting "Go, Mom!" from the sidelines. And Wes is filming the whole thing for blackmail purposes, no doubt.

By the end, we're both more than a little winded, but totally glowing.

"That," Abby pants, fanning her face with her hand, "was insane."

"But unforgettable," I say, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

The party unfolds around us. There's cake, kids chasing Spotty, and dancing under the stars.

Later, as the music slows down and the guests start to trickle away, I step aside with Greg near the lake's edge. The moonlight reflects off the water, and for a moment, it's just the two of us.

“Glad you came,” I say quietly.

He nods. “I almost didn’t.”

“I heard.” I swallow hard. “But I’m really glad you did.”

Greg shifts his glass in his hand. “For what it’s worth... I used to think I lost everything when I gave up hockey. But seeing you today—marrying her, loving Jake like your own—I realize I didn’t lose. I just took a different path.”

I look at him, my voice thick: “You’ll always be part of my team, Greg. No matter what.”

He clinks his glass against mine. “Right back at you.”

We stand there in silence, two brothers who once drifted apart, now stitched back together by forgiveness and time. Greg leaves to join Daniel with a promise to stay connected now that we have found each other.

Abby joins me a few minutes later, her heels dangling from one hand and her other arm around my waist.

“So...” she says. “Ready to kick off the honeymoon?”

“Oh, absolutely. You still good with the plan?”

“Couldn’t be more ready.”

The plan is to spend three days in a family cabin near Maplewood Falls, just the three of us—me, Abby, and Jake. Canoeing, stargazing, making s’mores. Jake even has a special “Honeymoon Buddy Badge” he designed himself, which he wore proudly at the reception.

Then Quinn and Wes will take over kid duty, and Abby and I will fly to a small beach cottage in the Virgin Islands for a quiet, private week—just the two of us. No distractions. No hockey. No deadlines. Just waves, hammocks, and love.

I glance down at her now, my new wife, barefoot and beautiful, and feel something inside me settle completely.

“We’re really doing this,” I murmur.

She smiles at me. “We already did.”

And with her hand in mine, we step into the warmth and laughter of our new forever.
