



Love on the Sidelines

Author: *Britney M. Mills*

Category: Romance

Description: Sometime love hits you at the strangest times, like on the lacrosse field.

I spend my days coaching a spirited bunch of teenage girls in lacrosse. It's challenging, but seeing their passion for the game makes it all worth it. Recently, a new girl joined our team, and to my surprise, she turned out to be Charlie's niece. Charlie, my brother's childhood best friend, loves to donate to our team, which drives me crazy, but it helps our girls have a better chance at a future in this sport.

Money has always been a tricky subject for me. My parents left me at my grandma's house when they came into money, choosing to travel the world without me. My ex-boyfriend, controlled by his family's wealth, walked out on our relationship when I wouldn't abide by the rules.

So, when I see Charlie, I can't help but draw parallels. His generosity feels like a shadow of my past, and it's hard to separate the two. But as we travel to lacrosse games and tournaments, I see a different side of Charlie. He's not just his money.

He's there for his niece, cheering louder than anyone, always ready with a supportive word. Slowly, my initial reservations fade. The more time we spend together, the more I realize how much I genuinely like him.

Maybe, just maybe, love can begin on the sidelines.

Love on the Sidelines is part of the Sunkissed Summer Novellas, a multi-author series about six former college roommates. They've gone their separate ways but love is going to find them all in the exact same summer!

Total Pages (Source): 49

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

1

AVA

Eight days.

Some people countdown to important things like weddings and having babies. Me? My countdown is to lacrosse season.

It's not that I don't want those things... eventually. Finding someone who'll put up with and want to procreate with me is the challenge. Just ask my one and only ex-boyfriend. Actually, don't bother.

Being an athlete and also a woman tends to give men an ego trip.

It's been a while since I was on a travel lacrosse team that wasn't connected to my college career, but I'm just as nervous as I would've been then, except I'm the coach this time. The only control I have is through shouting out advice instead of driving the ball to the net.

I'm hoping to give these girls the chance to play at a more competitive level than what they usually do here in northern Utah. But that means getting past all the good and bad from my own career.

Thinking of myself at the age of my players, thirteen and fourteen, it makes me realize how critical lacrosse was for building character when my life had been turned upside down in a few short months.

I've just visited my grandmother at the rehab center she's at after breaking a hip two weeks ago. Then I head over to the pickleball court in our small town.

Why am I here when I know nothing about this sport? Because I can't compete at a competitive level for lacrosse anymore, thanks to my bum knee. And I might've heard a girl on TikTok mention how she ditched dating apps (not that I've ever had those) and went to the pickleball court to find a date.

I mentioned I wanted to settle down and have kids one day, right? Well, sometimes it's better to start the search early. Trial and error is the mantra of my life.

In a town as small as Oakhaven, the chance of finding a guy in my age bracket would be a miracle, let alone if he's single and attractive.

How did I get here?

In college, I was confident that I would have a boyfriend and that we'd be able to go the distance. That turned out to be a joke. My ex-boyfriend ditched me for a women's softball player and I left college single.

That wasn't all bad.

I played at the University of Colorado and then played for a professional team for two summers before tearing my ACL for the last time. I probably could've pushed the doctors to let me play longer, but I knew it was time to be done.

I park next to the pickleball court and survey the landscape. It seems like this game is definitely a favorite among the older generations.

I pull out the paddle I bought when I drove to the next city over the weekend. Yesterday, I spent a couple of hours learning the rules and making sure I have a good

grasp of the game. Thank you to the people who think, “I should make a video of that,” and then post it online. It’s super helpful to the prideful people of the world, like me, who struggle to ask for help.

For a small town, I’m still surprised that we have this many courts. Sure, they can double as tennis courts, but there are already several people passing what I originally thought was just a wiffle ball back and forth.

I scan the area, feeling ridiculous that I’m even trying to find a date. To be honest, I had planned to be at the wedding for one of my roommates tomorrow. Going to a wedding by myself isn’t the worst thing, but I’m kind of glad Brooke called it off. The guy she was dating didn’t fit her well.

She’s the gal who will find someone even better soon, so I might as well search for my plus one now.

Maybe it’s getting older that makes me feel the pressure to find a significant other, or just living in this town where most of the women my age are already married and have a kid or two. I’m only twenty-six, so fairly young by my own standards.

I stand on the sidelines of the court and wonder what to do. I didn’t come with a partner and it looks like everyone else is paired up. Do I just wait and hope one of them will let me play? This was definitely not addressed in the videos I watched.

It’s like every horror dream I’ve ever had, except for there’s no heckling here.

“Aren’t you Shirley’s granddaughter?” a woman asks, walking over to pick up a towel on a bench.

“Uh, yeah.” I’m trying to place the woman, but I can’t really figure out who she is. Of course, everyone knows my Gran, which makes for a lot of awkward

conversations for me. “This is my first time trying pickleball.”

“I’m Betty Jean Carpenter. Your grandma was my preschool teacher all those years ago. She always knew how to cheer me up when I was having a hard time.”

My grandmother had been a preschool teacher for forty years before she retired ten years ago. Her health didn’t do well with all the little bugs and viruses the kids brought to class, and she sobbed the day her last classes graduated.

“Come play with us,” Betty Jean says. “Fran and I will teach you all the rules.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I smile and follow her to the third court over, where there's a woman on the other side. "Can you play with an odd number?"

Fran waves her paddler. "I've got to go to an appointment. Take my spot," she says to me. She leans in close but doesn't lower her voice when she says, "Watch out though. Betty Jean is good at cheating."

"I am not!" Betty Jean says, laughing. "You just need to get your eyes checked."

I might not have found a date, but what I did find was laughter and a zest for life. It makes me miss my roommates.

We were all so close during our time as the Sunny Girls. I probably should've gone to see Brooke and the others anyway with my plane ticket. Instead, I figured I'd save it for the next time one of them gets married. I doubt it will be long before that happens. I definitely lucked out in the college roommate department.

Over the next thirty minutes, I learn a lot about this sport. Betty Jean has to be in her late fifties, and while I wouldn't have pegged her for a fierce competitor, she's beating me with ease.

Several people have come and left from the courts, but I've barely noticed since I'm so focused on trying to hit the ball soft enough that it actually lands in the court.

"All right, darlin'," Betty Jean says. "It's time I head home and shower before I have to pick up my grandkids. We come to play on Friday mornings, if you're itching for a rematch." The wicked grin she gives me hurts my pride but also makes me laugh at

the same time.

“I’ll have to put that on my calendar,” I say, taking a swig from the water bottle I brought. This is probably the most exercise I’ve gotten since being cleared from my last surgery. I’m not feeling stiff right now, but I wonder if that’s because I’m not playing on grass or turf. Then again, soreness usually hits hard two or three days after a good workout.

Another woman standing close to the bench grabs a bandana and wipes at her forehead, wheezing. “It’s a hot one today.”

I nod and say, “It definitely is.”

She smiles at me and says, “Ava? Ava Hooper?”

Taking another look at the woman, I finally recognize her. “Hi Mrs. Danielson. I didn’t realize you’re back in town.”

“I moved back with my granddaughter a couple of days ago. How have you been?” She reaches over and pulls me into a bear hug. I cringe, hoping I don’t smell like a wet dog after sweating for the last sixty minutes.

“I’m doing well. Just working and taking care of Gran.”

She grins and says, “I need to stop by and see her. It’s been too long.” Her eyes get a faraway look to them and I’m sure she’s reliving some memory involving Gran. She smiles at me and says, “Do you want to play a game with us?”

I debate whether I want to head home or play. I have Fridays off because I spend any Saturday I’m in town and weeknights as the manager of the rec games on all the fields.

It's been quite a while since I've been this challenged in anything and I nod. "I'd love to, Mrs. Danielson."

"You can call me Tina. Charlie is on the other side. It looks like he's recruited someone to play as well. It's always a bit more fun with four on the court."

I freeze, glancing at the tall figure on the other side of the net.

Charlie Danielson. My brother's former best friend and the one who always teased me endlessly and then got my brother to ditch me every time they hung out.

Do I try to come up with some excuse to leave the court? It's too late, because I'm already here and Charlie has most definitely seen me.

"Where is it you've been?" I ask, trying to remember what Gran told me once I got back from college and playing away for two years. She's the best source of gossip in this town.

Tina says, "Michigan. I was up there with my daughter while she was going through cancer. She passed about six months ago and Emily, my granddaughter, and I just moved here on Monday. I used to play pickleball up there daily, so I finally wrangled Charlie out here to play. He needs it. The guy is behind a desk all the time and can use the sunshine."

Charlie is about twenty yards away from me, talking to a man who looks about his mother's age. What he lacks in a tan, he definitely makes up for in physique. Tina makes it sound like he doesn't get outside, but he must be some kind of gym rat to look that good.

He's always looked that good, even during the gangly years when his ears were too big for his head. If he hadn't been such a jerk all those years ago, I might've looked at

him differently.

“Yeah, I don’t know if he needs all that fresh air,” I say, trying to avert my gaze. No need to get all excited about someone who used to eat bugs for fun.

We walk to the net and Tina says, “Charlie, you remember Ava, right?”

Recognition hits in his eyes and he grins. “Yes, I definitely do. How’s Bobby?”

It’s been a while since I’ve been able to talk to my older brother since he works on a ship at sea and the cell service is spotty.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I reach out my hand to shake and he takes mine, making every nerve in my hand tingle. He shakes my hand, giving me a sly grin. Oh great, he hasn't changed one bit.

"He's good. Probably in the Mediterranean Sea?," I say.

"Lucky guy. He always knew where to find the fun."

I purse my lips, wondering if Charlie remembered what Bobby's career entailed. Deep-sea welding isn't something I'd call fun. He's basically giving the water a chance to take his life every time he dives in.

Tina asks about the man standing next to Charlie. "This is Paul," Charlie says. "He's been playing for over a year now."

"Women versus men?" Tina asks.

"You might not be happy that today is my first day," I whisper to her.

Tina chuckles and says, "It's all in good fun. Unless we place bets. Then things get interesting."

What can be that interesting about pickleball? Is there a hazing ritual I didn't stumble upon in my research?

Charlie nods. "Perfect. Rock, paper, scissors for first serve?"

I frown, turning to look at his mother. Maybe I was expecting chivalry, but—

“North side goes first,” Tina says with a smile, taking the ball to the back line of the court. Charlie grins at me and takes a few steps into the box on his side. “0-0-1.”

From all I’ve learned today, that means the score and what number of serve we’re on.

She hits it to Paul, since the ball has to go into the box opposite of where the server stands. He volleys it over to me and I’m able to get it over the net, but only barely in. Paul misses the ball and Charlie has to chase it.

“Nice,” Tina says, giving me a high-five. I smile and switch to the next box, getting ready for the serve.

After nearly thirty minutes, the set is close.

Charlie raises his eyebrows and says, “You’ve never played before?” He walks over to pick up the ball by the fence.

I shake my head and try to not let his approving look affect me. From everything I remember, this guy was a ladies’ man, one who has no problem swaying women to hang out with him. I’ve never been good at being a second or a seventh choice, so I shut down those feelings right now.

It’s my turn to serve, and I send it into Charlie’s square. It bounces once, and he sends it to his mom, who volleys it back. Paul hits it over to me and I take a big swing, sending the ball flying... right into Charlie’s face.

At first, I feel victorious.

Sure, the guy was impressed that I’ve only been playing for the last ninety minutes, but we’d battled in other sports growing up. He’s the reigning P-I-G champion with me as a close second. Bobby was never that competitive, mostly loving the

entertainment our games gave him.

But then I see blood.

My stomach tightens and I try to breathe out slowly, wishing I could redo the last minute.

“Are you all right?” I ask, walking up to the net.

His mom stands right next to me, but since he hasn’t moved, she jogs around the net to inspect the injury.

Blood. Why is there blood? My stomach twists at the sight.

He pulls his hand away from his eye and I see a small stream of red trickling down the side of his face. We use a wiffle ball for this sport. How in the world did it penetrate his skin?

He’s got that eye closed and I finally break out of my trance to grab the bandana his mother used earlier, so I don’t think she’ll mind.

I brave the sight and join the small huddle. “Here,” I say, handing Tina the cloth.

She glances over and gives me a tight smile before taking the light pink bandana and pressing it up against the wound. When she pulls it back, there’s a cut at the end of his eyebrow. It fills quickly with blood, making my stomach twist at the sight.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

“I think we’ll need to see a doctor for this one, Charlie,” his mom says softly.

His shoulders slump and he looks way more vulnerable than I’ve seen him since we started playing.

“I’m so, so sorry,” I say, hoping the wound won’t leave a scar. I mean, the guy is classically attractive. It wouldn’t be great to have that on my conscience to screw up his future life because of a hit to the eyebrow.

“He’ll be fine,” Tina says, giving me more of a regular smile at this point. “He’s not a huge fan of needles, but we’ll see how that works out now.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t like the sight of blood,” I blurt out. Charlie turns to give me a glare and then walks off the court with the bandana pressed against his wound.

He stops next to a nicer car, and my concern suddenly evaporates. If anything, Charlie probably has the money to get some kind of plastic surgery if needed. I try to remember if Gran told me what he does for work, but nothing comes to mind.

“Do you want to keep playing?” Paul asks from a few feet away.

I give him a quick smile and say, “I’ve already injured one man today. I would hate to do that to you.”

I turn on my heel and grab my water bottle from the bench before hurrying to my car. I’m going to need some serious regrouping time to come back after this. Maybe I’ll

get lucky and not see Charlie and Tina for a few months.

Chances of me coming back to play pickleball soon are slim. Instead of meeting someone dateable at the courts, I found Charlie, of all people. That about sums up my life right now.

2

CHARLIE

Meeting a woman at the pickleball court under the age of fifty was not something I had on my bucket list bingo. Reuniting with Bobby's younger sister Ava wasn't even remotely a possibility. The last I'd heard from her, she'd gone to college.

Was I surprised by how much older she is? Yes, but not in a bad way.

The last time I saw her, she was probably fifteen. The annoying sister of my best friend and kind of cute until she opened her mouth and started chirping about skills and stats.

Her parents had dropped her off at her Gran's house when she was thirteen before they took off to see the world. Since Bobby and I had already graduated and Mr. Hooper sold off his company for a high price, they decided they were done being parents. At least that's what I'd heard. I never really got the full story from Bobby.

The girl with the flat chest and the big dimple in her right cheek is now taller and has several more curves than before. But there's a fierceness in her eyes that I didn't see before. She's probably had to fight through a lot over the years.

Time definitely flies.

Was there a moment of attraction there as I saw her walk onto the court? For sure, until I realized she's Ava, the girl who terrorized us every time I came over to hang out. She also sent me to the hospital, so that should be a sign of how things would go for us.

"You'll be all right," Mom says as she waits for me in the lobby of the local doctor's office.

"I know I will be. I'm a grown man, Mom. You should probably go find Emily." My mom has always been the classic helicopter mom. She got a lot better when my sister and I were teenagers, but ever since my father's death and sister's cancer, I think it's her way of coping.

She nods, as if just remembering about my fourteen-year-old niece. The two of them arrived here yesterday, but the house I'd purchased once I knew they were moving in with me was still being painted, so we've all been at a hotel.

We were going to get a game of pickleball in and go unpack everything, but it seems we had to make a detour to get stitches. Which is not something I'm looking forward to.

"What about the car?" my mom asks as she gets up from the chair to leave.

"I'll find a way back. Maybe take an Uber or something."

My mother shakes her head. "That makes me sound heartless."

"No, that makes you a wonderful grandmother. I know Emily is probably hungry. Take her to get some lunch and I'll let you know when I'm done."

She gives me a kiss on the opposite side of the injury and says, "Okay, call me and

we'll come pick you up. You said you were going to find her a lacrosse team, too. Maybe look into that while you're waiting?"

Nodding, I say, "Thanks for the reminder. I'll do what I can on that."

Moving my mom back from Michigan, where she'd lived while my sister had been going through chemo had been easy to negotiate. She hadn't had time to meet too many people, aside from her weekly pickleball game. After already seeing some friends at the store, my mother looks relieved to be back.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Convincing my niece that moving to Oakhaven wouldn't derail her life's plans was a challenge. Negotiating is what I do for my career and Emily made me pull out all the stops.

My father died of a heart attack while I was in my teens, and Emily's dad was hit by a drunk driver five years ago. We've had our share of heartbreak, but we've been able to overcome it together.

It was one reason I wanted them to move to Utah. My mom isn't getting any younger, and being a parent of a teen isn't the easiest. Her blood pressure has skyrocketed since taking care of Emily and I don't want to lose her too.

I needed five stitches and am feeling the grogginess from the laughing gas. Yes, I'm thirty-one years old and had to be given meds to relax enough to get stitches, but I'll admit to it. In business, I'm a bulldog, so it's definitely a thing to have weaknesses somewhere.

I've gotten the go-ahead from the painters, letting me know the place is ready for us. We'll probably still be smelling that fresh paint smell, but it'll be better than the bed I slept in last night at the Oakhaven Hotel.

My townhouse in Salt Lake is under contract and I was tempted to drive the almost hour south just to get a few hours of sleep. I moved nothing into the new place, wanting to get the paint refreshed and new carpets put in before we had stuff to work around.

I walk out of the doctor's office, grateful to be done with that experience.

My mom doesn't answer when I call her to let her know I've survived. I'm not sure what she's doing or where she is, but I've lived away from her long enough to know that I can do things by myself. I run a billion-dollar company on my own. Well, more like with the help of people I've hired to run it.

Uber isn't a huge thing in this town, but I manage to find one person willing to take me from the doctor to the new house. I'll just have Mom meet me there.

Walking out of the doctor's lobby, I have to go through another hallway to get to the main doors where the Uber driver will pick me up. And who do I bump into but Slasher Ava. I think it's a fitting nickname since she sent me to get stitches.

Her eyes are wide as she takes in the gauzy rectangle next to my eye. "Are you all right?"

"Come to gloat at my suffering?" I ask, folding my arms across my chest.

She frowns and says, "Absolutely not. I didn't think about you coming here for the stitches. I'm here to see my grandma."

That's the one thing about this small town. The building we're in houses a clinic with several doctors, the small hospital, and the rehab center.

That's a noble thing, but why am I kind of irritated that she wasn't super worried about me and hurried to make sure I was okay? Then again, it's been over two hours since the incident.

Ava takes a step closer to me, examining the cotton covering my stitches.

"I'm sporting a new look. It's called Newbie Playing Pickleball."

A fire lights in her eyes and she says, “Oh, yeah, well, you didn’t look like you were going pro either, buddy.”

I’m trying not to laugh at how she ended that sentence, but it doesn’t go well. Instead of getting madder, I chuckle, which turns into an all-out belly laugh. Ava looks ticked about this change of events.

“How is Gran?” I ask, smiling at the memories of the bubbly older woman.

“She’s been better, but we hope she can come home soon.”

“What happened to her?” I say, glancing down the hall as if she’d just pop her head out of one of the doors on command.

Ava crosses her arms over her chest and nods. “She fell and broke her hip a couple of weeks ago when I was at work. She had to have surgery.”

My cold, dead heart twinges a bit. The Hoopers have never been super well-off, but they work harder than just about everyone I know. How Ava has got her Gran through all this, I’m not sure. But it makes me want to help.

“Tell her hi for me,” I say, getting a notification that my ride is here.

Ava grunts and says something before walking down the hallway that leads to the Rehab Care unit.

I probably shouldn’t have watched her walk away, but I’ve never really had a woman talk to me like that. Maybe it’s just been a long time since I’ve been called out on my attitude.

The drive to the new house takes about ten minutes and I’m in awe as much today as

I was when I walked through the house six weeks ago. It's a larger home than many in the vicinity and has its own private drive, which is preferable.

"Where are you?" my mom asks when I pick up her call.

"I got a ride to the new house. It's all done." I'm practically bouncing with excitement. The house I grew up in was a modest Rambler that my parents bought at the beginning of their marriage, just a few miles away from here. I'd finally convinced Mom to sell that one when she moved up to live with my sister, and I'm sure she's already driven to see it.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

To treat her to a house like this is something else. Like the final cherry on the success that has come with my businesses.

“Really?” I can hear relief in her voice. The past few weeks have been filled with her cleaning out my sister’s home to put it on the market, packing, and driving down here. I’m sure settling into the house will be a welcome relief. “Emily and I will go pack up our stuff at the hotel and head that way. Do you want me to get your stuff?”

“If you don’t mind. I think the movers are calling me right now. I’ll send you the address and see you soon.”

I hang up with her to grab the waiting call from the moving company. “This is Charlie Danielson.”

“Hi Mr. Danielson. This is Hefty Helpers Moving Company. The truck should be there within the next ten minutes. Will you have someone meet them there?”

“Will do,” I say, smiling as I end the call.

I’m surprised to hear that they made it this quickly from Michigan.

By the time the truck pulls up, I’ve gone through the home and pictured what things will go where. We’ve got a few things from my townhouse that will come up as well as whatever Mom and Emily packed in the moving truck.

Once the truck arrives and is backed into my driveway, I direct the three men on where to put things as they unload them into the house. Mom’s car comes around it,

waving before she's even stopped the car.

I walk over and open her door, waiting for her reaction.

"This place is nice, Charlie," Mom says.

"Well, I'm glad I have you both to share it with me."

I walk over to Emily and give her a big hug, but she groans and takes a step back and quickly.

"How are you, Ems?"

"I'm here." It's hard to move anywhere as a kid, but six months after losing her mom and leaving her friends, I know I'm public enemy number one in her books. "Did you contact any lacrosse teams?"

Dang. I totally forgot about that important detail. My mom gives me a knowing look, like she tried to warn me.

"It's in the works," is all I can say. "I'll make sure you get a tryout with every team in the valley if necessary."

She rolls her eyes. "I just need a team that's decent enough to play all over. If I'm stuck playing with girls who don't even know how to scoop the ball, I'm hitchhiking back to Michigan."

With a chuckle, I say, "I don't doubt that. Let's get unpacked and I'll show you to your room." I'm used to seeing Emily as a miniature of my sister, but this time, her snark calls up a mental picture of Ava. I brush that off, trying not to dwell on thoughts of my best friend's grown up sister.

I know coming to a completely unfamiliar state isn't ideal in her mind, but I hope to make everything work out.

Starting with finding her a team.

3

AVA

This week is not panning out how I thought it would. First Brooke called off her wedding and then I sliced open Charlie's eyebrow with a plastic ball, followed by the news that Gran won't be out of the rehab center as soon as we thought.

It's killing her not to be in her own home and able to cook in her own kitchen, but I need her to be safe when I'm away at tournaments. I've already asked our neighbor if she can monitor her for the weekends I'm out of town.

But there are other things to worry about, like today's lacrosse practice.

We can work on some plays we'll need for the tournament this weekend, and there is always a healthy dose of running involved. I might even join them today to get my workout in and to challenge them. I'm not sure why, but every girl likes the chance to one up me as her coach.

"Ava," a familiar voice says. I turn to see Marsha, mom to one of my more talented players, Sarah.

"Hey Marsha. How are you?" I've been so involved in all the things lately, mostly the implosion of my college roomie's relationship, that I've been a little behind on keeping up with minor details. Which is another reason Marsha is the one who keeps all the balls in the air for this team.

"I'm good. I hope you will be too after this conversation."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Sometimes I forget that I'm old enough to be an adult. All the responsibility should just be with the actual adults, not the ones like me who still haven't adjusted to the fact that I have to be an adult. I live with my grandma, who is on a fixed income, so I pay most of the bills, but that eats up my paycheck really quickly. That's enough adulting for me.

Marsha has been a great asset, because she gathers up all the fees and pays for the tournaments. One less thing I have to do and it allows me a lot more time to help the girls.

"What's wrong?" I ask. I scan the field for Sarah, hoping something didn't happen to her. Marsha's daughter is my best player right now. With the competition we'll face this summer, I'm going to need her in the best shape possible.

"Okay, hear me out," Marsha says, placing her hand gently on my arm. It's like she thinks I'm going to turn into a feral animal with whatever she's about to reveal.

"I'm good. Just tell me what you need." I'm not the best with surprises. I once accidentally whacked my dad in the face with my hand because I was so startled by a surprise birthday party. He ended up with a broken nose.

I still wonder if that was the tipping point for why they took off and left me at Gran's. I wouldn't change it for the world, but the brain likes to spin theories at random times, and that's a suspicion I've considered a lot over the years.

Marsha takes a breath and says, "I got an email from a guy who just moved to town and he has a daughter who's this age. He's hoping you'll give her a chance."

"That's a relief. I thought you were going to say you'd set up a date for me. As far as the player goes, that's a no. We already have our team. We've been working hard the past few weeks and it wouldn't be right to add someone this late."

Marsha bites her lip and I know there's more.

"So, I figured you'd say that. I've already chatted with the rest of the parents and they agree we should give the girl a chance."

I'm not really sure how to deal with that information. "You went behind my back?" I should be furious, but I'm slightly impressed by her negotiation skills. "What would make them okay with adding one more to the roster, taking playing time away from their daughters?"

"Well, he's offered to cover all the tournament fees, as well as the accommodations for the girls. It's an offer we can't refuse."

I bite the inside of my cheek as I think about this. Some guy comes in and throws money around and expects to get the royal treatment. He's definitely not someone I can trust.

In college, I'd dated a guy who came from a wealthy family. I thought it would be great until I realized that the money controlled them. His parents would dictate what he could and couldn't do, and they treated me the same, after they got over the fact that I was on scholarship. Money was the way to get anyone to do anything in their eyes.

Add that to my parents coming into a large sum of money and then taking off to travel the world without me. I still don't quite get it. I was only a few years away from adulthood. Why didn't they wait until then?

They sent money to Gran and Grandad every month until I turned eighteen, which helped. But now abandonment is one of my traumas.

Money changes, people, and I do my best to avoid those with a large bank account. It usually ends with less heartache for me.

"I thought we had a bunch of fundraisers lined up to help with costs."

Marsha blows out a breath. "Yeah, we have those, but let's be honest, the families will purchase most of the items, anyway."

I hate that she's right. Fundraising is fine until the family still has to help reach the goals to get whatever discount or cashback is worth it. I'm all too familiar with that scene, as it's the only way I played lacrosse at a higher level.

"Do I get any say in this?" I finally ask, sighing.

Marsha gives me a sad smile. "You get to decide how much she plays."

I raise an eyebrow. "He didn't add that in as a stipulation for donating the money?"

"No, I didn't," a deeper voice says from behind me. I turn to see Pickleball Charlie. "Sorry, I didn't realize you'd be the coach. Marsha told me to bring Emily here for a tryout practice." Recognition hits him and he frowns. "You coach lacrosse?"

I try to order my thoughts as I'm still surprised at the ambush here.

"Yes," I say, trying to decide which emotion to feel. Everything is making sense. The "daughter" must be his niece.

"So you're willing to give a ton of money to our team without the guarantee that your

niece plays?”

Marsha shakes her head. “No, it’s his dau—”

“We know each other,” Charlie says, giving Marsha a mischievous smile.

He’s an attractive guy, but I have a strict rule that I don’t date people related to my players, even if they’re a distant second cousin, six times removed. Especially if he’s my brother’s friend.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

And that Charlie is just throwing money around to get in everyone's good graces makes him the enemy in my mind. I just wish my brain wouldn't glitch when he's around, thinking that maybe there could be a future. I wanted a date, but not with this guy. Maybe I need to be more specific next time when I'm putting my goals out to the universe.

"It seems I've been ambushed into this," I say, my gaze bouncing from Marsha (the traitor), to Charlie, to the young woman standing behind him watching with intense interest.

"We'd appreciate a tryout. Emily has been playing for?—"

"Okay, Emily," I say, cutting Charlie off. I don't want to hear his praise for her. Usually that means the player is terrible, and I just want to get back to my practice right now. "Scoop the ball and throw it into the net over there."

It's not a far distance, but it will be enough to show me how much work we'll have to put into her by this weekend.

Emily, with almost perfect technique, bends over to scoop the ball and launches it toward the goal, hitting the top right corner as it lands against the net.

I almost have to use my hand to close my mouth. I've been working with my team for several months and most of them still aren't able to do that with as much ease as Emily did.

"Again," I say, wondering if it's a fluke.

This time, Emily scoops it and cradles the ball until she's about twenty yards in front of the net. She takes a step to one side and then spins to the other, letting the ball fly into the other corner.

Okay, so what are the chances that we actually landed a phenom?

I can't show how amazed I am without hurting my pride so I say, "Where did you play before this?"

"Michigan," Emily says, looking proud.

With a quick nod, I say, "That's awesome. We'll have you work with Sarah throughout practice."

Emily gives me a smile and I can see how nervous she is behind it. Being the new girl on a team is always a struggle. I'll have to talk to the team and make sure they include her. She'll definitely be an asset.

"I've got a check here," Charlie says, trying to hand it to me.

Instead of taking it, I take a giant step back. A check made out with more zeros than I've ever had in my bank account would definitely be lost if I took care of it.

"Marsha is in charge of all team fees. You can give it to her. I'm going to get practice started." I'll have to avoid him at all costs to make sure I don't do anything stupid.

Not the smoothest conversation I've ever had, but I'm not always the best at keeping my cool around awkward situations. I wish Marsha had given me a heads up about the whole thing, but I can see why she had to get everything in place before I could say no.

No matter what happens, as long as the girls get the chance to play with little financial burden to their families, that's a win.

I just don't want Charlie Danielson inserting himself because of it.

4

CHARLIE

I'm not sure what I expected when I showed up to take my niece to a "tryout" for her new lacrosse team.

I also didn't expect Ava to be the coach.

There aren't too many single twenty-something women who will put in the time to coach a travel team. Was I picturing an overweight woman with a bad haircut? Maybe. Probably because that's what Emily's coach in Michigan looked like the few times I could make it to her tournaments.

Ava didn't seem too excited to talk to me, but from everything Marsha told me through email and our one phone call last night to check in after she'd spoken with the parents, Ava might be a hard sell. Maybe she's being awkward because I'm still sporting the bandage where she hit me yesterday?

The fact she took a step back from a check instead of her eyes turning into cartoon dollar signs is commendable. But it's hard to turn down a donation when it helps the whole team.

I sit on the sidelines, watching as the group warms up and how Ava joins them for the jogging and stretching. She even picks up a stick and passes with one girl who doesn't have a partner.

My sport has always been hockey, but I'm learning a lot about lacrosse. I had to call just about everyone I know in the sports world to get connections to a few teams within driving distance. On our call last night, I had thought Marsha was the coach.

This seems like the best fit from everything I'd researched, but I hope Ava doesn't hold anything over Emily just because I'm her uncle. We've teased each other in the past, but something about our interaction on the pickleball courts and then again at the hospital yesterday signaled something deeper in Ava. What did I do that wrong this time?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

A call comes through and I answer it. Right now, most of my phone calls are ones I need to pick up and not the dumb bots that call repeatedly.

"This is Charlie."

"Hey Charlie, it's Steve Hartman."

My new general manager.

I nod, smiling. Steve is a legend in the NHL, having had a stellar career and then coaching several of the pro teams before he agreed to help us build the Utah Yetis. My goal is to build the professional sports realm in Salt Lake and the ultimate dream of mine is to have a professional baseball team here as well.

"It's good to hear from you, Steve. What can I do for you?"

"We're moving into the building today, but I just wanted to reach out for those checks you need to sign. We have a couple of contracts to go through, and then I think we'll be ready to prepare for the expansion draft."

Because this will be a new team in the NHL, in less than six weeks, we'll be picking players from the rest of the teams in the league. That will make up the team for our first year, at least until trade time happens.

"Great. I'll be down that way tomorrow morning and we can go over everything necessary to get the ball rolling."

"Thanks, Charlie. I appreciate the opportunity to be here. Building a team will be quite the challenge."

"One I know you can handle."

I hang up the phone, grateful to have Steve there to help guide me through the parts of this that I don't know or am just learning.

Ava has moved the girls into different drills and she's walking around, giving feedback to each one. She must've played lacrosse as a teenager or in college. I'm not sure how I missed that. Maybe she started in high school?

"We can all use a good challenge in life," I say, laughing to myself as I think about what Steve said.

Every part of my investing life has been a stretch for me, making it so I have to learn and grow from each situation. If only my dating life were as predictable.

As long as I have my work, though, I should be set for the next ten to twenty years. Fitting anything else into my life won't last. Even if I wanted it to.

5

AVA

Practice was great last night and adding Emily to the mix is going to strengthen us for our games in the local tournament this weekend and the out-of-state tourneys that have the girls already on college watch.

Charlie tried to talk to me after we got done, but I thanked him for his contribution and busied myself cleaning up the equipment. It would be nice to have a shed at the

field, but the parks and rec department would have to allow it. So I usually just add the lacrosse buckets to the equipment room inside the rec building.

I guess I could ask Charlie to get the city to put something up, but that feels gross. I've never been good at taking things from people because I don't like to feel like a peasant when I've worked and scratched my way to this point. The best thing about college was I didn't have to pay since I got a scholarship.

The biggest question is how the man I used to know has the money to throw around on things like a travel lacrosse team. The Charlie I remember wasn't really interested in anything but hockey and baseball.

Maybe it's nice living as a bachelor and being able to spend money on what he wants. I doubt my life would be much different if Gran wasn't here. I'd probably still live in her house, if it didn't need to be sold according to her will, and would probably start gathering cats and gardening or something.

I drive over to the Silver Strand Rehab Center attached to the hospital. It doesn't matter how much I try to avoid having thoughts about Charlie, they just keep invading my brain, especially since I saw him here yesterday.

What are the chances that his niece plays lacrosse? So much for thinking I'll be able to avoid him for the next few months. Seeing his stitches was bad enough, but now I'm going to have to see his face throughout the summer.

I focus on the smile on my face. Gran will know exactly where my head is if I'm not careful.

With a quick wave to the ladies behind the desk, I walk down the hall to room one thirteen, the one Gran has been in since she fell a few weeks ago.

"Hey Gran, how are you tonight?"

She gives me a toothless grin, which is kind of scary. Her dentures are sitting on the table next to the bed. "I'm good, Ava. How are you, honey?"

I lean in and give her a kiss on the cheek before taking a seat on the chair next to her bed.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"Good. Just got done with practice and wanted to check on you before I head home. How was therapy today?"

Gran rolls her eyes and groans. "Awful. I still can't stand on my leg for too long and the therapist keeps making me go longer and longer. Now it's aching."

"I'm sure they're just trying to get you better, Gran. You've been in here for a few weeks and you've got to make some progress."

"From all the pain I go through, I'm thinking a wheelchair would be better."

I laugh and say, "Yeah, but then you'll have to have someone come and put in a wheelchair ramp. In fact, you'd have to move because of all the steps in your house."

She thinks about that a bit and nods. "Why do you have to be right? I love my home and don't want to leave it. How's your team doing?"

"Good. We got a new girl today. She seems like she'll really help the team out. I'll be leaving tomorrow morning and then won't be back until late Sunday. Will you be okay without me?"

She shakes her head. "I'd be a lot better in my home."

I pat her hand and say, "I know, Gran. But healing is the key thing now. You don't want to be right back in here, do you?"

Glancing around the room, she sighs dramatically and says, "I guess not."

"Is there anything I can bring you?" I ask, feeling the weight of life settle into my back. I need some sleep, but that'll be hard with my brain trying to come up with scenarios for this weekend's tournament. And that could go on for infinity, meaning I might not get to sleep until this summer is over.

"My diet soda. If you can smuggle it past the guards at the front desk, I'd appreciate it. I feel like I'm going through withdrawals."

I chuckle and nod. "Okay, but if you get caught with it, I'm not responsible."

She chuckles. "Deal."

"Do you want me to stay and watch your show with you?" I ask, pointing to the TV across the room.

She gives me a tired smile. "I don't know how much of it I'll actually watch, Ava, dear. That therapy got me plum tuckered out. Maybe next week when you come back you can stay?"

"For sure," I say, leaning over to kiss her forehead. It's still hard seeing the woman I thought was invincible be stuck in a hospital bed, but she can't stay young forever.

I walk out and down the hallway, so distracted by lacrosse and Gran's recovery, that I don't see Charlie until I nearly collide with him. He holds my shoulders, which keeps me upright.

"Ava," Charlie says, his grin wide as he waits for me to gain my footing before letting me go. "Checking on Gran?"

"Are you stalking me?" I say, trying to put myself back together. Not that I should be even worrying about bumping into this guy here. Then again, why is he here? Is he

trying to buy me off and make it so I'm indebted to him?

I'm good. Got the T-shirt and all that.

Except for whatever cologne he's wearing has me leaning in slightly for another sniff. And his hands on my arms are warm, sending all sorts of strange signals to my brain.

"No stalking. Just trying to get to my mom." He's a little distracted, searching for something.

"What happened to her?" I ask.

Charlie's smile fades, and he looks more serious than I've ever seen him. With his hands tucked into his pants pockets, he looks up at me with blue-gray eyes and says, "She fell last night while unpacking and broke her ankle."

"Oh no! Does she have to have a cast?"

He shrugs. "They put some pins in. I'm not sure what the plan is now."

"Tell her I'm sorry and I hope she heals quickly." It's hard to be ornery about something like that. Tina is one of the nicest people and I'm sad she got hurt. "Also, tell Emily she did a great job at practice yesterday. I'm excited to see her in action this weekend."

That puts the smile back onto Charlie's face and I'm surprised at how much I like it. There should be no liking him at all, since his niece is on my team.

My biggest question is where is the man who usually argues with me? It's like ever since he came to practice yesterday, he's been trying to butter me up.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I wave goodbye and head out, doing my best to get rid of thoughts about this guy from my past and move on with my day.

Except I'm pretty sure that cologne is stuck in my nose now. It's going to be awhile before I stop thinking about him.

6

CHARLIE

It's definitely a surprise to see Ava at the hospital again. That a second member of the Danielson family had already visited the medical building in as many days isn't the best sign of our life here in Oakhaven.

I feel like I haven't slept in weeks at this point. Getting stitches from the doctor had been nice and fairly quick. The problem was that when Mom fell, I was worried about her back, because she couldn't move much. The ambulance came and picked her up, and we spent most of the night at the hospital. Who knew it took over an hour just to wait for a doctor to check on her?

Emily has been calling or texting me for updates ever since. She refused to come to the hospital, and I'm guessing there are a lot of memories that go along with the smell of antiseptic and bleach.

"Hey Mom," I say, smiling big once I turn into the room.

"Charlie boy," she says, patting my cheek as I lean in to give her a hug.

"How are you feeling today?" I ask, wishing it had been me who was in here. Every time she moves, she looks like she's being stabbed with a thousand tiny daggers. "Did you get some medicine?"

She nods and says, "I think I'm due for another dose. The nurse should be in soon. How's Emily?"

Classic Mom. Always worrying about everyone else.

"She's good. Worried about you. She wanted to put together a photo wall or something like that for you."

"That might be good for her. I was going to call the school and make sure we get her registered for next year. Last summer she had some summer assignments to do and I'd rather she didn't fall behind." I can see the wheels turning in my mother's brain and it's a wonder how she remembers it all. "Do you think the lacrosse team she's on will be good enough?"

I nod. "Yeah, I think it will be a good fit for her, although she disagrees."

My mom pats my hand and says, "You know what she's been through in the past few years. I'm sure it's hard to leave home and all she's known for a completely new area and living situation."

"She's worried about you."

"Yes, she is. But I think she's worried about the memories of this place." She moves her hands around and waves to the room she's in. "Sonja went through a lot in the hospital."

That's true. There was so much my sister had to suffer through at the end of her battle

with cancer.

"How much longer will you be locked up in here?" I say, trying to lighten the mood. I don't always like to talk about what my sister went through. It's one of those things that makes it difficult to contemplate if everything is just going to end in death and doom.

"I'm not sure. You'll be home, right? What about the tournaments? I won't be able to travel with her now."

I nod slowly, just now realizing that I've become the head chaperone on these weekend trips. The tournament schedule looked great until I realized I'll have to be there. "Yeah, I'll be around for Emily. It sounds like we'll be traveling a bit for her tournaments, which should make her happy."

My mom smiles. "The girl loves to travel." She must sense that I'm trying to figure out something on my own, because she says, "What's wrong, Charlie?"

I blow out a breath and say, "I'm just tired. It's been a lot to get this NHL team going and I can't believe it's almost time to pick the players."

"You've worked hard on it, that's for sure. What about the rest of your life, though? Are you happy?"

Here we go with the relationship advice. "I'm great, Mom. Now that you and Emily live here, I don't feel like I'm missing out on memories with the two of you."

"You're a great uncle. I think you'd make a great father."

"I know what you're trying to get at, Mom. I don't want to start something I can't finish. Relationships depend on having time and making time to do things for those

we love. I just don't see it happening."

"Just because Haley Stockton broke your heart five years ago doesn't mean you have to live like a monk the rest of your life."

The way she says it, with a little smirk, makes me laugh. "I'm not stuck on Haley."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Mom raises her eyebrow and says, "Really? I'm your mother and I know just about every emotion you're feeling. I can read you like a book."

"So original, Mom," I say, shaking my head.

"Well, you're thirty-one and still acting like a teenager for some things. I might as well add that in."

"Why didn't you ever remarry after Dad died?" It was a question I'd been thinking about for years. Maybe it would be the ticket to reroute this conversation.

"There are some things you can't ever get over. I didn't want to have a replacement for your father. And I figured it would just ruin my relationship with you and Sonja if I started dating someone else."

"Yeah, Sonja was such a pain," I say, rolling my eyes in exaggeration.

"You were the one I always had to chase around the house to get you to listen. You've never been good at sitting still for too long."

Which is exactly why I don't want to settle down with anyone. Loyalty is a Danielson trait, and to change my mind about something as big as marriage isn't something I think I can do. But with my work taking me all across the world, how could I ask someone to commit to that?

"You're exceptional, Charlie. Just don't work yourself so long that you forget what life is all about."

"I won't," I say. I doubt I can actually claim that, though. Work is a challenge, something I crave to solve or invent, invest or change. Relationships aren't built on one problem but many, and often they aren't fixed even after hours and months of working on the problem.

"Even if you're not into dating, you should call up some of your friends to go on vacation. You know, like when you turn your phone off and try to enjoy life around you?"

Leave it to Mom to put me in my place.

"That might be a good idea. I'll wait until you're back on your feet and Emily's tournaments are done before I prepare for that."

"It's all a mom can ask for," she says, giving me a tired smile.

"I'll let you rest, Mom. I need to make sure I feed your granddaughter before she dies of starvation."

That gets my mom laughing. Emily is a pretty great kid, but she can go from zero to hangry in three minutes flat.

"Sounds good, Charlie. I'll see you soon."

I leave my mom's room and walk past Ava's grandma's room, causing me to think of her again.

From the way Ava avoids me, it looks like I'm very out of practice for talking to women when it doesn't involve some sort of business strategy. I'll have to work on that so my mom won't constantly ask me if I'm working toward living life.

Communication is key. But will I survive these trips when I have a lot going on at work?

7

AVA

I'm convinced that butterflies will never actually go away for me. Not the good kind where someone falls in love with someone else, but the kind that means my nervous system is working overtime because I'm worried about what's to come.

The tournament this weekend is kind of like a warm-up for the summer. Instead of flying back east like we'll have to do for the rest of the tournaments, this one is in Salt Lake. I'm not even playing in this game and I'm feeling the effects of the old adrenaline I'm used to. If only my body had avoided injuries time and time again, life might look different right now.

Then again, I don't know who would take care of Gran now that Gramps is gone. She's a feisty lady, but she still needs that love and someone to check in on her.

"Okay, ladies," I say to the group right before we're to take the field. This tournament is only an hour from where we live, which means competition isn't as fierce as it will be. But I'm just as nervous for the girls as I will be before the start of every tournament. They've all been working so hard. I hope they'll be able to play well, especially during the tournaments where there are a lot of college coaches watching the games.

"Are we ready for today?"

"Yeah!" they shout as a group.

"Go out there and work your tails off. Pass and move up the field quickly. If you're tired, get off and we'll get someone in for you. We don't want to run out of gas when we've got the ball."

We put our hands in for a cheer, and I wait as they run out and take their places.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Movement close to me causes me to turn, and it's not our typical yellow and white attire, but Charlie in a pair of khakis and a black t-shirt. I don't know if the tight-fitting shirt accentuates his muscles a lot more or if he's just grown Hulk muscles overnight, but it's very distracting. So I shut down those thoughts the best way I can and focus on the case of sports drinks in his grasp.

"Parents and fans are supposed to sit on the opposite side of the field," I say, adjusting my sunglasses and following the play.

He nods. "Yeah, I didn't get here in time to drop these off for the team."

"Thank you, but next time, check with Whitney. She's in charge of assigning team snacks."

He nods and says, "Sounds good."

With that, he turns and walks away. He's not even going to fight me on this? I don't know why I think of him like that. Probably because we've done a lot of verbal sparring in the past.

I turn my focus back to the game, nearly losing my voice from yelling at the girls to get into position several times throughout the game. It was a close one, but we lost by one.

Our next game is only two hours later. The girls have small snacks they brought with them, but Whitney walks over with an enormous grin on her face, two large bags in her hand from the nearest sandwich shop.

I frown, trying to figure out what this is for. We rarely have enough money to cover team accommodations, let alone getting the team food.

"Here's some lunch, ladies," Whitney says in a singsong voice.

"Why did you do this?" I ask, whispering to Whitney.

"We just figured the girls deserved it," she says, grinning at me again. "You always tell them nothing heavy, like burgers and milkshakes. Sandwiches are perfect."

I turn to look at the group of parents who are seated a little way off in the shade and make eye contact with Charlie. He had to be behind this.

Whitney continues to pass the sandwiches out, and I stomp over to Charlie. "Did you pay for the sandwiches?"

"I don't know what you're talking about?" he says, trying to hide a grin.

"The ones Whitney is handing out." I point behind me and wait for his response.

"I'm not familiar with the restaurants around here," he says, tucking his hands into the pockets of his shorts and it makes his muscles flex again. Oh, have mercy.

Now is not the time for my body to be buzzing because I'm attracted to the guy. What happened to the red flags that usually go off for me? Sirens? Something would be great.

I can't stay next to him anymore. The guy is almost like my ex with his throwing around money wherever he can. I'll just have to wait and see if Charlie will accuse me of being a gold digger later. Yeah, that would be like repeating every part of my explosive relationship.

I'm focusing on the notepad I use to write thoughts throughout the game. It helps me know what to work on for upcoming games, how to instruct players, as well as what to focus on in practice.

It's then that Charlie approaches and sits down next to me on the grass, bringing with him a light scent of sandalwood.

Don't take another sniff. I never thought I'd have to tell myself that.

"How's it going?" Charlie asks.

"It's going," I say, keeping my focus on the notebook in front of me.

"Do you take all your notes in that notebook?" he asks, reaching over to turn a page back to read it. I swat his hand away before my manners come out.

"Sorry. I rarely let people read this," I say, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear.

"So you're saying you'd let me read it?" Charlie asks.

"No. It helps me prepare for games."

"There are these things called phones. They have apps that will let you take notes and then you don't have to carry around an extra notebook."

I shake my head. "I've never found one that worked for everything I needed it to."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"Oh really? Like what?"

I groan inwardly. I shouldn't be having this conversation right now. "How about we table this for later? I need to get ready for the game."

Charlie nods, standing. "Of course. Good luck."

Why am I oddly irritated at his tone? It's been less than a week since the stitches incident, but he's getting under my skin, and not in a good way. It's like he's gone from this guy I can argue with to a golden retriever.

8

CHARLIE

I think my days spent watching Emily's games are the most I've spent off my phone in at least three years.

And I don't hate it. Sure, there are some withdrawals that come with stuff like that, but it was nice to be outside, to support my niece. And she didn't seem to hate it either.

"You played great today," I say in the car on the drive home.

"Thanks for coming," she says. Her tone isn't bright and bubbly, like she used to be when she was younger. That could be the grief or the teenager talking.

"What do you want to do for dinner?" I ask, trying to think of some restaurants on the drive back. I'm tired, not from my own running around and playing, but more emotionally drained from the ups and downs of the games this weekend.

"Let's just get something and take it back to the house." She stares out the window, and I'm searching my brain for how to connect with her.

"Did you like playing with your team?"

Emily looks over at me and says, "I miss Michigan."

It's not said spitefully, but more of a contemplative announcement.

Nodding, I say, "I know, Em. I'm sorry we had to move you here. Grandma isn't as young as she used to be and if you're here, I can watch out for and take care of both of you."

Emily gives me a disbelieving stare and says, "I don't think you can care for yourself, let alone the two of us."

I frown, trying to follow her line of thinking. "What do you mean?"

"I've seen your clothes on the floor and the fact that you can't cook. Are you sure you didn't bring us down here to take care of you?" There's a ghost of a smile there on her lips and I can't help but laugh at her logic.

"You might be right, although I hired a maid to help me keep the house clean. I don't expect you to do that."

"What do you think of your coach?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"I like that she does stuff with us and doesn't just punish us for the littlest things. I don't know how much we'll win, though. If we had Jenn, Stacy, and Danielle from my old team, I think we'd have a chance."

I try to hide my smile at her confession. Ava is like a unicorn when it comes to coaching a sport. Usually the coaches are overweight and more than willing to bark orders and command the kids to run for miles on end. I've got enough experience to know that.

"That's cool. Too bad there isn't someone like that who knows stuff about hockey." The general manager I'd hired has been going through a few options for a head coach, but none of them have been appealing to me. Not that I have the decision on that. I'm the money and I have to trust that Steve will decide for the club what can help us be a successful franchise.

"You know a lot about hockey," Emily says, her interest piqued suddenly.

Laughing, I say, "I know a lot from the player's perspective, but I don't think I could be a coach."

Emily sits quietly, as if her brain is far away. "My mom would've been a great lacrosse coach."

"She never played."

"She was good at studying things she didn't know."

That's the truth. My sister had always been curious, and when she gave her word on something, she somehow went above and beyond.

"I miss her."

Emily's words hit me hard and I say, "Me too."

"Why are you single?"

I try to laugh off that comment, but I'm not sure I have a good enough answer. "I work a lot. Most women don't appreciate that."

"Don't you think you work a lot to avoid being with someone?" Emily's matter-of-fact tone makes me lose focus and I have to swerve to get back into the right lane before I hit another car. "At least that's what Mom would say when she talked about you."

"That sounds like your mom," I say. How did I not realize Emily is basically a parrot of her mother's sayings?

"It might be worth it to date more. Work less. Go on vacation." Emily now sounds like a twenty-five-year-old lecturing her thirty-one-year-old uncle.

"I'm not going by myself."

"Exactly why you need to find a partner in life. You've got enough money to travel. You just need a buddy."

I laugh. Emily has always been an old soul, able to talk to adults and children alike. But having her chastise me for my bachelorhood is a different kind of humility. Life didn't work out for my sister, not the way she'd hoped. And trying to make something

like what my parents had seems near impossible with the life I'm leading right now.

I doubt there's a woman out there who will care about me for me and not my money.

Ava comes to mind. The fact she backed away from me when I tried to hand her the check that first day of practice, it's like she's allergic to things like that.

I wonder what she would do if she were to be something more than just my niece's coach. I can't think about that, though. There's too much I need to figure out business and family wise. I don't need to disrupt the system that's been working so well. Or has it?

9

AVA

The college roommate chat has been going crazy this morning. Brooklyn and Meg are traveling and enjoying life. Meanwhile, my bank account says I can travel to my backyard and enjoy life there. At least I'll get to go somewhere with the upcoming tournaments, but it would be nice to go on an actual vacation where my biggest responsibility is deciding where to eat.

The fees for each player include enough to take care of my hotel room and a car if we need it. Sometimes I wonder what would've happened if I'd followed through on my childhood dream of being a lawyer. I'd have money to travel, but would I have the time?

It's early and I've already got everything set up for our itty bitty clinic for the parks and rec department. It's for ages three through five and it's my new favorite group because I never know what's going to happen.

We've been working on baseball for the past two sessions, and while I had to change out a few drills to keep their attention, it's going well for my first time holding this clinic.

"I'm so glad you're doing this," one mom says as she comes up to get a T-shirt we give out to all the kids when they come. Her boy missed the first two classes. "My little one is so active and just needs an outlet like this."

She points to the boy, who's chewing on his tiny mitt while running around a group of kids.

"Yeah, hopefully it helps," I say, trying to be kind.

"Can I just drop him off and come back later?" the woman asks.

I hold up a hand, alarm bells going off in my brain. "Yes, but the class is only forty-five minutes long. That time goes by quickly."

The woman waves her hand and says, "I'll be right around the corner. Good luck."

As I turn back to look at the group, I can see that it's going to be a high-energy day on all fronts.

Mitt boy trips another kid running by and then laughs about it. Breathing in, I try to do the best I can at keeping my cool.

I finally get the kids divided into groups for the drills. The teenagers who are supposed to be helping me are on their phones or are using this as their own personal chance to do the drills, even though the tee is set almost for their ankles.

"Chance and Aaron, focus. One of your kids is running across the field over there."

Aaron sees the little girl and takes off to grab her before she hits the sidewalk next to the parking lot.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Surprisingly, things settle down from there and the drills go well. The kids get excited when they can go through the little water obstacle course we've set up in the far corner of the field.

As the class finishes and the parents pick up their children, I'm left with two whose parents haven't shown up. Mitt boy and a little boy who's been excited about every aspect of the sport.

"Will you two help me clean up the balls?" I ask, waving for them to follow me.

The one little boy walks next to me, gathering as many balls as will fit in his arms. Mitt boy has his finger stuck up his nose.

"I like boogers," he says, taking his finger out and sticking it into his mouth.

I turn away and gag.

"Maybe you should go sit over there and wait for your mom," I say, cringing at the thought of his booger and saliva covered hands touching any of the balls and equipment I'll have to use for another group. I don't have time to disinfect everything. I barely have enough time to go get myself some lunch.

"Sawyer!" someone calls. I turn to see it's a dad who's just pulled into the parking lot. The child helping me dumps all the balls on the ground and runs over.

"Dad! Dad! I got a home run in our game."

That makes me smile. I love when they get so excited about the littlest things.

Sawyer's dad takes him with a wave and I'm still left with the mitt chewer. I reset the drills and make sure everything is ready to go.

"So Stu, what's your favorite thing to do?" I ask, taking a seat next to him. "Aside from eating boogers."

"I put gum in my sister's hair the other day. There was a lot of screaming after that."

Nodding, I say, "I can imagine. How about we walk over to the building and call your mom?"

I'm hoping there's a phone number for her or else I've been duped into babysitting. I could probably put a call into the police department, but I don't need to start trouble. It's best to just try to get hold of the mom before my brain spins with the possibilities.

Stu picks up the gravel that leads to the building and throws them at my legs as he walks a step or two behind me. It takes everything in me to keep calm.

I open the door to the rec center and say, "Okay, let's leave the rocks out here."

"I'm thirsty," Stu says.

I help him get a drink from the water fountain before I walk into the office area, looking for my sheet of parent info for the morning class.

"Who's your shadow?" Brenda, the receptionist, asks.

"His mom forgot to pick him up. I'm just trying to get her phone number and see if she's close."

"Poor kid," a deeper voice says, and I turn my head to see Charlie there.

"Showing up at my work? This is getting seriously creepy," I say, folding my arms across my chest.

Charlie raises his hands in surrender and says, "I didn't realize this is where you still work, I promise."

Brenda is practically fanning herself while trying to speak to him, so I go back to checking the sheet. As I dial the phone number to Stu's mom, I try to overhear why he's here.

"I'd like to get a membership to the gym."

I frown, trying to keep from laughing at his request. I'm pretty sure this guy gave a healthy chunk of change to our lacrosse program. That should mean he can afford a gym in his own house, right? Because even just one piece of equipment that works is better than what's in the little gym in this building.

The last time I was in there, it felt like that part in the Lord of the Rings where the main character was basically wrapped up in the web from a giant spider.

Boogers and spiders. Not my normal thinking pattern, but that's how today is going.

"Hello?" a voice says on the other line of my phone.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"Hi. Susan? This is Ava with the Oakhaven Parks Department. I have Stu here waiting to be picked up."

"I'm still about ten minutes out. Can he stay there?"

"I can wait ten minutes, but then I've got to run to lunch before the afternoon class."

Instead of words, the lady hangs up. I'm not sure what to make of it.

Charlie is filling out the paper to sign up for the gym while Brenda is on the phone with someone.

"Are you sure you don't want to join a gym somewhere else?" I'm not sure if I'm just taking pity on him or if I don't want him to be this close to my job regularly.

Charlie looks confused. "What do you mean?"

I glance at Brenda to make sure she isn't listening to this conversation. She and her husband were the ones who came up with the idea of a gym in the rec building and ended up donating several of their old pieces of equipment.

I lean closer, surprised at how good this guy smells again. And here I am just an ad for sunscreen and grass.

"Have you actually seen inside the gym? Most of it is falling apart."

Charlie stops filling out the paper and says, "Maybe we should take a look."

I'm not sure what he means by we. I've got a four-year-old to monitor. And he's got his finger up his nose again. Yuck.

"Down the hall to the right. I think the lock is broken, so you can get right in."

He disappears just as Brenda ends her phone call. "Where did he go?"

"To look at the gym."

Brenda looks distraught. "Why did you let him do that before I ran his card?"

"Some people need to know what they're getting into before they commit."

I hurry and lead Stu back outside, hoping his mom will be outside already. She's not.

We take a seat on the bench facing the road and the parking lot.

"So, do you live far from here?" I ask the little boy. Not that he'll know how to answer that.

"It takes forever to get here."

Great. My stomach growls and I'm wishing I'd packed a lunch today instead of assuming I'd be able to go out and get something. It's a splurge, but I'm kind of burned out on peanut butter and jam or turkey sandwiches.

"What are you two doing out here?" Charlie says, taking a seat on the other side of Stu.

"My mom is late," Stu says.

Charlie looks over at me. "I didn't realize you still work at the parks department."

I nod and turn to look at a car coming our way. Instead of pulling into the parking lot, it continues on the road.

"They gave me my job again when I moved back." Nothing like feeling I haven't grown up in the last ten years.

"That's cool. You've always been great with kids." Charlie asks. His cheeks color a bit, but I'm not sure why.

"I don't know. One of my old roommates works at a summer camp. She's got to be a saint for that." Sadie is working at a camp north of my small town, but they don't get to leave very often. Part of me wonders if that's the route I should've gone. Then again, I'd have to put up with the crazy kids for weeks on end instead of a couple of hours per week.

I don't know why I've divulged all this information, but it's nice to talk to someone closer to my age.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Stu's mom finally arrives and I don't think I've ever been so grateful for an interruption.

"I'm so sorry. I got going on things and didn't look at the time. Let's go, Stu." She waves for him to get into the vehicle, but he doesn't move.

"I can understand that. But in the future, I'd advise you to stay at the park. This is just a short clinic for the kids to learn skills. We aren't a babysitting service." It's the best I can do without raising my voice.

Susan looks like I just slapped her. "I didn't think it was a big deal. I had some errands to run."

Nodding, I say, "I get that, but next time he isn't picked up on time, we'll have to call the police or social services."

The woman is furious and waves her son over again.

"Do you want me to walk over with you, Stu?" I ask. He's been stuck to my side since all the kids left, so maybe that will help him.

"No!" he yells.

"We've got to go home and get lunch," the woman says. As if on cue, my stomach growls.

Stu slides back against the bench and folds his arms, giving all of us a scowl.

"I have to go help another group of kids soon. If you go home now, you'll be able to come back for the next practice." I'm pleading at this point, doing my best to avoid eye contact with Charlie. I'm not sure what it is about that guy, but he makes me feel uncomfortable. Not in a creepy way where I'm going to wake up to him staring in my window, but he asks questions that go way too deep for someone I don't know that well. It took me months to open up to my roommates.

And yet he's been so different, aside from the pickleball incident. Maybe he's just great at covering up his true personality? Or what if this is the real him?

The mom finally comes and kneels down in front of Stu, trying to bribe him with everything under the sun.

Part of me wants to yell at her to pick him up and carry him football style back to her car. But with how stubborn he's been during our classes, I'm sure that wouldn't go well.

I give the two of them a small smile and say, "I have to go prep for the kids that are getting here now. I'll see you next time, Stu."

I stand up and have only taken a couple of steps away when the boy latches onto my leg, making me slow to a shuffle.

"Stay."

"I can't, buddy. I've got to help other boys and girls."

"Look at this," Charlie says. I turn to look at him and see he's holding out a dollar bill.

If he's going to bribe this kid with money, I'm silently praying it works.

"I'll give you this dollar if you can find it," Charlie says. With a flick of his hand, the dollar bill is gone. The tension around my ankle eases up and Stu is lunging for Charlie's arm. I should probably stay and make sure Stu goes with his mom, but I'm free and I need to get out of here before I'm pinned down again.

I jog over to the field and hide behind a post for a moment, checking to see if Stu follows. He's not there, which means Charlie is his new victim, or his mom finally wrangled him.

Kids arrive at the field and I go through the same stations as this morning, only this time my teenage helpers are a little more attentive.

By the time the end of class rolls around, my stomach is growling and pretty much crying at the lack of food I've given it. I don't do well skipping meals.

With everything cleaned up and put into the equipment room, I walk in to write up the game plan for the next clinic. I usually keep things from other clinics, but since this is the first time we've done this one, I still have some things to work through.

"Oh, I was supposed to give you this," Brenda says with a big grin. She hands me a white paper bag, which can only mean that it's from my favorite Chinese place here in town.

"Who bought this?" I ask, opening the bag and breathing in the sweet and sour chicken with a side of broccoli and rice. "Thank you. Did the boss buy everyone lunch today?"

That only happened once upon a time, like five years ago.

Brenda's grin looks almost like a clown, and she shakes her head. "Charlie bought it for you."

I frown, looking from the bag to Brenda and then to the door, like there was some random detail I'd be able to pick up in the process that would make it all make sense.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"Why would Charlie do that? And how did he know what I'd like?" My stomach should not be flip-flopping right now. Sure, this is the first time a guy has ever brought me food before, but there's no way he could know what I like, right? Then again, my palate hasn't changed much over the years. It's possible he remembers from way back then, but that's hard to believe.

"Oh, there's this note too."

In an all-caps handwriting that is definitely not the swoops and hoops Brenda usually makes, it says:

Thought you could use a pick me up. Hopefully this gets you through the day.

And I think I've just melted a little inside. I'll give myself a few minutes to revel in this and then move on, knowing I can't date or get serious with him. Guys with more money than I make in ten years at this job will move on right as I fall for them.

But I could really get used to this kind of attention.

10

CHARLIE

"Hey Paul. Sorry I missed that meeting today," I say, sitting in my car in my garage.

I missed a lot while at the city offices. It took almost fifteen minutes to get Stu into his mother's car without picking him up and throwing him in. At least Ava escaped to

get her classes started. I watched her for a few minutes interacting with the kids, and she does a fantastic job of keeping them excited about the stations they're at.

Paul is one of my right-hand guys and he's usually in on all the meetings I am.

Ava is a distraction, a big one, but I can't seem to help myself with her. But for the first time, I'm not really sorry I missed the meeting.

"Yeah, that was a surprise. We were all in shock that you didn't show up ten minutes early or even a few minutes late."

I press my thumb and forefinger to the bridge of my nose. I'm losing my drive to be working every minute of the day. So many years I've done that and it was fine. Now, after moving my mom and Emily here and then my mom's surgery, it's not as high on the priority list as it was before. So while I'd like to say it's all because of Ava, there's been a lot of life upheaval lately.

"I'm only human, man," I say, giving a light chuckle.

"It's good to see that, Charlie. I mean, I've been thinking you were on the superhero side of life since you seemed to never need to sleep or to slow down."

While he means it to be flattering, it only highlights the fact that I've been taking on way too much for way too long. Maybe it's time I slow down and actually delegate everything that I don't need to do. But where do I start?

"What did I miss in the meeting?" I say, hoping to get back on track.

"The arena is almost done. We'll have some final colors to look at this week."

"Perfect. That will be great. I think I'll loop Steve in and then have him attend the rest

of the meetings for this."

Paul chuckles and says, "Trouble in paradise?"

I raise an eyebrow, trying to figure out if I should take that as a slight or a compliment. I've made a lot of money through my investments and several businesses. The people who know a general background about that income think my life is perfect and that I shouldn't ever have problems because money solves everything. But money doesn't bring back a beloved father for just one more day. And it doesn't save a sister from cancer, despite the request for the best doctors and surgeons in the country.

"Something like that," I finally say, wanting to end this call. "I'll add you to an email where we detail all this. It's best if you contact the general manager directly."

I'm way too close to this project and maybe that's why I've been micromanaging it. My dad and I dreamed of creating a sports empire, where we controlled several professional teams in one area. We never had that kind of money growing up, but it's been fun to take what we thought was only a dream and make it into a reality.

I type out a quick email to the general manager so he's up to speed on my first delegation of this process.

I need to focus on my mom and Emily right now. And let the people working for me finally do their jobs.

The drive from the city offices to the new house is short, which makes me grateful to be here. Everything in Salt Lake took time, even if it wasn't far away, just because of the traffic.

"How was your day?" I ask Emily when I walk into the house.

"Fine," she says, not turning to look at me. She's watching one of those teen reality shows, something about birthday parties and ridiculously lavish gifts for spoiled kids. I should be nicer, but after that phone call, I'm feeling a little irritated.

So instead of leaving the room, I sit down and watch it with her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"That girl is sixteen?" I ask, pointing to the main girl.

Emily nods, giving me a look like she's surprised I'm even sitting here.

I tell myself I'll leave after five minutes, which turns into twenty, and then four more episodes.

"That's a lot of minutes of my life I'll never get back," I say after the last episode. I stand and stretch, knowing I need to check on some things, but I'm not feeling like it right now. Maybe the binge took it all out of me.

"Sometimes it's nice to escape for a bit."

I turn to look down at Emily. She's got a faraway look in her eyes and I sit back down, pulling her into a hug. I've never really been an uncle to her. Not like a traditional uncle, anyway. Since I was a surprise several years after my? sister was born, I'm more like an older brother to her.

"I know, Em. It was a lot to bring you down here and upend your entire world. I'm sorry about that. It's just what I felt needed to happen, with work and everything."

She snuffles and nods, trying to put on a brave face.

"How about we take a trip back and visit a bunch of your friends before school starts?"

Emily looks up at me with so much hope I know this means a lot. "What about

Mimi?"

"She should be out of the hospital in the next couple of weeks. We'll take her with us."

"But what about the hockey season? Isn't that when you'll need to be here to check on how everything is going?"

I chuckle and then ruffle her hair a bit. "You definitely got the questions from your mother."

Emily finally smiles, as though that's exactly what she wants to be.

"Let's plan on it. I'm learning to delegate more."

She raises an eyebrow. "Is that why you could sit and watch the show with me?"

I sigh. "It might take a while, but I need to work more normal hours. Hopefully there's a lot more time soon. I'll be going with you to Tennessee for your next tournament."

"You won't make things weird, will you?"

Frowning, I turn to look at her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I think you have a crush on Coach Ava. You know how much lacrosse means to me and if I'm going to be stuck here, I don't want you to ruin it and make things weird with her."

I didn't think I'd done anything for her to worry about. I'd just tried to be helpful on the field and tournaments.

“Bringing sports drinks to your team means I have a crush on your coach?” I ask, trying to play this off.

She rolls her eyes. “Uncle Charlie, you might think you’re being coy, but you’re not.”

“You know she’s the one who made me get stitches, right?”

“You asked her out and she said no, didn’t she?” Emily asks with a soft laugh.

Shaking my head, I say, “I haven’t asked her out.”

“But you want to.” She doesn’t even make it a question.

“No,” I say, almost as a reflex response. “I like my life the way it is. Besides, I’ve got enough drama from you to fill my life for decades.”

“Haha, funny,” she says, glaring at me.

When she gives me a look that says she doesn't believe me, I raise my right hand as if taking an oath. "I promise. I'll be on my worst behavior." Am I allowed to cross my fingers and think of the quote by Jim Halpert from *The Office*?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Emily stands and walks to the fridge while I stare out the window and replay all my interactions with Ava. I'm not sure I know how Emily picked up on my interest in her. Maybe she just knows me too well.

Then again, Ava isn't the kind of woman I usually go for. My past girlfriends and dates have had certain qualities and Ava doesn't have those. Maybe that's why I'm so intrigued. Too bad it won't last long before I move on and find something else to obsess about. That's how most of my businesses started.

But if it's easier for Emily, I've got to cool my jets with the lacrosse coach.

11

AVA

Flying with a head cold is probably the worst thing ever. My ears had this sharp stabbing sensation on the ascent and descent of the plane to Tennessee, which was hard to hold in as a grown woman. I just turned my head toward the window and tried not to cry.

I've taken a few types of medicine by the time we get off the plane, because I've still got to be the tour guide since I've been here several times. Sure, I don't have any reservations for the vehicles, but I'll be driving one, since I'm finally legal in the car rental company's eyes.

"Are you all right?" I hear Charlie say from behind me. I'm sure my eyes are bloodshot and I'm just trying to get us to the hotel so I can sleep for the foreseeable

future.

"Just great," I say with a little bent arm swing.

"You got a cold, huh?" he asks, looking me over with a serious expression.

Nodding, I take out a tissue and wipe at the underpart of my tender nose. "Yep. Gotta love it."

Emily gives him a weird look before lengthening her stride and walking to catch up with some of the other girls.

"It looks like she's making friends," I say, pointing toward her. I probably shouldn't be continuing the conversation, but I want to talk to him longer. Maybe this cold is weakening my resolve to stay away from Charlie.

There will be a few parents on this trip, but mostly, it's like I'm the bouncer at a very young frat party. Maybe a little adult interaction is necessary.

"Yeah, she says that your team is the only reason she hasn't hitchhiked back to Michigan."

I chuckle and say, "At least I'm doing my job somewhat."

"What got you into starting this team?"

I sigh, wondering how much to divulge of this really long process.

"My very first coach was amazing, but after that, I didn't have the best coaches growing up or in college. I think I wanted to make a difference somehow, to grow the game and to give girls the opportunity to learn under a coach who didn't constantly

yell all the time. Marsha reached out to me when I moved back to help Gran, and I figured I could make it work. It gives me a little more time to remember the good times of lacrosse while not being forced into physical therapy for torn muscles again.”

Charlie frowns as we walk through the security gate and out to pick up gear and luggage. "That sounds painful."

"Yes, yes it was."

He mulls that over for a moment and I'm counting the girls, making sure they're all there.

"Is that why you coach now? Instead of playing?"

I swallow hard, the lump forming in my throat making it difficult. "Yeah. Three surgeries on the same leg meant I was now a liability for my team. I also didn't want to ruin my leg forever. I'd like to grow old without regrets."

"That's an interesting way to put things."

"Sometimes I think about the future and other times I hide from it." What can I say? Some days I just don't want to take responsibility. Those times are meant for brownies and pajamas.

We've rounded up all the girls and secured vehicles to take us all to the hotel.

"Okay, I'll go get the keys," Marsha says, and I'm just glad I can sit in the van. The humidity isn't as bad as I've played in before, but it's still enough to make this girl's hair go curly. And not the cute bouncy curls, but the frizzy, tangled ones.

"Are we ready for this weekend?" I ask, hoping for some response from the few girls in my van.

"Only if we can get some better music on in here," one girl says. We all laugh and I let Sarah take over as DJ, turning on the songs the girls want to listen to. I'm not that far out from the teen years, but there is a definite change in the genre of music being played these days. Geez, I sound like I should be at the nursing home with my grandma.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Marsha comes out of the hotel with room keys after checking in, and I'm just grateful to find my room and get to sleep. Sure, it's only five o'clock in the evening, but that's an hour later than at home and if I'm going to coach the girls, I'm need to be on top of my game.

It's not until we get to the rooms that I realize I'm in a connecting suite with Marsha, Sarah, and three other girls.

By suite, it's not to say there is room for days. Oh no, we have to scoot around each other just to get to the beds and bathroom. And the door to the room next to us takes up more space because we leave it open to come and go.

I claim the bed closest to the air conditioner because this girl runs hot at nighttime. Then again, the air will have to travel over the bodies on the pullout couch. Thank goodness I've graduated out of that spot. There's no rest at all on one of those things. Unless you're thirteen or fourteen and can bounce back from everything.

"Let's go get some dinner," Marsha tells the girls after we've figured out how to stick all the gear into designated spots.

"Go on without me," I say, tucking my arms underneath the pillow. "If you swing by a drugstore, will you grab me some cold medicine?"

Marsha nods. "For sure. Rest up. We'll try to be quiet when we come back."

I don't know how long they've been gone, but it feels like a blink and they're back again, except this time smelling like pizza.

"I got a few options for you," Marsha says, handing me the bag from the drugstore. "We missed you at dinner. I should've asked if we could bring something back for you."

There's a knock on the door and someone answers it.

"I have a delivery," Emily says, walking in with a small paper bag.

She hands it to me and takes a step back, talking to Sarah about how they should wear their hair for the games tomorrow.

I peek inside and see a bowl of soup. I could look up and ask her who it's from, but I'd be the one to look like an idiot from that.

"Look who thought of you," Marsha says with a wink.

The girls leave to go with Emily and I scoot back on the bed, opening the lid and breathing in. This smells like the best chicken noodle soup I've ever had. I should probably taste it to finish that statement.

I take a bite with the spoon provided and close my eyes. This is exactly what I needed tonight.

"Is someone sweet on a player's guardian?" Marsha says with a grin. She's rubbing goo all over her face to prepare for nighttime.

"Do people say 'sweet on' these days? I don't think that's typical."

"Hey, I might be a little older than you, but I'm still hip."

"Case in point. No one says hip now."

"They also don't say chill, but I think that's what you say every other word." We laugh at that and she gives me a more sober look. "So? You and Charlie?"

My stomach constricts, but I'm cool as a fan when I say, "Me and Charlie what?"

"I think you'd be great together."

An uncontrollable laugh overtakes me. "Just because he bought me soup doesn't mean he feels anything for me."

"Honey, I've been married to my husband for sixteen years and I'm pretty sure he wouldn't know what to do with me when I'm sick."

Okay, so a point goes to Charlie for that. What these points are supposed to add up to, I'm not sure yet.

"I'm not good with men, Marsha. I'm always too much for them."

Marsha laughs, spitting out some of her toothpaste. At least it didn't land on me. She disappears, probably to spit out the rest, and comes back a few seconds later.

"Why are you too much?"

"Too athletic, too dumb in science, too casual in my dress, too intense in sports. Too competitive in life."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Marsha blinks several times and then says, "Are these real things guys have said to you?"

I shrug. "More or less."

I eat a spoonful of the soup and wonder what Charlie's motivations are. If it's to get Emily to play, that's already going to happen. No need to be a brown noser. I can't even think that a guy like him, who dresses up in very nice clothing and can just drop a few thousand dollars to support our team, would even think of me in a way more than friendly.

"I don't know. It might be worth thinking about. The guy has been willing to buy and fund everything we've needed. Do you know he just put in a t-shirt order when Whitney said she would love to get matching lacrosse mom t-shirts?"

As cheesy as that sounds, that he put in an order after someone just mentioned something makes me smile.

And then reality sets in. "He'll support us and then move on once the honeymoon phase has ended."

Marsha stares at me with wide eyes. "Honeymoon phase? So you have feelings for him."

Waving my hands in the air, I say, "That's nowhere close to what I meant and you know it. Sure, he feels useful and happy to support now. Then he'll tire of donating and we'll be back to where we were before."

“I don’t know, Ava.”

“It’s what people with money do. They have the advantage of going anywhere and people will accept them.”

Marsha reaches over and pulls me into a hug. “I don’t think this is really about Charlie.”

A tear trickles down my cheek, and I brush at it quickly before pulling away from Marsha. “Charlie, my ex-boyfriend, my parents. It’s a blanket statement.”

Shaking her head, Marsha says, “I don’t know. Something tells me not to include Charlie in that group.”

“Because he brings me soup?” And Chinese food. Gatorade for our players. Paying for tournament fees. To be honest, I don’t think my ex, Terrell, would’ve chipped in money for any of his family members.

And now I can't not think about Charlie. Way to shove the purple elephant into my brain when I’m not supposed to be thinking of purple elephants.

12

CHARLIE

Being sick is the worst, but having to function while sick is probably my worst nightmare. The soup was the least I could do to help from afar. Emily wasn't excited when I told her to take the bag to Ava, but she also couldn't argue that I wasn't trying to stay away from her coach by having her deliver it.

There are so many things that I've learned about Ava in the past week that it makes

me want to know more. Sure, I thought I'd known a lot from the summers when we were kids, but there's a lot that's changed since then.

I even looked her up before the game the next morning. I didn't know there was such a thing as professional women's lacrosse, but Ava was good enough to play at that level.

I don't know if it's just my experience with hockey ending early, but I applaud her for being able to get that far.

It isn't the best weekend for our team, and we end up getting eliminated sooner than we'd hoped. But to Ava's credit, she teaches the girls what they need to fix calmly and is overall positive.

I didn't think that was a thing, having been yelled at so many times in my sports days.

Monday morning I'm back down in Salt Lake for meetings. Emily and I visited my mom last night and she was happy, saying they might let her out soon. I'll probably have to hire a nurse until she's fully back to normal.

"Where've you been?" Paul asks when I walk into the arena.

"Tennessee, for my niece's lacrosse tournament. Things are taking shape here. I like the extra touches you put into the building."

Paul raises his eyebrow. "What do you mean by me? You're the one who picked all this out."

Shaking my head, I say, "I need to give you more to take on. I already talked to one contractor and said you'll have full control."

"Are you sure?"

I know it's hard to believe that a control freak like me can give up certain things. But my blood pressure might never normalize if I don't figure out how to release some tasks in my life.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"There's something different about you," Paul says, studying my face.

"Just the realization that my life can't be all about work. You know how to do the job, and I need to let you do it."

"Are you sure that's all it is?" he asks. "No dates or anything lately?"

Dates have been few. But Ava is someone I think about almost as much as work, which is saying something.

Am I ready to say anything? No. I'm a grown man. I can't admit I've got a crush on my niece's coach, can I?

"Yeah, not much has changed. I'll be going back east again starting Wednesday and I'll be there for about eight days. Only call me if it's something you absolutely can't figure out on your own."

There. That wasn't so hard.

It might be later, but if I have something to do, I won't feel like I'm not fulfilled by all the little things.

Paul heads off to talk to a few other people and I pull out my phone, pulling up a text to Ava.

Me: Are you feeling better?

There's no answer for a bit, but she's probably at work, wrangling Stu again. The woman is a wonder with children. Would she be able to help with some of the outreach stuff for the Utah Yetis? Would she even want to do something like that?

That's another part I've had to delegate. I don't know grown-up Ava well enough to go to bat for her in the organization I'm the owner of.

Why do I feel such a need to help her? Maybe because of all she's done so far to help Emily. The girl was grinning from ear to ear when we got home last night. It's not the easiest thing to have her mother gone, but this team is helping her ease into life again. And that's all an uncle can hope for.

But it's more than just taking my niece under her wing. Ava speaks her mind and stands up for what she thinks is right. I've met plenty of people in my line of work who've sold out over money or fame, losing themselves in the process.

I have a feeling Ava could withstand that, which makes me like her even more. And as much as I like challenges, she's definitely keeping me on my toes.

She had several walls up when we first reconnected. How do I test out a relationship with her without getting cut off completely?

13

AVA

Another weekend, another tournament. This time it's for longer than just a couple of days.

Some girls have qualified for an elite camp and then we'll be in one tournament a few days before heading to another tournament right after that. It made sense to book both

of them because they're back-to-back in the same location, which means we only need to book one set of flights rather than two.

I'm feeling so much better this week and I'm hoping that will help my coaching abilities. Being off last weekend led to a few mistakes. I know I'm only human, but sometimes I think I should be past all that, especially since I'm not playing.

We're in the airport, trying to get everyone checked in, and it's pure chaos. We have a few parents attending this leg of the tournament, which helps keep the girls in line. Sometimes it's like herding cats with how distracted they get with their phones and each other.

It takes almost forty-five minutes to get everything squared away at the check-in desks. It's a good thing we told the girls to be early.

Then it's the battle for the security line. I'm jealous when I see Charlie and Emily go through the pre-check lines. I've always thought that might be a good investment with how often we fly in the summer. Finding time and the money to fill out the paperwork is the real issue.

By the time all the bags get through the scanners and special security checks for our equipment, our flight is almost ready to board. At least I'll have a couple of hours to relax after the anxiety-inducing event at the airport with a gaggle of girls.

"Before we begin our boarding process, we need a few passengers for flight DL2165 to Nashville to volunteer to take a later flight. We'll get you on the next flight in a few hours and are offering a travel voucher for any future Delta flight."

I glance down to see that's the number of our flight. That means there will be no extra seats to stretch out. There's no way I'm going to be taking the voucher, even though it would be nice to have money toward future flights.

We've got a full schedule and I need to prep the girls who are attending the elite camp tomorrow.

In need of a drink, I head over to the drinking fountain and fill up my water bottle. It's not as refreshing as the water I had to dump out when we arrived, but it's free and will get me through the flight.

Walking around and checking out a bookstore, I debate whether I should buy a book. I love the idea of reading, but there's usually a lot going on that disrupts any good book I'm trying to finish.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I decide the splurge is worth it and stand in line behind five other people.

My phone rings. Marsha's name is on the screen. "Hey, I'll be there in a minute."

"They're almost done boarding." There's a panic in her voice and I pull the phone away from my ear to glance at the time. We've still got thirty to thirty-five minutes before the flight takes off.

"Why so early?"

Granted, this is my first flight in around eight months, but boarding times are a lot like the security spiel they always give about fastening seat belts and finding exits should something happen.

"Apparently, they're shutting the doors fifteen minutes before the flight now. Hurry and get here."

There's some mumbling behind her and I hurry to put the book back before speed walking toward the gate. I'm usually the queen of the early bird status, but I'm not sure why I misjudged my time so badly.

I breathe out as I make it with the door open, searching for my boarding pass. It's usually on my phone, but a problem with the booking meant I had to have a printout. I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. It was in the book I was going to buy.

Sprinting back to the bookstore, the book is in the same position I left it. And thank goodness my boarding pass is inside.

I rush back to the gate, panicking as the airline worker closes the door to get onto the plane.

Trying to be as polite as possible under the circumstances, I say, “Hi, I’m supposed to be on this flight. I coach a girl’s lacrosse team and they’re all in there already. Here’s my boarding pass. Can I still get on?” My chest constricts while I watch the attendant’s face give me a small smile.

“I’m afraid that we’ve oversold this flight. You’ll have to be booked on the next one.”

My chest sinks. “But I have my boarding pass here.” I stretch it out to her and she gives me another polite smile.

“We had to give your seat away when you didn’t check in. The next flight to Nashville leaves at 7:15 pm. I can give you an aisle or a window seat for that one. May I see your ID, please?”

My cheeks are probably as red as when I’ve been outside too long without sunscreen. This is why I’m extra early for everything. I’m not sure what happened this time. Maybe my brain shorted out when I thought I had time to stand in line for a book.

Why is this my life? Some example I am for the girls. Actually, this is probably the best example ever of what not to do.

The woman behind the desk prints off something and hands me a ticket and my license back. The boarding time is six hours from now. At least it will be tonight. The girls need to be well-rested and at the elite camp early tomorrow. Not that I have to be there for the camp, but I’d like to encourage them on the way to the facility.

Calling Marsha, I say, “So, bad news. Apparently I now have to take a later flight that

doesn't leave for six hours."

"So you'll be on the same one as Charlie?" Marsha says.

"What do you mean?" Why is that how my day is going?

"I don't think he made it either. Emily got a text from him right before you called that the doors were shut."

"Great," I say, dragging the word out.

She chuckles. "I don't know. That might give you some good one-on-one time. The guy seems to be the real deal."

"What? Like a tool?"

"You know that's not how he is," Marsha chides.

Blowing out a breath, I turn in a circle, scanning the crowd for Charlie. He's looking very relaxed for having just missed the flight. He's studying his phone and I want to strangle him with how calm he is.

Marsha is right, but I don't want her to know that.

"Will you be okay until I get there?"

"Ava, I have children. I'll be fine. You enjoy your date with Charlie."

She hangs up before I can form a retort. I put my phone back into my pocket and glance around. What am I supposed to do for six hours at an airport? And why, of all the people in the universe, did Charlie miss the flight?

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I walk over and set my bag on the ground, sitting so there's an empty seat between me and Charlie. "Six hours at an airport, huh?"

Charlie looks over, surprised to see me. "You missed the flight, too?"

"Yeah. I got the time mixed up. What about you?"

He glances up at me, his eyes locking with mine. "I was on a work call and I couldn't end fast enough." He shakes his head and I can barely hear him say, "Just another reason I need to delegate."

"What are your plans?" It's only then I realize how it sounds. I don't want him to think I care about what he does for the next six hours of life, but I know boredom is going to set in really quickly for me.

"Trying to see if there are any private flights available."

"Private flights?" I didn't realize there was such a thing for people who aren't celebrities and athletes.

Charlie glances up at me and nods. "Yeah, there are smaller planes where you can see if they're going to where you need to go and then book a seat on them."

"So not buying out the entire plane?"

He chuckles and says, "Some people do that."

“How much does it cost?” I don’t know why I’m curious. My bank account might go into the red at the thought of booking a private flight.

“It depends on the size of the plane and the distance. This company says it’s around three thousand dollars per hour.”

I freeze, doing the math in my head. The flight I just missed was supposed to be just over three hours. Nine thousand dollars for three hours? That’s insane.

It could’ve been an hour that I sat there in a stunned silence. Sure, I haven’t talked to my parents in a few years, but even after coming into money, they only upgraded flights to first class. I could pay all the bigger bills for a year with that much money. The advantages of living in a mortgage-free home with my grandmother and paying for the basics.

“You would pay that much for one flight?” I ask, still trying to wrap my head around it.

He shakes his head and laughs. “No. I’m not that desperate.”

We sit in silence for a few moments, Charlie on his phone and me just trying to figure out how that much money for a flight is a reality.

“Let’s go,” Charlie says, standing up and pulling the strap of his messenger bag over one shoulder.

“Where?” I ask, glancing at the clock on the wall. We’ve still got five and a half hours until the flight takes off.

“I booked us a flight.”

Shaking my head, I say, “I hope you can get a refund.”

“For the regular seats on the flight we just missed? I’ve already done that.” That must mean he paid for them already. How much money does this guy have? And why am I touched that he would help all of us like this?

“I’m talking about the private flight. You don’t have to pay for me.”

Charlie sighs, like he doesn’t have the energy for me right now. I can understand. I wouldn’t have the energy to deal with me either.

“Ava, I’ve factored in several things. There is a big storm coming this way, one that might make it impossible for the plane to take off from here if we wait several more hours. You’re the coach. It would be hard for Marsha or one of the other parents to take over your duties. Think of it as a gift.”

“And what do you call the rest of the things you keep paying for?” It’s petty, but I’m trying to keep him far away in my mind, in the untouchable zone. But if he keeps doing things like this just because, it will be hard to keep my distance.

“Making my niece happy and helping others in the process. I might not know a lot about girl’s lacrosse, but I know the sports teams I played on growing up would have benefitted from someone to help with the costs of things.”

All the air from my arguments whooshes out of me. Darn caring hearted guy.

Sighing, I say, “Okay. Just this once.”

It’s not long before we get a car to take us to Skypark Airport, just a few miles away from the one I’m used to flying from. Luckily, I rarely check bags, aka. being too cheap to pay more money for them, so my carry-ons are all I have with me.

“Are you all right?” Charlie asks.

“I will be.”

“Anything I can do to help that along?” he asks, a ghost of a smile on his lips. Why am I staring at those beautiful pink things, wondering what it would feel like with them on mine?

“No. I mean, am I even dressed okay for a private flight?” Charlie is wearing slacks and a polo shirt, while I’m wearing the equivalent of a tracksuit and sneakers.

Charlie laughs. “Not too many people will even notice what you’re wearing. They’ll be too busy ‘conducting business’ to worry about that.”

“That makes me feel so much better,” I say dryly.

We get to the entrance and they check Charlie’s paperwork and then let us through. “That’s it?”

“People who pay for a higher priced flight are usually just trying to get to where they’re going.”

This differs from the ideas I’ve had about people with money for a good portion of my life. Who knew I’d learn that much from a missed flight?

CHARLIE

To say today has been odd would be an understatement. I'm sure I'll get some criticism for leaving my niece with practical strangers, but I got sidetracked by that conference call. At least Emily has friends from the team. Nothing like moving at the beginning of summer to ruin that part of her life.

And it's not like she's young enough that I need to hold her hand crossing the street. As long as there's a responsible adult around, I count that as a win.

But to find that Ava also missed the flight was a surprise.

I'd planned to use the time to work. Now I've got more room on this private charter, but I don't really have that itch to open up my laptop.

Ava looks like she's just found out the earth isn't flat because she keeps glancing around the cabin with her eyes wide. There are only about ten passengers, which is normal for me. Do I have enough money to buy a jet? Yes, but I don't want to be irresponsible. I've heard how people roast the Kardashians about stuff like that.

"What do you think?" I say, asking Ava.

"I really shouldn't be enjoying this as much," she says, settling into the chair.

I laugh and shake my head. "What do you mean by that?"

"It'll be hard to go back to the regular flights after this. All this legroom. I mean, I'm not the tallest person in the world, but even I struggle to stretch out in a normal commercial flight."

"It definitely has its perks."

There's a long moment of silence before she speaks. "Why are you really paying for all this stuff? Emily is by far our best player and she and Sarah mesh so well. I'm not playing her more because of that. She's got the talent and the height to go far."

I smile, thinking of my brother-in-law, who was several inches over six feet. He would love to know that his baby girl has height.

Mulling over her question, I say, "I didn't always have what I have now. I played youth hockey until it got too expensive for my parents to send me further. It was something my father regretted until he passed, but sometimes those trials end up making or breaking us."

"So you want others to have the opportunities you didn't," she says, more of a statement than a question.

I nod. "Absolutely. And Emily has been through a lot in the past year. If chipping in a bit helps make her smile and remember that I'm her favorite and only uncle in the world, it's worth it."

Something passes over her face and I wonder what she's thinking. It's usually difficult to tell with her.

"Why are you so opposed to people helping monetarily?"

Her lips form a thin line. There are several seconds where she says nothing and I wonder if I said something wrong.

"Not everyone with money has had the best intentions in my life. It's easier for me to be skeptical rather than nursing a broken heart again."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I raise my eyebrow, hoping she'll continue, but she doesn't expound. Maybe an ex-boyfriend caused it?

"How is Stu?" I ask, remembering the small boy from her sports class.

She laughs and it sounds like she's forgotten all her worries.

"Probably preparing to take over the world. Or I would imagine he's stuck something up his nose that doesn't include his finger and has to have it extracted by a doctor."

I laugh just as loud, drawing a little attention from the other passengers. "I put three quarters up my nose once."

Ava gives me a pained look. "No, really?"

"Yeah, my sister dared me to do it and we ended up in the ER around bedtime when my mother saw they were stuck."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen."

She laughs at that. "I was picturing six or seven. You knew what not to do and you still did it."

"True, but I figured it would be a science project or something."

“Not really dissecting frogs,” Ava says with a chuckle.

“I made my science partner do that.”

She laughs. “Me too. I had to have a clothespin pinch my nose so I wouldn’t gag from the smell.”

I try to picture Ava at that age, and I smile. This is the most open she’s been since we’ve reconnected and I like this side of her.

“How are the stitches, speaking of the hospital?”

“Still there. I’m supposed to get them out while we’re gone.”

“Again, I’m sorry.”

I wave my hand in the air and say, “It’s okay. My mom is the one I’m worried about.”

Ava’s smile disappears and she looks nervous. She reaches over and touches my arm, which sends a jolt of energy up to my shoulder. “Is she doing any better?”

“She’s not in a coma, but she is going to need to rest and recover. I’m sure once I call her, she’ll miss not being at the tournament.”

There’s a bit of a smile now, but it’s still not much. “Does she go to Emily’s games?”

“Every one. Even through my sister’s cancer treatment, she somehow took Emily to everything and still helped my sister.”

“My grandma came to everything she could, too. It was nice having someone on the

sidelines for me.”

“Have you not heard from your parents in a while?” I ask. Her reaction makes me realize I’ve hit a nerve.

She breathes in deeply, letting it out slowly before speaking. “They weren’t the most supportive before they dropped me off at Gran’s. I doubt they’ve given me a second thought since I turned eighteen.”

There’s some light turbulence, and Ava grips the armrest of the seat, looking terrified. I debate for a few moments before reaching over and taking her hand in mine. “It will even out. We’ll be there soon.”

She gives me a small smile before staring straight ahead. I’m wishing we could continue the conversation. It’s like I’m dragging down the wall between us, one brick at a time.

Me: You guys! I just flew on a private jet!

Chloe: No way! That’s amazing. We need details.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Brooke: Aren't those the best? There's so much room. Did you meet a handsome stranger who whisked you off to an island?

Meg: Girl! You've got to give us some more details than that. Don't just leave us hanging!

Me: Well, I caused a guy to get stitches two weeks ago playing pickleball.

Brooke: You play pickleball?

Me: That was the first time. So anyway, it turns out I'm coaching his niece in lacrosse. We both missed the flight, and he helped us get on another one. But there's nothing going on.

Brooke: Are you sure this isn't a first date kind of thing?

Maggie: Nothing going on? ;)

Me: You know my track record. The guy was just being nice, so I would get to the tournament on time.

Meg: I'm excited to hear more. Don't forget to keep all the little details coming.

Chloe: Forget the track record. Embrace this!

AVA

We land about thirty minutes after the team was supposed to touch down, and Charlie rents a car that is sleek and oh-so-comfortable. I can't complain, because I've just flown over three hours and have no new aches or a crick in my neck from trying to get a nap.

My conversation with Charlie was eye opening, and I'm still trying to compare his comments about being middle to lower class growing up and still being a decent human being now that he has money.

"Do you have the address to where we're staying?" Charlie asks me, pulling up the maps app. I find it somewhere in my emails and read it off to him.

It's only a fifteen-minute drive, and much of the drive was in an easy silence.

"So, what does this elite training camp consist of?" Charlie asks, looking really sexy as he guides the car along the route with his left wrist. His wrist is on top of the wheel and his body is turned slightly toward me, which is a lot more inviting than my ex-boyfriend's machismo.

"Well, there will be grass, a few nets. I'm assuming several dozen buckets of balls," I say, trying to keep a straight face.

"Okay, touché. What do you think the girls will have to do there?"

I try to remember the one camp I went to. It wasn't out of state and definitely wasn't anything fancy, but I'd loved every minute of it.

"A lot of drills, running, and grading their playing and coachability."

“What do we do with the information?” Charlie asks.

“It’s used as feedback to get better. But the best part is that there will be some college coaches there. Our girls will probably be the youngest, but it’s always a good thing to start the recruiting process early.”

We make it to the house we’d rented for the week-long adventure. “Wow, I can’t believe Marsha found a place like this in our budget. You didn’t pay for it, did you?”

He raises his hands like I’ve got a shotgun pressed to his middle and says, “I didn’t pay for this one.”

I don’t know if I believe him, but can I really get mad that I won’t be shuffling past a couple of girls for a week straight, stepping over the clothes and shoes they just leave all around in a hotel room? Definitely not.

We head up and walk inside to a dance party. All the girls are in the large front room dancing to songs that are only slightly familiar.

“You made it,” Marsha says, from the kitchen, slicing an apple.

“Yes, we did,” I say, setting down my bags. My shoulder hurts from the duffle bag.

“Okay, well, let me show you to your rooms. The girls have already claimed the loft and two rooms here below.” Marsha walks around the counter and waves for us to follow.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I hope there is a large tub in this place because I need to soak and get my senses back to normal. All the anxiety from the day has zapped my energy. Although I can't say it was all bad. Spending that much time with Charlie was definitely a plus.

Marsha opens a door to a queen bed. "Charlie, this is your room. Hopefully it's far enough away from any shrieking that you'll at least be able to make business calls without people thinking someone is dying."

I chuckle at that. One girl, Hadley, likes to pretend she's an ancient pterodactyl with the high-pitched screech and everything.

"Thank you. That will definitely help this week."

He walks in and sets one of his bags on the bed, but I see little more because Marsha has pulled on my arm and is tugging me in the other direction.

"Marsha, what's the rush?"

"Just showing you to your room. Why?" Her mischievous grin has me thinking she's got other plans.

"Because my hand is going to lose circulation and fall off if you don't stop squeezing."

Marsha glances down at her hand on mine and lets go. "Sorry about that."

She leads me into what I'm guessing is the primary suite. There's a giant king-sized

bed and a walk-in closet and a shower, tub, and vanity bigger than my entire room at home.

“I’m sharing with you, if that’s okay,” Marsha says.

“Of course, I don’t think I need all this. How did you pay for it?” I ask, waiting to hear some white lie that actually means Charlie paid for it.

Marsha chuckles. “We got it all worked out. I thought you didn’t want to worry about the money.”

She has me there. When I’d agreed to coach the team, I told her I didn’t want to be in charge of anything that didn’t involve working on lacrosse with the team.

“You’re right. I’m just grateful we’re not stuck in a hotel.”

“How was the flight with your boyfriend?” Marsha asks, clapping her hands together quietly.

I frown. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

Raising an eyebrow, Marsha says, “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Charlie is amazing, but there’s a lot more to it than that. The guy is loaded.”

“And that’s a bad thing because...?”

“Look, Marsha. It would be a joke to think Charlie Danielson would even look at me like a potential date. The guy wears two hundred dollar sport pants, while mine I got on sale for ten bucks.”

“There’s nothing wrong with using the money you have,” Marsha says, taking a seat on the bed. It looks so comfortable.

“What if I start liking him and he dumps me and moves on to greener pastures? Or worse, calls me a gold digger?”

Marsha says nothing, only standing to walk over and give me a hug. Like my grandma, Marsha is a mother figure to me.

“Then he wasn’t right for you,” she says.

“I’m surprised you didn’t start defending him,” I say, wiping under my nose as I step out of the hug.

She shrugs. “We don’t know him that well. But sometimes we have to go out on a limb when the opportunity is there.”

“Well, it’s not there.” That’s a lie. The guy basically kept me comforted the entire way here, holding my hand and talking to keep me distracted. “He’s the guardian of one of my players. I don’t want any complaints of favoritism.”

Marsha places a hand on her hip and says, “You do remember who we are as parents, right? I’m pretty sure we’re more occupied with you being happy and still trying to learn all the darn rules for this game. I think the only one who would complain would be Rainy’s dad, and that’s because he doesn’t get to see all the games.”

“I’m not sure if Charlie will be around a lot after this. The guy travels for work often.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

“How did you two get here so fast? I wasn’t expecting you to get here until almost midnight.”

I bite my bottom lip, trying to decide if I should tell her. “He got seats on a private plane.”

Marsha’s expression morphs into one of pure happiness. “Dang, girl! That sounds amazing.”

I wave my hand, trying to get her to stop getting too excited. I don’t know who’s going to be outside the door and when. No need to have listening ears hear something that they’ll spin out of proportion.

“He only got me a ticket because I missed the flight too.”

“How was it?” Marsha asks, reaching out for my hands and squeezing them.

“So nice,” I say with a sigh. “And now I’ll have to go back to regular flights and know what I’m missing out on.”

“Or you can hang out with Charlie and take more of those.”

“Funny,” I say, with a dry humor. “Let’s just focus on the camp and the tournaments this week and move on.”

It’s easier to keep up the outward facade even when my inner self is moving down the feelings spectrum. Because there’s a one in a million chance Charlie would want to

date me, so I'll just have to take things one day at a time.

16

CHARLIE

Being the only male in this house has its trials. Maybe it's because I haven't been around this many teenage girls and didn't realize the high-pitched level of screaming is a normal thing.

It's nice when the girls finally fall asleep, but then I get no work done as I'm exhausted from the day. It was fun traveling with Ava. I rarely travel with people, but I also got nothing done today.

After a couple of quick phone calls, Paul and Steve have things under control, which means I'm lost on what I should be doing. I don't think I can make a habit of watching reality TV, even if my niece loves it.

The next morning I wake up to a quiet house and realize that the girls heading to the camp are already gone. A loud snore from the upstairs loft tells me the rest are still asleep.

I guess I should ask what my role is supposed to be while I'm here. Just another guardian making sure the girls don't do something dumb?

I didn't even wish Emily good luck. Future Worst Uncle Award recipient.

I'm pouring myself a glass of orange juice when the door opens. Ava walks in, touching the earbuds and pulling them out of her ears. She's got a light layer of sweat on her forehead.

Marsha and Whitney come in behind her, panting. Their faces are a bright red with small splotches of white mixed in.

“Can I get you some juice?” I ask, holding up the carton.

“Yes, please,” Marsha says.

“I’m good. I’ll head for the shower right now,” Ava says. It’s hard not to let my gaze follow her until she disappears. From what I’ve learned about Marsha, she’s good at seeing everything. Maybe she can teach me some of that so I can better take care of Emily.

“Did you two go for a run?” I ask, sliding the glass over to Marsha.

She chuckles a bit and says, “My run is more of a walking jog. Ava runs circles around me.”

“How did you get her to coach the team?”

Marsha takes a long swig from her cup. She stares at me for a few extra moments and I’m trying to figure out where her line of thinking is going.

“I remember her going off to college and then when I heard she came back, I figured we’d ask her. The previous coach wasn’t great and moved to another state just a few weeks before Ava came back from the east.”

“And she just said yes? I mean, aren’t most coaches old and have kids on the team?”

“I’m sure that happens a lot, but there are some college-aged girls who’ve coached different teams over the years. It’s just nice having one who is rooting so much for the girls.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

“Yeah, she loves them, doesn’t she?” I say, turning to put the juice box back into the fridge.

“What’s your story, Charlie?” Marsha asks before sipping at the juice again.

I chuckle and shrug. “I grew up playing hockey. When I realized I wouldn’t make it to the higher leagues, I started investing. It started out small but then grew a ton.”

“Any marriages? Crazy ex-girlfriends?”

Why do I feel like I’m being interrogated about a serious crime right now?

“I’ve never been married. My most recent ex-girlfriend left me because I work too much.”

Marsha nods her head and her gaze washes over me, like she’s trying to figure something out. “Good to know. Would you have married her if she’d stayed?”

I shift, feeling uncomfortable with this level of probing. “Probably. I stick around for things I’ve committed to.”

She looks satisfied with that answer. But now I’m wondering if I passed her test or failed it completely. And what would passing get me?

“Run!” I yell. “Look for the open pass!”

I’m back to having all the tension in my chest as we start the first game of the tournament.

We made it through the elite camp and the six girls who attended it said it was worth going. Which means I’ll need to remember to get the younger girls on the list for next year.

We’re playing one of the better teams in this first tournament and our girls are holding their own. I just hope Lena doesn’t break down in the net. She’s had at least thirty shots rocketed her way and has saved all but two.

The game continues, and my stomach is all tied up in knots with the score being this close. And then the final whistle blows and we’ve lost by one goal.

“What a game, ladies,” I say, feeling sad as well as trying to keep the girls from hanging their heads at such a hard-fought game.

We do our usual post-game wrap up and head back to the house. We won’t have to play again until tomorrow, which gives us time to regroup and get ready for the next day of games.

Once I’ve taken a shower after the sweaty day on the sidelines, I walk to the kitchen for a snack. The nice thing about having Whitney and Marsha as the team moms is they always know what snacks everyone likes, except it looks like they haven’t been able to make the full grocery run yet.

Marsha is cutting an apple. I wash one off and dry it, waiting for her to be done with the apple cutter.

“This place is so nice,” I say, glancing around the large room. Of course, my typical budget doesn’t have a lot of extra cash, so I’ve usually only been to the houses that are not as clean as this. “Where did you find it?”

“Charlie mentioned he had a close friend who lived here. The guy is out of town, but he offered to let us stay here.”

I freeze, making sure I fully process all her words. Didn’t Charlie tell me he didn’t pay for this place? Then again, he’s technically not telling a lie if we didn’t have to pay anything.

Charlie walks by and I say, “You have a friend who lives here?”

“Yeah,” he says, nonchalantly. With his hands tucked into the pockets of his pants, he’s upping the hotness factor another degree.

“Well, we need to pay him something. Even if it’s for the cleaning after,” I say. There’s got to be money in our team account since we’ve paid for next to nothing in the last two weeks.

“That’s unnecessary,” Charlie says, looking up at Emily with a strange expression. “Good work today, ladies. It was so close.”

I can’t decide if he’s trying to get me to change the subject or not.

“That was a good team. We stayed right there with them. I can’t complain.”

Charlie slaps the counter and smiles. “I need to catch up on a few phone calls. Let me know if I can help with food.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

He walks out of the room and I mistakenly watch him go.

“Will you help me cut up some vegetables?” Whitney asks, rinsing off a bundle of carrots. I’m curious why she didn’t just buy the baby carrots that are already the perfect size, but we find a peeler and I get to work.

“What’s on the menu for tonight?” I ask, trying to get the hang of this peeler. It won’t peel easily and I’m trying different pressure points to fix that.

I catch Whitney giving Marsha a quick glance and then she goes back to slicing up some celery.

“We were thinking about ordering in for tonight. I haven’t gotten a grocery order just yet.” Whitney walks over to a notepad she has and tears out a grocery list. “Is there anything you want to add to it?”

“I’ll look at it when I’m done peeling. How did we get all this stuff if you haven’t been to the grocery store?”

Marsha says, “The owner of the house had a few things delivered before we got here.”

Last night. Usually Whitney has an order put in for the grocery stores by the time we’ve landed and we just pick it up on the way to the hotel. Maybe she’s just not used to preparing us for life in a house for a week.

“So, what do you think?” Marsha asks, giving me a bump with her hip.

“About what? I’m thinking we need to play Carly on defense tomorrow?—”

“That isn’t what I was asking about,” Marsha says, taking out the lettuce from the fridge. “I’m talking about the only guy in this house.”

With a quick glance around the room, I don’t see Emily, which is a good thing. “He’s a nice guy.”

“That’s all you have to say?” Whitney asks. “The guy has paid at least twenty thousand dollars this summer for our team.”

My eyes go wide as I think about that. With all the flights, hotels, car rentals, and food, that seems on the low end.

“He said he’s doing it for Emily’s happiness, but as long as she’s on the team, that would be enough, right? Why donate that much?” I ask. One of the orange peels hits the floor on the other side of the garbage can.

Marsha and Whitney chuckle and give themselves a knowing look. “Probably to write it off on taxes,” Whitney says.

To be honest, I haven’t had to do in-depth taxes in my life. Most of my low earnings have been easy to input into a computer or just have my grandmother’s accountant neighbor help me with that. Best thirty dollars I’ve ever spent.

“You should show some interest. You’d be set for life.”

That only brings up the memories from my past. My parents said that several times before they left me at Gran’s.

“The guy works a lot. If I ever start dating someone who could turn into more, I’d

hope that hanging out with me would be valuable and not a burden.” Just like my parents.

Marsha’s expression sobers. “I get that. But you have to start somewhere, Ava. It’s easy to run away from the things that scare us, but sometimes we have to take the chance.”

I finish with the carrot and move onto the next. “Were you nervous when you started dating your husbands?”

Marsha chuckles. “I pursued him. He was terrified of me at first, but I eventually won him over.” Sounds about right for Marsha.

“My husband asked me out every day for a year until I finally said yes. We got into a fender bender on the way to the restaurant. He handled it like a champ, and I realized I couldn’t imagine my life without him.”

Why am I even giving a thought to Charlie liking me? He’s just a nice guy with a lot of money who probably just needs some time away from the gossiping gals in the kitchen.

The problem is that I’m actually weighing the possibilities. There shouldn’t even be a sliver of hope that something would work out between us, especially given our history.

And yet, I can’t stop thinking about him. How sweet he was on the flight here. How he’s done little things to help the girls. He’s tried to support me, usually through food.

I laugh, thinking about the several times he’s brought lunch or the soup to help me feel better. Maybe the way to this girl’s heart is through her stomach.

CHARLIE

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I haven't even shut the door to my room when Emily knocks on it.

"A close friend is out of town? Why didn't you just say this is your house, Uncle Charlie?"

I peek out of the door to make sure no one heard her and pull her into the room before shutting the door.

"Let's not say anything about that, okay?"

She frowns, and says, "Why not? Aren't you proud of it?"

I smile and take a breath before answering. "I am actually really proud of everything I've accomplished. There are just some people who get weird around me when I say I own extravagant things like this."

"I always wondered why you moved away from this house. I remember Mom loving it."

"She decorated most of this. I guess I needed a change after she was gone. So many significant memories of her helping me here and bringing you to visit."

Emily thinks about it for a moment and then nods. "I can understand that."

"So, we have a deal? No spilling the beans?"

"Why do old people always say that?"

Shaking my head, I say, "Will you keep my secret for a bit? To be honest, I crave this anonymity."

Once the words are out of my mouth, I realize how true they are. It's not always easy to be around people who aren't trying to get something from me. This group of girls and coaches/parents treat me like an equal, rather than I'm above them, which I appreciate. And with my growing interest in Ava, I'd rather not destroy the fantasy yet.

Every woman I've dated in the past five years has been trying to bump into me so we can start dating or has been recommended by a friend's cousin once-removed just so they can say they helped to get us together.

If marriage is in my future, I'd rather it be with someone I can connect with on all levels, someone who isn't worried about how we look together, but who wants to build a life. Someone who loves me for me and sees us going the distance, rather than an alimony opportunity.

Ava might fit that bill, not that I think she would go for me at all. She tries to avoid anything having to do with money. And since I've worked my tail off to get to where I am so that I can support and take care of my family, I don't want to be ashamed of it.

Which is kind of what I'm doing by telling Emily not to say anything, huh?

I almost married someone who only cared about my money until she opened my eyes to that world. And I've kind of been jaded ever since.

Until Ava. Of course, nothing has happened, but it's almost like using a dating app under a friend's name. I'm just borrowing a friend's identity to enjoy a little more time in the unknown category.

Emily rolls her eyes and leaves the room. "Good luck. I'm not sure you can keep this secret for that long."

I chuckle and unpack my stuff into the dresser. It's strange not using my usual room, but I figured Marsha and Ava would be more comfortable there. Luckily, I had an old assistant who had time to come and clear out the wardrobe in there and stock the kitchen with a few things. I'd planned to stay here regardless of the hotel situation, but with this many girls in the house, we're going to need more than protein shakes and salads.

I walk out of my room and bump into Ava.

"Sorry about that."

She's got a sheepish look on her face. "You're good. I'm coming to see if you need anything put on the shopping list. There were a few things here, but we need to make a big grocery run for the week. We've got a whole slew of things the girls have requested."

I reach out and take the paper, our fingers lightly brushing, which turns into a shock. "Sorry about that.."

"It's just static," Ava says. She's moving her legs back and forth like she's jittery. "If you want to write what you like and then leave the list on the counter, I'll go with Marsha to pick it up."

Shaking my head, I say, "Don't worry about it. I'll go. You prepare with the girls for the weekend ahead."

I smile when I see most of the girls in their bathing suits outside jumping into the pool already. How do they still have that much energy?

"I can go. It's not that much work. And It will be helpful to have a few pairs of hands to go with."

"Sounds good." I'm so used to sending out for things and having people bring food and other goods to me. It's been a really long time since I've been grocery shopping. Maybe it won't be that bad.

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

I write a few things on the bottom of the list and then set it on the kitchen counter. Instead of leaving, I sit on a barstool and check my messages. I wouldn't put it past Ava to take the list and leave by herself. The girl is stubborn for sure, but I like that about her.

It's not fifteen minutes later before she walks out, fumbling with a little side purse.

"Hey," I say, smiling as she jumps. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"Seems like that happens a lot to me."

"Are you ready to go?" I ask.

"Y-you're coming?"

I nod. "I figured I could help. There's a lot of stuff we need to get for a week here."

"Is your friend okay with a small fee to use his house?" Ava asks.

"He said it was free."

Ava shakes her head, as if that's the last thing she expected to hear. "We can pay. Especially if he rents this place out. We need to compensate him."

"I can check with him again, but he sounded like this would be a pay-it-forward moment. Let's just worry about feeding the girls and we'll figure out payment later."

She gives me a look like she's trying to understand my motives, but I grab the keys to the nearest van and walk toward the front door. We could've parked in the large garage if I didn't still have a couple of my old cars parked in there.

"Where's Marsha?" I ask.

Ava sighs. "She said she's feeling a migraine coming on, but I wonder..."

"What do you wonder?"

"Never mind." Ava looks at me again once we're in the car and back on the road.

"Care to share?" I ask, more curious now than ever.

"She has this idea that you and I would make a great couple." Ava makes eye contact, her eyes squinting a bit as if she can read the answer on my face.

Inside, I'm ecstatic that someone else is finally putting us in the same realm. But I have to school my expression. Ava looks like a doe about to bolt.

"And you don't agree?" I say, backing the van up down the driveway.

"I'm cursed in relationships. And I always pick the guys who think they can handle my life and then end up leaving two weeks later."

That wasn't a no. I should take that as a sign.

"I get that. Most women don't like that I'm a workaholic."

"Most guys don't like that I'm athletic and so competitive."

I chuckle, surprised we're having this conversation. It's such a little thing, but from how she was putting up walls when we first met, I'd say this is progress.

"I like that about you," I say, giving her a small wink.

"You're just saying that."

Shaking my head, I say, "No, what's better than someone who's willing to try different sports and makes it exciting? I played hockey growing up and that's a tough sport. Watching lacrosse is different but just as intense."

"I've always loved watching hockey. I still don't get what icing means, though. Aren't some people bringing an NHL team to Utah?"

I open my mouth to say more and then nod. "That's what I heard. Sounds like it will be a fun adventure. And don't worry about icing. Most people don't know what it means either."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

We drive to Costco, chatting here and there about things. The conversation is a lot smoother than any other we've had. Maybe she's getting used to the idea that I'll be around for a while.

I have to stop and think about that for a moment. Since when did I swing from the no-dating category to looking for an opportunity to make it happen?

We squeeze into Costco just before they close the gates, each of us armed with a cart.

"Where first, Coach?" I ask, waiting for her to give me directions.

"Probably the fresh fruit. We'll need a bunch of that for the girls. Then we'll get some meat, Greek yogurt, and go from there."

I lean over to see the list and breathe in her lavender scent. She smells good.

"No treats on there?" I ask.

"Oh, there's plenty of treats. I'm just trying to balance them out with more nutritious stuff. I don't need them to be slow when it comes time to play."

"I don't remember you ever playing lacrosse when we were younger. What got you started?"

Ava disappears into the cold fruit locker and I wait outside. Not because I'm cold, but because there are still a million people here and I probably wouldn't be able to get the cart all the way around the middle section.

Ava comes out with half her cart filled with fruits and vegetables and walks over past the bakery and meat sections. She stops to pick up several packages of meat and two rotisserie chickens.

"I started around fourteen. You and Bobby were gone already, you went to college and Bobby to the National Guard. I needed something to do, and a friend invited me to try lacrosse. I absolutely loved every minute."

"Were you recruited to play at CU, then?" It had come up in my research of her online profile.

She nods. "Yeah, I played in a travel tournament between my junior and senior year of high school and that's where I got to see a few more schools than the local ones. CU offered me a full-ride, so I took it."

"If you started later, why do all these tournaments when the girls are this young? Emily has at least four years of school left."

"It's never too early to have options. There was a girl on my team who committed to a school at fourteen."

Shaking my head, I say, "I can't even think I'd know what was the right decision at fourteen. Four years is a long time to stick to a commitment like that."

Something in her expression flickers. "Not all the girls who commit end up going to those schools. Commitment is often broken in our society."

I think that has a deeper meaning than college lacrosse. But I don't want to dive into that, so I change the subject.

"You mentioned hurting your knee. When did you do that?"

She sighs and pushes the cart along to the dairy area. A lot of eggs and milk later and we're strolling up and down the aisles. I'm thinking she won't answer when she says something.

"The first time I tore my ACL was my junior year of high school and then a second time in my senior year. I missed out on all the opportunities to show coaches my improvement. So I went to CU and played."

"I take it you tore it again. Is that why you stopped playing professionally?"

She turns and looks at me like she's seen a ghost. "Maybe. Did you stalk me online?"

I shrug. "Maybe. I had to know who was teaching my niece. Well, Coach Ava, anyway. I only remembered you from when you were younger."

"You did enough teasing to make life difficult back then."

She turns to guide her cart over to the cereal section.

"Are you okay?"

"To be honest, I'm just surprised you're still talking to me."

"Why?" I ask, not understanding what she means.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

After piling in a few more things, she turns to me, emotion clear on her face. "Guys can be really cruel, you know? The ones I've dated didn't like that I could win a lot of competitions or games or that I knew a lot about sports."

"Are you kidding? You're like a unicorn in that. Women I've dated before haven't even known what icing was to begin with. That just shows you're on a whole other level."

"Only if you're not into models or other gals with more to offer than I did. That's why my ex left."

Ava turns around, but not before I hear the catch in her words.

All I want to do is hug her right now, to tell her she's amazing and I'm very interested in her. But how do you do that when you're walking around a crowded Costco?

We get the rest of the food and wait in the long lines to check out. I watch as Ava opens her phone and taps on an app. It looks like the logo of a local bank and sighs at whatever number is there.

Yes, I looked away. I don't want her to feel like I've invaded her privacy.

It's then that she gets a text and starts to furiously tap out words.

"Who are you talking to? Marsha?" I ask, chuckling. While she's distracted, I step in front of her and give the woman my club card. They scan the food and I'm just waiting so I can pay for the food.

"My roommates from college and I have a group text. It's just blowing up with a bunch of messages, mostly from one. She's a camp counselor and doesn't get great service."

I smile, trying to picture Ava with a bunch of girls while playing lacrosse in college.

"That's cool. What are they saying?" Why did I ask that? I'm not that close with her now to understand the complexity of their chats.

"Well, my one roommate called off her wedding and then went on the honeymoon by herself. She ended up meeting a guy there she knew from a few summers back. I think things are heating up for her."

Now I'm curious about what Ava would say if asked about her current situation. "I'm stuck with a guy trying to pay for all my stuff."

The cashier says the total and Ava gasps while I tap my card on the screen to pay for it.

"You didn't need to do that. That's a ton of money we have to split among the girls."

Shaking my head, I say, "I've been a single guy for a long time. I've built up enough to share. Just let me do it."

We walk toward the exit and Ava says nothing.

"What is it you invest in?"

"Like I said before, all kinds of things. Each is different, but it's a challenge I love to take on."

"Is it worth all the time spent working to have that much?"

I study her face and see that she's not trying to be rude or sarcastic. She's genuinely curious.

Shaking my head, I say, "Well, I used to do a paper route and search for empty soda cans to turn into the recycling truck. Going from that to what I do now is a lot more rewarding."

"So, money didn't change you?"

I breathe out and say, "Yes and no. It made life a lot easier than the dollar menu at McDonald's, which is what I did through college. But I think the goal is to help people rather than use it for my own good all the time."

"You're about the only one who thinks like that."

"What do you mean?" She's actually letting me load stuff into the van, but we've had to push down the back row of seats to make room for all the food.

"I mean that people with money don't always turn out like you."

"Your parents?" I ask, taking a guess. "Are they okay?"

Ava nods and says, "Yeah, they're living their best life on a yacht somewhere."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"That's cool. I don't think I could be at sea for too long, though."

"They won the lottery just after my father sold his company when I was in seventh grade. I thought we were flying to see Gran and celebrate, but it turns out they wanted to travel for a bit. A couple of weeks turned into months, and I think I've seen them three times since."

And now I'm dead inside. I didn't know she carries that much weight around with her.

"I'd always thought they were sick or something. Bobby never talked about them."

She gives a shaky smile before she says, "It was easier to not talk about them."

I stop loading the van and reach out my arms, pulling her to me. She's a few inches shorter than I am and her head fits just under my chin. I don't know why, but this feels like the most right thing in my life, like my soul is reaching out to hers and we're connecting.

"I'm so sorry, Ava. I had no idea."

"Most people don't. I struggled through injuries after that, and my Gran was the best, always helping me through therapies and driving me to my appointments. Going to CU helped because I was close enough to drive to get there, and I got a full-ride scholarship, which helped since my grandparents were on a fixed income."

Yes, I've been through a lot in my life, but I've always had the support of my family

behind me. At least before they passed away.

"I'm so sorry, Ava. No one should have to go through that."

She nods and takes a step back, as if she's just now realized that she's been this close to me. Her cheeks go bright red and she turns to focus on the food.

We have a quiet car ride home, but the silence gives me a lot of time to think about our conversation. Ava has been through a lot, not only with guys she's dated, but with the people who were supposed to have her back through life.

And it makes me want to protect her even more.

19

AVA

Idon't know if I took some truth serum at one point or not, but I can't believe I divulged all that to Charlie.

I should probably be embarrassed, but I'm surprisingly not. It felt good to have him understand where I come from, especially since I haven't shared any of it with Marsha either.

The Sunny Girls, aka my old college roommates, all know about my past, and while they've tried to get me to connect with guys and date, they've also understood the feeling of abandonment that plagues me from my parents and ex-boyfriend.

We get the girls to come help unload the van and they're so wired for it being late at night. It looks like they already ate by ordering DoorDash, so at least I don't have to worry about doing dishes tonight.

"We should probably get to bed, everyone. That alarm clock is going to go off early tomorrow morning."

After rounding them up and telling them to turn off their phones and lights, I feel like I'm their adopted mother.

Marsha is snoring in the room when I get back, and from the looks of the medicine on the nightstand next to her, she did have a migraine.

I take a while to wind down, but at least an hour goes by before I have to get up and head outside or just to get a drink of water. There's a lot going through my mind. If I can't quiet those thoughts, it's going to be hard to function tomorrow.

I see movement through the glass into the backyard and I walk over to see Charlie sitting in one of the pool chairs, staring up at the sky.

"What are you doing?" I ask after opening the door a smidge.

"Just relaxing. Taking it all in."

I debate whether I should go out there, especially since we hugged in the Costco parking lot. I don't think I've ever felt that warm and protected, but taking a chance on being next to this guy again is like playing with fire.

"Do you want company?" I finally ask. I'm wearing a t-shirt and a pair of flowy shorts, but the air is cool.

"I'd love it," he says.

I grab the closest thing to a blanket I can find, a thin throw that was on the couch, and walk out. I sit down in the chair next to him, wrapping myself up in the blanket as

much as I can.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"Are you a night owl these days?" I ask, glancing over at his silhouette. He and Bobby had stayed up late during the summers when we visited Gran and Grandad. I could never make it as long as they did into the night.

"It depends on the day. Sometimes, yes. Other times I just take more time to sleep."

"Me too." We sit in silence for a long time, staring up at the brilliant sky overhead.

"Do you do this a lot?" I ask.

"I used to. It's been a long time since I've slowed down and seen what's around me."

We enjoy the silence a bit more before I can't hold in the questions anymore.

"Where all have you lived since college?" I ask, turning to watch the soft light on the porch highlight his features. Why hasn't this guy been taken off the market yet?

I'm not asking that for me. Definitely not. My life is already booked.

Okay, full honesty here. Everything I've seen and heard about Charlie has been positive. And I can't help but wonder what it would be like to be in a relationship with him, to hug and even kiss him whenever I want.

He glances over and gives me a quick smile before saying, "Ohio, New York, Maryland, here in Tennessee, Florida, California, and then Utah."

I chuckle and say, "And you're how old?" He's six years older, something he and

Bobby wouldn't let me forget all those years ago.

"A mere thirty-two. Why? Do I look older?" He sits up and tries to look distinguished.

I can't help but laugh. "That's a lot of living in a few short years."

"It sounds like you've done a lot of that over the years. Traveling for a sport is a big deal."

Nodding, I say, "Yeah. It definitely is. I think I've done every kind of fundraiser possible to help pay for those dreams. Then again, my parks and rec job had to pay for the things we were selling for the fundraiser."

"So what's the plan? These girls are going to grow up and move on with their lives. Are you hoping to coach at a higher level?"

His question hits me square on and I say, "That was the original plan. But I guess things change as we get older. The main focus has been to help Gran in her later years. I don't know if I could travel around full time just recruiting kids for my program if I were a college coach. So while I accomplished the goal of making it to the professional lacrosse women's league for a couple of years, it's like I've crossed off that dream and don't have another to replace it."

What is it I want to do?

"What was your major?" Charlie asks. The way he does it has me wanting to shift a little closer and cuddle up to him. Not like I've ever done that before, so that's a weird thought.

"Communications. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life at the time I had to

declare my major and realized that talking about things would go a long way to changing what happened to me in the past so I could avoid it in the future."

Charlie frowns and says, "Is that what you learned in that major?"

"Not one bit. Okay, that's a stretch. I learned a lot about many aspects, but nothing deep enough to help." We laugh and I ask, "What was your major?"

"Business."

"I should've guessed that one," I say with a laugh.

Charlie grins and nods. "I figured it would help me, eventually. And it paid off a lot sooner than I thought it would."

"How do you find your investment opportunities?"

He stares at me for several moments before answering. "A lot of them are personal preference. What I want to see created or have happen. Others are brought to me by word of mouth."

"And you're able to make a profit on all of them?" I know nothing about investing, except for the random things in movies and TV shows about people in New York at the stock market. From what Charlie has said, this is nothing like that.

He moves his head back and forth a bit before saying, "Sometimes they don't earn back their investment. That's the risk of the game."

"Does that happen a lot?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

He chuckles. "As an investor, I want to make money back and then some on every project. But it won't happen like that every time. Part of it is expecting things to go well or to fail and setting up safeguards for that."

I don't know why everything he just said reminds me of my dating life. I usually expect everything to fail between a guy and me.

"That sounds like a lot."

"It is at the beginning, but sometimes it's easier to spot things that are like past experiences."

"What's your current investment? I assume you moved back to Utah for this reason."

He nods, but instead of looking happy, like he's done with everything else, his lips are a thin line. "It's a project down in Salt Lake."

"And you bought a house an hour away? That doesn't sound entirely practical."

He laughs now, and I love hearing it. "Who says I'm practical?"

"Not me," I say. I drop my arm to the armrest of the chair and accidentally brush Charlie's hand. He reaches over slowly and holds my hand with his, causing my hand to warm and all the veins leading away from it to get hot. I sit still, not wanting to ruin the magic that is this moment.

Am I a hand-holding virgin? No, because he helped me through the flight. But this is

a bit more intimate, since I'm not worried about falling to my death on a plane.

Sitting next to me is a guy several years older who's probably had his pick of women to date. And he's holding my hand?

If this ends up being a bet from Marsha, she's dead to me.

20

CHARLIE

I had a hard time getting to sleep after the chat with Ava. And I can't believe I held her hand. She probably thinks I'm a nerd or that I grew up in the wrong era.

There was no way I wanted to scare her off, though. So, while I kind of wish my movement had been smooth and something like a kiss, I have to be happy about it.

She eventually fell asleep on my shoulder. It would've been romantic to sweep her into my arms and carry her with ease, but I'm not that smooth. She woke up while I was trying to pick her up. Romance, no. Struggle bus, yes.

From everything she's told me, she's got some reservations about relationships. But then again, if I'd been abandoned by my parents, I would probably feel the same way.

The first weekend of games goes well. We win more than we lose and end up in fifth place. In the second tournament, we've already won one game and lost another.

It's day two and I must've slept through my alarm this morning because by the time I get up, it's after nine o'clock and the house is quiet.

A note on the counter says that Marsha took a bunch of the girls out shopping. A

quick glance out the window tells me they've taken the van.

It takes a minute for my brain to wake up enough that I remember the game isn't until noon. At least I didn't miss it. I doubt Emily would forgive me for sleeping through her game. She'd say something about how Mimi never misses, unless she's stuck in a hospital bed.

I find my phone and start making calls to the people who need me. Sometimes I wish they would just give me a day or two in between phone calls, but again, that's on me and my delegation process.

"Hey Steve, I got your message about the updates to the locker rooms. What did you decide?"

"I thought I sent you the pictures."

I pull my phone away from my ear and search through my text messages. "Oh, I think they're coming through now." My phone rarely takes this long to receive messages and pictures, but maybe it's just one of those days.

I check the photos and then go back to talking to him. "Those look great. I think the Utah Yetis sign should be bigger. Does it come in a bigger size?"

"The company can make any size you want. It just depends on the size of the room." He pauses for a moment and then says, "I can't believe this is actually happening."

Nodding, I can't keep my grin inside. "I know. This is something I've wanted for a very long time. And that we can see the team forming in just a couple of weeks is the best part."

I turn and see Ava standing there, her arms folded against her chest and her lips in a

tight line.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

"Steve, I've got to go." I hang up the phone and face her straight on. "How was the run?" I'm not even sure that's what she's been doing, but I thought I'd take a stab at it.

"I took the girls shopping," she says, her gaze shooting lasers in my direction. "I thought you weren't excited about what you're working on."

She sounds a lot like a jealous girlfriend and I'm not sure how to react to this.

"It's something I've been planning for years. Something I wanted to do with my dad before he passed away. Now I do it in memory of him."

"So you're not just a little investor," she says, as if she's trying to think out loud.

Shaking my head, I say, "No. I've been working on this for a long time."

"You're the one bringing the NHL team to Utah. And you just let me ramble about it. I can't believe you didn't just tell me." She nods and turns on her heel to leave the room. I'm not sure if I should just let her go or chase after her.

"Ava, don't go." I walk after her, but she hurries to the room she's been using, my room, and shuts the door. Instead of slamming it, there's a soft click as it closes.

That's almost worse.

She's explained how her parents ditched her after becoming wealthy, but hopefully she knows that I'm going to be the same person she met a couple of weeks ago. The

more mature version of the guy she's known since she was a teen.

I've tried to keep the same personality that I had when we had no money, because I didn't want the money to define me.

Except I should've been upfront and told her. Not that I knew my feelings would morph into this fire inside me now. So much for a sliver of anonymity.

Of all the projects and opportunities I've had, I don't think I've ever wanted something more at this moment than Ava.

21

AVA

I'm pacing in the room we're staying in. Now that all the pieces are fitting together, I wonder if this is even a friend's house or if it's just Charlie's and he's trying to be modest.

The lies hurt the most. Sure, mine to Marsha and Whitney about my feelings for Charlie are little white lies, mostly to ward off their teasing for the duration of this trip. But Charlie's lies of omission bring up all the red flags I'd missed with Terrell.

Are Charlie's as bad as Terrell's? No, but I don't want things to get worse. I'm already attached, but I've got to protect my heart from falling further.

There are several girls who are hoping I'll be able to help them get a scholarship, to get seen by several coaches over this summer and future years, and I need to focus on helping them achieve that. Me getting all mushy about an attractive guy only pulls me away from that purpose.

Time flew by today, and I'm already back in the van driving us to the house after our games.

Emily sits in the front seat and I almost wish she'd gone in back with the rest of the girls. I don't need a reminder of her uncle right now.

"How was it?" I ask, glancing in the rearview mirror at the other girls. They're kind of smiling, but they look exhausted.

"Good," Sarah says, giving me a thumbs up. "I could sleep for an entire week right now."

There's a mumble of agreement and I turn on some music to just let them chill on the way back.

"What can I work on?" Emily asks. "I know in the camp they said I need to get better footwork. Is there something I can do for that?"

I give her a broad smile and nod. "If you're willing to work on it, I've got some drills we can use to fix it."

"Are you okay? You seem different from the past few days." Emily is staring at me and I have to keep my focus on the road so I don't blab everything I'm feeling.

How do I say I found out her uncle is a lying jerk? Why it's affecting me so deeply, I'm not sure.

"Just a lot of lacrosse," I say, giving a forced smile.

"How's it going with Uncle Charlie?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Her question throws me off and while the rest of the group is practically comatose in the back couple of rows, I still would rather avoid this subject now and in the future. This is why I don't get involved with people related to the players. Then I'm off my game and it's awkward for the next seventy years.

I turn up the music a bit, hoping that the girls with their nose in their phones won't overhear.

"What do you mean?" I ask, turning on my blinker and changing lanes. I might as well dig for any information she's got.

"Do you like him?"

My heart beats faster as if to shout yes, while my brain is trying to be logical and smother that answer.

"He seems like he's got a lot on his plate," I say, trying to be evasive.

"Yeah, he definitely does. I know he likes you, though."

I snort, actually snort, and wish I could crawl into a hole and die. I'm supposed to be a cool example of what could happen in their future and here I am looking like Sandra Bullock in Miss Congeniality pre-transformation.

"I doubt that."

Emily shakes her head. "I've seen him with a lot of women over the past few years."

That makes me feel even worse. Am I falling for a playboy type? He's done all the right things, but is it because he's got a routine down for how to reel a gal in and then cast her back out to sea?

"And he's never paid attention to any of them but you."

Shaking my head, I say, "I'm your coach, Emily. I try not to date anyone's relatives."

"I was hesitant at first for you to be together, but I think you might be good for him."

"Yeah, him and his gajillions of dollars. Is the house we're staying at his?"

She tightens her lips into an almost imperceptible line before she gives a quick nod.

"I knew it!" I say, louder than I should've.

"Don't tell him I told you."

"Well, I already overheard him say he's basically the owner of the new hockey team coming to town. It's kind of hard to wrap my head around that."

"He had a plan with my grandpa that they would own a team one day. Charlie's been so focused on it he almost forgets about missing Grandpa."

And now I'm the complete jerk. He wasn't lying about that, he just wasn't upfront either.

What would that be like? I've learned to not miss my parents, to not expect them to come back into my life after all these years. But to hear of a family who worked together, who was going to do something great together, is completely foreign.

We pull into the drive of the house and I let the girls all go in before I even turn off

the van.

It's fine and noble that Charlie has donated so much money to this team, that he's let us stay at one of his houses (he probably has more than this), but that just means something is going to pull him away once I let the walls around my heart come tumbling down.

There's a knock on the window that makes me jump. Charlie is standing there, giving me a half-smile that sends my insides twisting.

I twist the key to roll down the window, trying not to look into his eyes again.

"We should probably talk," he says, running a hand through his short hair.

"What's there to talk about? I'm grateful for your help with this team so far. And letting us use your house." I take that moment to look right at him, enjoying the look of dismay on his face.

"I didn't lie about it. I mean, I am my own close friend, right?"

I roll my eyes and lay my head down on the wheel. It honks for a few seconds and then stops, leaving us in an eerie silence.

"Ava, I'm sorry. I promise I wasn't trying to lie to you about it. I just like the idea of having a moment of anonymity. That doesn't happen often."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

“Well, we all thank you for your contributions to this team. I should probably go in and make sure no one is killing each other.” Not that I need to worry about this group of girls that much, but I need some distraction.

He takes a step back from the door so I can open it and step out. Before I can get too far away, he reaches out to hold my hand—the traitor. It reminds me of the last few nights we’ve ended up out on the porch chatting about life.

“I’m sorry, Ava. I care about you and I don’t want you to think that I go around lying all the time.”

Shaking my hands, I say, “That’s your business. I will do everything I can to make sure that Emily gets recommended to some of the top schools, but I can’t do this.”

“Don’t say that,” Charlie says, and his tone causes me to glance up at him.

“You said it yourself, that you’re everywhere. You’ve lived in dozens of places and I will probably live in my grandmother’s house after she dies just to keep the memory of someone I love alive.” Tears have entered the chat and I don’t want him to see me this emotional.

“I’m working on settling down and I’d love to see where this can go.”

“You’re a couple of years too late. The jaded Ava is all that’s left.”

I turn and walk away, my insides ready to combust from the different emotions flowing through me. When I enter the house, I can tell the girls have probably been

spying on us, but I can't face them now. So I do what I do best when things don't go how I think they will. I hole up in the room and pretend the conversation didn't happen.

22

AVA

"Wake up, Coach," Marsha says, pulling back my covers.

"Just five more minutes," I say, reaching for the blankets because it's surprisingly cold in this room.

"It's time to get the girls going. They've already had breakfast. We just need to load up and head to the field."

I stretch and head over to my suitcase, pulling out a separate pair of black running shorts than what I wore yesterday.

With a bright yellow shirt to match the team colors and a pair of tennis shoes, I'm ready to go.

Marsha hands me a protein bar before picking up a bag identical to the one Whitney is carrying.

"Did you pack for an army?" I ask, chuckling.

"It's going to be a long day at the field. Might as well be prepared," Whitney says. She doesn't look as chipper as she usually does at this time of the morning, but she probably didn't sleep well in her bed.

Me, well, I don't think I've ever slept better. It's only then that I realize Marsha and I are probably sharing Charlie's room. How embarrassing.

The girls file into the vans. We drive ten minutes to the fields. Once we're out, I see that there's no car following.

"Where's Charlie?" I ask Marsha in a low voice. I don't want any of the players to think I'm worried about him or might have feelings for him, which I've been debating for the last twenty-four hours as it is.

Marsha sighs, giving me a placating smile. "He left early this morning to take care of some business. I assured him that Emily would be okay and that we'd make sure she got home." There's a hesitant pause and then she says, "What did you do?"

"Me? What do you mean?"

"We all saw your little display in the driveway yesterday. Why did he leave?"

So much for keeping things under wraps.

"He's the owner of the new NHL team in Salt Lake. That means he's not just a millionaire. His net worth is probably in the billions."

"You're probably the only woman on the planet who turned down a hot billionaire."

Letting out a long breath, I say, "It's not like that. There's no stability for him. He's lived in so many places and probably has a house in all of them. The house we're staying in? It's his."

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out. Who cares if he likes to work and has a project for something he's dreamed of doing since he was a kid? All you had to

do was talk to him to know about that much. Or watch the news. Actually, don't do that. It's depressing."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

Marsha waves her hands in front of me and takes a deep breath. “You’re ruining a good thing all because you don’t want to get hurt again. Well, let me tell you, love isn’t all roses and bacon,” she says, and it’s hard to keep a straight face on that last word. “Sometimes things are hard, when we want to bicker about every little thing they do wrong. But we show up, we talk it out, and we find a solution to move on.”

“That’s the problem. There are so many people who move on when I feel like I’m standing still.”

“What do you want, Ava? Do you want to be a college coach? Do you want to stay in Oakhaven and keep working at the parks department? There are always more options, but you just have to figure out what you want.”

If I didn’t respect Marsha as much as I do, I’d be furious right now. I’m honestly impressed with her motivational speech. Maybe I should hand the coaching reins over to her from time to time.

“I don’t know.”

“My honest opinion is that I think you want to keep everything the same because it’s safe, predictable. That way you don’t have to worry about everything going back to the way it was before. But what if change is beautiful and good? What if it can make you the happiest you’ve ever been?”

“What if I’ll always be in fear that he’ll leave me? That I won’t be good enough for events or that five years down the road I’ll be divorced?”

Marsha raises her eyebrow. “So you’re thinking about marriage already?”

I wave her off, trying to keep my emotions steady so I don’t break down into tears. “I want to get married someday, Marsha, but how do I get over being abandoned?”

Marsha pulls me in for a hug. I try to keep my emotions in, but my body shudders, trying to release some of the tension.

“You’ve just got to trust and work on it together. Weren’t you a communication major? Use what you learned there and talk through whatever you’re feeling. Did you do that with your ex-boyfriend?”

I think back to my time with Terrell and realize that I just kind of went with the flow for him. He made all the plans, and I just figured that because he had money and then ditched me, that he represented a certain type of male I needed to steer clear of.

But in reality, I didn’t help the situation. Was that why he got bored with me? Because I didn’t oppose him in anything?

Looking back, it was like I was trying to fit into some mold he’d established. And it was probably due to whatever issues I had from being a teen without her parents.

“Oh man, I’ve messed up.”

Marsha nods. “I didn’t want to say anything,” she says with a laugh.

“So how do I fix it?”

She shrugs. “That’s something you’re going to have to figure out.”

CHARLIE

“Are you all right, boss?” Paul asks, giving me a slap on the back.

Am I a coward for running back to work after Ava stopped talking to me? Probably, but I don’t really know what to do about it. There’s a lot going on in my career, but all I want to do is to be with Ava.

That’s definitely a first.

“I’ll be fine. Lead the meeting. I’m just sitting in to listen.”

Paul’s surprised expression makes me second-guess even coming in today. I’d told him he had control over several things and here I am, looking like I’m back to micromanaging. What I’m trying to do is get my mind away from thoughts of Ava.

The image of her expression when she overheard me talking about the team will probably be burned into my brain forever. The shock and hurt, the slump of her shoulders as she turned and walked away.

I stand in the doorway, ready to walk into the conference room, and something about it is stifling. I loosen my tie an inch, but that doesn’t help air get to my lungs. Instead of finding a seat, I turn on my heel and head toward my office, needing some time alone.

I’m going to ruin the dream my dad and I had together all because of some woman who’s mad I have money. Well, I kept things from her when she asked me directly. She has a right to be angry.

My phone rings and Emily’s name comes up on the screen. “Hey Emms,” I say, trying to muster a cheerful tone.

“Charlie, where’d you go?” The sound of her voice transports me back to when she was two or three. She’d lost her favorite animal, and I was struggling to find it. It was like there was so much trust there and I’d broken it by not finding it. Now it was the fact I’d abandoned her with almost strangers.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

“I’m sorry, Emily. I had to come back to Salt Lake for some big meetings.” A quick glance around the room shows me that’s not really true.

“What did you do to Ava?” she asks after a long pause.

“I’m not sure exactly. She’s not happy I’m helping with the new hockey team.”

Emily groans and says, “That’s not true. You better fix it.”

I chuckle, surprised at the seriousness of her tone. “I thought you didn’t want me to be anywhere near her.”

“Yeah, well, that was before I saw heartbroken Ava.”

My smile fades and I say, “What do you mean? Is she yelling at the team?”

“No, but the only time she smiles is when we’re playing. After that, she mopes around.”

Blowing out a breath, I say, “I don’t know if I’m the reason she’s like that, Ems. She’s been through a lot, just like you. The chances of earning her trust now are non-existent.”

“What about not giving up? How much did you fight for this NHL team to get started? I know you worked hard for it because you wanted to honor Grandpa. Why can’t you do the same thing with your relationship?”

I don't want to tell her that there hasn't been a relationship, nothing beyond hand holding.

"You're right. I need to fight for what I want. I guess I'm just nervous."

"About what?" Her tone tells me she's in full teen mode right now.

"That she'll reject me. Again."

Emily clears her throat and says, "Did you actually say, 'Ava, I like you. Will you be my girlfriend?'"

Her imitation of me makes me laugh and I say, "Well, no."

"Maybe start there. Then you can see where things go."

"I probably should've come to you for relationship advice a long time ago," I say with a laugh.

"I just call it like I see it. And you both like each other."

"When do you fly back home?" I ask, my brain already turning with ideas. This is the most hopeful I've felt in a while.

"Um," Emily says, probably trying to figure that out. I could look it up, but I'm interested to see what she says. "Looks like it's late tonight. What are you thinking?"

I rub my palm over my chin, trying to put together options of what to do to show Ava that I'm a viable candidate as a significant other. That I won't just abandon her, despite me fleeing to safety back in Salt Lake.

“I’m not sure yet, but I’ll come up with something.”

We end the phone call. I search my brain for options. How do I show someone that even though I’m busy, that I won’t be abandoning her for the latest and greatest business opportunity? That being with her is more important than all that?

24

AVA

I’m trying to change my mood, but it’s been rough for the past few days. The last tournament didn’t go as well as I would’ve liked, but the girls are young, playing up an age group, so I can’t complain.

And I can’t get Charlie out of my head. The way he looked when he knocked on my window that day and then how he was trying to talk to me. I should’ve let him continue, but I didn’t. In my mind, it was a sort of self-preservation. Now I wish I could rewind time and redo it all over again. Everyone keeps telling me I need to listen and I’ll admit it’s my biggest fault in everyday life.

“I still think you need a grand gesture,” Marsha says as we walk toward the gate at the airport.

I’m already exhausted from trying to clean up everything in Charlie’s house before we left. I’ve already threatened Marsha with her life if she doesn’t give him some money for a cleaner.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

The one bonus to today, the girls opted to ride in the van with Whitney, leaving our van with all the luggage. At least there are no listening ears to our conversation.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you not watch chick flicks? It’s where one person proves how much they love the other person by doing something that means a lot to them.”

I reach out a hand to stop her, ready to say that we are not in love territory. But a strong crush? Check.

We drive farther, and I think about all the insignificant moments we’ve shared throughout this trip. I’ve never missed someone as much as I’ve missed Charlie since he left.

“He lied to me,” I say, trying to come up with something that will help me get back to regular territory. My safe zone.

We leave the vans at the rental car place and walk toward the entrance to the airport.

“The guy has a lot of money. I can imagine he’s sick of people trying to take advantage of him.” Marsha gives me a knowing look and I turn my head to stare at the check-in line.

“Then why would he so freely give it to our team?” I ask. Then again, he already told me the answer. He’d been on a team that could’ve used some outside funds to get them to the next level.

Marsha stops walking, not joining the girls in line yet. “Having known him for many years, and now as an adult for a couple of weeks, do you really think he would leave you without a word if you were dating?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you’re the one who pushed him away. What do you want, Ava?” This makes me think of our conversation a couple of days ago.

My brain does a speedy power point presentation of all the interactions I’ve had with Charlie over the past couple of weeks. He’s changed a lot from when I was a teenager, but in a good way. And I’ve grown to see that he’s not as arrogant as he once was. He’s a good guy, one of the few people who hasn’t let his money change him.

I’ve been going about this all wrong. Instead of making a blanket assumption about all people who have over six figures in their bank account, I should’ve worked to see the character underneath.

Maybe he felt like he needed to leave some things out because of my attitude.

And for the first time, I realize that those strong crush feelings are bordering on the love spectrum.

How can I tell him I’m sorry? How will I make it up to him?

I wouldn’t mind if that starts with a kiss, but that might not be the best opening to an apology.

Marsha gives me a knowing look and then walks up to join the girls at the check-in desk.

Everyone is able to check-in, except for me.

“You don’t have a booking for Ava Hooper?” I ask. Why wouldn’t it be in there? Did Charlie’s refund cancel the return flight?

Whitney turns to me and says, “Maybe we can use some of the money we collected at the beginning of the season to buy a ticket.”

Marsha shakes her head. “I don’t think we can do that.”

I’m shocked by her response. “How am I going to get home?”

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a physical ticket. “This is for you.”

I take it from her and see it’s just like the one Charlie used for the private flight to Tennessee nearly a week ago.

“Where did you get this?” I ask, waving it in front of her.

“From Charlie.”

I frown. “When did you see him?”

“This morning. It’s time for that grand gesture,” she says, smiling.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

“So, you drove me all the way here, already knowing that I wouldn’t be on the same flight as you all?”

She shrugs. “What’s a matchmaker to do?” I punch her in the shoulder gently and shake my head. It’s then that my brain focuses on the fact that Charlie bought me a seat on a private plane for the second time. But why didn’t he come see me so we could talk?

My stomach ties itself into knots and I’m suddenly just as nervous as if I were getting ready for a lacrosse game.

“Head outside and look for your name. I think the driver should be there now.”

I walk out to the pickup area where there’s a man with my name on his board.

“I’m Ava Hooper,” I say, wheeling my bag up to him.

“Perfect, Miss Hooper. I’m supposed to take you to the private airport.”

He opens the door and then takes my bag to the trunk while I slip into a nice seat in the back.

I try to relax, but I realize I didn’t get all of my questions answered. Did Charlie fly out in person to give Marsha my ticket? Or did he just do a video call and send a courier with it?

The driver is kind and we chat a bit before arriving at the smaller charter plane

airport. I recognize it from our arrival a week ago.

I walk out onto the tarmac, wondering what is going to greet me. I'm not usually a fan of surprises, but this has been good. At least I'm not stuck in Tennessee trying to panhandle my way home.

"Miss Hooper, we're happy to have you aboard," the flight attendant says before I've even shown her my ticket.

"Uh, thanks?" I say, not sure what's going on. I turn to walk down the aisle and realize that it's completely empty except for one smiling face in a chair three rows back.

"You made it," Charlie says, standing to take my bags and put them in an overhead bin.

"You didn't have to do this again," I say, trying to sound more serious than I am. This is it. The chance where I could fall and possibly get my heart broken.

Charlie turns to me, reaching up to touch my cheek with his warm hand. "Yes, I did. I'm sorry I left."

"I would've done the same thing," I say, offering a small smile. With him this close to me, I can hardly breathe. My eyes keep dipping down to look at his lips, my brain doing all the scenarios of what they would feel like against my own.

Charlie leans his forehead against mine and says, in a soft whisper, "I'm sorry, Ava. You've taught me a lot in the past few weeks, all about loyalty and dedication. I've been running from a relationship for so long, I didn't know how to go about asking for you to be my girlfriend."

I gasp and say, “You want me to be your girlfriend?”

He grins, sending my insides flipping like a gymnast on a floor routine. “Yes. I know you’ve had many people leave you in the past, but once I commit to something, I stick with it for as long as possible. Ava, your passion for lacrosse and your love for your team are unmatched. You are blunt, which is something I need but don’t hear often. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about the hockey team and everything. Just know that I’ve been in a type of survival mode too, ever since losing so many in my family. I liked you, even from that moment on the pickleball court, when you hit me in the face.”

We both laugh a moment, and I shudder as I try to breathe in. “I made you face your fear of needles.”

“Well, if I have to face my fears while adventuring with you, I’ll gladly do it.”

His eyes search mine and it’s all I can do to smile before reaching up and pressing my lips to his. It’s like fire meeting ice and I almost hear a sizzle. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. This is like drinking from a water bottle on a hot day after being on the field for an entire game.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” the flight attendant says over the intercom. “We’ll need you to take your seats before we take off.”

We pull apart and laugh. I’m not sure how this is my life right now.

“What next?” I ask, fastening my seat belt.

“How about a proper date that doesn’t involve Costco?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You thought of that as a date?”

He chuckles and says, “What’s a date more than two people getting to know each other? I feel like that was a good start. But I want to show you something even better.”

“That’s cryptic. Can you elaborate?” I say, giving him a cheesy grin.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

“How about a quick flight to New York? We can take in the sights and then have lunch at my favorite place.”

My stomach drops and I say, “I need to check on Gran.”

Charlie reaches over and says, “Sorry, I forgot to show you something.”

He pulls out his phone and opens it to the gallery, clicking on a video. And there on the screen is my grandmother, with her faded bubblegum pink hair, sitting in the hospital bed.

“Ava, dear, you’ve been holding out on me. Since when did you start hanging out with Charlie Danielson?” She pauses and wiggles her eyebrows, making me laugh. “I hope what he tells me is true. If you like him, let him take you on a trip. I’ll be here for at least three more days. Enjoy yourself, be young for once instead of hurrying back for responsibilities. Tina and I will keep each other company while you’re gone.”

The screen pans over to the bed next to Gran and I see Tina smiling back. “Marsha will take care of Emily. Go have fun for the day and we’ll see you back here soon.”

The video cuts off and I’m stunned. “You visited Gran?”

He looks panicked and says, “I apologize. I just wanted to make sure I’d covered my bases and taken care of everyone before I whisked you away.”

I try to hold back the tears, but a couple of them fall, trickling down my cheek.

Charlie reaches over with a finger to swipe it gently and says, “I’m sorry. We can ask the pilot to head home.”

Shaking my head, I say, “No, it’s not that. I’m just surprised that you took into consideration my family. Thank you.”

“Family means a lot to me, too. I just think you deserve some time exploring without having to figure out what to do next as an adult.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t listen. I let my views cloud the situation, making it so I didn’t see it clearly. You’ve done nothing but take care of me, even when it was the smallest acts. Will you forgive me?” I bite my lip, not sure how his answer will go from the somber expression on his face.

“Of course I forgive you,” Charlie says, his voice breaking on the last word. “A few weeks ago, I thought I was fine with working myself to the bone, because it helped me cope with the loss of my father and sister. But now I know that life isn’t the same when we’re running from it.”

“You’re right,” I say, grinning at him.

Giving me a shy smile, he says, “So, I’m not sure I heard your answer on the girlfriend situation. Do I need to write it on a piece of paper so you can check yes or no?”

I laugh, taking his face into my hands and pulling forward. “Charlie, I would absolutely love to be your girlfriend.”

We close the distance with a quick kiss before I sit back a few inches.

“I’m going to need the source of that chicken soup again.”

Charlie laughs. “Done.”

I lean over and kiss him deeper, grateful for that awkward moment on the pickleball court when I made him get stitches. And for every moment after that.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

Ava

I can't believe it's been a year since everything happened with Charlie.

He's been one of the brightest parts of my life so far. He's taken me on a trip here and there, but mostly, we've been able to mesh our families for holidays and other events. We're still a small bunch, but we're mighty. Bobby even came to visit for a week a few months ago and laughed at our antics, just like when we were growing up. The best part now is that I can kiss Charlie anytime I want.

Gran healed up well and joined me on the pickleball court. There have been no more stitches or surgeries needed, though. She loves Charlie and all that we've been up to.

Tina also recovered from her injuries and has been like a second mother to me throughout this time. She's one of the best cooks I know, and I've learned a lot from her about how to make something other than casseroles.

Emily already has some interest from college coaches, but she'll be returning to the elite camp in two weeks and will probably get more interest going there.

Charlie has been working on not working as much, and I'd say he's doing a pretty good job of it. The first year of the NHL team was a lot, but he didn't let it consume

his schedule, leaving plenty of time for the two of us. They did pretty well for a first-year team, making it to the first round of the playoffs before being eliminated.

We're down at a tournament in Park City, just outside Salt Lake, and I'm so proud of the girls. They've worked and worked to get to a higher skill level and the way they pass and work together is paying off on the scoreboard in each game.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:00 am

We win this game, and I can't help but smile as I look over at Tina and Gran. Where's Charlie?

He was sitting there only moments ago.

There's a bunch of oohing and ahing from the girls, more like giggles. I turn my head a bit and see Charlie kneeling down behind me. He looks nervous, but I'm hoping he didn't get hurt and now can't stand back up. The history of hip and leg injuries we've had in our families is extensive.

Then he pulls out a ring and says, "Ava Marie Hooper, I have loved you for a long, long time. You're one of the best things that's happened to me, and you've helped me change my perspective on what living life should be like. I want to be with you for forever. Will you marry me?"

Squeals all around me cause my heart to beat hard enough it might pop out of my chest. Staring at the man I love, I can't help but let the tears fall. He's worked through my fears of being abandoned and has helped me find a safe space with him.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

He slides a simple ring on my finger and I can't help but grin. "This is beautiful."

He stands up and leans in to kiss me. "I wasn't sure what you would like, so I took Gran."

I laugh and say, "So that's why she was showing me all of her jewelry and having me

try it on!”

Charlie laughs. “I wanted this to be a surprise. Did it work?”

Grinning, I say, “Yes,” before leaning in to give him a kiss.

I lean back, surveying the group around us. The dozen girls on the team, their parents, Gran, Tina, Emily. They’re all there. An odd little family, but they’re all excited, cheering for us as we record this new milestone in our relationship. I couldn’t ask for a better moment than this.

The perfect ending to a love story started on the sidelines.

* * *