







# My Pucked Up Neighbor

**Author:** *Lily Doral*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She's my ex's little sister. Off-limits. Next door.

And one move away from being mine.

I've had my fill of puck bunnies and post-game mistakes.

The last thing I need is a distraction.

Then Mandy spins the bottle, and kisses me like she means it.

Sweet, innocent and mind-blowing.

She's all grown up with ambition, attitude, and killer curves.

But off-limits in every way...ex's orders.

She needs a quiet place to study for the bar exam.

So, I offer my spare room knowing damn well it's trouble.

It's supposed to be harmless.

It's not.

She wears tiny shorts. Steals my hoodies.

Tests every bit of control I've got.

Late nights turn into real talk and loaded looks.

And the second her lips touch mine again...

Game over.

She's the kind of good I never saw coming.

I'm the risk she can't afford.

And, if she wrecks me...

It'll be the hit I never recover from.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

## Chapter one

Nate

“Little Fields?”

The words slip out before I can stop them.

She turns, slow and sharp, one eyebrow already cocked. Her arms are full of a cardboard box and a canvas bag that’s halfway sliding off her shoulder, but she still manages to give me a look like I’ve just committed a felony.

“Don’t call me that.”

I lean against my apartment doorframe, take a sip from the coffee mug in my hand, and grin. “What? It’s a classic.”

“It’s outdated,” she says. “It’s Mandy.”

I hum, pretending to think. “Mandy Fields. Doesn’t have quite the same ring.”

“Yeah, well, neither does ‘Nate Jones: Professional Menace,’ but here we are.”

Okay. She's still got it.

Mandy Fields. Last time I saw her, she was sixteen, wearing a hoodie two sizes too big and muttering sarcastic commentary from the backseat of her sister’s car. Now

she's standing ten feet from my front door in leggings and a University of Michigan Law sweatshirt that's falling off one shoulder like it was designed to drive men insane.

She's not a kid anymore.

Definitely not.

Her hair's longer. Her stare's bolder. She looks like she walked straight out of a dream I didn't know I'd had, and moved in next door.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, because apparently my brain still hasn't caught up to the part where she's real and standing in my hallway.

"I live here," she says, like I'm the slow one. "Just moving in this morning."

Next door.

Mandy Fields...Allison's little sister. My ex's little shadow.

Now a full-grown problem in black leggings and chapstick.

"You're kidding."

"Nope." She shifts the box on her hip. "Apartment 1606. And you must be..."

"1604," I say, still stuck on the visual of her in my hallway. "So... you're seriously my new neighbor."

She gives me a look. "Guess I seriously am."

A second woman comes out of the apartment, shorter, brunette, balancing what looks like two giant coffee cups and a bag of cleaning supplies. She glances between us, then smirks.

“Kira,” Mandy says, tilting her head toward her. “My roommate. Kira, this is Nate. He dated my sister, Allison, back in high school.”

Kira eyes me. “Wait a second... are you Nate Jones? Defenseman for the Acers?”

I blink. “The one and only.”

Kira's eyes light up. "My family is obsessed with the Acers," she says. "My dad still talks about the trade that brought you over. Said you were a steal."

"Sounds like my kind of fan."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

Mandy groans. "This is going to inflate his ego for the entire season."

I glance back at her. "You sure you've got that box? I can grab it."

She shifts it slightly. "What, you think I can't carry a few books and a throw blanket?"

"Just trying to be a good neighbor, Little Fields."

"Mandy," she corrects again, but there's a smile tugging at her lips.

She walks past me toward her apartment, the curve of her mouth daring me to keep up.

I do.

"You went to law school?" I ask, matching her pace as we head down the hallway.

"Yup. Working and studying for the bar now."

"When is it?"

"July but there's a lot to know. And I work so I need months to prepare."

"Let me guess," I say, watching her adjust the box in her arms. "You're the overachiever type who's going to make the rest of us feel like slackers."

She scoffs. "If by 'overachiever' you mean I function like a normal adult while you

live on muscle memory and protein powder, then yes."

"Two very important things for a pro hockey player. Essential, really."

"Oh, and let me guess, protein powder and peanut butter straight from the jar count as dinner?"

"Gourmet, if you drizzle some honey on it."

She lifts an eyebrow. "I honestly thought you'd have evolved by now."

"I have," I say, feigning offense. "I'm practically enlightened. I buy vegetables and everything."

She snorts. "You say that like buying vegetables automatically puts you on a higher plane of existence."

"It does if you pair them with quinoa and smug self-satisfaction," I say, giving her a lopsided grin.

She laughs, an actual surprised laugh that hits me dead center. "Wow. Look at you. Self-aware and still full of it. I'm almost impressed."

"Stick around. I have layers. Like an onion. See? A vegetable."

She rolls her eyes but she's smiling as she pushes her door open. "We'll see about that, neighbor."

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Mandy Fields.



Not “Little Fields.” Not Allison’s bratty sister.

Mandy. Law school grad. Future lawyer. Currently my neighbor.

And she looks like trouble.

The kind of trouble that walks right into your life without warning, flashes a smile, and turns everything sideways without touching a damn thing.

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## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

The cold air slaps me across the face as I step out of the elevator into the garage. I dig my keys out of my pocket and hit the unlock button on my car. It beeps once, loud and sharp.

I climb in, toss my coffee in the cupholder, and sit for a second, hands on the wheel.

I've played through injuries. I've skated into fights with men twice my size. I've handled press conferences, hat tricks, and a five-game losing streak in one of the most brutal markets in the league.

But that girl?

That smirk?

Those eyes?

Nope. No strategy for that.

And now she lives next door.

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I pull out of the garage and head toward the arena, heart still thumping like I just took a puck to the ribs.

Because something about Mandy Fields is different.

And if I'm not careful, she's going to be the one thing this season I can't defend against.

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The Acers facility smells like sweat, tape, and overpriced cologne, and coffee. Burnt, arena-style coffee in a paper cup someone left on top of the skate dryer.

I walk into the team conference room just as Coach is setting down his clipboard. Right on time, but not late enough to dodge the incoming chirps.

"Well, well, look who decided to join us," James says, drumming a pen against the table. "What happened, high-rise Nate? Got stuck signing autographs for the neighbors?"

"He was probably admiring his own reflection," Ethan adds, spinning backward in his chair. "Guy's cheekbones are sharper than his slapshot."

"Careful," Mikey chimes in. "He'll flex and crack the projector screen."

I slide into my seat between Parker and Connor, deadpan. "You boys rehearse this, or is it all-natural talent?"

Parker chuckles, always the calm center of chaos. "They've been warming up since you were going to be the last to arrive."

"It's not my fault I live somewhere that requires an elevator and manners," I shoot back.

Connor smirks. "Manners, huh? Didn't peg you for the hold-the-door type."

“Only when it’s for a law student who can carry a box like she’s auditioning for a moving company,” I mutter before I can stop myself.

James pounces. “Law student? Whoa. Who’s this?”

“Someone,” I say.

“Oh, it’s definitely someone,” Ethan says, grinning. “And judging by the smile you’re trying to hide, she’s hot.”

Parker raises a brow. “Wait. This wouldn’t happen to be someone you’re actually talking about without flinching?”

I blink. “Seriously?”

“Which means,” James says, “she’s someone. And you’re already in too deep.”

Before I can dig myself out, Coach Stephens clears his throat. Conversation dies instantly. The room shifts from chirps to focused silence with one look from the man.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

“Alright, listen up,” he says, slapping his clipboard against the whiteboard. “Dallas is hungry. They’re coming off two losses and they’ll be skating pissed.”

He circles two names on the game sheet.

“We shut them down by playing smart on transitions and keeping the D tight. Jones, expect more minutes. You’re defending your zone with control and confidence.”

I nod, keeping it simple. “Yes, Coach.”

“We’ll run reps after this, then hit the ice at noon. No passengers. Got it?”

“Got it,” we echo.

Coach steps aside and Nina, our sports psychologist, stands next. She’s all business with calm eyes, tight ponytail, and a clipboard that could double as a shield.

“Quick reset strategy today,” she says. “I want everyone to grab a card.”

We each take one from the stack she passes around.

Mine says ‘Block’.

Fitting.

“Use it however you want,” she explains. “Mid-game, during a shift, when you feel things slipping. Mental reset is everything. We don’t wait for chaos. We get ahead of

it.”

I nod, slipping mine into my gear bag.

Nina’s eyes linger on me a second too long.

Yeah. She knows I’m preoccupied today. Not enough to call me out. But enough.

The meeting breaks. Guys file out, heading toward the locker room or grabbing snacks before the skate.

James tosses a towel at Mikey. “You still owe me twenty bucks from that beer pong disaster last weekend.”

“That was a setup. The cups were too close together.”

“You elbowed two into your own lap.”

Parker laughs. “You boys ever do anything quietly?”

“Not when there’s money and pride involved,” Ethan says.

Connor nudges me. “So, really, who’s the girl?”

I open my locker. “Just a neighbor.”

“Does your ‘neighbor’ know you stare like you’ve seen a ghost?”

“She’s... familiar. That’s all.”

James whistles. “Familiar like a hookup? Or familiar like ‘Oops, I went out with her

sister in high school’?”

"Not a hookup." Then my silence does the talking.

“Oh shit.” Ethan’s eyes go wide. “You dated her sister, for real?”

“Senior year,” I say flatly, pulling on my thermal layer.

Connor nearly chokes on his water. “This gets better by the second.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

James leans against the stall beside mine. “So what’s the issue? Too much baggage, still not over the sister or just worried she remembers your teenage haircut?”

“Okay,” I say, lacing up my skates. “You clowns done?”

“Not even close,” Ethan says. “But I gotta ask... is she single?”

“I have no idea. I literally just saw her in the hallway moving in.”

They quiet, just for a second. Then James grins.

"They're always single unless there's a ring on the finger. Dude, are you hot for her?"

I don't answer.

Because I am.

She's off-limits.

She's Allison's little sister.

She's studying for the bar, probably buried in flashcards and outlines and five-year plans.

She's also gorgeous. Sharp. Way too quick with comebacks.

And she smiled like she remembered exactly who I used to be... and didn't hold it



against me.

I shake my head as we head to the ice.

New team. New apartment. New season.

And now, a walking, talking complication lives ten feet from my front door.

Chapter two

Mandy

“Please don’t tell me this is your idea of unpacking.”

I look up from a pile of flashcards, surrounded by unopened boxes and three half-drunk energy drinks. Kira stands in the doorway to the kitchen with one hand on her hip and the other holding a roll of paper towels like she’s about to stage a full-blown intervention. Music pulses from the Bluetooth speaker on the counter. It’s some bouncy pop remix that makes it impossible to concentrate.

“Technically, I’m reviewing criminal law,” I say, flipping a card. “The chaos is background ambiance.”

Kira’s eyes narrow. “You’ve been in this apartment less than twelve hours and you’ve already buried yourself in bar prep. You know what that tells me?”

“That I’m dedicated?”

“That you need a break. And a drink. Maybe even a kiss from someone who isn’t a Supreme Court case.”

I groan and toss a flashcard into the air. “Is this about the party again?”

“It’s not a party,” she says, dramatically offended. “It’s a soft housewarming. And it's this Friday night. Think intimate. Casual. Barely a gathering. Some of my friends from work. Some of yours. And that hot guy next door.”

I freeze. My mouth is wide open.

Kira doesn’t miss it. “What?”

“You invited him?”

“Of course I invited him. He looks like a Greek god and smells like sin and soap. Plus, it’d be rude not to.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

I bury my face in my hands. “This is a terrible idea.”

“Why? I told him to bring a few of his player friends.

“No!” I say, way too quickly.

Kira smirks. “Still wild that your sister dated the hot neighbor.”

“I know. Trust me, I wish I didn’t remember every single detail.”

“You said they went to prom, right?”

“Prom and everything,” I mutter. “He was her boyfriend for like most of their senior year. He was at our dinner table multiple times.”

“That makes this even better!”

“No. That makes this the beginning of my personal ‘ick’ documentary.”

She shrugs. “Well, he should still come. And bring friends. We could use some Detroit Acers eye candy.”

I try to go back to my flashcards, but it’s no use. My brain’s stuck on that smirk, the curve of his jaw, the way his voice wrapped around “Little Fields” like it was a secret only he knew.

He looked good.

No, he looked unfair. Older. Broader. Confident in a way that no one should be before 10 a.m.

And now Kira has invited him into our living room.

He'll be there holding a red solo cup.

God help me.

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An hour later, while Kira's doing some kind of pre-party sparkle cleanse in the bathroom, I get a text.

ALLISON: Did you move in okay?

I stare at the screen.

I type: Yeah. The building is nice. Currently unpacking.

I don't type: Nate Jones lives next door.

Instead, I slide the phone facedown.

It's fine. Nothing's happening. We said maybe ten words. He probably forgot already.

Except he didn't look like he forgot.

And I definitely didn't.

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The first week in Detroit is a blur of caffeine, cardboard, and constitutional law.

Kira works late most nights, so I take over the kitchen table with textbooks and color-coded tabs. She FaceTimes dates while I wear noise-canceling headphones and highlight every third line out of spite. I work during the day as a law clerk at a law firm. In the evening, I rotate between the library and our apartment for study space, but nothing blocks out the noise like Nate's existence does.

Because I keep seeing him.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

The hallway. The gym. Once in the elevator, where he held the door and winked like he knew exactly what it did to my insides.

Each time, it's casual. Harmless.

But his voice slides under my skin like velvet and hockey tape. Today, I see him in the mailroom.

"I should've guessed you'd be the kind to color-code your mailbox," he says, leaning one shoulder against the mailroom wall, his arms crossed like he had all the time in the world.

I freeze mid-sort, one hand holding a bright pink envelope labeled "Study Materials" and the other clutching my tabbed legal pad like it was a shield.

"Organization is sexy," I reply, trying not to fumble the envelope or the sudden uptick in my heart rate.

He grins, all slow confidence and cocky charm. "So is chaos. Wanna compare methods sometime?"

I roll my eyes, but it isn't real. Not when my face is already warming. "Let me guess. Your system involves losing everything and blaming the universe?"

He steps closer. "Only the unimportant stuff. I never lose track of the things that matter."

My stomach flips.

“You always flirt in front of utility bills?” I ask, managing to drop a flyer for mattress cleaning and then immediately curse under my breath.

He crouches to pick it up and hands it back with a crooked smile. “Only when the company is this good.”

I try to laugh. I really do. But the way he looks at me? Like I am more than just Allison’s little sister? This is new and it’s dangerous.

I tuck the envelope under my arm and turn to leave, but not before glancing back. “Your mail’s hanging out of Box 204. That chaos you’re so proud of is showing.”

He winks. “Good thing I live next door to someone who thrives on order.”

I hit the elevator button and step inside, fully aware he follows a second later. The doors close with a soft ding, sealing us into a space that suddenly feels ten degrees warmer.

“You always this smooth in confined spaces?” I ask, arms crossed, trying to focus on the floor numbers lighting up.

“I save my best material for elevators,” he says, with a huge shit-eating grin on his face.

“I’m honored. Truly.”

He grins. “I mean, think about it. Limited escape routes, the perfect acoustics for witty banter, and zero distractions unless someone hits the emergency stop.”

“Do you flirt with all your neighbors like this or am I just lucky?”

“Only the ones who carry color-coded tabs and walk like they’ve already drafted closing arguments in their heads.”

“Guilty,” I say, refusing to smile. I’m already losing that battle.

We ride in silence for a moment, the next ten floors creeping slowly upward. He glances over at me.

“So... you and your roommate settled in yet?”

“Mostly. I hear that she's already invited you and your friends to our housewarming party. No game on Friday?”

“No game,” he says, smirking. “I’ll be there with two friends. Looking forward to it.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Just know we’re classing it up with solo cups and suspiciously enthusiastic playlists. You’ve been warned.”

He chuckles. “Sounds like a good time.”

The elevator dings for our floor. He waits for me to exit first. As we walk side by side toward our doors, he tilts his head.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

“For what it’s worth,” he says, voice quieter now but still cocky, “I think the folders are a front. You’ve definitely got trouble hidden somewhere in that highlighter collection. After all, you are a Fields.”

My hand pauses on the doorknob to my apartment. “And wouldn’t you like to know!”

He smiles a big smile. “Maybe I would.”

I should laugh it off.

But instead, I blush.

And I haven’t stopped thinking about his smile since.

Which is bad. Very bad.

Because Nate Jones is exactly the kind of man I’ve spent years avoiding.

He’s gorgeous, confident and a badass.

And he flirts like a fire alarm—fast, hot, and with enough intensity to short-circuit common sense.

I’ve got the bar exam in six months. My life is flashcards, outlines, and grinding until I make partner before thirty. That’s the plan.

Nate Jones is not part of the plan.

## Chapter three

Nate

“This feel like a co-ed dorm mixer to anyone else?” James asks, stepping into the elevator with a dramatic sigh. “I’m having college flashbacks.”

“Except now we have abs and dental insurance,” Ethan replies, flashing that cocky grin.

Mikey lifts a brow. “Speak for yourselves. I’ve got a cracked molar and two gym memberships I never use.”

James elbows me. “What exactly did you promise this girl to get us into a future-attorney shindig?”

I smirk. “Just told her I’d show up. Her roommate is a total party girl and apparently a big Acers fan. She invited me and the rest of you.”

“Sounds like she’s a risk taker,” Ethan mutters.

The elevator dings and the doors slide open.

Kira answers the door with a drink in one hand and confidence in both shoulders.

“Well, well. Hockey royalty arrives,” she says with a wink. “You must be the starting lineup.”

“Only the charming half,” James says, sliding past her with a smirk.

“I’m the cute one,” Mikey adds.

Ethan raises a brow. “And I’m just here for the snacks.”

Kira’s grin widens. “This way, gentlemen. Try not to ruin the vibe.”

The apartment’s more crowded than I expected, maybe twenty people, scattered in small groups with drinks and paper plates. There’s music playing, something retro-pop with a beat that makes your shoulders move whether you mean to or not.

I scan the room and find her.

Mandy.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

Hair down. Minimal makeup. A dark green tank top tucked into high-waisted jeans. She's laughing at something her friend is saying, fingers curled around a red solo cup, eyes bright.

She looks comfortable. Confident. Beautiful.

And then she spots me.

The laugh fades into something softer, more curious. Her lips curve. She lifts her brows like she's daring me to say something smart.

I walk toward her.

"Hey, Little Fields," I say.

"Jones," she replies. "You brought backup."

"Didn't want you thinking I crash parties solo."

She motions toward two women standing beside her. "These are my friends from law school, Lexi and Priya."

"Nice to meet you," I say, offering a hand.

Lexi smirks. "So... how do you two know each other?"

"I dated her sister in high school," I say easily.

Mandy deadpans, “And now he lives ten feet from my front door. God help us.”

Lexi chokes on her drink. Priya’s eyes go wide. “Ohhh. This is that guy.”

Mandy shrugs. “Yep. That guy.”

I grin. “Nice to know I’ve been promoted from ‘what’s his name’ to ‘that guy.’”

“We’re big on titles,” Mandy says, sipping her drink. “Keeps the chaos manageable.”

Ethan swings by with a paper plate piled with pizza. “You hiding the good stuff in the kitchen, or is this it?”

“Depends,” Mandy says, tilting her head. “What are you looking for?”

“Alcohol. Gossip. Maybe a life lesson or two.”

Kira reappears and tosses him a bottle of hard cider. “Start with that. Then we’ll talk.”

Ethan raises the bottle. “You’re my new favorite person.”

“You’ll say that to everyone by the end of the night,” she calls back.

The energy is easy, loose, like the warm-up before a game. I drift beside Mandy, our shoulders almost brushing.

“Nice party,” I say.

She glances sideways. “Not too chaotic for you?”

“Not enough solo cups stacked into pyramids. But I’m managing.”

She smiles, soft but sly. “Give it time.”

James strolls over, balancing a plate stacked high with tortilla chips and a plastic cup overflowing with salsa. “This party’s missing one thing,” he says. “Chili cheese dip. But I’m willing to forgive that if someone points me to a karaoke mic.”

Priya laughs. “There’s no mic, but if you’re brave enough, I’m sure the windows will amplify your voice nicely.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

“That sounds like a threat,” James says, eyeing her with mock suspicion.

“It’s encouragement,” Kira chimes in, stepping closer, a new drink in hand and a glint in her eyes. “I fully support Acers karaoke if shirts start coming off.”

Mikey, arriving just in time, coughs into his drink. “You had me at ‘shirts.’”

Kira turns to him. “And you’re the cute one, right?”

Mikey nods solemnly. “It’s a burden, but I carry it with grace.”

Ethan laughs and raises his bottle in salute. “Don’t encourage them, Kira. They’ll never leave.”

“I haven’t decided if that’s a good or bad thing yet,” she replies, giving Ethan a once-over.

James grins. “If it helps, we clean up well and bring our own snacks.”

“You also bring chaos,” Mandy adds, arching a brow.

“You love it,” I say, bumping her shoulder gently.

“Undecided,” she says, but she’s smiling.

Lexi nudges Priya. “I feel like we just stepped into a live version of a sports rom-com.”

Kira tosses her hair and points to the group. “And I’m clearly the scene-stealing best friend.”

“Careful,” Mandy says, sipping her drink. “You’re going to give them ideas.”

James winks. “Too late. I’m already working on our team name.”

Kira raises an eyebrow at Mikey. “So, cute one... do you have an actual name or should I just keep calling you that all night?”

Mikey grins. “Depends. If I tell you, will you still flirt with me?”

“No promises,” she says, sipping her drink. “I like a little mystery.”

“Mikey,” he says, leaning closer like it’s a secret. “But I answer to ‘cute one’ if you say it the right way.”

Ethan groans. “You’re giving her material for days.”

“Oh, please,” Kira says. “I’ve been waiting for a lineup like this since I moved in. Three hockey players, one of which is my neighbor, walk into my living room. It’s practically a fantasy.”

Priya laughs. “You should sell tickets.”

James points at Ethan. “This one’s the show-off. Catches shirts, hearts, and penalties.”

Ethan shrugs. “Not wrong.”

Kira turns to Mandy. “You weren’t going to tell me the view was this good?”



Mandy deadpans. “I was trying to protect you. Clearly, I failed.”

I watch the exchange with a smirk, heart thudding in that strange, restless way it does before something fun, or dangerous happens.

Yeah, this night is just getting started.

Kira turns that mischievous grin toward me now. “And what about you, Nate? You always this quiet when you're not on the ice, or are you just playing the broody, mysterious type tonight?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Depends. Is it working?”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

She fake-thinks. “Eh. You might need to brood harder. Maybe lean against a wall, look tortured by your own good looks.”

Mandy snorts into her drink. “Please don’t encourage him. He already thinks he’s a walking hockey romance novel.”

“I mean...” Ethan starts, but I cut him off with a sharp look.

“Don’t finish that sentence,” I warn.

Kira's laugh bubbles over. “I knew you had a personality under all that defenseman energy.”

“Wait, wait,” James cuts in. “Define ‘defenseman energy.’”

Kira points her finger like it’s a weapon. “Stoic. Low tolerance for nonsense. Probably thinks a date night is watching tape and sharing protein bars.”

Mandy grins. “In his defense, pun intended, he’s only part robot.”

“I have layers,” I say. “Like an irresistibly charming parfait. Sweet, tempting, and best served cold.”

“Oh,” Kira says dramatically, “youarea hockey romance novel.”

Mandy shakes her head with mock regret. “And to think, I just wanted a quiet place to study. Now I’ve got abs, sarcasm, and hockey boys on demand.”

“Sounds like you hit the neighbor jackpot,” I say.

“Questionable,” she fires back, but her smile says otherwise.

Kira lifts her cup. “To dangerous proximity and highly flammable tension.”

Mikey clinks his drink to hers. “And to being the cute one. Officially.”

Kira claps her hands. “Alright, alright, gather round everyone. I’ve decided it’s time for a game.”

Ethan raises a brow. “What are we playing, Truth or Tequila?”

“Nope,” she grins. “Spin the Bottle. 2020s style. One spin, one kiss. No dares, no drama. Just fun.”

James groans. “We’re not seventeen, Kira.”

“Exactly. We’re adults with better technique and stronger alcohol.”

Mandy snorts. “This can only end badly.”

“Perfect,” Kira cheers, already placing a half-empty bottle in the center of the rug. “Form a circle, people. Let’s get mildly inappropriate.”

Mikey plops down immediately. “This is the best night of my life.”

I hesitate. “I’m too old for this.”

James nudges me toward the floor. “Relax. It’s for charity.”

“What charity?”

“The one where I get to watch you awkwardly kiss a stranger while holding back laughter.”

I roll my eyes, but sit. The circle forms fast. Kira spins first and lands on a guy named Matt from Mandy’s study group. She plants a theatrical kiss on his cheek, curtsies like a Disney villain, and spins again just to show off.

The bottle makes its way around. James spins and lands on Priya, who leans in like a queen granting a kiss to her court. James gives a dramatic bow, kisses her quickly, and then collapses backward like he's been emotionally wrecked.

“Yup,” he says. “That’s it. I’m retiring on a high note.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

“Sit down,” Priya laughs. “That kiss barely counted.”

“You wound me.”

Next up is Mikey, who spins and lands on a woman named Tanya, one of Kira’s work friends. She’s already laughing before he even leans in.

“You sure about this?” Mikey says, hand hovering over his chest. “It’s a lot of pressure being the cute one.”

Tanya grins. “I’ll try not to swoon.”

The kiss is light and goofy, and when they break apart, Kira shouts, “Okay, Tanya, now rate the experience!”

“Eight out of ten. Deducted points for the pre-kiss monologue.”

Mikey clutches his heart. “Brutal. But fair.”

Then it’s Ethan’s turn.

He spins. The bottle wobbles... slows... stops on Mikey.

The room goes silent. Then explodes in laughter.

Ethan leans away from the bottle like it betrayed him. “No friggin’ way.”

Mikey is already puckering dramatically. “C’mon, Ethan. For the fans.”

Ethan groans. “I’m spinning again. Sorry, bud. I don’t kiss teammates.”

James: “Now that’s some real locker room loyalty.”

Ethan spins again. This time, it lands on Kira.

The whole room erupts into another round of cheers and catcalls.

Kira raises her cup in mock solemnity. “I accept this fate with the gravity it deserves.”

Ethan smirks. “You sure you’re ready for this?”

“I was born ready.”

The kiss is surprisingly sweet, but Kira throws a wink over her shoulder mid-kiss, just to make the entire room groan.

Mandy, beside me, mutters, “She lives for moments like this.”

And I’m suddenly very aware that I now live ten feet from both of them.

Then it’s my turn.

I sigh, reach for the bottle, and give it a smooth, practiced spin.

It slows.

Stops.

Lands on Mandy.

The entire room exhales in one collective gasp. A chorus of "oooohhhhh" swells like a wave.

Mandy looks right at me, blinking once, then letting out a breathy laugh. "Of course it would."

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

I give her a smirk. “Guess we’re doing this.”

She nods, not backing down. “Try not to look so smug.”

“I make no promises.”

We lean in. The room falls totally silent. A record scratch might’ve felt less dramatic.

I go for a quick kiss. But the second our lips touch...

She lingers.

Just a second longer than needed.

But that second feels like stepping off a ledge and realizing you never wanted to hit the ground.

The kiss is soft, unexpected, and just enough to short-circuit logic.

When we part, no one speaks for a moment.

Then James claps slowly. “That was not a spin-the-bottle kiss. That was a ‘we’re writing fanfic about this later’ kiss.”

Mandy shakes her head with a flustered grin. “Shut up, James.”

Kira fans herself. “I need ice.”



I laugh under my breath, but my pulse is racing.

Because that wasn't just a kiss.

That was something else.

The game goes on. People spin, people kiss, people laugh.

But Mandy disappears into the kitchen. I wait a minute, then follow.

She's standing by the sink, refilling her drink, her hand resting on the counter like she's bracing for an earthquake.

"Hey," I say.

She turns. "Hey."

"That was a hell of a welcome to the neighborhood."

She lifts a brow. "Pretty sure that's not in the lease."

"No, but I'd definitely pay extra for that kind of greeting."

She snorts, shaking her head. "You're ridiculous."

"Ridiculously charming, though."

Her lips twitch. "You keep telling yourself that."

There's a pause.

Mandy grins and turns toward the sound. “Better get back before she starts assigning us karaoke duets.”

We walk out together. She rejoins her friends. Mikey cracks a joke. Mandy laughs bright, effortless.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

Kira claps her hands again. “Alright! Last round, people. Make it count.”

James grabs the bottle dramatically and gives it a theatrical spin. “If I land on Mikey, we’re fighting.”

The bottle slows... and lands on Mandy.

James throws his arms in the air. “The universe has spoken!”

Mandy rolls her eyes but plays along, standing as he does a goofy strut across the circle toward her.

“I shall cherish this moment forever,” James says solemnly.

“Just don’t write poetry about it,” she mutters.

He plants a quick kiss on her lips and then clutches his chest. “Tragic. She’ll never love me back.”

Everyone laughs.

Everyone but me.

I know it’s a game. I know James is all talk. But there’s a beat in my chest that ticks harder than it should when I watch him kiss her, even jokingly.

Mandy glances back at me as she returns to her seat, and for a second, I think maybe

she felt that beat too.

And I just watch her, thinking about our "spin the bottle" kiss.

That kiss wasn't just a kiss.

I can still feel the echo of it, like the taste of adrenaline after a fight.

She's Allison's little sister. She's off-limits. So why do I already want another "spin"?

Chapter four

Mandy

I wake up with the distinct feeling of being kissed.

Not a dream.

Not a fantasy.

A memory.

And it's not just any memory. It's Nate's lips, warm and solid against mine, the soft heat of his hand brushing my hip as our friends collectively held their breath like we were the finale of some teenage drama series.

I groan into my pillow.

It was just a game. Just spin the bottle.

Okay... maybe notjusta game.

And fine. The kiss wasn'tjusta kiss.

It was... unexpected.

It was steady and real and slow enough to burn through me like an exposed wire.

But it was also public. Silly. And something that absolutely cannot mean anything.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

Except for the part where I haven't stopped replaying it in my head since it happened.

I roll over and squint at the ceiling. Morning light filters through the curtains in soft golden streaks. Somewhere in the living room, the tail end of a party playlist is still playing at low volume. Probably Kira's doing. That girl could sleep through a hurricane and leave a speaker on at volume six like it's white noise.

I sit up and stretch. I've got flashcards, outlines, and a criminal law brief waiting for me. The bar exam doesn't care about my flustered hormones or my very confusing neighbor.

But before I can even reach for my textbook, Kira groans from her room.

A door creaks open. "Mandy?"

I sigh. "In here."

She shuffles in with last night's eyeliner smudged into smoky chaos and a fuzzy blanket wrapped around her like a bathrobe cape. "I feel like I got hit by a tequila truck."

"Serves you right," I mutter. "Who decided spin the bottle was a good idea?"

She flops onto my bed. "Me. You're welcome."

"I was being sarcastic."

“You still got kissed by the hottest guy in the building.”

I stiffen. “It was a game.”

“That kiss had main character energy,” she says, pulling the blanket up to her nose. “Like, I’m sorry, but even my hangover paused to be impressed.”

I roll my eyes, but my cheeks heat anyway. “It was nothing.”

“Sure. That’s why you’re staring at the ceiling like it has answers.”

I throw a pillow at her.

“And don’t think I didn’t notice the real reason you wanted to play spin the bottle,” I tease. “Trying to guarantee a kiss with one of Detroit’s finest?”

Kira grins without shame. “Please. It was a public service. I gave the people what they wanted.”

“And by people, you mean yourself?”

“Exactly. And FYI, Ethan tastes like spearmint and sin. I have zero regrets. I kissed a Detroit Acer, Mandy. What are the chances of that? I peaked.”

She nudges me. “So? How’d it feel kissing NateandJames? You got the deluxe package.”

I scoff. “James was dramatic, Nate was... Nate.”

Kira grins like a cat with a secret. “But Nate’s the one that got to you, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “It was a kiss. One kiss. For a game.”

“You keep saying that like your face didn’t go all ‘soft smile emoji’ every time he looked your way.”

I pause. “You realize my sister’s gonna go full FBI if she finds out, right?”

“Oh yeah. She’ll pop up like a soap opera villain. ‘Howdareyou make out with my ex!’”

I laugh despite myself. “I wasn’t making out. It was a simple kiss. Spin the bottle.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Little Fields.”

“Don’t you start calling me that.”



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

“Too late.”

I finally get her out of my room and drag myself into leggings, sneakers, and a hoodie. If I can’t shake this hangover with caffeine, I’m going to sweat it out instead.

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The apartment gym is quiet when I walk in.

And of course... Nate’s there.

Shirtless. Sweaty. Headphones in. Muscles doing entirely too much while he works a punching bag like it personally offended him.

I try to backtrack quietly.

Too late.

He sees me, pulls out one headphone, and grins. “Didn’t expect to see you voluntarily sweating this morning.”

“Didn’t expect to be awake, period,” I shoot back.

“It’s the weekend. You could have slept in.”

“Speak for yourself. You don’t have bar prep hell to face.”

He tosses me a towel from the bench. I catch it instinctively. It smells like laundry and cedar... and trouble.

“Use that,” he says. “Before you short-circuit the treadmill.”

I raise a brow. “That your way of saying I look like crap?”

“No,” he says. “That’s my way of saying you look flushed. Could be from the kiss. Could be from the hoodie. Could be from the company.”

I narrow my eyes. “You done?”

He shrugs. “For now.”

We both head toward the free weights. I do a half-hearted round of light reps just to seem normal.

“Hey,” he says after a beat. “That spin-the-bottle thing...”

I keep my eyes on the dumbbell in my hand. “You mean besides the fact that you kissed me in front of your teammates?”

He smirks. “I’m pretty sure you kissed me back.”

I don’t dignify that with a response. Mostly because he’s not wrong.

“So what does that mean?” I ask before I can stop myself. “That’s how spin-the-bottle works. Two people kiss.”

He shrugs again, wipes sweat from his chest with the towel. “Means maybe it wasn’t just me. You seemed... pretty into it, too.”

I raise an eyebrow and tilt my head. “Doesn’t mean I wrote your name in my diary.”

He smirks. “If my name’s going in the diary, I just hope it’s in pen...and underlined.”

I shake my head, unable to hide the grin forming at my lips. Thankfully the treadmill is on the other side of the room and I head over to walk for the next thirty minutes.

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As we head for the exit, he holds the door open.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

“Hey Mandy, if you and Kira ever want to come to a game, let me know. I can get tickets anytime.”

I pause. “Is this a neighborly gesture, or are you trying to recruit fans?”

He smirks. “Both. I like a loud cheering section.”

“Good to know. And yes, we'd love tickets. You know Kira is a big hockey fan.”

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Back in my apartment, I toss my hoodie on the couch and sit down with my flashcards.

Except I don't study.

I stare at the table.

And think about him.

His voice. His smirk. The way his arms flexed while he hit that punching bag. That kiss.

What is happening?

He's off-limits. He's Allison's ex.

But now I kind of want to see him in full gear, crashing someone into the boards.

Kira walks in with a glass of juice and a knowing look.

“You gonna stare at that textbook or call your sister and warn her you’re about to steal her ex?”

I throw a flashcard at her.

She ducks and grins. “I’ll take that as a maybe.”

I smirk. “By the way, I just saw Nate at the gym. He said he can get us tickets to any Acers game we want.”

Kira freezes mid-sip. “Shut up.”

“I’m serious.”

She lets out a high-pitched squeal and throws her hands in the air. “Mandy! You should’ve led with that! This is officially the best day of my life.”

“I figured you’d react like that.”

She bounces on her toes. “We’re going. I don’t care what night of the week it is! If I have to work, I’ll find coverage, call in sick, fake the flu, whatever. I’m going to an Acers game.”

I laugh. “He said we could go whenever. Just let him know.”

Kira clutches her juice like it’s champagne. “I’m bringing my dad. My whole family. We’re a hockey household. My dad still wears his old Acers jersey to mow the lawn.

This is going to blow his mind.”

“Should I tell Nate to add six tickets to the list?”

“Make it eight. We’ll bring snacks.”

I laugh. “Let’s just start with two for now, just you and me. Maybe after that, I’ll ask for more.”

Kira’s eyes sparkle. “Oh, it’s happening. Maybe I’ll bring my dad next time. My mom would freak out too. Our whole house is basically decorated in Acers memorabilia.”

She winks at me and continues. “And speaking of game invites, how did it feel watching your sister’s ex offer you premium tickets while shirtless?”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

I groan. “You’re insufferable.”

“Admit it, Little Fields. He may actually like you like you.”

I wrinkle my nose. “That’s ridiculous. Why would you say that?”

Kira grins like she’s just been handed gossip gold. “Because he gave you the look. You know, that look. The one guys give in rom-coms right before they confess their undying love or ruin your life. You’re practically halfway to stealing your sister’s boyfriend. You just need a matching jersey now.”

I shake my head, heart pounding.

I’m not about to steal anything.

I’m just curious.

And mildly distracted.

And maybe, possibly, in a little bit of trouble.

Chapter five

Nate

The second I step into the Acers facility, I know I’m not going to make it to my locker in peace.

“Look who finally decided to show up!” James calls across the room, grinning like he’s been waiting all morning to pounce.

“Good afternoon, lover boy,” Ethan adds, tossing a rolled-up towel at my chest. “How’s the party scene in Unit 1606?”

Mikey peeks around his stall. “You bring any leftover pizza or just romantic tension?”

I sigh and set my bag down. “You guys really need hobbies.”

Connor, already halfway into his pads, raises an eyebrow. “What’d I miss?”

“Nate, Ethan, Mikey, and I all hit up Nate's new neighbors' party last night,” James says, wiggling his eyebrows. “Spin the bottle was involved. So was scandal.”

Connor blinks. “Wait. Spin the bottle? Like... seventh-grade energy?”

“Yup,” Ethan says. “Only with adults and tequila.”

Alex, quiet in the corner, finally chimes in. “Did you win?”

I look at him. “I don’t think there was a winning option.”

James scoffs. “That kiss said otherwise.”

Parker walks in with a protein shake in one hand and Bessie’s latest drawing of a unicorn in the other. “Wait, wait...who kissed who?”

“Mandy,” Mikey supplies helpfully. “New neighbor. Law school. Also his ex’s little sister.”



Parker nearly chokes. “You kissed your ex’s sister at the party? That’s the familiar ‘someone’ you saw moving in? Keeping it in the family, huh?”

“Smartass,” I mutter. “It was a game.”

James: “Again that left the room silent for ten full seconds.”

Ethan: “And then Kira screaming, ‘I need ice!’”

Connor’s laughing now. “You’ve been here how long? Six months? And you’re already a legend in the building.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

Dillon leans over. “Do we need to get her a jersey?”

I roll my eyes. “Nothing happened.”

“That’s not what your face said afterward,” Mikey comments. “You looked like someone just rewrote your entire playbook.”

James nods. “I’ve seen you take slapshots with less intensity than that kiss.”

I open my mouth to reply, but Coach Stephens walks in. Saved by the coach.

Coach barks. “Focus up. Big game tonight. Let’s get on the ice and warm up.”

The teasing dies instantly. Sticks hit the floor. Laces tighten. Everyone locks in.

We hit the ice hard for practice with tight drills, high tempo. I’m paired with Dillon for the first rep. He’s fast, scrappy, and annoyingly chipper before noon.

“Still thinking about your neighbor?” he teases as we circle the cones.

“Still thinking about leaving you behind on this breakout,” I mutter.

Coach blows the whistle. “Faster transitions, let’s go!”

We run neutral zone reps and cycle coverage. I dial it in, pushing a little harder, skating a little tighter.

I catch Nina sitting on the bench with her notebook, watching like always.

After a round of corner battles, she waves me over as I grab water.

“Your stride’s tight,” she says, not looking up. “You okay? You look a little off like your timing’s lagging half a second.”

“I’m good. Just locking in.”

She finally meets my eyes. “Stay focused and breathe.”

I nod and head back to the line, but my pulse is still somewhere between her advice and last night’s kiss.

Because something about that moment with Mandy...short, public, and completely unexpected...is still humming just under my skin.

And it’s not going away.

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I bounce on the balls of my feet, shifting my stick from one hand to the other as the announcer’s voice echoes above us.

“Acers fans... it’s game night!”

Connor’s tapping his gloves like a drumbeat against his thighs. Parker stretches one leg out and rolls his neck. James smacks Ethan’s helmet just because.

“Let’s light it up,” I mutter under my breath.

We step into the roar. Lights flashing. Crowd on their feet. I scan the boards during warm-ups and...there she is.

Mandy. Up in the lower bowl, just off-center ice. Her dark hair's pulled back, and she's holding a drink and food in her hands. Kira's next to her, already cheering like it's the playoffs.

They're here.

Shit. Focus, man.

The puck drops hard in the first period. I crash into the game with energy, pinching the boards and throwing my weight into every check. Defense is tight. Puck movement's sharp.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

Dallas plays heavy, physical hockey. First ten minutes, I'm digging pucks out from the wall and slamming into their forwards like they insulted my mother.

"Stay wide!" I shout at Ethan as we rotate.

We strike first. James forces a turnover at the blue line, Parker picks it up and threads a slick pass to Connor flying down the wing. He dekes once, freezes the goalie, and backhands it five-hole. The place goes nuts.

But late in the first, Dallas buries a greasy one. It's a rebound off the pad, scrambled in front, and their center taps it past Alex before we can clear the crease. The crowd boos. Coach curses. We tighten up.

We're still tied in the second period. The puck gets loose on a rebound at the other end and James snipes it top shelf. Bar down, crowd explodes.

He skates past our bench and points right at me. "That one's for the law girl!"

The whole line erupts in laughter.

Coach is already growling. "Shut it down and reset!"

We do.

Midway through the period, though, Ethan takes a foolish penalty. Two-hander to the stick. Obvious. Loud.

He slinks into the box like a kid caught sneaking out.

James leans forward on the bench. “You play any dirtier, they’re going to name a penalty after you.”

Ethan flips his glove off dramatically. “I call it emotional forechecking.”

Mikey adds, “I call it dumb as hell.”

Ethan retorts, “Says the guy who got a delay of game for tossing a puck to a fan and missed the net.”

Mikey shrugs. “The fan ducked. That’s not on me.”

The third period rolls in with an Acer's one-goal lead. Dallas is hungry, buzzing the slot.

I take a high slapshot off the shoulder blocking a drive. It stings like hell, but I grit my teeth and skate through it.

Final two minutes, they pull their goalie.

We clear the puck deep into their zone to relieve pressure, standard play when they’ve pulled their goalie. But they regroup fast, setting up in our end with clean passes. They cycle the puck around the perimeter, forcing us to chase. My legs burn as I pivot and track, sticking to my coverage like glue.

Ten seconds. Their winger winds up at the blue line and rips a shot that’s clean, fast, and high. I step into the shooting lane, absorb it square in the shoulder with a grunt, pain lancing down my arm. The puck deflects off me and drops loose in the slot.

“Clear it!” I bark, voice ragged.

Ethan swoops in, snags the puck, and rifles it down the ice.

“Clear, clear, clear!” he yells like a war cry, grinning through the cage as he skates past the bench.

Final buzzer.

Acers win.

The arena erupts. Gloves fly. Sticks slam the ice.

I glance toward the stands again.

She’s on her feet, hands clapping, a smile stretching across her face.

And even through the glass, the noise, and the sweat, I feel it.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:28 am*

Something new.

Something I didn't know I was skating straight into.

And it's wearing a Detroit hoodie and the most dangerous smile I've seen in a long time.

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The locker room explodes like a champagne cork.

Music blares. Towels snap. Someone's already sprayed half a water bottle across the ceiling.

James spins in a circle with his arms wide. "That's how you send a message!"

Parker tosses a roll of tape at him. "That celebration was embarrassing. You looked like you were summoning pigeons."

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, Dad."

Ethan's peeling off his pads and drops into his stall like a movie star exiting stage left. "I'd like to thank the academy and also Nate's shoulder, for taking that slapshot like a champ."

I grunt and rotate my arm. It aches, but in a satisfying, earned-it kind of way.



“You good?” Mikey asks.

“Still standing,” I reply.

Connor slaps my back. “Hell of a block, man. You dropped like a brick wall.”

James winks. “Yeah, well, the real highlight was Mandy cheering him on like he just proposed mid-game.”

I shake my head, grabbing a towel. “You’re impossible.”

“Just observant.”

He tosses me a protein bar like it’s a mic drop. “Tell her I’m available if you blow it.”

I smirk. “You couldn’t handle her brain for five seconds.”

“Oof,” Mikey winces. “Straight to the IQ burn. Love to see it.”

Ethan leans forward. “So you are into her.”

I pause just long enough.

“I didn’t say that.”

(Which, of course, means I totally did.)

The guys erupt like middle schoolers who just heard a dirty word.

“HE LIKES HER,” James sings at full volume.

Parker laughs so hard he almost knocks over his water.

Ethan says, “Come on, we all saw her. Law girl was giving major eyes.”

“Kira was cool too. She called me 'the cute one'. Smart girl.” Mikey chimes in. "But, Ethan, she had you marked like a shot chart.”

Ethan grins. “She said I tasted like spearmint and sin. Her words.”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

James fake gags. "Please. I just ate a snack."

Connor points with his Gatorade. "I'm sorry, did you say tasted?"

"Spin the bottle," Ethan says smugly.

"Oh, right," Dillon adds. "The 'innocent' party that somehow included you making out with the neighbor's roommate."

"She spun. I followed the rules."

Parker shakes his head. "This team has no off switch."

Connor smirks and turns to James. "Speaking of off switch, what's going on with your love life, Casanova?"

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you. Last week it was the yoga instructor. Week before that, wasn't there a pastry chef?"

James shrugs like he's giving a press conference. "All in the name of research. I like carbs and flexibility."

Connor groans. "You're the reason our team HR exists."

"I am team HR," James fires back. "Hot and Reckless, baby. HR at your service."

I snort. “More like Hopeless and Ridiculous.”

The guys lose it, towels flying, someone pounding the bench like it’s overtime.

Coach blows his whistle, but there’s a hint of amusement in his eyes.

“Good team win,” he says. “Enjoy it. Recover fast. We go again Tuesday.”

“Will do, Coach,” someone says.

I finish unlacing my skates, leaning back against the cool wall.

We won. I did my job. We held the line.

But the truth is, I spent most of the game glancing toward the stands.

Watching her.

That smile. That laugh. That spark.

I told myself this season was about proving myself on the ice.

But tonight, she was the only thing I wanted to win.

Chapter six

Mandy

Kira is still buzzing from the game as we walk into our apartment, her voice two octaves higher than normal.

“Can we just take a second to appreciate how cool that was?” she says, kicking off her boots and spinning in a little victory dance. “Like we got actual tickets. From actual players.”

I smile, hanging up my coat. “I know. It felt kind of unreal.”

She drops onto the couch dramatically. “Unreal? Mandy, we were practically VIP. The usher even smiled like he knew we were special. We got the good seats, saw them up close, and now I kind of know which one I’d let ruin my credit score.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

“You already picked?”

“I’m narrowing it down. Ethan’s a frontrunner. But James has that chaotic good energy I respect. And let’s not even start on Mikey; the dude winked at me during warm-ups.”

I laugh, sitting beside her. “It was fun. Not just the guys, the whole thing. The crowd. The energy. It was addictive.”

Kira nods enthusiastically. “Same. And the fact that we know them now? Like, that’s wild. Who are we, right?”

“Two girls who may be in over our heads.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m diving in headfirst.”

“And, girl,” she continues, flopping onto the couch like she just ran the rink herself, “you didn’t watch the game, you watched the guy.”

“I watched the game,” I lie, setting my purse down and heading for the kitchen.

She’s already pulling up clips on her phone. “Oh, really? Because the way you leaned forward every time number twenty-three hit the ice suggests otherwise.”

I try not to smile. “It was an exciting game.”

“Sure was. Especially when number twenty-three blocked that slapshot like a human

wall. Pretty sure half the arena gasped. You included.”

“Kira.”

“What?” she says, grinning. “I’m just saying, if I had that kind of man candy next door interested in me, I’d be doing more than borrowing sugar.”

I grab two glasses of water and hand her one. “You’re insane.”

“I’m honest. And don’t act like you weren’t mentally writing your vows in the third period.”

I shake my head and sip my water. The truth is, watching Nate on the ice tonight did something to me. The way he moved was controlled but explosive, aggressive but clean. It made it hard to look away.

Not to mention the moment he spotted me in the crowd.

Just a glance. Just a flick of recognition.

But it hit like a puck to the chest.

I lean against the kitchen counter, watching Kira scroll her phone with a goofy grin like she’s still at the game.

“You know,” I say casually, “for all that teasing, you were watching someone pretty closely yourself tonight.”

She gasps, looking up like I just accused her of a federal crime. “Excuse me?”

“Ethan,” I say, pointing my finger. “You were watching Ethan like he was your final

exam and you forgot to study.”

She clutches her chest. “I was watching the game. The beautiful, fast-paced, high-stakes game.”

“Uh-huh. You mean the part where Ethan got a penalty and you said, and I quote, ‘I’d still let him check me into the boards’?”

Kira doesn’t even blink. “I stand by that. That man could commit a minor infraction on me any day of the week.”

I laugh so hard I almost spill my water.

“And don’t act like I didn’t see you clocking the rest of the roster,” I say.

“I mean, can you blame me?” she says, raising her brows. “We were surrounded by more abs, jawlines, and smirks in one place, than I’ve seen in my entire adult life.”

“You’re incorrigible.”



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

“I’m awake. And breathing. And very much an Acers fan.”

She fans herself dramatically.

Eventually, we call it a night. Kira disappears into her room with a snack and a Bluetooth speaker that’s already playing something upbeat. I double-check the lock, turn off the lights, and retreat to my bedroom, still humming with the energy of the game.

I slip into my pajamas and pull the covers up to my chest, but sleep doesn’t come easy. The image of Nate on the ice focused, fierce, and fast, won’t leave my head. And the way he looked at me in the stands? It wasn’t casual. It wasn’t nothing.

I close my eyes and sigh, and force myself to go to sleep.

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The next day, I’m halfway through a brutal practice essay when there’s a knock on the door. It’s midafternoon, and I expect it to be a package or Kira forgetting her keys again.

But it’s Nate.

He’s in jeans and a dark long-sleeve shirt that somehow looks custom tailored despite being casual. His hair’s still damp like he just showered post-practice, and he holds up a tiny plastic bag with foam earplugs inside.

“Neighborly supply drop,” he says, with that crooked smile. “Heard your roommate’s pregame hype music yesterday through the walls. Figured you could use reinforcements.”

I blink, surprised. “You came to deliver earplugs?”

“And check if you made it through the post-game hangover.”

I laugh. “I wasn’t hungover.”

He tilts his head. “Did you at least enjoy the game?”

“It was great. Intense. Loud. Fast-paced. Kira was salivating over your entire roster, by the way.”

He chuckles. “She’s got taste.”

“I had to remind her we were at a hockey game, not a Chippendale show.”

“Well, tell her she’s always welcome back. She probably had more fun than some of the season ticket holders.”

I shake my head, grinning. “That’s for sure!”

He leans casually against the doorframe. “And for the record, I did see you in the crowd. You looked like you were having a good time. Cheering hard.”

I shrug. “I mean, I did what I could.”

“It was much appreciated.” He glances down the hallway, then back. “Well, if you need silence to survive studying, those should help.”

I take the bag from him, our fingers brushing. “Thanks. They’ll go right next to the caffeine stash.”

Nate hesitates like he’s about to say more.

“You played well,” I add before he can speak.

His eyes meet mine. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You looked sharp and made some really great plays.”

A pause, and then that smile again. “Was trying to impress someone.”

I smirk. “Please don’t say Kira.”

“Only if she comes with a huge fan crowd,” he says jokingly. Then after a beat, he adds more quietly, “Though between us, some people are harder to impress, and a lot more fun to try.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

We both laugh and I blush.

“You know,” I say, softening looking at the earplugs, “this is weirdly thoughtful.”

He leans in slightly. “What can I say? I’m a man of mystery. And excellent hearing.”

I shake my head. “Well, mystery man, thanks again.”

He nods once, then takes a step back. “If you and Kira want to come to another game, let me know. I’ll leave a couple tickets at will call.”

“I might take you up on that.”

“Good,” he says, and starts walking.

I close the door slowly, earplugs in hand, heart just a little louder than it was a moment ago.

Because it was just a knock.

Just earplugs.

But now it feels like something is beginning.

Chapter seven

Nate

I don't do well with chaos and have no experience with kids. Which is probably why Parker thought it'd be hilarious to volunteer me for a LifeSpark Kids skate session at the local community rink.

"Come on," he said. "Just an hour. Kids love hockey players."

He left out the part where said kids would be wiping out every three seconds, screaming with joy, and somehow managing to turn a simple skate into a demolition derby.

I step onto the ice in full gear with skates laced tight, helmet tucked under one arm, and gloves in hand. Within seconds, I instantly dodge a kid barreling past in a helmet too big for his head.

"Mr. Jones!" a volunteer waves from the boards. "Thanks again for coming!"

"No problem," I call, plastering on a smile. "Glad to be here."

Kind of.

A girl, maybe eight or nine, skates up to me with cheeks red from effort and a wobble in her stride. Her helmet slips slightly over her eyes.

"You're the defenseman," she says breathlessly. "The one that blocked that shot with your body."

I grin. "That's me."

She beams. "I was watching with my family. My dad stood up and fist-pumped when you did that. Said you've got 'old-school grit.'"

I bark out a laugh. “High praise. Tell your dad, thank you.”

She eyes me seriously. “Do you ever get scared to fall in front of everyone?”

I blink. Didn’t expect that.

“Yeah,” I admit. “Sometimes. But falling’s not the problem. It’s the getting back up part that counts.”

She tilts her head. “That’s what Miss Tracy says. She’s my gym teacher.”

“She sounds smart.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

“She wears sparkly sneakers,” the girl adds like it’s proof.

“Then she’s definitely smart.”

I guide her back to the other kids and watch as she joins a group trying to form a shaky conga line on skates. It’s chaos. Pure, loud, unfiltered chaos. But kind of... good.

“Hey, Jones!” Parker calls from across the ice. “You racing or just admiring the view?”

Before I can answer, a kid with a buzz cut and a competitive glint in his eye skates up. “I can skate faster than you.”

“Big talk, little man.”

He grins. “Bet I can beat Parker too.”

“Oh, now you’ve done it,” I say, and nudge him toward the center line. “Let’s go. On three.”

We race. I let him win. He knows I let him win. That makes it better.

Afterward, I kneel beside him while he catches his breath.

“You fast because of those skates?” he asks.

“Nope. I’m fast because of my stubbornness and I like to win.”

He laughs like that’s the funniest thing he’s heard all day.

"But I can do it because I practiced a lot, so I can skate fast and not get hurt," I add.

The boy's expression turns thoughtful, his gaze dropping to his skates. "I’m not really good at anything. Not like you guys."

I frown. “Who told you that?”

He shrugs, but the way he keeps his eyes down says enough.

“You know, I wasn’t always good at hockey,” I tell him. “First time I tried to skate backwards, I wiped out so hard, my coach thought I’d dislocated something. Turns out, it was just my pride.”

He chuckles.

“But I kept showing up. Every day. Even when I sucked. That’s the difference, man. It’s not about being perfect. It’s about showing up anyway and keeping at it.”

He glances up, brow furrowed. “My brother’s the good one. He plays all the sports. My mom always says I should be more like him.”

My chest tightens. “Yeah? What do you like?”

He shrugs again. “I dunno. Drawing, I guess. My grandma gave me this sketchpad, and I draw stuff from video games. Or like, cool buildings.”

I lean forward. “That’s awesome. You know how many hockey players wish they



could draw something other than a stick figure? That's a skill, not a backup plan."

He blinks, surprised. "Really?"

"Hell yeah. And don't let anyone make you feel like you've gotta fit their idea of what 'good' is. Being different isn't bad. It's just brave."

His mouth tugs into a crooked smile.

"You think I could be brave?"

"You're out here skating with a bunch of loud kids in the cold. That's already pretty brave."

He kicks at the ice with the toe of his skate, processing that.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

“I don’t think my brother ever said that to me.”

I pause. “You ever say it to yourself?”

He shakes his head slowly.

“Well, say it now. Go on. Just once.”

He glances around like he’s afraid someone will hear. Then, under his breath, he mumbles, “I’m brave.”

“Didn’t hear you.”

“I’m brave,” he says again, louder.

“There it is.” I give him a light nudge. “Say that every morning, even if you don’t believe it yet. Eventually, you will.”

He nods, and something shifts in his eyes. I see it. That little flicker of belief starting to take root.

“You coming back next week?” he asks.

I smile. “If you are.”

He grins and skates off to rejoin the other kids.

Parker glides over beside me, brow raised. "You give him a Ted Talk while I wasn't looking?"

"Just reminded him of something important."

Parker claps me on the back. "You've got a thing with these kids, man. They listen to you."

"Yeah, well. Someone's gotta tell them they're worth something. Might as well be me."

A few minutes later, Parker and I wrangle a group of six kids to one end of the rink for an impromptu "turnaround clinic."

"Alright, troops," Parker announces dramatically. "Today's mission: the art of not wiping out when the ice curves."

One kid raises his hand. "You mean like, turning without landing on our butts?"

"Exactly," I say, grinning. "We're gonna show you how to cross one skate over the other and keep going around the curve without face-planting like a cartoon banana peel scene."

Parker demonstrates first, gliding smoothly through a tight circle and hamming it up by throwing in a twirl at the end.

"That twirl's optional," I deadpan. "Unless you want to get roasted in the locker room."

The kids laugh as I take my turn, carving around the cones with a little more speed. "Key is to lean into it, not fight it. Bend your knees, cross that outside foot over, and

trust the edge."

One girl falls immediately and throws her hands up. "I leaned into it, and it betrayed me!"

Parker skates over, mock solemn. "The curve is a fickle beast. But we shall conquer it."

They try again. And again. And by the third round, they're starting to get it, and laughing the whole time.

We spend ten minutes doing nothing but loops and exaggerated turns, coaching through fits of giggles. It's completely ridiculous, but it's working.

When it's time to wrap up, a few kids wave at me like we're old friends. One even asks if they could give me a hug.

But inside, I'm hit with something heavier than I expected. The kind of ache that sits just below the surface.

When I was their age, I wasn't skating for fun. I was skating to survive. Every city we moved to, every team I joined, it was always with one thing in mind...skate well to be accepted.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

No one ever told me it was okay to fall.

As I sit on the bench and remove my skates, I glance back at the ice. The kids are still laughing. Still falling. Still getting up.

And for a second, I let myself think maybe this city's doing something to me.

I like it here.

Too much, maybe.

My contract is one year. No guarantees.

But I'm starting to hope I get to stay.

That thought sticks with me as I head out of the rink, shove my hands into my pockets, and start the walk back toward home.

It's close to 9:00pm and cold and dark outside. As I round the corner near my building, I spot someone walking alone, head down, with her backpack slung low.

Mandy.

I cross the street without thinking. "Does the library kick you out when you start looking too stressed?" I call out.

Mandy startles, then grins when she sees me. "Only when I threaten to set fire to my

flashcards. You know, normal Tuesday behavior.”

I fall into step beside her. She’s bundled up in a coat that still doesn’t look warm enough, her cheeks pink from the cold. “You walk back this late often?”

“Only when I lose track of time. The bar exam doesn’t care about personal safety.”

“You should text me next time. I’ll walk you,” I say without thinking.

She gives me a look. “So now you’re my bodyguard?”

I sneer. “Only if the job comes with a badge and the authority to arrest guys who look at you too long.”

Her laugh is low, a little tired, but real. “And Kira would absolutely turn it into a full-blown rom-com. She’d have popcorn, a fake Oscar ballot, and color commentary about your ‘sultry scowl.’”

We reach the block leading to our building. The air between us tightens with each step. It’s quiet, but not uncomfortable. She breaks the silence.

“I think my brain is going to liquefy. The reading. The practice tests. And every time I finally hit a groove, Kira starts blasting EDM or on the phone with her latest online match.”

“You know...” I glance sideways. “I have a spare room. It’s quiet. Has a desk. Decent lighting. You could study there if you need to.”

She blinks. “What?”

“I’m gone half the time. And even when I’m here, I’m not throwing house parties.

You need a quiet place, and I've got one."

She smiles, and it hits me right in the sternum.

"Okay," she says. "Let's say I'm interested. What's the catch?"

"No catch. Just rules."

"Rules?"

"One: no inviting Kira. Two: no judgment if I heat up frozen pizza at 2 a.m. Three..."

I pause, lowering my voice. "Don't rearrange my furniture. I'll notice."

She grins. "Did you practice that?"

"Just making sure we're aligned."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

We enter the elevator. I dig into my pocket, pull out my keychain and take off a key. “Spare key. It’s yours, if you want it.”

She raises an eyebrow, amused. “Are you sure? I mean, what if you have a date over or something? I wouldn’t want to crash your...extracurriculars.”

I grin. “Are you asking if I have a sock-on-the-door policy?”

She laughs. “I’m just saying maybe we need some kind of sign system. Like a post-it on your door when the study cave’s closed for... hockey player reasons.”

“Fine. I’ll leave a game puck outside the door. If it’s there, you’re good. If it’s gone... maybe come back later.”

She looks at the key for a long second. “This is... unexpectedly sweet.”

I shrug. “Just being neighborly.”

She reaches out and takes the key.

Our fingers brush, and the moment stretches longer than it should. Her eyes shift up to meet mine.

“Thanks, Nate.” The doors open and we walk down the hall.

I nod once. “See you around, Little Fields.”



She huffs. “You’re the worst.”

And as she disappears into her apartment, I’m left standing in the hall like some kind of idiot who just gave his neighbor, a very off-limits neighbor, a key to his place.

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Back in my apartment, I toss my keys into the ceramic bowl by the door.

Except now, one’s missing.

I pull off my jacket, crack my neck, and sit on the edge of the couch.

The apartment’s quiet. It’s cleaner than usual and still smells like whatever protein-packed leftovers I nuked earlier.

But my head’s not here.

It’s back out in the hallway.

Back walking next to a girl with tired eyes and smart comebacks, and a habit of looking way too good in freezing weather.

She’s not a distraction.

She’s a complication.

But the weird thing is...

I don’t mind.

I tell myself it's just a spare room. Just a key.

But deep down, I know...she's the one thing I might not be able to keep off-limits.

## Chapter eight

Mandy

I knock on Nate's door with my arms full. I've got my lamp in one hand, tote bag slung over the other, and my favorite ceramic mug wedged between my elbow and ribcage.

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

He opens it almost instantly, like he was already standing there.

“You move fast,” he says, leaning against the frame with that lazy grin. “Should I clear out a drawer too?”

“Don’t tempt me,” I shoot back. “I color-code.”

I push past him and into the apartment, taking a slow, sweeping look around.

It’s clean. Shockingly so. Like he either lives like a minimalist hockey robot... or just shoved everything he owns into a closet.

“Okay, it’s giving ‘hockey cave with potential,’” I declare, setting the lamp down on the kitchen table. “This lighting situation is tragic.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You need a specific vibe to memorize case law?”

“Absolutely. Ambience is half the battle. So, which room is the official study cave?”

Nate gestures toward a door down the hall. "Second one on the left. It doesn’t get used for much. There’s just a desk, a chair, maybe some ghosts."

I shoot him a look. “If I find one, I’m making it quiz me on tort reform.”

I grab my lamp, make my way to the room and flip on the overhead light.

It’s simple, but not bad. There’s a sturdy desk along one wall, a rolling chair that

definitely looks like it's seen a few late-night strategy sessions, and a low bookcase with a random mix of hockey gear and a few trophies. A futon sits beneath the window, folded neatly, with a gray blanket draped over the arm. No frills. No clutter. It just screams bachelor.

I smile to myself, set the lamp down on the desk and plug it in. The yellow glow immediately softens the space, making it feel less like a spare room and more like mine, at least temporarily. Then I unpack my mug, a stack of notebooks, and a highlighter pouch so aggressive it could signal aircraft.

Nate watches from the doorway like I'm installing IKEA furniture.

"Is this part of some nesting ritual I should be worried about?"

"You're just lucky I didn't bring throw pillows."

He watches me with a curious smile. "You're really doing it. Taking over."

"Don't worry, I'll leave the testosterone unbothered. But this..." I wave at the study nook I've unofficially claimed, "this is mine now."

"Noted."

I sit, open a notebook, and pretend I'm going to study. Instead, I glance around again. The apartment's quiet in a good way. Comfortable. Like him.

There's a knock at the door. Nate shoots me a look. "Expecting backup?"

"Nope."

We both go to the door. Kira breezes in like she's been here a dozen times already,

carrying a canvas tote overloaded with snacks, a candle, and a mini cactus in a pink ceramic pot.

“Ladies!” she sings. “Study session upgrade. You’re welcome.”

She drops into a chair and looks around. “Okay, this is... surprisingly not gross.”

Nate folds his arms. “I’ll take that as a glowing review.”

Kira grins. “You should. Mandy’s usually allergic to man caves.”

“I cleaned,” he deadpans.

She hops off the couch. “Where’s the new digs?”

“Over here. C’mon, I’ll show you.”

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

I take her down the hall and Nate follows. And, as soon as she peers in, she says, “Oh, you’re nesting. This is serious.”

“Kira,” I warn.

“What?” She surveys my desk. “You brought a lamp, a mug, and those neurotic highlighters. That’s girl-code for ‘claiming territory.’”

“I’m claiming peace and quiet,” I say. “Which I clearly won’t get with you here.”

Kira shrugs. “I just wanted to see the setup. And maybe flirt with the tall one a little.”

Nate raises an eyebrow. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

Kira winks. “I like your confidence.”

I groan again. “Please don’t encourage her.”

He chuckles. “Too late.”

Kira now walks around the apartment like a realtor, and then points to the couch. “This could use a throw blanket. Maybe a decorative tray.”

“You’re terrifying,” Nate mutters.

“Thank you.” She pulls out her phone. “I’ll send you links.”

I look at Nate, exasperated. "I swear, she's not usually this intense."

"She's fine," he says with a laugh. "Kind of like a caffeinated interior designer."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Kira calls from the kitchen.

"Just wait," I whisper to Nate. "She's going to open your fridge and do an inventory."

"I've already accepted my fate."

"You're a brave man."

"I gave you a key, didn't I?"

That shuts me up.

Because I'm smiling too much.

And he notices.

And suddenly, this whole ridiculous study setup feels a little too much like something else entirely.

Kira stretches out dramatically across the couch. "I vote we carb-load. I need garlic knots like I need air."

Nate leans on the wall, arms crossed, amused. "There's a place two blocks down. Best garlic knots in the city, if you don't mind red-checkered tablecloths and servers who call you 'sweetheart.'"

"Do they judge you for ordering extra cheese?" I ask.

"Only if you don't," Nate says.

Kira claps her hands. "It's settled. Operation Carbs Commences."

We bundle up and head out into the cold. It's one of those wintry nights where your breath fogs up immediately and your hair threatens to freeze if you breathe wrong. But there's something charming about it too. The sidewalks are lit with strings of twinkling lights, and the bite of cold in your lungs making everything feel sharper.

The restaurant is small, loud, and smells like heaven. There's a giant plastic tomato in the window. It's the kind of place that hasn't updated its menu since 1983.



## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

We slide into a red vinyl booth and Kira immediately opens the menu with a dramatic sigh. "This is already the best night of my life."

The waitress, probably in her sixties and wearing cat-eye glasses, appears with a notepad. "Drinks, kids?"

"Sangria for me," Kira chirps.

"Same," I say.

Nate leans back. "Do you do draft beer or are we talking bottled nostalgia?"

"Draft," the waitress replies, unimpressed.

"Beautiful. Surprise me."

She nods and disappears. Kira leans over the table. "Okay, question: worst date you've ever had. Go."

Nate raises an eyebrow. "You first."

"Fine. I once got set up with a guy who showed up twenty minutes late wearing a fedora, told me he didn't believe in utensils, and then ate sushi with his hands."

I nearly choke on air. "Please tell me you're kidding."

"I wish. He said chopsticks were a colonial conspiracy."

Nate snorts into his water. "That man is unhinged."

"Wait, it gets better. Halfway through, he took off the fedora and said, 'I feel like you haven't seen the real me.' And underneath was... a second fedora."

I actually slap the table, wheezing. "A nested fedora?!"

"It was like a magic trick gone terribly wrong...hat after hat, each one worse than the last."

The drinks arrive and Nate lifts his glass. "To double hats and zero shame."

Kira turns to Nate. "Okay, your turn. Locker room superstition. Don't pretend you don't have one."

He sips his beer. "Fine. I wear the same socks on game day."

"Like... same pair?"

"Same exact pair. Washed, obviously. But yeah. I've had them since juniors."

"You mean to tell me the fate of Detroit's defense depends on a pair of ancient socks?"

"Don't disrespect the socks. They've seen things."

I giggle into my drink. "I suddenly feel unsafe."

"You get on the ice with guys who haven't changed their laces since 2015 and tell me who the real risk-takers are."

Kira mock-gasps. "Hockey players: emotionally stunted golden retrievers with superstitions and laundry skills."

I snort soda straight out my nose.

Nate calmly passes me a napkin. "She's not wrong."

I dab my face, laughing too hard to care. "You're really just a bunch of muscled-up toddlers."

"With better balance," he says. "Most days."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Just then, the waitress returns, ready to take our order. She doesn't bother with a greeting. She just flips open her pad and levels us with a no-nonsense look.

Kira goes first. "We'll start with garlic knots, obviously. And I'll do the penne alla vodka. Extra parmesan. Like a criminal amount."

The waitress jots it down and gives her a nod. "Good choice, sweetheart."

Mandy raises a brow as she orders. "I'll have the baked ziti, please. And can I get a side salad with that? No onions."

"You got it, sweetie," the waitress replies.

Then she turns to Nate, who just hands over the menu with a lazy smile. "Meatball pizza. Extra sauce. And a Caesar salad."

The waitress smirks. "Nice and messy. That's how we like it. Good call, sweetheart."

She walks away with the efficiency of someone who's been dealing with people's nonsense since the 70s.

As soon as she's out of earshot, Kira leans in. "Did I just earn a 'sweetheart'? I feel honored."

"She gave us all one," I point out. "We're officially in the club."

Nate raises his glass. "To honorary sweethearts. May we never sit at a table without

red vinyl seats again."

I sip my sangria, shaking my head. "You were right about the 'sweetheart' thing. It's a whole brand here."

"She's got that vibe," Kira says, lowering her voice. "Like she's raised six kids, wrangled eight grandkids, and still manages to host Sunday dinner without breaking a sweat."

"Yeah," Nate nods, smirking. "You can tell she doesn't take crap from anyone. Probably sews Halloween costumes, makes her own meatballs, and drives a tank of a minivan."

I laugh. "And if her grandkid mouths off? Boom. Silent stare. That kid's apologizing before dessert hits the table."

Kira grins. "Honestly? I feel safer knowing she exists. She'd probably fight off a bear with a rolling pin and then bring you a plate of cookies afterward."

Just then, a loud thud comes from the kitchen, followed by a crash and a yell.

We all freeze.

The waitress reappears a second later like nothing happened and sets a tray of garlic knots on the table. "Don't ask."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Nate replies smoothly, eyes twinkling.

We dig in. The knots are everything Nate promised and then some...pillowy, buttery, and absolutely drenched in garlic. I'm halfway through one when I realize Nate and Kira are arguing over whether spaghetti is an acceptable first date food.

"It's too risky," Nate insists. "Slurping? Sauce splatter? No one looks good eating spaghetti."

"Please," Kira counters. "If you can't handle me at my sauce-stained worst, you don't deserve me at my mozzarella-stick best."

"That sounds like a dating app bio," I mutter.

Kira beams. "I should update mine. That's gold."

Our food arrives, steaming and glorious. We pass around bites like we've been doing it for years. Nate steals one of my ziti noodles. I steal a meatball. Kira tries to barter garlic knots for Caesar salad croutons.

Then it happens.

As Kira leans to grab the parmesan shaker, her elbow knocks over her sangria glass. It topples in slow motion, wine splashing, ice cubes clinking, red liquid cascading directly into Nate's lap.

He jerks up with a yelp. "I've been struck."

Kira gasps. "Oh no! Your jeans!"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"My dignity!"

The table is chaos. I'm already blotting napkins at his leg like a frantic dry cleaner. Kira's half-laughing, half-apologizing. The couple at the next booth is watching us like we're a live sitcom.

"I swear," Kira says between giggles, "I didn't mean to baptize you in sangria."

Nate sighs dramatically. "First the socks confession, now this. My image is ruined."

"At least you smell like citrus and regret," I offer, failing to hold back laughter.

He grins at me through the catastrophe. "You did say ambiance was half the battle."

"This isn't ambiance," I say, shaking my head. "This is a food fight disguised as a bonding moment."

When the chaos dies down, the waitress returns with a few extra napkins and club soda.

We eat the rest of our meal with extra laughter, soaked napkins everywhere, and a quiet, ridiculous kind of joy I didn't expect to feel tonight.

It's honestly the best study break ever.

We bounce between topics: law school horror stories, hockey travel mishaps, and the great debate over whether pineapple belongs on pizza. (It does. Nate's wrong.)

By the time the bill comes, we're all warm and full from the food and the laughter, a cozy haze settling in like we've been doing this for years.

Nate casually reaches for it before we can even make a move. "My treat."

Kira raises an eyebrow. "Look at you, Mr. Gentleman."

"Chivalry isn't dead," I tease. "Just apparently in hockey skates."

He shrugs like it's nothing. "You two suffered through my sock confession and a sangria tsunami. Least I can do."

"Well, thanks," I say with a smile. "We'll make sure to put it in your gentleman file. Right between 'good taste in restaurants' and 'tolerates chaos with grace.'"

Kira adds, "You're stacking points, Jones. Keep it up, and we might let you hang out with us again."

Outside, the cold hits again, sobering but not in a bad way. We walk under a canopy of string lights, boots crunching softly on the salted sidewalk. The streets are alive even on a cold night, tiny bistros glow with golden light, their windows fogged from hot food and customers inside.

A bakery across the street has a tray of fresh cannoli in the window, and a couple walks a fluffy poodle past a boutique that's still lit up with colored lights strung around the doorframe. There's a row of brick townhouses down the block with wreathson the doors and smoke curling from chimneys. Every detail feels like a winter postcard, like something you'd miss if you weren't paying attention.

When we reach our building, Kira veers off to grab the mail from the lobby, humming some retro pop song under her breath.



That leaves me and Nate. Side by side.

"Thanks for dinner," I say, shoving my gloved hands deeper into my coat pockets.

"That was actually... fun."

"Glad we went. Hope your new study hall works out."

We stop just before the elevators. I look up at him and say, "Nate, thanks again for dinner and the room. I guess I will wait for Kira."

"You're quite welcome. I am going to head upstairs and get out of these wet and now cold pants."

We don't kiss.

But we hover.

That close-but-not moment, full of potential and tension and all the things you don't say out loud.

He tilts his head, just slightly. "Night, Mandy."

## Page 35

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"Night, Nate."

He enters the elevator. I wait for Kira. My heart is pounding like I ran a sprint.

It was just a study room setup.

Just pizza, pasta, books and borrowed space.

So why does it feel like I just cracked open something I won't be able to close?

Chapter nine

Nate

Thursday night. Late. The kind of late that hums quiet and low through the city, where even the streetlights feel sleepy and the cold outside tries to bully you into staying home.

Mandy's here.

She let herself in with the key I gave her last week. It's something I did without thinking, but can't stop thinking about now. She's tucked away in the guest room, her little lamp glowing through the cracked door like a firefly. I passed her earlier on the way to the elevator. She had her hair tied up, sweater sleeves shoved to her elbows, glasses on, and a look of pure determination.

She didn't even say hi. Just grunted, "Torts tonight," and waved me off with a

highlighter.

I went downstairs to the gym for a light workout. Got in a few sets, some cardio, cleared my head.

When I get back an hour later, I don't make a sound. She's still studying, and something about her being here makes my place feel less... stark. Warmer. Like I came home to something instead of just returning to a box with a decent view.

I take my phone into my office-slash-storage room and keep the TV volume low. I give her quiet. Space. Peace. She deserves that. And if she keeps choosing this place over her chaotic apartment, I'll do everything I can to make it feel like a damn sanctuary.

Around eleven, I hear her shuffle down the hallway.

I'm now in the kitchen, eating cereal like a grown man with no shame, standing up, because I like to eat standing up at the counter. Doesn't everyone?

"You know," she says behind me, "standing while eating cereal feels very divorced dad of you."

I turn and smile. She's wrapped in one of those oversized cardigans that somehow still manage to look cute instead of frumpy. There's a pink streak on her cheek from where she must've leaned into a notebook.

"I'm auditioning for the part," I reply, raising my spoon. "You caught me mid-performance. Want some cereal?"

She laughs, "Sure, I'm starving."

I grab her a bowl, spoon, and the milk while she joins me at the bar counter, perched on the leather-wrapped stool.

For a minute, we eat in silence. The good kind. The comfortable kind.

"Thanks again for letting me use your space," she says eventually, scooping a spoonful of Cheerios. "It's seriously saving me. My apartment's become a revolving door of wine, lip gloss, and whatever whirlwind Kira's latest Tinder match brings."

"You're welcome here anytime," I say. And I mean it more than I should.

She's quiet again, then, "It's weird, but this is the first time in a long time I've felt like I can breathe while studying."

I glance over. "That bad?"

She nods slowly. "It's not just the noise. It's the pressure. I've been trying so hard to be perfect. To control everything. My schedule. My future. My life."

I listen.

"I even waited to move in with Kira because I wanted to be in the perfect headspace. I didn't even kiss a guy all through law school because I didn't want distractions. Like, I needed to prove to myself that I could stay in control. Over my grades. Over my body. Everything."

She stirs her food like it might respond.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"Is that weird?"

I shake my head. "No. I get it. When everything feels like it could go sideways, control is the only thing that feels safe."

She looks up, and our eyes meet.

"You too?"

"Yeah," I say, setting down my spoon. "After high school, when I didn't get picked up right away, I went through this stretch where I thought I'd never get out. People said I was too scrappy, too aggressive, too much of a risk. My family wasn't rich, I didn't have fancy camps or connections. I trained on frozen ponds and in sweaty basements."

She smiles softly. "You made it, though."

"Eventually. It took years. College. Trades. Sitting bench. Injuries. Learning how to keep my mouth shut and play the game, on and off the ice. I worked my ass off and learned to live out of a suitcase."

"Sounds lonely."

"Sometimes," I admit. "But hockey's the one thing that makes sense. The rest? I'm figuring it out."

She sets her bowl aside. "You ever think about the future? Like, post-hockey?"

I nod slowly. "Lately, yeah. I've been thinking more about roots. What home means. If I even know how to stay in one place."

She watches me for a beat, then rests her chin in her palm again. "What does home look like to you? I mean, when you close your eyes."

I chuckle under my breath. "Used to be a rink. Anywhere I could skate. Smell of ice, sound of blades carving into it. But lately, I don't know. I think it's less about the place and more about the people."

She smiles at that. "That's a good answer."

"What about you?" I ask. "What's your version of home?"

She's quiet for a second, fiddling with her spoon. "Somewhere I don't feel like I have to prove anything. I've always been the good one. The responsible one. The one who says no when everyone else says yes. Sometimes I wonder if I'm living for myself or just trying not to disappoint anyone."

That hits something in me. Deeper than I expected.

"That sounds heavy."

"It is," she says with a soft laugh. "But it's also freeing, in a way. Law school gave me structure. Rules. If I followed the path, everything made sense. But I'm starting to realize that real life doesn't care about structure. Real life throws wine-stained exams and roommate chaos and really nice hockey players in your path."

"Hey," I say, grinning. "You lost me at chaos but circled back nicely."

She laughs, eyes lighting up. "You are nice, though. You didn't have to offer me this

place to study. You didn't have to keep the TV low. You didn't have to make me feel safe. But you did."

I glance at her, and there's something fragile but honest about the way she's looking at me.

"I like having you here," I say. "Even when your highlighters squeak."

She grins. "They're vital and each color means something. Don't mock the system."

"Never. I fear it deeply."

There's a pause, and the mood softens again.

"Do you ever think we'd be sitting here like this?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Not in a million years. Last I saw you, you were tagging along at Allison's grad party, wearing braces and asking if I liked Taylor Swift."

She groans. "I forgot about that. God, I was such a baby."

"You've grown up," I say. "A lot."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"You too. You're not just that guy with the cocky grin and the slapshot anymore."

"What am I now?"

She taps her chin like she's thinking hard. "The guy who has backup cereal. And listens. And gives a damn."

"Revolutionary," I deadpan.

She leans her elbows on the counter, chin in her hands. "You know what's wild? You're nothing like I expected."

"Let me guess," I say. "You thought I'd be a cocky, puck-chasing stereotype."

"I mean... based on what I'd heard, I figured you'd be a cocky player type with a new girl every week," she says, grinning. "But you're thoughtful. Kind. You made it easy for me to be here. Even tonight, you were so quiet."

"Because you were working. And it mattered to you. That's enough reason."

She blinks, like she's not used to people paying attention to the little things.

Then her phone buzzes. FaceTime. She glances down and groans. "Speak of the devil."

"Who is it?"



"Allison."

She answers with a smirk. "Hey, you called at a good time."

Allison's voice comes through instantly. "Are you still buried in those law books? You better not be stress-snacking your way through another can of frosting."

Mandy rolls her eyes. "That was one time. And it was finals week."

"Once is enough to earn a reputation," Allison teases. "Anyway, how's the new place? Kira driving you nuts yet?"

"She's fine," Mandy says, smiling. "But I've been studying at a neighbor's apartment instead. Quieter. Less glitter."

Allison raises a brow. "A neighbor?"

Mandy flips the camera. "Look who's my neighbor."

Allison's face appears on-screen, mid-wine sip. "Holy crap! That's not, Nate?"

I wave awkwardly. "Hey."

"Well, well," she drawls. "Didn't expect to see you again without a puck involved."

I chuckle. "Yeah, it's been a while. How've you been?"

"Busy. Married life, two kids, a mortgage that eats my soul every month. You know, adulthood."

"Sounds like a power play," I say, grinning.

"Every day's sudden death overtime," she replies, smirking. "But we're good. You still skating like your life depends on it?"

"Pretty much. New team, new city. Trying to find my rhythm."

"Detroit is a cool city. Hope it's treating you well."

"Yeah, it's starting to feel like home."

Allison raises an eyebrow, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. "And Mandy's your neighbor now, huh? That's... interesting."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"She's easy to live next to. Throws wild parties but never steals my packages."

Allison laughs. "Yet. Give her time."

Her tone shifts just slightly, teasing but protective. "Just... don't be an idiot, Nate. She's not like the girls you used to go for."

"I've noticed," I say. And I mean it.

Allison eyes me. "I would appreciate if you would keep an eye on my sister and your hands off of her, Jones. She's too nice for a hockeyplayer, in both senses of the word."

Mandy blushes. I smirk and reply. "Noted."

"I'm serious!" Allison says, though she's clearly half-teasing. "I know your type."

"And yet, you dated me," I shoot back.

She scoffs. "A mistake I've spent years trying to erase. Just kidding. You were pretty nice back then."

"You're welcome," I say dryly.

Mandy rolls her eyes and ends the call. "Well, that was... Allison."

"She hasn't changed much."

"Nope. Still bossy. Still dramatic. Still protective."

We fall into silence again, but it's not awkward. Just thoughtful.

She stands, taking her bowl to the sink. "Anyway, I should get going. I've got work in the morning."

I follow her to the door.

"Thanks again, Nate. For tonight. For the room. For... being so accommodating."

I don't know what to say, so I just nod.

She smiles, then disappears down the hallway.

I watch her go.

And for the first time, I'm not just wondering what it would be like to kiss her, for real this time. I'm wondering how long I can last without doing it.

## Chapter ten

Mandy

"You've got ten minutes before the partner check-in," Richard warns as he passes by my desk, coffee in hand, tie already loosened like he's been here since sunrise.

"I'm ready," I reply, clicking out of my notes and straightening the collar of my blazer. I'm wearing my go-to confidence outfit... neatly pressed black slacks, a soft blush blouse, and the small gold hoops that make me feel like I have my life together.

My desk is tidy, laptop open, a blue gel pen poised beside a lined notepad with a dozen bullet points about today's case review. Organized and efficient, just how I like it.

It's a calm, focused rhythm in the office this morning, with fluorescent lights humming, and keyboard clacks in sync with murmured calls behind glass conference room doors. Associates in fitted suits zip past junior associates like me with an air of seasoned importance. But I hold my own. I belong here.

I pass a quick smile to Rachel from HR, who's balancing a tray of waters with her elbow while texting. "You're a machine," I say.

She grins. "You say that like it's a bad thing. You ready for Wilkins?"

"As I'll ever be."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"Good luck. He's in one of his 'devil's advocate' moods."

I fake a dramatic sigh, and stride into the small meeting room like I'm not about to get grilled by a partner who enjoys verbal combat more than caffeine.

Inside, three other associates are already seated around the table: Sanjay, Kara, and Becca. They are looking as tense as students during finals week. Wilkins is at the head of the table, flipping through a legal pad, glasses perched low on his nose like a stern professor about to fail someone for blinking wrong.

"Let's begin," he says without looking up. "Sanjay, what progress have you made on the motion to dismiss in the Anders case?"

Sanjay stammers through a half-answer, his voice wavering. Kara jumps in to try and add something, but Wilkins cuts her off. "Next time, try answering the question I actually asked."

Becca fares a little better, presenting a well-reasoned summary. Wilkins nods, barely.

Then it's my turn.

I straighten my notes, heart hammering, but my voice is calm when I speak. "I focused on the jurisdictional argument you flagged last week. I found a Sixth Circuit ruling from 2020 that aligns with our position and helps rebut the plaintiff's timeline."

Wilkins finally looks up. "Which case?"

"Taylor v. Kinston Freight. The court ruled that the contractual clause did not override jurisdiction due to lack of sufficient notice."

He stares at me for a beat longer than is comfortable and replies. "Good. That's the kind of detail we need. And the case law is on point."

I don't smile, but inside, I'm doing a full-on victory dance.

After the meeting ends, I gather my things and shoot Becca a quick, encouraging smile. She looks rattled. "You did fine," I whisper. "He grills everyone."

She nods, and a bit of the tension drains from her shoulders. I walk out of the room, heels clicking with purpose, and finally let myself breathe.

I made it through the Wilkins gauntlet and maybe even earned a little respect.

"You survived," Richard says, offering me a fist bump as I pass.

"Wilkins asked me to back up my argument with precedent, and I countered with a Sixth Circuit ruling from 2020. He smiled."

Richard blinks. "Wilkins smiled?"

"I know. I'm still recovering."

I settle back at my desk, sip my now-lukewarm coffee, and scroll through my calendar to prep for the next task. I've barely made it through three emails when my phone buzzes.

Nate:Lawyers love hockey, right?

There's a photo attachment: a goalie in a full suit reading a legal textbook in the net. The caption says: "When your contract clause says defend everything."

I snort. Out loud. One of the senior associates walking past gives me a look.

I text back.

Mandy:Objection. Relevance. Also, who told you we have a weakness for jocks in suits?

Nate:Just a hunch. Is it working?

Mandy:Unfortunately.

He replies with a winking emoji and a GIF of someone dramatically flipping a page titled "Flirting for Dummies."

Mandy:I swear if you send me one more meme, I'm reporting you to the Bar.

Nate:Better than being sent to the penalty box. Or maybe not... depends on the referee.



## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

I press my lips together, trying not to laugh. Too late. It bubbles out of me, and Richard raises an eyebrow from across the office. I just shake my head and look away.

Without thinking, I forward the thread to Kira.

Mandy: Tell me I'm not full-blown crushing.

The reply is immediate.

Kira: Oh, sweet baby field mouse. You are past crushing. You are knees-deep in the flirty wilderness.

Mandy: That's not even a thing.

Kira: It is now. He's texting you lawyer memes. You're basically married.

Mandy: He's just being nice.

Kira: Nice? That man is hockey's version of a cinnamon roll dipped in sin.

I nearly choke on my coffee.

Mandy: That's it. You're banned from metaphors.

Kira: You're just mad because I'm right.

I turn off my phone and place it face down on the desk, heart thudding a little too fast for a work break.

But I can't wipe the smile off my face.

\*\*\*

That night, I'm back at Nate's.

He's not home, so I've got my books spread across the kitchen table for a change, highlighters standing at attention, and notes stacked in color-coded harmony. I even moved my little desk lamp and plugged it in here.

But tonight, I'm restless. Maybe it's the Wilkins victory buzz, or maybe it's the fact that my heart skipped a beat when my phone lit up with Nate's name earlier.

I'm mid-sentence in my Property Law outline when I hear the front door open. Footsteps. The soft thud of his duffel hitting the floor.

I glance up just as he walks in.

He freezes, then grins. "Well, damn. This kitchen's never looked better."

"Sorry, my desk lamp lured me. Felt like a change of scenery and you weren't home."

He walks over, eyeing a paper I left turned sideways. "What's this?"

I grin. "Law school thing I learned. It's like a mini argument: facts, rule, analysis, conclusion. We live and die by them."

He lifts a brow and scans the first few lines. "This is actually impressive."

"Are you surprised?"

He shoots me a look. "Only that you didn't charge me to read it."

I laugh. "Give me time. There's an hourly rate."

He opens the fridge and grabs a bottle of water, tossing me one without asking. I catch it. Smooth. Practiced. Like we've done this a hundred times.

"I'm going to hit the shower real quick," he says. "Don't let that outline bully you too hard."

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"No promises."

He disappears down the hall, and I watch him go with a stupid flutter in my stomach. Now that he's home, I move back into my study room. I try to refocus...just need one more hour of study before I can take another break.

At exactly ten, I close my laptop and stretch. My shoulders ache, and I'm mentally fried. I walk quietly to the kitchen, pausing when I hear Nate in the living room, flipping channels with the sound low.

He glances over. "Surviving the night shift?"

"Barely. My brain is mush. I'm taking a break for a minute and will continue until 11:00."

"I've got water, protein bars, and leftover cookies. Choose your poison."

"I'll take a cookie. The law can't scare me after sugar."

I grab one and sit on the arm of the couch, biting into it while he leans back, looking at me like he's been waiting all evening to talk.

"You okay?"

I nod. "Just tired. Long day. But productive."

He's quiet for a second, then says, "You ever feel like you're trying to prove

something to people who already made up their minds about you?"

I blink. That's not what I expected.

"Yeah," I say softly. "All the time."

He exhales and rubs his jaw. "That's how it felt when I got traded here. Like I wasn't wanted, just tolerated. Some of the guys were cool, but a few made it obvious I was on trial. I had to prove I wasn't just a filler until they could find someone better."

I feel a tug in my chest. "That's awful. I'm sorry."

He shrugs. "Part of the game. You get used to earning every inch. But it wears on you. Especially when you realize you're not just fighting for ice time. You're fighting to be seen."

I don't say anything right away. Just sit beside him as I shove the rest of the cookie in my mouth.

"I see you," I say quietly. "I've seen how you've made space for me here. How you didn't ask for anything in return. You don't talk much about yourself, but when you do, it's real. That counts."

His eyes lock on mine. There's something in them I haven't seen before, something raw and almost vulnerable.

He chuckles, a quiet sound that doesn't quite match the look in his eyes. "Thanks. That means more than you know."

Then, more softly, he adds, "It was hard at first. Coming to Detroit. Everyone smiles and says the right things, but you can feel when you're not really wanted. I kept

wondering if it was all in my head, or if I actually didn't belong."

I shift closer, instinctively.

"But I stuck it out," he continues. "Played hard. Shut my mouth. Let my game speak for me. And eventually, the tide turned. The guys respect me now. Coach trusts me. It's better. But the pressure never leaves. You're only as good as your last game."

"That sounds exhausting," I say, meaning every word.

He nods. "It is. But I love the game. That part hasn't changed."

I draw a breath. "Honestly? I get it. Today, Wilkins grilled everyone. I held my own, but walking into that room, I felt like I was back in junior high. Like I had something to prove just to be allowed in the room."

"Did he say anything?"

"Yeah. He said I nailed it. But even then it still felt like I was holding my breath. Being a lawyer is all about proving yourself. Your case. Your worth. Sometimes I wonder if that ever stops."

He meets my gaze again. "Maybe it doesn't. Maybe we just get better at pretending we're not scared."

I smile softly. "Or maybe we find people who see us even when we're not trying to prove anything."

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

His eyes don't leave mine. "Maybe we do. You're kind of a surprise, Mandy Fields."

"I get that a lot. Usually after I destroy someone in court simulations."

He chuckles, the mood softening. "Remind me never to cross-examine you."

"Too late. You already judged my case brief."

"And gave it glowing reviews. I might even leave a Yelp rating."

I laugh, leaning back, the tension easing.

He stands. "I'm getting more water. You want something?"

"I'm good."

He walks to the kitchen, and I notice a small leather-bound notebook on the coffee table. I recognize it. He was scribbling in it the other night.

Curious, I pick it up and flip it open.

It's not a journal, not exactly. More like a collection of thoughts. Quotes. Mantras. Some look like pregame rituals. One page has a list of things he's grateful for.

And my name is there.

I freeze.

He returns, pausing in the doorway. Our eyes meet. He sees what I'm holding.

"You weren't supposed to read that."

I set it down, gently. "I didn't mean to pry. It was just... there."

"It's okay," he says after a moment. "I write stuff down to make sense of it. Doesn't always work."

I nod slowly. "It makes sense to me."

We're sitting close now. Too close. The air between us is charged, full of unsaid things and barely-there breaths.

He reaches out, tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

I don't move.

"Mandy..."

I look up. "Yeah?"

He exhales, shakes his head like he's trying to be the bigger person. "You should probably go study some more. I made your break longer than it probably should have been."

"I want to put in another hour."

But neither of us moves at first.

Then, when I get up and walk back to the guest room, I feel his eyes on me the whole



way.

I like it.

And every time we talk, he surprises me. Not just with what he says, but with how much I want to hear more.

Chapter eleven

Nate

It's all noise, bodies, and heat the second I step inside.

It's one of those spots with exposed brick walls, Edison bulbs hanging low over the tables, and music loud enough to give the illusion of privacy without making conversation impossible. Half our team's already claimed a corner booth and a cluster of tables. There are beers and cocktail glasses spread out like a welcome mat of bad decisions.

Connor and Haley are tucked in close, her laugh cutting through the noise. Parker's got Grace on one side and Stacy on the other, probably swapping dad jokes. Mikey and Dillon are already arguing over who's the better beer pong player, while James is perched like a gremlin on a stool, scanning for trouble and clearly finding it.

Mandy walks in with Kira, flanked by two friends I vaguely recognize from the housewarming party. One's tall with model vibes—Priya, maybe?—and the other, Lexi, is already raising her arms like she just won a touchdown.

Kira spots the table, then points dramatically at me. "There he is! Detroit's finest defenseman with the most questionable taste in sweatpants."

I raise my beer in salute. "Nice to see you too, Hurricane Kira."

Mandy laughs behind her hand, but not before I catch it. She looks good. Like, pause-your-life-and-stare good. Tight jeans. Black fitted sweater. Ponytail that says I didn't try but still crushed it.

"You're staring," James says under his breath.

"I'm evaluating."

"Uh-huh. Is that what we're calling thirst these days?"

Before I can elbow him, Kira and the girls descend.

"Drinks, people," Kira announces. "We need drinks, food, and someone to tell me I'm too much."

"You're too much," Parker offers without missing a beat.

"Thank you. Someone's listening," Kira fires back.

Mandy slides into the seat next to me, her knee brushing mine. "This table looks like a disaster zone."

"That's because it is," I say. "We thrive on it."

"Noted."

James leans over with a grin, lifting his glass toward Mandy. "I gotta say, Mandy, your presence has dramatically increased the average IQ and overall charm level at this table."

Mandy raises an eyebrow. "So, we're starting with flattery? That's suspicious."

Kira jumps in. "Quick, someone check if he's running a fever."

"I'm serious," James says, holding up his hands. "Nate's been broody since

preseason. Now he's cracking jokes and almost smiling. Coincidence? I think not."

Mandy glances at me. "I'm going to need that in writing for future blackmail purposes."

"I'll notarize it myself," Kira adds. "This table needs more witnesses."

Lexi's already making friends with Mikey, who is giving her the full dramatic reenactment of his only fight this season, complete with a barstool as the opponent.

"It's a rare treat," James whispers to Priya, motioning to Mikey. "He usually only performs during full moons or after tequila."

Priya raises a brow. "What happens with both?"

"We don't talk about it. Legal reasons."

The waitress comes by and takes our drink orders. Mandy gets something citrusy. I stick with beer. Kira orders a round of shots "for team bonding." It's a lineup of poor decisions in liquid form.

"To questionable choices!" Kira declares.

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"To not getting fined tomorrow!" James echoes.

"To the fact that Mandy keeps showing up and hasn't run away yet," I add, lifting my glass toward her.

She clinks it with mine. "I like a challenge...and my new study digs."

"Careful," I murmur. "I do too and you're welcome. It's safer than walking home alone at night."

Her eyes flick up. Just for a second. But it lands like a hit to the chest.

Kira chimes in. "Safer? Maybe in some respects, but not others."

Mandy elbows her and Kira chuckles.

Twenty minutes later, the table's a mix of laughter and overlapping conversations. Kira is talking Priya into crashing the guys' next charity skate. Haley and Grace are plotting a girls' brunch. I catch Mandy watching me over her drink, her lips curved like she's in on a secret I haven't been told.

"Come here," I say quietly, standing.

She blinks. "Where?"

"Just..." I gesture toward another room in the back. "Trust me."

She grabs her drink and follows without hesitation, weaving through the crowd. We end up in a room with a pool table and high top tables. This room is calmer. No loud laughs or beer sloshing across tables like the front. Just a pool table, a few high tops, and enough space to breathe. It's dim, quiet in that low-key way that says you can take your time here. Run a game. Nurse a drink. Watch without being watched.

"What's up?" she asks.

"I needed five minutes without James narrating our body language."

"He's observant."

"He's a menace."

I step closer. Not too close. But close enough that I can smell her perfume. Her eyes catch mine. She doesn't look away.

"Hey," I say, scratching the back of my neck. "Can I show you something?"

She raises a brow. "Show me what?"

"You'll see. It's stupid. But also not." I take a folded piece of paper out of my wallet.

She gives me a look. "If this ends in a magic trick, I'm walking."

I laugh. "Not quite. I, uh, I remembered something earlier when you were talking about liking a challenge."

She tilts her head. "Yeah?"

"When I got traded here, I made this list. Stupid goals. Like, get to know the local

pizza guy, don't punch any teammates in the first week, stuff like that."

"Reasonable."

"One of them was: Don't get distracted." I point that out on the list and then fold the paper up again and put it away.

She arches a brow. "And how's that going?"

I smirk. "Terribly. Because now every time I see you, I forget what the hell I was doing five minutes earlier."

She pauses. Her breath fogs between us. "That's... a line."

"It's also the truth."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Her voice softens. "What made you remember the list?"

I shrug. "You laughed at something James said. I looked at you, and boom. List gone. All I could think was how you've managed to hijack my focus. And I kinda don't mind."

She stares at me for a moment. "Okay, I'll admit, that's better than a magic trick."

She laughs, and the sound settles between us like a secret. There's something in the way she's looking at me now, like she's trying to figure me out, and liking what she sees. And that's dangerous. Because every second we stand here, I'm less interested in playing it safe.

"You're funnier than I expected," she says softly.

"That's not how I expected that sentence to start."

"And you're... different. Not what people assume."

"You mean not a cocky player who hits on anything with a pulse?"

She shrugs, playful. "The bar was low."

I chuckle. "Good to know I'm clearing it."

We fall quiet for a beat.



Then she says, "My sister doesn't think you do, but every time we talk, you surprise me."

My throat tightens. "Good surprise?"

"Maybe."

I don't move. But I want to.

She shifts, just slightly. Like maybe she wants to too.

Our eyes lock. The moment stretches until she moves to sip her drink.

Then...

"There you are!"

We both jump as James barrels around the corner, drink in hand.

"Jesus," Mandy mutters.

James looks between us, then smirks. "Ohhhh. Sorry. Was I interrupting? Wait, don't answer. Your faces already did."

"Go away," I say without heat.

He lifts his hands. "Say no more, Romeo. Just here to warn you, Kira challenged Parker to a shot contest. Grace is filming. Bedlam is brewing."

He disappears with a wink.

Mandy and I look at each other. She's biting her lip.

"He's the worst," I say.

"He's also kind of the best."

"Debatable."

We start walking back, but slower. Like maybe we're both a little unwilling to let go of whatever that almost was.

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

The night keeps rolling like a highlight reel on fast forward.

Kira and Parker are mid-shot showdown, cheered on by half the bar and judged ruthlessly by Grace, who's filming it on her phone with live commentary. "Parker's still got the edge on volume, but Kira's form? Flawless."

"I was made for this," Kira declares, slamming down a shot glass with flair. "College didn't teach me much, but it did teach me endurance."

"Careful," Parker grins. "I've got dad reflexes. You're outmatched."

"Is that what we're calling early bedtime energy now?"

Meanwhile, James and Ethan have somehow become Kira's honorary wingmen, or prey, it's hard to tell. She flirts with both, switching targets every few minutes just to keep them off balance.

"You've got the jawline," she tells James, twirling a straw. "But Ethan's got that dangerous little smirk. Honestly, I'm conflicted."

Ethan smirks harder. "If you need help deciding, I've got a spreadsheet ready."

"Are there graphs?"

"Pie charts."

"Sold."

Lexi and Priya wedge themselves into the banter like pros. Lexi's critiquing James's drink choice ("A whiskey sour? Bold. Conflicted. Possibly compensating.") while Priya and Mandy exchange knowing looks over their cocktails.

Mandy leans in to me, voice just loud enough to cut through the music. "Your teammates are unhinged."

"Completely."

"It's kind of great."

I grin. "They grow on you. Like mold."

"The charming kind of mold."

"Exactly."

Across the table, Lexi leans toward Mandy. "Okay, serious question. If you had to choose one of these guys to be stranded on a desert island with, who would it be?"

Mandy lifts an eyebrow. "Alive or dead?"

"Alive, obviously. Otherwise it's a horror movie."

Kira chimes in, already pointing. "Mikey. He'd make friends with a coconut and create an entire society in three hours."

"I would," Mikey agrees. "It would be called Mikeyland, and I'd rule with charm and slight delusion."

James raises his glass. "I'd give Mikeyland twenty-four hours before it devolves into

a musical."

Ethan nods solemnly. "And I'd be cast as the brooding anti-hero."

"I'd pay to see that," Priya says. "Especially if there's choreography."

The banter goes on like that, wild and sharp and a little unhinged in the best way. Mandy's relaxed now, leaning back, laughing harder and more freely than I've seen before. Her smile is the kind that makes you forget how loud the world is.

At one point, she catches me staring and quirks a brow. "What?"

I shrug. "Just watching you win over everyone."

"Is that what I'm doing?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"Yeah. Effortlessly."

She looks away, a flush creeping up her neck. "I think it's the alcohol."

"Nope. It's you."

She opens her mouth to say something, but Kira grabs her hand and drags her up toward the dartboard. "Time for team girl domination," she announces.

Mandy throws me a look over her shoulder, half helpless, half delighted.

I just sit back, take another sip, and watch her laugh as she nails a bullseye her first try.

Damn. I'm in trouble.

But every time she glances at me, and I glance back, I can still feel the almost.

I love that we're becoming friends. Easy. Comfortable. But every time she laughs, every time she looks at me like that, I want more. And I have no idea what the hell I'm supposed to do about it.

Chapter twelve

Mandy

The apartment door clicks open just as I finish highlighting another paragraph for the

hundredth time. My highlighter squeaks across the page like it's as tired as I am.

I hear the thump of Nate's duffel hitting the floor, followed by the unmistakable sound of him cracking his neck. That was loud.

I call out from the guest room without looking up from my notes. "We win?"

"We did. Came back in the third. Townsend got a goal, I blocked a shot that probably cracked a rib, and Mikey fell into the penalty box trying to hop the boards."

I smile to myself but stay hunched over my flashcards.

A few seconds later, he appears in the doorway with two bottles of water, one already open. He tosses me the other.

"Nice assist," I say, catching it.

Nate grins, still in his post-game gear, sweatpants, a fitted Acers tee, baseball cap turned backward, and that low-key swagger that makes my brain short-circuit.

"We're both putting in the work tonight," he says.

I gesture to the sea of flashcards and outlines. "Yeah, well, my opponent is Bar Exam v. Sanity, and I'm getting bodied."

Nate walks over, leans on the chair behind me, and peers at my notes. "You color-coded again. I'm terrified and impressed."

"Welcome to becoming a lawyer. We're all just one paper jam away from a full breakdown."

He hums thoughtfully. "You've been hunched over this table for hours?"

"Yup. It's literally a pain in the neck."

His hands settle lightly on my shoulders. "Let me help."

I hesitate. "With torts or tension?"

"One's easier than the other."

I exhale, and before I can argue, his thumbs press into the knots in my shoulders. Firm. Warm. Focused. I melt into the touch before I even realize I'm doing it.

"Jesus," I mutter. "That's not fair."



## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"You're wound up like a goalie in overtime."

"It's bar prep. I'm allowed."

"Yeah, but you're not alone in this. You've got me now."

The way he says it sends a ripple down my spine.

His thumbs work slow circles along the base of my neck, moving up toward the edge of my scalp. It's innocent enough at first, but there's heat underneath. A current.

I close my eyes.

He leans in, close enough that I can feel the heat of his breath at my temple. "You smell like mint and stress."

"And you smell like AXE and ego."

He laughs. "Fair."

I glance over my shoulder again, teasing. "So... how do you celebrate after a win, usually?"

He smirks. "Cold beer and watching terrible movies I can quote by heart."

"Like what?"

"Point Break. Road House. Anything where someone gets thrown through a window. Helps burn off the post-game adrenaline, you know? Keeps me from bouncing off the walls all night."

I snort. "That explains so much."

"Hey, that stuff's elite."

"So you're telling me your post-game recovery involves shirtless brawls and bad one-liners?"

He grins. "If I'm doing it right."

I laugh, leaning back into his hands. "And here I thought you'd be the type to come home and wind down with cartoons or video games, not... Patrick Swayze doing roundhouse kicks."

"I'm a mystery," he says. "Layers."

"Like an onion."

"Like a sexy, humble onion."

I laugh again, biting my lip to stifle it. He leans closer, his breath warm against my ear.

"What about you? What's your post-study ritual?"

"Normally? Ice cream and one very judgmental episode of true crime."

"Judgmental how?"

"I talk to the screen. I yell at people. It's therapeutic."

He grins. "Remind me not to commit a crime near you."

"Remind me not to hang out with a guy who thinks he can out-snark me."

"Too late," he says, his voice dropping as his hands flex at my shoulders. "You're already losing."

"Am I?" I challenge.

## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

His lips brush my jaw. "Completely."

I shift slightly under his hands, just enough to glance over my shoulder at him.  
"You're really good at this, you know."

He dips his head, lips brushing my ear. "You have no idea what else I'm good at."

My breath hitches. "Is that a challenge?"

"Do you want it to be?"

I turn in the chair, eyes locking with his. "Maybe. Depends what I get if I win."

His mouth curves. "Anything."

My heart skips in my chest. "Bold offer."

He shrugs. "You bring out the risk-taker in me."

"I thought you were supposed to be the responsible one. Stay focused. No distractions."

"Then stop distracting me, Fields."

My lips part, caught between a laugh and something far more dangerous. "I'm not doing anything."

"Exactly. And it's ruining me."

I turn slightly in the chair, and suddenly we're face to face. I go still, every nerve suddenly on alert. His eyes drop to my lips.

The air shifts. Again.

I should stand up. I should create space. But instead, I stay perfectly still.

His fingers trail down my face and brush along my jaw.

I'm not breathing.

And then he kisses me.

His mouth takes mine like he owns it, confident, hungry, all heat and pressure. It's not soft. It's not sweet. It's a kiss that says he's done pretending he doesn't want me, and every inch of me answers back with a yes I'm too breathless to say out loud.

I kiss him back. God help me, I kiss him back.

The chair scrapes as I stand and he pulls me into him. My hands go to his solid, warm chest. His arms wrap around my waist, strong and sure, drawing me in until there's nothing between us but heat and want. The kiss deepens as his lips part mine with slow certainty, like he's learning me, mapping each response.

My fingers slide up to his neck, anchoring there, as if letting go might unravel me completely. He tilts his head slightly, his mouth moving with more skill now...teasing, claiming. It's not rushed, not desperate, but there's a hunger beneath it, a quiet ache that says he's been waiting to touch me like this.

I meet him with the same fire, answering every kiss like it's the only language I've ever known. Time stalls. There's just the warm press of him against me and the slow burn building between us, like the night itself is holding its breath.

"Damn," he breathes against my mouth. "You kiss like you mean it."

"I do," I murmur. "And you kiss like you've been waiting."

He smiles, lips brushing mine again. "I have."

"How long?"

"Since the hallway. That first day you moved in. You were holding a box and looked like you might murder someone with a highlighter. I was gone."

He kisses me again, slower this time, like he's savoring it. His fingers slip through mine, anchoring me in place while everything else around us drifts out of focus.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"You're dangerous," I whisper.

"So are you," he says, his voice low and hoarse. "But I've never wanted a risk more."

My whole body flushes with warmth. With want. With the terrifying, wonderful awareness that I might never kiss anyone else the same way again.

He backs me toward the futon, one hand sliding up my side, the other finding my hip. My pulse is everywhere. My brain is nowhere. We sink down together, slow and weightless, the kiss never breaking. I feel the soft give of the cushions beneath me, his body hovering just enough to keep us in that charged, breathless space. The room fades. All I can feel is his mouth, his hands, the warmth of him pressing into every nerve ending like he's rewriting how I experience touch.

"You drive me crazy, you know that?" he murmurs, lips brushing the corner of my mouth.

"Good crazy or bad crazy?"

His laugh is low and rough. "The kind where I can't stop thinking about doing very bad things to you. The kind that'll have you moaning my name and forgetting every single bar exam fact you ever learned."

"You say that like it's a problem."

"It is," he whispers, kissing along my jaw, "because every time I try to keep things easy between us... you go and look at me like that."

"Like what?"

He pulls back just enough to meet my eyes. "Like you want me as much as I want you."

My breath catches. "What if I do?"

His hand slides up my back, slow and certain. "Then we've got a problem. Because I don't think I'll be able to stop at just one kiss."

His shirt rides up slightly, my fingers brushing bare skin. I gasp. He groans.

We break apart, just enough to look at each other. His eyes are dark. Searching. "Tell me to stop."

I don't.

Not yet.

His lips find the curve of my neck, trailing fire across my skin. One of my hands finds his hair. The other presses to his chest, as if to steady myself, or maybe to memorize the shape of him.

We're breathing hard now. Lost.

His hand moves from my hip, slow and reverent, sliding up beneath the hem of my shirt until his palm settles over my breast. The fabric is thin, and the touch is firm but careful, exploratory. I forget to breathe for a second. I don't stop him. I can't. My body arches into it, craving the pressure and the warmth.

But there's tension in my chest, tight and coiled. I feel it even as I let him keep



touching me, this war between want and warning pulsing behind my ribs.

He senses it. His hand stills, his thumb brushing gently across the curve of me, not demanding, just waiting.

My eyes find his.

He pulls back just enough to look at me again. "Mandy."

I press my forehead to his. "I want this. I do. But I can't... not yet."

He nods instantly, pulling back, breathing like he just played a full game in overtime. "Okay."

I pull my shirt back down and smooth my hair. "Okay."

He runs a hand down his face, jaw tight with restraint. "You have no idea how badly I want to throw caution out the window and take you right here. But this doesn't mean a thing unless you want it just as much, without hesitation."

My chest aches. "Thank you."

He leans in, presses a firm kiss to my forehead. "Just so we're clear, I'm not backing off. Not until you tell me to."

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

And somehow, that makes it worse. Because I want him more than I want control.

I nod and start gathering my flashcards, but my hands are trembling.

And here's the problem.

Because every time I let him get closer, I don't want space.

I want everything.

And I'm scared I'll lose myself trying to have it.

What's worse is Allison would lose her mind if she knew.

So I shove the fear down. I sit back at the desk.

And I pretend like my body isn't still humming where he touched me.

But the truth is, every time he touches me or looks at me like that, I want him more, even though I know he's a player, I'm a virgin, and my sister would kill us both.

Chapter thirteen

Nate

"You look like crap, Jones. Late night?"

James claps a hand on my shoulder as I lace up for practice.

I grunt. "Just tired."

"Tired or twisted up over your hot neighbor?" Ethan smirks from the bench, balancing his stick on one knee.

I shoot him a look and drop my bag. "You wish."

But they're not wrong.

I haven't stopped thinking about Mandy since I walked out of that room last night.

Not just the kiss.

Not just her body pressed under mine.

Not just the way she whispered my name like she didn't know whether to pull me closer or push me away.

I haven't stopped thinking about her, period.

Coach Stephens blows the whistle and barks out drills. We hit the ice, running suicides and cross-rink passes until my legs burn. Still, I can't focus. Every time I try to dial in, my brain short-circuits with images of her lips, her laugh, the way her eyes went wide when my hand slid up her shirt and found those soft, perfect tits. And, how she arched into my palm even as her breath caught somewhere between wanting and not knowing if she should.

Fuck.

I adjust my helmet and push harder. Nina's watching from the boards.

She tracks every movement like a hawk with a psychology degree. I mess up a pass, and she doesn't even flinch. Just writes something on her clipboard. Probably: Nate is spiraling. See page 5 for coping tools.

After practice, Coach tells us to hit the showers and meet in the conference room for a group session with Dr. Nina.

Great.

Nothing like team therapy to cap off a mediocre skate.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

We file in. Nina waits at the front of the room with her calm smile and intimidating posture. I grab a chair in the back, arms stretching out.

"Today," she begins, "we're talking about commitment."

A few groans. One dramatic gasp from James, who clutches his chest and shouts, "Did someone say commitment? I thought this was hockey, not a lifetime supply of couple's counseling!"

Ethan snorts. "Relax, James. No one's asking you to give up your dating app rotation."

Mikey adds, "Yet."

Laughter ripples through the room, and even Nina cracks a smile.

"Not that kind of commitment," she says dryly, flipping her marker open. "I mean showing up. On the ice. For your team. For the game plan. For the moments that matter. Even when it's hard. Especially then."

I shift in my seat, her words needling a little too close to home.

"Commitment means trust," she continues. "It means consistency. It means deciding that your job isn't just about you. It's about the guy next to you."

Connor raises a hand. "Even when the guy next to you smells like a foot?"

Laughter. Nina smiles. "Especially then."

She keeps going, but I zone out. Not because I don't care. Because suddenly I do.

The thing is, I get what she's saying. About trust. About consistency. About being someone others can count on.

Hell, I live it on the ice.

But off the ice?

When was the last time I really showed up for something or someone?

Mandy shows up for herself every damn day. Studying for the bar. Working long hours. Carrying the pressure like it owes her rent.

And I offered her my spare room to study. Told myself it was the nice thing to do. But if I'm being honest, it was selfish. I want her. I want under that perfect control of hers. And yeah, I want into her pants. Coward.

"Questions?" Nina asks, looking around.

No one speaks. Most of the guys shift uncomfortably.

James raises a hand. "Yeah, I've got one. Are we allowed to commit to post-practice wings? Because I'm really good at that."

More laughter. Nina nods like she's amused, but she doesn't let the moment escape.

"Commitment shows up in the little things like blocking a shot, finishing your shift, or taking a hit to make a play. It starts there. So, what moments on the ice have you

held back? When did you hesitate to trust the guy next to you, or yourself? And why?"

There's a beat of silence before Mikey speaks up. "I pulled up early last week on a backcheck. I thought Ethan was going to cover, but I should've finished it."

Ethan lifts a brow. "I would've had it."

"Would you?" Mikey shoots back, grinning.

"Point is," Nina says, holding up her hand, "Mikey noticed. That's awareness. What else?"

Connor leans forward. "I've been overcommitting on my first shift and losing gas by the third. Trying to prove I'm still in first-line shape."

James chimes in, unusually sincere. "I've hesitated to drop the puck in tight. I'm thinking too much instead of trusting the system."

She nods. "That's real. Anyone else?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

I shift in my seat. “I second-guess reads when the pressure’s on. Especially since the trade. Still feels like I’ve got something to prove.”

Nina meets my eye and gives a small nod. “Awareness is the first step. The next is showing up, anyway.”

She straightens and clicks her marker. “So let’s lay it out. How can we adjust?”

Connor leans forward. “Maybe we rotate the second D-man up quicker on the pinch. Last game we hesitated and lost the zone.”

Ethan nods. “Yeah, or stagger the forecheck and give more room for read-and-react on the second wave.”

James, ever the jokester, actually sounds serious for once. “We also need to call switches earlier. That’s on me last game when Dillon and I both went puck-side.”

Nina gestures toward the whiteboard. “Let’s sketch it out.”

For the next few minutes, the room fills with markers squeaking and guys tossing out adjustments. Mikey diagrams a new look on the breakout. Parker suggests a tighter gap for closing space on the rush.

Coach Stephens remarks, “I like what I’m seeing here, men. Very impressive.”

I add my own thought. “If we tweak the weak side communication with just one word cues, it could tighten our recovery lanes.”



Nina beams. “Exactly. Commitment isn’t static. You adapt. You speak up. You trust.”

And somehow, those words stay with me even as the session ends and we all file out."

She looks right at me as she says it. Or maybe I imagine that part.

Either way, it lands.

\*\*\*

Back at my place, I drop onto the couch with a groan. My shoulder’s screaming, so I grab an ice pack and slap it on.

The group chat lights up.

Connor: Engagement party at my place. Saturday. 7pm. RSVP or be shunned. Singles, bring dates.

Parker: Can I wear my tux t-shirt again?

Haley: Only if I get to pick the bowtie.

Connor: Nate, bring a plus-one. Or James is assigning you one.

James: I have a spreadsheet of candidates.

Me: Hard pass.

James: Too late. The algorithm has spoken.

I set the phone down and close my eyes for a second.

A plus-one.

Nina's words are still echoing in my head. So is Mandy's laugh. Her voice. The way she always shows up for herself, no matter what kind of day she's had.

I know who my plus-one is, and it sure as hell won't be some puck bunny from James's roster.

I toss the ice pack into the sink, grab a snack and walk out of my place, heart hammering for no good reason.

I walk down the hall and knock.

## Page 54

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Mandy opens the door in leggings and a t-shirt. Hair up. Reading glasses on.

"Did I just break some sacred tort law by knocking during bar prep hours?" I ask, leaning against her doorframe.

She smirks. "Only if you don't come bearing snacks."

I hold up a bag of M&Ms. "I know my audience."

She laughs and steps aside to let me in. "You're lucky that's my weakness and I like surprises. What's up?"

I glance around, then back at her. "Connor and Haley's engagement party is next weekend."

"Oh, that's exciting."

"Yeah." I rub the back of my neck. "I want you to come. With me."

Her smile falters for a second. "As your neighbor?"

I step closer. "No. Not as my neighbor. As my date."

Her eyes search mine, wary but curious. "As your date, huh? That some kind of team hazing ritual?"

I grin. "If it is, I'm the one volunteering. No puck bunnies, no blind picks off James's

spreadsheet. I want you."

She lifts a brow. "I don't know if that's brave or stupid. My sister would kill us both." She folds her arms, still half in the doorway. "And honestly, I'm not sure it's a good idea. You've got a reputation. I'm studying for the bar. We live next door. A lot could go wrong."

I keep my tone easy, but I don't miss the flicker of hesitation in her eyes. "Or it could go right. You'll never know unless you say yes. It's just a party, not a federal deposition."

She stares at me for a beat, then changes the subject. "Hey, by the way, Kira's out on a blind date tonight. Her coworker set her up. Total ambush."

"Kira agreed to a blind date? That's bold."

Mandy laughs. "She's probably already texting me SOS but my phone is in the other room."

I chuckle. "Think she'll bail halfway through?"

"Only if the guy orders a well-done steak and drinks milk with dinner."

I groan. "Yikes. Yeah, she's ghosting that man by the appetizer."

We share a smile, the ease between us settling in again.

Then I clear my throat and meet her gaze. "So... you'll go on Saturday?"

Mandy hesitates again, searching my face for something I'm not saying out loud. But whatever she sees there must work, because she finally nods.

"Alright, Jones. You've got yourself a date."

I grin, cocky but steady. "Perfect. I'll pick you up at seven. Go back to studying."

As I leave, my head's already spinning with what the hell I just did.

And how it feels like the boldest move I've made in a long damn time!

Chapter fourteen

Mandy

"Is that your actual outfit, or did you steal it from a Victoria's Secret runway?"

## Page 55

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Nate's voice hits me the second I open the door to my apartment, and my cheeks flush.

I smooth my navy satin dress and smile. "You don't like it?"

He opens his mouth, then closes it. "I didn't say that. Just didn't realize I'd need backup to survive the night."

I grin. "Guess you should've worn armor."

He offers his arm. "Good thing I brought a weapon."

I chuckle. "Most guys call it their Johnson, their joystick, or their certified love handle. You call it a weapon?"

"He smirks. "A weapon in the best sense of the word, like a finely tuned instrument with devastating aim."

I shoot him a look. "That thing better be registered. Sounds like a public safety issue."

He winks. "Only dangerous if you're lucky."

With a laugh, I follow him toward the elevator, already excited from the banter.

We ride down to the garage, the air thick with anticipation and a touch of cologne, though thankfully, not enough to cause injuries. When we reach his black Camaro, he opens the door for me with a playful bow.

"So, think we'll survive this party?" he asks as we pull out of the garage.

I laugh. "Depends. Are there going to be strippers? Or just James and Dillon thinking they're God's gift to women again?"

"Honestly, that's worse," he mutters. "But hey, at least there's booze. And you. I think we'll survive."

\*\*\*

Inside, Connor's house is already packed, loud, and in action. The living room's been cleared for dancing, with a DJ spinning throwback tracks and uplighting bouncing off the walls. A tray of tiny gourmet tacos zooms past on a server's arm.

James and Dillon are already in the thick of it, surrounded by a pair of bottle-blond twins that look like they arrived straight from an NHL calendar shoot.

"Oh great," I murmur. "Puck bunnies in their natural habitat."

"Be careful," Nate warns, lips twitching. "James bites when threatened."

We weave into the crowd. I spot Priya and Lexi near the bar, all with drinks in hand. Ethan and Mikey asked them to go, along with Kira. Connor wanted more women there for the single guys. Priya squeals when she sees me.

"Mandy! You look like a goddess."

Lexi whistles. "Is that silk or sin?"

Nate answers, deadpan: "Definitely sin."

The girls cackle as we join them, and a round of introductions kicks off with some of the players standing nearby. Parker and Grace wave from across the room, already mid-laugh with Stacy and Tanner. Kira struts over, wearing a minidress and a smirk.

"Where's your blind date?" I ask, nudging her.

She rolls her eyes. "I faked a stomach flu after he ordered a Bud Light and tried to explain cryptocurrency to me."

Nate snorts. "Sounds like a keeper."

James saunters up with his arm around one twin and his eyes on Nate. "So. The bad boy brought a plus-one. Hell might be freezing."

"I brought a real date," Nate shoots back. "Being your date tonight, James, qualifies her for hazard pay."

The twin gasps, but James just cackles. "Mandy, how are you still breathing? Jones here just proved he's got some depth, calling you a real date."



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Lexi grins. "It's fine. Mandy's got her inhaler."

"You all suck," Nate mutters, though he's fighting a smile.

The music shifts and someone yells, "Oh hell yes!" as a ridiculous old-school rap song blasts through the speakers. Before I know it, James, Ethan, Alex, Connor and Mikey are on the dance floor.

James slides across the hardwood on his knees. Ethan moonwalks into a chair and nearly wipes out. Mikey breakdances...badly.

"This is a crime," Lexi declares. "Where's a cop when you need one?"

"You mean besides the fashion police?" Priya adds.

The girls are dying laughing, and before we know it, Ethan and Connor pull Nate onto the dance floor. All hell breaks loose. The guys start shouting the lyrics at the top of their lungs, jumping up and down like frat bros at a tailgate.

James spins in a circle, pumping his fists like he's headlining Coachella, while Ethan tries to do the worm and ends up face-planting into a throw pillow. Mikey leapfrogs over Connor, who's air-guitaring with a breadstick from the appetizer tray.

Kira and I whip out our phones, crying with laughter as we record the chaos. "This is going on the Acers group chat," Kira yells. "With zero context."

Connor yells the chorus like he's headlining a rock concert, fists pumping as he jumps

in time with the beat. Dillon throws himself backward and shouts, "Catch me!" as two confused puck bunnies try to hold him up while laughing hysterically.

Alex, calm no more, goes full Michael Jackson, moonwalking like he's got glitter socks and a fedora. Ethan and Mikey do synchronized air-saxophone solos with baguettes, while James adds dramatic body rolls like he's auditioning for Magic Mike: Acers Edition. The room erupts, Kira and I nearly dropping our phones from laughing as we capture every rowdy second.

Haley joins our group, grinning as she slides between me and Kira. She glances toward the dance floor where the guys are still goofing off. "Okay, that was either the best or worst boy band reunion ever," she laughs. Then she nudges me with her elbow, lowering her voice. "You and Nate are giving off serious 'something's up' energy tonight. Should we be worried?"

"Who, us?" I say, flashing an innocent grin and batting my lashes. "No, nothing. Just here for the tacos."

"Just making sure you're enjoying yourselves. But, I don't think we have tacos," she adds, raising her glass.

Before I can respond, the DJ's voice cuts through the music. "Alright, Acers family, this one goes out to the happy couple. Grab your person and slow it down."

The madness is interrupted by a slow song, and without warning, Nate grabs my hand.

"Come on."

"What...where?"

But he's already leading me onto the dance floor, sliding an arm around my waist.

It takes a second, but I fall into step with him.

His hand rests on my lower back, warm and possessive. "You clean up nice, Fields."

"You're not so bad yourself."

He chuckles. "That's it? I ditched James's striptease and I get 'not bad'?"

"Would you prefer 'devastatingly handsome with a side of cocky'?"

"That'll do."

We sway in silence to the music. The party continues around us, but here, it's just us.

"You didn't have to bring me tonight," I say softly.

"Yeah, I did, or I would've been stuck with one of the twin puck bunnies James dragged in. Not exactly my idea of a good time. Plus, I wanted to bring you."

His voice is low. Serious. I glance up at him.

"Because we're friends and I am so fun to be with?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

His jaw flexes. "Yeah, that. And maybe something else."

Before I can respond, my phone vibrates in my clutch. I glance down.

Allison.

I show him the screen. "She's FaceTiming. Should I answer?"

He smirks. "Nah. It's like she knows. Watching from the clouds."

I laugh. "She'd kill you if she knew you brought me."

He leans in. "Then let's give her something to roll her eyes at."

And then he kisses me.

Right there. Middle of the dance floor. Not soft. Not polite.

It's hungry. It's heat.

His lips claim mine like he's wanted this all night. And I kiss him back like I've forgotten every reason not to.

We break apart just as the song ends. Our friends are cheering or pretending not to watch.

He grabs my hand. "Come with me."

He pulls me down the hallway, past the noise, into a guest room. Door barely clicks before his hands are on my waist, tugging me in.

"Nate—"

"Say you haven't been thinking about that kiss since the last one. Say it."

I swallow. "I can't."

He grins. "Didn't think so."

Our mouths crash again. His hands slide up my sides, teasing the bare skin beneath my dress.

"You taste like champagne and trouble," he murmurs.

I grin against his mouth. "You are trouble."

"You like trouble."

I gasp as he backs me into the wall, lips trailing down my neck.

His mouth trails heat along my collarbone as his hands roam over the satin of my dress, pulling me closer until there's no space left between us. I wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers tangling in his hair as his mouth finds mine again. This kiss is dirtier. His body pins me to the wall, and I can feel every hard line of muscle, every bit of tension he's been holding back.

He palms my breast through the thin fabric, thumb brushing over my nipple until I gasp against his lips. My body arches into him on instinct, even though my brain screams caution. He's a player. I'm his ex's sister. And I'm... not exactly

experienced.

Still, I let him. Because the way he touches me is not just skilled, it's hot. And it lights something inside me I didn't know was waiting.

"You have no idea what I want to do to you," he growls in my ear. "Things that'll have you moaning my name, squeezing your thighs together, and begging me not to stop."

I shiver, breath catching.

He grins. "You like that idea?"

"Maybe," I murmur, pulling him back to my lips.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Footsteps echo outside the door. We both freeze, holding our breath. Just someone walking past. Then a toilet flushes.

We break out in laughter, the kind you can't hold back. Nate takes my face in his hands again and kisses me, deeper, rougher, like he's claiming every unsaid word between us.

I'm flustered, my heart is pounding, and my lips are tingling.

"Do all you hockeyplayerskiss like that?" I murmur, breathless.

He smirks, cocky as hell. "Only the ones who know what the hell they're doing."

I laugh, the sound low and stunned. "No wonder there's a whole damn fan club drooling over you guys."

He grins. "Good. Let 'em drool. Right now, I'm only interested in the girl in this hot blue dress."

"Good answer." I flash him a sly smile. "Might even earn you another round, if you play your cards right."

We return to the party flushed and pretending like we weren't just mauling each other like horny teenagers.

James raises a brow. "So, where'd you two disappear to?"

Nate grabs a drink. "Bathroom. Very complicated plumbing discussion."

"Must've been riveting," Kira says, smirking.

She nudges me. "Mandy, seriously, you're glowing. Did I see a little hallway disappearing act earlier?"

"Nothing happened," I say, too quickly.

Her smirk grows. "Uh-huh. Sure."

Grace swoops in just in time, passing out champagne. "Connor's about to give a toast. Everyone's gathering by the bar."

The DJ dims the lights and a spotlight hits Connor, already raising his glass.

"To the love of my life, the woman who somehow tolerates my locker room stench and still agreed to marry me. Haley, you're my forever line mate."

Everyone cheers. Haley covers her face, laughing through happy tears.

Glasses clink. James whistles and shouts, "To the guy who somehow landed the girl way out of his league. Connor, what's your secret, man?"

"Skill, Henderson, pure skill."

He grins, lifting his glass higher.

James adds. "To our captain, who leads by example on and off the ice, and to Haley, who somehow keeps him humble, sane, and looking like he has his life together. We should all be so lucky!"



Everyone applauds as Connor and Haley give James a hug and a high five.

Then the DJ cues up a slow song.

Nate leans into me again. "Round two?"

I smile, slipping into his arms. "I thought you'd never ask."

And as we sway under soft lights, his hands steady on my hips, I feel it again, that shift.

Something's changing.

And I'm not sure I'm ready for what it means...

### Chapter fifteen

Nate

It's quiet when I step inside. Not peaceful. Just... still.

Tossing my keys in the bowl by the door, I toe off my sneakers and glance around. The living room glows with the soft amber light of the floor lamp. My stomach growls, but I stop cold when I spot her.

Mandy.

Curled up on the couch, one arm draped over her notes, her head resting on a throw pillow, lips parted slightly like she fell asleep mid-thought. She's wearing one of those soft cotton Acers T-shirts she stole from my closet and those tiny sleep shorts that should be illegal.

I stand there like an idiot, watching her breathe.

My chest tightens.

She shifts slightly, a soft sound escaping her throat, and I step closer. Her highlighter is still clutched loosely in one hand, her laptop screen dimmed beside her. There are color-coded tabs in a law book on the floor.

Of course she studied herself to sleep.

I grab the blanket from the back of the couch and lean down to drape it over her. She stirs, blinking slowly, her lashes fluttering as she registers me.

"Nate?"

"Yeah, it's me. You passed out cold. Thought I should cover you up."

She yawns, then smiles sleepily. "You always come home this late?"

"Late night's just part of the job, and sometimes, a guy needs a few hours away from the noise to remember who the hell he is."

She shifts again, this time sitting up slightly. The blanket falls around her shoulders.

"Where were you?"

"Team thing. Post-dinner drinks. Dillon tried to do karaoke. I left before he started serenading the waitress."

Her mouth curves. "Coward."

"No, smart man."

She laughs, but it turns into a shiver. Without thinking, I sit down beside her. The blanket brushes my thigh.

She leans into me.

That's all it takes.

Her body fits against mine like it was made to. Warm and soft and mine, at least right

now.

My hand lifts to brush the hair from her face. "You should get to bed."

"I was cozy on the couch. I studied here since you weren't home."

"You'll be cozier in my bed."

She glances up, teasing. "Is that an invitation, Jones?"

My hand settles at her waist, fingers brushing bare skin where her shirt has ridden up.

"Not if you're gonna keep calling me Jones."

She leans in, her nose brushing mine. "What if I call you Captain Handsy?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

My lips twitch. "Only if you let me live up to the name."

And then she kisses me.

Not a soft kiss. Not a curious kiss.

This one's all heat and want and the frustration of a hundred lingering glances and almost-touches. My hand slides up her thigh, slow and claiming, until she gasps.

She pulls me closer, straddling my lap, and I let my hands roam over the curve of her hips, the small of her back. That T-shirt is thin, but not thin enough. I slide my hands beneath it.

"You're even hotter like this, stretched out across my legs and all mine."

She nods, breathless. "Yes."

I lift the shirt slowly, touching the strip of skin I reveal inch by inch until it clears her head. Her hair tumbles down her back as she sits in just her tiny sleep shorts and a bra that looks way too delicate for my current state of mind.

"Jesus, Mandy."

"That bad?"

I shake my head. "That good. That fucking good."

She laughs, nerves and heat all tangled up, and I reach for her again. My hands span her ribs, my thumbs brushing the swell of her breasts through lace.

"God, you're beautiful," I whisper.

Her fingers find the hem of my shirt and tug it up. I help her, yanking it over my head and tossing it aside. Her hands splay across my chest, exploring, tracing the lines of muscle like she's committing them to memory.

"I like this version of you," she says.

"Shirtless and desperate for you?"

"Exactly."

I grin and slide my hands down her back again, tugging her forward until our bodies press together. Her skin is warm against mine, and I kiss her like I'm starving. Her hands wind around my neck, her legs tightening around my waist.

I shift us, laying her back on the couch, half-covered by the blanket as I hover over her.

She pulls me down, mouth finding mine again, and I can feel her heart racing under my palm.

I trail kisses down her neck, along the curve of her shoulder, then lower. My mouth finds the top of her breast and she moans, arching into me.

"Jesus, Nate," she whispers, voice shaking. "You're going to kill me."

I grin against her skin. "There are worse ways to go."

Her laugh is breathless, delicious. "Cocky much?"

"Confident," I murmur, brushing my lips across her again. I take her hand and put it on my pants. "You feel that? That's what you do to me."

I dip lower, trailing kisses across the swell of her breasts. My teeth find the delicate clasp at the center of her bra, and I tug it open with a slow, deliberate bite. My mouth covers her, sucking gently, then harder, until her nipples peek and she cries my name like a prayer I never knew I needed to hear.

My hand glides up her thigh, slow and reverent, and I kiss her again, drinking her in. Her skin's warm beneath my palm, soft and begging to be touched. My fingers trail higher, sliding beneath the hem of her loose sleep shorts. She tenses when I reach the thin barrier of her panties, the heat of her nearly searing through the fabric. I touch her lightly at first, over the fabric, teasing, until she squirms under me. Then I slip my fingers in from the side, just enough to feel the slick heat of her, and my pulse slams in my throat. "Fuck, Mandy..." I murmur against her skin, voice low and wrecked. "You're so damn wet for me."

My fingers find her center, rubbing slow, lazy circles, and she unconsciously parts her legs, a soft sigh slipping from her lips.

But then she stiffens.

Not much. Just enough.

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Enough to make me freeze.

Her fingers tighten on my shoulders.

"Nate..."

I lift my head. "Yeah?"

She bites her lip. Her voice is soft, almost too soft.

"I want you... just not yet."

I still.

The air between us goes quiet.

And then I press a kiss to her temple.

"Okay."

She blinks. "Okay?"

I nod. "Then I'll wait. Just don't make me wait forever."

I roll off her gently, pulling the blanket up over both of us. She settles against my chest like it's the most natural thing in the world.



We lie there, her fingers tracing light circles on my abs. My hand rests on her hip, not moving, just feeling her there.

The fire's still burning in my blood, but I breathe through it.

Because she's not just another hookup.

She's Mandy.

And she's worth waiting for.

Even if she drives me insane doing it.

Even if every part of me wants more.

After a few quiet minutes, I exhale hard and push up from the couch.

"I should cool off before I melt this couch."

She gives me a sleepy smile, curling deeper under the blanket.

I head to the kitchen, grab a couple bottles of water, and then raid the pantry for the big bag of popcorn. I dump a generous heap into a bowl and carry everything back to the living room.

"Figured you could use some nourishment," I say as I set the bowl on the table and hand her a bottle of water. "Bar exam fuel, right?"

She grins, sitting straight up. "You just wanted an excuse to keep me here longer."

"Not denying it."

We sit like that for a while, sharing handfuls of popcorn and watching the flickering light from the muted TV across the room.

Then, out of nowhere, I ask, "Can I ask you something personal?"

She looks up at me. "Sure."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

I shift slightly to face her. "You said you were waiting. That you want it to mean something. Was it always like that for you?"

She hesitates, then nods. "Yeah. I don't know... I guess I always knew I wasn't going to be the hookup type. There was never anyone I wanted to give all of myself to and risk getting crushed over. Not just physically. Emotionally too."

I nod, slowly. "Makes sense."

She tucks her legs under her. "My sister was the wild one. Party girl. Boys. Drinking. Some people didn't respect her, especially when we were in college. It changed as she got older, but I saw what it did to her back then. And I didn't want to be a cautionary tale. I just... I held back. I guess I figured if the right person came along, I'd know."

"And no one came close?"

She shrugs. "No."

The air stills for a moment. She quickly adds, "Not that I mean..."

"No, I get it," I say. And I do. "But, didn't you ever just want to have some fun and get some experience?"

"I had my fair share of fun, but I never handed over the full-access pass. Your turn. What about you?"

I exhale and lean back into the couch. "College was a lot of fun. I had some hookups and a few short-term relationships, nothing long-lasting. Hockey came first, always. Women liked the status, the attention, the lifestyle. And hell, when I was younger, I liked being wanted. I took advantage of it. Not proud or ashamed, just honest. It was instant gratification and it was great, but now it leaves me... I don't know, empty."

Mandy nods like she understands.

"Sometimes I wonder if the other guys feel it too. I mean, we joke and boast and talk trash in the locker room, but deep down, I think a lot of them feel the same. Maybe not James. He seems to thrive in the madness."

That earns a soft laugh from her. "James is a fun and exciting mess."

"Exactly."

She rests her head on my shoulder. "Do you ever think about when the right time is? To let someone in for real?"

"Yeah. I think about it more than I used to. Before, I didn't want the complication. The distraction. But lately, I'm starting to think the right person isn't a distraction, they're the anchor."

She hums softly. "Maybe it's about timing and the person. I think both have to align."

"Maybe." I glance down at her. "I never thought I'd be into a girl who uses color-coded tabs and finds tort law sexy."

"Excuse you, tort law is riveting."

"If you say so."

We sit in a comfortable silence, until she glances at the clock.

"Holy crap, it's one a.m.?"

I glance over. "Yup."

She stands slowly, grabbing her hoodie. "I should get to bed."

I walk her to the door. Before she steps into the hall, I catch her wrist.

"Mandy?"

She turns.

I pull her in for a kiss. "You really know how to drive a guy crazy, don't you?"

She smiles, soft and real. "Good. You deserve it."

As she walks down the hall, I close the door, lean against it, and exhale.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Yeah. Whatever this is, I'm way past the point of pretending it doesn't matter.

### Chapter sixteen

Mandy

Nate's apartment smells like garlic and roasted tomatoes when I walk in, but not even the promise of takeout can cut through the knot tightening in my chest. My bag slips off my shoulder and hits the floor with a thud that mirrors the headache pounding behind my eyes.

He's leaning against the kitchen counter, sleeves pushed up and a faint sheen of post-practice fatigue still on him. He grins when he sees me. "Hey, Little Fields. Saved you the good eggplant parm."

I nod stiffly. "Thanks."

He pauses mid-step, reading me in that way he does. "You okay?"

I force a smile. "Long day."

He peeks into the takeout containers on the counter. "Well, the food's hot, the beer's cold, and the study room has your name on it."

I walk toward the kitchen, stiff and exhausted, my limbs dragging like they're underwater.

He watches me for a second, then says lightly, "You know, you've spent more nights here this week than your actual apartment. Should I start charging rent?"

I freeze.

It's meant as a joke. I know that. But the fuse in me is already lit.

My head snaps up. "Is that your way of saying I'm around too much? Because if I'm suffocating you, feel free to say it without the sarcasm. Or take the friggin puck away from your front door and I won't come in."

Nate's eyebrows shoot up. "Whoa, Mandy! No. That's not it."

"God, do you even take anything seriously? Or is it all just jokes and easy nights and hockey practices that don't require real life?"

He blinks. "Okay. That's not fair."

"Yeah? Well, neither is the bar exam! Or my job, or my family's constant expectations! Or trying to be perfect all the time while pretending none of it's crushing me."

He takes a step closer, brows pinched. "What the fuck, Mandy? It was a joke. I like you being here. That's all it was."

"Then maybe try acting like it means something! Or don't."

His jaw tightens, but he stays calm. "It does. Mandy, you know I'm into you. But something else is going on right now. So talk to me."

My hands are already shaking. I grab my bag. "I need air."

"Mandy—"

"Don't. Please. Just... let me go."

I'm out the door before he can stop me, the hallway spinning. I barely register the elevator ding or the streetlights flaring against the night sky. My lungs feel tight. My eyes burn. I start walking, no destination in mind, only the ache in my chest pushing me forward.

A few minutes later, I hear footsteps behind me.

He's not calling my name. He's not chasing.

He's just... there.

Silent. Steady. A few paces back.

I walk a block. Then another. Then turn toward the quiet side street that leads to the benches overlooking the river.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

When I sit, he doesn't speak. He waits...a few feet away.

The silence stretches until I can't stand it anymore.

"I'm scared."

My voice cracks, brittle and broken.

He sits beside me, careful not to crowd me. His presence is warm and grounding.

"Of what?"

I stare at the rippling water. "Of failing. Of not being good enough. Of becoming someone I don't recognize just to meet everyone else's expectations."

He doesn't answer, so I keep going. "My parents don't say it out loud, but I can see it. They want another success story. Allison was the wild one. Now she's the married one, the settled one. And I'm the one who's supposed to make good on everything. But I feel like I'm drowning."

My hands shake in my lap. "And when I'm with you... it feels good. Too good. Like I'm forgetting the pressure. Like I'm losing myself in you. And I'm scared that one day I'll wake up and I won't know who I am anymore. Just a player's girlfriend. A footnote. A notch on his belt."

He's quiet for a long moment. Then he says, voice low but fierce, "You really think I see you as a notch on my belt? That's messed up and ridiculous... and insulting."

I close my eyes. "I guess not. I just know I can't afford to lose myself. Not when I've worked so hard to get here."

He shifts beside me, and I feel the heat of his hand as he gently touches my knee. "Mandy. Look at me."

I do.

His voice is low and raw. "I don't want you to disappear into me. I want to stand beside you. To watch you become whoever the hell you're meant to be, and cheer so damn loud when you do."

Tears flood my eyes. He doesn't flinch.

"You think I've got it easy. That hockey is just skating and scoring and no stakes. But I've been traded. Injured. Dropped into cities where I don't know anyone. And you know what scares me the most?"

I shake my head.

He leans closer. "Never having something real to lose."

My pulse kicks up hard.

"I've never had someone I was terrified to screw things up with," he says. "Until now."

The tears spill over, hot and silent.

He doesn't move to kiss me.

He just cups my cheek and brushes a tear away with his thumb.

"You're not alone in this. Not anymore."

That's what breaks me.

I press my face into his shoulder and let myself cry. For the pressure. For the fear. For all the ways I've been trying to be strong for too long.

He holds me. Quietly. Steadily.

No jokes. No lines.

Just him.

Just Nate.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

When I finally pull back, my head feels clearer.

We sit there, the distant rush of traffic filling the quiet.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Don't be. You're allowed to hit a breaking point. I'd be more worried if you didn't."

"Why did you follow me?"

"Because letting you walk these streets alone would make me a damn idiot, and I'm not that guy."

I smile, just barely. "Again, you're not what I expected."

"Good. I plan on keeping you on your toes."

"Mission accomplished," I mutter.

"Careful," he says, grinning, "you keep poking the bear like that, and he may bite."

"That a promise or a threat?"

He leans in a little, voice low. "You tell me."

I roll my eyes, but my heart isn't quite ready to slow its rhythm.

"You always this charming after a fight, or is this a special edition?"

"Only for you, Little Fields. You've got me pulling out my best material."

"Tragic. That was your best?"

He gets up and steps in front of me. "Nah. My best is reserved for when you stop dodging what's right in front of you."

I smirk, playing it cool. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He lets out a low laugh. "Yeah? Well, you're not exactly subtle, and lucky for you, I don't stop until I get what I want."

And somehow, with that stupid cocky smile and the heat still simmering in his gaze, I know he means every word.

He pulls me up and we start walking again, slowly.

This time, I let our shoulders brush.

Neither of us speaks much. We don't need to.

When we reach our building, he stops.

"You okay to go in?"

I nod. "Yeah."

We ride the elevator in silence, his arms wrapped around me like he's holding something fragile. When the doors slide open on our floor, I step out first and say

quietly, "I'll just grab my bag from your place. I think I need some space tonight to relax and not study."

He nods, searching my face. "At least eat something first or take some of the food. You must be starving."

I nod, softening. "Okay. I'll grab something. Thanks."

As I head to the bathroom to splash water on my face, Nate disappears into the kitchen. By the time I return, he's already packed up a plate of eggplant parm and garlic knots, tucked neatly into a to-go container.

## Page 66

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

I take it from him, our fingers brushing.

"Thanks," I say, voice soft.

"Anytime," he says. "Get some rest."

\*\*\*

Inside, the quiet of my apartment feels different.

Not empty.

Not lonely.

Just... still.

And for the first time in weeks, I let myself believe that maybe I don't have to do this alone.

Maybe I'm not losing myself.

Maybe I'm finding a new version of me.

One who can be brilliant and brave, and still have someone standing beside her.

Maybe he's the anchor.

Maybe I'm enough.

Even when I break.

Chapter seventeen

Nate

"You ever been tackled by a seven-year-old wearing glitter sneakers?" I ask as I hold the gym door open for Mandy.

"Not recently," she says, eyeing the colorful raucous inside. "But I guess today's a good day to change that."

We step into the LifeSpark Kids Center, the place already buzzing like a beehive. The team decided to do a volunteer day instead of practice, and Coach figured it would be good PR and even better therapy for our head game.

Mandy pauses at the entrance, her eyes scanning the carnival of art supplies, soccer balls, and sugar-fueled energy. Kids dart around like pinballs, a few already clinging to players' legs. Somewhere, someone squeals.

"This is your idea of a relaxing afternoon?" she teases.

"Chaos builds character," I say, patting her back. "Let's go find our name tags before someone recruits you for dodgeball."

James jogs by in full fairy costume, complete with tutu and wings, getting chased by three kids waving foam swords.

"Good luck, Your Highness!" I shout.



"They're savages!" he yells back. "I demand backup!"

Mandy laughs, that soft, surprised kind that hits me square in the chest.

We find our name tags near the volunteer table. Kira and Mikey are already arguing over who spilled the entire bin of googly eyes. Mikey looks like he just stepped out of a glitter explosion.

"I didn't even touch the cart!" he swears.

Kira points to his face. "You have Elmer's glue on your eyebrow. Your defense is invalid."

## Page 67

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Mandy leans into me. "This is already the best thing I've seen all week."

I grin. "Wait until the cookie decorating disaster starts. That's when the frosting war breaks out."

We split off into stations. Mandy gets the reading-and-career-goals corner, while I end up in charge of mini floor hockey with Dillon.

Half an hour in, I glance over between shifts and catch Mandy kneeling next to a little girl in pink glasses who's holding up a homemade "Future Lawyer" sign.

Mandy's laughing, animated, nodding as the kid rattles off reasons why she wants to "argue for justice and make the bad guys pay."

I lean on my stick and watch them for a second.

She doesn't see me.

But I see her.

"You're really good at this," I hear her say gently to the little girl in pink glasses, who's holding a stack of construction paper briefs and a glitter-covered toy gavel.

"Do you really think so?" the girl asks shyly.

"Absolutely. You laid out your case better than most first-year law students," Mandy says with a warm grin.

The girl giggles, puffing up with pride. "I wanna be a lawyer like you. Or maybe a judge. Then I can bang the hammer."

"Gavel," Mandy corrects softly. "But yeah. It's yours to bang. Just make sure you listen first. The best judges listen more than they talk."

"That's hard. I talk a lot."

"Me too. But I learned it's okay to be both strong and loud, and still good at hearing other people."

The girl leans in. "Do people ever not take you serious? 'Cause you're a girl?"

Mandy's smile doesn't waver. "All the time. But that just makes proving them wrong feel even better."

"You think I can really do it?"

"I know you can. You already are."

The girl nods fiercely and hugs her.

And fuck, I fall a little harder.

\*\*\*

"Why is James on the roof?" Mandy asks an hour later, holding a paper plate covered in frosting and crushed Oreos.

I follow her gaze out the gym window.

"Technically, it's not the roof. It's the storage shed. And technically, he lost a bet with Mikey."

"So naturally he had to climb up there in a tutu and sing Let It Go."

"Detroit Acers tradition. You wouldn't understand."

She shakes her head. "Y'all are unhinged."

"Accurate."

James belts the chorus with impressive commitment. A few of the kids join in. One little boy is conducting with a popsicle stick.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Kira walks by holding a spray bottle labeled “Emergency Glitter Control.”

"What'd I miss?" she asks.

"James is being James."

"Cool. That tracks."

Back inside, Mandy helps a few kids finish their crayon resumes for their "Dream Job Wall." I bring over a juice box and set it next to her.

"For when the litigation stress kicks in."

She looks up, cheeks flushed, a purple marker smudge on her wrist. "This is more intense than law school orientation. One kid asked if I know how to sue Santa."

I sit beside her. "Well? Can we?"

"Only if there's negligence involved."

I nudge her shoulder. "That's my girl."

Her smile flickers.

Yeah. That might've slipped out too easy.

But she doesn't flinch.

Instead, she dips a finger into the green frosting and swipes it across my nose.

I blink. "Oh, you wanna play dirty?"

"Consider it a cross-examination."

"Objection."

"Overruled."

Before I can recover, her finger swipes another dab of frosting onto my cheek.

I narrow my eyes, dip mine in the container, and get her right below the chin.

"Retaliation."

"Unethical conduct," she accuses, laughing as she scoots back.

"You're the one who opened arguments with frosting."

She grabs a napkin and throws it at me. "Sustained."

I lunge playfully like I might go in for more, but she holds her hands up in mock surrender, giggling. The kids around us giggle too, sensing the game without knowing the context.

James passes by, smirking. "Careful, you two. That's how glitter baby rumors start."

Mandy laughs so hard she snorts. "Let me guess, you speak from experience?"

"Let's just say, frosting is a gateway."

Mandy turns to me, wiping her cheek. "I need a lawyer. This is clearly harassment."

I grin, licking frosting off my thumb. "You started it. I'm just defending myself."

"With frosting?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"Like a man on a mission to win a war with sugar."

We both crack up.

I haven't laughed this hard in weeks.

I know I'm done for. I hear her giggle again as the little girl beside her tugs at her sleeve, asking for help gluing sparkles to a cardboard crown. Mandy kneels to help, laughing as glue ends up more on her hands than the crown. She's glowing, not from glitter, but from the kind of warmth that sneaks under your ribs. Yeah. I'm wrecked.

A little while later, we rotate stations again. Mandy ends up with Coach Stephens in a circle of high school kids, a banner reading "Planning Your Future" hanging overhead. They're doing some kind of goal-setting game with index cards with LifeSpark t-shirts and mugs as incentives.

"Alright," Mandy says, holding up a mug. "Whoever shares a personal goal and one step to get there, gets a prize."

The teens laugh, and a few raise their hands. One boy talks about wanting to be the first in his family to go to college. A girl says she wants to be a nurse because she used to help take care of her grandma. Coach nods along, chiming in with encouragements.

Mandy listens like it's the most important thing she's heard all day. When one shy kid mumbles that he's not sure what he wants, she leans forward and says, "That's okay too. You've got time to figure it out. But today, let's pick one thing that makes



you curious. Just one."

He perks up, scribbles engineering on his card, and Coach leans in with a nod. "That's a great start, man," he says. "Smart minds build the world."

Next to them, I'm working with middle-schoolers, helping them build spaghetti-and-marshmallow towers while sneaking in lessons on teamwork and strategy.

"Mr. Nate, is it cheating if we tape the base?"

"Yes," I say. "I appreciate that you don't want to cheat, but you just pitched me a loophole so smooth, I almost hired you as my agent."

They laugh and dive back in. I catch Mandy glancing over, watching me pretend to referee a marshmallow collapse.

She grins.

And I swear it feels like we're already playing for the same team.

\*\*\*

The day winds down with a talent show that somehow turns into the highlight of the afternoon. Mikey juggles oranges while standing on one leg, nearly slipping but recovering with a bow that gets loud cheers. A high school girl follows up with a cartwheel, then a spontaneous roundoff that sends glitter flying from her shirt.

James takes the stage next, dragging Kira along with him. "Fairy ballet duet," he announces dramatically. Kira glares but goes along, doing exaggerated twirls while James tiptoes like a rhinoceros in sneakers. The kids go wild.

Coach Stephens is called out by name from the audience. “Coach! Coach! You gotta do something!”

He rolls his eyes, then walks to the center, lifts his hand, and executes a single, slow dab. That’s it. No words. No extra moves.

The place erupts. Kids chant his name like he’s a pop star.

I end up helping two boys with a goofy dance we call the “Penalty Box Shuffle.” It involves shuffling sideways, stick-handling an invisible puck, and taking dramatic falls like we’re being tripped. Mandy records the whole thing.

"This needs to go viral immediately!" she cheers.

It’s hilarious.

And it’s perfect.

Mandy ends up singing a duet with a girl named Sasha who wants to be a pop star. They belt a Taylor Swift song like they’re headlining Madison Square Garden. They are off-key, full volume, and absolutely fearless.

After the applause dies down, and the milk and snacks are passed out to the kids, I walk over to where Mandy is helping clean up the art table.

"You, Little Fields, are a menace with a glue stick and a microphone."

She smirks, brushing a stray sequin off her jeans. "Just trying to leave my mark."

I watch her for a second. She looks tired but radiant. Happy in a way that has nothing to do with me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

And everything to do with who she is.

"You were great with them today."

She shrugs. "Kids are easier than adults. They don't fake things. They just... are."

I nod.

Then I say, without thinking, "You'd be a great mom someday."

She blinks.

And for a moment, I want to take it back. Too soon, too heavy.

But she doesn't freak out.

She just looks at me, really looks, like she's seeing something in me she hadn't let herself see before.

Then she says, softly, "You'd be a good dad."

That hits harder than anything.

I clear my throat. "Guess we'd make a solid team."

Her lips quirk. "Dangerous combo."

"Unstoppable," I grin.

And just like that, we're back to easy and light. To whatever this thing is we're building.

I don't know where it's going.

But today made me want to find out even more.

Every damn messy, cupcake-frosted, glitter-covered step of the way.

Chapter eighteen

Mandy

It's been months of late-night study breaks that turn into make-out sessions I pretend not to crave.

He hasn't pushed for more, but he doesn't have to. Nate's always there, waiting in the wings, like temptation with a six-pack and patience.

And I've been holding the line. Mostly.

Because no matter how badly I want to give in, my sister's voice is always in my head, reminding me he's off-limits, reminding me what happens when you blur lines you can't take back.

And he's still a hockey player. And we all know about hockey players.

There's a knock at my door.

“Who is it?”

"Pack a bag, Little Fields. You've just been drafted for a bye-week getaway."

I open the door, eyebrows already raised. Nate's standing there in jeans, a plain black tee that hugs him like sin, and that cocky smile that should come with a warning label.

"Drafted? Is that what we're calling kidnapping now?"

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

He doesn't flinch. Just leans on the doorframe like he has all the time in the world. "Swimsuit, something for dinner out, the rest causal, and an appetite. You've got ten minutes."

"That's all I get? No itinerary? No consent form?"

"Nope. You said you like surprises. And I like bossing you around. Win-win."

I fold my arms. "I have work, bar prep..."

He steps closer, voice softer. "You've been busting your ass. Let me take care of you this weekend. One night. Just say yes."

God help me, I want to.

"Okay. I could use it."

Twenty minutes later, I'm buckled into the passenger seat of his Camaro, my overnight bag in the back, and my stomach full of butterflies that have nothing to do with travel.

The airport is surprisingly quiet, considering it's a Saturday. Nate parks, tosses me a devilish smile, and grabs my hand like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Still not telling me where we're going?" I ask as we head toward security.

"Nope. But you're gonna love it."

TSA is its usual brand of awkward, made better by the fact that Nate gets flagged for a protein bar and proceeds to make a whole production about it.

"Don't confiscate it," he says to the agent. "She gets hangry. I fear for my life."

"You fear for your life?" I repeat as we collect our bags. "You have a hundred pounds on me."

"Women who are hungry are like vicious bears. Very, very scary."

I shake my head, but I'm grinning as we head to the gate. I try guessing destinations while we wait, and he shoots down every theory with increasingly ridiculous lies.

"We're going to Antarctica. I heard penguins love lawyers."

"Nice try. But obviously, we are on a plane to Missouri."

"Admit it. You're intrigued."

"Fine. Mildly. Maybe."

Onboard, he pulls out a snack I didn't know I needed, the exact protein bar I grab when I'm stressed.

"You're unsettlingly observant," I say, taking it.

He smirks. "It's cute how you think this is a new development."

By the time we land, I'm relaxed in a way I haven't felt in weeks. The air is warmer, the sun softer, and the landscape greener than home.

After about two hours or so in the rental car, I see a sign that says Lake of the Ozarks. We drive along a winding road lined with trees bursting in color until we pull into an elegant but cozy cabin nestled at the edge of a lake. It's like something out of a storybook: warm wood, big windows, and a wraparound porch.

I blink. "Nate, this place is gorgeous."

He shrugs, like it's no big deal. "Figured you deserved something nice."

"You planning to kill me here?"

"Only with pleasure."

My mouth drops open, and he just walks away, laughing.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"Have you been here before?"

"Yeah, when I was young. I have cousins that live a few hours from here."

We get our keys and he shows me inside, drops our bags, then turns with that same mischievous glint. "Come on. There's one more thing."

I follow him around back, and that's when I see it...a sleek black motorcycle parked beside the porch.

"Tell me that's not for show."

He tosses me a helmet. "You ever been on one?"

"No. And that sounds like a terrible idea."

"You trust me, don't you?"

I hesitate, then tighten my grip on the helmet. "God help me."

Nate chuckles. "Put on a jacket, strap on the helmet, and let's go for a ride, Little Fields. I promise you won't regret it."

\*\*\*

The ride is pure adrenaline, with my arms wrapped tight around him, and the rumble of the bike beneath us. We cut through winding roads like we have no destination but

each other.

I laugh out loud at one curve, feeling more alive than I have in months.

He pulls off at a scenic overlook, shuts the engine down, and we take off our helmets. We just sit there, breathing it in. Trees stretch out in every direction, and the lake glistens below us.

"Okay," I say. "That was... reckless. And amazing."

He turns to me, smile softer now. "Told you I'd take care of you."

I don't know if it's the air, the ride, or him, but something in me unlocks.

"I needed this," I whisper. "More than I knew."

He leans in and kisses me. Slow. Sure. Like he's claiming something he's already earned.

When he pulls back, his voice is low.

"You're safe with me. Always."

And in that moment, I believe him.

\*\*\*

We get back to the cabin and take turns showering. I pull on a soft sundress and swipe on a little mascara, nerves fluttering in my chest as I meet him by the door.

He's wearing a crisp button-down and jeans, hair neatly tousled, sleeves rolled.

Effortlessly sexy.

"You clean up well," I say.

He grins. "You haven't seen anything yet."

The restaurant is tucked beside the lake, glowing with candlelight and low music. Everything feels slowed down, like the rest of the world doesn't exist.

We order wine and appetizers. I offer him a bite of mine and he leans forward, catching my finger with his lips as he takes it.

A tiny gasp escapes me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

He just smirks. "What? Thought you liked surprises."

"That one had a delayed effect."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Our server is cheerful and discreet, bringing us a pair of entrées that smell incredible. Mine is a creamy pasta dish, and his a perfectly grilled steak. We take our time, laughing over shared bites, the food rich and comforting.

As the meal goes on, the playful air softens into something quieter.

"How are you really doing, Mandy?" he asks, voice low.

I twirl my wineglass, then sigh. "Honestly? Overwhelmed. Grateful. Tired. All of it. Sometimes I feel like I'm sprinting and still falling behind."

"You don't have to be perfect. Not with me. I don't want perfect, I want you. Real, messy, brilliant you."

Tears sting behind my eyes, and I look down at my plate, then back at him. "That might be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

He leans closer, his thumb brushing mine across the table. The comment sends a warmth through me so intense I nearly forget where I am, and a sweet ache blooms low in my belly. My heart thuds wildly and I'm caught in a heady daydream of us, of this thing between us turning into everything...until the server reappears with a

dessert tray.

"For the sweetest part of the evening," he says with a wink.

We both lean forward, and Nate points at the richest-looking option, a molten chocolate lava cake with vanilla bean gelato and berries. "That one," he says. "No way we're not ending the night with something sinful."

We share it from one plate, passing the spoon back and forth, fingers brushing, laughter bubbling up between bites.

"I might have to marry this cake," I murmur.

"Better make it quick before I propose first," he deadpans.

Hold on...what? Did he just say that?

\*\*\*

We leave the restaurant walking close together, arms brushing. The night is cool, but I feel lit up from the inside, like I've just lived inside a dream.

The drive home is low key, singing to the radio and talking about nothing. When we arrive back at the cabin, we sit outside by the fire pit, wine glasses refilled, wrapped in a shared blanket. The stars are scattered above us, the lake a still mirror of light.

"Can I ask you something?" I say.

He nods. "Anything."

"Why me? Out of all the girls you've known..."

He doesn't let me finish. "Because you see me. You challenge me. You make me want more. I've been with women before, yeah. Some were nice. Some were fun. None of them made me feel like I was actually becoming a better man. You do."

My heart stutters. "I never thought I'd fall for a hockey player. Especially one who used to date my sister."

"Yeah. About that, I didn't expect it either. But here we are. And I don't want this to be temporary. I don't want just sex, Mandy. I want everything with you. And for the record, I never slept with your sister. We were young, went out senior year of high school, but it never went that far. If that weirds you out, I get it. But I need to know, how do you feel about it? About us?"

I take a breath, searching his eyes. "I never thought I'd like you this much," I admit. "Not with everything going on, not with my sister in the picture. But I do. And yeah, maybe Allison would freak out, but that's her problem. You're the one I want, Nate. This means something to me. You do."

His jaw clenches slightly, as if holding something back.

"I've never had something I was scared to lose until now."

My throat tightens. "I'm ready. For all of it."

He doesn't move right away. He just watches me, like I'm the only thing that matters in the world.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

And tonight, I think I might believe I am.

We carry our wine glasses to the kitchen, setting them in the sink. Nate steps in front of me, lifts me effortlessly by the hips, and settles me on the counter. He moves between my legs until we're almost eye to eye, his palms braced on either side of my thighs.

"You drive me crazy, you know that?" he murmurs.

I lean in. "You're not so easy to ignore yourself."

His lips crash against mine, hot and hungry, but there's a tenderness underneath, like he's holding back just enough to remind me I matter. The kiss still makes my toes curl, but it's different this time. More deliberate. Like he's memorizing me. His hands slide along my hips, anchoring me as his mouth takes its time, his tongue exploring, tasting, and teasing.

Heat swells between us. I unfasten the top few buttons of his shirt, curiosity and want humming through me, then slide my hand across his bare chest. His muscles flex under my touch, warm and solid and so very real.

"You like what you feel, Little Fields?" he teases, voice low and rough.

I smile against his jaw and whisper, "You feel amazing. All that muscle should be illegal. And you're not hard to look at either, Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome."

His grin is wicked. "Neither are you. But fair warning, I may bite or nibble when

provoked."

"Maybe I want you to."

He groans and kisses me deeper, mouth hot and insistent. His hands trail up my thighs, stopping just at the hem of my dress, fingers pressing gently as if asking a question without words. Every nerve is alive. Every inch of me wants him closer.

"You're gonna ruin me," he murmurs against my neck.

"You started it," I whisper back, tugging him even closer. He slides his hands beneath my dress, palms skimming up my thighs, coaxing a shiver from deep inside me. When his fingers brush over the thin fabric of my panties, he groans low in his throat. "Jesus, you're burning up. That for me?" he whispers, voice thick.

I bite my lip and nod, barely able to breathe. "All for you," I say. He presses a kiss just beneath my jaw, slow and devastating. "Fuck, Little Fields... you're gonna undo me."

I grin, breathless and bold. "Good. Maybe I like the idea of wrecking you."

His eyes flash with something fierce, reverent. "Then I'm all yours."

He lifts me off the counter like I weigh nothing and carries me to the bedroom, never breaking eye contact.

The world narrows to this moment, just him and me.

And this moment is everything I hoped it would be.

"You sure?"



I nod, but he doesn't move.

"Mandy."

"I want you," I whisper, my voice trembling. "I trust you."

His whole expression shifts. Like I gave him something sacred.

He kisses me again, like a promise. Gentle, reverent, unhurried.

When we reach the bed, he puts me down. I'm standing there, heart racing, hands unsure.

"If we do this," he says softly, "I'm not going to be able to pretend it's casual. And I don't want your first time to be a one-and-done. Not when it's you. Not when it's me with you."

"It's not," I tell him. "Not for me either."

The next kiss is deeper. His hands skim my waist, steady and strong, grounding me.

He slides his hands under the hem of my sundress again. "Okay if I...?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

I nod, lips parted.

He lifts it slowly, and I shiver as the cool air hits my skin. My bra is navy lace, something I wore without thinking. Now, it feels like it matters.

His thumbs trail under the band as he kisses my collarbone. “You’re beautiful, Mandy. So fucking beautiful.”

I shiver. “You’ve seen girls half-naked before.”

“None of them were you.”

I can’t breathe. Can’t think.

He kisses my shoulder and reaches for the clasp. He unhooks it slowly, letting it slide off my arms. I instinctively move to cover my chest.

“Hey.” He presses a kiss to my temple. “Look at me.”

I do.

“You don’t have to hide. Not from me.”

I lower my arms slowly.

“You okay?”

“Just... nervous.”

“We don’t have to do anything,” he says. “We can stop, cuddle, order pizza...”

“I want this,” I interrupt. “I just don’t want to get it wrong.”

He shakes his head. “You can’t. We make the rules.”

I lie back, heart pounding, eyes never leaving his.

He kicks off his shoes and climbs over me, bracing himself so he’s not too heavy.

I reach for the edge of his shirt. “Can I...?”

“Please.”

I finish unbuttoning his shirt I’d already started in the kitchen, and slide it off his shoulders, revealing his chest. There are scars, faint lines and pale marks from hockey hits.

I press a kiss to one near his ribs. “How’d you get this one?”

“Blocked a shot in St. Louis.”

I kiss another. “This one?”

“Stick to the shoulder. Got stitched mid-period.”

“You’re insane.”

“Probably.”

I smile. My hands explore slowly as I want to remember everything. Learn him.

I trail my fingers across his chest, slow and deliberate. “You always this tense when a girl’s got you half-naked?”

He nods, jaw tight. “You’re killing me.”

“Good.”

He grins, then his hands trail down my sides. When he reaches my breasts, he pauses, eyes locked with mine like he’s waiting for a sign. I nod, breath shaky.

He lowers his mouth and kisses the swell of one breast and moves closer to the peak. His tongue flicks lightly over my nipple, and I arch, a quiet gasp escaping before I can stop it. He groans low in his throat, like my reaction does something to him.

He licks and sucks gently, hand cradling the other breast, thumb teasing in slow circles. My fingers slide into his hair as my back arches again.

“Oh my god...” I whisper, voice breaking on a breath.

He looks up, smug and tender all at once. “Feel good?”

I manage a breathless laugh. “You have no idea.”

Then his hands drift lower, his fingertips skimming, exploring, as he kisses down my stomach with aching patience.

One hand stops at the waistband of my panties.

“I can't wait to feel you come apart for me,” he murmurs against my skin, voice thick with need.

He kisses the inside of my knee, then hooks his fingers into the sides of my panties

and slowly slides them down. I lift my hips to help. He moves slowly and carefully, like he's unwrapping something rare.

When they're gone, he kneels and lets his hands skim the outsides of my thighs.

"You are so damn stunning, Mandy. You have no idea."

My voice is barely a whisper. "You keep saying things like that, and I'm going to fall in love with you."

He kisses my thigh. "Then I better keep saying them."

I laugh softly, breathless.

His kisses move down my body...stomach, hips, inner thighs...like he's worshipping every inch. I tremble under the weight of it, of him.

He spreads my knees apart with both hands, slow and confident, and settles between them like he belongs there.

Then his mouth finds me.

He starts with gentle kisses that are feather-light and teasing. My breath hitches as his tongue flicks about, tasting every bit of me.

"Oh," I gasp, my fingers clutching the sheets.

He hums low in his throat, the vibration making me jolt.

His tongue moves deliberately now, licking slowly, then circling, then pressing exactly where I need him. He finds my center like it's instinct, like he's done nothing

else his whole life but figure out how to make me fall apart.

My thighs start to tremble, my hips lifting into him before I even realize I'm doing it. He holds me still with strong hands and keeps going, relentless in the most devastating, beautiful way.

"Nate," I gasp, breathless and breaking.

"Come for me, baby," he murmurs, and then his mouth is on me again, and I shatter.

His fingers slide between my thighs, gentle but sure, exploring slowly. When he finds how wet I already am, he groans, deep and low like it's pulled from his chest.

"God, Mandy..." he murmurs. "You're so ready for me."

One finger strokes through my slick heat, and I arch with a gasp, and almost choke on my own breath. He circles carefully, teasing, coaxing pleasure out of every nerve ending.

I can barely hold still. My hips roll, seeking more, and he gives it, one finger slipping inside, followed by another, slow and steady.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

I clutch the sheets, moaning softly. “Oh my god...”

He leans in, kisses my jaw, my neck, all while his fingers keep working, his touch steady, skilled, and relentless.

“You feel incredible,” he whispers, voice ragged. “Hot, wet and tight.”

“Put another finger in. I want to see how that feels.”

He does slowly and gently and I suddenly feel a gush of liquid.”

“Jesus, Mandy, you are so wet. Spread your legs even more. I want to look at you.”

He watches as he inserts three fingers and moves them in and out. I watch him do it and it’s making me squirm and move around involuntarily.

Then his lips return to mine, and I kiss him like I’m already falling.

“Ready?”

I nod. “Nate... I’ve never...”

“I know.”

He presses his forehead to mine. “And I’m honored.”

That makes something inside me crack open.



We kiss again. Slower. Deeper. His hands cradle my face.

He stands, takes off his pants and boxers, and returns to me. My eyes widen slightly. He smiles.

My hand trails lower, fingers brushing the hard length of him. He sucks in a sharp breath, his muscles going tight beneath my touch.

“Feel how hard I am, Mandy...” he groans, his voice rough and hungry.

He rolls on a condom and hovers over me, one hand braced beside my head, the other trailing down my thigh. He nudges my legs apart and settles between them, his body warm and solid and exactly where I want him.

“Breathe,” he whispers. “I’ve got you.”

When he slides into me, he goes slowly, so slowly it steals my breath.

I gasp, gripping his hand.

He stills. “Too much?”

“No,” I whisper. “Just... a lot.”

He kisses my shoulder, my jaw, my mouth. “I’ll go slow, baby. But I’m going to make you feel every damn second of it.”

And when he finally pushes in, my body arches beneath him. It’s more than pressure, more than stretch. It’s him filling me inch by inch, steady and careful, like he knows exactly what I can take and what I need.

A soft gasp slips out of me, part pleasure, part disbelief that this is really happening. He stills once he's fully seated inside me, forehead pressed to mine, letting me feel every bit of him.

"You're so tight," he murmurs, reverent, like I'm something to worship. "So damn perfect."

My body trembles, adjusting around him, every nerve sensing everything. I shift my hips experimentally, and his breath catches.

"Mandy..."

That single word wrecks me.

## Page 78

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Then we move.

He pulls back slowly and pushes in again, setting a rhythm that's deep, deliberate, and devastating in the best way. His hands slide under my thighs, pulling me closer, angling deeper, and I cry out, clinging to him like I might fly apart.

Every thrust sends sparks through me, friction building where we're joined, heat curling tighter with every stroke. He's everywhere, his mouth on my neck, his breath in my ear, and his body pressed to mine like he can't stand an inch of space between us.

I fall apart the second his thumb brushes over the spot he knows makes me shatter.

My back arches. My legs lock around him. Pleasure crashes over me so hard I forget how to breathe. I call out his name as I come, gripping his shoulders like he's the only thing anchoring me to the world.

But he's not done.

He groans, low and rough, and his pace falters. His rhythm turns wild and I feel him lose it right there inside me, his release hitting hard, his mouth crushed to mine as he follows me over the edge.

We collapse into each other, breathless, tangled, wrecked.

And still, he doesn't let go.

He pulls me to his chest, and I fit there like I belong.

Silence stretches between us. Soft. Safe.

“I’ve never felt more seen,” I whisper.

He kisses my temple. “That’s ‘cause you finally let someone see you.”

And I smile, knowing I wouldn’t change a single second.

\*\*\*

I wake to the smell of bacon.

Sunlight pours across the bed, and I blink slowly, stretching under soft sheets that definitely don’t belong to me.

Nate’s shirt is wrapped around me buttoned halfway, sleeves rolled up and swallowing my hands. It smells like him. Clean laundry and spice, and something darker. Something that lingers on my skin.

I sit up and hear soft clinks from the kitchen.

When I pad out barefoot, he’s at the stove, barefoot too, shirtless, with shorts slung low on his hips. A pan sizzles as he flips eggs. There’s a bowl of fruit already on the counter, two mugs of coffee, and a carton of orange juice.

“You went out for groceries?” I ask, voice raspy from sleep.

He glances over his shoulder with a smirk. “Hope last night didn’t ruin you for future sleepovers.”

I cross my arms, still drowning in his shirt. “I might demand a cabin clause in our relationship contract.”

He laughs. “Add it. I’ll sign anything that keeps you in my bed.”

We eat on the deck. The lake sparkles like it’s in on the secret. Trees sway. Birds chirp. It’s too perfect. And somehow real.

Nate watches me from across the table, one hand cradling his coffee, the other stretched casually behind his chair like he owns the whole world, and me with it.

After breakfast, I change into a black bikini I packed mostly as a joke. But now I want to see what it does to him.

I step out onto the deck. Nate turns.

His jaw slackens. “You trying to kill me before lunch?”

I shrug. “It’s not against the rules.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

He walks over, eyes still locked on me, and loops his fingers through mine. “If we don’t get in the lake now, I’m not responsible for what happens on that deck chair.”

The water is cool and perfect. We wade in together, laughing when the chill hits our skin. I splash him. He retaliates. It turns into a full-blown splash war.

“You cheat!” I cry, wiping water from my eyes.

“You’re smaller. I’m leveling the field.”

“You’re six foot two and full of excuses!”

He lunges forward, grabs my waist, and pulls me into him. We’re both soaked. My legs wrap around his hips instinctively, and he holds me like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

We’re laughing, dripping, and breathless.

He presses his forehead to mine. “You make everything feel easier.”

I kiss him. “You make me feel like I can finally breathe.”

We stay in the water until our fingers wrinkle.

\*\*\*

Eventually, we pack. He loads our bags in the SUV and we drive with the windows

down, my hand on his thigh, his thumb brushing my knuckles at red lights.

On the plane, I lean into him, drowsy, cheek against his shoulder.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“For what?”

“For this. I didn’t know how much I needed to just... be.”

He squeezes my hand. Doesn’t overdo it. Just enough.

\*\*\*

Back in Detroit, he walks me to my apartment. I fumble for my key, heart weirdly heavy.

This feels like an ending.

I turn to say goodbye.

But Nate steps in close. Close enough to knock every logical thought from my brain.

My heart stutters.

I kiss him.

It’s soft. Intentional. Not a goodbye. A promise.

He rests his forehead against mine. “Get a few hours of studying in.”

I smile. "I will."

"And don't forget about poker night on Tuesday."

I step inside, close the door, and lean against it.

And I swear, for the first time in a long time... I feel complete.



### Chapter nineteen

Nate

Mandy opens the door barefoot, wearing gray skinny jeans and a striped shirt with the sleeves pushed up. Her hair's in a messy bun that looks like it's held together by hope and caffeine. No makeup. No effort. And I swear to god, she's never looked hotter.

How is she the sexiest person alive?

She cocks an eyebrow, hand on the doorframe. "Brace yourself, I'm terrible at poker. I might need some tutoring."

I bite back a grin. "That sounds dangerous. I take tutoring very seriously."

"Oh, I bet you do."

I open the car door for her when we get downstairs. She pauses, one foot halfway in.

"You feeling chivalrous tonight or just scared I'll drive?"

"I've seen how you take corners in that clunker you call a car. I'm just trying to make it to poker night alive."

She snorts, hops in, and fastens her seatbelt with a little click that sounds way too satisfying.

\*\*\*

Parker and Grace's place is already packed with laughter and noise by the time we show up.

There's a sign next to the door that says Welcome Puckheads.

Mandy points at it. "Cute."

Parker opens the door with a beer in hand, grinning.

"Jones! And his better-looking half. Come on in."

Grace's head pops around the corner from the kitchen. "Drinks are labeled in the fridge! Beer, seltzer, soda, and mystery punch that James brought, so drink at your own risk."

James is already at the poker table, sorting chips like he's planning a heist.

"Everyone bring cash?" he calls. "Or are we playing for pride and leftover Halloween candy?"

Ethan drops onto the couch beside Connor and lifts a Tupperware. "I brought chips. Tortilla and poker."

Connor deadpans, "We'll try not to eat your ante."

Mandy grabs a seltzer and plops beside me on the couch. Her leg brushes mine, and I'm instantly aware of how hot she looks in those pants.

"Place looks amazing," she says to Grace.

Grace waves her off. “Thank you. I told Parker to stay out of the way, and voilà. Magic.”

“Hey,” Parker grumbles.

Across the room, James eyes Alex like he’s spotted prey.

“Yo, Chadwick. Where’s your better half? She doesn’t mix business with pleasure?”

Alex doesn’t even flinch. “She’s got a psychology conference dinner thing. Something about keynote speakers and fancy food that doesn’t involve poker chips or you, so... her loss.”

James makes a face. “Sure. Or maybe she just didn’t want to see you cry when I take all your money.”

## Page 81

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

“Please,” Alex says, sipping his drink. “You fold more often than I fold my laundry.”

Laughter ripples around the room.

Stacy high-fives Haley. “This is already my favorite game night.”

Mandy leans in and whispers to me, “Do they always bust chops like this before playing?”

“Constantly,” I whisper back. “It’s half the fun. It’s like they’re animals marking their territory.”

She grins. “Or foreplay.”

The girls and I bust out laughing. Grace nearly chokes on her drink, and Haley snorts so hard she startles Parker. Mandy’s still giggling when...

James glances over from the table. “What’s so funny?”

I smirk, leaning back. “Just watching you get busted by our future attorney. It's inspiring, really.”

James groans. “Mandy, I thought we were allies.” He fake-pouts, then adds with a wink, “Et tu, Brute?”

Mandy bats her lashes innocently. “Sorry, James. Loyalty gets rerouted when chips are on the line, and I've heard that your poker face is basically an open book.”

The girls crack up again while James clutches his chest like he's been personally wounded. "Brutal," he mutters. "She's spunky, Nate. I like it."

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We all gather around the poker table. Cards shuffle. Chips clack. Haley passes out little slips of paper with names drawn in Sharpie like we're in middle school homeroom.

"Assigned seats?" James asks, eyeing his. "What is this, the eighth grade dance?"

"Don't complain," Grace says. "Last time you sat beside Ethan and you both cheated with signals."

"That was not cheating," Ethan says. "It was creative collaboration."

"You tapped your cup every time you had a good hand."

He shrugs. "Still lost to Stacy."

Mandy and I end up side by side. She lays her cards down like she's handling a tarot reading.

"You sure you've never played?" I ask, eyeing the neat little stack of chips she's already won.

She shrugs. "Maybe once or twice. I think I'm getting the hang of it."

James squints at her across the table. "You're a killer. We should sign you on as another mental performance coach."

“Or an enforcer,” Ethan says. “You sure you’re not a mob wife in disguise?”

Mandy doesn’t blink. “You think I’d waste mob-wife energy on poker night? Amateur hour.”

Everyone loses it.

Tanner grins. “Ten bucks says Nate’s letting her win.”

“She’s beating me too,” I say. “Either she’s really good, or I’m terrible.”

“Or both,” Connor adds with a smirk.

Mandy tosses a chip at him. “I just play smarter.”

## Page 82

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

She leans back in her chair, totally smug. I should be annoyed. I'm not. I'm mesmerized.

"How are you doing this?" I whisper.

She shrugs. "Law school. Bluffing is part of the curriculum."

"I should've known."

"Also, I'm very competitive."

"You're terrifying. In the best way."

"Flatter me all you want, Jones. I'm still taking your chips."

She wins another hand with a full house. I swear I see James mouthwhat the hell at Ethan.

"Maybe it's beginner's luck," she says shyly, jokingly.

I push back from the table a little and rest my hand on Mandy's leg. "Okay, if you're so good, come over here and guard my stack for me."

She raises an eyebrow. "Are you surrendering?"

"Strategically repositioning."

“Mmhm. Scoot over.”

She climbs onto my lap, tossing her legs across mine like it’s the most natural thing in the world. The whole table erupts.

James smirks. “And now we’re just making out mid-game?”

“Let them be cute. You’re just mad she’s better at poker than you,” Haley retorts.

Grace chimes in. “Someone take a photo. I need to frame this.”

She grins, turns back to the game, and places a casual bet that wipes out James’s last few chips.

He drops his cards. “That’s it. I’m done. This game is rigged.”

“You played yourself,” Connor says.

“I’m starting to think she’s actually some kind of agent,” Ethan says.

“She is,” I say, grinning. “And she’s mine.”

As the night winds down, the poker table starts thinning out. Drinks shift from beer to water. Voices soften.

Mandy’s curled up on the couch with Haley, Grace, and Stacy, laughing over some group text thread. Her feet are tucked under her, hair falling loose from the bun. Her eyes crinkle when she laughs.

I sit back with a beer and just watch her.



She's not trying to impress anyone. She's just... her.

I'm in trouble. And I'm not even mad about it.

Every time I'm around her, I forget what it's like to be on guard.

"Final hand," James calls. "Winner takes the last of the peanut butter cups."

Mandy jumps in, rejoining the table.

## Page 83

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

She bluffs. Wins.

Fist-pumps like a dork.

Kisses my cheek.

And starts collecting her candy haul with the glee of someone who's just robbed a bank.

She might've cleaned me out at the table.

But I'm already all-in, and I'm not bluffing.

Chapter twenty

Mandy

The morning starts out perfect. The sun is shining through the kitchen window, warming the tile beneath my feet. I'm cross-legged at the table, wrapped in Nate's hoodie like a blanket of security. My bar flashcards are spread out in front of me, a highlighter tucked behind one ear, and my hair is up in a knot that's slowly loosening as the hours go by.

Kira hums along to a soft indie playlist as she scoops grounds into the coffee maker. She looks impossibly put together in high-waisted jeans and a cropped sweater, scrolling her phone with one hand while stirring oat milk into her coffee with the other.

It's peaceful. Ordinary. Exactly the kind of morning I didn't think I'd be lucky enough to have during bar prep.

Until Kira lets out a low whistle.

"Well, well, well. Look who made it into the group chat."

I glance up from my flashcards. "What group chat?"

She turns her screen toward me.

It's a screenshot from Grace's story: me curled up in Nate's lap at poker night, one hand guarding his chips, both of us grinning like idiots. The caption reads:

Jones finally found someone who can out-bluff him.

I blink. "Okay, that's cute."

"You look disgustingly in love," Kira teases. "You guys are like a Hallmark movie, but with hotter people."

I laugh and reach for my coffee. "Alright, alright. Let's not get carried away."

The notification ping on my own phone draws my attention. I swipe it open, expecting a calendar reminder or maybe a meme from Nate.

Instead, it's a tag. One I didn't expect.

My stomach dips.

I've been tagged in a thread from an old law school committee group chat, one I

haven't thought about in months. I technically left it after graduation, but apparently I was still searchable.

I tap in, and there it is.

The same photo.

My name.

A string of comments:

"Isn't that Mandy Fields with some hockey guy?"

"He's hot but wasn't he dating that influencer last year?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"Girl went from student council to NHL real quick."

"LMAO she's living the puck bunny dream."

"Hope she's not trying to be taken seriously anymore."

I stare at the screen, fingers suddenly cold.

Kira must see my face because she walks over. "What's wrong?"

I just tilt the phone in her direction.

She reads the messages, her expression going flat. "Wow. Classy bunch."

"They weren't even friends. Just committee people. Law review, some leadership stuff. I don't even know who half of them are."

Kira leans a hip on the table, arms crossed. "Then who cares? They're irrelevant."

I nod. But the pressure is already in my chest.

Irrelevant or not, it still stings.

Because it wasn't meant for me to see.

Because someone saw a moment I loved and turned it into a punchline.

Because I didn't think being with Nate would feel so... visible.

"They make it sound like I'm just some groupie." My voice is too quiet.

Kira softens. "You're not. Anyone who knows you knows that."

"But they don't. And that's the thing. They're going to assume whatever they want. That I'm not serious anymore. That I'm just some chick dating a hot athlete."

Kira sighs. "You're not dating a hot athlete. You're dating the hot athlete."

I don't laugh.

She reaches for my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Come on, Mandy. You've got a JD, you're taking the bar soon, and you're dating a guy who clearly worships the ground you walk on. You win."

I want to believe that.

But the uneasiness won't leave.

Kira settles beside me, cradling her coffee mug, eyebrows pinched with concern. "You okay? Like, really okay?"

I pause for a beat, then slowly shake my head. "I don't know. This isn't normal for me. I'm not used to this."

"This?"

"Being... seen. Or talked about like that." I let out a long breath, rubbing at the back of my neck. "I've always kept things private. Focused on school, work, what's next.

Now I'm a screenshot in some gossip thread?"

Kira hums, thoughtful. "To be fair, you've also always been kind of boring."

I shoot her a deadpan look, and she laughs.

"I meant that as a compliment," she adds quickly. "Low drama. Under the radar. Now you're dating someone whose literal job is to be in the spotlight."

"I didn't sign up for the spotlight," I murmur. "I signed up for Nate."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

“And he signed up for you,” she says, gently but firmly. “Look, people are going to talk. They’re nosy. They speculate. Especially when they see a girl they thought they understood doing something unexpected, like being happy.”

I wrap my hands around my coffee, letting the warmth bleed into my fingers. “I don’t even care what strangers think. I really don’t. It’s just... this weird feeling, like I stepped outside of myself. Like suddenly my choices are up for public commentary.”

Kira nods slowly. “It’s disorienting. But it’s not forever. The novelty wears off for them. You’ll always be the one living it, though.”

“And that’s what scares me,” I admit. “What if this isn’t something I’m built for?”

Kira leans forward. “Mandy, you’re built for a hell of a lot more than some jealous randos in a group chat. You’ve got a vision, a plan. You don’t just float through life like most people. You choose.”

I go quiet. Her words settle over me, both comforting and slightly overwhelming.

“I know I’m not some influencer or Instagram girlfriend,” I say softly. “And I don’t want to be. But I also don’t want to be the reason people talk shit about Nate. Or think he’s downgraded.”

Kira makes a scoffing sound. “Anyone who thinks Nate Jones is downgraded by being with you should be banned from the internet.”

I offer a tiny smile, grateful.



“He hasn’t texted yet,” I say after a pause. “Not that he has to. It’s just...”

“Today of all days, you want the reminder.”

I nod.

Kira’s voice is gentler this time. “Give it time. He probably doesn’t even know any of this is happening. And he’s not gonna care when he does. But if it’s bothering you, tell him.”

“I will,” I say. “Just... not yet.”

The cards are still in front of me, my highlighter waiting like an eager puppy. I pick one up and read it twice before realizing I haven’t absorbed a word.

My phone buzzes again. I don’t look this time.

Somewhere in the back of my head, a question rises:

Can I have the life I want, and the guy I want, without it turning into a circus?

I wish I knew the answer.

I close the group chat and set my phone down like it’s radioactive. My flashcards are still sitting there, waiting. Highlight uncapped. Focus shattered.

I shuffle them without looking.

The logical part of me says it doesn’t matter.

But the quiet part of me whispers: This is only going to get harder.

I check my phone again. No message from Nate yet.

Not unusual. He has morning skate. Or team meetings. Or maybe he's just not a morning texter.

But today it feels... different.

Like the moment I walked into the light with him, the shadows started closing in.

I rub my temple and push my flashcards aside.

I didn't mind falling for him behind closed doors.

It's what happens when the world starts watching that terrifies me.

### Chapter twenty-one

Nate

The arena lights blaze overhead, bright enough to rival the sun, and the roar of the home crowd is already electric. This is our turf. Game night. And I'm locked in.

Almost.

I catch her right before warmups.

Mandy and Kira are sliding into their seats three rows up behind the bench. Kira's waving like she's on a parade float. Mandy's bundled in one of my jerseys, her hair down and tousled from the wind outside, and when our eyes lock, she blows me a kiss.

I grin.

James elbows me on the way by. "That for you, lover boy?"

"Nah," I deadpan. "She was aiming for Parker."

"Right. Because Parker's abs have their own fan club."

I shake my head, skating off toward center ice. I'm not letting James get in my head. Not tonight.

Coach gives us the usual pregame speech. Stay sharp. First shift sets the tone. Play our game.

I feel solid tonight.

The first period starts fast. We're skating hard, throwing clean hits, and setting the tempo. I get a good early shift, and clear the puck with a long pass off the boards that springs Connor into the offensive zone. He doesn't score, but he draws a tripping penalty, and that sets us up for our first power play. We don't convert, but it swings the momentum our way.

Back on the bench, the boys are fired up. James keeps chirping the other team's winger, some rookie who tried to throw a hit and bounced off Parker like a beach ball. Ethan snorts into his water bottle, and even Coach cracks a rare grin.

We close out the first period up by one thanks to a rebound goal from Tanner. The arena's alive, and I swear it's the kind of energy that gets in your bloodstream.

Between periods, the locker room smells like sweat and adrenaline, and nobody's saying it out loud, but we want this win bad.

Midway through the second, I block a shot on the penalty kill, spin the puck up to Ethan, and he takes it coast to coast for a shorthanded goal. The bench erupts. He taps his stick against my shin as we pass. Connor slaps my helmet.

"That was sick," he grins.

I glance at the glass.

Mandy's up on her feet, clapping and whistling like she's front row at a rock concert.

Fuck, I love that look on her face.

In the locker room during second intermission, the mood is high. We're up 2-0, the guys are loose, but focused.

I grab my water bottle and check my phone. Just a glance.

One like.

From Mandy.

On an old Instagram post. A photo from my rookie season. I haven't seen that picture in forever. I must've looked like a literal child.

She commented too:

"Still my favorite #23."

A slow smile creeps across my face.

## Page 87

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

Ethan walks by and peers over my shoulder. "Bro. Are you stalking your own Instagram?"

"Nah. Just catching up on fan engagement."

James leans in from across the aisle. "Is that your girl scrolling like she's decoding your playbook?"

I pocket my phone. "She's just...curious."

James whistles. "Smitten Jones. Damn. Never thought I'd see the day."

"Play your period, Henderson."

But I'm still grinning.

Back on the ice, the third period starts with a bang. The other team comes out aggressive, pressing hard to break our lead. I block a slapshot with my shin pad and grunt through the sting. Connor clears the zone, and James lays down a perfect check that gets the crowd on their feet.

"Nice hit, Hendo!" I shout, skating past.

He smirks. "Had to remind him this isn't a Sunday skate."

We dig in. Shift after shift, it's grind time. The boys are talking nonstop: switch, cover high, push left. I lay out to intercept a cross-ice pass and hear Coach yell

behind me, "Atta boy, Jones!"

The clock ticks down under five. We win a faceoff in the D-zone, and I chip it up the boards to Parker, who eats twenty seconds just ragging the puck. Ethan dumps it in with a smirk and teases the goalie as he skates off.

When the horn finally sounds, the scoreboard's 3-0. Shutout.

Solid win. Hard-earned. And it feels damn good.

Except the night's not over yet.

It's one of those post-game extras. Season ticket holder appreciation night. Half the guys duck out, but a handful of us head to the event space upstairs where fans line up for autographs and pictures.

Mandy and Kira are waiting by the entrance when I arrive, fresh out of a post-game shower, yet still sweating from the adrenaline rush.

Mandy leans in with a smile. "Congrats, stud."

"That block in the second?" Kira says. "Hot."

"Tell that to my bruised shin."

We pose for a couple of quick selfies before I get pulled to the welcome table.

The night rolls on. Sign a jersey here. Snap a pic there. It's all good.

Until I glance over and see Mandy chatting with a blonde woman in a glittery jacket. Season ticket holders always bring some flair, but there's something off about the

vibe.

When I wrap up, I make my way over. Mandy's smile is polite, but a little too tight.

"Everything okay?" I murmur into her ear.

She nods quickly. "Yeah. Just someone who recognized me from that poker night picture."

My brows lift. "From where?"

"Instagram. Said she follows a few of the 'wives and girlfriends' accounts. Thought I looked familiar."

I pause.

Mandy shrugs, trying to shake it off. "She asked if I was your new flavor of the month."



My entire body goes still.

Kira, standing behind her, mutters, "I was about two seconds from spilling champagne on her shoes."

Mandy exhales, brushing a loose curl from her cheek. "She didn't stop there. Said she follows all the team accounts and keeps tabs on who's dating whom, like it's her full-time job. Told me she was 'just surprised' to see me, because I didn't seem like Nate's type."

Kira's eyes narrow. "I was like...what the hell does that even mean?"

"Exactly." Mandy folds her arms. "She said something about how your last girlfriend was always posting gym selfies and brand collabs and tagging him in everything. Said I must be new to the scene."

Kira scoffs, then tilts her head. "So I smiled and said, 'Yeah, she's new all right, new to putting up with shallow commentary and fake designer bags.'" She gives Nate a pointed look. "Then I asked her if she needed help finding the exit or just preferred to slither away quietly."

I high-five Kira.

She grins, still fired up. "That woman had so much filler in her face, I thought she was going to pop if she smiled too wide. Probably spent as much time contouring her cheekbones as she did learning the players names and dating histories."

"Oof, that's rough. I feel a cat fight coming," I joke.

Kira crosses her arms and continues. "You know the type...sparkle filter selfies, 'boss babe' in her bio, and thinks dating a hockey player is a career strategy. Probably trying to sleep her way into a sponsored bridal post."

I snort. Mandy tries to hold back a laugh but fails.

"It just threw me off." Mandy's voice softens. "I know it shouldn't matter what some random chick says, but it felt like I was being measured against this invisible checklist I didn't know existed. Like I'm already behind and I haven't even figured out if I belong in this world."

"Mandy."

She waves it off. "It's fine. I just... wasn't expecting it."

I grab her hand. Tight.

"By the way, you're not a flavor," I say, low and serious. "You're the fucking main course."

She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

Something's shifting. I can feel it.

And I don't like where it's going.

Chapter twenty-two

Mandy

The apartment is quiet, save for the low hum of the refrigerator and the occasional rustle of a page as I flip through my bar exam notes. I'm sitting cross-legged at the kitchen table, still wrapped in Nate's hoodie, the one that swallows me whole and smells faintly like his aftershave. The sleeves are too long, and the cuffs are a little frayed, but I love it anyway.

Kira's out, which means I finally have some silence. There's a mug of tea cooling beside me, and my laptop sits open, paused on an outline I can't seem to concentrate on. I pick up the next flashcard. Torts. Great.

I read the definition twice and retain nothing.

My phone buzzes. I glance at the screen, expecting maybe a text from Nate. The team had a few away games this week, but they flew home last night. He sent me a text when they landed but I was already sleeping.

But, no, it's a Facebook notification. Detroit Acers has posted new photos.

Curiosity wins. I tap.

A slideshow from the team's post-game outing from a few nights ago loads. Celebrating the win, the caption says, complete with little trophy and fire emojis. I swipe through a few pictures of the guys at a swanky rooftop bar. Connor is doing a stupid dance. Parker has a drink raised in one hand and a kid-like grin on his face. James is photobombing someone.

And then I see it.

Nate.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

A photo of him leaning against the bar, drink in hand, that cocky half-smile on his face. And beside him, a girl.

Blonde, long legs, tight dress. She's laughing, one hand on his arm, her body tilted just slightly into his. Like she belongs there. Like she's been there before.

My stomach knots.

I study the picture too long. It's not that he did anything wrong. He didn't even post it. But there it is...the world he lives in. The effortless way women orbit him. The kind of effortless I can't compete with.

I set the phone down and pull in a breath. Then I open my camera roll and scroll. There it is. The photo from poker night. Me curled into Nate's lap, both of us smiling like the rest of the world didn't exist. It should make me feel better.

Instead, it makes me feel foolish.

The phone rings. I jump.

It's Allison.

I hesitate, but swipe to answer. "Hey."

Her face fills the screen, hair in a sleek bun, brows already raised. "Mandy. Are you seriously dating Nate Jones?"

I blink. "Hi to you, too."

"Don't deflect. I saw the picture on Instagram. You're all over the comments. Mandy Fields, future attorney, caught up with some NHL bad boy."

I sigh, sinking back in my chair. "It's not like that."

Allison snorts. "He's nice to look at, sure. But come on. Do you know how many girls that guy's been linked to? There were literal Twitter threads."

"That doesn't mean anything now."

"It means he has a reputation, Mandy. A big one. And you're just starting your life. You worked so hard to get here."

"And I'm not throwing that away."

"You say that, but relationships like this... they don't end well. They end in heartache."

I press my lips together. "You don't know him."

"I know enough. He's a hockey player, Mandy. And not the wholesome team-dad type. He's the tattooed, fan-favorite defenseman who sleeps around and gets in fights."

"He's also the guy who checks on me after late nights, who lets me study in his apartment because mine is too loud, and who made me pasta when I forgot to eat."

Allison frowns. "Even so, don't lose sight of your future for someone who probably doesn't even see one with you."

That one lands too hard.

I go quiet.

"Mandy, I'm not trying to be mean. I'm your sister. I've seen what guys like him do. They make you feel like you're the only one until they don't."

"This isn't about you and your ex."

She flinches.

I regret it instantly, but I'm too wound up to take it back. "I'm not you, Allison. I know what I'm doing."

"I hope so. Just... be careful. Please."

We hang up soon after, the air brittle with tension.

## Page 90

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

I stand in the middle of the kitchen, my tea now cold, my stomach churning.

The flashcards are still scattered across the table, but I can't even look at them.

Instead, I pace.

Around the kitchen. Down the hall. Back again.

Her words echo louder than I want to admit. And worse, they dig into cracks that were already starting to form.

I want to believe this thing with Nate is different. That he sees me. That I'm not just another face in the crowd.

But what if I'm wrong?

What if I'm just late to a game everyone else already played?

Kira walks in with a few of her coworkers, all chatting and laughing as they drop their bags by the couch.

"Hey, Mands," she says, toeing off her boots. "Meet Tara, Steve, and Jen. We're gonna watch a movie and yell at the plot holes. You in?"

"Nice to meet you guys. Sounds tempting, but I've got a date with constitutional law."

Tara laughs. "Oof. You're hardcore."

"Or just slowly dying inside," I reply with a shrug.

Kira gives me a look but doesn't push. "We'll keep the volume low. Text me if you want popcorn."

"Thanks, but I think I'll just go next door to study. See ya later."

I grab my bag, stuff the flashcards in, and sling it over my shoulder.

I need to study.

But more than that, I need to see him.

Even if I don't know what I'll say when I do.

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I wonder if he's home. I knock gently on Nate's door. It opens almost immediately.

He's fresh from practice, a faint sheen still clinging to his skin like he just got out of the shower. He's in jeans and a fitted tee, and his whole face lights up the second he sees me.

Then dims.

"Hey," he says, voice a little more cautious now. "You okay?"

I force a smile and lift my bag. "Just tired. Long day."



He steps aside to let me in, closing the door behind me as I walk straight to my study room. I turn on my lamp and I can still smell the cinnamon candle I burned last time. I unload my things in silence, sit down, and start arranging my notes with robotic precision.

"You want anything? I've got hummus. Crackers. Leftover pasta. That weird trail mix you pretend to hate but always eat."

I glance up briefly. "I'm good. Thanks."

He leans against the doorway, watching me.

I flip over a flashcard.

## Page 91

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:29 am*

"You're really in study beast mode tonight," he jokes, trying to cut the tension with a smile.

"The bar isn't going to pass itself."

He walks over and kneels next to my chair, resting a hand on my knee. "How about kiss hello? I missed you."

When he leans in to kiss me, I turn, pretend I'm reaching for my pen.

The moment passes. Awkwardly.

He says nothing, but I can feel it: the confusion, the quiet disappointment.

Still, he doesn't push.

And I can't concentrate.

My mind is a spinning reel of social media comments, Allison's voice, the blonde in the photo, and the way that woman at the meet-and-greet looked at me like I was temporary.

Like I was irrelevant.

I stare at the same paragraph for fifteen minutes.

After one hour, I pack up and try to leave.

Nate is at the kitchen table going through mail. "You done already?"

"Yeah. I should get back. Early start tomorrow."

"You sure? We've barely..."

"I just need to be in my own space tonight."

He stands, watching as I zip my bag. "Okay. Want me to carry your bag over?"

I shake my head. "It's fine."

I sling the strap over my shoulder, move toward the door.

"Night, Mandy."

"Goodnight."

No kiss. No hug.

He stays in the doorway as I walk down the hall.

I close the door behind me, press my back to it, and exhale shakily.

I don't know if I'm overreacting... or waking up.

Twenty minutes later, my phone lights up with Nate's name. I hesitate, but answer.

"Hey," I say quietly.

"You in your room?"

"Yeah."

There's a pause. Then, more gently, "Are you okay?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

I close my eyes. "I don't know."

He sighs. "Mandy... talk to me. Please. You've been off all week...when I was away and we talked on the phone, and you barely looked at me tonight. Did I do something?"

I swallow. My throat tightens. "It's not something you did. It's everything around you. Around us."

"What does that mean?"

I sit on the edge of my bed, fingers twisting the hem of his hoodie. "I saw the pictures. The ones from the team night out. The girl who looked like she belonged on your arm. I heard what that woman said at the meet-and-greet. I heard my sister's voice in my head saying I'm an idiot for thinking you'd want me for real."

"Jesus, Mandy—"

"I'm not done."

He goes quiet.

"I'm trying so hard not to let it get to me, but I don't know how to live in your world. I don't know how to keep pretending it doesn't sting when people look at me like I'm a temporary fix. Like I'm a bookmark until the next blonde in a tight dress smiles at you."

"You're not temporary. You're it. And it's fucked up that you're down the hall thinking otherwise."

"But they don't know that. And honestly? Some days I'm not sure I do either."

He's silent for a long beat. "Mandy, you're not some random girl in a picture. You're the one I think about during every away game. The one I want next to me when the world shuts up. I know I haven't said it right. Or enough. But damn, I should've seen this coming."

My eyes sting. "That's the problem, Nate. You didn't know. And I didn't want to say it. Because the second I do, I feel like I'm the clingy girl in a hoodie asking too much."

"You're not clingy. You're mine. And I want you to say everything. Even the hard stuff. Especially the hard stuff."

I blink back the tears. "Then prove it. Because I'm not the girl who chases. I never have been. I never will be."

"You don't have to chase," he says, his voice low. "I'm already running toward you."

I huff out a shaky breath. "Yeah, for now you are..."

His voice sharpens. "What the hell does that mean?"

I hesitate. "I don't know. Just... that maybe this is easier for you than it is for me."

Silence stretches between us. Heavy. Awkward. Not like us.

Finally, he says, low and tight, "Yeah? Well, it sure as hell doesn't feel easy watching

you pull away like this."

I have no answer to that. Nothing that makes it better. So I just sit there, hoodie wrapped tight, and let the uncertainty scream between us louder than anything either of us said.

"I'm going to study now, Nate."

He exhales, quiet for a second. "Okay. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I hang up. The screen goes dark, and the distance between our apartments suddenly feels bigger than a hallway.

## Chapter twenty-three

Nate

I can barely lace up my skates without picturing the way she looked last night. Distant. Smiling like it cost her something. I'd rather take a slapshot to the ribs than see Mandy pull away like that again.

Practice starts early. Coach has us running through warmups before sunrise, but I might as well be skating through fog. My timing is off. My passes are half a beat too slow. Every time I shift direction, my mind boomerangs straight back to Mandy.

## Page 93

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

She said she needed her own space.

But I know what that really means.

Space turns into silence. Silence turns into goodbye.

Connor whistles beside me during a drill. "Yo, Jones. You planning on passing that puck to me today or just making snow angels out here?"

I grunt. "My bad."

We line up for the next set. I try to focus, but my stick fumbles a drop pass and I hear Coach's voice cut through the rink.

"Jones! Lock it in! You want a warmup or a wakeup?"

"Yes, Coach."

I chase the next drill like it owes me money, but my head's still not in it. James skates up next to me and bumps my shoulder.

"Dude. You okay? You missed like three jokes in a row. One of them was even about a Zamboni and a raccoon."

"I'm fine," I mutter.

Connor smirks as he flies past us. "Somebody's got a case of the 'girlfriend said



something cryptic and now he's spiraling."

My teeth clench. "Fuck off."

They both go quiet. It hangs in the air like a slapshot gone wrong.

Then James whistles. "Damn. He's in it. Like...itit."

Connor grunts. "That dude is sinking in quicksand and can't pull himself out."

I shoot him a glare, but it doesn't land the way I want.

Because they're not wrong.

\*\*\*

In the locker room after practice, the guys are loud as usual. Towels whip through the air. Music blasts. Someone's arguing over who farted during scrimmage like it's a war crime.

I don't move. I'm sitting on the bench, staring at my phone like it might ring. Or buzz. Or maybe just blink with a miracle.

Nothing.

James walks past, towel slung low, and stops. "Alright, bro, you gotta tell us what the hell is going on. You've been skating like you left your soul in the penalty box."

I rub my hands over my face. "She's pulling away."

Connor spins around. "Mandy? The bar-exam badass?"

I nod.

Parker leans against his locker, frowning. "What happened?"

I exhale. "She saw those pics from our night out. You know the one. That blonde clinging to my arm like I was about to propose?"

James whistles. "Yikes. That girl was definitely auditioning to be a puck bunny centerfold."

"I didn't do anything. Didn't even notice her until the flash went off. But Mandy saw the comments. The tags. And then her sister FaceTimed her, apparently had a full meltdown over something on Instagram."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

Connor snorts. "That's sucks."

I shoot him a look. "Not helpful."

He lifts a hand in mock surrender. "Sorry. Proceed."

I continue, voice low. "And then there was this woman at the meet-and-greet who made a comment to Mandy... something about me upgrading after my last girlfriend."

The room goes quiet.

Parker's voice is soft. "That... sounds a little familiar."

James nods. "Yeah. Grace got hit with similar crap when she and Parker got together. People treat you like scenery in a guy's highlight reel."

Alex folds his arms. "Coach went through something with Lizzie, too. Damn near blew it until he figured it out."

I glance up. "Yeah?"

He nods. "You should talk to him. Guy's smart as hell and he's got wisdom tucked under that permanent frown."

I stare at my phone one more time. Still nothing.

\*\*\*

After I get dressed, I grab my phone and step into the hallway. The locker room noise fades behind me. I scroll to Mandy's name and hit call before I can second-guess it.

It rings.

And rings.

"Hello?"

My chest tightens at her voice. But it's not the usual soft, curious, teasing Mandy.

It's neutral. Clipped. Like customer service Mandy.

"Hey. Just checking in after last night."

Pause.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

Another pause. Like she doesn't know what else to say.

"You sure?"

"I've just been working a lot."

I nod even though she can't see me. "Okay. I get that. But... if there's something you need to say, say it. I can take it."

Silence.

"Mandy?"

She exhales. "I just need to focus right now, Nate. On school. On passing."

I blink. "So we're pretending this thing between us isn't real now?"

She doesn't answer.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

That silence says more than anything.

I force out a breath. "Okay. I hear you. I won't push."

"Thank you," she says, but it doesn't sound like gratitude. It sounds like finality.

We hang up.

I stand there in the hallway, phone still in my hand, heart still in my throat.

The call felt cold. And Mandy never felt cold.

I mutter, "Unreal," and turn to leave, and then remember I left my damn watch in my locker.

Of course I did.

Because apparently today wants to keep kicking me in the teeth.

Coach Stephens is standing just outside the locker room when I round the corner. He looks up and narrows his eyes.

"You look like someone just traded your heart to the minors."

I snort, trying to keep walking.

But he blocks my path with a raised brow.

“Something you want to say, Jones? Because what affects you and your performance, affects the team. And you were off today at practice. Anything I can do to help?”

I hesitate, then mutter, “She’s pulling away. And I don’t know how to stop it.”

Coach folds his arms and leans against the wall. “Care to elaborate?”

I nod slowly. “It’s not just one thing. It’s everything, little moments stacked on top of each other. She’s second-guessing us. Well, me, really, with my hockey player reputation and reading into publicity pics. And I’m trying to prove her wrong without even knowing what she needs, to feel right.”

“When Lizzie pulled back, I thought giving her space was noble,” he says. “Turns out what she needed was presence. Not pressure. Not silence. Just... me showing up for her in the way she needed.”

I shift on my feet, his words hitting harder than I expect.

“How the fuck am I supposed to figure that out?”

“Figure it out, or lose her. Those are the stakes.”

I nod slowly, taking that in.

He claps a hand on my shoulder. “You’re a smart guy. You’ll handle it. But don’t wait too long. Silence doesn’t break on its own. Someone has to do it.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

“No problem, Jones.”

After grabbing my watch from my locker, I pause in the hallway and mutter to myself, "Maybe Nina's around. Could use a female perspective, and she's sharp as a tack."

Nina's office door is open. She's typing away on her laptop, earbuds in.

I knock gently.

She looks up and pulls out one earbud. "Hey, Nate. You alright? Can I help you with something?"

I give her a half-smile. "Got a minute?"



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

“Sure. Come in.”

I do, slumping into the chair across from her. “Mandy is pulling away. I tried to talk to her a few times, but she shuts me down.”

Nina closes her laptop and listens as I explain the whole thing.

“I told her she’s not temporary. That she’s the one. But it didn’t land. At all.”

Nina tilts her head. “Because words aren’t always the answer. You’re a physical guy, Nate. But she’s emotional. Detail-oriented. Cerebral.”

I groan. “I just took her away for the weekend. Told her she’s the one I play for. Showed her I’m all in. And still it didn’t land. Because of some damn media posts and fucked up comments! So what the hell do I do?”

“Speak her language,” Nina says, leaning forward. “Think about what matters to her. If she thrives on structure, clarity, and plans, give her something that shows you understand that. She builds walls to protect herself. You want her to believe you? Show her the blueprint that proves you’re not just trying to knock those walls down. You’re trying to belong behind them.”

I nod slowly. “Right. No more guesses. No more hoping she just knows. So how do I do that? Got any ideas?”

Nina offers a small smile. "Welcome to the mental game. Now it's your turn to find the play she'll recognize, something that proves you're not going anywhere, even

when she puts up a wall or the shit hits the fan from the outside."

"Thanks, Nina."

"You're very welcome. Good luck."

I walk out of the facility, still a little bruised, but now, I've got purpose in my eyes.

I pull out my phone.

Not to text her.

To plan my next move.

Chapter twenty-four

Mandy

My key sticks in the door again, and I shove it harder than necessary. "Come on," I mutter, exhausted. The lock gives with a clunk, and I step into the apartment, dropping my bag and kicking off my shoes in one fluid, graceless motion.

The place is quiet. Kira's probably still out, and thank God. I need silence like I need oxygen. The kind of silence where I don't have to explain the ache lodged under my ribs or why I can't stop thinking about everything with Nate...how right it felt, and how wrong it suddenly seems.

I toss my coat over the back of the chair and head to my desk. My plan was to review tort outlines and maybe rewrite a few essay responses. Nothing that exciting. Nothing that dangerous.

Until I see it.

A manila folder.

It's centered perfectly on the desk, crisp edges, a red label across the front like evidence in a case file. My stomach flips.

Exhibit A: I'm All In

I blink at it. Literally blink. Like maybe it'll disappear. But it stays put. Quiet. Waiting.

"What the hell," I whisper, already reaching for it.

My fingers tremble as I slide it open. Inside is a stack of papers, carefully arranged. Typed printouts. Highlighted screenshots. Handwritten notes.

The first page is a screenshot of one of our early text threads. I'd joked about how he always managed to have a stash of cereal options ready for our late-night study breaks. He'd sent back a selfie with a smug grin and a post-it note stuck to his forehead that said, Be Right Back. I'm headed to the pantry to win snack MVP.

My heart gives a painful little twist.

There are more.

## Page 97

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

Text messages from that night I panicked before a presentation at work. Typed out recordings of when he sent voice notes instead of texts because he said my brain didn't need more reading.

One message is a picture, beneath it is a Post-it that has a pink highlighter slash across it:

"Exhibit 1: Your smile when you cleaned me out at poker night. Confirmed lethal."

I let out a broken laugh. "Idiot."

Another page has a photo I didn't even know he took. Me asleep on his couch, a highlighter cap stuck in my hair and notes scattered all over my chest. A Post-it is stuck to the top of the image:

"Exhibit 7: You, asleep on my couch with highlighter ink on your cheek. Confirmed adorable."

I cover my mouth with my hand, but it doesn't stop the soft gasp from escaping. Tucked between the last pages are clippings from our weekend getaway: receipts from the little coffee shop where I spilled hot chocolate on his jeans, the map from our motorcycle ride to the scenic overlook, and the label from the bottle of wine we shared at the firepit, late into the night.

There's even a sketch he made, just a doodle of the kitchen counter where we'd started fooling around, before we made love for the first time. I trace my fingers over them, stunned. The fact that he kept these hits like a punch to the heart. I don't know

whether to cry or smile, so I do both.

There are more notes, more tiny captions in his handwriting, that charming all-caps scrawl I've memorized from the sticky notes he left on water bottles and snack bags.

"Exhibit 12: You make my place feel like a home. That should be illegal."

"Exhibit 15: You call me on my shit. That's love in a court of law."

The last page is a sticky note, centered like a verdict:

"Case Summary: Falling for you was never a debate. It was a ruling."

My hand is shaking now.

There's a second envelope under the folder labeled:

"Bar Exam Survival Kit"

I almost laugh. Almost. But the tears threaten first.

Inside:

A stress ball shaped like a gavel.

A small tin of mints labeled "Exhibit Breathe."

A playlist code scribbled on a card: "Spotify – "Study Like a Badass" – scan to play.

A black and gold pen engraved with "You've Got This."

## Page 98

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

A keychain with a quote from Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RBG): "Fight for the things that you care about."

A mini pack of sour gummy worms with a sticky note that says, "For when you're sweet but savage."

A granola bar with "Study fuel, just like you like it, oats and no nonsense." written in his handwriting.

A tiny bottle of lavender hand lotion labeled, "So your hands don't cramp from writing briefs."

And finally, a folded certificate that reads:

"This Certifies That: MANDY FIELDS

Has Officially Outworked, Outlasted, and Out-Badassed the Bar Prep Season

Awarded by: NATE JONES, Head Cheerleader, Defenseman, and Certified Idiot In Love"

I clutch the pen in my fist like it might keep me upright. Nate wrote Idiot in love right there on the certificate, and it's the "love" part that undoes me.

I sit down at my desk, hard.

He did this.

After everything. After the awkward silence, the cold phone call, the photos, the whispering doubts in my head that said he'd move on the second things got hard.

He didn't move on.

He stayed.

And not just with promises. But with pages. With exhibits. With receipts. With proof.

"This is insane," I whisper, tears tracking down my cheeks.

I flip the last page over, and on the back is a single Post-it:

"If any of this made you smile... open the front door."

"What... the front door?" I whisper, blinking at the note like it might sprout legs and walk away if I stare too hard. My heart lurches, slamming somewhere between my ribs and my throat.

I stand.

## Page 99

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

My feet move before I think. The paper in my hand crinkles as I walk barefoot to the front door.

I pause.

Then I twist the handle and pull it open.

Nate is sitting outside in the hallway, hoodie up, arms resting on his knees, like he's been there for hours.

He doesn't look up right away.

But when he does, his eyes meet mine. Hopeful. Hesitant. Open.

Standing there with tears rolling down my cheeks, I don't say anything.

And neither does he.

Instead, I step out into the hallway, sink down beside him on the carpet, and slip my hand into his.

His fingers close around mine like he was waiting.

Maybe he was.

Maybe I was too.



And maybe this is the beginning of everything.

## Chapter twenty-five

Nate

Her hand is small in mine. Warm. Soft. It fits so naturally, like it's always belonged there. And maybe it has. Maybe I was too cocky or too scared to see it clearly until now.

We sit there for a while. In silence. Not awkward, just full. Full of everything that hasn't been said, everything that's piled up since the last time we looked each other in the eye without armor.

I finally glance over at her. "Hey."

Mandy shifts, her eyes still glassy from the tears, but her voice is steady. "Hey."

I nudge her shoulder gently. "Wanna go inside?"

She nods. We both stand and walk back into her apartment, our fingers still laced together. She leads me to the couch, drops down onto the cushions, and pulls her knees up like she's bracing herself.

I sit beside her but don't crowd. Not yet. Let her breathe.

Mandy speaks first.

"I was scared."

I turn toward her.

She continues. “Of how much you mean. Of what this could be. And how fast it happened, at least for me.”

I kneel down in front of her, settling on the rug so I can meet her at eye level.

“You’re not a distraction,” I say, low and sure. “You’re the reason I play better.”

Her throat bobs. Her eyes shine again.

I keep going. “I don’t want space from you. I want your stress. Your all-nighters. Your ranting about contract clauses and late-night caffeine crashes. All of it. You’re not temporary, Mandy. You never were. And I should’ve told you that more.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

She breaks. A tear slides down her cheek.

“You made me feel seen,” she says, her voice trembling. “And that scared the hell out of me.”

I stay quiet.

“I’ve always compared myself to Allison. She’s loud. Confident. Sexy. And I’m... the studious one. The one who wears sweats and plans every hour of her day.”

I reach for her hand again. She lets me take it.

“Being with you made me feel like I belonged,” she whispers. “But then people looked at me like I didn’t. Like I was just some flavor-of-the-week girl who got lucky. And it cracked something in me. Because I’ve worked so damn hard not to need anyone’s validation. But yours?”

She inhales sharply. “Yours mattered.”

She hesitates, then adds, "But what happens when the comments start again? When the pictures pop up, or some fan says something snide online?"

I wait.

“I don’t want to be the jealous girlfriend,” she admits. “I don’t want to constantly question what I see or hear. But you’re public. People notice you. They talk. And I don’t know if I have the backbone for that kind of attention.”

I nod slowly, scooting a little closer.

“You don’t have to pretend it doesn’t bother you,” I say. “It’d bother anyone. But I need you to know that what happens out there doesn’t change anything in here.” I press my hand to her chest, gently. “You’re not in this alone.”

She swallows. “I don’t know how to be okay with it.”

“Then we figure it out together,” I tell her. “No perfect answers. Just us, handling it one step at a time. And anytime something gets too loud, you tell me. We’ll deal with it as a team. And if anyone tries to mess with what we have, I’ll fucking kick their ass. No hesitation.”

I squeeze her hand and add, “I can’t control the noise. But I can make damn sure you know where I stand.”

Her lip quivers. “You already did. That folder? That survival kit? You spoke to every single part of me. Without even being in the room.”

A long moment stretches between us.

Then she leans in. I meet her halfway.

The kiss is soft. Tentative. Then firmer. Emotional. Like it’s trying to say everything we haven’t been brave enough to.

Her fingers slide into my hair. My hands find her waist.

When we finally pull back, we’re both breathless. Foreheads pressed together. Laughing through the emotion.

“You’re still annoying,” she murmurs.

I grin. “And you still color-code your snacks, Little Fields.”

She narrows her eyes. “You better not eat my gummy bears.”

“Check Exhibit C.”

She laughs, a real one this time. Light and free.

We curl up together on the couch. Her body nestles into mine like we’ve been doing this for years. I tug a blanket over us, and she lays her head on my chest.

I kiss the top of her head.

I lean in, tightening my hold on her. "By the way, whatever you see in the media is always skewed, Mandy. Take that Facebook picture, for example, the blonde touching my arm? That wasn't anything."

She gives me a skeptical look, so I clarify.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

"You want the real story? That woman was trying to get Ethan's attention. She was waving, flipping her hair, and doing this weird squat thing like she was auditioning for a fitness video. He didn't bite, so she turned to me and grabbed my arm to ask if I could introduce her. That's when the picture got snapped."

Mandy snorts. "She did a squat?"

"Yeah. She squatted next to our table like she was trying to tie a shoe that didn't exist, smiling, sticking her chest out, and moaning about her quads like she was in a fitness commercial. Every time Ethan looked at his phone, she dipped another inch like she was trying to win a gold medal in seductive lunges. I thought her kneecaps were gonna file a restraining order."

She laughs, and I grin. "I told her Ethan was into women with brains. She walked away like I told her she had to pass a bar exam to talk to him."

Her laugh lingers in the air like music I didn't know I needed.

"I believe you," she says quietly.

I close my eyes.

"Let's finish the season, get the bar exam out of the way...together," I whisper. "And then whatever comes next... I'm in."

She shifts, just enough to look up at me. "You mean that?"

I brush my thumb along her cheek. "With everything I've got."

The moment settles around us. It's still, certain, and sealed.

We don't need a contract.

We just chose each other.

And that's binding as hell.

Chapter twenty-six

Mandy

I'm mid-brain fog, halfway through rereading a con law chapter, when my phone buzzes with a group FaceTime from Haley, Grace, and Stacy.

"We have news," Haley grins like she's about to tell me I just won the lottery.

"We're road-tripping to Columbus for Game 7," Grace adds, her curls bouncing with excitement. "You're coming. No arguments."

Stacy waves from the corner tile, her background showing some kind of chaotic kid scene. "I can't make it, but you three are carrying the vibes. All the good karma. Plus, Nate will be useless if you're not there."

I blink. "Seriously? You want me to come?"

Haley tilts her head like I just asked if the ice is cold. "Mandy. It's the divisional Game 7. We need our guys dialed in. You showing up is basically a good luck charm. Also... your sister lives there, right?"

My stomach flips. "Yeah."

"Well, we happen to have two extra tickets. Thought it might be a nice peace offering."

I exhale, a smile tugging at my lips. "Okay, okay. Let me call her."

I hang up and dial Allison.

"Well, look who it is," she answers, playfully suspicious.

"Hey," I say softly. "I, um... I wanted to tell you I'll be in Columbus tomorrow. The girls invited me to Game 7. And they have extra tickets for you and Ben. If you want them."

There's a beat of silence. Then she exhales. "Yeah? You sure?"

"Yeah. And I wanted to say... I know we fought. But I love you. And I'm figuring this thing with Nate out. He means a lot to me."



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

Another pause. Then she says, "I was hard on you. But I just don't want you to get hurt."

"I know," I whisper. "But I'm okay. And I want you there."

"Woohoo! Love you, Mandygirl."

"Love you too, Alli."

I hang up and stare at my phone for a second, heart fluttering. Then I practically launch myself into motion. I find my overnight bag. Thank god I did laundry and I start tossing in the essentials: comfy clothes, a decent outfit for the game/night out, my lucky hoodie, a sexy nighty, and way too many snacks. I triple-check that my phone charger is in there, then add a backup just in case.

I wasn't expecting this. I thought I'd be watching the game from my couch, alone or with Kira, yelling at the TV and refreshing Twitter every five seconds. Now, I get to be there. With Grace and Haley. With my sister. And best of all, surpriseNate. The butterflies are real, and they're throwing a party in my stomach.

I zip the bag and smile to myself. Game 7, here I come.

\*\*\*

The knock comes at 7:45 AM. I open the door to Grace holding two coffees and Haley dramatically waving a hockey scarf.

"You'd better be ready, loser," Haley says with a grin. "We're going to Columbus."

I laugh, already feeling lighter. Stacy pops up on FaceTime from her kitchen.

"Don't forget your lucky bra," she teases.

"It's Game 7, not a date! And who has a lucky bra?"

"I do." Stacy replies.

"I have lucky panties," says Haley.

"You're both crazy," Grace chuckles.

"With a smoke show defenseman like Nate, you're lucky your underwear didn't melt off the second he looked at you," she quips.

"Yeah, well, he is pretty hot, right?" I say. "All these guys are. It's like walking into a calendar shoot for 'Hockey Hunks Monthly.'"

They all burst into laughter.

"Save me a centerfold," Stacy snorts. "And tell Nate to behave himself—no scoring on or off the ice without your approval. Bye ladies. Have an awesome time and keep me in the loop."

"Bye," we say in unison.

The car's barely out of the city limits before Grace hits play on her chaotic "Away Game Hype" playlist, which starts with a remix of Hollaback Girl and has Haley screaming, "YES. THIS IS MY JAM!" like we've just hit a dance floor instead of I-

75.

“I feel like I should’ve stretched before this drive,” I joke from the backseat, wedged between two tote bags and a suspiciously large duffel labeled ‘Connor’s Emergency Game Snacks.’

“Stretch your core,” Grace shouts over the beat. “You’ll need it. We’ve got three hours of screaming, snacks, and absolutely no silence ahead.”

“I figured,” I grin, popping open a Diet Coke. “You two don’t seem like the audiobook type.”

“Excuse you,” Haley says, twisting around from the passenger seat. “I once tried to listen to a biography. Got five minutes in before Connor turned it off and made us listen to Eye of the Tiger on loop.”

“That’s his game day superstition, right?” Grace asks.

Haley groans. “Absolutely. He says it ‘activates the predator in his blood.’ Meanwhile, he brushes his teeth to Disney music. The duality of man.”

Grace cackles, tapping the steering wheel. “Parker sharpens Bessie’s pencils before home games. Says if her pencils are on point, his game will be too.”

“I can’t tell if that’s adorable or terrifying,” I laugh.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

“Both,” Grace and Haley say at the same time.

The miles roll by quickly with laughter layered over stories, each one more unhinged than the last. I find myself melting into the energy. These women have pulled me in without hesitation.

And I’m not sure I want to leave.

“Okay, Mandy,” Grace says, glancing at me in the rearview with a smirk. “Your turn.”

“For what?”

“Tell us what it’s really like dating Nate ‘Stone Wall’ Jones.”

“Oh yeah,” Haley grins wickedly. “We’ve seen the jawline. We’ve heard the chirps. But give us the behind-the-scenes.”

I blink. “Uh... intense yet surprisingly gentle.” I say, and immediately regret it when Haley lets out a gasp so dramatic she might need a fainting couch.

“Gentle?” she repeats, fanning herself with a gum wrapper. “Like... how gentle are we talking here? Baby lamb? Fluffy pancake? Connor holding a puppy?”

Grace’s laugh fills the car. “Okay, but now I need the scale. Because if we’re rating NHL players by emotional softness, Parker’s a nine out of ten, but only because Bessie exists. Is Nate up there?”

I sip my Diet Coke to buy time, stalling while my cheeks threaten to match the taillights ahead of us.

“He’s...” I start, then shrug. “He’s just different with me. Like, off the ice, he listens. He remembers things I said in passing three days ago. And he makes space for me, you know? Even when he doesn’t get it.”

There’s a pause. A soft one.

Then Haley murmurs, “Okay, that’s hot.”

Grace hums. “Really hot. Thoughtful Nate might be my new fantasy.”

“Please don’t fantasize about my boyfriend,” I deadpan, and they both burst out laughing.

“You sure?” Grace teases. “Just a little? I bet he’s the type to unhook your bra after asking how your day went.”

“He is,” I blurt, then slap a hand over my mouth as they shriek in tandem.

“MANDY,” Haley howls. “I KNEW IT. He’s one of those secretly soft alphas. Does he tie your shoes too? Tuck you in?”

“No,” I say, nose crinkling. “But he did make me oatmeal once and cut the bananas into perfect little coins.”

Grace mock-gasps. “Girl. That’s domestic foreplay. He’s already got you in the fake suburbs, wearing matching robes and arguing over throw pillow colors.”

“Oh my God, shut up,” I laugh, but I’m grinning so hard it hurts. Because... they’re

not that far off.

Nate is intense. Focused. Sometimes too guarded for his own good. But with me? He's that guy. The one who notices when my shoulders are tense or when I need silence instead of jokes. He's never asked me to be anything other than myself.

And that's what makes all this...the craziness, the late nights, the off-limits panic...worth it.

Haley reaches back and squeezes my knee. "We're just giving you crap because we like you, you know."

"I know," I say softly.

Grace glances in the rearview again. "We also like to prepare our own. So if Allison ever gives you hell, just know we've got a group chat and a plan."

"What plan?"

Haley grins. "Let's just say if she pulls anything, we've got your back."

Grace nods. "No glitter cannons. Just backup. Loud, loyal, and always on call."

## Page 104

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

I laugh until my stomach hurts. Until I don't feel nervous about Columbus or awkward about being "the little sister."

Right now, I'm not just Mandy Fields, law associate and Nate's girlfriend.

I'm one of the puckwives.

And it feels damn good.

\*\*\*

We arrive at Nationwide Arena just before puck drop and meet Allison and Ben at the main entrance.

"Mandy, Mandy!"

She wraps me in a tight hug while Ben offers a warm smile and short side hug. Grace and Haley introduce themselves, and within moments, everyone is chatting like old friends. I give her the tickets and she chuckles.

"Who would ever have imagined that we would be going to watch Nate Jones play hockey?"

"I know, right?" I laugh as we make our way through the gate.

Inside, the WAG (wives and girlfriends) section crackles with anticipation, the sound of cowbells and goal horns already ringing through the halls. Grace and Haley flank

me as we walk down the row.

"You good?" Haley whispers.

"Terrified. Excited. Possibly both," I say, heart pounding.

Grace nudges me. "Well, you look hot. You'll make him sweat."

"Front row of the WAG section," Haley grins. "You better scream loud."

"You don't have to worry about that," I laugh, heart pounding with anticipation.

To our right, Allison and Ben settle into their section. I wave back at them, heart swelling. It's all really happening.

The lights dim. Music blasts. The Acers skate out to roaring applause, despite being the visiting team.

The game begins.

The first period is a rollercoaster. Columbus scores early on a power play, their fans exploding with noise. But the Acers answer back late in the period, Connor sneaking in a rebound off a point shot from Parker.

Nate racks up two gritty blocked shots and gets into a shoving match behind the net that earns some colorful gestures from Coach Stephens on the bench, mostly aimed at the refs. There's one near-fight after James chirps the goalie and gets whacked in the back of the leg. Tension is through the roof.

By the second period, the score is locked at 1–1. Every shift is a battle, every play tighter than the last. The whole arena is practically vibrating with tension.



Midway through the second, the Blue Jackets make a breakaway. It's a heart-stopping moment until Nate lays out, clean and hard, disrupting the play and sending the puck back up the boards.

He turns toward the bench...and freezes.

His eyes lock on me.

For a heartbeat, time stops.

I lift my hand, giving him a small, shaky wave.

He nods, expression unreadable under his helmet. Then he turns, focused and fierce, and skates off with renewed energy, just as a fight breaks out near the boards, sending gloves flying and fans roaring. The refs struggle to separate the players, whistles shrieking as fists fly and helmets clatter.

Nate doesn't flinch. He barrels into the next shift, knocking an opponent off balance and drawing a retaliatory slash. The ref's arm goes up—penalty and power play for the Acers. The Acers set up quickly in the offensive zone, puck movement crisp and relentless. Parker threads a pass to James, who dishes it to Connor on the wing. Without hesitation, Connor rifles a wrist shot past the goalie's glove. Goal! The bench erupts, and the Acers take a 2–1 lead, capitalizing on the momentum.

As the players clear for intermission, the Acers head down the tunnel. Just before disappearing into the tunnel, Connor and Parker glance toward our section. Grace and Haley wave like maniacs. I do too, jumping up and down.

## Page 105

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

Connor smirks and nudges Parker. They both nod, clearly having spotted us.

"They see us!" Grace says, half-laughing, half-screaming.

"Oh my God, they totally see us!" Haley adds, waving both arms like she's directing traffic.

My heart races. This is so exciting!

\*\*\*

Middle of the third period. Tie game. The entire arena holds its breath.

Connor wins the faceoff. Nate corrals the puck and threads a perfect breakout pass up the ice, right onto James's stick. James flies down the ice and roofs it, top shelf.

GOAL!

I'm cheering and dancing. Grace screams. Haley nearly falls over.

3-2.

With two minutes left, the Blue Jackets throw everything they've got at the net. It's like a war zone out there: bodies crashing, sticks slashing, the puck flying through a maze of players. But Alex is an absolute brick wall in goal, blocking shots left and right, up and down. A one-timer rockets in from the point and he flashes the glove. A rebound skitters loose and he dives to smother it. The crowd is on their feet, shouting,

groaning, gasping.

"He's a machine!" Grace yells, eyes wide.

"I swear he just teleported across the crease," Haley adds, hands on her head.

Nate's out there battling for every inch. He checks a forward so hard he knocks the guy's stick out of his hands, then scoops up the puck and sends it sailing down the ice. It's pure grit and precision, and as they clear the zone again, the clock is running.

The Acers hold the lead. The final seconds tick down—five, four, three. The buzzer blasts. We win!

We're going to the damn finals!

The bench empties. Helmets fly. Nate's on the ice, arms up, teammates mobbing him.

And then, he looks back at me.

His grin is wild and beautiful and full of everything: relief, joy, love.

I press a hand over my heart.

He sees me.

And I see him.

The celebration continues as we are dancing in our seats, watching the chaos with hearts full.

A few minutes later, my phone buzzes.

A text from Nate.

Wait for me.

I smile.

Already am.

Chapter twenty-seven

Nate

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

"Please tell me this place serves more than kale chips," I grumble, stepping inside with James right behind me.

"Don't knock kale chips. They're rich in fiber and disappointment," James fires back, tugging at his collar. "And besides, you're the one who scarfed two burritos before the game. What more do you need?"

"I need a steak."

"Yeah, me too." James says as we walk into the restaurant.

No more cameras. No more gear. Just the team and their people, packed around long tables that radiates warmth even from across the room. My shirt's wrinkled, my legs are still humming from the game, but none of that matters. We won. We are in the Stanley Cup Finals and Mandy is here.

My eyes sweep across the dining room, and then I see her.

She's perched between Grace and Haley at a long table, talking to Coach Stephens and Lizzie like she belongs there. Her eyes light up when they find mine, and I cross the floor without looking away.

I lean down, kiss her head and whisper. "You really were the good luck charm."

Her cheeks flush, and I swear the rest of the room fades.

Grace moves down a chair and I slip into the empty seat beside Mandy, nodding

greetings to the guys already there. Connor, Parker, James, Alex, Nina, and even Coach and Lizzie are with us. It's a full table of our people.

Dinner kicks off in true Acers style, rowdy, hilarious, and heartfelt. Grace is teasing Parker about his second-period revenge hit.

"He launched that guy into next week," she says proudly, raising her glass.

Parker shrugs. "Guy had it coming. You check me into the boards like that, you're getting planted."

Connor grins. "You looked like a human freight train. I think you left a crater."

James leans forward. "Connor, did you see your meme yet? It's all over Insta. You mid-fist-pump with your mouth open like you're about to inhale the whole arena."

Haley pulls out her phone. "Here it is!"

Laughter explodes around the table.

Mandy covers her mouth, laughing. "Okay, but it kind of looks like he's trying to eat the puck."

"That was my warrior face," Connor says defensively. "It was intense. You try scoring under pressure while looking hot."

"Impossible for you," Parker deadpans.

We're all howling when the server comes over to take drink orders. Mandy slides her hand into mine under the table.

Across from us, Allison and Ben are quietly sipping their drinks. I offer a warm smile as I lean across a bit. "Hey, Allison. It's been a while. You look great."

She returns it, maybe a little hesitant, but kind. "You too, Nate. This is my husband, Ben. Ben, this is Nate. We grew up in the same town."

Ben offers a handshake. "Good to meet you, man. Congrats on the win."

"Thanks," I say, shaking his hand firmly. "Appreciate you being here tonight."

It's the first time I've seen Allison since high school. I let Mandy take the lead from there, the conversation light and easy as we ease into this new dynamic.

After the initial greetings and awkward pleasantries, conversation flows around them.

"He's grown up a lot. He's different," Allison says quietly.

Mandy doesn't flinch. "I have as well. And I'm not just your little sister anymore."

Allison nods, the corner of her mouth lifting. "I know. You're better."

## Page 107

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

The two of them reach across the table and squeeze each other's hands, and something unknots between them. Closure. A long time coming.

James chooses that moment to raise his glass like a conductor with a champagne flute. "Alright, alright. Before we start throwing breadsticks at each other, I have a toast."

We all lift our glasses, bracing.

James clears his throat dramatically. "To the Acers! To sweat, blood, blocked shots, broken sticks, delayed flights, sketchy hotel pillows, and to Parker's eyebrows, which somehow survive every game without moving."

Laughter erupts.

Parker deadpans, "They're insured."

Connor stands next, lifting his glass. "To the people in this room. To the ones who show up, even when they don't have to. To the women who keep us grounded and make life off the ice worth something more."

Haley pretends to wipe a tear. "That was almost poetic. Who helped you write it?"

He kisses her cheek in reply.

Alex is next. He stands with his glass, tossing a wink Nina's way. "To the Acers, for being the most stubborn, ridiculous, lovable group of guys I've ever played with. To



Coach, for yelling at us just enough to scare us straight. And to Nina, who somehow manages to fix our heads without smashing them in. I don't know what kind of wizardry that is, but I'm pretty sure it involves caffeine, patience, and blackmail."

Laughter ripples through the table, and Nina rolls her eyes with a fond smirk. Alex continues, a little softer now, "Seriously though, thank you for keeping me sane this year. This team wouldn't be where we are without you."

He raises his glass higher. "To good people doing hard things, and who make it look easy."

Coach Stephens gets up next, glass in hand. The tables quiet.

"This team has fought through hell this season. I'm proud of every damn one of you. Enjoy tonight. You earned it."

A round of heartfelt applause, clinks and murmured cheers follow.

Then it's my turn. I push back from the table and lift my glass.

"To unexpected turns... and the people who make them worth it."

My gaze lands on Mandy. She smiles, eyes shining.

"Cheers," the table echoes.

Connor tips his glass toward me and says, "That was solid, Jones. Maybe you've got a future as a motivational speaker."

"Doubtful," I reply with a smirk, settling into my seat.

Grace is already halfway through a story about Parker getting stuck in a too-small jersey before the game. "He swore it shrunk in the wash, but I swear he just grabbed the wrong size. His biceps were trying to break free like the Hulk."

Haley nearly spits out her drink. "Please tell me someone got a picture."

"I did," Nina says calmly, holding up her phone.

Connor groans. "Group chat. Now."

Laughter swells again as phones buzz with incoming photos. Parker throws up his hands. "It was compression fit!"

"It was circulation cut-off fit," James quips. "I'm surprised you're still upright."

The server arrives with another round of drinks and a massive appetizer platter of wings, sliders, and some fancy-looking flatbread no one touches. The table leans in, arms overlapping, stealing bites and swapping stories.

Mandy leans close and murmurs, "This is wild. I've never seen anything like this."

"Team dinners after big wins? It's part roast, part therapy, and part feeding frenzy."

## Page 108

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

"You forgot full-contact comedy hour," she adds, just as Parker tries to reenact his hit on the boards using Connor as a prop.

Connor shoves him away, laughing. "Get off me, caveman. Save it for practice."

Across the table, Nina and Lizzie are talking about playoff beards and how most of the guys look like castaways.

"Mine's distinguished," Alex says, stroking his chin. "Rugged. Mysterious."

"Yours looks like a raccoon gave up halfway through," James says.

Everyone bursts out laughing again.

"Don't worry, babe," Nina says, grinning. "It's growing on me."

"Good," Alex fires back. "Because it's definitely growing on me."

More laughter. More teasing. More of everything that makes this crew a family.

I look around the table, Connor with his arm around Haley, Parker sneaking fries from Grace's plate, James telling Lizzie a completely fabricated version of tonight's game, and Mandy beside me, glowing from laughter.

This is a perfect night.

\*\*\*

She doesn't even make it two steps into the hotel room before I shut the door behind us and pin her with a look.

"You've been teasing me since dinner," I say, stepping into her space.

Mandy lifts a brow, smug. "You mean breathing? Wearing jeans?"

"Yeah, those jeans and that sexy top," I growl, brushing the back of my fingers against the curve of her hip, "should be illegal in public."

She laughs softly, but her breath stops when I lean in, mouth at her ear.

"I spent the entire night imagining what you're wearing underneath it."

"Wouldn't you like to know," she breathes, tilting her head like she's daring me.

I smile, slow and sharp. "Oh, I'm about to find out."

She backs toward the bed with that little intentional sway in her hips. She knows exactly what she's doing.

"I don't remember giving you permission," she teases.

"Good," I murmur, stalking after her. "Because I'm not in the mood to ask."

Her knees hit the edge of the mattress and I step between her legs. My hands find her waist, then slide up her sides, thumbs brushing the edge of her bra beneath that shirt.

"Unless you're too tired," I say, voice low.

She looks up at me, eyes dark and gleaming. "Not a chance."

I dip my head and kiss the corner of her mouth, barely. A tease. Her lips part, but I pull back, grinning.

“You always this quiet when you’re turned on?” I murmur.

She narrows her eyes. “What makes you think I'm turned on?”

I grin and lean in close. "You really want me to believe you're not turned on right now?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

She lifts her chin, defiant but breathing a little too fast.

"That flush on your cheeks? The way your chest is rising like you just ran a mile?" I trail my fingers lightly down the front of her shirt. "And don't even get me started on what's pressing against this fabric, practically begging me to notice."

Her lips part, but she doesn't say a word.

"Yeah," I murmur, brushing my thumb just beneath her collarbone, "I know exactly what you want."

She surges forward and grabs my shirt, pulling me down into a kiss that hits like a match to gasoline. There's nothing careful about it. It's just heat, hunger, and the kind of raw want that makes you forget everything else. Her hands are in my hair and I kiss her back just as hard, pushing into her until the only thing I can feel is her body, her mouth, her fire.

God, this girl. I press her down against the bed, hovering over her as I kiss her deeper, my tongue thrashing with hers, until we're both breathing like we just finished a sprint.

I pull back just enough to look her in the eyes. "Let's get naked."

She grins like she's been waiting for that line all night. I yank off all my clothes in one rough, eager motion and fall back onto the bed, bare and ready, with a cocky grin. "Your turn."

She starts slow, pulling her top over her head with a little shimmy that makes my blood roar. Her jeans come next, hips swaying as she peels them down her legs. She tosses them at me, and I catch them without breaking eye contact.

She's down to her bra and panties, and holy hell, I'm gone. I prop myself up on my elbows, stroking myself slowly as I watch her with hooded eyes. "You have no idea what you do to me," I growl, my voice rough with need.

With a sultry smile, she unhooks her bra and lets it fall. My eyes are glued to every teasing move, every curve she reveals. Then she hooks her thumbs into her panties, dragging them down slowly, putting on a show just for me.

I growl, low and primal. "You're gonna kill me."

She climbs onto the bed with a wicked grin. "Good. Then die happy."

Before I know it she takes my length in both her hands and strokes me without breaking eye contact.

I think I'm about to explode!

To keep myself from finishing before I get started, I flip her over and kiss her again, deeper this time, more deliberate. Then I start to move lower. Her neck. Her collarbone. Her chest. Her stomach.

"You like teasing," I murmur against her skin, "but so do I."

I kiss my way down her stomach, lingering at her hips, and glance up with a wicked smile. "Tell me you want this," I murmur, my fingers already sliding lower, teasing just above the place that's flushed and hot for me. "Because your cheeks say yes, your breathing screams yes... and what's pressing against my hand right now? That's

begging for it, sweetheart."

She writhes beneath me, breathless, impatient. "Nate..."

I finally give her what she wants. Soft, slow strokes with my tongue that make her hips lift off the bed. I build her up, then back off, then build again, keeping her just on the edge until she's shaking.

When I finally let her fall, it's with a cry that shoots straight to my core.

I rise up and grab a condom from my wallet on the nightstand. Her eyes are on me as I slide it on. Still breathing heavy. Still glowing.

I climb over her and kiss her hard, lining myself up and pressing inside slowly, inch by inch.

She gasps and clutches at my back.

"Deeper. Keep going."

I move over her, taking my time, letting her feel everything. She wraps her legs around me, urging me deeper.

We find a rhythm that makes her cry out again. And then, just when I feel her tightening around me, I flip her onto her stomach and guide her up onto her knees.

"Nate," she breathes. "Oh my God..."

I thrust into her from behind, gripping her hips and groaning her name like a prayer. She moans, wild and breathless, until she unravels for the second time.



I pull her up against my chest and turn us again, laying back so she's on top.

## Page 110

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

“Your turn,” I rasp. “Ride me.”

She does. Slowly at first. Then harder. Her hands on my chest, her body a perfect rhythm over mine. Her breasts bounce with every movement, a hypnotic rhythm that makes me lose my damn mind. I watch her fall apart again with her head thrown back, skin flushed, and mouth saying my name.

I grip her hips and let go with her, every nerve on fire, every muscle tight until the only thing that exists is us.

Breathless. Tangled. Completely wrecked.

And as she collapses on top of me, her heart racing against mine, I realize one thing:

This girl...she's it.

"You feel that?" I murmur, still breathless, my lips brushing her ear. "That was more than just sex. That was mine claiming yours."

Mandy smiles, lazy and satisfied. "Yeah. No going back now."

"Good," I say, pulling her closer with a smirk. "You think you're getting away from me, Little Fields? Not a fucking chance."

Chapter twenty-eight

Epilogue- Mandy

Two Months Later...

We're halfway through dessert when my phone buzzes on the table at the restaurant.

I grab my phone and gasp. "Oh my God. The results of the bar are in my inbox."

Neither of us move.

"Do you want to look now?"

"I want to wait. Let's look on the computer when we get home," I say, my voice shaky with nerves.

He throws down his napkin. "Shit. I better step up my game if I'm dating a full-fledged attorney."

"That's right," I tease, grinning. "Or I'll sue you for emotional distress and stolen kisses."

"I plea guilty. What's the punishment?"

"Hmmm. You'll be sentenced to three months of backrubs and cooking dinner for me in your boxers."

"Harsh. I may need to appeal."

We grab the check and hurry back, my hands starting to sweat as I fumble with the apartment keys. Kira's out for the night, thank God, or she'd be narrating this like it's the bar exam Super Bowl.

I sit at the kitchen counter, Nate behind me with both hands on my shoulders. I click

the link, enter my credentials, and hold my breath.

And then I see it.

Congratulations! We are pleased to inform you that you have passed the Michigan Bar Examination.

I let out a scream. Nate spins me around in the stool and kisses me like we just won the Stanley Cup...again!

I text Kira and later she bursts through the door with sparklers and a Google Doc titled "MANDY'S BAR BASH" scheduled for next weekend.

Nate steps out to go to his place for a few minutes and then returns.

"I was saving this," he says, holding out an envelope.

## Page 111

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

I open it and gasp.

Two tickets. Italy. Amalfi Coast. Departing right before training camp starts.

“I figured...” he says, watching me carefully, “that you would pass the bar. I locked in my five-year deal. Thought maybe we should celebrate properly.”

I stare at the tickets, then back at him. “You want to take me to Italy?”

He grins. “I want to see the world with you.”

He pauses. Lowers his voice.

"Italy's just the start, Counselor. After that, we take on everything...together."

Chapter twenty-nine

Sneak Peek

If you liked *My Pucked Neighbor*, then you'll LOVE *My Pucked Up Enemy*!

It's fun and flirty like your favorite locker room rom-com, but with a depth that sneaks up on you and hits you right in the heart.

This story is perfect for readers who want their romance smart, sexy, and impossible to put down.

Click here now to getMy Pucked Up Enemy!

Sneak Peek

She was hired to get in my head.

I'm a goalie. I don't let anything in.

But she's the one I can't shut out, and I'm breaking every rule to make her mine.

Dr. Nina Erwin is the Acers' new sports psychologist.

All curves and attitude, she's too good at reading what I don't say.

I give her nothing.

She doesn't flinch.

She calls me out. I shut her down.

And still...she gets under my skin.

One brutal game loss. One hungry kiss...zero apologies.

And suddenly, the lines between us aren't so clear.

She says it can't happen. I say it already did.

Now we're hiding something that could jeopardize her job, the team, and my game.

She's the calm I never asked for.

The chaos I didn't see coming.

But just when it starts to feel real, she gets offered everything she's worked for.

## Page 112

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

Everything that doesn't include me.

If she walks, I'll let her go.

But I'll make damn sure she wants to stay.

Because I don't just protect the net...I protect what's mine.

[Click here now to getMy Pucked Up Enemy!](#)

### Chapter 1

I'm already in the room when the chirping starts.

They see me. They just don't think I'm listening. Or maybe they don't care.

From my seat near the back, I hear them, voices low but not low enough.

"Did we seriously just hire a shrink?"

"Sports shrink, James. Supposed to 'fix our heads.'"

"Good luck with that circus."

"Wait till she makes us talk about our feelings."

"I'll retire before I say 'I'm sad' in a group circle."



“Bet she’s got one of those soothing voices. Like one of those sleep apps.”

“You mean the kind where they whisper at you for an hour?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t mind if she whispered at me.”

And then, the kicker—just loud enough:

“Didn’t know we were hiring a Barbie for the bench.”

I clear my throat and smile.

“If Barbie has three degrees, several years of experience with combat veterans, and a black belt in judo, sure. Let’s go with that.” I interrupt because it’s time to get started.

“Oooooooh!” The entire room reacts in unison.

Then silence, sharp and sudden, like a puck slamming against the glass.

Coach Stephens steps in beside me, not missing a beat. “This is Dr. Nina Erwin. She’s here to help get your heads straight and your game back. I expect full participation and zero bull.”

“Are we getting graded on this?” James Henderson interrupts. “Because I left my No. 2 pencil at home.”

“If I misbehave,” Ethan Lovelace adds, “do I get detention or just a spanking?”

Several groans. A few laughs.

Connor Jessup, team captain, shrugs. “Can she fix a fear of commitment? Asking for

a friend.”

“Gentlemen,” I say with a bright smile. “If you’re all finished proving why your emotional maturity levels hover somewhere around kindergarten...”

Silence.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

Coach smirks. “She’s not wrong.”

I continue, stepping forward like I own the damn place. “Let’s get one thing clear. I’m not here to sing Kumbaya or pass out participation trophies. I’m here because this team is in a slump, and slumps don’t start in your legs, they start in your heads. You don’t have to like me. You just have to show up and put in the work. Sound familiar?”

That gets a few nods. Parker lifts his Gatorade bottle like he’s toasting me.

James mutters, “She’s spicy. I like it.”

Coach gives me a look that says, you sure you still want this?

And I shoot one right back that answers: more than ever.

From the back of the room, a low voice cuts through the chatter. “Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

My eyes lock on him immediately. Alex Chadwick. I recognize him from the team photo Derek gave me last week. Arms crossed, leaning against the wall like he’s seen this circus before and isn’t impressed. He is annoyed at best with his wall up, drawbridge pulled, and a moat full of sharks in between.

“Not quite,” I say, matching his calm tone. “But I’m a quick study.”

“Is that so?” His mouth twitches. It could almost be a smirk. Almost.

“Well,” I say, clasping my hands lightly in front of me, “I already know which one of you is going to be my favorite challenge.”

A few guys chuckle. James lets out a soft, drawn-out, “Ah, we’ve got our teacher’s pet.”

Alex laughs and turns to me. “Good luck.”

I smile. “I never rely on luck.”

He doesn’t respond. Just pushes off the wall, snags a water bottle from the table, and strolls out like I didn’t say a word.

I keep the smile on my face as I turn back to the rest of the team.

But inside a wave of nerves hits my stomach.

That one’s going to be a fun project.

By the time the guys shuffle out, leaving behind the scent of liniment, protein powder, and testosterone, I’m mentally cataloging my priorities like it’s a tactical op.

Priority one: Earn trust without demanding it.

Priority two: Get Alex Chadwick to talk.

Priority three: Try not to punch the next guy who calls me Barbie.

I follow Coach Stephens into a small office tucked beside the video review room. It’s been cleared out for me. Neutral walls. One modest desk, two chairs, and a dry-erase board that still has a scribbled diagram of a failed power play on it.

A blank slate. Perfect.

I drop my tote on the desk and start unloading. Laptop. Notepad. A stack of laminated mental conditioning checklists. And a photo of my younger brother in army fatigues, grinning with a black eye and a missing front tooth.

He'd always said pain meant progress. Not a clinical statement, but still.

Coach watches me, arms folded. "You sure about this?"

"You have doubts already?" I glance up at him.

"Not about you." He chuckles. "About them. They're not the easiest crew to break in."

"They don't need to be broken. They need to be understood. And maybe smacked upside the ego once or twice."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

He huffs a laugh. “You’ll get along with Chadwick very well, then.”

“Goalie, right?”

“Yep. One of our ice philosophers. Parker being the other.”

I pause. “That’s a title.”

“Alex has been a little off lately. Came back strong after the knee injury a couple of years ago, but something’s not clicking. He’s locked in physically, but mentally, something’s shifting. He won’t talk about it.”

“Of course not,” I murmur. “Because talking is weakness, and goalies are gods.”

Coach nods slowly, like he’s not sure if I’m mocking or agreeing. I’m not sure either.

“How’s his leadership?”

“Quiet. Calculated. He doesn’t waste words, but when he speaks, they listen.”

“And when I speak?”

Coach’s mouth slowing tries to grin. “We’ll find out.”

He leans a hip against the desk and folds his arms again. “Connor’s the captain. He’s the heartbeat of the room—steady, focused, knows when to rally and when to rip someone a new one. Parker’s right behind him. He’s a rule-follower, but he’s got

some bend when it counts. James, Ethan, and Alex? They're the ball busters, classic single guys who live to give each other crap. And you'll meet a few of the younger guys like Mikey Tran and Dillon Foster...good kids, still figuring out their place."

He pauses, and the edge in his voice softens. "But here's the thing. They're all solid human beings. They've got each other's backs. They've got mine too. This group is a family. And just like any family, sometimes the dynamics get messy."

He gives me a knowing look. "That's where you come in."

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The next morning, I settle into the glass-walled observation suite above the rink. It's a bird's-eye view without being in their faces.

Lukewarm black coffee in hand, I watch the team drag themselves through post-practice cooldowns and stretches. The vibe is... off. No real banter. The rhythm feels forced.

At the far end of the ice, Chadwick moves like he's on autopilot. Every motion is clean. Exact. Mechanical.

There's no joy in it.

His shoulders are hunched just a hair too much. His jaw doesn't move. Not even a word to the trainer. Hyper-focused or hiding? Probably both.

I jot in my notebook:

Chadwick – goalie – high-functioning pressure cooker.

Watch for signs of burnout. Perfectionist tendencies. Control fixation. Isolation masking stress? Possibly sleep disruption or repressed trauma from injury recovery.

I glance back down. Parker is joking with Ethan, tossing a puck at his feet mid-stretch. Ethan dodges it like he's done this routine a hundred times.

James is doing a hamstring stretch all wrong and knows it, but keeps talking through it, unbothered.

They're not broken. Just out of sync. Probably mentally exhausted from playing tight. You can't win if you're gripping the stick so hard your knuckles go white.

I keep writing:

Connor – captain, steady leader, team anchor

Parker – social regulator

Ethan – internalizer, perfectionist



## Page 115

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:30 am*

James – deflector, high sarcasm, possible stress clown

I sip my coffee again, making a face. Still tastes gross, but it's still necessary.

I jot a few more names down, mapping the room the way a field commander maps a combat zone—who leads, who follows, who hides.

A tap on the door pulls me back.

Derek's head pokes in. "Hey, Doc. You've got your first one-on-one in an hour."

I look up. "Already breaking them in?"

"Softball to start," he grins. "Ethan. Thought you might like a warm-up round."

I nod, even as my eyes drift back down toward the ice.

Chadwick's stepping off the rink, helmet under one arm. Sweat dripping down his temples. He looks like he just won a war. Or lost one.

He doesn't look up.

Doesn't need to.

That energy is coiled, cold, unreadable. It rolls off him like fog. He disappears into the tunnel without a glance in my direction.

But I feel it. The challenge. The wall. The unspoken dare.

Yeah.

He's going to be the hard one.

Well, I've never liked easy, so bring it on.