



Accidentally Checked By My Brother's Best Friend (Accidentally In Sports #3)

Author: Abby Greyson

Category: Sport

Description: A Brooding Hockey Player. A Gorgeous Movie Star. And One Very Public Break-up.

Ava

Duncan James has always been the one person I couldn't hide from.

He saw me. The real me I hid from everyone.

Ten years later, that hasn't changed, but Duncan has.

The younger brother of my best friend is all grown up. And way too attractive for his own good, and mine.

With a crazy ex, I have a favor to ask: Pretend to be my boyfriend.

Duncan

The moment I laid eyes on Ava Norris, I knew she was my person.

Now she's asking the impossible: pretend I'm in love with her.

One problem: I'm pretty sure I still am.

Fake dating never goes well in the movies. And if the 'fake' kisses are any indication, my heart's about to be broken a second time.

Unless I can figure out a way to make her mine for real.

Total Pages (Source): 40

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Chapter One

Duncan

“Hey, Red, what’s up?” Holding my phone, I board the Wolverines charter plane after a three-game series against the Pittsburgh Penguins. My niece’s voice rings out as I make my way down the aisle toward the back seats.

“Uncle Dunky, you were great today!” I take the phone off speaker, turn my head around, and scowl at my snickering teammates, who immediately school their expressions.

“Scarlett,” I whisper-yell. “How many times have I said to only use my nicknames in private?”

A snort comes from behind me, and I slowly turn to glare at the guilty party sitting in the seat I just walked past. Levi Wallace, the Wolverine’s right winger, is staring straight ahead, but from his shaking shoulders, I can tell he’s doing everything to hold in his laughter. I glance around at the rest of my teammates, and I find them all in similar situations. My lip curls and I snarl, only to have some guys chortle while others cough to cover up their laughter.

My jaw ticks, and I work to bring my attention back to what Scarlett was saying.

“I am in the privacy of my own home,” she counters. I shake my head and scoff. This niece of mine is way too smart for her own good. “It’s not my fault you like to use the speaker on your phone.”

“You’re right.” I squeeze the bridge of my nose, breathe in a deep breath, and slowly blow it out. If I could just remember to bring my headphones, I wouldn’t have to worry about what nickname she uses. And she, unfortunately, has way too many I would prefer not to have overheard.

“As I was saying,” she continues. I roll my eyes and press my lips together, walking toward the back of the plane. “You were guarding that basket like a man on fire.”

The way my niece talks, you’d never know she’s only eight years old. My brother David swears she’s eight going on twenty-eight, and with every conversation I have with her, I’m not sure he’s wrong.

“Ava Norris has just broken up with her fiancé after seven years of dating!”

My head whips in the direction of the voice talking about Ava. I stop in my tracks, my mouth parting slightly while my heart slams against my ribcage.

“ This is huge news, considering he just proposed to her last week, and they have been relationship goals for the longest time. And people, we have reasons to believe that this breakup was inspired by none other than the most eligible bachelor... ”

“Oof!” A body slams into me, and I turn a hard stare over my shoulder at Tom ‘Viper’ Davidson, the Wolverine’s center and captain.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. You’re the one who stopped in the middle of the aisle.” He pins me with his gaze. “Mind moving along so the rest of us can get to our seats.”

“Uncle Duncan?” Scarlett’s voice cuts through my haze. I force my suddenly heavy feet to move. “Were you listening to me?”

“I’m sorry, Scar, I wasn’t. What did you say?”

“Aunt Ava is coming to stay with me and Daddy!” Her excitement is palpable and buzzes through the phone. Suddenly, I have two left feet, and if not for Tom grabbing my arm to steady me, I would’ve landed on my face. I rip my arm from his grasp and start walking forward again. His chuckle in my ears has my lips drawing into a tight line. “She’ll be here tomorrow!”

“...the insane chemistry between Sean and Ava cannot be overlooked. Her poor ex-fiancé! But who could blame Ava? I would do the same.”

My stomach churns like a newly awakened volcano, restless and ready to erupt. The news of Ava ending her engagement and coming to stay in Maple Ridge completely overwhelms my senses. Reaching my seat, I shove my bag in the overhead bin and close it with a bit too much force, causing Coach Stone to look at me.

“You okay, James?” He questions.

Focused solely on the voice talking about Ava and her recent breakup, I look around to see if I can figure out where it’s coming from.

“James?” I turn my gaze toward Coach and give a stiff nod before taking my seat. I scrub my hand up and down my face, landing on my beard.

“You haven’t seen her in a while, have you?” I ask Scarlett, working to keep my voice steady while every cell in my body is pulsating.

The last time I saw Ava was at Fiona’s funeral, her twin sister and David’s wife. Scarlett was only three years old then.

Playing for the Florida Panthers and living halfway across the country meant Ava and

I usually visited David and Fi at different times.

Except for exactly three times. Scarlett's birth, her baptism, and Fiona's funeral.

That arrangement worked fine for me, especially after Ava started dating Nathan Vaughn. Yes, mega action star Nathan Vaughn.

I'm sure I would've disliked him just for dating her, but it turns out he's one of the most arrogant people I've ever met—which is saying a lot. As a professional athlete, I encounter arrogance regularly, but Nathan, let's just say he's in a league of his own.

"Forever ago!" Scarlett squeals, bringing me back to the present.

"Scar, time to get ready for bed," David's voice calls out in the background.

"Okay, Daddy," she yells back before asking me, "Will you be stopping by tomorrow?"

My chin falls to my chest. They may call me 'The Denier' on the ice, but when it comes to my goddaughter, it's hard for me to deny her anything. But that's exactly what I'm going to have to do. I need a minute to pull myself together before seeing Ava again for the first time in years.

"I'm sorry, Red." Her pout is so loud I can hear it over the phone. Shame consumes me as the lie rolls off my tongue. "I have practice tomorrow."

"But I've missed you!" My heart melts at her words, and guilt floods me.

"I've missed you too. I promise I'll stop by soon, okay?"

She lets out a pained sigh, and my lips tug up at the corner. She takes after her aunt

with all the dramatics. “Okay.”

“Scarlett?” I say softly.

“Yes, Uncle Dunky?” I bite my lip to keep from chuckling at the small whine in her voice. She’s laying it on thick.

“I love you, and I’ll see you in a few days.” Again, remorse fills me for saying no, and honestly, only the possibility of running into Ava would make me do that since I’m a complete pushover when it comes to this little girl. “With a surprise.”

“Scaaarrrlett!” David screams, his patience wearing out. “You have school tomorrow!”

“Go get ready for bed before your dad gets even more upset.” Scarlett lets out a giggle. She has us all wrapped around her finger, and she knows it. “Good night.”

“Good night, Uncle Dunky, I love you too.”

I slip my phone into my pocket and glance up to see the team’s two defensemen, Noah ‘The Enforcer’ Philips, and Henry ‘Cavill’ Spencer, smirking at me from over their seats a few rows up.

“What?” I glower.

“Nothing,” Noah snickers, “Uncle Dunky.”

“Leave him alone.” Henry punches Noah’s arm, his eyes dancing.

I roll my eyes. Those two are the least of my worries right now. Everyone on the team knows Scarlett is one of the few who can tease me. Rarely would anyone else

ever dare.

I plop my head against the headrest and breathe out a big, slow breath. Closing my eyes, I try to calm the emotions running through me at the news I just heard.

Ava is single.

And she's staying with David and Scarlett.

Five minutes from my house.

A hand raises to my chest, palm open, circling in an attempt to release the tightness gathering there. Fiona's funeral was the last time I saw Ava, and like every other time since David and Fi's wedding, it was cordial but strained.

My stomach swirls remembering my eighteen-year-old self confessing to a then twenty-three-year-old Ava that I was in love with her.

Just drafted to the NHL, I was filled with a boldness that had previously eluded me when it came to admitting my feelings for Ava—not to mention that she was older than me and my brother's best friend.

For the first time since I'd known her, our five-year age gap didn't feel like such a big deal. The day was filled with so much love, and Ava looked radiant. Holding her in my arms, feeling her warmth against me, and smiling up at me, I was overcome with emotion. The words effortlessly fell from my lips without hesitation.

My hand freezes and falls from my chest as the pity in her eyes fills my mind.

My hands squeeze into fists as a small trickle of the pain that consumed me at that moment returns. It took me years to control my emotions any time I saw her after

that.

Both in person and on the big screen.

Since then, I've done everything possible to avoid seeing her unless a situation absolutely calls for it, and when it does, I make sure to be polite but distant.

Living across the country in Florida made that easy without finding an excuse. But now I live in Maple Ridge.

Minutes from David and Scarlett.

Minutes from where Ava will be.

It appears my past is about to slam into my present and there's nothing I can do to avoid the collision.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Chapter Two

Ava

Rick Springfield's Jessie's Girl blasts through my car speakers and my hands tighten on the steering wheel. When Caroline's name appears on my phone, the tightness gripping my body releases.

Since I ended our engagement two days ago, Nathan, and the press, have been calling nonstop. Knowing that his team is responsible for the media circus only confirms ending things was the right choice.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I answer the call. "Hi, Caroline."

"Ava!" Caroline's voice is tinged with worry. "Are you okay? My phone has been ringing off the hook. Nathan has repeatedly called me asking where you are, and the media is hunkered down in front of my office."

"Yeah, he's called me continuously, too." My chest tightens again. This entire situation is a complete mess. "Doesn't he get that when you end an engagement, things are over? Do you think it was his team getting the press involved?"

"To answer your first question with another one: Did you really think his ginormous ego would let you walk away?" Even though her tone is light, she's serious. "To answer your second question, sadly, I do. He's doing all types of damage control and if that means putting pressure on you to get back together—he'll do it."

I run my hand through my hair and swallow hard past the lump in my throat. This is a complete disaster. Nathan's reaction to all of this shows me that who I thought he was and who he actually is are two completely different people.

Maybe it was naive of me to think he would just let me end things easily. I definitely didn't think he would sic the press on me.

"How did I not see who he really is?" I mumble, hurt and confused by my blindness. "I guess he's a better actor than I realized."

The truth is, Nathan and I knew for a long time that our relationship wasn't going to last. It was more about the perception of us as a couple, than us being in love.

We met while working together on the hit movie *Cars, Men, and Pretty Faces*, and we had fun. The idea that we had fallen in love on set was great press for the movie.

That small detail was a surprise boost to both of our budding careers. The movie being a smash hit was the icing on the cake.

After my twin sister Fiona passed away, I was devastated and desperate, and I leaned on Nathan. Now, years later, when he asked me to marry him, I said yes because it seemed like the next step.

It was only when my pesky co-star, Sean O'Connell, started asking me what I saw in Nathan and digging into my relationship that I began asking myself the same question.

Sean was annoying, but he helped me admit what I had known for a long time. Nathan was never going to be the man for me. The only reason I stayed with him was because of the grief.

My sister, ironically, didn't like Nathan at all.

Fiona's voice runs through my head, and a wry grin crosses my face.

"Sure Av, he's hot, but, really, where's the substance?" Fi asked, a frown marring her face.

"Who said I was looking for substance?" I answered her question with a question, rubbing the frown from her brow. "He's fun, and it's helping our movie."

Her clear blue eyes penetrated mine, looking deeply into my soul in a way that no other person has since. People talk about twins having a deep connection, but it's hard to understand unless you are one.

That look was filled with a million words that were never spoken. All of them said, 'Don't fall into that trap, Ava. Don't fall into the Hollywood love relationship'.

"Stop worrying about me, Fi!" I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. "I'll be fine. Besides, not all of us can marry our high school sweethearts."

The smile she gave me was forced, and sadness filled her eyes. But it was her response that haunted me. "Promise me that you won't fall into the ease of what you and Nathan have. You deserve someone who will treasure you, Ava. A man who loves you more than they love themselves won't hesitate to do anything for you."

"I promise." A huge smile crossed my face. The high from the success of our movie and all the other offers I was getting consumed me with an excitement that made me giddy. "Nathan is Mr. Right Now, not Mr. Right. I know that, Fi."

The grin on my face falls. My sister knew me so well.

An ache pings my heart as an image of Duncan holding Scarlett in his arms at Fi's funeral flashes. His layers of softness hidden deeply under the gruff exterior he shows to the world have always been endearing.

The intense longing I felt at that moment to be held in his arms terrified me.

The grief that filled me at Fi's sudden loss and the acute need to be comforted by Duncan had me running toward Nathan instead of from him. Everything I knew was forgotten in a moment of desperation.

"Sean's team has been calling too," Caroline's voice pauses my trip down memory lane. "They told me the plan was to lay low. Sean, however, is taking the opportunity to go home and visit family."

"Sounds like Sean. He would be the person to make lemonade out of lemons." A soft chuckle falls from my lips as I think about my happy-go-lucky co-star making the best of any situation. "I feel bad he's caught up in all of this. But that's fame for you."

The early reviews for Web Of Love came out at the same time news of my breakup did. Because of our chemistry, Sean is being blamed for the things ending with Nathan.

"I really did think Nathan would let this go easily. It's not like we didn't know this was more about us being a power couple than actually being in love." Saying the truth out loud is freeing. A heaviness lifts from my chest for the first time in a long time. Nathan had been a crutch for so long, longer than I ever meant him to be. "I didn't realize how much of an ego he truly had."

"I think it's more about a bruised ego," Caroline jeers. "With everything being said about the chemistry between you and Sean, everyone is speculating."

She's right. Nathan hates to be one-upped. I'm sure that's how this feels to him. The timing of things gives everyone fuel for gossip.

"What do you think you're doing, Ava?" Nathan growled. His eyes were hard, disgust filling his voice as he stared at my hand holding out the three-carat engagement ring. "Do you know how bad this is going to make me look? All the reviews are talking about the chemistry between you and Sean. This is going to hurt the release of my new movie!"

"Silly of me to think he would handle this maturely." I scoff. Of course, he'd only think of himself. "Please promise me you won't tell him where I'm headed."

"Of course not!" Disbelief fills her voice at me even insinuating that she would do something like that. "In order to do that, which I never would, I'd need to know where you're going. Since you didn't tell me, I have no information to reveal."

Her statement reminds me that I didn't tell anyone where I was going; I just packed a bag and hopped into the car. Once on the road, I called David to tell him I was visiting.

"You know Scarlett and I will be thrilled to have you here, but this is sudden. Is everything okay?" David's voice was filled with worry. "And why are you driving instead of flying?"

"I ended things with Nathan." The words fell from my lips for the first time.

"Yes!" David yells. "Uhh..I mean, I'm so sorry, A. Are you okay?"

A small smile creased my face at his reaction. "The news isn't out yet, but he's not handling it well. I think being out of the spotlight for a bit will be a good idea, which means driving rather than flying."

“Well, with that ego, I wouldn’t expect anything else.” Shock filled me. David had never said anything negative about Nathan. “I know why you stayed with him, A, but I’m so grateful you’ve come to your senses.”

I snorted. “Tell me how you really feel!”

“I think I’ll let Scarlett tell you how she really feels.” He chuckles.

The thought that my eight-year-old niece had thoughts about my ex made me laugh out loud.

“I’ll be staying with David and Scarlett,” I tell Caroline.

“Of course,” she replies. “That’s your safe place.”

Running to my sister and my best friend, David, has always been what I’ve done whenever I needed support.

The tightness is back in my chest, knowing Fiona won’t be there this time when I arrive, but David and Scarlett will be. It’s been too long since I’ve seen the two of them in person; I’ve missed them. This visit should’ve happened a long time ago.

My goddaughter is growing up fast, and I’m missing it. Whenever a picture of her shows up on social media, I swear she’s grown. Our video chats are satisfying but never enough.

The last picture of her I saw was with David and Duncan and her latest missing tooth.

Her long auburn hair flowed down her back, and her smile was huge as the brothers pointed out her missing canine.

I ignore my tension for a moment as I remember David wearing a massive grin and Duncan with his typical stoic expression. The one he wears for the world to see. But if you look closely, you'll find a slight sparkle in his green eyes.

That's how it's always been. Duncan looking bored and uninterested unless you—

“Nathan will figure that out at some point,” Caroline says, interrupting my thoughts again. “Maybe you should have that handsome hunk of a goalie protect you.”

“Who?” My brows pull together, confusion coursing through me.

“Duncan,” Caroline says, surprise in her voice. “He was traded to the Colorado Wolverines.”

Duncan was traded to the Wolverines?

Drat! He lives in Maple Ridge, close to David and Scarlett. It's why he's been in so many recent photos.

My stomach drops and starts to swirl. Emotions I've kept tucked away forever begin racing through my body, causing my heart to crash against my ribcage.

Seeing Duncan wasn't on my radar. Suddenly, it seems like the history I pushed down just crashed headlong into my reality, and I'm powerless to steer clear of the wreckage.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Chapter Three

Duncan

Pulling up in front of David's house, I kill the engine, rest my hands on the steering wheel, and let out a slow breath. I'm picking up Scarlett for our weekly visit to Mile High Mutts Rescue. It's something the two of us look forward to. But today is different.

Today is the first time in years I'll be seeing Ava.

The drive here reminded me of my first professional hockey game. My stomach is rolling, my heart is racing, and tiny thrills of excitement are coursing through every cell in my body.

I'm gonna be sick.

Flipping down the visor, I stare at my reflection in the mirror and run a hand through my hair. Slamming the visor closed, I wipe my palms against my pants and blow out one more big breath before getting out of the car.

Walking around the front of my Acadia, I hear the door to David's house open. The corner of my mouth lifts as I see Scarlett making her way out.

"Uncle Duncan," she screams, running down the stairs and throwing her body into my arms.

“Oof.” I groan, pretending her weight is too much. She wraps her arms around my neck and squeezes. Feigning I can’t breathe, I choke out, “How much have you grown since I’ve been gone?”

Her tinkling laughter rains over me, spreading tiny rays of warmth throughout my body, causing my chest's tightness to loosen.

Scarlett gives another tight squeeze just before she wiggles out of my arms and grabs my hand, pulling me toward the house.

“Guess who’s here?!” She beams at me in that way of hers that melts my heart. If I wasn’t so tense knowing who’s staying with them, there’s nothing that would stop a smile from creeping across my face.

Scarlett’s excitement has that effect on me. Normally. Instead, there’s a stampede of horses running around my chest, and the pounding in my ears is making it difficult to do simple tasks like walk.

“Who?” My stomach clenches as I realize she’s dragging me into the house. I was hoping there would be some way I could avoid seeing Ava. I swallow hard and run my tongue over dry lips.

“Aunt Ava!” We walk into the house, and I give a cursory glance around the downstairs, and to my relief I don’t see Ava anywhere. Before I can relax, Scarlett calls out. “Aunt Ava! Uncle Dunky is here!”

Internally, I groan at Scarlett’s nickname for me. Ava walks through the archway of the kitchen, and my heart stops.

Her dishwater blonde hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, exposing her long neck. My eyes linger a moment before slowly lifting to her heart-shaped mouth only to find

it slightly lifted at the corner. When I raise my eyes to hers, I see a glint of humor dancing in her baby-blue orbs.

My heart is pounding so hard I'm afraid it's going to ram through my ribcage.

"Hi, Duncan," she says, her voice washing over me. She shoves a hand in her jeans pocket and leans against the door frame. Her navy blue t-shirt hugs her curves. "Or should I say 'Dunky'?"

I feel my lips tighten into a straight line, and she puts both hands up in surrender.

"Duncan, it is," she says, her eyes sparkling.

Every feeling I've stuffed in deep, dark places concerning the woman standing twenty feet away rushes over me like a tidal wave. Tightness grips my chest, and I struggle to breathe.

I'm drowning in emotions I've worked years to rein in. Emotions I so carefully crafted and skillfully built only to have them break through the levee.

Or so I had thought.

A hand squeezes mine, and I look down to find Scarlett's hazel eyes smiling up at mine. The storm immediately calms, and the tension drains from my body.

"Did you remember my surprise?" She asks, beaming at me. She knows I always keep my word, and the trust reflected in her face has my heart expanding.

My lips curve into a lopsided grin, and I place my thumb on her cheek. "Of course I did. It's waiting for you at Mile High Mutts Rescue."

“Oh, are we going to see Ryder?” She bounces up and down, and a soft chuckle falls from my lips.

“We’ll have to see when we get there,” I tell her. “But your surprise is something else.”

“Tell me, tell me!” She squeals, clapping her hands. Then, she uses the tone that usually breaks me, “Please. ”

I throw my head back and laugh, only to hear a gasp come from across the room. My gaze snaps to Ava’s, and my mouth goes dry from the look in her eyes. In an instant, the look is gone, and she pushes herself from the door frame and heads over to the refrigerator.

Pulling my eyes from Ava’s back, I glance down to Scarlett, who patiently awaits my response. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Uncle Duncan,” Scarlett whines, the corner of her lips pulling down. I press my lips together to keep the grin from breaking through. “You know I hate waiting.”

“And you know I hate being called Uncle ‘Dunky’.” The little imp lowers her head to her shoulder, puts a hand on her hip, and has the audacity to grin so big I’m not sure how her face doesn’t crack.

“I know.” She shrugs. “I just like seeing your expression.”

A chuckle comes from the other end of the room, and it takes everything in me not to look at its source. I give my goddaughter a scowl that would make any one of my teammates take cover, only to have her smile get bigger. “I’ll remember that later, Red.”

“What do the two of you do at the rescue?” Ava asks.

Is that hesitation in her voice? I glance toward her to see her focused on ripping at the corner of the water bottle label.

“Take some of the dogs for walks; make sure they have fresh water and food,” Scarlett responds. “One day, I even got to watch a training class where the dogs were doing agility. It was soooooo cool!”

Ava's eyes land on Scarlett, a warm smile resting on her face as she listens to her talk about a few of our adventures at Mile High Mutts Rescue.

I let my gaze roam over her face, taking her in. She's as beautiful as ever, but I can't help but notice the slight darkness under her eyes. An urge to wrap my arms around her comes over me. As if feeling my thoughts, her eyes slide over to mine.

My stomach tightens. I clench my jaw and narrow my eyes. The smile on Ava's face dims just a tiny bit, and guilt floods me at the thought of hurting her. But I need to get these feelings under control. Ava will never return the feelings I had. And if I'm not careful I'll fall in love with her all over again.

My heart and soul can't take that pain again.

“I love you.” The words fell from my mouth without hesitation or thought. For the first time, other than on the ice, I was utterly lost in the moment and saying exactly how I felt.

Ava's smile dropped, and a confused expression filled her eyes. “Duncan. I'm sure you—”

“I always have.” I place a hand on her cheek and forge ahead. “I know I'm younger

and David's brother, but I feel like there's always been a—"

The tips of her fingers gently covered my mouth to stop the flow of words falling. The look in her eyes had my stomach tied into knots.

Pity. So much pity.

A car door closing pulls my attention back, and I reach over and gently tug on Scarlett's braid. "Are you ready to get going?"

"Yes!" Scarlett runs toward the front door, yelling over her shoulder. "See you later, Aunt Ava!"

"Bye," Ava responds. "Have fun. I'll see you when you get home."

Without looking back at where Ava stands, I walk through the door after Scarlett. I find Scarlett in her Dad's arms, giving him a quick hug.

David's gaze falls on me, and I can see him searching my face for any reaction to seeing Ava again. I slip my usual guarded look on and watch his eyebrows pull together. I give him a nod in greeting.

"Will you be staying for dinner when you bring Scar home?" Panic fills me as I try to think of a good reason for breaking from our usual routine.

"No," I answer too quickly, avoiding eye contact. "I have to...I have to meet up with Noah and Henry to discuss strategy for tomorrow."

David nods, skepticism filling his eyes. Thankfully, he doesn't say anything else.

"Come on, Uncle Dunky!" Scarlett yells from the passenger side of my truck, a

serious expression on her face. “We’re gonna be late!”

A muffled cough comes from behind me, and I slam a glare in David’s direction. His mouth is covered by his fist just as he ‘coughs’ a few more times, his shoulders shaking.

Scrubbing my hand up and down my face, I turn back toward the truck and walk around to the driver’s side.

Scarlett and I will need to find a compromise on this Uncle ‘Dunky’ thing. As much as I would give her the world, I’m not sure my ego will survive the humiliation that nickname causes me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Chapter Four

Ava

Unable to drag my eyes from Duncan's broad shoulders as he follows Scarlett out, I find myself hoping he'll turn back to look at me one last time before leaving.

He doesn't.

Lifting the water bottle to my lips, I take a swig and shake my head. A small chuckle escaping. That's what I get for starring in one too many romantic comedies.

Where did that wanting for Duncan to look back come from? It's Duncan—my best friend's younger brother.

Duncan. The quiet little boy who was always on David's coattails. Then, the sulky teen who barely ever spoke a word or smiled.

The corner of my lip lifts, and my heart skips as I think about how that grey Henley stretched across his muscles. He's certainly not little anymore. However, he's still sulky and quiet.

Except with Scarlett.

Listening to him banter back and forth with my niece was a shock. I didn't know he could say that many words at once without grunting.

I definitely didn't realize he had that many teeth, and I most assuredly had no clue he could laugh so freely.

That rich sound ran through me like the first blast of heat on a humid August day after being stuck in air conditioning all day. The gasp that left my body was pulled from me and stunned me just as much as it clearly bewildered Duncan.

When he turned his gaze my way, the adoration Duncan felt for Scarlett was so brightly on display. Those emotions, directed at me, had my knees nearly buckling. Breaking eye contact and turning away was the only thing to do with the tide of emotions swirling in my stomach.

Keeping my hands and mind busy seemed like the most intelligent thing at the time. Grabbing a bottle of water was the only thought that my muddled brain could come up with but it helped to ground me.

My heart was racing, and my palms were sweaty. It's not a reaction I'm used to, but it's certainly not something I expect to experience with regard to Duncan.

Emotionally, I'm not in any state to handle the feelings that have come up, but more importantly, considering them is unfair to Duncan.

I've never fully gotten over the hurt in his eyes after he told me he loved me at Fiona and David's wedding. I can't hurt him like that again.

I refuse to hurt him. I care about him too much.

Whatever this attraction is to the man who was standing in front of me, acting like the biggest mush, needs to be squelched.

Now.

Like I said to Duncan at Fi and David's wedding, he deserves someone so much better than me. I may not be the same girl who said those words, but the scars from my father's abandonment still linger.

It's the reason Nathan and I worked. He never wanted more from me than I was willing to give, which was little. The freedom to have fun without delving deeply emotionally was ideal.

But somewhere along the way, that changed.

Playing multiple main characters who could be emotionally open to receiving a deep, true love made me crave it. At some point, I started to believe that happy endings didn't only have to be in movies. Then Sean got into my head. Now, here I am, believing it's possible.

But Duncan?

Duncan's thumb on Scarlett's cheek, the gentleness in his eyes—

“No!” I chastise myself for even considering him as a possibility. “Duncan is off-limits.”

“What about Duncan?” David's voice comes from behind me. My feet leave the ground, and my hand lifts to my chest, working to keep my now-pounding heart from leaping out. “Sorry, didn't mean to scare you.”

Narrowing my eyes, I give him a playful glare at his chuckle. Then I shrug. “It's not you; I've been on edge lately.”

It's not a lie; ever since Nathan's reaction to our breakup, my nerves have been threadbare. Between him calling me day and night, along with the media, I've

practically jumped every time my phone rang. So I turned off my phone.

I let Caroline know I'd check messages a few times a day and if there was an emergency to reach me through David.

Nathan showing up in Maple Ridge is unlikely, but, to be honest, I'm not sure he won't show up here. With every message he leaves, he seems angrier. More desperate. I've never seen him like this, and it's starting to scare me.

I watch David as he places some grocery bags on the counter and grabs the items to put away. Walking around the counter I start to help. The comfortable silence and mindless task are just what I need to calm my nerves.

"When did Scarlett start calling Duncan 'Dunky'?" I laugh, recalling the expression on Duncan's face. "He hates it."

"I called him 'Dunc' a few weeks ago. The next time he came over, I heard her calling him 'Uncle Dunky,'" He says as he places a box of cereal in the cabinet next to the fridge. "The look of horror on his face stayed with me for days. Not to mention the scowl he gave me for laughing."

I've witnessed the scowl David's talking about, and I can't help but laugh, too.

I grab one of the empty bags and start folding it.

David slips a half gallon of milk in the refrigerator, leans against the counter, and turns toward me. "How are you doing?"

I lift one shoulder and continue to fold the bag. "I'm doing okay, all things considered."

“Want to tell me what happened?” Glancing up, I see David’s hazel eyes full of concern.

“Nathan was unhappy about the press my co-star, Sean, and I were getting.” I reach my arm across my chest and massage one of my shoulders, thinking about the last fight Nathan and I had. “I got tired of him complaining about it. I’m an actress. It’s my job to make people believe my part is real.”

Shifting back to the bag on the counter, I glance at David over my shoulder to see his eyebrow quirked. Turning and handing him the folded bag, he puts it away.

“So what made this time different from all the other times he’s done this?” He asks quietly, knowing he’s breaching a no-go zone.

I wrap my arms around my waist and lean back against the counter. I peek through my lashes and see David placing mugs on the counter. He turns on the electric kettle quietly, waiting for me to continue.

A coldness comes over me, and I rub my hands up and down my arms to get rid of the chill.

“Too many romance movies and a meddling co-star.” A sheepish smile crosses my lips, and I scoff. “You have to know Sean O’Connell. When he gets fixated on something, it’s hard to get him off it. Being that this is the second movie we’ve made together, he wasn’t hesitant to point out how bad he thought Nathan was for me.”

“He’s right,” David grumbles, holding out two boxes of herbal tea. “Lavender or ginger?”

“Lavender and ginger, please.” I smile. I see a brief flicker of sadness touch David’s eyes, and I remember that Fiona would mix teas, too. I see he still misses her as much

as I do. I take the mug from his hand, lean back against the counter, and wrap both hands around it, hoping some of the heat will transfer to my body. “I know. Which is why, after this last incident, I ended things.”

A tiny gleam replaces the sadness in David’s eyes, and a smile curves his lips. “I think I like this Sean character. Any chance—”

“No!” I put a hand out to stop him before he can finish. “I adore Sean, but he is not the one for me. It’s nice to know I have a friend who cares enough to be honest, though. Even if it completely annoys me.”

Lifting the mug to my lips, I take a sip. Warmth spreads through me, erasing the coldness that was lodged in my chest. I look up to David’s serious expression.

“Fiona would want you to be happy, Av.” I swallow hard as he continues. “She always hated that you could act the role of a woman falling in love, but at the same time, never let your guard down enough to find that type of love in real life. She always thought—”

“David,” I say sternly, my lips thinning. “I don’t want to talk about this. Especially not right now. I can’t.”

Blowing out a breath, he gives me a gentle smile and pushes off of the counter. Reaching out to squeeze my shoulder, he walks past me into the living room. Leaving me alone to sort through the dirt he stirred up.

I sigh. He’s right. Fiona would hate to see me like this.

“Fi,” I whisper. “I wish you were here. I need you.”

A single tear falls down my cheek, and I stiffly wipe it away.

Crying isn't going to solve anything. It never does.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Tea Time

Hey Tea Lovers.

Oh, do I have some tea for you today from Maple Ridge.

No, we don't usually spill tea from that area, but this tea was too hot not to share!

Ava Norris has been found!

Yes, you read that correctly.

After being off the grid for a week, we finally know where she's been hiding.

That's right! One town over.

We don't have many details, but should that change, you can be sure to find out here!

Till next time, Chamie

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Chapter Five

Duncan

The crowd is pouring in for tonight's season opener against the Blackhawks, one of our division rivals. It's bound to be a great game if I can get my head on straight. My attention should be on the ice; instead, it's on the three people I know who are coming.

So far, I've let three practice shots get past me. With the way I'm doing my job, the Blackhawks will make me look like a rookie. The problem is that only half of my attention is on the ice and the other on the bleachers. I keep glancing up at their section, only to find empty seats.

Seeing Ava yesterday messed with my head, and my ability to be present has evaporated. Thoughts of her have taken possession of every crevice of my mind. Regardless of my technique, I can't get into the zone.

"James! I thought you were supposed to guard the basket?" I look up and see Davidson skating toward me, his blue eyes full of concern. "Denier, you okay?"

I grunt at him, but he doesn't leave. This is what makes Viper a good captain. He doesn't let something go unaddressed. It's only when I'm the one with the problem that needs addressing that I hate his dedication to the title.

Coming closer to the net, he lowers his voice. "I know something is going on, but I can't put a finger on it. I also know you're not going to talk about it. But for this

second and the next sixty minutes, concentrate on keeping the biscuit out of the net.”

My eyes harden, and I nod. Davidson smacks me on the side of my helmet and heads back into rotation with my other teammates.

Quieting my mind, I tune in to blades slashing the ice—the sound of sticks slapping the biscuit. Nothing gets in my basket for the remainder of warm-up. Following the guys off the ice and into the locker room, I glance up toward the bleachers.

Catching a glimpse of David and Scarlett, I lift my stick in acknowledgment. I don’t look closer because I need to keep my head in the game. Seeing Ava will have the exact opposite effect, and she’s already taken up too much space in my thoughts as it is. I can’t afford to be distracted tonight.

“James.” I look up to see Coach waving me into his office, and I groan. The last time I was ‘talked’ to by my captain and coach, I was in grade school. I grab my sports bottle, take a swig, and head to Coach’s office.

“Coach?” Standing in the doorway, I wait for instruction.

“Come in and sit. Close the door behind you,” he says, looking at a piece of paper before him.

Clenching my jaw, I do as he asks, sitting in the chair across from his desk. Still not looking up at me, my stomach knots, and I feel my fist grip my hockey stick.

When he’s done writing, he puts his pen down and flips his gaze to me. I see the same look that Viper gave me earlier. “Want to talk to me about what’s going on?”

My lips draw into a thin line. I’m reining in the urge to snap at everyone asking me what’s wrong. Ava is wrong, and no one can fix it.

Instead, I take a deep breath, run my hand through my hair, and say evasively. “Everything’s fine. I’ve just had a few rough days.”

“We all have rough days,” he says, leaning forward on his desk as if trying to figure out what I’m not telling him. “But when it starts affecting my players’ game, I must address it. We have high expectations for you...”

He trails off mid-sentence, leans his elbows on his desk, and rests his chin on his entwined hands, pinning me with his gaze.

Feeling like a teenager, I work so as not to squirm in my seat.

“You know you can talk to me, right?” His eyes soften and I feel the knot in my stomach loosen.

One of the reasons I was happy to be traded to the Wolverines was their entire organization, especially the coaching staff. To them, you’re a person first and a player second. But having this concern directed at me is making my insides twitch. I’m used to handling things alone.

Ava is throwing me off, and it’s affecting my game. Who am I kidding? It’s affecting everything, and now it’s affecting my game, which means my team.

I nod and swallow hard. “Yes. There’s just nothing to talk about.”

His gaze nails me one last time before he responds. “Okay.” From his tone, I have no doubt he knows I’m not being honest with him or myself.

Standing up, I turn toward the door, but his next words stop me dead in my tracks. Sucker punching me. “If that’s the case, I’ll need to go by your game play. If this keeps up, I may need to bench you.”

Not turning back to face him, I close my eyes and nod, letting him know I heard what he said. It's fair. I get paid to do my job, and my job is to keep the net empty. If I can't do that, I deserve to be benched.

Opening the door, I walk to my locker, getting my gear in order. I adjust my pads and pull on my gloves.

Coach walks to the exit, and the team gets up to follow. It's time to do what we get paid for.

All I have to do is find a way to have tunnel vision, protect the net, and keep the other team from scoring. Lastly, I need to push Ava as far from my mind as possible for the next sixty minutes.

If possible, longer.

Entering the third period, it's a tie game. The match has been a real barnburner—lots of back and forth and fast play. Division games are always challenging, but the Blackhawks are last year's division champs, and they're giving us a run for our money.

Overall, I'm doing what needs to be done, but Ty Matthews, the Blackhawks' center, is the third-top scorer in the NHL. The fact that the score is tied is a testament to the talent of both teams.

A whistle blows as the Blackhawks call a timeout right before a commercial break. When the Kiss Cam music starts playing, Coach calls us to the bench.

Coach's voice is barely audible over the fans oohing, ahing, or clapping when someone gets caught on the Jumbotron. Pretty routine for this activity. When the oohs and ahhs shift to loud murmuring, I can't help but glance up at the screen.

Staring back at me is Ava. She has always been breathtaking, and tonight is no different. Seeing her bright smile as she waves to the crowd, my breath catches. My heart starts to race, and a heat spreads throughout my body.

“James!” I whip my gaze to coach only to find brows furrowed. “Are you good? We need you for the next ten minutes.”

“I’m good, Coach.” He stares at me briefly before sending the team back on the ice.

“Ava Norris is in the crowd! Think she’ll stop by the locker room after the game?” Pretty Boy Wallace asks as he skates past me into position. The glare I give him makes him smirk. “Think I found what Denier’s problem is.”

“She’s my brother’s wife’s sister,” I growl at him.

“Then you won’t mind me making a move.” Wallace snickers. “She’s pretty hot.”

Red blurs my vision. There is no way that Wallace is doing anything with Ava. As I move my body forward, Spencer grabs the back of my jersey and stops me.

“Pull it together, Denier!” Spencer yells, shoving me back. “Ten. More. Minutes.”

Meeting his stare, I take a deep breath and give him a stiff nod. Positioning myself in front of the net, I stare at Thompson’s back and wait for the faceoff.

Ten minutes later, the Wolverines pull off the win by one. I did my job and kept my head in the game.

Before heading toward the locker room, I skate by David and Scarlett. I do it every game for my goddaughter, and I’m not skipping it tonight just because Ava is with them.

I see Scar's palm pressed against the glass when I get close to their seats. I move closer to tap the glass with my fist. Ava is right behind her, smiling and clapping. My heart stutters. Her being at a game, cheering for me, has been a dream I gave up on when I started my NHL career.

Quickly turning away, I skate to the locker room. Only to come face to face with my teammates taunting me about Ava and my reaction to her on the Jumbotron.

"So," Wallace shouts at me when I walk through the door. "You gonna introduce me to Ava? I hear she's single."

A muscle ticks in my jaw, but I don't do anything except continue to my locker and get out of my uniform.

"I don't need your help, Denier. I can get an introduction for myself." Wallace scoffs.

"I'm pretty sure you're not her type," I throw over my shoulder, jaw clenched. "She likes men with substance."

The laughter that rings out in the locker room has Levi mumbling on his way to the shower.

"Ava Norris, huh?" Thompson says quietly from behind me. "Everything makes sense now."

"What makes sense?" I ask, keeping my voice calm and collected. It's better if no one knows about my feelings for Ava. Things are already messy without the details.

"Your odd behavior on the plane last week and being off this past week with practices. Distracted, more irritable than usual. Your sloppy play."

“I’m not more irritable than usual,” I growl at him. I can’t deny or defend anything else. It’s true.

“If you say so.” He slaps me on the shoulder and walks backward toward the shower.

“But I’m here if you need an ear.”

“I don’t need an ear,” I grumble, then whisper. “I need a heart specialist.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Chapter Six

Ava

Hockey games move so fast, and the puck is like looking for a needle in a haystack that someone keeps kicking around. Thankfully, my niece is an encyclopedia of knowledge when it comes to the game. It was like having my own personal tutor on all things hockey. Her comprehension of the players' nicknames, statistics, penalties, and what player caused the penalty—the entirety of it—was key in helping me enjoy the game more.

Truthfully though, the only position I was interested in watching was the goalie, and lucky for me, that's the most straightforward position on the ice to understand. Just defend the net from the puck. Or “biscuit”, as Scarlett calls it.

Watching Duncan play in person was more exciting than I could've imagined. His athleticism and flexibility aren't something I would've ever guessed at. Not to mention the intensity with which he plays. There was a magnetism to him that made it impossible for me to drag my eyes away.

He's always been intense and committed; it hasn't mattered what he was doing. Once in, Duncan has always given one hundred percent. However, the version my memory shows me was him as a boy, but this version? This version is all man.

This man left me feeling like a teenager with her first crush. Heart pounding, mouth dry, and swarms of butterflies panicking to break free. My eyes were glued to him. When he skated by us at the end of the game, my stomach quivered, anticipating the

possibility of him glancing in my direction.

When he only had eyes for Scarlett, disappointment filled me. I get it; she's my favorite, too. But the desire for him to search me out was powerful and unnerving.

"Uncle Dunke—" Scarlett begins as we walk away from the bleachers toward the concourse. David looks down at his daughter and warns her with his eyes not to finish that word. A mischievous smile curves her lips as she continues. "Uncle Duncan was off today."

"He was?" I ask, surprised. "I thought he did great."

"Aunt Ava, you don't know hockey," she chastises me, her tone flabbergasted. I feel the corner of my lip lift. "That was mediocre play at best."

Mediocre? If that was mediocre, what would Duncan look like when his play was elite?

Can I even handle watching that version?

A rush of heat fills my stomach at the thought. I take a deep breath and try to shake the image from my mind.

Get a hold of yourself! This. Is. Duncan.

Yeah, a smoking hot Duncan.

Blowing out a breath, I mentally chide myself. I don't know what is going on with me, but I feel I need to find a way to eliminate this attraction. Apparently Real Ava can't do it, but maybe a Hollywood Ava can.

That's right. I'm an award-winning actress. I can act my way out of this...I hope.

Biting my bottom lip, I wipe sweaty palms against my jeans to calm my nerves as we approach the locker room exit. David and Scarlett usually wait for Duncan after home games. Me leaving would look suspicious, so I'm waiting, too.

"Ava, we're gonna run to the restrooms. Do you need to go?" David asks, pointing toward the corridor.

"No, I'm good. I went before the start of the third period." Leaning against the wall across from the locker room door, I settle in to watch the activity.

"Okay," David says over his shoulder as he and Scarlett walk to the arena's main veins, heading toward one of the many restrooms. "We'll be back in about ten minutes."

I lift my hand and smile at them, then place my hands against the wall and lean on them, curbing the temptation to fix my hair.

"Uninterested Ava wouldn't care how she looks," I mumble to myself.

Heads and curious eyes land on me, but surprisingly, most people just smile and walk past. Maybe having a scandal isn't so bad after all. Rather than approaching me, people whisper after they pass me. I can handle whispering.

"I loved Web of Love ." A woman gently touches my arm and murmurs in my ear. "So glad you broke up with Nathan. I was never a fan. You deserve better."

She squeezes my arm, and in response, I give her my 'Everything is Perfect' Ava smile while mouthing, "Thank you."

Being a celebrity is one of the strangest experiences. Regardless of where I am, people feel like they know me. What they know is the persona I show them. My childhood gave me lots of opportunities to perfect the face I wanted the world to see while working to keep the truth hidden.

The majority of the time, I could get away with it, but some saw through it—

“Ava, Ava!” Panic fills me as I recognize that tone. “Are you dating Sean O’Connell?”

A phone is shoved in my face, demanding an answer. My stomach drops, and my heart races, causing my breath to come in short bursts. I force myself to smile as I shake my head.

Another voice calls, “Then why did you break up with Nathan?”

Then another, “If you’re not dating Sean O’Connell, none of this makes sense.”

Four phones are shoved in my face with people waiting for a response. I ran from Los Angeles to get away from the press. Yet here they are hounding me. My smile starts to fall, and trembles run through my body.

“Is what Nathan’s saying true? Are you going to give us your—”

“Enough!” Duncan shouts as he pushes the phones away from my face and moves in front of me like a shield. A lightness washes over me. “She’s not interested in talking about this right now.”

“Denier, great game!” One of the voices says. “Do you want to tell us how winning against your division rival feels?”

Duncan gives a low growl and wraps his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close to his side. I melt into his warmth and grip his shirt with my hand. Tucking my head in his chest. The smell of cedar rolling off him and surrounding me has another calming effect.

Ignoring the people shouting questions at us, he pushes his way through the crowd and drags me away from them.

“And The Denier denies again.” A voice carries to us from a distance, sounding far enough that it’s safe to believe they aren’t following.

Instead of releasing his grip, Duncan’s arm tightens around me. For the first time since that phone was shoved in my face I feel my body relax.

We make a sharp left and a quick right as Duncan leads me down a hallway. When we almost reach the end, he turns me toward him. His green eyes are full of worry as they roam my face.

Tiny tingles follow everywhere his eyes touch. My knees give way, and my body starts to crumble. A strong arm wraps around my waist, pulling me up and in; its warmth embracing me, and I shiver.

“Are you okay?” Duncan’s voice is filled with concern. “They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

Placing my hands on his biceps, I try to speak but nothing comes out.

“Ava? Please say something. You’re scaring me.” His scratchy voice envelopes me, and when his eyes soften, my stomach dips.

Duncan has always known when I was pretending to be okay versus when I truly was.

It was my biggest pet peeve that this boy could see through my facade. The fact that he still has that ability creates a longing to be known completely. With him, I don't have to hide.

What would happen if I finally let someone in to see all of me? What if that person was Duncan?

"Ava?" He places a hand on my cheek, and a sigh escapes.

Any words I was working to form to let him know I'm fine are entirely lost to me, but that's because I'm not fine.

I'm not fine with him standing this close to me, looking at me with concern that has warmth pooling in my stomach. I'm not okay with him whisking me away like my knight in shining armor, and I am definitely not fine with the emotions running through my body.

When it comes to Duncan, I can't play a part. He can see through it, and for the first time in my life, I want to let my defenses down. I want to let someone in.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Chapter Seven

Duncan

When my eyes landed on Ava and the crowd surrounding her as I walked out of the locker room, it took every ounce of control I had not to smash my fist into the head of every one of the people shoving a phone in her face. Seeing her shaky smile and eyes full of fear filled me with a staggering urge to protect her.

My heart is pounding furiously, and I'm sure it will batter its way through my chest. Her cheek is so soft under my hand, and her body feels so tiny next to me. The urge to keep her safe, even when we're away from danger, is like a hunger that has to be fed.

"Ava." My other hand cups her cheek, and I bend my knees to get to her eye level. "Please talk to me. Are you okay?"

The hand on my arm gently squeezes while I watch her mouth open and close a few times. No words are coming out.

Clenching my teeth together, I let my eyes look over her face again, ensuring she isn't physically hurt.

"You're safe," I whisper. "I'm here, and I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise."

A shiver moves through her body. Her teeth pull her bottom lip and I notice it quiver.

“Look at me, Ava.” Her crystal blue eyes glance up, and she meets mine. “Take a deep breath.”

I feel her body rise and fall shakily against my forearms. “There you go. Good girl. Just breathe.”

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen this version of Ava. Her brave front collapses in front of my eyes—the need to keep her guarded from the world reemerging.

I remember the first time I had this feeling. I was a gangly thirteen year-old. Me, Fiona, David, and Ava were walking home from the high school football game because David’s ‘classic’ 1975’s Chevy Chevelle was once again in the shop.

The night was one of those perfect autumn nights where the air is crisp and cool but not cold—the crinkling sound from the leaves getting blown around by the wind surrounding us.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Ava, the worried expression on her face making me want to wrap her in my arms. Fi and David were walking in front of us, hand in hand, quietly talking.

When Ava and Fiona moved next door, I was immediately smitten. Ava looked like a goddess, her silky blonde hair hanging loosely around her face. The smile she gave me was full of confidence, but her soft blue eyes had a touch of lingering sadness that I couldn’t put my finger on and it pulled at my heart.

The desire to make that sadness go away was almost as fierce as needing to play hockey. Tonight, five years later, it’s still the same.

“I hate that you can do that,” she grumbles.

“Do what?” My forehead furrowed as I looked at her over my shoulder.

“See me. I hate that you can see me, Duncan.” Her voice was filled with discomfort.

“I can hide from everyone. Except Fi and you.”

Ava has always presented a collected front to the world, one I could always easily see through.

Despite the fact that I’m working to keep my distance from her while she’s here, that ability hasn’t gone away. Neither has the desire to protect her. But right now, I don’t question any of my actions. My only concern is ensuring the woman in front of me is unhurt.

Her breathing slows down, and her eyes pool with tears. I feel my stomach twist. Her hand gripping my shirt kneads me like a kitten.

My heart rate spikes, and I stand at my full height. Wrapping my arms around her and pulling her close in an attempt to relieve her from whatever is causing her this pain.

Click.

A gasp falls from Ava’s lips. We both whip our heads toward the sound, but there’s nothing. I feel pressure on my chest and look down to see the golden crown of Ava’s head resting on me.

Shaking racks her body, and an overwhelming feeling of dread fills me. I place a finger under her chin and gently lift her face up, only to find her laughing with no humor behind it.

“Great! Another scandal.” She says, not meeting my eyes. A delirious smile spread across her lips. “Me caught with another man. In an empty hallway. Perfect!”

Quietly, I watch the emotions playing over her face. Her beautiful face. Suddenly, she whips her round eyes to mine, panic filling them.

“Nathan,” she says quietly, fisting my shirt.

“What about Nathan?” I place my hand gently over her fist, trying to settle the panic I can feel oozing from her body.

Glassy blue eyes rise to mine, and a wrench squeezes my heart at the desperation reflected in them. “I’m afraid.” Her fist squeezes my shirt tighter.

In an attempt to calm her, I rub my hands slowly up and down her arms. “Afraid of what Ava? You’re here with me. No one is going to hurt you.”

She shakes her head back and forth furiously but doesn’t say a word. Her lips are tight, and her eyes are round. My stomach drops.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her close to me. Once again, I can’t help but marvel at how fragile she feels in my arms. Her head barely reaches the top of my chest. The soft smell of sandalwood invades my nostrils while the warmth of her pressed against me penetrates my frozen heart.

Tiny shakes move her body, and wetness seeps through my shirt. My chest tightens, and my stomach dips. Apparently, the fairytale relationship stories presented about Ava and Nathan weren’t even close to being true.

Gently swaying back and forth, I wait for her breathing to return to normal.

“Now I know why Scarlett would always stop crying when you were holding her.” Her words vibrate against my chest. “You’re good at this.”

My lip curves up at the corner. “I do have some redeeming qualities.”

“Not just some, Duncan.” She pulls away from my chest and pins me with her gaze. “You have many good qualities.”

Afraid to ruin the moment happening, I stay still and hold my breath.

“When you’re not being a complete grump, that is.” A gleam of humor enters her eyes, and my stomach clenches.

This woman is my kryptonite, even after all these years. I silently watch her lift her hand from my chest and wipe the tears from her face. When I feel my hand lift to her face, I catch myself and take a step back, putting distance between us.

A buzz against my leg grabs my attention, and I reach into my pocket, pulling out my phone.

“Hey,” I answer, meeting Ava’s gaze, and mouth the words. “It’s David.”

“Dunc, where are you?” His voice is tinged with worry. “Is Ava with you?”

“Ava’s with me. When I got out of the locker room, she was surrounded by people hounding her, and my instinct was just to get her out of there.”

“Thank goodness.” Relief pours through the phone. “I was worried. Ava hasn’t said anything outright, but I know she’s concerned about Nathan.”

“Yeah. I get that feeling, too.”

Ava tilts her head, and her eyebrows pull together.

“Has she said anything to you?”

“No, it’s just an impression I got.” This time Ava crosses her arms over her chest and glares at me. I have to press my lips together to stop the smirk that wants to pop. She has never liked people talking about her as if she wasn’t there. “Look, I’ll head over to your house, drop Ava off, and stop in for a bit. I have something for Scarlett.”

“Yay!” Scarlett’s cheer can be heard in the background. “It better be good.”

There’s no stopping the smirk that skates across my face at that. “See you in a bit.”

Sliding the phone back in my pocket I glance up to see Ava with her arms still crossed and a frown on her face.

“What was all that about?”

“David’s worried about you.” She snorts and shakes her head. “And I can see why.”

Her eyes widen, and her mouth falls open.

“Let’s go,” I say quickly, placing my hand beside her. Hoping the stubborn look I see in her eyes won’t hold. She reminds me of Scarlett when she sets her mind on something. “I’m tired, and I’d like to see my niece before it’s her bedtime.”

“It’s already past her bedtime.” I watch the tightness release as her shoulders drop and the lines around her mouth relax.

“Well, then, we better get moving.” I start walking toward the corridor, hoping to encourage Ava to follow me.

“Duncan,” she calls out softly. Tingles move through my stomach, and I turn back to

look at her. The earnestness in her eyes squeezes my chest. “Thank you for your help. I wasn’t expecting any of that. The press, that is.”

“You’re welcome.” A rare smile slides across my lips. “Ready?”

I wait for Ava to reach me before I start walking toward the players' parking lot.

“This is mine,” I say a few minutes later, breaking the comfortable silence when we reach my Acadia. Ava lets herself in the passenger side, and I slide into the driver’s seat.

Neither one of us speaks on the way to David’s, but it’s not uncomfortable, and for the first time in over a decade, there is a sense of ease between us.

But it feels bigger, like we’re finally on an even playing field. That I’m no longer just her best friend’s younger brother, but Duncan. A man. Her equal.

The realization jolts me to my very core, and I can’t help but wonder: Who’s going to protect me from Ava?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Tea Time

Hey Tea Lovers.

Things have gotten a bit spicier in Maple Ridge.

Last night, Ava Norris was seen in the arms of one Duncan James, the Wolverines' brooding yet irresistibly handsome, new goalie.

For those who aren't aware, Duncan is the brother of David James, the Smokies' Shortstop.

And Ava is the twin sister of David's wife, Fiona, who sadly passed away a few years ago.

Even bigger?! They are the godparents of David's daughter.

Talk about shared history! And tropes!

This has all the makings of a great Ava Norris, Sean O'Connell movie. scream emoji

Speaking of Sean, I guess he's out of the running.

Is it possible the story was never about Sean and Ava but Ava and Duncan? Did she come to Maple Ridge for him specifically?

Oh, the steam from this tea is quite aromatic.

It might be one of my favorites!! grin emoji

Till Next Time, Chamie

Chapter Eight

Ava

Scarlett's excited chatter muffles right before I hear the front door close. I throw the covers off but don't attempt to get out of bed. The thought of hiding in my room all day and pretending the outside world doesn't exist is tempting.

Equally tempting is the rich aroma of fresh coffee David brewed right before leaving with my name written all over it. Unless I'm mistaken, he didn't just use fresh coffee grounds but also made sure the grounds were a mixture of hazelnut and caramel.

Throwing the covers back over my head, I groan only to have a pair of concerned green eyes flash across my mind.

Duncan.

Grumbling, I toss the covers off again and throw my feet on the floor. Not only do I not want to deal with whatever is being said about me and Duncan, but I don't want to address the fact that my sleepless night was caused by a continuous replaying of every little detail from last night.

I can still feel the solidness of him under my hands, his heat warming me when he pulled me against him. I felt safe and cared for.

"Ugh!"

Pushing myself from the bed, I rub my hands up and down my face. Coming to Maple Ridge was supposed to be a sanctuary of sorts; instead, it's a pot of emotions that has me examining my life. Running a hand through my hair, I grab my phone from the nightstand before heading to the kitchen.

The house's silence is deafening, with all the thoughts stomping around in my head. Thoughts of Duncan and the feelings surfacing. Fear of how Nathan will react when he sees the image of me and Duncan.

And the most worrisome is this overwhelming feeling that I am losing a handle on my well-scripted life.

Picking up the mug David left out, I watch the brown liquid fill the cup. Working to stay in the present moment, I focus on each little task. Grabbing sugar. Pouring cream. Mixing them together.

The tension in my shoulders starts to ease a bit as I make my way to the strip of sun covering a corner of the couch. Sitting on a folded knee, I inhale the coffee before taking a sip. The warmth from the coffee and the sun work together to dissolve the chill that's been a constant companion since ending my engagement.

Ten minutes later, I finally whip up the courage to power on my phone. Almost immediately, alerts start pouring in, and my stomach churns. When the sounds finally stop, I look to see the damage.

Not surprisingly, Nathan has been on a rampage. He's called numerous times and left multiple messages. He's also sent a ridiculous amount of texts. I'd forgotten how he hates to be ignored.

Caroline has also called and left a message. I hit play. It's a simple message for me to call her back, but her voice lacks its usual lightness, leaving my palms sweaty and my

heart thrumming.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I dial her number.

“Ava! Thank goodness.” Relief floods her voice. “I was worried about how long it would be before you reached out.”

“I told you to call David if you needed me,” I spit out, pulling nervously on the collar of my shirt.

“I did. But he told me he was out and wouldn’t be back until later this afternoon.”

“Well, you’ve got me now,” I say, trying to sound cheery, hoping the worry I’m feeling doesn’t come through. “What’s up?”

“What’s up?” Caroline sputters. “I’m guessing you haven’t seen any pictures or read Tea Time ?”

“Tea Time ?” I ask, pulling my eyebrows together.

“Pleasant Hollow’s local gossip column?” Her voice is aghast. “Remember the Mavericks’ star wide receiver Josh Owens?”

“Maybe? You know I barely listen to you and all the gossip you try to fill me in on, right?” I tease. “Besides, you’re the one who’s supposed to be letting me know what’s happening.”

“How about you tell me what happened with you and Duncan last night?” Her voice takes on a tinge of amusement, and I feel heat creep up my neck. “I may have underestimated just how sexy that man is.”

You're not the only one.

Keeping that thought to myself, I give her the facts and only the facts. "I was waiting for David and Scarlett to come back so we could wait outside the locker room for Duncan. But the press found me first. Then Duncan intervened."

"I'll say he did," Caroline's sultry voice carries over the phone, and I roll my eyes. "That picture is causing quite a stir."

The picture is causing quite a stir? How about the man in the picture and the stir he's causing me? My heart races for a different reason as I once again recall the feel of his arms wrapped around me. The musky scent of cedar radiating off him. It's all but branded in my memory.

He's branded in my memory.

Dropping my head in my hand, I grumble. "Is that a bad thing?"

"Depends on who you're asking. I, however think this presents us with an opportunity—"

"Caroline—"

"You haven't even heard me out yet!"

"This time." I rub my hand up and down my face. "I've been a part of your schemes before."

"This isn't a 'scheme'. It's a well-crafted idea, one that I think could silence Nathan...for good."

The thought of getting my ex off of my back sends a sense of longing so deep that I nearly moan in desperation. But I know Caroline, and I'm afraid of what concoction her mind has come up with. She's a fantastic agent, but she missed her calling as a screenwriter.

Whatever this 'opportunity' of hers is, I'm positive I don't want to be cast as her leading lady.

"Okay. Spill. But please don't make me regret considering this."

"Really?" The excitement in her voice already makes me regret letting her present the idea, and she hasn't even said anything yet. "Okay. So I spoke with Duncan's agent, Finn Mitchell—"

"No," I say, in a tone that brooks no argument. And one Caroline steamrolls right past.

"Finn and I thought that maybe you and Duncan could—"

"Caroline," I growl.

"Pretend to date," she finishes excitedly. Pretty sure she's chewing the cover of her pen, waiting for my reaction.

"What?!" I screech. "Are you kidding me right now?"

"Not kidding. Social media is loving you and Duncan." The glee in her voice has my stomach swirling. "Everyone loves the 'Grumpy/Sunshine' trope. And they loved seeing this grump of a man getting sappy all over you. He's an internet sensation. They even have a nickname—"

“Stop. Caroline. Just stop,” I groan, leaning my head against the back of the couch, my palm planted on my forehead. “Duncan and I are practically family.”

“But you’re not family,” she says with way more enthusiasm than I can handle right now. “That’s the beauty of this. Besides, Finn says that it worked out magically for one of his other athletes.”

My mouth falls open. “What type of agent is Finn?”

“A good one. And one who cares about his clients,” Caroline spouts. “Just like me.”

“Hah!” I sputter. “This doesn’t feel like caring.”

“Sweetie, listen to me.” Her voice takes on a serious tone. “Nathan is out of control, and I’m not sure what he’ll do. How many times has he reached out to you today?”

Pulling in a deep breath, then slowly releasing it, I think about the hundreds of messages flooding my phone from Nathan. Not to mention the new ones that have probably come in since I’ve been on this call with Caroline.

“Exactly. You need someone like Duncan to keep you safe...from Nathan.”

I hate that what she’s saying makes sense, and yet there is no way Duncan would ever agree with this. “What about David? David could do it.”

“Ava. Everyone knows your back story. They know he’s your best friend, not to mention your sister’s husband. No one would ever believe the two of you are a couple. Especially Nathan.” I tug my bottom lip between my teeth, knowing she’s right. “Besides, it’s you and Duncan in the photo, and everyone is talking about it.”

I scrub my face with my hand again. “There’s no way he’d be willing to help me. Not

after what I did to him,” I whisper.

“Based on how he was holding you in that picture, I’m pretty sure there’s nothing that man wouldn’t do for you.”

Her words knock the wind out of me, kicking my heart into high gear and setting the wheels in my head spinning.

Could Duncan still have feelings for me?

Yeah, feelings of extreme dislike. Maybe even hate.

“Caroline, whatever you think you saw from that picture, I can promise you, that’s not what it was. Duncan would never—”

“Just give it some thought, Ava,” she encourages. “I’ll do my best to work on a Plan B if Duncan disagrees. But first, you need to see if it’s a definite no.”

The hurt in Duncan’s eyes when I rejected him has my heart dropping to my stomach. Maybe letting him reject me is only fair?

I drop my forehead into my palm. I can’t believe I’m even considering asking him to do this. It’s insane.

“Okay.” I sigh, chewing the inside of my mouth. “I’ll consider it.”

“Great!” Caroline delights. Based on her reaction, you’d think I just told her I’m all in. “Tell me what he said after you talk to him. Toodles!”

“Toodles?” Three beeps sound in my ear, and I pull the phone away to stare at the screen. Sometimes, I wonder about my agent and her frame of mind, like if she’s

actually sane.

Another text from Nathan pops up, then another. I turn my phone off and place it on the coffee table, my hands trembling.

Nathan's behavior needs to be addressed, and soon. Before, he does something more dangerous than call or text excessively.

A realization strikes me.

I'm more afraid of what Nathan might do than I could ever be of Duncan not agreeing to this arrangement.

If he says no, it's only what I deserve. And I'll figure something else out.

Chapter Nine

Duncan

“No,” I cut Finn off before he can persist with this unhinged idea he’s calling about. I toss my duffle bag in the back of my Acadia and slam closed the hatch. Sliding into the driver’s side, I shut the door, scrubbing my three-day-old stubble. “I’m struggling to keep my head in the game as it is, Finn. Being part of something like this isn’t going to help me.”

Ava being at David’s is affecting every area of my life. It’s bad now; what would it be like if I agreed to ‘fake dating’ and had actually to spend time with her? Touching her, kissing her—

“No,” I say, firmer this time as I turn over the ignition. “Count me out.”

“Duncan,” Finn’s voice surrounds me in the car. “Her agent is really concerned about what Vaughn could do. Caroline told me that based on the number of times Nathan has reached out to her, he’s probably quadrupled that with Ava. She’s starting to get concerned for Ava’s safety.”

“And?” I ask mulishly. The thought of Ava being harassed has my gut churning, but she’s not mine to protect. She made it clear that that’s not something she’d want from me, despite what a snapshot in time may depict. “How do you even know Ava’s agent?”

Turning from the parking lot onto the highway, I head toward home.

This entire day has been one crazy episode after another. This call from Finn is the icing on the cake. It all started when I got to the Arena for film, only to have my teammates grilling me.

As for 'Tea Time', it's safe to say the guys had a field day with that one.

"Here's our 'brooding yet irresistibly handsome goalie' now," Spencer snickered when I walked through the locker room doors, causing everyone to catcall.

I narrow my eyes at him with a silent question as to what he's talking about.

"Tea Time," he yells. "You're officially famous!"

"Now I know why you didn't want to introduce me," Wallace grumbles. "You wanted her for yourself."

"Will someone tell me what the heck you're all talking about?" I growl, glancing around the room. The faces staring back at me with dancing eyes and smirking lips are starting to make my blood boil.

Except for Spencer. The corner of Spencer's eyes crinkled and every tooth in his mouth was showing.

"You don't know Tea Time?" Davidson claps me on the back, pulling my attention away from Spencer. "The Pleasant Hollow gossip column?"

I stare at him blankly and he laughs, making me grimace.

"Hold on." He heads to his locker and grabs something before returning to shove his phone in my face. "Here."

I look down and read a few lines before grabbing his phone.

“What the devil?” I barked, feeling a muscle in my cheek tick as I read what was reported about Ava and me.

“Oh, that’s not the best of it, my friend,” he says excitedly, ripping the phone out of my hand before shoving it back in my face. The picture of Ava in my arms stared back at me, stark and unforgiving. Heat crawls up my neck as I remember the feel of her in my arms, the smell of sandalwood surrounding me. “The two of you look very cozy. Do you have any confessions for your teammates?”

“This isn’t what it looks like,” I mumble. Heat is creeping up my face, and my heart rate spikes. “I was just getting her away from the press.”

“I’d like to get her away from the press too,” one of the guys teases.

My fist clenches and I glare at him. He raises his hands in front of him before turning back to his locker.

“Geez, Denier. It’s really only fun when your nickname applies to the net.”

“That offer to talk still stands,” Davidson whispers close to my ear.

“Like I said—” I scowl, catching the glint in his eyes, “I’m good.”

My stomach clenches as his laughter reaches me. I’m so not good.

“Caroline is my best friend’s little sister,” Finn’s voice pulls me back to the conversation. “We go way back. When she called to tell me about Ava’s situation, I knew I wanted to help if I could.”

“Perfect!” I scoff. “You can be her ‘pretend’ boyfriend.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, a burning sensation fills my stomach, and my hands tighten on the steering wheel. The thought of Finn dating Ava, even just for appearances, makes me uncomfortable.

The thought of anyone dating Ava has my blood boiling.

“Duncan, people want to see you and Ava together. Have you checked your social media account today?” I don’t even bother with a response. He knows I hate social media and that the Wolverines’ social media manager handles everything on my account. “People have always been intrigued by you.”

A snort falls from my mouth. I’ve never been a fan of the fame that comes along with being a professional hockey player. I like to keep my head under the radar, do my job, and stand out on the ice, not off of it.

Off of it, I just want to live my life.

I take my job seriously and am always available for team events, volunteering, and fundraising, but that’s it.

As for the fans? I love the fans. I just want to keep my private life private.

This thing with Ava would be public. Very public. And as much as I’d like to help her, I can’t.

“Finn,” my voice is hoarse as I run a hand down my face, surprised I’m admitting this out loud. “Ava and I have an... um...a complicated history. I’m not the right person to help her with this problem.”

“You’re exactly the right person. I don’t know anyone more intimidating than you are when you want to be. Nathan Vaughn’s ego needs someone like you to shut him down.”

I grip the steering wheel, my stomach knotting at the thought of Ava being in danger. Every ounce of me wants to keep her safe. Last night is the perfect example. I didn’t even hesitate when I saw her surrounded by those vultures.

I don’t regret what I did, but I’ve waited forever to hold her close to me, and now that I’ve done it, I want more of it. Of her.

The desire to be near her, to feel her pressed against me, and to protect her is so overpowering that it’s taking all of my self-control to stay in my lane.

The truth is I want to say yes to this ridiculous idea. I want to dive in head first. “What has Ava said about all of this?”

Did I actually utter those words? What is happening right now?

Finn, like a shark smelling blood in the water, pounces on my weakness. “She said she’d think about it.”

Of course she did! Did I really think that anything would change after last night? If Ava doesn’t want to do this, doesn’t want me, what I have to say about it isn’t important.

Disappointment floods me. I feel rejected all over again. I have to say no, my heart can’t handle the heartbreak again. The armor surrounding it has started to fissure.

Ava is already creeping her way back in. Not intentionally, I know, but it’s happening.

“Finn—”

“Duncan, just give it some thought before you shut it down. You know I’d never steer you in the wrong direction, right?”

“In my career, no. But this?”

“Look at Josh Owens and Adam Daniels,” Finn responds. His tone is light, so I know he’s only being partly serious. “Everything worked out for them.”

“Are you looking to change careers and become a matchmaker?” I scoff.

“Gosh, NO!” And I can’t help but chuckle at his response. “What I’m saying is that I wouldn’t suggest you do something if I thought it would hurt your career or you.”

I take in a slow, deep breath and then blow it out. Not believing I’m going to say yes to this. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Finn repeats.

“Yeah. I’ll do it.” I sigh.

“You’ll do it?”

“But,” I say firmly, shaking my head for saying yes when every inch of me is protesting— well, except for the part that wants to keep Ava safe and have an excuse to spend time with her—“Ava needs to be fine with it. Otherwise, I’m out.”

“Understood. I’ll let Caroline know,” his voice takes on a calming tone. “And Duncan? This is a good thing you’re doing. Nathan Vaughn is unpredictable right now, and there’s no saying what he’ll do.”

I clench my jaw and flex my hands around the steering wheel as I absorb his words.

If Nathan does anything to Ava, and I mean anything, I'll make sure he regrets it. I don't care how famous he is.

I pray I don't regret it more.

Chapter Ten

Ava

Pulling up in front of Duncan's house, I silence the engine and take a deep, shaky breath. I never thought I'd be in a situation like this or asking for this kind of help.

Especially from the one person I never meant to hurt but did. I hurt Duncan so badly.

Watching Fi and David dance together has my heart so full. The two people I love most in the world are now husband and wife. They're practically glowing, and for a moment I envy them.

Turning my face back to the man in front of me, holding me in his arms, I smile. "Well, don't you look ridiculously handsome in this tux."

A tinge of pink touches Duncan's face. And my smile grows a bit brighter at how adorable he is. Yesterday at the rehearsal dinner was the first time I'd seen him in a couple of years. The man standing in front of me is different from the boy I remember—yet still the same.

"In this old suit?" His eyes dance at me, and the sense of ease I'd always felt around Duncan fills me.

"You're going to have women falling at your feet when you're in Florida." Duncan was just drafted into the NHL and will be playing for the Florida Panthers. "What do you think they'll call themselves? Duncan's Divas?"

“Did you just come up with that, or is it something you’ve been thinking about?” His green eyes twinkle. “Did you want to be the founding member?”

My eyes widen and laughter flies from my lips, causing people to turn and look at us. When my gaze lands on Duncan again; he's smiling, and my stomach swoops.

I could count on one hand how many times I’ve seen this expression from him. It’s like finding a four-leaf clover. And when it happened in the past, I always felt special. That feeling hasn’t changed.

But today, it makes my heart skip a beat.

“I love you.” Duncan’s sudden confession has my heart racing and a sense of dread runs through me.

No...please don’t, I silently beg. My stomach swirls and my smile falls. “Duncan. I’m sure you—”

“I always have,” he continues, above the pounding in my ears, “I know I’m younger and David’s brother, but I feel like there’s always been a—”

The tips of my fingers gently cover his lips, needing to stop the flow of words falling from his mouth.

How can I tell him that he deserves someone amazing? Someone worthy of the heart he has? How do I do that without hurting him?

Too late. Before I can find the words, I see a deep pain swimming in his expressive green eyes. A heavy tightness takes over my chest, but I can’t find any words.

Then the music stops and a hardness comes over Duncan’s expression.

“Thank you for the dance,” he says coldly before walking away.

Watching his back, I know things will never be the same.

Staring ahead of me at the sun setting through the bare trees, I work to slow my pounding heart.

Since that moment, Duncan has been kind and courteous but always distant. And every time I see him, it stings. If he ever wanted an opportunity to get back at me for hurting him, now would be his chance.

I’m pretty sure that won’t be the case; he’s not petty and has never held a grudge. I’m sure that if he says no, it’s because he feels he needs to. But the fear of him saying no is daunting.

“Okay, A. It’s time to see if Duncan will pretend to be your boyfriend.”

Blowing out a deep breath. I work to slip into the confident version of myself; the one who learned that ‘no’ doesn’t really mean ‘no’. I didn’t become the famous rom-com movie star Ava Norris by stopping at my first no.

I can do this.

Before I can change my mind, I slide out of the car and walk up the steps to Duncan’s house. Once there I immediately knock, afraid I’ll lose my nerve if I think too much about what I’m doing.

The door swings open to a grumbling man wearing a pink apron that says, “Time To Make The Donuts.” A huge smile spreads across my face. I glance up to see Duncan’s surprised wide eyes and a pink flush creeping up his neck.

Chuckling, I point to his apron and watch him glance down. The flush turns a bright red.

“Scarlett got it for me,” he says shyly, a sheepish grin crawling across his lips. “She calls me Uncle ‘Dunkin Donuts’.”

My eyebrows shoot past my hairline as what he said sinks in, and I cover my mouth. Trying to keep the laughter from bubbling out. “Well, I’m pretty confident I’ve never seen someone wear pink so well before.”

To my surprise, Duncan laughs with me, and the sound sends tiny tingles to my toes. When his gaze lands back on mine, my breath catches. The air between us lights up. My eyes drop to his lips, and I notice his Adam’s apple bob.

Whipping my gaze back to Duncan’s, I feel heat creep up my face when I am caught, only to find heat filling his eyes. Warmth spreads across my belly in response, and my heart starts to pound.

I clear my throat and break eye contact. “I wanted to thank you for your help yesterday.”

“It was nothing, Ava.” Goosebumps cover my flesh as he says my name. “I’m glad I could help.”

“It wasn’t nothing, Duncan,” I whisper, overwhelmed by how out of control my life has become. “And now you’re caught up in the drama. I’m so sorry. I didn’t think this would happen when I broke up with Nathan.”

“Nathan has always been about what’s good for Nathan. You breaking up with him wasn’t good for him. I’m not surprised at his response.” He crosses his arms and leans against the door frame, putting his apron in focus once more, and I can’t help

but chuckle again.

“Guess there were things that others saw that I didn’t.” When I meet his gaze this time, the guarded expression I’ve come to expect from Duncan is back. I push past the lump in my throat. “Anyway. Thank you.”

He nods stiffly, keeping his expression cool.

Rubbing my palms against my pants, I work to find the words to bring up the fake dating when I notice a black haze coming from the kitchen. “Is something burning?”

“Oh bugger!” Turning away, he runs back into the house. Crossing the threshold, I close the front door and follow him.

Walking through the hallway to get to the kitchen, pictures of David, Fiona, and Scarlett line the walls. There are a few photos of his family and his parents when he was young. His house has a cozy feel, and despite Duncan’s grumpy disposition, it fits.

He has always had a strong loyalty to everybody he cares about. It’s not surprising that it’s reflected here.

When I reach him, he’s pulling a cookie tray out of the oven and cursing. I know I shouldn’t make myself comfortable, but I’m shocked at what he’s baking. The apron led me to believe he liked to bake, but this, this I never would’ve guessed.

“Are those dog treats?” I ask, leaning around him for a better look at the adorable paws, bones, and fire hydrants that, although an unattractive shade of grey, are ridiculously delightful.

“I volunteer at the rescue and like to bring treats for the dogs,” he mumbles. “What

can I say? Baking has always been something I've done to relieve stress."

I can't help but stare at him, my lips curving up at the corner. "I remember your mom used to love to bake."

"Yeah, she taught me everything she knew." He walks the treat tray to the trash and dumps the burnt biscuits in. "Whenever I visit her, we try out a new recipe. We've been working on dog treats to help Mile High Mutts Rescue fundraise. Obviously, it's still a work in progress."

I watch him as he brings the cookie tray back to the stove, doing everything to avoid looking at me.

"What would Tea Time think about this little tidbit?" He whips toward me, eyes wide. "Don't worry, I won't say anything. But I'm pretty sure you'd have even more people curious about the 'brooding yet irresistibly handsome goalie.'"

The look on his face is mortified, and a giggle escapes.

"Ava..." A warning tone escapes him, and he narrows his eyes.

"Your secret is safe with me," I say, crossing my heart.

The corner of his lip lifts, and a tiny glint lights his eyes. Once again, I find myself wondering who this man is.

"So," I say, clearing my throat and moving to the other side of the kitchen island to put some distance between the two of us. Being this close to him is doing strange things to my heart. "I had an interesting call from my agent today..."

I look down at the island and notice Duncan's workspace filled with all things cookie

and a bowl of treat dough. I start to play with one of the cookie cutters before pulling my gaze back to his.

The glint is gone from his eyes and his lips are tight. My stomach drops, and I watch him as he turns off the oven.

“I got a call from my agent Finn, too,” he says, his back still facing me. “I would love to be able to help you with this, Ava, truly, but I don’t think I can.”

“Oh,” I say, failing to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “I understand.”

He turns back to me, his gaze slamming into mine, and my stomach plummets.

Chapter Eleven

Duncan

Ava is doing an impressive job hiding her disappointment, exhibiting once again why she's the award-winning movie star she is. But as always, I can see through it. There's an ache in my chest, and my stomach is queasy. The desire to say yes and help her is powerful, but my need for self-preservation is stalwart.

"I really—"

"Duncan, please. You don't need to explain." She forces a smile and shakes her head, holding her hands up and laughing awkwardly. "I told Caroline this was a silly idea. But she insisted I ask."

My eyes are glued to her face, and I can see every nuance of emotion rolling over it. I'm not sure I've ever seen Ava feel so uncomfortable around me. Well, except...

"She's working on a Plan B," she interrupts my thoughts, returning my focus to her. I watch her smile shake as she tries to make light of the situation. "I'm a bit worried about what ideas she may come up with, to be honest. She can be a bit...um...creative."

Taking a slow breath, I push the longing that's surfacing. I'm a fixer. It's not something many people know, but it's true. I clench my jaw to stop the words lingering on the tip of my tongue from falling out.

“I didn’t expect you to say yes, not after...” her voice fades before she finishes, but I know exactly what she’s talking about.

Moving toward the island, I reach for the bowl of treat dough and pull it toward me. Sprinkling some flour on the counter, I pick up one of the dough balls and roll it out with the rolling pin. “It was a long time ago,” I say softly, not looking up. It may have been years ago, but sometimes it feels like yesterday.

This past week especially.

I can feel her eyes on me, slowly moving over my face. Leaving a trail of heat everywhere they touch. It’s all I can do to focus on the dough under my hand.

At the sound of Jessie’s Girl , I stop working the dough and look up to find Ava answering her phone.

The corner of my lip lifts slightly as I remember the talent show where Fiona and Ava sang this song. Ava was obsessed with Rick Springfield.

“Hi, Scarlett,” Ava’s voice rings out. Her eyes snap to mine. “I’m at Uncle Duncan’s.”

I hear Scarlett ask something just before Ava puts the phone on speaker.

“Uncle Dunky!” Ava’s lips quirk, and I narrow my eyes, which only causes the corners of her lips to lift higher. “Are you making the donuts?”

At this, Ava covers her mouth, and I’m pretty sure I heard a snort.

“I’m trying. I burned the first batch.” Scarlett groans loudly. “I know. I know. I forgot to set the timer.”

“Uncle Dunky,” Scarlet cries, and Ava giggles. “We talked about how important the timer is. Nana always says it’s the first thing you do right after putting them in the oven.”

I roll my eyes and look over to see Ava pressing a hand to her mouth, trying not to laugh out loud. It’s bad enough to have Scarlett lecture me when it’s just the two of us, but with Ava here listening in, I’m looking for the nearest rock to crawl under.

“I know.” I rub my head against my palm, feeling heat creep up my face. “I was distracted.”

Ava wags her finger at me, backing Scarlett up, and my lip curls.

“The cookie cutters you picked out work great, though. The dogs are going to love them.”

“I forgot about those,” Scarlett says excitedly. “Will I be able to help you before we go to Mile High Mutts again?”

“We should be able to make that work. I’ll talk with your Dad to see what he says.”

“Okay. You’re coming to dinner tonight, right?” My eyes glance at Ava before falling back to the phone.

“Probably not, Red.” I pick up the rolling pin and go back to flattening the dough in front of me. “I want to try and get a couple of batches of treats done tonight.”

“Bring them here,” Scarlett suggests. “I can help.”

“Not tonight.” I peek at Ava and see her eyes dim a bit.

My heart clenches because I know she knows why I'm staying home. Or rather, because of whom.

"Okay," Scarlett says, disappointment dripping off every syllable.

I blow out a deep breath and try to rein in the guilt I'm feeling at both Scarlett's and Ava's reaction to me not going to dinner.

I roll the dough a little too hard, causing it to thin out more than I want. Putting the rolling pin down, I pull the dough from the countertop and mold it into a ball. Starting over.

"What time will dinner be ready, Scarlett?" Ava pulls the phone to her ear, taking it off speaker. From the corner of my eye, I see her nodding her head. Then her gaze rises to mine again. "I'll ask him for you; I took the phone off speaker."

I go back to working the dough, focusing on the feel of it between my hands.

"Hold on, I'll have you tell him that." I look up, raising an eyebrow, to see Ava again put the phone on speaker. "Okay, he can hear you."

"I'll miss you at dinner," Scarlett whines, laying the guilt on thick. "I love you."

The corner of my lips lift and my heart is left melting. "I love you too, Red. I'll make sure to visit soon."

My eyes fall on Ava's face, and my breath catches at the softness I see staring back at me before she turns her focus back to the phone and takes it off speaker again.

I go back to rolling the dough out in a hopeless attempt to take the focus off the woman across from me, which is obviously not working with how poor of a job I'm

doing with a simple roll out.

“I’ll see you in a little bit. Bye, sweetie.” I hear Ava slide the phone in her purse. And though she doesn’t say anything, I can feel tiny tingles on my skin. Fully aware that she’s watching me.

The air in the room is so thick that each breath I take feels strained.

“Duncan, I know that before I came, you were constantly at David’s for dinner, and I hate knowing that you’re not seeing Scarlett as often as you normally do. Because of me.”

I shake my head at her, but she continues anyway.

“When I left LA, I didn’t think about where I was going; I just went.” She goes silent, and I look up to find her chewing on her bottom lip. “I forgot that you were traded to the Wolverines. And I forgot how close the arena is to Maple Ridge. I never would’ve—”

“Ava, it’s fine.” I stop pushing the roller and pin her with my gaze. “Really.”

“You’re being nice, and I’m not sure you should be.” She’s running her thumb under her fingers, a sure sign she’s uncomfortable. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile as much as you do when you’re around Scarlett. It’s obvious how much she means to you and how much you mean to her.”

“Ava—”

“Can you do me a favor?” Her head tilts slightly, looking just like Scarlett whenever she’s about to say something sassy.

I press my lips together to keep them from curving up and nod, “Anything.” In that moment, I mean exactly that...anything. If she brought up fake dating again, I would say yes.

“Let me know when you want to see Scarlett, and I’ll make myself scarce. Okay?”

Ava MIA, when I’m around, is exactly what I’ve wanted since she came to town. It’s what I still want, I remind myself. So why am I hesitating to answer?

“Duncan?”

“Sure,” I say through a tight throat. “I appreciate that.”

Jessie’s Girl plays through the room again, and Ava pulls her phone out of her purse. Her face immediately goes white. With shaking hands, I watch her decline the call and immediately power it off.

“Ava?” The fear in her eyes has me wanting to wipe whoever put it there off the face of the earth. “Everything okay?”

“Fine. Fine.” Her smile is shaky, and she’s not meeting my eyes. “It’s just Nathan. Again.”

“How many times has he called you?” I ask. It looks like Finn and Caroline were right to be worried about her if the expression on her face is anything to judge by.

“Duncan, please don’t concern—”

“How many?” I ask in a tone that sends most of my teammates scurrying.

“He never stops,” she whispers, rubbing her hands together. “I keep my phone off

most of the day and check it every so often to make sure I'm not missing any important texts or calls."

My fists clench, and heat crawls up my neck. I can feel a muscle in my jaw tick.

She glances up, and I can see the worry in her eyes, but it's for me this time. "Duncan, it will be fine. He can't keep this up."

Even as she says the words, I know she doesn't believe them. We both know how determined Nathan can be when he's fixated on something. And he is fixated on Ava.

"I'm gonna head back to David's. Dinner is most likely ready, and Scarlett will yell at me if I'm late."

She forces a smile that I know she's hoping will have me believing she's okay, but I know she isn't. The color drained from her face, and her eyes were filled with panic.

Watching her walk out the front door, I groan.

"Ava!" I call after her, but she doesn't answer.

I know exactly what I said about pretending to be Ava's boyfriend, but after what I just witnessed, there is no way I can let her go through this alone.

Chapter Twelve

Ava

Heading from the kitchen to the door feels like the longest walk of my entire life. The front door shuts behind me, and I scurry down the stairs, all but running to my car. My heart is pounding so hard it's like a drum banging in my ear.

"I told Caroline this was a horrible idea. Why did I even listen to her?" I mumble, focused on getting into my car and driving away as quickly as possible.

The back of my eyes burn, and my throat is tight. Duncan saying no is exactly what I expected. But this feeling? This feeling of disappointment that is clenching my chest has come out of nowhere.

Reaching the sidewalk, a black car whips in front of me, nearly hopping the curb. My heart rams against my ribcage. Terror grips me at the realization that I could've been killed. My eyes widen as I watch the man get out of the car, slam the door, and move in my direction. My body goes cold.

"Nathan!" My voice squeaks. "What are you doing here?"

His eyes are hard as he angrily strides toward me.

"If you would've just answered your phone, I wouldn't have had to come." His voice is deceptively quiet, but I know that tone. Backing away from him, I stumble my way toward Duncan's house. "I just wanted to talk to you."

“No, Nathan,” I say firmly, my mouth dry. I square my shoulders, trying to move faster. “You wanted me to change my mind.”

“Ava, you need to be there for next week’s premiere.”

Is he serious? I study the look in his eyes. He’s serious!

My brows shoot up, and my mouth drops open. Does he not understand that everyone knows our engagement is off? It’s been everywhere! Not to mention that I’ve been connected to two different men since it happened.

Everyone, except him, understands we’re over.

“Baking, big guy?” Nathan’s eyes shift to something behind me, and a condescending smirk covers his lips just as I slam into something hard. “Really?! Pink? It’s not your color.”

Big hands gently wrap around my upper arms, steadying me.

“You’ll have to tell my niece that. She seems to think pink looks good,” Duncan’s voice is deceptively calm, but there’s an edge to it. I feel him shrug. “I, on the other hand, think gray suits me better.”

“Are you okay?” He whispers softly in my ear, never taking his eyes off Nathan.

I blow out a shaky breath and stiffly nod. Rather than let me go, he pulls me closer to him. Securing my back against his chest. My heart skips at what he’s silently conveying. The warmth radiating from him grounds me and alleviates the coldness swimming through my veins with Nathan’s arrival.

“So it’s true,” Nathan grinds out, sneering at Duncan and glaring at me. “You are

dating him.”

A chill runs through me at the rage shining in his eyes. Duncan, feeling it, moves me to his side and places his body between Nathan and me. Putting his arm around my shoulder, he tucks me into his side. Before I can deny it, Duncan responds.

“Yes. We’re dating.” Nathan’s nostrils flare, and Duncan places his lips gently but firmly on my temple before pinning me with a stare, warning me not to contradict him.

If this were under different circumstances, I might tease him about how fickle he is. But right now, I’m grateful to have him agree to be my boyfriend.

A flicker of emotion runs through his eyes that I don’t have time to read before he glances back at Nathan. “Is there any last thing you’d like to say to Ava before you leave her alone...for good?”

A desperate look fills Nathan’s eyes, and I feel sorry for him for a brief second. I know what purpose Nathan served in my life—the place he was holding. But for him, ‘we’ were about the appearance of having it all: The perfect career. The perfect wife. The perfect family.

Without that, he’s lost.

He’s always cared more about the image people perceive than about me. For the first time, I realize how devastated he is, and a feeling of deep empathy fills me.

“Nathan,” I say as calmly as possible. “This could potentially work in your favor.”

His brows pull together, his lips thin, and his eyes whip back and forth between me and Duncan. I can see the muscle in his jaw tick. “How?” He growls.

“Play the broken man. The injured party,” I answer. “I did injure you, right?”

A real emotion shoots through his eyes, and for a single moment, his facade falls. For the first time since knowing him, I understand his struggle with me ending things. He is a broken man. I was the shield keeping everyone from seeing it.

It doesn’t excuse how he’s been acting, but it explains the absolutely insane behavior.

“You can blame me,” my voice breaks, and I feel Duncan’s eyes roaming my face. His hand moves slowly up and down my arm, giving me strength. Then I softly say, “I can handle it.”

Nathan’s face pulls together, and he steps forward, but he abruptly stops when Duncan moves toward him.

His eyes snap to Duncan, and a snarl distorts his handsome face. “It’s going to be fun letting everyone know that the burly hockey player is a complete softy.”

“Do what you need to do, man.” Duncan’s shoulders tense, but from the evenness of his voice, you’d never know just how much he hates this part of his life becoming public. People knowing he wears a pink apron that says ‘Time To Make The Donuts’ is one of his biggest nightmares. “I’m pretty secure in my masculinity. Not to mention my skill on the ice.”

Looking between these two broad and powerful men, having a silent battle of wills is fascinating and terrifying.

Nathan breaks eye contact with Duncan and switches his gaze to mine. The turmoil there leaves me sympathetic for the man I was in a relationship with for almost seven years. When his eyes harden, and hate replaces the turmoil, a tinge of fear at what his next move will be makes my stomach turn over.

“This isn’t the end,” he grinds through clenched teeth, pointing at me and Duncan before getting into his car and peeling away.

Watching his car drive down the street, my stomach fills with dread.

When Nathan is out of sight, Duncan turns toward me, his hands resting on my arms and his eyes searching my face. I give him a wobbly grin.

“Have you ever seen that side of him before?” Duncan gently asks, pushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

Warmth spreads through me at the gentle touch. Slowly shaking my head, I try to process everything that just happened.

Nathan knows where I am. He had a complete meltdown. Duncan just told him we were dating.

Wait. Duncan just told Nathan we were dating.

“Duncan, why did you tell Nathan we were together?” My brows pull together, and confusion fills me. “I know you don’t want to pretend we’re a couple. You don’t have to do this.”

“Ava,” he says gently. His green eyes hold mine, and my stomach swoops. “I was on my way to tell you I’d do it, but then I found you with Nathan.”

“But why?” I question, none of this is processing through my mind. It’s happening too fast, and I’m still shocked by Nathan’s rage.

“Your face when Nathan called you.” I stare at him, my eyes wide and my head shaking back and forth, feeling like I trapped him. “I saw how afraid you were. At

that moment, I knew I couldn't let you go through this alone."

"Duncan—" I whisper, overwhelmed by this man's ability to forgive. He's standing so close that his scent surrounds me, and his hands still rest gently on my arms. His nearness and touch are causing my heart to hopscotch.

I take a deep breath and try to regain my composure.

"I called out to you before you left, but I don't think you heard me. That's why I came out." He takes his hands off my arms as if he just realized he was still touching me. My arms wrap themselves around my shoulders to replace his warmth. "It's a good thing I did. Nathan was insane."

Running my hand through my hair, I slowly exhale. His apron catches my eye, and a smirk crosses my lips. "Looks like Tea Time, and the entire world will know that it's 'Time To Make The Donuts.'"

Heat crawls up Duncan's face, and a sheepish grin crosses his lips as he shrugs. "At least it will be minor compared to the news that we're 'dating.'"

"You're welcome?" I scrunch up my face and shrug. To my delight, Duncan's eyes dance.

"Come on," he says as he slips the apron over his head. "We need to tell David and Scarlett that we're a 'couple.' " He puts air quotes around the word couple. Then points to my car, "Is this yours?"

Nodding, I unlock the car and watch him slide his massive body into the passenger seat of my white BMW sedan. He looks like a sardine squished in there.

"Are you just going to stand there and stare at me?" There's a glint in his green eyes,

and for a moment, I can't move, completely smitten. "Ava, come on! In case you didn't notice, this car is a bit small for me."

"Oh yeah, sorry,." I say, shaking myself out of my stupor, and begin walking around the front of my car. After getting in, I fire up the ignition. "Let's go tell our family the news...Dunky."

Putting the car in drive, I feel Duncan's eyes on me. To my surprise, he laughs, and a wry grin splits my lips.

Rubbing his hand up and down his face, he groans. "If you ever call me that in public, I can't be held responsible for what I do."

Tension from my encounter with Nathan drains from my body, and I feel relaxed. But a new tension rises, one that takes me by surprise.

What would Duncan do if I called him that in public? A smirk replaces the grin.

I may need to test it out.

Chapter Thirteen

Duncan

I feel like an idiot sitting in Ava's Beemer. Driving my SUV would've been smart, but I didn't think it was safe for Ava to be in the car alone. We will be taking my Acadia from now on.

We .

That one little word has my gut clenching and my heart jumping around like a Mexican jumping bean. 'We' is never a word I thought would apply to me and Ava. Now that it does, at least until everything with Nathan blows over, I feel...Anxious? Excited?

Yes, yes, and yes to all of those and more. But it's the more that concerns me.

I've dated on and off over the last ten years, but none of those relationships went anywhere. Not because I didn't want a relationship; I did, and I do. There just wasn't a connection. And with Ava sitting next to me as my 'girlfriend,' I now know why.

Ava parks in front of David's house, and the engine goes silent. She fiddles with the keys, not making any attempt to get out of the car. Turning her body to face me, her hesitant gaze meets mine. "Are you sure you want to do this? The two of us together will cause a massive stir, and the press will be out of control."

Her blue eyes hold a myriad of emotions. Uncertainty? Relief? Hope?

Hope? No. That can't be right. I need to be careful about letting myself read into anything where 'we' are concerned. This entire situation is fabricated. Ava needs to be protected, and I'm the man for the job.

End of story. Finito. Nothing else to see here, folks.

"I deal with the press frequently; it's part of being a professional athlete and isn't foreign to me. Besides, do you really think there would be any chance I would let you handle this by yourself?"

She pulls in her bottom lip, drawing my eyes to it. My heart stops, and all the air feels sucked from the vehicle. I slowly drag my gaze to Ava's, only to be startled by a loud banging noise from the car window.

"Ouch," I grumble, rubbing my head after slamming it into the top of her car.

"Are you okay?" She asks with a chuckle, placing her hand on top of my head and rubbing gently. When her hand touches me, I freeze—a strong current moves down my body.

"Uncle Dunky! I thought you said you weren't coming to dinner." Scarlett pulls open the door and drags me out of the car, causing me to bang my head again.

Did I say how much I hate small cars?

When she grins at me and lifts her arms so I can pick her up, a grin slides across my face. As per usual she smothers me by squeezing my neck too tight, and I love every minute of it. There is nothing I love more than her little arms wrapped around me.

Done with the hug, she starts squirming and I put her down. The next thing I know, she's grabbing my hand and dragging me to the house.

“Did you bring the treat dough? What are you doing here? I’m so glad to see you! Aunt Ava, are you coming?!” I turn my head toward Ava and see her just outside the car door watching us, the corner of her lips lifted.

“Yeah, Aunt Ava,” I tease, raising a brow. “Are you coming?”

Ava’s brows lift before she gives me a smile that makes my heart stutter. That stuttering heart immediately slams to a halt when I remember I need to tell David and Scarlett that Ava and I are in a ‘relationship.’

“Did you just say you’re a couple?” David’s hands stop mid-air as he grabs a chicken breast from the plate in front of him, his mouth nearly hitting the table.

“Yay!” Scarlett cheers. David narrows his eyes at his daughter. She sends him an innocent look. “What? I think it’s great. My favorite aunt and uncle are finally together.”

“We’re pretending to be together, Scarlett,” Ava says calmly. She takes the serving dish from David and looks from his eyes to the serving fork and back. He plates the chicken breast and hands the serving fork to her. Plating a chicken breast for herself, she puts the dish with the chicken back in the middle of the table and picks up the salad bowl. “Just until this whole thing with Nathan gets under control.”

Scarlett puts on her special ‘That’s not cool’ face, and I can’t help but smirk.

“Wait, what?” David asks, beyond confused, if the look on his face means anything.

Ava and I share a glance, and I nod my head toward her, letting her know to take the lead.

Ava tells David what happened today—starting with both of our agents suggesting

that we take advantage of the gossip surrounding the two of us from last night's game, and Nathan showing up at my house unhinged.

"You're okay with this, Dunc?" David turns his gaze to me, his eyes full of concern. We've never talked about my feelings for Ava but I am pretty sure he knew how I felt.

"After what I saw today, yes." I lift a shoulder to my ear. He stares at me hard, like he's trying to find answers to questions he'd rather be asking in private. He's not the only one asking those questions. I am, too. But the one thing I'm sure of is that helping Ava is the right thing to do.

As if seeing what he wanted, he nods, looks at Ava, and then back at me. "So what do Scarlett and I need to do?"

"Don't act surprised when we do 'couple' things," Ava responds, an adorable hint of pink staining her cheeks.

"Like kiss?" Scarlett asks, a bit too excitedly. All of us whip our heads in her direction.

I narrow my eyes at her, and she gives me an impish grin. I bite the inside of my lip to keep from grinning at her. I swear, this niece of mine is too much.

"What? You and Mom used to kiss all the time," she says, pointing her fork at David and then back and forth between Ava and me. "Why wouldn't they?"

Heat creeps up my neck as her words sink in, and I swallow hard. Glancing at Ava, I find her looking down at her plate and pushing her food around.

With all the thoughts I had about saying yes to this 'fake dating', I didn't think about

the kissing aspect. In fact, I've been doing everything in my power to not think about kissing Ava. Which of course, isn't working.

As if feeling my eyes on her, Ava's gaze lifts to mine, and my gut clenches.

"You're right, Scarlett," I say, not breaking eye contact with the woman across from me. "Couples kiss."

Ava's eyes darken and I can see her swallow hard.

"Just like in the movies," she says before glancing at Scarlett. "And what do I say about movies and kisses?"

"That they're fake." Scarlett's shoulders droop, and her excited smile falls.

"Exactly," Ava says, not meeting my gaze. "Uncle Duncan and I are playing a part. You need to remember that, okay?"

Scarlett looks at Ava and then back to me. "Uncle Duncan, you aren't an actor. How will you feel about fake kissing?"

My eyes pop open at her question, and my mouth goes dry.

"Okay, that's enough questions, Scarlett," David says, pushing his chair back and getting up from the table. "Time to get ready for bed. Grab your plate and put it in the sink, please."

David gives me one last glance before he heads to the kitchen. Ava picks up her plate and the salad bowl, following David and Scarlett.

"Scarlett, do you want help getting ready for bed?" Ava asks. "I can braid your hair

for you.”

“Yes, please!” The brightest smile crosses Scarlett’s face as she skips toward Ava.

I can hear their banter as they walk down the hallway from the kitchen toward Scarlett’s room.

Picking up my plate and one of the others on the table, I push my chair back and head to the kitchen, feeling heaviness in my chest.

“Uncle Duncan and I are only playing a part.”

The way Ava explained our situation to Scarlett was perfect and true. But it was like a punch to the gut that had me gasping for air.

Crossing the threshold into the kitchen, I’m greeted by the sound of running water and the sight of David washing the dishes. I put my plates on the counter next to him and turn to clear what’s left on the table.

“Duncan?” David calls, turning off the water, drying his hands, and watching me closely. “Are you really okay with this?”

“Ava asked me the same thing multiple times,” I growl. “And my answer hasn’t changed.”

I know David is worried, but right now, I can’t think about what I agreed to. And I can’t think about how it may affect me. I don’t have that luxury.

“Are you going to be okay with fake kisses?” He asks the same question his daughter did.

“You didn’t see her when Nathan called or when he showed up at my house. She’s terrified of him.” I scrub my face before running my hand through my hair and blowing out a frustrated breath. “I guess I’ll have to be.”

“There has to be something else we can do, Dunc. Other ideas. Options—”

“I already told Nathan we’re dating.”

David’s brows shoot up, and he lets out a soft whistle, “Oh.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “It will be all over the internet by tomorrow, if it’s not already, and Nathan will do everything to portray Ava as the villain.”

“She’s stronger than she looks, Duncan.” His voice is gentle.

Meeting his stare, I can see he really believes what he says. But here’s the thing: Ava only pretends to be emotionally tough. She’s really not. I’ve always known this. David, as close as he and Ava are, never saw that side of her because she didn’t let him or Fiona. She didn’t want them to worry about her.

Honestly, she didn’t want me to see either—I just did.

“She’s really not, though,” I say firmly. “I know this isn’t the smartest thing I could do, but I can’t let her go through this alone.”

“Are you still in love with her?” My stomach drops at his question. He pins me with his gaze, saying the quiet part out loud. “Don’t pretend you weren’t. Anyone who paid attention could see it written all over your face.”

Blowing a heavy breath, I shove my hands into my pockets and stare at the ground. “Let’s hope not,” I whisper.

David walks past me, patting my shoulder as he heads back to the table. “Just be careful, okay?”

Meeting his concerned blue eyes, I nod.

Where I am now is way beyond the point of being careful. Careful would’ve been keeping my distance from Ava the moment I found out she was coming to Maple Ridge.

I am officially in the danger zone.

Chapter Fourteen

Ava

Walking up the stairs to the house, I wipe the sweat from my forehead. This is the first run I've gone for since coming to Maple Ridge, and it felt good working my muscles.

Bon Jovi's Shot Through The Heart is blaring through my headphones, and I'm humming along, making my way to the refrigerator to quench this thirst. Grabbing a bottle of water, I close the fridge door.

A scream flies from my mouth; my heart leaps out of my chest, and the bottle I'm holding flies from my hand when I find David standing in front of me. His body shakes as he bends to pick up the water bottle and hand it back to me. The grin he's wearing shows every one of his teeth.

"You scared me to death," I yell, making sure to be heard over the music blaring in my ears. His grin gets larger as he points to his ear. Remembering I'm wearing headphones, I take them out. "Sorry. I forgot I had those in."

"You were singing loud enough for the neighbors to hear you!" He chuckles, leaning against the kitchen door frame. "I thought you were ignoring me. I asked you a question and called you three times."

"Why would I be ignoring you?" I tilt my head and narrow my eyes at him as I take a swig of water.

“Because I was asking you about Duncan.” It’s his turn to narrow his eyes at me, and the smirk he’s wearing has my face heating.

“What about Duncan?” Trying to play it cool, I walk past him and head into the living room.

Putting my water on the coffee table, I sit on the couch and pour all my attention into untying my sneakers. The care I’m taking with them would have you thinking they were Gucci. Getting up, I put them by the front door and come back to grab my water. I look up to find David watching me.

“Are you going to his game tonight?” He asks casually, but he has that look in his eye—the one where he wants to ask me something but doesn’t know how to go about it.

“Yes, I’m going to his game tonight. What about you and Scarlett?” I ask, walking back to the kitchen. When I get there, I pull the rubber band out and let my hair fall. I take a deep breath and try to slow my heart rate.

David is my best friend and has been since high school. Back then, I would tell him and Fiona everything. It was great having my two favorite people available for advice. But this situation is different.

It’s Duncan. And I’m not sure how to talk to him about Duncan.

Or, should I say, pretending to date his younger brother and all that entails? Which is weird because now that I think about it, he had no problem talking to me when he realized he had feelings for Fiona.

But this situation isn’t about me having feelings, though. So maybe that’s it? This is more like me acting in a new movie with a new co-star. I would talk to Fi about that,

but not David.

That's why this situation is awkward. I never talk to David about my co-stars, except Nathan. But we had started dating by then. Duncan and I aren't dating; we're pretending, which is why all of this is uncomfortable.

Yeah, that's it.

"No," David yells from the living room. "It's a school night, so we'll watch from home."

Walking toward the kitchen door frame, I stop and lean against it to see David scrolling through his phone.

"That makes sense. How is she when she can't go to Duncan's games?" I take another swig of water.

"She's usually fine. The two of them have a secret code he does at the end of the first period for her."

Warmth spreads throughout my chest at the thought of Duncan and Scarlett with a secret code. I can't deny Duncan is pretty adorable when he's not being a curmudgeon. "Do you know what it is?"

David looks at me with his eyes twinkling. "If I knew, it wouldn't be secret."

"Ha. Ha." I chuck my water bottle at him, making him laugh before he catches it with ease.

"Thank you," he says, opening the bottle and sipping. "I was thirsty."

Shaking my head and laughing, he lifts the water bottle and I put my hands out to catch it as he tosses it back.

“A?” David calls out to me just as I’m turning down the hallway to my bedroom. “You’ll want to see this.”

Walking back to David, I see him holding out his phone. His eyebrows are pulled together, and his mouth is in a straight line. When I get close enough to him, I take the phone out of his hand.

The headline staring at me makes my stomach drop.

Nathan Vaughn Speaks Out About His Breakup with Ava Norris.

Without reading anything else, I hand the phone back to David.

“He must be so excited to have the top story at TMZ.” Lifting a trembling hand to my mouth, I take another sip of water. “Let the mud-slinging begin.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” David asks, and I shake my head.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” I shrug and turn away from him, heading back toward the hallway. My stomach is swirling, and my mouth is dry. “It’s only the beginning. I hope I don’t cause any problems for Duncan by dragging him into this.”

If David has a response, I don’t hear it, and I don’t stick around long enough to wait for one.

Walking up to the players' entrance at the arena, I turn to wave at both David and Scarlett as they drive off. Rubbing my hands against my jeans, I take a deep breath. My heart is racing, and I feel like I’m walking down the red carpet for the first time

as the lead actress in Kiss Me Maybe?, the movie that put me on the A-list of actresses in Hollywood.

Tonight, I'm a bundle of nerves just like then, but instead of being in a formal gown with cameras all around me, I'm wearing Duncan's jersey. I run a hand over the number on the front of my shirt, and my stomach erupts in flutters.

There is something about wearing the jersey of a man you're dating. Apparently, it happens when you're fake dating one too.

"Ava!" An enthusiastic voice calls from the door. "I'm Sandy Davidson, Tom Davidson's wife. Duncan asked if I could come out and bring you in."

We walk toward the door, and the security guard smiles at Sandy. His eyes widen when he looks at me, but he doesn't say anything. I smile at him, and he nods.

Sandy slips her hand through my arm and pulls me into her, warmth radiating from her in waves. Immediately I feel my nerves starting to settle as she leans in close. She's the type of person who makes everyone feel comfortable.

"First, I am a huge fan! I've seen every one of your movies," she says excitedly before leaning closer and whispering. "Second, you're the first girlfriend Duncan has ever had in the players' box."

"Really?" I ask, unable to stop the grin that spreads across my face. "I can't believe that."

"It's true. Not for lack of opportunities, mind you. Everyone wants to date the 'brooding goalie' whose eyes radiate adoration every time he looks at his niece. That alone makes him pretty swoon-worthy in the hearts of every woman who's witnessed it." She giggles, winking at me.

“He is pretty amazing with her,” I say softly. “Scarlett knows exactly how to get past his gruff exterior.”

“You have the same effect on him,” she says, just as we reach the area of the arena we’re sitting in. “It was sweet how he wanted to ensure you weren’t left alone. He’s pretty smitten.”

My stomach swoops, and a swarm of butterflies takes hold at her words. I don’t have long to focus on what she just said because, just then, we arrive at our seats, and she starts to introduce me to all the women sitting around us. I sit down only to have the team song start playing as the Wolverines take the ice.

Leaning on the edge of my seat and watching the players, my senses are overloaded by all the activity in front of me—the sound of blades tearing up the ice against blaring 80’s music. The players move by so rapidly that my eyes don’t have enough time to process their shapes. But I’m not looking for someone who’s moving. I’m looking for the man who stands in front of the net.

Duncan glides over to the ‘basket,’ and once again, I’m amazed at how graceful he looks on the ice. I know it sounds strange because he’s so big and looks even bigger with all his padding, but his movement is effortless. I can’t drag my eyes away.

“Well, he’s not the only one smitten, I see,” Sandy whispers in my ear, a smile in her voice.

I nod in her direction, barely registering what she just said.

The pace of the game is swift and, once again, hard for me to follow. I miss my tutor, who is home waiting for Duncan’s secret signal.

The sound of sticks hitting the ice skates sliding back and forth and screeching to a

halt. The slapping that sounds when the puck is hit or passed across the ice. The startling sound of the buzzer when someone scores has all of my senses being pulled in different directions. Despite that, my focus is on the only man I'm interested in.

When the siren goes off, calling the end of the third period, the stand erupts at a Wolverines victory. Like everyone else, I stand up and cheer.

Duncan had a fantastic game, blocking almost every shot taken, and I can't help but wonder if Scarlett would approve.

"Your man was putting on a show for you tonight," Sandy giggles, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and squeezing. "That was one of the best games he's played since being traded to the team."

"I was wondering what my niece would think. I assume it would be a yes."

Sandy nods, then points to the ice. "Here he comes."

I turn back toward the rink, and my gaze collides with Duncan's. There's no mistaking he's looking directly at me. He skates next to where I am sitting, giving me a two-finger salute and a wink. The grin on his lips and the sparkle in his eyes have my heart hammering against my ribcage.

A grin spreads across my face so big that I can feel my cheeks strain—not to mention the heat leaving every limb in my body feeling like jelly.

So this is what it feels like to have Duncan James' sole focus on you. It's not just intense; it's like testing out a new ice cream flavor only to find that you never want to eat any other kind.

I'm already addicted.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Tea Time

Hey Tea Lovers.

We're removing 'brooding' from the Wolverine's goalie title and just saying 'irresistibly handsome'.

Why do you ask? Because Duncan James has teeth that form the most delicious smile. heart eyed emoji

There wasn't one woman in the arena not dying to be on the receiving end of it.

Including Ava Norris.

Things between the two of them just became the perfect cup of tea with a stick of cinnamon.

Warm and spicy.

And I, for one, am here for it. smirk emoji

Till Next Time, Chamie

Chapter Fifteen

Duncan

Coming off the ice after the game and finding Ava wearing my jersey has my blood pumping. I can't remember the last time I felt this sense of euphoria, and my teammates are noticing.

"I need a pair of shades," Spencer teases, walking over to me and shielding his eyes. "I didn't know you had so many teeth."

Tightening my lips and narrowing my eyes, I grunt. "Knock it off, Cavill."

"And he's back!" He laughs. A twinkle in his eyes as he punches me in the arm before walking over to celebrate with some of the other guys.

My lips lift at the corner, and I turn to my locker, but not before Viper catches it and roars with laughter.

"We all knew there was a smile in there somewhere," he jokes. "Just weren't sure what it would take for it to make an appearance."

"Don't get used to it," I mumble, rolling my eyes and biting the inside of my cheek. "It's not sticking around."

"I said the same thing about Sandy." He winks, catching me off guard. "Sometimes everyone knows before you do."

Staring at his back I think about what he just said. It was never a question of me knowing that Ava was the one for me. The moment I laid eyes on her I knew she was my person.

Despite how young I was.

Me knowing isn't the problem—has never been the problem. The problem is that I am in this situation and have feelings again. Pushing out a breath I remind myself what Ava and I are doing.

Faking it.

At least, we're supposed to be, and she is. She fakes it often. It's her job.

The lightness of the past sixty minutes drains from my body and is replaced with the heaviness of truth.

Scrubbing my face, I call on the grumpy and seal my heart with it.

When I head out of the locker room, I find Ava talking with Sandy and Tom, relaxed and safe.

The tightness in my gut releases, and my heart jumps at the sight of her.

"Remember what this is," I quietly murmur to myself. I mentally zip up my heart again.

But telling myself to do something and actually doing it aren't the same thing apparently, because walking toward her I'm enchanted. Her face is glowing, her eyes are bright, and a desire so strong comes over me that it grips my stomach.

I want her to look at me like that.

As if on cue, she turns her face toward me, and my knees buckle.

The tenderness in her eyes, for me , is even better than the happiness I just witnessed. The other people in the room fade away and I make my way over to the three people before me.

“Thank you, Sandy, for taking care of Ava for me tonight.” I give Sandy a nod, tilted in her direction, without taking my eyes from the woman in front of me. “I really appreciate it.”

“I’m surprised Tom didn’t tell you how big of a fan I am. You did me a huge favor by asking me to help!” Sandy giggles, putting her hand on Ava’s arm. “It was so great spending time with you. Can’t wait to do it again.”

Ava turns to Sandy and hugs her. “Thank you, Sandy. You made coming alone so much easier for me.”

“I’m glad,” Sandy says, grabbing her husband’s arm and pulling him away. “Enjoy the rest of your night.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Tom staring at me with a grin but choose not to acknowledge it. I’ve had enough teasing for one night.

“See you at practice tomorrow, Denier.” I give him a quick nod before snapping my gaze back to Ava, only to find her watching me with a grin. My heart jumps, and the corner of my lip lifts.

“Nice jersey.” I point at my number, suddenly feeling uncertain of what to do next. We’re supposed to be dating, should I kiss her? You know, for appearance's sake?

Not because I want to or anything.

“This old thing,” she says, looking at it shyly. “Someone sent it to the house with my name on it.”

I raise a brow and feel a laugh bubbling up. “Do you wear things that come from unknown senders, often?”

“Only if it’s new,” she says with a shrug and a mischievous smile. Her eyes dance.

A snort escapes and I feel a smile spread across my lips. “I’ll remember to make sure my name is on anything I send you from now on.”

“This was from you?” She says playfully, pulling the jersey away from her body. “You definitely need to make that clear next time.”

I can’t help it; I throw my head back and laugh. I can feel everyone’s eyes on us, and I don’t care what they think. Taking a step closer to Ava, the scent of sandalwood surrounds me. Gently, I slide my hand partially around her waist and feel a shiver run through her body. Bringing my mouth to her ear, I whisper. “So what am I supposed to do? I’ve never pretended to be somebody’s boyfriend before. Should I kiss you? Is that what a fake boyfriend would do?”

I hear her breath catch and a thrill runs through my body.

“Do you want to?” She whispers breathlessly.

Do I want to? I’ve never wanted anything more in my entire life. But should I?

The smart answer is no.

I pull my head away from Ava's ear and look at her face. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes shine, and my glance drops to her lips.

They part slightly as a gasp falls from them. I lift my gaze back to hers and pull my hand away from her waist. A flicker of disappointment runs across her eyes.

Moving my hand to cup her chin, I pull her face gently toward me. Right before our lips touch, I lift my gaze back to hers, making sure I have permission. What I find are lashes lying softly on her cheek. At my hesitation, her lids open, and a question lingers in her gaze.

I don't wait a second longer before covering her lips with mine.

I never claimed to be smart.

My muscles strain as I lift the one-hundred and eighty pounds of weight from my chest. The day after a game is supposed to include a light workout, but after kissing Ava last night, and the way she looked at me when I dropped her off, I need to quiet my mind.

Workouts usually help with that.

But remembering how her lips felt under mine has been delicious torture, and I haven't been able to think about anything else since. It's driving me insane.

The barbell rattles against the stand as I let go of the weight. My chest rises and falls in short, uneven breaths. My muscles burning is a satisfying ache that has no effect at quieting my thoughts.

Swiping the towel across my face, I lean forward, elbows on my knees, and take a long pull from my water bottle but the tension in my body isn't fading. I need more.

Pushing to my feet, I roll my neck and head toward the squat rack, adjusting the weights with a little more force than necessary.

Maybe if I push myself harder, I'll be able to get her out of my mind.

"James," Coach shouts from the door. "What are you doing? It's supposed to be an easy weight day."

"It is," I grouse, dropping my towel and water bottle beside the weight machine, I load it up with the max weight I can handle. "I've only been working out for thirty minutes."

"That's thirty minutes too long and you know it. I don't need you hurting yourself. Make sure you spend some extra time in the ice bath." I ignore him, and continue to prep the squat machine before putting my body in position. I can feel his eyes on me but he doesn't say anything right away.

"When you're done here, head over to PR. Stacy Mullins needs to talk to you about something."

Reluctantly curious, I give him a glance. "PR? Did they say what they wanted to talk about?"

"Didn't give me any details except she needed to see you. And that it's important."

"Important?" My eyebrows pull together. Thoughts race through my head trying to figure out what could be important enough for PR to need to see me , but I draw a complete blank.

"Ten more minutes. Then off to see Stacy." Coach slaps his hand on the door frame before heading out.

I grunt.

“Don’t grunt at me,” he yells from the hallway. “And remember that ice bath before you leave here today. I don’t need my starting goalie pulling a muscle.”

“Yes, Coach,” I respond, my mind already going over all the possibilities of what Stacy in PR could want when it becomes crystal clear.

Nathan.

I haven’t checked social media, I never do, but I’m pretty certain this has everything to do with him and what he’s saying about Ava. And by association, me.

Because I’m involved, the team is being dragged into this. This is all about damage control.

I grab my towel and water bottle and head to the locker room for my phone. The first thing I do is look up news of Nathan Vaughn and Ava Norris.

Running a hand through my hair, I push out a breath. Everything I’m reading has me wishing I had decked him when he was here the other day. He deserves it.

My thoughts pivot to Ava, and I immediately pull up her contact and send a text.

Me: How are you? Is everything okay?

Ava: Well this is a nice surprise. wink emoji

My lip lifts at the emoji, and a wave of emotion moves through my body. Taking a deep breath and scrubbing my face I pull myself together. This isn’t the time to be distracted by feelings.

Ava: I'm pretty good. How are you?

Me: Have you heard from Nathan at all?

Staring at my phone I watch as three dots appear and then disappear multiple times. I continue to wait but after a few minutes I try again.

Me: Ava? Me: Have you heard from Nathan?

This time she responds immediately.

Ava: No. Ava: But I did text with Caroline. Ava: She wants to talk later.

The tightness in my stomach loosens knowing that Nathan hasn't bothered her, but the fact that Caroline wants to talk to her, confirms that there is trouble brewing. My stomach twists.

Me: My PR department wants to talk to me, I'm pretty sure it has to do with whatever Nathan is spreading through the media.

Ava: Duncan, I'm so sorry.

Me: I'm not worried about me. I'm worried about you. Me: Are you okay?

She takes so long to answer that when she finally does, I realize I'd been holding my breath the entire time.

Ava: I'm okay. This has just been rough.

Me: Whatever is going on we'll take care of it. Me: Together. Me: I'll talk to Finn and Stacy and see what our best option is.

Ava: Thank you, Duncan. Ava: You are the best fake boyfriend ever.

Best. Fake . Boyfriend.

My stomach knots, and an ache takes over my chest. With those three words, I'm brought to my knees.

Chapter Sixteen

Ava

Best fake boyfriend ever?

“Ava,” I groan, slamming my palm against my forehead, blowing out a big breath. Flopping back against the couch I grind out, “Why did you say that?”

There was nothing fake about what I felt when Duncan kissed me last night or the way my body responded. The moment his lips touched mine, my heart nearly leapt out of my chest and my entire body came to life.

I know the kiss was for show, but when it was over I wanted more. One kiss wasn’t enough. And from the look in Duncan’s eyes I’m positive he felt the same.

The car ride home was quiet, the tension thick, and every inch of me was aware of the man beside me. When we arrived at David’s, Duncan pulled into the driveway and parked the car. My senses were immediately on high alert.

Would he kiss me again?

Looking over at him, his hands resting on the steering wheel, his gaze facing forward. I took a moment to admire his profile, before letting my gaze linger on his lips. When he glanced in my direction any emotion was masked. I knew there wasn’t a chance of that happening.

Disappointment dripped off me in waves, my heart in my stomach. I softly said goodnight and started out of the car. The response that followed was a husky ‘Goodnight Ava’ that had my heart skipping a beat.

When I reached the door I turned back to look at Duncan. Through the windshield, I could see his eyes on me, watching and when our gazes met the intensity in them sent a flutter through my body and made my breath catch. He stiffly lifted his hand, and I did the same, a wobbly smile crossing my face, then walked into the house not looking back.

The emotions I had felt from the last few hours were all over the place, and I was left questioning everything.

“Hey,” David acknowledged me as I walked into the room. “How was the game?” he asked from the couch, watching TV.

“Fast. I missed my Hockey for Dummies professor.” I chuckled, doing my best to act like my entire world wasn’t turned upside down because of his younger brother. “It’s been a long day. I’m gonna head to bed. Night.”

Concern lined David’s forehead but he didn’t say anything other than, “Okay. See you tomorrow.”

When I walked away I could feel his eyes on me making me wonder what David was worried about. Is he concerned about my situation with Nathan? Or was he more concerned about the situation with Duncan?

David had never said anything to me about how Duncan felt all those years ago but Fiona did a time or two. I can’t help but wonder if his concern was for his brother.

“You know he’s in love with you right?” Fi asked, as I was finishing up packing for

my flight in a few hours.

“Who?” I innocently asked, trying to play dumb. Putting my hand out without lifting my head, I waited for her to give me the shirt she was holding.

When the shirt didn’t hit my palm I was forced to look over at her. Her eyes were wide and her head tilted. The look thrown my way was loudly saying ‘don’t pretend with me little sister.’ I ripped the shirt out of her hand and quickly looked away trying to act like what happened wasn’t a big deal.

But it was. Duncan is David’s brother. His baby brother. I would never want anything to come between me and David. Breaking his brother’s heart would definitely fall under that category.

“He told me how he felt at your wedding,” I said softly. “I told him there was someone more suited for him out there. That he would meet her one day.”

Silence greeted my words and I looked up to find Fiona’s eyes full of sadness as they searched my face.

Till this day I don’t know what that look was about and we never talked about Duncan or his feelings after that. Especially once I started dating Nathan.

David still hasn’t broached the subject of Duncan being in love with me all those years ago, but if Fiona knew how Duncan felt, it’s guaranteed he did, too.

Once again my thoughts turn back to the feel of Duncan’s lips on mine. It was the first thing I thought of when I woke up; I can’t remember the last time I had this sense of excitement where a man was concerned.

I even powered on my phone early, hoping he would reach out. And when he does, I

say, 'Best fake boyfriend ever'?!

Idiot!

Looking at my phone, I see that there's still no response from him. I start to type a message but delete it.

What can I say to fix this?

Even if I'm questioning how I feel about Duncan, the reality is that right now our 'relationship' is fake. But the drama surrounding my life isn't. I hate dragging Duncan into the chaos, but now that his team is getting involved I feel worse.

My phone buzzes and my heart jumps, then thuds into my stomach when I realize it's only Caroline.

"Ava!" Caroline declares before I can even say hello. "Are you okay?"

Now both Duncan and Caroline have asked that question. I'm starting to get worried about what Nathan has been saying.

"I was feeling good, but now I'm not so sure," I say, my throat tight. I've been keeping off social media but I'm beginning to wonder if keeping my head in the sand was a bad idea.

"Why just now?" Caroline asks, her voice hesitant.

"Because I got a text from Duncan a little while ago asking the same thing," I say, rubbing my thumb against my fingers. "He also mentioned that his PR team wanted to talk to him."

“Well after that kiss is it any surprise?” My face heats at Caroline’s words. “I’m surprised the ice didn’t melt. It was hot !”

“Caroline!” I bite the inside of my lip to keep the grin that I’ve been fighting off all morning from my face. “It was just for show.”

“Suure, it was.” Her chuckle sounds through the phone and my stomach flutters as I recall when Duncan’s lips touched mine. “I’ve seen what you playing a part looks like, remember? There wasn’t any of that between the two of you. The only thing I saw were sparks!”

“How did you see this?” I ask, my eyebrows drawing together. I don’t remember anyone around us taking photos, but then again, once my eyes landed on Duncan the entire room blurred.

“Nathan’s team posted a video.” My stomach churns. “Duncan’s team is calling a press conference tomorrow morning before the Wolverines head out for their series against the Hurricanes. They want both of you there.”

“Damage control,” I mumble, shaking my hand through my hair and taking a deep breath as I sink further into the couch. “This is bad.”

“It’s not bad,” Caroline says, her voice dripping with scorn. “It’s Nathan. He always acts like a child when he doesn’t get his way. This temper tantrum is just one of many.”

“How did I not see this?” Shaking my head I think back to all the years I spent with Nathan. How did I miss this huge character flaw?

“Because you were working. Building a successful career. He loved how the two of you looked together and kept the majority of things to himself,” Caroline sneers.

“The only thing he couldn’t keep contained was his jealousy. His ego wouldn’t let him.”

Thinking back over the years I was with Nathan it’s easy to see how I missed it. Our schedules were like two ships passing in the night and the time we spent together was limited due to ongoing shoots. The majority of it was spent at events and Nathan was always on his best behavior.

“I can say this now because you’re not together anymore.” Caroline has always been honest with me when I asked her for advice, but she has never overstepped any boundaries about my life unless she thought it would hurt my career. “I think you were enamored with who you believed Nathan was.”

Her words steal my breath as I hear the truth in them.

“You’re a good person, Ava,” Caroline says softly. “You look for the best in people. Nathan is an amazing actor for a reason. He also has a horrible reputation and has fooled many people.”

“Thanks Caroline. I don’t feel like a good person at the moment.” I sigh, and switch the conversation over to the press conference. “Can you tell me what you know about tomorrow?”

Getting up from the couch, I head to the kitchen for a drink.

“I talked with Duncan’s agent, Finn. He told me that the team is just looking to get ahead of what Nathan is accusing the two of you of.”

The cup I’m holding stops midway to my mouth and I lean against the counter. “What is Nathan accusing us of?”

She lets out a big sigh but doesn't say anything.

"Caroline?" I push off the counter and head back to the living room.

"He's saying that you and Duncan had this planned the entire time." I plop in one of the chairs by the dining table and put my cup down. That isn't a surprise; he mentioned it when he saw us together. "And that you cheated on him with your co-stars."

A gasp flies out and tears burn the back of my eyes. "He wouldn't..."

"He did," Caroline retorts angrily. "But I want you to know that Sean and others are already coming out and saying that isn't true."

Resting my elbow on the table I lean my face on my hand. Tears run down my face. This is a nightmare. "Duncan!" Panic courses through me at what this could mean for him.

"Duncan is aware of exactly what's going on. Finn filled him in." I wipe a tear from my cheek and take in a shaky breath. "He's angry that this is happening to you."

"He should be angry at me. This is all my fault. How could I put him in this situation?" I get up and start pacing.

"Ava, this isn't your fault. This is about Nathan needing to be the center of attention." Caroline says softly. "Duncan's job isn't in danger, they just want to get ahead of the gossip."

Relief floods me at her words. I don't think I could ever forgive myself if I was the reason that he lost anything. "Thank goodness."

“Finn also mentioned that Duncan is determined to set the record straight tomorrow.”
A tendril of calmness wraps around my heart spreading warmth through my chest.
“He’ll do whatever you need him to do.”

I have no reason to doubt a single word she’s saying because that’s who Duncan is.
Pushing out a breath I feel some of the tension release.

I don’t have to do this alone. I have Duncan.

Duncan. The one I’ve been running from my entire life.

“Thanks, Caroline. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Hanging up the phone I sit for a moment in the quiet house, my elbows resting on the table and I let myself enjoy the way it feels to know I have someone who will stand by me.

Picking up my phone I send him a text.

Me: Thank you.

Duncan: No problem. Duncan: I’ll see you tomorrow morning.

I’ve run from this my entire life, not just Duncan, but love. I don’t know if things will work with him after everything I’ve put him through, but I know one thing for sure.

I’m tired of running...

Chapter Seventeen

Duncan

It's a beautiful crisp morning when I pull into David's driveway, and park next to his truck. It's not quite seven-thirty yet so I have a chance to visit with Scarlett before I travel to North Carolina. I haven't been able to stop by over the past two days and I miss that pipsqueak when I don't see her.

Reaching out I grab the rearview mirror and turn it in my direction, giving myself a quick once over. Running my fingers through my hair I work to flatten it a bit from the drive over with an open window.

"Uncle Dunky!" Scarlett yells from the door, and I quickly put the mirror back in place. "Are you fixing your hair?"

"So much for being subtle," I mumble, rolling my eyes. Pushing open the door, I climb out of the car. "Hey, Red!"

A blur of auburn hair and bright colors runs down the stairs before the sixty pounds of my eight-year-old niece lands in my arms.

"Are you straightening up for Aunt Ava?" Scarlett stage whispers in my ear, as I walk toward the house. Heat creeps up my neck. "She was fixing herself for you, too. Make sure you tell her how pretty she looks, okay?"

A soft chuckle escapes, and she turns and places a hand on each cheek and pins me

with her I-mean-business-stare.

“I’m serious!” She chastises. I just can’t with her! Her following words, however, nearly have me tripping. “If you want the two of you to be real, you need to be extra nice to her. Show her you appreciate her.”

“Red, me and Aunt Ava are pretending—” A small hand covers my mouth and squeezes my lips together. I can’t stop my eyebrows from shooting to my hairline.

“Why do you insist on lying to me?” She says, her nose pushed up against mine. God help the man who falls in love with this girl; they’re going to have their hands full. “Just. Be. Nice.”

“Yes, ma-am,” I mumble through my squished-together lips and give a two-finger salute.

A massive grin splits her face, and I chuckle. Kissing her on the cheek, I put her down in front of the steps. The four-foot tyrant looks up at me and points a finger. “Tell her she looks pretty.”

I dutifully nod and follow her up the steps into the house.

“Uncle Dunky is here for you, Aunt Ava!” I catch David’s grin as he picks up his coffee and takes a sip.

“Your daughter is a slave driver,” I whisper to my brother, who shakes his head and snickers.

“To be honest, I’m a bit terrified of what she’s going to be like as a teenager,” he whispers behind his hand, keeping an eye on the third grader attempting to micromanage our lives. “Scarlett, come back to the table and finish your breakfast.

We need to leave for school soon!”

Feet scramble across the floor as Scarlett runs to the table and plops back into her seat, quickly scooping up her eggs and chewing. The glint in her eyes and the smirk on her face actually has my stomach swirling.

Swallowing hard, I sit down and pour myself a cup of coffee. Lifting the cup to my lips, Ava walks into the room. My hand stops mid-air, and my open mouth freezes.

My eyes land on brown boots that stop at the knee and travel up the fitted jeans covered by a loose button-down in powder blue. They continue their way up to wavy blonde hair flowing around her shoulders. A tiny smile lines glossy lips. When my gaze finally meets hers, I find them sparkling at me, causing my heart to race.

Ava doesn't look pretty as my niece told me; she's breathtaking .

I feel the corner of my lip lift just as Scarlett clears her throat and says not so subtly. “Tell her she looks pretty.”

Ava's giggle carries across the room just as David blows out his coffee, and I feel my face heating.

“You're looking pretty this morning.” I glance over in Scarlett's direction to see her beaming at me.

I lift my coffee cup to my mouth and take a sip only to nearly spit it out when Scarlett stage whispers, “Tell him he looks handsome.”

“Scarlett Ava James!” David scolds his daughter.

“What?” she asks innocently, rapidly blinking her eyes at him. Ava and I laugh.

“Doesn’t Aunt Ava look pretty? And Uncle Duncan handsome?”

“Are you done with your breakfast?” David asks, trying to be firm but his eyes are dancing. She nods, and he points to her backpack. “Then let’s get you off to school. Say goodbye to your Aunt and Uncle.”

I watch as Scarlett obediently follows her dad’s orders and heads over to Ava, giving her a hug and a kiss. When she makes her way over to me, a grin spreads wide across her face, she kisses my cheek and lets me know she’ll be watching the game later.

David holds the door open and right before Scarlett scoots out, she turns around and looks back and forth between Ava and me. “I love you.”

“Love you too, Red.”

“I love you too, Scarlett,” Ava echoes. “See you when you get home from school.”

The door closes, and we hear David lecturing his daughter on meddling as they get into the car. Laughter fills the house at how our niece just played the room and a bit of pity at the handful David has to deal with.

“She reminds me of Fiona more and more every day,” Ava’s eyes have a wistful look, and a reflective smile crosses her lips. “She was always meddling.”

“She reminds me of you.” Ava’s blue eyes widen and slide over to mine, a question in them. “You were always larger than life.”

Her eyes soften and she takes a slow breath, glancing over my shoulder. “I never felt like it. I always second-guessed myself.”

“I know you did, but that’s not what everyone saw,” I say, looking down at the cup in

my hand. The openness on her face and the flicker of hesitation in her eyes has me wanting to scoop her up in my arms and hold her close. Needing to get my mind off her warm body close to mine, I change the subject and sweep my hand over the table. “Do you want anything to eat before we head out?”

I watch her gaze skate across the table. “I’m good. I finished eating before you got here. Scarlett was the one who was a flurry of movement and couldn’t focus on breakfast.”

I nod then push out of my chair and reach into my pocket for the car keys. Holding them out to Ava, she looks at me with a question. “You’re driving.”

“We can take my car,” she responds, with narrowed eyes and a head tilt. But takes the keys when I place them in her hand.

“No, we can’t,” I shake my head and head out of the house. “First, your car is way too small. And second, my luggage is in my car.”

“Okay, but you can drive,” she says from behind me as she tries to give me the keys back.

“Ava, you’re going to need to drive home, and I want to make sure you feel comfortable doing it when I’m not with you.”

“Who’s going to pick you up when you get back?” Standing in front of the passenger side, I wait for her to unlock the door. Instead, she just stands by the front of the SUV, staring at me with confusion written all over her face.

“One of my teammates will bring me here, or David will come and get me.” Glancing in her direction, I see her still standing with her hand out. Moving back to her, I place my hands on her shoulders and say gruffly. “My girlfriend would drive my car, Ava.

It's not that big of a deal."

As if those words snap her out of her trance, she giggles. "You're right. Sorry. I know I'm acting weird."

I give her a gentle squeeze and watch her walk toward the driver's side. When she puts her hand on the handle, nothing happens.

"You have to unlock it first," I tease; the corner of my lips lifts as a tinge of pink covers her cheeks. She hits the button and then opens the door. Sliding in next to her, I watch her and a grin crosses my lips. "Now do you see why I wanted you to drive?"

"Because you wanted to laugh at me?" At this response, my shoulders relax, and a laugh pushes past my lips. "I like my old stick-the-key-in-the-ignition-and-turn-to-start-the-engine car."

"Not surprised; it usually takes the older folks longer to get on board with technology." She gasps and smacks my arm, causing my grin to spread. "Step on the brakes and then push the start button."

Her glare has me chuckling, but then she does as I say, and the engine roars to life.

"Welcome to the twenty-first century," I say, adjusting the station from a sports talk show to one of the 80's stations.

"Well, aren't you just the comedian this morning?" She glares at me but her eyes are dancing. "Anything else you want to tell me before we head to the arena?"

Pressing my lips together, I turn my face forward. "Adjust the seat and mirrors before putting the car in reverse."

“Duncan!” She yells, just as she pushes her arm out to shove me. My reflexes kick in, and I gently catch her hand to stop the forward movement.

Her breath catches at the contact and my eyes drop to her lips. My heart starts hammering against my ribcage, and I swallow hard.

“We should start heading over to the arena.” My voice comes out huskier than I intended, and I begrudgingly let go of her wrist. “We don’t want to be late for the press conference.”

“Right,” she says softly, dragging her eyes from mine and looking behind her as she shifts into reverse. Keeping my eyes on her profile, I watch her as she backs out of the driveway. “Are you going to be staring at me the entire trip?”

“Sorry.” I let my eyes linger for a second longer before turning and facing the street, my lips lifting at the corner. “Just making sure you know what you’re doing.”

“I’ve been driving a lot longer than you, if I recall,” she scoffs, and I snort. She whips her head at me. “What? I have.”

“I was in the car with you when you were learning how to drive, remember? I’m still traumatized.” Her laughter fills the car as we both recall the first time Ava was behind the wheel. She ran over the curb when learning to parallel park, and instead of stepping on the brake, she hit the gas. “I thought we were going to die.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer driving?” She points to the steering wheel as we stop at a red light before hopping onto the highway. I shake my head but dramatically double-check my seatbelt.

We laugh together before falling into a comfortable ride filled with easy conversation.

A lazy grin sits on my lips as the feeling of sliding into an old t-shirt comes over me. For the first time in a long time, I let myself enjoy being around Ava.

My heart has always belonged to the woman next to me. There's no point in trying to pretend differently when I'm supposed to be acting like we're in love. Maybe Scarlett has a point, and the key to winning Ava over is letting her know I appreciate all of her.

Chapter Eighteen

Ava

As soon as we walk into the arena, Duncan's Wolverines' PR rep, Stacy, and his agent, Finn, greet us. Stacy immediately starts informing us where we'll be going and the estimated length of the press conference, but I barely register any of it with my heart pounding in my ears.

This isn't my first press conference; I've done hundreds. It doesn't make sense why I'm so nervous, yet I can't stop fidgeting.

A warm hand wraps around mine, and I glance up to find Duncan watching me with a knowing look. The one that sees through the front I'm putting on for the rest of the world, and my stomach swoops.

Giving him a relieved, shaky smile, he twines his fingers with mine. Looking down at our entwined hands, I blow out a breath, letting his calmness ground me.

"Thank you," I mouth to Duncan, only to have him give me a nod.

"Can I get you anything, Ava?" Stacy asks as we stop in a room next to where the press conference will be.

"Water would be great," I say, working to give her my everything-is-fine-smile. Duncan gives my hand a squeeze, and another layer of tension slides from my body.

Having him by my side and knowing how private he keeps his life is mind-blowing. In the past, when I was curious about what was happening with Duncan, it was nearly impossible for me to find out anything unless I asked David or Fiona. So for him to be here now, opening his private life to the press, for me, is humbling.

“Of course. If you’d like to sit, feel free to make yourself comfortable.” Stacy points toward a couch to the left of us, and I nod. The only place I want to be right now is next to the man beside me, and I have no intention of moving away from him.

“Hey, Ava,” Finn says, reaching his hand out to me, an easy smile spreading across his face. “I’m Finn Mitchell. It’s nice to meet you finally.”

Regretfully letting go of Duncan’s hand I reach out and shake Finn’s. Narrowing my eyes at him, I tease. “So you’re the one my agent’s been colluding with.”

“Guilty as charged. Though Caro wasn’t that hard to convince.” He grins and winks at me.

“Caro, huh?” Beside me, I feel Duncan before I see him, and he gently places a hand on my lower back. The warmth from his nearness moves through me, cutting a chill I didn’t know I had. “Your idea is right up her alley. I’m just glad it wasn’t as crazy as some of the other ideas she’s had in the past.”

“It’s right up Finn’s alley, too, apparently,” Duncan grumbles. But when I look up at him, I see a glint in his eyes. The corner of my lip lifts, and my heart expands at how handsome he is. When his gaze slides to mine, my breath catches in my throat. “He’s made two successful matches.”

“Two very successful matches,” Finn jokes. He then looks back and forth between us, his eyes dancing. “Can I add a third to my record?”

“Are you looking to change your profession?” Duncan needles Finn while keeping his eyes on me.

A nervous giggle falls from my lips, and Duncan’s gaze lingers on my face for a moment longer before shifting back to Finn.

“Not at all,” Finn says, slapping Duncan on the shoulder and laughing. “I love working with athletes. And as long as they’re willing to let me ‘help’ them out of sticky situations, there’s no need.”

A gleam of humor lights his eyes just as a look passes between the two of them that I can’t decipher.

“Duncan, can I talk to you for a minute?” Finn asks, nodding his head away from us. “Ava, I promise to have him back to you quickly.”

“Sure,” Duncan responds. He then leans in and whispers. His breath on my skin sends tiny tingles to my toes. “I’ll be right back.”

“Ava, here’s your water,” Stacy says, just as Duncan walks away with Finn. Handing me the bottle, she calls out. “Duncan, they’re ready for the two of you.”

Duncan glances at Stacy and nods, letting her know he heard her, while Finn continues with whatever he says.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but I’m a huge fan of yours,” Stacy raves. “Web of Love is my all-time favorite movie.”

“It was a really fun movie to make,” I smile and glance at Duncan, wondering if I would be here today if it weren’t for Nathan and his jealousy.

My mind wanders to how Duncan feels about being here. I've been afraid to ask. Does he regret agreeing to help me?

"You know, these last few weeks are the first times that any of us have seen Duncan with a smile." She nods at him and Finn. "He's a phenomenal hockey player and has a great heart. But trying to get a smile out of him is like trying to pull teeth. Literally."

A small smile tugs at my lips as I watch Duncan talking to Finn. Duncan glances over his shoulder and meets my gaze. The tug becomes a full-blown grin, and I watch his eyes soften, sending a wave of emotion through me.

"It's obvious to everyone that you make him happy," Stacy adds.

"The feeling is mutual." Duncan puts his hand on Finn's shoulder and then heads our way.

"Shall we get this over with?" Duncan asks, looking first at me and then Stacy. Stacy starts off toward the door and just when I start to follow, Duncan places his hand on my arm, halting me. "How are you feeling?"

I shrug one shoulder. "It's not my first rodeo. I'm sure it will be fine."

He keeps his hand on my arm and pins me with his gaze before giving me a slight nod. "Let's do this."

Five minutes later, we're sitting at a table in front of a room full of reporters. Stacy made it clear that everyone is free to ask whatever they want but to ensure they keep it respectful.

An arm reaches over my shoulder, and I see a new bottle of water. "Thank you," I

say, grabbing it with trembling hands and sipping. Keeping it in front of me, I play with the label.

Multiple people are calling my name, but I point to the younger man sitting in the front row with the glasses.

“Ava, did you come to Maple Ridge because of Duncan?”

Here we go.

Swallowing hard, I shake my head. “I was coming to visit my brother-in-law, David, and my niece, Scarlett. I honestly forgot Duncan had been traded to the Wolverines. I’m not that big of a hockey fan.”

I shrug and smile sheepishly, placing my hand on Duncan’s arm. “Sorry, Duncan.”

The room erupts into laughter, and from the corner of my eye, I see Duncan press his lips together.

The yelling starts again, and I point to a woman in the back wearing a blue shirt with her brown hair pulled into a high ponytail. Holding her phone in front of her, she asks. “Can you tell us why you ended things with Nathan Vaughn, Ava?”

I pull in a big breath and slowly let it out. “Most of the time, relationships end because they’ve run their course or served their usefulness. I guess the same could be said for me and Nathan.”

“Usefulness?” She questions. “Can you explain what you mean by that?”

“That came out wrong.” I pause and look down at the water bottle in my hands. “I meant more like a season. All seasons come to an end. Our season came to an end.”

“What about Nathan’s claims that you cheated on him?” Someone else yells out.

“Those are just rumors. My dad’s infidelity destroyed my parents’ relationship and left our family in ruins when I was younger.” My heart is ramming against my ribcage. This isn’t something I usually talk about, and I’m left feeling completely exposed. Duncan slides his hand on my back and gently rubs. The simple touch helps me to remember that I didn’t do anything wrong and gives me the strength to continue. “Knowing the pain that it causes firsthand, I would never hurt someone I cared about like that.”

“He’s been pretty adamant that you cheated on him.” Someone from the middle of the group yells.

“He has,” I say simply. “But that’s not the case, as my co-stars have confirmed. I’m sorry he’s hurt by the way things ended. But they didn’t end because I cheated on him.”

“Duncan!” Someone from the back calls out. “What about Nathan’s claims that the two of you were seeing each other before Ava came to town?”

“As Ava said, just a rumor.” Duncan turns to me and lets his eyes roam over my face. The unexpected heat in his gaze turns my knees to jelly. “We haven’t talked or seen each other in years. Especially with me being on the East Coast through the end of last season. And with her dating Nathan.”

“If that’s the case, how did the two of you get together so fast?” A voice from the back asks. At this point I’m no longer paying attention to the faces in the crowd. I can’t drag my eyes from Duncan.

“Us getting together is as big of a surprise for me as it was for all of you.” He gives me a crooked grin, and my heart jumps. “Maybe more so since I’ve had a crush on

her since we were kids, but she refused to give me the time of day.”

He then leans over, places his lips on my cheek, grabs my hand, and kisses my palm. Heat creeps up my cheeks, and my eyebrows shoot up as suddenly the world knows that Duncan has always had a thing for me.

What is he doing? But more importantly, is he trying to kill me in front of everyone?

And just like that, the press conference has gone in a completely different direction, with Duncan and his ‘crush’ being the main focus.

Chapter Nineteen

Duncan

Did I just admit out loud that I've always had a thing for Ava?

If the look on Ava's face is any indication, I did indeed do that. The next question thrown out confirms it.

"Are you telling us you've always been in love with Ava?" Asks the woman in the blue shirt.

Swallowing hard, I look out over the crowd of people waiting for my response. I glance at Finn and see him holding up three fingers, a smirk on his face.

Last, I turn my head in Ava's direction, and my heart starts to pound against my chest so hard I swear it's going to bust through my ribcage. It feels like I just ate a wad of cotton, and words that were easily flowing are now stuck in my throat.

Ava's eyes hold questions I'm not ready to answer for myself, let alone for her, even if all the answers are probably yes.

"It's safe to say there's always been a soft spot in my heart for her," I hedge. Avoiding a direct confirmation of where my feelings for Ava stand. "Seeing her again brought them to the forefront."

Ava's hand shifts in mine, and I realize I'm still holding it. Staring at our hands, I feel

tiny prickles on my face. Lifting my gaze to hers, I find a host of emotions swirling, leaving me unable to form a cohesive thought.

“Sometimes it’s all about the timing,” Ava says softly, breaking through my haze. Then, turning to the people in front of us, she shrugs. “At least that’s what my niece keeps telling me.”

The room breaks out in laughter for the second time today, and the corner of my lip lifts.

“She’s a niece to both of you, right?” Asks a man in the back with his hair in a man bun and wearing a t-shirt that may say Tea Time , but I can’t be positive from this distance. “Your brother and her sister were married to each other?”

“Yes,” Ava and I say together.

“Scarlett is also our goddaughter,” Ava offers, which sends out a flurry of questions about David and Fiona.

“Last question,” Stacy yells out before pointing to a woman with red hair in the front row. “The team has to get on the road so they don’t miss their flight.”

“Duncan, your brother was married to Ava’s twin sister, Fiona?” I nod again, not sure which direction this question is going. “Does it feel weird that the two of you are dating now?”

I stare at him for a second with narrowed eyes, shifting in my seat.

Is it weird that I’m dating my brother’s dead wife’s sister? Maybe if I wasn’t in love with her before David and Fiona got together.

“I’ve honestly never looked at it like that. Ava was David’s best friend before he and Fiona were a couple.” Glancing over at Ava, I see her eyes watching me intently. “Not to mention that I was the younger brother who was always tagging along.”

The room is silent, waiting for the rest of my answer. While I try to process all the thoughts moving through my head, I hear Ava’s voice.

“I think what Duncan is trying to say is there’s always been a connection between the two of us, but the difference in our ages, the fact that his brother is my best friend, who then became my brother-in-law, made things...unconventional.”

“One more question?” A person raising her hand in the middle asks Stacy.

“Last one,” She says firmly. “And make it quick.”

“When you say ‘connection’, Ava, what do you mean?”

I turn to Ava and notice her biting the inside of her lip and running her thumb over the back of her fingers—a sure sign she’s uncomfortable with this question. As much as I want to comfort her, I can’t because I am just as curious about what she meant.

I’ve always felt that there was a connection between us. I just never dared to hope she did, too. Especially after her reaction to my feelings for her.

She lifts a shoulder and glances at me before quickly looking back at the person who asked the question. “Duncan and I have always understood each other. There were moments when he seemed to know me better than any other person. Even my twin sister at times. I don’t know how else to describe it other than to say ‘connection’.”

People start calling Ava’s name, but Stacy cuts them off, letting everyone know that that was indeed the last question.

“Is that true?” I ask, holding my breath. My gaze pins hers as I wait for the answer.

A vulnerability crosses over her face, and my heart clenches. She blows out a breath, nodding her head, and softly says, “Yes.”

A rush of emotion runs through my body from this information. I reach out a hand to take hers just as Finn slaps me on the back.

“I think that went well! You both did a great job getting the focus away from the accusations made by Nathan.” His grin is mischievous, and he laughs. “But I think you made them more curious about your history.”

“As long as it’s helpful and not hurtful to the Wolverines, I’m okay with that,” Ava responds, before throwing a thumb over her shoulder. “I’m gonna head to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

My eyes follow her as she asks Stacy where she can find the restroom. She glances in my direction and gives me a small smile, causing my pulse to quicken.

Is it possible that Ava feels what I feel? Has always felt it?

My stomach drops with a thud as doubt creeps in. Yes, it’s possible , but is it likely? The past rolls through my memory like a flash of images making up a movie. The moments we’ve shared. The ease with which we’ve always gotten along.

“You two keep looking at each other like that, and I will have an undefeated record,” Finn says for my ears only.

“Finn, she’s an actress,” I mumble. “A good one.”

“But you’re not. It’s obvious to anyone watching you that you’re in love with her,” he

says, looking down at his phone and scrolling and placing an image in my line of vision. I see a photo of me and Ava. How do they get these up so fast? “Look at her expression. It’s not just you, Duncan.”

I let my eyes move over Ava’s face. What Finn says isn’t wrong. There’s a softness in her expression while watching me answer one of the many questions sent my way. The way her lips are curved up and a gleam in her eyes. My heart tugs, and hope washes through me.

How do I dismiss what I see?

“Exactly,” Finn says, taking back his phone. “No one is that good at pretending, especially without a script.”

I stare at him with an open mouth, no words forming to contradict what he’s saying or what I saw in the photo of the two of us.

Memories of our kiss after the game flood me. The feel of her pulled against me, my lips on hers, and how she responded to me. My heart jumps like a dead battery receiving a charge, and hope that I had buried years ago resurfaces.

At that exact moment, I’m surrounded by sandalwood, and a warm hand grabs mine. When I look down, I find blue eyes shining up at me. “So what’s the normal routine for the team leaving?”

“I have to run.” Finn grins, his eyes moving between me and Ava. “Duncan, come home with the win. Ava, I will talk to you soon, I’m sure.”

“Bye, Finn.” Ava gives him a smile just as Finn turns around and walks out. She brings her attention back toward me, wearing a shy expression. “What do girlfriends usually do? I know that press conferences aren’t normal, but what about players being

dropped off by their significant others?”

I fight the smile my cheeks are working to make happen and shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve never paid attention to them. I’m not even sure if wives or girlfriends drop any of my teammates off.”

“Oh. Okay, ” she says, looking around. The sparkle in her eyes dimming a bit. “I guess I can just head out and let you do whatever you do before a game.”

“I’ll walk you to the car since I need to grab my bags.”

“You didn’t grab them when we came in?” She asks, with a tilted head and narrowed eyes.

“I forgot.” I start walking toward the parking lot, her hand still in mine. “But I don’t think I’d let you walk out alone anyway. Our lot is secure, but I want to personally make sure you get in the car safely.”

“Duncan, you don’t have to; I’ll be fine.” She tries to stop me from walking, but I nudge her forward.

“I know. I want to.”

A soft ‘oh’ falls from her lips as she falls in step next to me. She places her other hand on my forearm, and I feel the warmth of her body as she leans into me. My heart skips, answering a question that I’ve silently been asking.

Ava opens the car and slides into the driver’s seat. “Can you pop the trunk for me?”

A beep sounds as the tailgate opens, but instead of walking to the back, I gently close the car door. I’m about to walk away but an idea crosses my mind. I signal her to roll

down the window.

“Did you forget something?” She asks, looking over at the passenger seat. “I don’t see anything here.”

When she meets my gaze, her brows are pulled down, and I can’t help the smirk that slides across my lips.

“I didn’t forget anything, but there’s something I’ve been thinking about.” Her head tilts, and the smirk turns into a grin. My heart is pounding so loud I wonder if she can hear it. Leaning my arm against the top of the car, I say, “I think if any of the guys had their girl drop them off, they would definitely kiss goodbye.”

“Oh?” Her blue eyes pop open, and the corner of her lip lifts slightly. “They would?”

“I think so,” I say as I move my arms to rest on the open window. “What do you think?”

A sparkle enters her eyes just as her gaze drops to my lips. “I think you’re onto something there.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement,” I whisper, leaning in closer before suddenly pulling away to a shocked expression on Ava’s face. “Wait. Get out of the car.”

“Get out?” She asks as I open the door and help her out of the front seat.

Before her feet hit the ground, I snake an arm around her waist and slide a hand behind her head. A gasp escapes her just as I trap her lips under mine.

The feel of her arms sliding around my neck, her body pressed flush against mine, leaves me wondering why I wasn’t letting myself indulge more in this part of our

fake relationship.

Kissing Ava is all I want to do. Forever.

Then I remember the reason...another heartbreak.

It's too late to worry about that since my heart is, and always has been, hers.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Tea Time

Hey Tea Lovers.

One of our very own was at the press conference held by the Wolverines today, and we officially have more questions than answers.

First, let's put to rest the idea that Ava Norris cheated on Nathan Vaughn.

Not only do her co-stars deny it happened, but the infidelity that destroyed Ava's family as a teenager makes it clear she would never cheat on someone she cared about.

I can't help but wonder about Nathan's motives with all this bad press and if he knew Ava at all.

As for the Wolverines' goalie, it's plain to anyone looking at him that he is, and always has been, in love with the lovely Ava Norris.

The new question: has she felt the same?

If she hadn't been smitten before, she might be now if this picture of them kissing goodbye before he headed to North Carolina says anything.

I'm sure their matchmaking niece will be very happy! in love emoji

Till Next Time, Chamie

Chapter Twenty

Ava

A goofy grin lingers on my face hours after leaving Duncan at the arena. The burst of color in amber, orange, and red from leaves falling on the Acadia only enhances it as I head to pick Scarlett up from school.

I'm not sure the last time I've had butterflies about someone or something. Maybe when Nathan and I first started dating? I mean, how could I not have been excited about Nathan? He's Nathan Vaughn.

But who he is versus who I thought he was are two different people.

This experience is altogether different. It's Duncan. There's no guessing about who he is; I've known him more than half my life.

"Duncan," I say, awe and disbelief filling my voice.

Jessie's Girl sings out over the speakers, and I look to see Caroline calling for what has to be the hundredth time today. I know she wants to talk about the press conference and Nathan's reaction, but for just this moment, I want to revel in this giddy feeling I'm experiencing.

Hitting the decline button, I send a quick text.

Me: I'm picking up Scarlett from school. I'll call you later.

Caroline: Fine. I guess I'll just have to wait to hear about that kiss.

Warmth moves through me as I think about the kiss she's referencing. That kind of kiss is the sort of thing every girl dreams of, and movies do their best to convey.

Wait! How does she know about the kiss?

Another text pops up with a link to Tea Time. I blow out a deep breath and groan, running my hand through my hair, so much for not having eyes on me while I'm here.

Caroline: I must say for a local gossip column Tea Time is on the ball. Caroline: Girl!!! Either both of you are really good at acting or... Caroline: Call me as soon as you get home!!

For a moment, my stomach thuds at the thought of Nathan's reaction to the photos, only to find I don't care what he does. I did nothing wrong.

I ended a relationship that wasn't working, and because he's acting like a spoiled child, I know I made the right decision.

He can throw whatever he wants at me. The only thing I'm going to focus on is what Duncan thinks and feels about whatever is happening between us.

Turning onto Scarlett's elementary school street, I'm surprised to see a line of cars waiting. This is the first time I've picked her up, and the scene unfolding before me was not what I had expected.

Pulling up behind the last car, I park. Killing the engine, I leave and walk over to the front of the building, where I see others waiting. Immediately I notice everyone glancing at me and then do a double take. Pretty normal response and nothing new to me, just part of being a celebrity.

However, their reaction is a bit different from the norm.

Usually, people look at me, smile, and talk behind their hands or come up and ask for a selfie. Today, they're just talking, looking at their phones, and then returning to me.

Heat creeps up my face as I remember the Tea Time link Caroline sent me, and I pull the sweater I'm wearing closer, wrapping my arms around my waist. Whirling away from everyone, I head back to the car and grab my phone.

Looking up Caroline's text, I click on the link to Tea Time, where I find multiple photos of Duncan pulling me out of the car, wrapping me up in his arms, and kissing me.

My breath catches as each image has me reliving every moment. One picture shows Duncan looking at me. I enlarge it so I can see his expression. The smirk he's wearing is so rare that I struggle to drag my eyes from it. Running my fingers over his face in the picture, my heart skips across my chest.

This man is so unbearably handsome he literally takes my breath away.

A chuckle falls from my lips, and I shake my head. For the first time, I feel like one of the characters I play in my movies. This lightness filling me can't be real life, can it?

The ringing of the bell pulls me out of my thoughts and back to the sidewalk filled with parents waiting for their children.

The majority of them are watching me. Intently.

Loud, excited voices take the focus off of me as kids appear through the doors.

“Aunt Ava,” Scarlett yells, running over to me. “How did the press conference go?”

“How do you know about the press conference?” I take her hand. A small grin lines my lips, and my brows pull together. “I thought you were in bed when your dad and I talked about it?”

“When are you going to learn that I know everything going on,” she says, smiling as she skips. Abruptly, she stops and looks around. “Where’s your car?”

“Oh, I have Uncle Duncan’s today. We took his car this morning. It’s right over there.” I point to the Acadia parked about fifty feet in front of us.

“Uncle Dunky let you drive his car?” Is that surprise and awe in her voice? “He never lets anyone drive his car.”

I open the passenger side door and hold my hand out for her backpack. She hands it to me and climbs in the passenger seat. Moving to the rear passenger side door, I pull the handle and toss her backpack in.

Sliding into the driver’s side seat, I pull my seat belt on.

“Buckle up,” I tell Scarlett as she slides a booster seat under her.

Firing up the engine, I glance outside again to see the large group of parents still there, talking animatedly while glancing at us. Leaning on the steering wheel, I sigh.

“They’re talking about you and Uncle Dunky,” Scarlett says without looking up. “It’s what they’ve been talking about since the news that the two of you are dating was announced.”

“Always? Like this?” I ask, nodding in their direction.

“Not usually, but then you don’t normally pick me up. It wasn’t this bad with Uncle Dunky last week either.” Scarlett mulls their reaction over before asking, hopefully, “Did you kiss him?”

“Scarlett,” I scoff, feeling my face heat up. “You know that even if we did kiss, it’s just pretend, right?”

“If it’s pretend, why are you blushing?” My eyebrows shoot up, and my mouth falls open. “And why are you making sure that you look pretty? Today, you took forever to get ready. Was that just pretend?”

Looking at my niece wearing a stern expression, with her hazel eyes narrowed and arms crossed over her chest, I can’t help but chuckle at her. The maturity level of this child is that of a thirty-year-old.

“Well?” She insists.

Messing her hair with my hand, her eyes pop, and she slaps my hand away. “You’ll just have to leave that to the adults for now.” I chuckle.

Putting the car in drive, I pull away from the school and head back to the house.

“Do you like him?” She pushes.

“Uncle Duncan? Of course, I like him.” I smile and do my best to act like I don’t know what ‘like’ she’s talking about. “What’s not to like about him? He’s a good guy.”

“Aunt Ava, I’m being serious!” She yells at me.

“So am I.” I grin, laughing at her annoyed expression.

“Then answer me,” she taunts. “Do you like Uncle Duncan...enough to kiss him? For real?”

Glancing over at Scarlett, I see how much this means to her. What I don't fully understand is why.

“Scarlett, honey, can you tell me why this is important to you?” She bites her lip, looks out the window, and turns away from me.

This is not a side of Scarlett I see very often. She rarely holds back what she's thinking. Despite being eight, she has very strong opinions that she never hesitates to share. Staying quiet, I wait for her to tell me what's on her mind.

Just as we pull into the driveway, I feel her eyes on me. I kill the engine and turn my body toward her.

“You and Uncle Dunky are my favorite people,” she says softly.

“Aww. You know you're my favorite person, too, right?” She nods and wraps her arms around my neck. My heart melts.

“It would make me happy if the two of you were a couple for real,” she says against my ear. My throat gets tight and the back of my eyes burn. “Plus, you make Uncle Dunky happy.”

Her words wrap me in warm tendrils of possibility. “What makes you think that?”

“The way he looks at you. It's how Daddy would look at Mommy,” she whispers, and my breath hitches at her words. Kissing me on the cheek, she moves to get out of the car. She grabs her backpack from the backseat and hesitates before saying something that makes my heart race. “And you look at him like Mommy looked at Daddy.”

Closing the door, she heads up the stairs, leaving me spinning with the fact that she just told me Duncan and I look at each other like we're in love.

My heart pounds like a sledgehammer against my chest, and I can't help but wonder if we kiss that way.

Chapter Twenty-One

Duncan

My phone buzzes just as I'm walking to the team bus waiting in the hotel parking lot. Our three-game series against the Carolina Hurricanes was disappointing, and we're heading home with one win.

When I look down and see Finn's name on my screen, my stomach sinks. I haven't talked to Ava today, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't longing to hear her voice.

Since the kiss, we've texted and made a brief phone call, which I think my matchmaking niece initiated. Ava's voice was pensive and Scarlett did the majority of the talking until David had her get ready for bed.

Overall our conversations consisted of updates on the latest Nathan news, which just re-confirmed that the overrated actor deserves a good punch in the face. I regret not being the one to give it to him.

We did not, however, talk about The Kiss which left me hungry for more. More of Ava. Seeing her more, talking to her more, more of her in every way possible. Now, here I'm left questioning if she felt the earth move, too.

I did my best to push all of those feelings in the back of my mind and focus on my job. But with Tea Time spotlighting us for the world to see and my teammates bringing 'The Kiss' up every chance they got, it was nearly impossible.

The Ava genie is out of the bottle, and there's nothing I can do about it. More importantly, I'm pretty sure I don't want to put her back in.

"You gonna get that, Denier? It could be your girlfriend," Wallace taunts. "You know the one I'm gonna sweep off her feet..."

Scowling, I grunt, generating a laugh from him. The two of us have come to an understanding. Levi understands that Ava is completely off-limits, and I understand that him ribbing me about stealing her is not going to stop.

My relationship with him is pretty hate/hate, but we're co-existing. I'm realizing that most of what he says is all about getting a reaction. And my reaction gives him extreme enjoyment. Learning to keep that reaction low-key where Ava is concerned is a work in progress.

Just like everything concerning Ava right now.

"Hey, Finn," I mumble, rubbing my hand up and down my face. "What's up?"

"How's my favorite goalie today?" I grumble something unintelligible at his happy tone, and his laughter rings through the phone. "That good, huh?"

"I'm looking forward to getting home and away from people. I need some serious R it's life off the ice, too. "The usual. I may need some new ideas."

"Have you talked to Ava?" I freeze. The question hangs in the air. The feel of her lips under mine comes back to me full force, sending shivers through me. "If the pictures are any indication, you need to have a conversation about feelings."

"A little bit here and there over the last few days." I lean my forehead against the bus window, staring at the cars in the parking lot. "She gave me the latest update with

what's happening in the press. Do I need to be worried about her safety?"

What I've heard from both Ava and my teammates, who apparently love gossip, is that Nathan is looking more desperate and foolish by the day. The foolishness isn't a surprise, but the desperation concerns me.

"Caro is keeping a close eye on the situation. According to her, Nathan's team is working earnestly to rein him in." Coach Stone and Coach Nolan walk onto the bus and take their seats, and we start our journey to the airport. "His ego is having a hard time letting go. With a movie premiere coming next week, let's see what he does. And you evaded my question about talking to Ava..."

Blowing out a sigh, I don't say anything right away. The fear that grips me when I think of discussing what's happening with Ava leaves me speechless. I'm not ready to open myself to that exchange again...yet. "I haven't, at least not about that."

"I think I found your problem. You're distracted," Finn says triumphantly, like he's solved all the world's problems.

"You think?" I grouse. Of course, I'm distracted. That's obvious to me and everyone around me. What's not obvious is what I can do to pull myself together that doesn't include talking to Ava about how I'm feeling.

A call comes through, and I glance at the screen to see Ava's name. My heart jumps and my grip tightens on the phone before I decline the call.

"Sarcasm isn't going to help you know," Finn quips. "You need to figure it out, and soon. Maybe talk to David and see how he got his head together after Fiona passed. He had a hard time for a little bit there, too."

David was a mess after Fi passed and it definitely impacted how he played. But then

he worked through it. I know our situations aren't the same, but the effect is. At this point, I need help getting my head together, and David is the perfect person for me to ask.

“That’s a good idea, Finn. I’ll reach out to him. Gotta go, we’re at the airport.”

“I’m here if you need me,” he squeezes in before I disconnect the call.

Right before getting out of my seat, I text Ava quickly, letting her know I’m getting on the plane and will get back to her in a bit. After hitting send, anticipation zips through me. Immediately, I slip my phone into my pocket and stand up.

I walk into the bus lane behind the Wolverines' physical therapist. Walking down the stairs and onto the tarmac, I feel a buzz and then another. The corner of my lip lifts, knowing it’s Ava. Without pulling my phone out I continue making my way to the plane.

When I’m finally on the plane and settled, I draw my phone out of my pocket. My heart is drumming through my body just seeing Ava’s name on the screen, but rather than opening her text, I send one to my brother.

Me: Hey. Will you be around to talk sometime this week?

David: I’ll have time Tuesday afternoon. Does that work?

Me: That works. Thanks.

David: Everything okay?

Me: You’ve been watching my games, right? What do you think? Me: Better yet, what does Scarlett think? palm to forehead emoji

David: laughing emoji I was wondering when you'd reach out. David: It's sooner than I thought. David: You can be a pretty stubborn guy.

I roll my eyes and shake my head. Look at him calling the kettle black. I'm not the one who sent everyone home after Fiona died because I'm 'I need to take care of everything by myself' stubborn. That was him. Mom couldn't even get him to see reason.

But rather than heading home, like David demanded, she booked a room at a bed and breakfast a town over until he called for help. Mom knew he would ask, but she also knew it needed to be when he was ready.

Grief is a strange animal.

Me: Takes one to know one.

David: Of course it does. We're related eye roll emoji David: I'm glad you asked Dunc. Hopefully I can help.

Me: Thanks. Me too.

A sense of relief washes over me at the realization I don't have to figure all of this out by myself. Sometimes, I forget I have people who support me. It's easy to become someone who believes you must handle everything yourself, especially when you're the person on your team who protects the goal.

I can't win or lose a game, but my position puts me in a place of being responsible for how much we win or lose. It's easy to place the game on my shoulders, even though I will never put any points on the board for my team.

Hopefully, my brother can help me. I need to get out of my emotions and get my head

back on straight so I can focus. I have to get this under control whether things work with Ava or not. Being able to compartmentalize is key to everything.

Maybe David can help me regarding Ava, too. I never told him how I felt, but I'm sure he knew because Fiona did.

Her rejection nearly broke me once, and the fear of it happening again is paralyzing me. Last time, I was able to push all my feelings down, which is why I'm in this position. Losing Ava devastated me, but I somehow recovered.

This time, I need to find a way to process my emotions. If this has shown me anything, it's that if you don't process feelings when they first show up...you will have to address them at some point.

I lean back against the seat just as the plane starts moving on the runway. Some guys are playing a card game, and I can hear them razzing each other with every turn. The lighthearted tones make it easy for me to focus on them and breathe.

There's no point in dwelling on what I can't control until I figure out how to address it because there's nothing I can do right now.

The puck is the other goalie's problem, and I'm just a spectator on the opposite end of the ice. Closing my eyes, I settle in for the plane ride home.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ava

A lopsided grin crosses my face, and goosebumps prickle my skin at the deep timbre of Duncan's voicemail. I leave a message asking if he still needs a ride home.

I've missed him these past few days, and having an excuse to see him wasn't something I wanted to pass up.

My phone dings, and my pulse races, seeing Duncan's name.

Duncan: Just getting on the plane. Will get back to you in a bit.

Reading his message twice, I assume the generic response likely means he didn't listen to my message but just wanted to acknowledge my call. I responded with a text letting him know the reason I called.

Me: Sounds good.

I pause a moment before typing the next message.

Me: Do you still need a ride home from the arena?

A rush of energy darts through me, and my heart races. Sliding my phone in the front pocket of my jeans, I run my hand through my hair and take a deep breath.

He probably already made arrangements for a ride home. Otherwise, he would've asked, right?

Maybe I shouldn't have been so forward. What if he didn't ask because he doesn't want to see me? Is it possible he hasn't been thinking about the last time we were together?

Does he regret kissing me? What if I'm making the kiss out to mean something more than it is? Is it possible for someone to kiss a person like that and not have it mean everything?

Blowing out a deep breath, I pull my bottom lip with my teeth. All of these unanswered questions leave me wishing I knew what Duncan was thinking. How he was feeling. About me.

What if the only one falling is me?

My heart sinks and thuds in my stomach. Rubbing my arms up and down, I work to get rid of the chill that runs through me at the thought of being rejected this time.

"Aunt Ava? Can you braid my hair?" Scarlett's arms wrap around my waist, hazel eyes smiling at me, and her chin resting on my stomach.

Grateful for the distraction, I run my hands over Scarlett's hair and grin at her. "Of course I can. What type of braid do you want?"

"Can you do a Dutch braid?" She asks, jumping up and down. "I like the way it looks."

"You'll take it out before you go to bed, right? That style usually gives me a headache if I sleep on it." She shakes her head so emphatically I can't help but

chuckle. “Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you if your head hurts tomorrow.”

“I’ll take it out before bed.” A frown mars her brow, but it’s immediately replaced with wide eyes as she leads me into the living room. Sitting on the couch, I see everything we need on the coffee table. “Will you be able to braid it again before school?”

“Of course, I can do that for you!” Kissing the top of her head, I pick up the brush lying in front of me, and start brushing out the knots. I separate a few pieces and start interlacing them in the opposite direction you would a French braid. “Something special going on at school tomorrow?”

Midway down Scarlett’s head, the braid is starting to take form and I realize that my usually talkative niece hasn’t answered me. I stop and move my face over her shoulder to look at her. The corner of my lips lift at her expression.

“So what’s his name?” I ask in a sing-song voice and watch her cheeks take on a tinge of pink.

“Whose name?” Scarlett skillfully evades. “I just want my hair braided.”

Chuckling at her response, I silently go back to braiding. A lesson that my mom taught us before life got crazy was that silence will catch the same number of bees as honey.

“I don’t have a crush on Steven,” she says timidly. “He just moved here, and I want to be nice to him.”

“Steven, huh?” I ask, a wide smile on my face. “Want to tell me about him?”

Listening to Scarlett excitedly disclose all about the new kid in class is adorable. Her

voice is filled with such enthusiasm. It's obvious that she's completely smitten, and I love it. "Does your dad know about Steven?"

At that exact moment, David walks into the house carrying a grocery bag. "Who's Steven?"

I can feel tension fill Scarlett's shoulders, and in that moment, I understand how hard it is for her not to have her mom around as all of these feelings about boys start to come up.

"Just a new person at Scarlett's school, right Scar?" I say in a way that lets her know I won't be the one telling her secret. "She was telling me about how he just moved to town."

"Oh? Well, that's cool." David heads into the kitchen, not grasping that his eight-year-old daughter has her first crush. "Scarlett, when you're done, will you help me with dinner? I got your favorite."

"Macaroni and cheese? Yes!" Tying off the braid with a rubber band, Scarlett bounces off the couch, turns and gives me a hug, and whispers in my ear. "Thank you, Aunt Ava."

Wrapping my arms around her and giving a squeeze, I say, "Of course, darling girl. Your secret, for as long as you want to keep it, is safe with me."

She kisses me on the cheek before running into the kitchen to help with dinner. While cleaning up the extra hair ties and brush, a ding sounds from my pocket. I pull my phone out to see Duncan's name. My heart starts hammering through my body. Swallowing hard, I open his text.

Duncan: Hey. Our flight is getting in pretty late. Davidson's gonna drop me off at

home.

My heart sinks, and the amount of disappointment that weighs me down has me feeling heavy.

Me: Oh, okay. Me: I know Scarlett will be disappointed. She was looking forward to seeing you tonight.

Scarlett will be disappointed she won't see him tonight, but I was talking about me. I'm disappointed.

Duncan: I'll miss seeing her too.

The corner of my lip lifts as I read his words, and just for a moment, I pretend he's saying he's missing seeing me.

Dropping my head in my palm, I shake my head and roll my eyes.

Girl, you've got it bad!

Me: I'll make sure she knows.

Duncan : Thanks. I'll stop by tomorrow after my run to grab my car.

Me: I'll be here with your key.

Duncan: Are you sure you still have my car? Duncan: My car doesn't have a key.

Me: Huh? What's that little thingamajig?

Duncan: rolling on the floor laughing emoji Duncan: Did you just say 'thingamajig'?!

A giggle escapes me at the thought of this grumpy, brooding man laughing hysterically because of me.

Me: Duncan James, are you laughing at me?

Duncan: I would never laugh at you Ava “thingamajig” Norris. Duncan: winking emoji Duncan: grinning squinting face

Me: Hey! pouting emoji Me: If not a key, then what is it called?

Duncan: A fob.

Me: A fob?

Duncan: Well technically it’s called a key fob.

Me: Wait! squinting emoji Me: Did you just make fun of me for calling your key fob a key?

My face splits with a wide grin, and I let out a chuckle. This is the silliest conversation, and I am loving every minute of it.

Duncan: Well technically I made fun of you for saying ‘thingamajig’.

I can’t argue with his logic, and a goofy grin takes hold of my face. My cheeks are getting sore from how big my smile is.

Me: Fine. I’ll have the fob for you when you get here.

Duncan: Thank you. I look forward to it.

I go back through our messages, a smirk still on my face. I love this playful side of Duncan. I didn't realize how much I missed this banter until seeing him again after all these years.

Another ding comes through.

Duncan: Are you busy tomorrow? Duncan: Scarlett and I will be baking dog treats for Saturday's Mile High Mutts Rescue fundraiser.

My breath hitches as I read his message. Even if I was busy, which I'm not, I would rearrange my schedule to spend time with him.

Duncan: It'd be nice if you could join us...

My heart stops and then sputters back to life. My mouth is dry and feels like I just swallowed a big wad of cotton.

Did Duncan just ask me to spend time with him?

The smile on my face does the impossible and grows even bigger.

Duncan: I understand if you're busy and can't, just thought it might be fun.

Me: I'm not busy. Me: I'd love to help. Me: And there is no way I'd miss seeing you in pink again. Me: wink emoji

Duncan: Well, I look pretty good in pink, even if I do say so myself...

I throw my head back and laugh. Pink isn't his color, but even I have to admit he looks good in that apron.

“Aunt Ava,” Scarlett calls from the kitchen. “Dinner is ready! Come and grab some plates to set the table.”

“I’ll be there in a second.”

Me: wink emoji Me: See you tomorrow. Me: Good night, Duncan.

Duncan: Good night, Ava. Duncan: “Thingamajig” grin emoji

Still grinning, I slide my phone back into my pocket and all but skip into the kitchen.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Duncan

The perfect fall day; cool air, and leaves rustling in the breeze have no effect on me as I get closer to David's house. My heart accelerates, and my breath gets shorter. And faster. Which is ridiculous since the whole purpose of me going for a run is to get my heart rate up. It's not like I took it easy before I circled back in this direction.

Apparently, my well-conditioned heart has a very different response to physical exercise versus its racing reaction at getting to see Ava. Inhaling the brisk air, I work to quiet the pounding in my ears.

Turning down David's street, I slow my pace to a walk. Meanwhile, the closer I get, the harder my heart pumps. The pounding is no longer just in my ears, but it's now making its way around my body like a herd of stampeding mustangs.

Running up the stairs to the house, I swipe my sleeve across my forehead, take a slow, deep breath, and then run my hand through my hair. I knock before opening the door and yelling out, "Hello."

"Hi, Duncan," Ava yells from the back of the house. "I'll be right there!"

Stopping in front of a mirror, I give myself a quick once-over. I attempt to tame the unkempt mess on my head. Heels click sharply against the floor and I quickly move into the kitchen. If Ava tells Scarlett I was caught being vain, I would never hear the end of it.

Reaching into the fridge, I grab a bottle of water and lean against the counter, doing my best to look relaxed and unaffected. At the sight of Ava, my hand freezes. The bottle hovers at my lips, unable to move now that these stampeding mustangs are in my chest.

Her hair is in a high ponytail, her face has little to no make-up, and she's wearing a loose sweatshirt and jeans. Taking a sip, I swallow past the lump in my throat. Everything about her is perfectly adorable.

"Your key." She lifts the fob and gives it a shake. The smile she throws my way has my cheeks lifting.

Reaching my hand out, she drops the fob in my palm. Her fingers brush mine, sending a trail of heat through my arm and causing my breath to hitch.

"You mean 'thingamajig,' right?" Smirking, I take a sip of water in an attempt to wash the cotton ball down.

"Ha. Ha. Ha." She narrows her eyes. "You're so very funny."

Unable to stop the laugh that bubbles up, I grin at her. "We both know I am definitely not funny."

"Duncan, do you not recognize sarcasm?" Her blue eyes dance, and she gives me a lopsided grin. My eyes linger on her mouth for a moment before lifting my gaze to hers. The intensity staring back at me leaves me momentarily stunned. Slightly breathless, she pushes out, "We all know you don't have a sense of humor."

Knowing I'm not the only one affected by this close proximity has my body humming. Letting my eyes roam over her face, I acknowledge that I'm walking on shaky ground. The air feels like it's being sucked from the room, making it difficult

to breathe.

A shiver runs through her, and she lifts her hands to her arms, rubbing up and down. “Cold?” I ask huskily, taking a step toward her, letting my emotions dictate what my body does. Right now, every part of me wants to be as close to her as I can get.

Her round eyes sparkle as she shakes her head, and I slowly reach my hands out to her arms.

“Hey!” Ava and I both whip toward David’s voice and I drop my arms to my sides just as the door slams. “Duncan! What are you doing here?”

Disappointment rushes through me at David’s untimely arrival, but I do my best to cover it up by casually leaning back against the counter. “I’m here for my car. Got in late last night and figured it would be easier to have someone drop me off at home. I needed to run today anyway, and stopping by after made the most sense.”

“Oh,” David says, a knowing look on his face as he glances back and forth between the two of us. Making his way to the cabinet, he pulls out some coffee grinds. “Want any?”

“I need to head home and shower.” I play with the fob in my hands and shake my head slightly. “Red can still come over this afternoon to bake?”

“I forgot about that, but I’m sure Scarlett didn’t,” he chuckles, pulling a mug from the cabinet. “When is the fundraiser for Mile High Mutts Rescue?”

“This Saturday.” I shift my gaze to Ava only to find her watching me. Taking a swig of my water, I swallow hard. Looking back at David, I ask, “You’re still planning on stopping by, right?”

David laughs. “You know there’s no way I’d get out of that. Scarlett lives to see the dogs. She’s been talking non-stop about Ryder.” Sputtering sounds fill the room as the coffee begins dripping into the carafe. “Are you going, Ava?”

“Uh...I don’t know.” Ava answers David, surprise written all over her face. Bringing her gaze back to me, she asks shyly, “Do you want me to?”

That feels like a silly question since I want to be with her all the time. But before those words slip from my mouth, I take a sip of water and nod as I swallow. “But only if you want to.”

Ava narrows her eyes and tilts her head like she’s trying to figure out what I’m not saying. Lifting the bottle to my lips again, I swig what’s left and leave it on the counter. “Think about it, and let me know when you and Scarlett stop by. No pressure.”

The smell of roasted coffee beans fills the air just as a sputtering noise indicates the coffee is almost done.

“Time to head home.” I raise the fob at Ava and start to make my way out of the kitchen. “Thanks for the ‘thingamajig.’”

She rolls her eyes and chuckles.

“Thingamajig?” David asks, his brows pulled together.

“I’ll let Ava explain.” Grinning, I turn back and throw a wink her way. She swats at me, and I duck. Laughing, I jog toward the front door. “See you later.”

Ava’s mumbled voice follows, and I hear David’s laughter as the front door closes behind me. Sliding into my car, I back out of the driveway. I whistle the entire way

home.

It's only been a few hours since leaving Ava and David, but time has been creeping by. Looking at the clock, my chest expands, and a rush of energy runs through me.

Scarlett and Ava should be here any minute.

Rearranging the bowls, ingredients, and spoons on the island, I triple-check that I have everything we need. I pick up the aprons I prepared.

A grin slides across my face as I read them. I can't wait to see Ava's face when she sees hers.

The car door slams. I run my hands down my sleeves, tug the bottom of my shirt, and run my hands up and down my jeans.

Making my way through the kitchen and into the living room, I'm met with the sight of Ava holding the door open for Scarlett, and my stomach clenches.

Ava's face glows as she beams down at my precocious niece. When her gaze lifts and meets mine, her eyes soften, and her grin widens. My mouth slides into a lopsided grin, and my heart skips like it's jumping hopscotch.

Feet pound the floor as Scarlett runs to me. "Uncle Dunky! Aunt Ava has never baked dog treats before." Dragging my eyes from Ava, I look down and see a blinding grin on Scarlett's face.

"Is that so?" I ask, feigning surprise, as I lift her for a hug; watching Ava's expression over Scarlett's shoulder, I let my eyes skate over her face. Her eyes dance while Scarlett continues filling me in on some apparent 'tea'.

“Yup,” she says enthusiastically before whispering loudly behind her hand, “She told me the last time she tried to bake something, it was a disaster ,” exaggerating the last word.

Ava shrugs her shoulders, and a sheepish grin covers her face. “What can I say? My skills are a bit lacking in the kitchen.”

“Well, we will have to work on helping her change that today, won’t we?” I stage whisper to Scarlett without taking my eyes off Ava. Scarlett nods vigorously, and I smile.

“Wait,” Ava asks, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Didn’t you burn a batch of treats that day I was here?”

I give her a mock glare. “If I remember correctly, someone interrupted me.”

Pinning her with my gaze, I’m reminded of the day she showed up asking me if I’d be willing to pretend to be her boyfriend. A tinge of pink stains her cheeks at the same time her eyes darken and I’m pretty sure she’s recalling that day too.

Crazy how just a few weeks can change everything.

“Come on, let’s get started!” Scarlett says excitedly, grabs my hand, and drags me into the kitchen. “Do you have an apron for Aunt Ava?”

“I do.” I look over my shoulder and smirk.

Scarlett runs over to the chair and grabs the aprons. She hands me mine and brings Ava hers. I slide mine over my head.

“Thank you, Scarlett. You definitely need to wear pink more often,” Ava directs at

me, a playful glint in her eyes. “I think your teammates would get a kick out of it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I roll my eyes at her, looking over at Scarlett. Throwing a thumb over my shoulder, I ask, “Do you want to tell your aunt who the real boss is?”

Scarlett turns to Ava, a grin splitting her face, hands on her hips. Ava covers her mouth and giggles when she reads. ‘While I have this apron on, I am the boss. Any questions?’

“Aunt Ava, look at yours!” Scarlett giggles and covers her mouth.

Letting the apron hang in front of her, she laughs, reading the message. When she slides the ‘It was me. I let the dogs out.’ apron over her head; it’s to me and Scarlett singing. “Who, who, who, who, who?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ava

The last few hours baking with Scarlett and Duncan have been the most fun I've had in...I don't remember how long. I'm walking on sunshine.

The best part of it all was having Duncan as a teacher. He was patient and kind while guiding me through every step. Sliding the tray with the dog treats I made in the oven was one of the most satisfying experiences. And in two minutes, we'll see the final results.

The worst part of today was being so close to Duncan without touching him. It's the greatest form of torture I have ever known. An innocent graze or a touch of the hand to help me with the right pressure for rolling out the dough left every part of my body pinging with energy.

I can't help but wonder if he could hear my heart every time it jumped around my body like a jackhammer.

I lean on the island and watch Duncan clear the space to make room for the cooling racks. When he places the last rack on the island, he glances at me and gives me a crooked smile, causing my heart to leap into my throat.

Blowing out a slow breath, I ask the question that's been on my mind this entire time. "What do you want to do after you're finished playing hockey?"

“Finished with hockey?” Duncan asks, surprised.

“Yeah.” Giving myself permission, I let my gaze linger on his strong jaw. When I shift my gaze to his, the heat I find staring back at me makes my stomach swoop. I swallow hard before finishing. “Do you ever think of what you’ll do after you’re done playing?”

“He’s going to open a bakery where he bakes dog treats,” Scarlett answers and points at his apron. “‘Time To Make The Donuts’. Right, Uncle Dunky?”

My eyebrows shoot up, and I look back at Duncan. He pulls at his collar and works hard to make himself look busy.

“Is that right?” Unable to hide the surprise in my voice, I smile at him. “That’s kind of cool, actually. Of course, I’ll decide whether or not I think it’s a smart idea after I see if the dogs enjoy them on Saturday.”

Duncan’s gaze snaps to mine, and a shy expression lights his eyes. It still amazes me that the man in front of me, the one that everyone and anyone would think twice about messing with, is such a mush. A warmth of emotion fills me, and my heart expands.

“The dogs go crazy for them.” Scarlett claps her hands. “They get all excited and jump when we go into the kennel area. Wait until you meet Ryder; he gets so excited and does a ‘wooo wooo wooo wooo wooo.’”

“Ryder was adopted, Scarlett,” Duncan says gently. “I’m not sure he’ll be there Saturday.”

Scarlett’s face falls before she gives us a forced smile. “I’m glad that he found a home; I just wish I could’ve said goodbye.”

Slipping my arm around Scarlett, I pull her close and kiss her on the top of her head. A beeping noise intrudes, and my niece jumps up and claps her hands again.

Duncan puts on a pair of oven mitts resting on the counter and pulls down the oven door to reach in and grab the trays of treats. Moving closer to Duncan, I try to squeeze around him to see the finished product.

“Here,” Duncan says, placing the treats on the island; he lifts his arm so I can fill the space between him and the counter. Warmth from him surrounds me, but this time I focus on the biscuits we made.

The dog bones, fire hydrants, and paw prints look amazing. My cheeks lift, and I feel a smile stretch across my face, a sense of pride filling me. “These came out so great!”

“We still have to put on the icing,” Scarlett says, heading over to the refrigerator and pulling out a bowl with white icing.

My eyes widen, and somehow, my smile expands.

“We take our baking very seriously.” Duncan pins me with his gaze, his lip lifted at the corner. “Right, Scarlett?”

“Yup!” She sticks her finger in the icing and brings it to her mouth. “Yum!”

“Scarlett! You know you shouldn’t stick your finger in food you make for others.” The laughter that falls out minimizes my chastisement.

“It’s okay if I don’t double dip,” she says, turning innocent eyes toward Duncan, and I see him nod.

I throw my head back and laugh.

“But more importantly, the dogs don’t care,” he says just as he sticks his finger in the icing, too. Picking up the bowl, he holds it in front of me, A grin lining his face. “Here...try.”

Looking at him, Scarlett, and then back to the bowl, I shrug and dip my finger in. “When in Rome.”

I can feel both of their eyes watching me. The icing melts in my mouth, and the sweetness surprises me. Without thinking, I go to stick my finger in again, only to have the bowl pulled away from me.

“No double dipping,” Duncan says, his eyes dancing.

Heat climbs up my face, and both Scarlett and Duncan laugh. “It was really good,” I shrug sheepishly.

“Red, can you grab that last tray on the counter so I can put it in the oven?” Scarlett picks up the tray and hands it to Duncan, when he’s sliding the tray in the oven, she sticks her finger in the icing bowl.

My mouth falls open, and my eyes widen. She shrugs and mouths. “The dogs don’t care.”

I bite my bottom lip to keep the laughter bubbling up from escaping. When Duncan turns back to the island, he acts like nothing happened, but when his gaze meets mine, I see that he knows exactly what Scarlett did.

He winks, leaving me feeling all warm and gooey inside. And just like that, I’m nearly certain Duncan is the one I’ve been looking for my entire life.

When we pull up to Mile High Mutts Rescue, it feels like one of the town fairs my

parents would take Fiona and me to when we were children. There are bouncy houses for the kids, courses of some kind that dogs and people are running around in, and people walking dogs while shopping at the vendors' booths.

"Are the people walking the dogs adopting them?" I ask, moving my hand in the direction of the crowd.

"One can hope," Duncan says as he opens the tailgate and slides out of the driver's seat. "Though some of them may be people who are coming to support the rescue with the dogs they've already adopted from Mile High Mutts."

Getting out of the car and moving toward him, I take one more look at the smiling faces and dogs pulling people around. The excitement is palpable. A grin crawls across my face. When I get to the back of the Acadia, I find him pulling out all the treat-filled Tupperware containers.

Knowing that I helped bake them fills me with the same sense of pride I had yesterday. "Do you need any help?" I ask, putting out a hand to take some of the containers.

"Not with these," he says, looking down at his full hands. "But can you close the tailgate?"

"Sure," I say, and walk around him to stand in front of the opened truck bed. When I get there I don't see any handle to pull down, and I hear Duncan snicker. Narrowing my eyes at him, he smirks. "Are you going to tell me how to close it, or are you going to stand there and laugh at me?"

"I think I may just laugh at you." His eyes twinkle with humor. When I scowl at him, he laughs out loud. Managing to pull himself together, he tells me what to do. "Press the button over to your left."

“I think I hate you,” I growl at him, only for him to give me a teasing grin that makes my knees weak.

“You’ll figure out all these new high-tech car ‘thingamajigs’ before you know it,” he says playfully. “Until then, I am going to have fun laughing at you.”

“Oh, you!” I press my lips together and pull my brows down but fail to keep the laughter from breaking free as the tailgate starts to lower.

“Duncan!” A male voice calls out. I turn and see a tall, attractive man with broad shoulders holding the hand of a pretty brunette. She’s holding the leash attached to a striking black and white dog. “Finn said you would be here. I’m Adam Daniels and this is my wife, Susie. I’m the right guard for the Mavericks.”

“I would shake your hand, but mine are a bit full at the moment,” Duncan says, nodding at the containers he’s holding. Tilting his head toward me, he says, “This is my girlfriend, Ava.”

Duncan using the word ‘girlfriend’ has me nearly melting into a puddle at his feet.

“You’re the family that Ryder adopted?”

The dog lets out an enthusiastic yodel as if he’s answering Duncan’s question himself. A wide smile crosses my face, and we all laugh.

Susie hunches down, and Ryder turns to her, giving her kisses. The wide grin spread across his muzzle lets me know just how happy he is. It’s one of the most adorable things I’ve ever seen.

With a grin spread across her face, Susie looks up at Duncan. “We are the family that he adopted, and we couldn’t be more grateful he did.”

Ryder turns to Duncan, sits in front of him, and looks directly into his eyes. His head tilted in expectation. Duncan's lip lifts at the corner, and my heart nearly melts at the softness of his gaze. "I know what you want, little man. Ava, can you grab one of the treats."

"Of course I can." I lift the lid and slip one of the bone-shaped treats out. When Duncan turns that same look on me, my knees nearly buckle. Pulling myself together, I shift my gaze to Ryder, who is now staring at me with his mouth open and tongue hanging out. "Here you go, cutie."

Ryder gently snatches the treat from my hand and swallows it whole. After he's done, he sits tall in front of Duncan as if asking for seconds.

"One per dog," Duncan says, as if Ryder can speak English. When Ryder all but rolls his eyes and snorts, I can't help but wonder if he does.

"Ava?" Susie asks as she leans in closer and whispers, "Ava Norris?"

As soon as the corner of my lip lifts, she reaches out and grabs my hands. "I am such a HUGE fan of yours! Adam, it's Ava Norris!" She screeches.

Adam looks down at his wife with adoring eyes, and I can't help but chuckle at her reaction. "I'm so glad you broke up with Nathan. He's a complete nincompoop."

Duncan steps closer to me and gives me a gentle nudge. "I'm glad she broke up with him, too." I glance up, and the emotions in his eyes catch my breath.

Slipping my arm through his, I smile and lean in, finding comfort in his closeness. "I don't think either of you is as happy as I am. Though I'm looking forward to the day when there isn't some celebrity gossip about it."

“Have you not looked lately?” Susie asks, her brows pulled together. When I shake my head, she goes on. “Nathan has been getting a ton of pushback. Just the other day, he went after a reporter at one of his pressers for his new movie. Pretty sure he’s in the process of ruining his career.”

As I take in what she says, I find that I don’t feel any satisfaction at the news. I’m glad that the press is focusing on other things and that he’s showing his true colors, but all I feel is sadness.

Looking up at Duncan, I find him searching my face, and a slow grin creeps along my lips. What we have is supposed to be pretend, but the more time I spend with him, the more things feel real.

The real relationship I was in with Nathan is what was fake, but not what I have with Duncan.

A chuckle escapes me, and I shift my gaze to Susie. “Thank you for telling me that. I’ve been trying to stay out of the drama of it all. I feel a tiny bit bad for him, if I’m honest. I didn’t realize he was so unhappy with his life.”

Duncan’s arm tenses under my hand and I look up to find his expression wary. I narrow my eyes and try to figure out what it was I said that caused his reaction.

“It was great to meet the two of you, but I need to get these dog treats to the front office so the rescue can start selling them,” Duncan says to Susie and Adam. “You have a great dog there. Make sure to stop in and buy him some treats.”

Ryder jumps up and gives a high-pitched bark, causing Susie and Adam to look down at him affectionately. “We’ll definitely grab some before we leave!”

“My niece Scarlett would love to say hello if you’ll be here for a bit. She should be

here any minute.” Duncan looks around and juts his chin forward. “There they are now.”

Looking in the direction that Duncan indicated I see David and Scarlett waving at us. Scarlett says something to David before dropping his hand and running over, calling out Ryder’s name.

Ryder lets out the ‘wooo wooo wooo wooo’ Scarlett demonstrated and starts to pull Susie over to my niece as she gets closer. Scarlett pulls a ball out of her pocket, and he immediately starts jumping up.

“Can I play fetch with him?” She asks Susie. “I know how much he loves it.”

Susie looks at Duncan, who nods. “Sure. Why don’t we head over to that open field over there.” She points to a fenced area where the dogs can run off-leash.

Susie and Scarlett walk away with Scarlett talking non-stop and asking all types of questions. David, who wasn’t quite near us yet, shrugs at his daughter and changes direction to follow them.

The smile covering Adam’s face is full of tenderness as he watches Susie with Ryder and Scarlett.

“Do you have anything else you need to carry over?” Adam asks, pointing to the containers in Duncan’s hands. “I’d be happy to help.”

“This is it,” Duncan says, lifting the containers. “But thanks.”

“Sure. Well, it was great seeing the both of you.” Adam gives both Duncan and me a smile as he turns to follow the group that went to play fetch.

“I’m going to bring these to the office. Do you want to join David and Scarlett in the park?” He asks, without looking at me.

I let go of his arm and step before him. I wait for him to turn toward me. When his gaze finally meets mine, my heart drops to my stomach with a thud at the guarded expression I see there.

What the heck just happened?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Duncan

My heart is pounding as she looks at me, confusion evident in every nuance of her expression. I'm probably overreacting, but I can't stop the thoughts that have been rising since Ava's response to Susie about Nathan.

Doubt that what was happening between us was too good to be true is resurfacing. She told me a long time ago that we couldn't work, and here I go, falling for her all over again.

"No," Ava says, her brows pulling together. The corner of her lip dips as she searches my face. "I came here today because I want to spend time with you."

My heart bounces in my chest, pounding like a sledgehammer—fear and desire battle in my heart. My mind races as memories from a decade ago compete with the last few days.

Which one do I believe?

"Duncan?" Questions fill her gaze, and at the same time, her eyes soften. She tries to step closer, but how close she can get is limited by the Tupperware containers. I'm grateful for my makeshift shield and full hands because I'm not sure I could keep my hands from reaching out to her.

"Yes?" A soft breeze surrounds me with the scent of sandalwood, making my chest

squeeze.

“Can you tell me what I said that has you shutting me out?” I swallow hard and bite the inside of my cheek, feeling foolish.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I shift my gaze from her to the people all around, trying to keep my voice neutral.

“Sure you don’t.” Moving to my side, she slips her arm through mine, and I look down at her small hand resting on my bicep. The heat from her touch feels like a branding, and leaves my heart racing. I take a deep breath and force the corner of my lip up. “Let’s head to the office to drop these treats off. Shall we?”

“That smile of yours is going to need some work if we’re going to be convincing.” Gazing into her blue eyes, I see a bit of uncertainty behind the smile she’s confidently wearing. She nods slightly and then pulls me toward the main office.

“People don’t expect me to smile,” I grumble, glaring at the crowd. When I hear her laughter, I turn to her and glower.

“When you’re with me, they do.” Her eyes hold a mischievous glint, and I feel my lip tug. “And I have the pictures to prove it.”

Searching Ava’s gaze, the tension in my chest loosens, and I see her face relax as I watch her exhale slowly. The woman standing beside me is not the same one who rejected me.

I don’t know what will happen after things with Nathan die down, but for today, I’m going to enjoy the time I have with her at an event that I love participating in.

“There it is.” She nudges me with her body, making my gut clench and my heart

squeeze. “Brooding fits you well and makes you seem mysterious to everyone else. But I like the version of you with teeth.”

I throw my head back and laugh, gaining the attention of everyone within a fifty-foot radius. The closer we get to the main office, the more I can feel the weight of people’s eyes watching us.

Worrying about Ava, I glance in her direction only to find her eyes on me. A warmth runs through me, and my heart beats faster.

As we walk into the main office, we’re greeted with barking.

“Duncan,” Jade, the head of Mile High Mutts Rescue, calls from behind the desk, with a wide smile lining her lips. When her eyes land on Ava, they widen for a moment before she schools her expression. Putting the containers on the counter, I pop the top, and Jade gasps. “These get better and better every time!”

“I had a little help from Scarlett and,” placing my hand around Ava’s back I gently guide her in front of me, so she’s facing Jade, her back to me. “Ava. Ava Norris, meet Jade Davis, the one who makes everything happen.”

A slight blush creeps up Jade’s face. “You know I’m just one cog in the machine that keeps all this together. It takes a village to keep things going.” She points to the containers as proof.

“I thought that you could try selling them this time. What if you asked people to donate a dollar so every pup could get one? That way, you can raise money for the rescue, too?”

“That’s a great fundraising idea!” Jade says, waving her hands animatedly and pointing to pictures of dogs on the walls. “I could print out all the dogs up for

adoption and cross off one at a time when someone buys a treat.”

“I,” placing my hands on Ava’s arms and pulling her almost against my chest, “ We , plus Scarlett , made extra so that you could sell them to anyone else that might be interested.”

“When will you set up your own little shop, Duncan?” Jade asks pointedly. Holding a finger in front of my mouth, I can feel Ava smirking at me.

“It’s a secret, remember?” I whisper, looking to see if anyone heard. Relief floods me when I see there isn’t anyone else in the office at the moment. “Right now, I’m just a hockey player who enjoys helping Mile High Mutts Rescue by bringing dog treats.”

“Sorry, Duncan, I keep forgetting.” She chuckles before turning to Ava and asking hesitantly. “Would you mind taking a picture with one of our shelter dogs? It could really help them get more attention for adoption.”

“I’d love to!” A smile crosses Ava’s face before she points at me. “Would you want both of us in a picture?”

Jade’s face lights up like a Christmas tree. “That would be amazing! I have the sweetest pup that just got here, but she’s shy of strangers. I would love to get some exposure for her.”

Jade doesn’t have us take photos with ‘one dog’ but dozens, not to mention gathering all of the families at the event with dogs who were previous residents of the rescue. It will be great PR and will get lots of dogs new homes.

The crowd continues to disperse as the day comes to an end. Glancing at the Mile High Mutts banner, I catch Ava standing for a photo with Adam, Susie, and Ryder.

My lips lift as I watch Ava in action. Not only does she appreciate her fans, but she makes them feel special. It's obvious from the joyous expressions that anyone who leaves her has on their face.

After the photo is taken, Susie says something to her, and she laughs. For the first time since she's been in Maple Ridge, out in public, she looks relaxed and at ease. Her eyes are shining, her smile is bright, and she seems...content.

As if feeling my gaze on her, she turns toward me. A lopsided grin crawls across my face and a warmth spreads through my chest. A gleam lights her eyes as her smile widens, but behind the smile, I notice the tired look.

Making my way toward Ava, I see Scarlett and David heading in the same direction. Scarlett's face is full of joy, but David looks exhausted. I get it. I love my niece, but there are days when her energy level exhausts even me.

"Ryder is so happy in his new home, Aunt Ava! And Susie and Adam said I could visit him anytime! Uncle..." I narrow my eyes at her, and she catches herself before 'Dunky' comes out. "Duncan. Would you take me over sometime?"

"What does your dad think?" Shifting my gaze to David, I press my lips together as he rolls his eyes.

"Since when does what I think matter?" He mumbles. "If I say no, she'll just ask you."

She looks over her shoulder at her dad and puts on her most innocent expression. "He said we'll see, but then he also said I could ask you."

Ava snorts, and David scoffs. Rubbing my niece's head, I say, "Well then, we'll see."

The frown covering her face almost has me promising her whatever she wants, but I know that backing up my brother is important to him, at least sometimes. “Definitely not today. I’m sure that Ryder and his family, not to mention your dad, had a long day.”

“Tomorrow?” Her eyes light up, and a hopeful smile covers her face.

I shake my head. “I have a game tomorrow, and you’re coming, right?”

“YES!” She jumps up and claps her hands; running over to David she grabs his hand and whispers something.

They start walking to the car just as I hear David say, “We’ll see.” He looks over his shoulder, a wide grin on his face, and he waves at us.

“See you both tomorrow,” I yell. Scarlett is still talking animatedly and doesn’t respond. Closing the distance between me and Ava, I ask, “Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” she says, just as her stomach rumbles. “What were you thinking?”

“I thought we could stop at Rocco’s in Pleasant Hollow. They have some of the best Caprese salad and a killer Chicken Milanese.” Her eyes shift, and she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “We don’t have to do Italian; we could do something else.”

“Would you mind if we didn’t go out?” Her voice is hesitant as she asks like she’s somehow asking for the biggest favor in the world. “I’ve had enough of being in a fishbowl for today.”

“We don’t have to. We could get takeout and go to my house to eat. Normally, I’d cook, but it’ll be faster if we order in.” It feels like I’m asking Ava out on an actual

date and I swallow against the lump in my throat. “Is that okay?”

There is a lightness in her eyes as she beams at me. A drumming starts in my chest and moves through my body as I wait for her answer.

“You cook too? You really are a catch.” Her eyes dance, and she blows out a slow breath and extends her hand out to me. “That would be perfect.”

I stare at her open palm for a second debating whether or not to take it. Something inside me releases and the decision becomes easy. Reaching out I entwine our fingers together. When she wraps her other hand around my arm and leans against me, warmth spreads throughout my entire body. Before I can overanalyze what I’m doing, I lean in and kiss the top of her head. Letting my lips linger for a moment, I breathe in the scent that is wholly Ava and let out a sigh.

From an outside perspective, it’s a small gesture, but at that moment, I’m making a silent promise. When she squeezes my hand in response, I know that she felt it, too.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ava

Duncan wasn't lying about Rocco's. The Caprese salad and Chicken Milanese were exactly what I didn't know I needed.

Like the man sitting a few feet away from me.

We settle back on the couch after clearing away the take out. The TV plays softly in the background.. My legs tucked under me and my hands wrapped around a warm cup of tea, the TV playing softly in the background. Duncan sits with his arm lightly resting on the back of the couch behind me.

Being this close to him makes me aware of every inch of him, and his slight movement has butterflies swarming in my stomach.

"She didn't?!" My mouth falls open and a surprised laugh is pulled from me. "In front of everyone?"

My cheeks are lifted in a smile that won't quit and my stomach aches. Duncan has been telling me about Scarlett and her cheeky little ways.

That niece of mine is a piece of work, and she should be a comedian.

"She did!" Duncan's eyes dance, his lips stretched across his face. "Then she yelled at me for having her on speaker phone."

The sheepish grin that follows, makes me belly laugh. “In a way, it is my fault. I need to remember that that imp is unpredictable and doesn’t think about what comes out of her mouth.”

“I’m not so sure I believe that.” Pulling my lip between my teeth, I chuckle. Thinking about her matchmaking ways when it comes to the two of us. “I think she has a plan for almost anything.”

Duncan’s eyes twinkle and his smile softens. “I’m pretty sure she’s smarter than all of us put together.”

“Don’t tell David, but I’m a bit scared for him.” Duncan throws his head back and laughs, the throaty sound making my heart race. “She’s only eight.”

“I tell him that all the time!” His gaze meets mine and my heart stops. His eyes shift and warmth runs through me. Taking a sip of my tea, I swallow hard trying to push the cotton down my throat. “But to be honest, I’m a bit scared too.”

The seriousness in his tone has ripples running through me, and I can’t stop the laugh from erupting. Placing my tea on the coffee table, I look back at him. The solemn nod he gives me rips another laugh from me. Putting my arm around my stomach.

“You’ve only been here a few weeks! You have no clue what she’s capable of.” Glancing up at Duncan’s face, his brows furrowed and his lips drawn together, he’s pretending to be distraught, but the glint in his eyes belies how he feels about our goddaughter.

“You have heard of FaceTime, right?” My eyes widen and my cheeks pull up.

“Of course I have, but I wouldn’t think an old timer like you has.” Reaching out, I smack him, only to have my hand sting at the boulders this man calls muscles. His

reflexes are so fast he covers my hand holding my palm captive against his chest.

The air crackles and my breath catches in my throat. For a moment, heat lingers in his eyes, and it quickly becomes replaced with the humor that was dancing there a minute ago. Slowly dragging my hand away, I immediately regret the loss of his warmth. I nervously chuckle to cover the effect that simple touch has on my body.

“I’m only five years older.” Breaking eye contact in an attempt to slow my heartbeat. I pick up my tea and take a sip. Holding the cup in both hands, I glance back at Duncan; the way he’s looking at me has my heart dropping to my stomach before it gallops around my body.

“Your age has never been something that bothered me.” His eyes are filled with a gentleness that makes my entire body tingle, and the way his eyes roam my face has me feeling like I’ve been in the desert without water for weeks. Swallowing hard I watch as a mischievous grin covers his face. “But teasing you about it will never get old. Pun intended.”

I’m so caught up in how he makes me feel that it takes me a moment to process what he said. “Hey!” I squeak out.

His grin widens, before he points at me, and makes a circle with his hand. “This reaction is why. You’re just too cute.”

Heat creeps up my face and I look away, taking another sip of my tea. I can still feel his eyes on me and with every shift of his gaze a tingle is left in its wake.

“You were talking about FaceTime?” A grin crawls along my lips and I take another sip, before putting the mug down.

Turning back toward him, I smile self-consciously. “You’re not the only one Scarlett

has embarrassed in front of people.” The temperature of my face gets hotter as Duncan’s eyes widen and curiosity covers his expression. “I was going over lines with Sean a few years ago for the first movie we did together...”

“ The Zamboni Kiss. ” My gaze whips to Duncan. Pretty sure my eyes are the size of saucers right now. A tiny bit of color appears on his cheeks, and a bashful grin lines his lips. “Red loved that movie and thought I should too because I played hockey.”

A tinge of disappointment sneaks in that he only watched it for Scarlett’s sake, but the image of him watching it with her has my heart expanding. “Yes, that one.”

Duncan’s dancing green eyes remind me of the perfect spring day after a week of rain. Bright and breathtaking. Licking my lips, I continue.

“Fiona was still alive and Scarlett was just learning to talk. Remember when she had that lisp?” Duncan’s smile widens and I’ve already started chuckling. “Fi was telling me one of the many Scarlett stories when her little voice could be heard yelling ‘Aunt Rava, Aunt Rava’. Sean let the entire crew know and for the rest of the shoot my chair said “Rava” Norris. They were also talking about how everyone was ‘rava-ing’ about the movie.”

“Oh come on!” Duncan scoffs, and rolls his eyes so hard I’m surprised they don’t go around his head. “That’s nothing compared to Uncle Dunky!”

I cover my mouth to keep the laughter in, but I can’t. My lips split across my face and the laughter explodes. Holding my already sore stomach I laugh until tears run down my face. Wiping them away, I look at Duncan. The scowl he’s giving me starts the entire process all over again.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he puts on his best glower. I might believe he was bothered if not for the gleam in his eyes. “Yeah, that one went around the locker

room for a few days, which is a short time for my teammates. Luckily for me, there was something else that caught their attention.”

His gaze pins mine and his meaning takes hold, making my stomach flutter. What distracted them was the news of the two of us ‘dating’.

“I’m glad that I was able to help... Dunky.” Biting my bottom lip I grin. He narrows his eyes at me and tilts his head before inhaling and exhaling slowly. The entire reaction has me covering my mouth to keep from laughing again.

His eyes suddenly turn roguish as he gently pulls my hand away from my mouth, and looks at my lips. My heart stops and thuds to my stomach as his gaze lingers there. I push past the tightness in my throat and try to breathe.

It takes me a moment to realize he asked me a question and by then, it’s too late as he starts to tickle me.

“No! No! Nooooo!” I squeal, only to have him laugh uproariously at me.

After what seems like an eternity of torture I finally escape by rolling off the couch onto the floor. Gasping for breath, I look up to find Duncan resting his head on his hand, looking down at me with a glint in his eye.

“How did you know I was ticklish?” I ask, still trying to catch my breath—a smile on my face.

“Fiona,” Duncan grins. “I used to tickle Scarlett all the time and Fi would laugh saying she was just like you.”

I close my eyes and think of my sister, a longing so intense comes over me. Blowing out a big breath, I open my eyes.

Duncan is watching me. The warmth in his eyes has my heart ping-ponging around my chest. He extends his hand and I tilt my head at him giving him a skeptical look.

“Just trying to help you up from the floor.” His hands are raised, but I give him a questioning glance. He throws his head back and laughs before extending his hand again. Then he says softly, “I promise. No more tickling.”

Staring at his hand, then glancing back at him, I place my hand in his and a jolt of energy moves through me from the contact.

Did he feel that, too?

He gently pulls me back on the couch, holding my hand for a moment before reluctantly letting it go. Watching his hand as he pulls it back, I swallow and shift my gaze. My eyes stop at his lips, before moving up to his eyes.

He swallows hard before a lopsided grin slides across his face. “Do you want to watch a movie?”

Glancing at my fitbit I notice it’s after nine. Not wanting to leave yet, I nod. “Which movie did you want to watch?”

“How about The Zamboni Kiss ?” My eyes nearly pop out of my head and a giggle escapes. “I told you, Scarlett made me watch it nearly every day. I had to buy a digital copy.”

“If you really want to,” I say shyly. “I haven’t seen it since the screening.”

Duncan reaches out to the coffee table, grabs the remote control, and deftly pulls up the correct app before selecting the movie. When he turns back toward me, I quickly look away and adjust myself on the couch to get comfortable.

“Come here.” Duncan’s raspy voice sends a shiver through me. Looking over, I find him with his arm up, inviting me to sit closer. Without hesitation, I slide up beside him and rest my head on his chest letting the warmth of his body seep through every inch of me. His arm falls over my shoulder and tucks me into his side.

I hear the steady beat of his heart as it pounds against his chest. Being wrapped in his warmth, an overwhelming sense of peace settles deep in my belly...along with the realization that I’m sleepy.

Duncan hits play and the opening credits roll.

I yawn and feel Duncan’s lips press against the crown of my head. A contented smile creeps on my face and I let my eyes drift close.

Duncan gently pushes a strand of hair behind my ear, and the rise and fall of his chest under my face relaxes me even more.

Sighing, I wrap my arm around his waist and snuggle closer, his scent making me certain I could stay in his arms forever. The last thing I feel before drifting to sleep is the weight of his cheek on my head.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Duncan

Shifting, I feel a tightness in my neck and a heaviness on my side. Taking a deep breath, I slowly open my eyes. When I look down, I find Ava's body resting against me. I inhale deeply and let the scent of sandalwood permeate my senses.

My lip lifts and a lightness fills my chest. Waking up with her in my arms is something I haven't let myself want for a very long time. Honestly, this is better than my imagination could have concocted.

If waking up with Ava every morning meant I would have to agree to having a stiff neck for the rest of my life, I would gladly endure the pain.

Leaning over, I gently kiss the top of her head and feel her snuggle into my side while making the cutest little protest.

"Good morning, beautiful," I whisper hoarsely in her hair, loving the feel of it against my lips. "I have to get up and start getting ready."

Tightening her arms around my waist, my heart stops before skittering back to life a bit faster than normal. "Nooo. Stay here with me a bit longer," she grumbles.

"I can't," I groan. Having her beg me to stay with her when I have to get moving is pure agony. "I have a game. You, however, can lay here for as long as you want. Well, until I have to leave and drop you off at David's."

“It’s too early,” she mumbles, and my grin expands as she tries to convince me to stay.

“Actually, it’s later than I normally get up on game days.” I give her a squeeze, my chest rumbling. Feeling her arms tighten around me again, my stomach tightens and I grouse. “But I’d like nothing better than to stay here with you.”

“Then stay.” Ava looks up at me, her eyes are bright and her skin is radiant. I start to shake my head. “Just ten minutes more. Please.”

Gazing into her eyes, I feel every ounce of me resisting getting up from the couch, away from her. “You’re killing me,” I gripe, kissing her forehead. Grudgingly I untangle myself from her.

“Fine, be that way,” she whines, dramatically flinging herself on the couch where I was sitting and pulling a throw pillow under her head. Blowing out a breath, her splayed out hair flows up and I catch a glimpse of the smile lining her lips.

Watching her like this has my stomach doing funny things. This is not the put together version of Ava I’ve always known.

This version of her is irresistible and my heart tugs. I want nothing more than to forget that I have things to do and stay entangled in her arms, but I need to start my day. Leaning over her, I pull one of the throw blankets from the back and tuck it around her.

Eyes still closed she reaches out and grabs my hand just as I go to turn away. “Duncan?” she says softly.

The corner of my mouth lifts. “Yes?”

“I had a great time yesterday.” Her voice runs over me like a soft summer breeze and I melt a little inside.

“I did too,” I say gruffly. I hear her soft breathing, and her grip on my hand loosens.

A lopsided grin crosses my face at the fact that she fell back asleep. Tucking her hand next to her body, I gently push her hair out of her face and run a finger over her cheek. Her skin is soft against my rough finger.

Suddenly feeling stuck in quicksand, I realize I don’t want this moment to end. So instead of walking away, I allow myself some extra time to indulge in watching her sleep a bit longer.

My heart beats in a firm, steady rhythm against my ribcage. For the first time since I saw her at David’s, I let myself admire her with the eyes of a man in love.

Everything about her is perfect, and there’s no point denying my feelings to myself anymore.

My stomach twists as old fear grips me. If she rejects me again, the devastation I’ll feel this time will be astronomical. The first time I fell in love with her, I was a boy, and I bounced back, but I’m not sure this man’s heart will be able to do that.

Who am I kidding? My heart never really bounced back.

This situation came about because Ava needed help. But the feelings I have, and I think she has, aren’t fake. Right?

But what if I’m wrong? What if I’m still not the person she wants? What if...

Stop!

Running a hand through my hair, I blow out a breath. Finn was right. I need to find out how Ava feels and what she wants. And I need to do it soon.

Things with Nathan are dying down, meaning we could probably put a deadline on when 'we're' done.

If that's what she wants.

Me? I want to spend the rest of my life with her, but if that's not what she wants, I need to get out now. Before my shattered heart will be beyond repair.

Glancing down at her one last time, I feel my chest expand. The shock I felt at learning she was single floats around me. Never in my mind's remotest recesses did I dream I'd be here with her.

Getting a second chance.

A heaviness of a different kind than Ava resting on me hits my chest, and I sigh. Turning around, I walk to my bedroom. The first thing I need to do, before taking a shower, is get my head in the right space to play hockey.

Ava, and what this is will have to wait a bit longer.

But right now I know exactly who to call.

Scrubbing my head with a towel, I stop and stare at stormy green eyes looking back at me.

"There is no easy way to do this, Dunc," David said when I called. "You just have to decide that it's what you're going to do."

My brow furrows at his words. “But I do...”

“No,” he interjects. “You think you do...just like I thought I did. But when everything you’ve worked for your entire life moves into second place. You realize you truly didn’t.”

“Second place?” My brow pulled together trying to understand what David was saying to me. He always put baseball first, I watched him do it. I have no clue what he’s talking about.

“Yes, second place,” he says firmly. “When I fell in love with Fiona, baseball took second place. I had to work every moment to ensure my head was in the right place for every game. Fiona understood and supported that, but everything I did was for her. When she passed away...”

Waiting for him to continue, I remember how he was after Fi’s death. My brother was barely holding it together, but firm that he needed to do it alone. Everything was falling apart—especially his play on the field.

“Everything just crumbled. Nothing seemed important. The only reason I got up every morning was for Scarlett. She became my why. But she wasn’t enough when it came to my performance. I had to learn a whole new way. I had to decide.”

“Decide what? I don’t understand.”

“Decide to turn it over. Decide that this is just what I would do and then do it.” I can hear David exhale just before he continues. “At some point I started playing for Fiona and our life together. When I lost her, that didn’t work anymore. And I needed to decide that no matter what showed up in my life, how scared, sad, heartbroken I was that it was okay for me to go on living. I decided to play for myself and allow myself to enjoy it. And not only that. I had to give myself permission. Permission to love

baseball again.”

Running my hand up and down my face I groan. “You’re not speaking English.”

David’s chuckle irritates me, making me want to reach through the phone and shake him.

“But I am,” he says patiently. “I know it doesn’t make sense. It was hard for me to grasp too. Until I decided.”

“Decided what ?” I grumble, unable to keep the frustration from my voice.

“To shut it all out.” Silence greets me as I take in his words, trying to decipher his code. “ All of it. The sadness that was so heavy I thought I was going to die, the voices that told me life was over. The feeling that I would never be happy again. The belief that playing baseball, a sport, was somehow betraying the memory of the woman I loved more than life itself.”

Shaking my head I exhale and squeeze my neck. I can’t relate to his feelings when it comes to this type of loss.

But don’t I already do what he’s saying? I thought I did, but maybe I’m not? This is so confusing.

“Do you remember what you did after my wedding? When Ava said no?” David asks softly, and I stop breathing. “You shut everyone out. You moved across the country and were completely off the grid for six months. Not taking phone calls, returning texts. Just focused.”

The shock that David knew about Ava, is replaced by the memories that flood me. It was make or break for me and I nearly lost everything I had worked for. But I didn’t

because I blocked my past out. By not allowing anything but hockey to be my focus, I could keep my eyes on the prize. To be the starting goalie of an NHL team.

I had setbacks when Ava would have a new movie out, or I would see her, but I pulled it together because I had to. I was desperate.

“Duncan,” David’s voice breaks through my past and jolts me back to the present. “The difference between now and then, is that you can’t run from your past. Your past has become your present. Until you can reconcile the two and find peace with them, you will struggle deciding.”

“If you say decide one more time, Yoda, I’m not sure I can be held accountable for what I do to you.”

His laughter rings through the phone and my grip on it tightens. “I get it. I felt the same.”

“Can you try explaining it another way?” I ask, clenching and unclenching my hand.

“What are you afraid of right now? What fear keeps you from being in the moment when you’re in front of the goal?” His question sucker punches me, making it hard to breathe. He’s right, fear is ruling my world at the moment. But how do I just let that go? “For me it was that I would be happy again without Fiona. I felt like I was somehow betraying her by loving baseball and being good at it.”

“That’s silly, Fi would never have wanted you to feel that way. She loved watching you play.” When David laughs at me, I finally get what he’s saying. “But then you decided it was okay.”

“I decided it was okay. I also remembered how much Fiona loved everything about me playing. Every moment she celebrated my wins, she made sacrifices to support

where I was. She was okay sharing my love of baseball with my love for her and our life together.”

Closing my eyes, I let his words sink in. I still don’t know how I will do what he says, but I finally understand what he’s saying. I decided long ago to do whatever was necessary to become a professional hockey player.

Now I need to decide that I want to keep being one. Regardless of whatever is happening with outside circumstances. Tightness grips my chest as fear runs rampant. But can I do this?

“If I can do it, Duncan, you can do it. Just decide it will be okay,” David answers the question I’m asking internally. “Regardless of what happens, it will be okay. Let your focus be where you are and in the present moment. Don’t let any other possibilities creep in. Just play your game. The rest will fall into place.”

Blowing out a breath, I put toothpaste on my toothbrush and begin brushing my teeth.

This simple decision to not let my teeth rot confirms what David said, but I’m still unsure how to implement it where Ava and hockey are concerned.

Just decide. Just decide. Just decide.

Shaking my head I chuckle at myself, but then my hand freezes in my mouth and my eyes round.

What if Ava decides , again, that I’m not the one for her?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ava

Stretching like a cat sunbathing, a grin spreads across my face at the sound of Duncan moving in the other room.

A tingling sensation runs through my body, and I can't stop thinking about how it felt to have his arms around me and the warmth from his strong body supporting me. My cheeks pull up further and I swear they're going to crack.

"Duncan," I whisper, shaking my head and pulling on my bottom lip, a snort escapes.

There's no more denying that I am utterly infatuated with the brooding hockey player, my best friend's younger brother.

Giggling, I throw the blanket over my head and let out a little squeal.

"Everything okay out there?" Duncan calls through the door, his husky voice sending a thrill to my toes.

"Completely fine," I say, ripping the blanket off my head and doing my best to calm my racing heart. "Just getting up."

Inhaling and slowly blowing out a breath, I sit up, push off the cushion and stand. Reaching for the blanket, I fold it and place it over the back of the couch. Tossing the pillow in the corner, and then straightening it, I make my way to the kitchen. I comb

my fingers through my knotted hair as I go.

Catching a glimpse of my appearance in the mirror hanging in the hallway, I groan. Not washing my face before falling asleep has me looking like a raccoon, and my hair looks like someone spent hours teasing it.

The fact that Duncan saw me like this has my stomach swirling. Licking my finger, I remove the smudged mascara from under my eyes. Then I do my best to smooth my wild hair. Staring at my reflection, I sigh. I wish I looked more put together before seeing Duncan in a little bit, but then I remember he saw me like this when he woke up.

Planting a palm on my forehead, I grumble and sigh. “The real me is not as glamorous as the screen me.” I shrug.

Despite my appearance, I all but skip into the kitchen. Heading over to the counter, the first thing on my list is to find the coffee. Making my way down all the cabinets, I come up empty. It’s not until I check the fridge that I see a can sitting on the door shelves.

“Hmmm...Duncan keeps his coffee in here? Interesting.” I’ve heard cases supporting this and against it. But I’ve also heard putting it in the freezer is best. My lips pull up at my random thoughts. Regardless, I’m curious to see what his reasoning is.

Taking the coffee out, I bring it to the countertop and put it down. Looking back over the counter, I search for the coffee maker. Spotting it against the wall, I reach out, tug it in the middle of the counter and fill the carafe with water.

Once the coffee has started, I head back to the cabinet where I remember seeing mugs and pull out two.

“Does Duncan drink coffee?” I mumble to myself, only to have my heart lodge in my throat when his deep voice responds.

“No, I don’t.”

Turning to him with my hand covering my chest, my mouth hanging open. My heart falls and starts to race. Seeing him makes my stomach swoop and my knees feel like jelly. Standing in front of me is the most sexy, rumpled version of Duncan I’ve ever seen.

Or maybe I’ve just never noticed before. How could I not have noticed?

His brown hair is tousled and he’s wearing a Wolverines sweatshirt that clings to every one of his muscles, making his shoulders look ridiculously broad, with a pair of black sweats.

When my gaze slides back to his face, his green eyes are dancing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

The temperature in the room must have increased ten degrees since he’s been standing here, and I’m pretty sure my face is an alarming shade of red. The air feels like it’s being sucked out of the space.

Reaching up I run my hand down my loose hair and let out a slow, shaky breath. “Why don’t you keep the coffee in the freezer?”

His brow quirks and the corner of his lip lifts. “What?”

“Your coffee can was in the fridge. Why don’t you keep it in the freezer?” The smile on his face expands and I feel ridiculous for even bringing this up, but it was the only thing I could think of with him looking like that.

“Does it make a difference?” His voice dips as he starts to make his way over to me, and gently pushes my hair behind my ear, sending tingles down my spine.

Doing my best to pretend that every ounce of my body isn’t firing on all cylinders, I answer his question. “Well, the freezer is said to help extend the shelf life, whereas the fridge doesn’t.”

“Is that so?” He says gruffly, his chest rumbling as his gaze drops to my lips. My heart starts to thrum its way around my body. “The only person who drinks coffee when they come over is David. I’ll have to make sure to ask him.”

“Well, as we saw, he keeps his in the cabinet. So…” Duncan’s grin spans his face and he throws his head back and laughs.

A silly little grin creeps along my face in response, and when his gaze finds mine, there is a tenderness in them that makes my breath hitch.

“How did you sleep?” He leans his hand on the counter next to my waist, surrounding me with that cedar-y scent of goodness that is distinctly Duncan.

Lifting my hand I rest it gently on his chest. “Your couch is surprisingly comfortable,” I murmur, holding his gaze with mine.

“It’s not too bad, I guess.” His eyes crinkle at the corner. “I enjoyed the company.”

“The company was very nice,” I say, smiling shyly. Under my hand I can feel his heart pounding like a drum. Knowing I have the same effect on him as he does on me has my heart bouncing around my chest. “Were you comfortable?”

He rolls his neck before saying, “I think the coffee is done.” My brows shoot up and I tilt my head. “The coffee.” He steps away from me and moves toward the coffee

maker.

Oh yeah, the reason I'm in the kitchen in the first place.

I watch him as he grabs one of the mugs and starts pouring. "How do you like it? Sugar, cream?"

A smirk lines my lips as I watch him. "Yes, please."

He moves to the cabinet and pulls out the sugar bowl, while I head to the fridge and grab the creamer. "Are you sure you don't want any?"

"I'm not a huge fan of the taste, but even if I were I definitely wouldn't drink it on game day—way too dehydrating." Grabbing a spoon from the drawer and holding the top of the sugar bowl open, he asks. "How much sugar do you like?"

A goofy grin creeps on my face. His eyebrows narrow slightly, and a self-conscious lopsided smile crawls on his lips. I pour a bit of creamer in my coffee before responding. "Half a spoonful. And you're kind of adorable."

Placing the carafe back on the hot plate, I turn to my mug, and mix the creamer and sugar with the spoon Duncan left for me.

I can feel his eyes still on me and I lift my mug to my lips. "What?" I ask right before taking a sip, glancing in his direction.

"Nothing." The glint in his eye tells me there's something he's not saying. "Are you going to my game today?"

"Of course!" I smile as he walks over to the fridge and pulls out what looks like three dozen eggs. "Scarlett tells me you're playing the Panthers for the first time since you

were traded. She keeps saying it will be a ‘big game’. She’s excited.”

“Are you hungry?” He asks, holding up the frying pan before turning on the burner and putting it on the stove. “I need to get some protein in.”

“I’m good.” Leaning against the counter, I watch him as he deftly mixes a dozen eggs in a bowl before pouring them in the pan. “Are those all for you?”

“Have to make sure I get all the protein I need.” He turns and looks at me with a mischievous grin on his face. “But this isn’t the half of it. I’ll make a smoothie in a little bit, and then I’ll eat something else about an hour before the game.”

My eyes widen and his smile broadens. “Hockey players burn a ton of calories during a game, and we need to worry about muscle repair afterward.”

Pulling out a plate from one of the cabinets, I place it next to the stove, and then I reach over to grab a fork. “I think that is about half of my daily calorie intake.” I chuckle, pointing at the cooked scrambled eggs he’s scooping on his plate.

“Yeah, I’d never survive on your diet.” He takes his plate and moves to the island, sitting at one of the stools. Leaning against the counter, sipping my coffee, I let myself indulge in watching his movements.

“Will you be wearing my jersey?” He looks up at me before quickly returning to his eggs.

“That’s what your girlfriend would do, right?” I say teasingly, but as soon as the words are out of my mouth I regret them. Duncan’s hand freezes in the middle of scooping and looks at me guardedly before dropping his gaze down and continuing to eat.

“Yup,” he says, abruptly and my stomach sinks. “Ava...”

“Yes?” A flicker of hope flits around my chest, but it’s quickly smothered at his next words.

“I forgot I need to get to the arena early and will need to head out in about ten minutes. I’ll drop you off at David’s then.”

“Oh...okay.” I finish my coffee and rinse out the mug, silently cursing my choice of words.

Placing the mug in the dish rack, I lean back against the counter and study Duncan for a bit. He finishes his breakfast and places the plate, fork, and frying pan in the sink, not looking in my direction once.

“I just need to grab my stuff and then we’ll head out,” Duncan throws over his shoulder.

Watching him walk out of the room I sigh. We need to have a conversation about ‘us’. I know I’m not the only one who feels what’s happening, but the man in the other room has some doubts.

Not that I can blame him, especially after my reaction last time.

My fear? That he’ll reject me this time.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Tea Time

Hey Tea Lovers.

Who was at the fundraiser for Mile High Mutts Rescue yesterday?

You weren't? Then I guess you missed the absolute sweetness of Duncan and Ava.

This picture of the two of them smiling at each other is just adorbs! It's obvious to anyone paying attention that the Wolverines' broody goalie isn't broody when his eyes are on Ava.

Can you say swoooooon! Picture of Duncan smiling at Ava.

Oh and our grumpy goalie is actually the one who bakes the dog treats for the rescue. Can he get any less prickly?

As good as that tea is, this morning's tea is even better!

Apparently, Duncan and Ava left his house this morning together ! Now we aren't saying that something happened, but we aren't saying nothing did either.

Oh to be a fly on the wall...sigh.

Till Next Time, Chamie

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Duncan

The car door closes behind Ava, and I watch her walk up the stairs, pausing at the front door. She turns toward me, smiles so wide that it yanks at my heart, and gives me a wave.

She doesn't have a care in the world, meanwhile I'm stuck on one sentence that keeps playing over and over in my mind.

'That's what your girlfriend would do, right?'

Scrubbing my face, I growl and put the car in drive, making my way to the arena. Frustration at myself evident from the tightness that grips my shoulders.

There wasn't anything wrong with the question and her tone was teasing. But it dredged up this anxiety that it's only a matter of time before my heart gets splintered into a million pieces. I know I'm being ridiculous, yet I can't dispel this irrational fear.

Nothing about the time we spend together feels like faking. That smile wasn't 'covering something up'. And the Ava I know has always been honest and straightforward...even when she knew it would hurt.

I'm nearly positive she wouldn't play with my emotions when we're alone if she didn't have feelings for me. But you see there's the conundrum—I haven't forgotten

the soul crushing pain that nearly destroyed me last time.

David nailed it earlier. When I moved to Florida, I hid out until I could get my emotions under control. Until the only thing I lived and breathed for was hockey. For years it worked.

Until I heard about her break-up.

With those words, all the memories I had buried came rushing back. The box I put my feelings for Ava in somehow found their way out of the safe I had them in. And I was faced with the realization that I had lied to myself.

I never stopped loving her, I just figured out how to function without her.

Shaking my hand through my hair, the truth kicks me in the stomach.

I am not an insecure person. I go after what I want and don't take no for an answer. In fact, Ava might be the only thing I've wanted in my life, and I walked away from it at the first 'no'. And it's haunted me ever since.

The game doesn't start for another few hours. I could've taken the time to talk to Ava and clear the air. But nooo...I had to freak out.

Clenching the steering wheel, I groan.

My phone rings through the car speakers, and my heart jumps out of my chest, only to plummet immediately when I see Finn's name.

Blowing out a massive sigh, I answer.

"Hey Finn," I grumble.

“Is my favorite goalie tired?” I roll my eyes at the question. “Tea time spilled some very interesting news this morning.”

“From the fundraiser yesterday?” I scrub my eyes and squeeze the bridge of my nose as I park in the players' lot. “That’s good. Maybe some of the dogs will find new families.”

“They definitely talked about that.” Finn’s voice is filled with amusement and I find myself glaring at the phone screen. “But also about this morning and something about baking.”

“This morning?” My brows pull together and my stomach dips before I groan. “It’s not like that. We ate dinner, watched a movie, and fell asleep on the couch.”

“You and Ava are adults and what you do is none of my business.” He then dares to laugh out loud. “I’m just spilling the tea.”

Rolling my eyes, I run my hand up and down my face muttering. “Great. Just great.”

“It’s not a big deal. People know you’re a couple—”

“Pretending to be a...”

“Are you telling me the two of you haven’t talked yet?” He roars through the phone. Dropping my head on the steering wheel, my stomach clenches, I don’t say anything. “Did you at least have a conversation with David?”

“Yes,” I mumble.

“You know you’re ridiculously stubborn, right? I mean it’s what makes you great in your career, but seriously?”

“Are you done lecturing me?” I lean back against the seat, clenching my jaw, eyes squeezed shut.

“Not even close.” It’s a rare day when I get this version of Finn. It’s like being talked to by your grandparent who has finally had enough of your stupidity. It’s not undeserved, I’m acting like a fool. “There isn’t one person who’s seen you and Ava together, whether in person or through pictures, that thinks the two of you are faking it. Heck, even you don’t believe it! What is going on here?”

Taking a deep breath, tightness grips my chest at the thought of being honest about this. Rubbing my hand around my heart.

Pausing, I exhale when what he said about baking hits me and my body pushes off of the seat. “Wait! Did you say Tea Time mentioned baking ?”

“Just heard that part, did you?” Finn chuckles.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Slamming my palm to my forehead, I groan. For the moment, Ava is forgotten. The realization that the guys are going to harass me like nobody’s business has my stomach rolling.

At least they can do it individually since I’m here before everyone.

A knock on the window has me nearly putting my head through the car’s cabin.

“Hey Duncan Donuts.” Cringing at Wallace’s voice, I rub the top of my head. Pulling my brows together I turn and glower only to find him and Phillips with wide grins on their faces. The gleam in their eye does nothing for my current mood.

“That one might be better than ‘Uncle Dunky’,” Philips singsongs and Finn’s laugh bursts through the speakers before it’s muffled. I hit the end button without saying

goodbye and throw the car door open.

“Alright, you two, get it all out,” I grumble, grabbing my duffle from the back seat and tossing it over my shoulder. Slamming the door, I start marching toward the arena. “What are you two doing here so early?”

“No changing the subject...Dunky.” The glare I shoot Wallace’s way has them both throwing their hands up, but I can see them pressing their lips together. I turn forward and pull the players’ entrance door when Phillips drops in. “‘Duncan Donuts’ it is then.”

I close the door behind me and sending them a death glare through the glass, only to find the two of them in the parking lot, holding their stomachs and slapping their thighs.

To my surprise, I feel the corner of my lip pull up watching them. Running my hand through my hair, I walk through the empty hallways, turning on lights as I make my way to the locker room.

Once there, I throw the duffle bag on the bench and blow out a slow breath.

“Denier,” Davidson’s voice calls from the locker room entrance. Humor dancing in his eyes and dread grips me at what will come from his mouth. “Didn’t expect you here so early.”

“Same,” I gripe, dropping down on the bench. “You want to get some punches in too?”

Davidson looks at me pointedly, pinning me with his gaze. “Nope.”

My brow furrows trying to figure out what game he’s playing.

“No game,” he says as if reading my mind. He turns toward his locker and drops his bag on the bench. “I called a team meeting to talk about Tea Time and their umm...recent update.”

Quirking an eyebrow, I can see him biting his lip to keep from laughing. Collapsing on the bench I lean against the locker and squeeze the bridge of my nose. Outside I hear Wallace and Phillips making their way down the hall and I groan.

“Duncan, I did this because I want you to know we’re here for you.” Davidson slaps me on the shoulder. “This team needs you, but we need you with your head on straight.”

“You may be alone in front of the net,” Wallace says as he walks through the locker room door.

“But you’re not alone on the ice,” Phillips adds as the door closes behind him.

Rolling my eyes, I mutter and look away from them all. Shaking my head. “Did you script that?”

Laughter fills the room. I hate being the center of attention; this is way too much for me. “I can handle it,” I grumble.

“That’s the thing though,” Davidson’s voice takes on a firm tone. “You don’t have to. And in all seriousness, you’re better when you let the rest of us support you.”

Meeting each one of their gazes individually, I don’t find an ounce of humor in them. What I see is a frankness and sincerity that shocks me. A tension I didn’t know was in my gut unfurls and I nod stiffly.

“So let’s get to the most recent news that Tea Time spilled...” Davidson pauses and

my chest tightens waiting for him to bring up Ava spending the night, but I nearly fall off the bench at his next words. “So do you bake for humans, or just dogs?”

Laughter fills the room and instead of my usual frown, the corner of my lip pulls up.

“A smile! Quick get a picture before it goes away!” Phillips grabs his phone, just in time to catch the scowl I hurl at him.

“Just wait until he sees Ava,” Cavill shouts as he enters the locker room. “Did you bring anything freshly baked....‘Duncan Donuts’?”

My brows shoot up to my hairline and a small laugh falls from my lips to my surprise. The room immediately gets quiet and I look around to see faces with wide eyes and mouths hanging open. “What? I laugh sometimes.”

“That girl has been good for you,” Philips says as he walks to his locker and starts unpacking his duffle.

“Yeah...” Clenching my fists, I take a deep breath. “About that, I should make a confession. It isn’t real—”

“I’d like a fake girlfriend to look at me the way she looks at you, man. When you’re around, she doesn’t see anyone else. Believe me, I’ve tried.” From the corner of my eye I see a white object hit Wallace in the face. Looking for the offender, he whines. “What? It’s true .”

“Even Sandy said Ava is head over heels for you. She couldn’t take her eyes off you once when we were on the ice,” Davidson adds.

Memories from that night flood me. The warmth in her eyes when she saw me walking toward her, the sparks that engulfed me when our lips touched. Glancing

around the room, I see everyone nodding and I let the fear that's been gripping me loosen.

"You and your girl can talk later. But right now—" At Davidson's words I stop listening.

My girl...Ava is mine. And everyone knows it.

A goofy grin settles on my face. "Got it!" Philips crows only to chuckle when I send a scowl in his direction.

"Alright James, let's talk about preparing for a game." Davidson shakes his head and works to bring the conversation back on track. When I open my mouth to protest, he lifts his hand. "All of us have our routines; we know you do too. We just want to give you more ideas so you can be the goalie the Wolverines need to win a championship."

Looking around at the guys standing before me, wanting to support me, a knot in my stomach loosens. Realizing how much I shut myself down years ago becomes glaringly obvious.

Time to change that...in all areas of my life.

Chapter Thirty

Ava

My smile falls as soon as I walk across the threshold. The urge to throw one, ridiculously handsome, downright obstinate, Duncan James through a window is overpowering. Any attempt at conversation on the drive over was like pulling teeth. Not to mention the amount of grunting coming from the driver's seat. I felt like I was sitting next to a caveman.

I know earlier I said that I can't fault him, and I don't. Doesn't mean it's not annoying.

Feeling like a teenager whose parents will punish them for being out all night, I close the front door behind me as quietly as possible. Tip-toeing my way down the hall to my bedroom I hold my breath until I'm safely inside.

Thirty minutes later I'm showered and in fresh clothes feeling more like myself and less like a raccoon that was struck by lightning. David and Scarlett's happy voices carry through the house and my cheeks lift. I forgot how much I missed being in a space with people doing normal things.

The smoky smell of bacon slams into me, making my mouth water and my stomach grumble loud enough to wake an entire village. Hand over my stomach, I walk into the kitchen. David looks over his shoulder and smirks at me. "Good morning, sleepyhead. Did you have a good night's sleep?"

My eyes widen, and I feel heat creeping up my body. The chuckle I hear makes me want to throw another James brother out the window. Laughing at my expression, he turns back to scrambling eggs.

“Aunt Ava!” A wide smile spreads across my face at the sight of Scarlett. Dropping the crayon in her hand, she leaps from the chair, running over to wrap her arms around me like a sloth hanging from a branch. “I missed not seeing you before bedtime. Can you braid my hair before the game?”

“Of course,” I squeeze her back and kiss the top of her head. “Is it okay if we eat first? I’m ravenous.”

“We know,” Scarlett giggles, returning to her chair and continuing where she left off with her coloring. “Your stomach was talking.”

“I’m not sure talking is the right word to describe it.” Giggling, I walk over to the cabinet and pull out a plate and resting it on top of the two already on the counter. I reach up, pull a glass out, and fill it with orange juice. “Your brother is maddening,” I mumble to David before sitting beside Scarlett.

David quirks a brow, humor dancing in his eyes. “My brother? Duncan? The one who grunts more than talks? I don’t believe it!”

Scooping the eggs onto a plate, he asks Scarlett. “How many pieces of bacon do you want?”

“All the bacon,” she spreads her arms out wide.

“Three pieces it is,” David laughs, and Scarlett groans. “Ava?”

“As many as I’m allowed because apparently there’s a limit.” I nudge Scarlett with

my elbow and she nods vigorously.

“He’s maddening too,” she whisper-yells behind her hand, making me press my lips together. “Especially when it comes to bacon.”

Carrying the plates over, David shrugs. “It’s my favorite. Do you want any coffee?”

“No I—” David’s brows shoot up and I realize I almost said I had some at Duncan’s. “I’m good.”

Slipping a plate in front of me and Scarlett, the two of us immediately dig in.

“Hey! It’s polite to wait for everyone to be seated before you start eating.” David crosses his arms over his chest and glares at us.

“He’s grumpy too,” I murmur leaning over toward Scarlett.

“He’s always grumpy before his coffee,” she whispers.

“Sitting right here you two.” He scowls at us, but his eyes are twinkling. Scrunching my face I look at Scarlett and chuckle. “So what did you and Duncan do last night?”

As I pin David with my gaze, my eyes widen to the size of saucers. A smug look is resting on his face as he innocently takes a bite of his bacon.

“We ordered take out from Rocco’s and then watched a movie,” I murmur, picking up my orange juice and sipping.

“Did Uncle Dunky make you watch The Zamboni Kiss ?” Scarlett asks, the corner of her lips lift up but she doesn’t stop coloring. “He makes me watch it all the time.”

David nearly spits out his coffee, and I narrow my eyes as the corner of my lips pulls up. “He said it used to be your favorite?” The question starting to form in my mind has my entire body humming.

“When I was like five,” she huffs, and rolls her eyes. “But I think he just really likes watching you.”

My fork stops mid-air and my mouth hangs open. All the butterflies in my stomach take that moment to flap their wings. Swallowing hard I ask. “Why do you think that?”

Scarlett puts down her crayon, and examines my face. Her eyes scrutinize me in a way that is too wise for her young age. She finally lands on a look that says you can’t be that dumb . Dropping my arm and leaning it on the table, my lip quirks.

“Cause he’s in love with you.” My eyes bug out of my face and my pounding heart moves through me like a ground-shaking rumble. Grinning, she shifts her gaze to David. “Right, Daddy?”

My eyes whip to David only to have him shrug noncommittally and continue scooping eggs in his mouth. But he never takes his eyes from mine.

The pounding is now a thundering mass of buffalo running full speed around my entire body. Eyes wide open, I watch Scarlett pick up the project she’s been working on and hold it close to her chest. A mischievous glint fills her hazel eyes before turning the paper around for me to see the image she’s drawn.

My heart skips a beat before my stomach swoops at what she drew: A pink heart with the initials DJ & AN written in black block letters.

Heat creeps up my face, my cheeks tug up, and a sheepish grin rests on my face.

Pushing my eggs back and forth, I feel David's and Scarlett's eyes on me. I feel like a schoolgirl whose crush just found her doodles in her notebook.

Duncan's in love with me.

"See, Daddy! I told you she loves Uncle Dunky."

The grin on my face widens. When I look up, I shrug a shoulder and bite my lip.

"Fiona always claimed you did," David says softly, nudging my elbow. "I didn't believe it until I saw the sparks fly this time."

Chewing on a piece of bacon I smirk. "My sister always was pretty smart, wasn't she?"

"Definitely," David smiles, a slight hint of sadness lingers in his eyes before a massive smile slides across his face. "She'd be happy for the two of you, A."

"Let's not count our eggs before they hatch, shall we?" I say pushing my food around. "Duncan and I still need to talk."

"With your lips?" Scarlett's face lights up and I laugh remembering her newest crush.

"You've been talking an awful lot about kissing, Scarlett...is there something you want to tell me?" David asks his daughter. The flaming shade of red that covers her face tells it all, and his expression is priceless. He's trying to act calm, but his eyes have an underlying look of terror.

When his panicked gaze flies to mine, I shrug one shoulder, take a bite of my bacon, and smirk, grateful the focus is off my crush and me.

All of us are wearing Duncan's jersey as we make our way to our seats. The music blares, blades shred up the ice and cracking sounds of sticks slapping the puck multiple times fill the air as the players warm up. Scarlett has been talking non-stop since we left the house about why this game is essential for the Wolverines.

I wish I could say I've been paying attention, but most of my yesses and nods were place fillers. My sole focus is on what happens after the game. Because regardless of the outcome of the game, I hope Duncan feels like a winner.

Settled in my seat, Scarlett still talking, I let my eyes skate over the ice. Immediately, my gaze lands on Duncan. He's covered from head to toe in gear, and I can't make out his expression. I wipe my hands on my jeans knowing I'll have to wait hours before I can tell him how I feel.

Under the excitement is the slightest part of me terrified he won't feel the same. Irrational? Maybe. But it's lingering nonetheless.

David and Scarlett may have told me that he loves me, but I won't be able to relax until I hear the words come from his lips. My body zings with energy as Duncan's gaze slams into mine just as he's skating toward the locker room.

Scarlett jumps up and down, and Duncan waves her. Then, he looks back at me and gives me a two-finger salute. From where I'm sitting I can see his green eyes gleaming and I have to control the urge driving me to get up and throw my arms around him.

Two. More. Hours. If there isn't overtime. Impatience swirls through me. I don't want to waste another moment where we aren't on the same page. I want the world to know he's mine. Most importantly I want him to know that he is, and has always

been, the only one for me.

I collapse fully into my seat, butterflies flitting around my body. Scarlett babbles happily about stats, records, and how Duncan played on the Panthers versus his play on the Wolverines. Looking over her shoulder at David, I mouth, “You’ve created a monster.”

His lip pulls up, a satisfied grin spreads across his face, pride written all over it. “Wait until baseball season,” he mouths back, and I groan.

I love my best friend, but I have never been a huge sports fan. Don’t get me wrong, I will cheer all day long, but most of the time I don’t fully know what’s going on.

Just like hockey.

A wide grin spreads across my face and a shiver runs from head to toe at the thought of all the time I can spend with Duncan letting him teach me about hockey. When the Wolverines take the ice and Duncan heads to the ‘basket’, my cheeks pull up to the point that I think they may crack.

I plan on making sure that it includes lots of snuggle time and kissing breaks.

Chapter Thirty-One

Duncan

Bottom of the third period and we currently have a shutout. It's not that big of a surprise considering the goaltenders. Matthew Steel, the Florida Panthers' goalie, was my backup and is a phenomenal player. Not to mention the rest of the talent on his team.

He, in particular, however, is living up to his 'Man of Steel' nickname when it comes to everything the Wolverines have been hitting him with. And I am living up to my nickname of 'Denier'.

My former teammates have been doing their best to push all my usual hotspots, but today, I'm solid. As irritated as I was to find my current teammates calling a meeting to discuss how to help me, I can see clearly how much I needed their help.

My performance on the ice is proof. I'm not just the goal defender, I'm one-sixth of a team. A pressure I didn't realize I was carrying is released as I let the rest of the team help with the load and do their jobs.

The Panthers' center, Green, grabs a pass from their winger, Slater, and makes it past both Wolverines' defensemen, leaving the stop up to me. Green takes an incredible shot toward the upper left corner of the net only to have it denied. The crowd roars.

Just as quickly, Slater is able to rebound and attempts another shot but it's denied again. The roar from the crowd this time is so loud, the vibration moves in time with

the pumping of my heart.

From behind me, I see Cavill able to wrap around and skate the biscuit down to the open ice and into Panther territory. He gets checked by the Panthers' winger but not before he can get a quick pass to Davidson who grabs the puck and takes one last shot before the buzzer ending the third period blows. The goal horn wails and the scoreboard changes to 1-0.

Tapping the ice with my stick, I pump my fist in the air before slowly skating over to celebrate with my teammates. My body is buzzing with adrenaline and feeding off the fans' excitement. My eyes flick up looking for Ava and when my gaze lands on her I can see a smile splitting her face from here. A bead of sweat rolls down my back, warmth spills throughout my chest, and a lopsided grin crosses my lips.

Scarlett grabs Ava's hand and leads her to the rink, standing in front of it, and waits for me—our usual routine. When I reach them, Scarlett has her hand pressed against the glass and I splay my hand over hers.

Shifting my gaze over to Ava's, her blue eyes are sparkling and the smile stretched across her face makes my insides feel like candy sitting in the sun too long on a warm summer day. I move my hand to the glass before her, and she lifts her hand to cover mine. Looking at our hands together, my insides melt a little bit more.

A calmness settles deep in my chest.

Glancing back at her face I let my eyes roam over every inch of it. When my eyes fall to her lips I pause. Her lips move, and my stomach swooshes. My mouth drops open and my eyes whip back to hers. The look in her eyes grabs my heart, as she nods. My heart pounds like wild horses running across my body, leaving my knees weak.

All thoughts fly from my mind, and my heart stops.

“James!” Davidson yells in my ear, chuckling. He gives me a stiff shove toward the locker room. “Come on. You’ll see her in a little bit.”

Scowling to Scarlett and Ava’s delight, I follow my team captain and make my way off the ice.

Walking into the locker room I stop and let my gaze swing over my teammates. A sense of camaraderie filling me for the first time since playing with the Wolverines. And maybe, if I’m honest, for the first time since being drafted. I forgot what it was like to belong to something bigger than myself.

I thought I was part of a team for years, but today showed me how I’ve kept myself protected by only giving small pieces of me to anyone or anything. I was present physically, but didn’t give myself emotionally.

The tension I’ve been carrying over the last decade seems to have fallen off me like leaves from a tree in autumn. Effortlessly. So much so that I don’t even have an overwhelming urge to smack the smug look off Wallace’s face.

“Good game,” I say, slapping him on the shoulder. The wary look in his eye makes me chuckle, and I must admit that I’m as surprised as he is.

“I’m not sure I like this version of you,” he says, eyes narrowing, a skeptical look on his face. “It’s freaking me out.”

I scowl at him. “Better?”

“Much.” Shaking my head, I laugh and walk over to my locker.

As good as I feel right now, not just from the win, but the new connection with my teammates, I know there’s something even better waiting for me.

Humming, I make my way to the shower. And leave a long line of very confused teammates behind me.

Running my hand through my damp hair, my duffle over my shoulder, I push through the locker room doors. Once out, I scan the area for Ava. When my eyes land on her with David and Scarlett, I feel my lips push up.

“Uncle Dunky!” Scarlett yells out, to the amusement of everyone within hearing distance and my complete embarrassment. Heat creeps up my neck and I narrow my eyes at her, but I can’t stop the grin from breaking out as I lift her and kiss her on the cheek. “You played better than I’ve ever seen before. It was awesome!”

“Thank you.” Making my way to David and Ava, I nuzzle my chin in her neck. She starts squealing as I hit a tickle spot.

“I have a secret...” Scarlett screams out, pulling her shoulders up to her ears to protect the sensitive areas of her neck. “Do you want to know what it is?”

“You know I love your secrets,” I say, as I pin Ava with my gaze, my lips tugging up at the corners. She’s impossibly beautiful and my heart is nearly bursting in my chest.

Scarlett covers her mouth with her hands and gets close to my ear. She whispers exactly what Ava mouthed to me, my body buzzes and I feel like the entire world is mine.

“Is that so?” I ask Scarlett, who nods resolutely. “Well then I guess I’ll need to talk with her.”

“Scarlett, let’s head home so your aunt and uncle can talk privately.” David sticks his hand out to his daughter and encourages her to come over to him. When I try to put her down, she squeezes me tighter.

“Do all these people get to stay?” Scarlett asks, pouting, as I attempt to lower her again. “Why do they get to stay?”

“Scarlett Ava James! Get over her now,” David says sternly. Pressing my lips together, I glance at Ava and see her covering her mouth. When her eyes skate to mine I feel my chest rumble. “You can talk to them both later. But right now we are going home.”

Scarlett clings to my neck harder, determined not to miss out on the upcoming exchange. “Red, do what your dad says.”

Scrunching her face, she puts her feet on the floor, crosses her arms, and stomps over to David, all of us working not to laugh at the dramatics. He puts his hand out but she pushes it away. Looking over his shoulder, eyes dancing, he throws out. “Great game Duncan. I’ll see the two of you later.”

He whispers something in Scarlett’s ear and she yells “Yes!” Then grabs David’s hand and turns to the two of us. “Bye!”

“See you later.”

Taking the few steps it takes to close the gap between me and Ava, I drop the duffle on the floor. When I stand back up, I find her watching me, her eyes shining. My eyes drift slowly over her face and she places her hands on my chest. The warmth of them slips right into my heart.

“Duncan—”

“Wait,” I place my hand over the one resting on my chest. “I need to get this out first.”

She nods and her eyes flicker with an emotion I can't discern.

Glancing away, I take a deep breath and then bring my gaze back to hers. "Ava," I say softly. "You deserve someone so much better than me."

Her eyes widen and the corner of her lips drop before she meets my gaze. I recognize the moment she realizes what I'm doing, and she rips her hand out from under mine and slaps me lightly.

"Duncan James, that's not funny—"

"It's a little funny." I smirk. Cupping her cheeks I pull her lips to mine and stop the flow of words from falling. Letting out a sigh, Ava rests her hands on my forearms and leans in to the kiss. Her lips are soft and supple under mine, making my heart race. I slowly pull away, and lean my forehead against hers.

Scrunching my face, I chuckle. "You know I couldn't let that pass, right?"

Her sapphire blue eyes dance as she shrugs a shoulder. "I guess not." A small smile lines her lips and I can't stop myself from pressing them with mine. "Can I try again..."

I nod and wait, letting every ounce of emotion I have for this beautiful, perfect woman show on my face.

"I wasn't wrong when I told you that ten years ago. You did deserve someone so much better." She pushes a strand of hair behind my ear, sending shivers down my spine. When she rests her hand on my cheek I sigh. Resting my hand on hers, I turn my face toward her palm pressing my lips to it. "I just didn't realize it would be me, ten years later."

My breath hitches and I wait for the words I've longed to hear from her my entire life.

"I love you." Her lips curve up and my heart races.

"I love you, too." My hands cup her face and I lean in, just as my lips are touching hers, I whisper the question I've been dying to ask. "Marry me?"

Her eyes widen, her brows shoot up, and a gasp escapes her. A few seconds pass before she throws her arms around me. "Yes!" Pulling her flush against me, I spin her around. "When?"

"As soon as you want." I lean in and press my lips to hers, breathing in the scent of sandalwood and letting it seep through every part of me. She cups my cheeks and kisses me quickly a few times before settling on her feet. Still holding her close, I see a glint in her eye. "Ms. Norris. I know that look. What do you have up your sleeve?"

"Want to marry me tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" My eyes widen and for a second I hesitate. "Are you sure?"

"Duncan." Her hand and eyes move over my face, and the heat I see there spills into my gut. "I let you get away once. I'm not going to make the same mistake twice."

Standing on her toes she presses her lips to mine and I sigh at the pure sweetness of her. Then she whispers. "Say you'll marry me tomorrow."

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Tea Time

Hey Tea Lovers.

The tea is piping hot today!

A bystander, who just happened to be eavesdropping on Duncan and Ava yesterday after the Wolverines game, overheard some ridiculous news.

The broody goalie and the sunny movie star are getting married!

Today!

We haven't figured out where yet...but we're working on it. smirking emoji

Congratulations to the newlyweds.

Till Next Time, Chamie

Ava

Less than twenty-four hours later Duncan and I are standing in front of the altar at the Graceland Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas. Elvis, an impersonator—we all know that he's not still alive—is dressed in the famous American Eagle Jumpsuit. He's waiting for us to tell him it's okay to start.

“Who is that?” Scarlett's voice sounds through the tablet. “And why does he have those big glasses on?”

Through the speakers we can hear David explaining quietly.

I completely forgot today was a school day, which meant they couldn't be here in person. Instead, we scheduled a time when Scarlett would be home from school so we could do a video call.

It's been great...until now.

“I like his hair,” Scarlett says and the entire room laughs.

“Thank you. Thank you very much,” Elvis answers, and I lean my face into Duncan's arm and chuckle.

“Are we really doing this?” I whisper, my cheeks ache from the grin stretched across my face since yesterday.

“Which one? Getting married or having Elvis marry us?” Duncan's chest rumbles and

his smile sends tiny shock waves through my body.

“Both?” I scrunch my face looking up at him. A tiny giggle escaping.

“Yes.” His eyes roam my face and I feel heat everywhere they touch.

Duncan looks so unbearably handsome that it hurts me to look at him. He’s wearing a dark grey suit that fits him like a glove, with a pair of blue suede shoes. It’s beyond perfect. He’s beyond perfect, and the way he keeps looking at me like he won the lottery makes all parts of me warm and fuzzy.

Grabbing my hand from his arm, he lifts it to his mouth, and chills run through me as his lips brush my skin. My heart is nearly exploding with all the love I have for him.

“Ava, if you don’t want to do this, we can wait and plan something else. I’ll marry you any place, any time. Just tell me when.”

“You’d do that for me?” I ask in awe of the man standing beside me.

“I’d do anything for you.” His husky voice leaves me slightly breathless, and his smile has my heart jumping around my chest.

There isn’t any doubt that I want to marry him or that I want to marry him right here and now. But the fact that he would come to Las Vegas, twenty-four hours after proposing, only to tell me that he would wait makes me feel like I won in life.

“When are you going to kiss?” Scarlett huffs. Once again, laughter rings out and impossibly my smile gets bigger.

“How did I get so lucky?” I squeeze Duncan’s hand in mine. “Yes, I want to have Elvis marry us. I mean, who wouldn’t want to have that experience?”

The crowd behind us cheers and I give them a fist pump with my bouquet. It only has them cheer louder.

It's a pretty packed house and honestly I'm not sure if other people are getting married or if they just followed us here to watch. Apparently, Tea Time got hold of the news that we were getting married today and figured out where.

Tea Time spreading the news makes it feel like we've come full circle.

"Aren't these two just the sweetest?" Elvis looks around the room and waits for the crowd to respond. Then looking directly at me, he asks. "Are you ready to marry this hunka, hunka, Burning Love?"

"I've never been more ready to let someone be my Teddy Bear or Love Me Tender, in my entire life."

Duncan gives me one of those smiles that sucks all the breath from me turning my knees to jelly.

"Getting into the swing of things, I see." Elvis winks, then swivels his hips.

Laughing, I squish my face into Duncan's arm. When he leans down to kiss me, Elvis puts a hand out.

"No kissing until after the I dos." He swivels his hips again. "Let's get this started, shall we? The groom is getting impatient."

"Finally!" Scarlett groans.

The room erupts with laughter and cheers. Duncan and I nod.

As Elvis starts with the invocations, Duncan's eyes beam down at me, my breath hitches, my heart stops, and the world stands still for a moment.

The ceremony is ridiculously campy, but irresistibly sweet. I've been married more than once in the movies I've filmed, but this is the best one hands down.

"The feelings you have now are a Fountain of Love that will nourish each of you as you move through life together. The rings represent the desire to show that love to the rest of the world."

Putting my left hand out, Elvis places the simple gold band Duncan and I agreed upon. He then does the same for Duncan.

"Duncan, do you promise to love Ava tender, to never treat her like a fool and never stop yourself from falling in love with her?"

Duncan looks over at me, his eyes glassy and I feel the back of my eyes burn. "I do." He lifts my hand, slides on the simple gold band. When I go to pull my hand away, he grips it tighter and slips on the most beautiful emerald cut sapphire that leaves me blinded.

"Duncan!" I gasp. "We said we weren't going to get anything fancy."

Duncan gives me a sheepish grin. "Welcome to the first day of me spoiling you for the rest of your life."

I nearly throw my arms around him, but Elvis's hand pops out again.

"Almost done, little lady."

Laughter fills the room again.

“Ava, do you—”

“Yes!” I yell and place the ring on Duncan’s finger. I slide my arms around his neck and kiss him for all he’s worth.

“Well then, I now pronounce you man and wife.”

“Took long enough.” I can all but feel the roll of Scarlett’s eyes.

The room laughs and clapping breaks out nearly bringing down the house.

When Duncan scoops me up, the room roars and my heart flies. When he snuggles his face in my neck and tells me just how much he loves me, I’m grateful for all his muscles since I’m certain I wouldn’t have the strength to stand.

Since Duncan lifted me in his arms after the ceremony, my feet haven’t touched the ground once. Getting our new room key was quite the experience. But now that he carries me over the threshold to the honeymoon suite, I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

The past thirty minutes of being Mrs. Duncan James has consisted of very little talking, at least not with words, and every little touch leaves a trail of flames across my body.

For the first time I realize how empty the characters I’ve been playing have been. I didn’t think this type of love was possible for me; heck, I didn’t believe it was possible at all. How could I, when I never got to experience it?

The absence of Duncan’s lips as he tries to navigate the room has me protesting and him chuckling.

“You don’t want to fall, do you?” Letting my hands slowly explore his face, my lips curve into a crooked grin.

“I guess.” Duncan chuckles. He gives me a quick peck that nearly makes me cry out in frustration. “You can always put me down so I can walk for myself.”

“Not in this lifetime. I’ve been waiting forever to do this.” When I quirk an eyebrow he chuckles. “Okay. Just for the next few minutes, until I find the...there it is.”

As if I am the most precious thing in the world, Duncan gently lays me on the bed. When he pulls his arms away from me, rather than following, my eyes widen in surprise.

“Mr. James, where do you think you’re going?” A mischievous grin spreads across his face and his eyes fill with heat.

“I’ll be right back.” Pointing at me, he commands. “Don’t move.”

A silly grin stretches across my face and I let my gaze roam over my husband’s body as he walks away. Extending my arms over my head, I let out a content little sigh and impatiently wait for what seems like forever.

My mind wanders over the last few weeks and everything that’s happened. An intense longing fills me, wishing Fiona was here so I could share all of this with her.

“I hope you—” his voice cuts off, and he rushes over to lie next to me, his thumb working to smooth the lines of worry on my forehead. “Ava, what’s wrong?”

The huskiness of his voice wraps around me like a blanket, and my lips lift at the corner a tiny bit.

“I was just wishing Fiona was here.” I cup his face with one hand and he turns his lips toward my palm. “I miss her so much.”

Smoothing my hair with his hands, he pins me with his gaze. “I do too. I don’t think she ever told you...” He pauses and I see, for the first time, how much Fiona meant to him too. “She was the only person who knew how I felt about you. I never told her, she just knew.”

Warmth bursts through my chest knowing that Fiona is a part of this journey, even if she’s no longer physically here.

“We can always name our first daughter after her...” He waggles his eyebrows at me and I giggle. “What do you think? We can get started right now.”

“Right now, huh?” I run my fingers over his lips and pull his face down. “I think that might be your best idea all day.”

“All day?” He stops and pulls his head away, eyes dancing. “I think I’ve had a ton of good ideas today.”

When he starts to name them I groan.

“Dunnncan,” I whine.

“Yes, Mrs. James?”

“Will you stop talking and kiss me?”

“Do you want me to stop talking for the rest of my life or for a little while?”

“Dunc—”

Duncan's lips claim mine and I lose all train of thought. When he stops, I groan. Cupping my face he whispers against my lips. "I love you so much, Ava. I look forward to a lifetime of showing you just how much."

He pulls his head away slightly and lets his eyes roam over my face. The love I see shining in his eyes makes my breath hitch.

"I love you. So much. And how about you start by showing me right now?"

Duncan's roguish grin and quirked eyebrows tell me everything I need to know. When his lips land on mine this time, there's no more talking.

The End.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Duncan

ASHARP, PIERCING BEEP ALERTS me that the current dog treats in the oven are done. Leaving the dough that I'm rolling out for the next batch, I wipe my hands on my apron and slip on some oven mitts. A sense of pride fills me at the professional convection oven in front of me filled with dog biscuits—a far cry from my humble beginnings using my oven at home.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:42 am

Accidentally In Love with my Best Friend's Brother

My best friend's annoying brother, some spilled tea, and a crazy proposition.

Josh Owen's is the top receiver in the NFL, with a bad boy reputation. He's click bait fodder for any, and all, gossip columns.

Now me, 'good girl' Brie, is in the rumor mills with him.

A released video shows us "kissing", and the news is spreading like wildfire.

His agent sees a golden opportunity for Josh to get on better terms with his team.

I think it's crazy, but Josh needs help.

In spite of our love-hate relationship, I agree to be his "girlfriend".

Spending time with him, I get to know the real person, not just the one who's constantly pushing my buttons.

I can't deny that I don't hate him. In fact, I like him. A lot.

As fake kisses feel more real, Josh brings up making 'us' real.

Only one problem, when my parents died, my heart went on lock down.

Can the bane of my existence be the one who's had the key all along?

Chapter 1

Josh

Leaning against a tree with her head buried in a book is Brianne, my sister's best friend and our next door neighbor. I feel a smile creep up on my lips as I think of how often she's in this same position. That girl studies like no one I've ever met before. It's also the reason she's top in her class and will probably graduate as valedictorian.

"Hey Brain-anne," I tease, and feel laughter getting ready to break through as I see her shoulders tense at my nickname for her, but I hold it in. The fact that she hates that nickname makes using it that much more fun. I admire how smart she is, but I would never tell her that. Plus it's way too enjoyable getting a rise out of her.

"Hey, jerk." She scowls at me. The laughter I've been holding back falls from my lips, making her scowl deepen which just makes me laugh harder.

"Not trying to scare the world today?" I think about the face masks her and my sister Susie were wearing at their usual Friday night sleepover. They're always doing these girly things and although I would never admit it to anyone, I've never seen anyone look more adorable with a green face.

I laugh even harder as she sticks her tongue out at me. "Witty come back, Brain-anne," I throw over my shoulder, as I walk past her.

"Dude, she's so cute," Scott says. Scott has been one of my teammates and friends since freshman year.

"No." The word is out of my mouth before I can stop myself. That single word by itself is more of a tell than I would like, especially since there is nothing to tell. Brie is just my sister's friend.

“She’s serious girlfriend material and not the fling type. Plus she’s like a sister to me and if you ever hurt her I’d have to do something about it.”

“I was just saying.” Scott gives me a questioning look that I ignore. I’ve given away too much already. He shrugs and drops the subject, shaking his head.

Brianne, “Brie”, is two years younger than me and has been friends with my sister since the first time they met when she came to visit her aunt and uncle with her parents. I was five and Susie and Brie were both three. Any time Brie would come to visit they would follow me around like puppies and do whatever I was doing. I would complain to Mom constantly.

“Be nice to your sister and Brie.” I can still hear her words ringing in my head. It used to annoy me to no end. Finally they got their own hobbies and would go off to do those things instead of being my constant shadows. Remembering Brie in her braids and Susie in her pigtails makes me smile. Okay, they were two of the cutest, most annoying girls in the world.

It’s not that I don’t love my sister or Brie, who’s like a second sister; it’s just that having two girls follow you everywhere when all you want to do is play with your friends is a bit of a drag. Plus all my friends would tease me about them or tease them. Which was the worst.

Even though they annoyed me, I wouldn’t hesitate to beat up anyone who would pick on them. It’s caused me to get into a few scuffles here and there.

I remember Johnny Smith picking on Brie because she was an orphan and making her cry. She was only eight at the time. I heard Susie yelling at Johnny telling him he was mean, and Johnny just laughing and pointing at Brie. He looked like an idiot.

I couldn’t believe that someone would dare pick on Brie. Before I knew it, red hot anger had me rushing over to him on the playground. The teachers had to pull us

apart, and we were both sent home for fighting.

That was the last time he, or anyone else, ever picked on Brie about the fact that her parents died in a car accident, or that she was living with her aunt and uncle.

Brie was mad at me for drawing attention to her, my sister was proud, and my mom lectured me about how fighting wasn't the answer.

"What Johnny did was wrong, Josh, and I know you were only trying to help, but using your fists is never the answer," she chided me.

"But Mom," I complained. "He made Brie cry."

"Josh, honey, your intentions were good but not your actions. Using your fists to solve a problem is rarely the answer." She would always say stuff like this to me. Unfortunately, I was never as level headed as she would have liked me to be.

"I heard you got into a fight at school with someone picking on Brie," my dad said that night when he got home, giving me a pat on the back and a proud smile. At my mom's stern look he tried to look disappointed, failing miserably. "You're still grounded with no video games for a week," he said firmly.

That wasn't the last time I would be grounded for fighting. But that particular incident was completely worth it.

Even now, I am still overly protective of both Brie and Susie, and everyone knows it.

It annoyed Susie a little but at the same time she took advantage of knowing that she could flirt with anyone and just have fun. It only truly bothered her if she had a crush on someone. Brie, on the other hand, completely hated it.

"He's your brother, not mine, and yet he acts like he has to protect me from the

world. It's annoying," I overheard Brie as I walked by Susie's partially open door. I had just come home after a night out celebrating a win that got us a place in the playoffs.

"He just loves you," Susie responded. Her words made my heart stop and my mouth go dry.

Love? I don't love Brie.

"No he doesn't, he hates me! Why else would he tease me?"

"That's what big brothers do," Susie laughed. "You're just being sensitive." Brie let out that little huff she does when she's still annoyed but doesn't have a comeback.

Ahhh yes, brotherly love. I definitely love Brie like a sister.

As we got older, Susie leaned more towards sports like me, but Brie was still seen with a book in her hand anywhere she went. If I didn't know both of them personally I would never understand why two seemingly opposite people were friends. But Susie and Brie, minus their enjoyment in slightly opposite things, were identical. It was weird, but endearing.

"Hey, big bro." Susie taps my arm bringing me back to the present moment as she walks by with a smile at Jake and Scott. Brianne, who is walking next to her, gives me a glare and the smirk that was on my face turns into a full-blown smile. I love getting her all riled up and mad at me. I swear pushing her buttons throughout the day is something I wake up looking forward to.

I hear Scott and Jake laugh and I remember they're standing across from me. We walk toward the building with everyone else.

"Dude, let's head in, the bell's gonna ring soon and I need to stop at my locker," Jake

says. He's the very conscientious student out of our trio. That perfect blend of academics and athletics. Teachers love him.

"Friday night's game is going to be a tough one," Scott says. He's all about sports. "If our D can't stop that offense there's no way we'll be able to win."

"Well, considering we are the defense and the offense we better find a way," Jake says, smacking Scott on the back of the head. "Right, Josh?"

"I'm gonna trust Coach to have a game plan," I say distractedly just as I see Brie open her locker. I grin, and just as I get closer to her, I step over to the right and gently push her locker door closed. The initial surprise on her face as the locker door swings shut immediately turns to annoyance as she realizes it's me and I chuckle.

"Seriously, Josh? You have the maturity level of a flea."

"Fleas have maturity levels? You'll have to tell me more about this one day," I say as I walk backward and smile at her. She grabs her book and slams her locker door. She's so easy to poke fun at. I turn around and walk forward still smiling. Scott and Jake join me as we go to our first period. They exchange a look and Jake takes a deep breath.

"Hey, Josh," Jake says slightly hesitantly. "I'm thinking of asking Brie to Homecoming."

"You are?" The smile falls from my face and I feel my chest tighten. I pick up my hand and rub circles in the general vicinity of my heart to loosen up the area. I'm ignoring that his words mean anything to me. "That's probably not a good idea."

My tone is harsher than I mean it to be so I try to soften it. "I mean, her uncle is really strict about things like that."

“Sure, that’s what you meant.” Scott glances at me with a sarcastic glint in his eye, and I push him into a locker.

“Stop. Brie’s like a sister and you know how I am about Susie. It’s the same thing. I’d rather not have to hurt one of my friends for breaking their hearts.”

They both give me a side eye. I shrug and roll my eyes.

“Seriously.”

“Okay,” they chorus, but I can tell they don’t really believe me.

“It was just a thought,” Jake says as we head into Homeroom.

Brianne Woodbury is nothing more to me than my little sister’s best friend. I pick on both of them equally, and am just as protective over Susie as I am Brie. There is no way that I would let anyone take advantage or hurt them.

It’s not my fault people think something differently. There is no way that I have anything more than platonic feelings for her. Period. End of story.

As the bell rings, the last thought in my head before I sit at my desk is of Brie’s scowling face when I shut her locker door. A smirk crawls on my face. Okay, so maybe I like teasing her just a tiny bit more than I do my sister. But it still doesn’t mean anything.