



Another Powerplay (Wildcatters Hockey)

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Category: Sport

Description: Hes a fortress of ice with a heart locked away. Shes the oncology nurse who might just melt his defenses. When fate throws them together, sparks fly on and off the ice.

Lennon Cruz, star defenseman for the Houston Wildcatters, thought he had his life figured out. But when Vivian Lees hat lands in his lap, everything changes. As she cares for his ailing mother, Lennon finds himself drawn to the compassionate nurse who sees beyond his tough exterior.

Together, they champion a cause close to Lennons scarred heart—reuniting service dogs with their military handlers. But as their connection deepens, buried secrets threaten to shatter their fragile chance at happiness. Can Lennon and Vivian overcome their haunted pasts and open their hearts to love? Or will the ghosts of yesterday destroy their shot at forever?

Get ready for a heart-pounding romance that will leave you breathless. One-click now and immerse yourself in this unputdownable story of healing, hope, and the power of second chances!

Warning: Contains a brooding hockey player with a heart of gold, a fierce nurse who wont take no for an answer, loyal service dogs, and a love so hot it might just melt the ice.

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Cormac

“So, we’re agreed?” I asked. “We’re moving forward with the plan to fix Cruz’s relationship with the nurse from San Francisco?”

“Her name is Vivian,” Naese said. “And he met her last summer. From what Hana told me, they really hit it off, but then Cruz shut it down.”

It was early February, and we were gearing up, as our season seemed poised to transition into a playoff run. Our current record gave us a strong shot for the Stanley Cup, and we had gathered at my house today to strategize about changing up our play and our lines to maximize health and scoring potential. And eventually, we would get to that all-important tactical meeting. But I’d asked the core group of our team, my best friends, to come over early so we could sort out Cruz’s love life.

He'd played with the tenacity we expected from him this season, just sometimes with too much fervor—unusual for one of the steadiest men on the team. And he’d seemed defeated since Naese had announced his plan to marry Hana, which he’d now done. No one liked Cruz’s current funk, so we’d decided to solve the problem.

I studied the intense faces of my teammates Maxim Dolov, Luka Stol, and Paxton Naese, and coaches Kramer and Whittaker, as they considered my question, sprawled on a semi-circle of three large sofas in front of the fireplace I’d never used. Above it hung a large, flat-screen TV playing the sports station, muted. They were all big men. Our head coach, Silas Whittaker, was graying a little at the temples, but he, like the rest of my teammates, was of powerful build.

As I waited for a response, I picked up my glass—fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice and sparkling water—and took a long, refreshing drink. The rest of the guys had sports drinks or fresh-squeezed orange juice. We were all pretty good about our diets, particularly when our coaches were in the room with us.

I'd invited Coach Whittaker to this meeting because he likely knew Cruz's history the best, though none of us was particularly well-versed in it. While Cruz was great about helping all of us with our lives, he rarely gave details about his, the shit bag.

But we were changing that—and we were going to help him.

After a moment, the heads all nodded, their lips pressed together in firm commitment.

"You won't tell the ladies?" I asked, using my stern, team-captain voice.

This caused Naese, Maxim, Stolly, and Coach Adam Kramer—still weird to call him that since he'd been my teammate for so long—to falter. Their gazes dropped to their clasped hands or out the window as they shifted.

"I don't like keeping secrets from Naomi," Coach Kramer said, his brows tugging lower. "It's a huge deal in our relationship, and I won't intentionally break her trust."

I nodded. "I get that, and I'm with you. Normally . But we found this woman for Cruz?—"

"We didn't do shit. I did," Naese said, narrowing his eyes.

"And I'm the one he's talked to about her for months now," I shot back. "I'm the one who found him all mopey at your wedding a couple of weeks ago and realized he's totally in love with her. Granted, she doesn't understand how he feels about her, but we do, and that's why we're using this information, and our closeness to Cruz, to

make sure we close this deal for him.”

“He’s mentioned her to me, too,” Coach Whittaker said. That wasn’t surprising. Coach was like an older brother for the veterans on the team. I’d gone to him for advice more than once.

“Me, too,” Coach Kramer added. “You know, I don’t think he realizes how much he’s talked about her.”

“Which is why we have to fix this,” I stressed. “He’s not the same Cruiser, and I—we—want our guy back.”

“He’s playing with more anger,” Stolly said. “I watched the film again to make sure. He does his job, and does it really well, but when it came time to let the gloves fly, well, you saw.”

“I think so, too,” I said, glancing over at Coach.

He didn’t say anything. If he knew more, which I’d bet he did, he wasn’t going to break Cruz’s trust by telling us why our best D-man was throwing too many punches.

“You think he got another concussion?” Maxim asked. His scowl appeared frightening, but that was Maxim: intense. He and Cruz were our first line D-men, and Maxim was protective. Almost as protective as Cruz.

The rest of the players looked toward Coach Whittaker. He compressed his lips. “He hasn’t had a concussion this season.”

I raised an eyebrow. Coach was dancing around the answer. “But in the off season?” I pressed.

Coach hesitated again. “There was an incident.”

“And that incident included a concussion,” Maxim concluded. “As bad as he had a few years back?”

We all shifted, likely remembering the hard hit that had caused Cruz to crumple to the ice during an early season game the Wildcatters’ first year in the league. He’d seemed okay at first, even been able to give all the pertinent information to prove he was okay—but he wasn’t. The next few hours had been surreal as he’d faded in and out of reality, sometimes thinking he was back when he’d found out his brother Ruben had been killed in action. I shuddered.

“Did he hallucinate this time?” Stolly asked. He grimaced. “Fuck, that was scary. I didn’t know how to help him.”

“None of us did,” I said. “So it’s a very good thing our team doctor’s a leading expert on head trauma.”

“That makes two concussions in his career,” Coach Kramer said. “That I know of. How worried are we?”

Coach Whittaker smoothed a hand over his trousers. “Concerned enough to have had a conversation. He said he didn’t hallucinate the last time.”

“And you believe him?” Maxim asked.

Coach hesitated. “I’m not sure...”

“That’s why you’re here,” I realized. “You know something about Cruz that we don’t, and you think it’s important we know.”

He didn't say anything, but with Coach that was basically an admission.

"Well, hell," Naese muttered. "That makes the situation even stickier."

"And more important to sort out," I said.

"Vivian's a nurse," Maxim said. "She can keep an eye on Cruz's noggin."

"Which leads back to our original plan," I said smoothly. "And not telling our wives so we can finally get credit for one of these marriages."

"Hold on, we gotta get them together first," Coach Kramer said.

"And make sure they fit," Maxim said.

"I told you, they fit," Naese grumbled.

"Be that as it may, I don't like the idea of lying, even by omission, to Millie," Stolly said. "She deserves my respect."

"Which you give her every day," Maxim rumbled with a smirk. Millie and Maxim's wife, Ida Jane, were close, so those two had become closer as well.

"Are we sure this'll work?" Coach Kramer asked. "I don't want my first time matchmaking to crash and burn. Because then it'll be my last, and worse, I'll never hear the end of it."

There were grumbles and nods. I gritted my teeth at their insecure need for a sure thing. Life wasn't a sure thing. But I did know deep in my bones that Cruz was the best of us, and he deserved to be happy as much as any of the guys in this room.

“We’re not going to fail,” I said with a confidence I was no longer feeling. “Look. We all agreed that we need to show our wives we can be just as effective at love and romance as they are. And each of you has mentioned that their bragging is getting out of control.”

“It’s the gloating,” Coach Kramer said on a sigh. “Can’t stand that shit.”

“The tone of their victory,” Stolly grumbled in agreement.

There were many nods and shifting once again. The ladies’ crowing was a live nerve.

“So we move forward with the game plan, which includes not telling the wives, unless one of them asks us straight out,” I said with a glance over at Coach for support.

He’d crossed his arms over his powerful chest and stretched out his legs, stacking his argyle-clad ankles. “Don’t look at me. I don’t like the idea of keeping something from Paloma any more than Kramer wants to keep something from Naomi.”

“But...but...we agreed we were going to be the ones to set up Cruz,” I said. A flutter of something like betrayal stirred in my gut.

“Oh, we will,” Maxim said, leaning forward. “Naese said she’s perfect for Cruz. I looked her up, and she is. Really pretty in that kid-next-door way. She walks dogs in her free time.” He shook his head. “And she knits. On purpose.”

I tucked my lips into my mouth, amused as always that Maxim got most but not quite all of the American idiom correct.

“She has the faintest of freckles on her nose,” Naese said, wiggling his fingers over his own. “They’re adorable . She’s basically his every fantasy.” He leaned back, a

cat-with-cream grin spreading on his face. “And he talks about her all. The. Time.”

“But if Hana asked you if you were actively working to set Cruz up, would you tell her?” Coach Kramer asked.

“Fuck, yes,” Naese said without the slightest hesitation. I had to respect him for that. “Like you guys said, I’m not going to lie to her. Lies have no place in our relationship.”

Naese’s father had lied to him about Hana, which had nearly destroyed their chance at a relationship. If anyone would be against lies, it was Naese.

Coach Kramer gave a nod of approval.

“You guys! The wives take credit for every one of our relationships. I want this one.” I slammed my fist on my knee to emphasize the point. “And we deserve it.”

“Then you better work fast, because Millie and Ida Jane told Paloma they’re crafting some plan with Keelie, Hana, and Naomi to get Vivian out here,” Coach said as he settled deeper into his chair. “They also think Vivian and Cruz should be together. And that’s based on Hana’s insider knowledge about Vivian’s feelings for Cruz. Plus, Hana knows the story of how they met.”

“What? No,” Maxim said. “Ida Jane said nothing of this to me.”

“They’re taking our plan and enacting it?” Stol gasped. He tugged on his lower lip. “That’s pretty smart. I mean, we all know it’s a good plan.”

“Yeah, but I was the one who realized Vivian’s perfect for Cruz,” Naese said with a pout. “I feel like they’re cheating.”

“They are,” I said. “Don’t get me wrong, we’d use any advantage against our opponents that we could?—”

“Ethically,” Coach Whittaker added firmly.

“Of course ethically.” I scowled at him, and he nodded. All right, we were on the same page. “Still, we can’t let them win this one.” I shook my head. “The gloating would be insane.”

“This is true,” Maxim said, squinting with thought. “And it appears that they have failed to mention their idea of bringing Vivian for a visit. I do not like this...lapse in their honesty.”

“Have you noticed that our wives are all competitive?” Coach Kramer asked. He leaned back against the couch, hands tucked behind his head. “They may not be as obvious about the need to win as we are, but those ladies sure do like being right and getting their way.”

Stolly and Naese, the youngest members of our group, appeared stunned. Slowly, they nodded.

“You’re right,” Naese said. “Hana is always first at work—first to a discovery. Hell, first to get out of bed.”

“It’s the quiet ones you have to watch out for,” Coach Whittaker reminded us. “They’re intense.”

We all knew this from our years on the ice. Sure, the mouthy assholes were a problem, but the guys who kept to themselves were often even more focused on winning.

Maxim narrowed his eyes. His jaw clenched, released, then clenched again. “Ah, that little sneak of mine. She must have heard me talking to Naese about bringing Vivian out for a game. I couldn’t believe she refused to come to your wedding. That’s what got me thinking about forcing the proximity.”

Naese snapped his fingers. “Oh! Yeah. I bet you’re right. Hana was all over having Vivian stay with us.”

“Why didn’t she?” I asked.

Naese shrugged. “She got busy with work or something.”

“Sounds like an excuse. Anyone know why she and Cruz are on the outs?” I asked, looking at the rest of the guys. They shook their heads.

“I bet the women do,” Coach Kramer muttered.

“We need to talk more,” I said. “I mean, among us.”

The guys shook their heads and snorted.

“We’re doing that now . It’s just that our ladies have more practice and experience,” Coach Whittaker said with an indulgent smile.

“I love Ida Jane’s commitment to happiness—ours and others—so much,” Maxim said with a blissful sigh. His icy gaze met each of ours in turn. “That said, our wives have now set the rules of this competition.”

“But I refuse to lose,” I said.

Coach uncrossed his legs and sat up, setting his elbows on his thighs. “You guys

think we're going to matchmake better than our wives?"

"We can," Stolly said. He swallowed nervously. "Once we set up the right strategy."

"We'll execute it beautifully," Coach Kramer added. "We're good at that."

Coach Whittaker looked over all of us critically. "And this will not in any way jeopardize our play on ice. I want the Cup, and I put together a hell of a team to make sure I get it."

"So do we," I assured him. "It'll be a seven-, no eight-time HEA." I grinned. "And we'll have bragging rights."

"I know what that is," Maxim said with a chuckle. He stretched out his legs and smiled like a cat who'd eaten an entire tree full of canaries. "Ida Jane likes romance novels and movies. Those make her?—"

"Don't go there!" everyone shouted.

Maxim scowled. "Teary eyed! She gets all sweet and weepy. Dirty-minded fucks."

We all guffawed.

"So does Keelie," I said once I quit laughing—in part to placate the scowling Russian but also because it was true.

"So, strategy," Naese said. "Vivian's a nurse. We know this from Hana. She likes her job, and she's good at it, but it has to be stressful."

"And you said she wants to pay off her student loans as quickly as possible," Coach Kramer added.

“Or...she’s avoiding Cruz,” Stolly offered.

“Good point,” Coach Kramer said.

“Well, that could cause a crimp in the plan.” I glanced over at Coach Whittaker. “We offer her a job with the organization. She can do?—”

He shook his head. “We can’t. She has great skills, but we don’t have a team nurse, especially not one who focuses on cancer. That’s her specialty. Paloma told me,” he added.

I felt myself sweating as I considered our dwindling chances of winning.

“M.D. Anderson,” Stolly said.

“What?” I asked.

“The cancer hospital here in Houston. Millie’s been working with them to get even better-quality staff, especially for pediatrics.”

“Cruz’s mom will help us,” Coach Whittaker said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“What?”

“But she’s a woman!”

“She might talk to the ladies...”

The comments crashed over each other.

“Lola came to see me,” Coach said. “It was a private matter, and I won’t tell you more than that, but I can say that she’s also aware Cruz has been in a funk, and she thinks he needs to work through what happened to make him push Vivian away. So, I think we get her involved in helping us craft a way to get the two of them together.”

We nodded, and I noted the determined expression on the guys’ faces.

“Sounds like the ladies are already working to get Vivian a position at M.D. Anderson,” Stolly said.

“So we focus on getting Vivian and Cruz together as often as possible,” I said. “Better yet, we get Lola to help us set up something that ensures constant contact between the two of them, and then their relationship will go from there.”

All the heads were bobbing up and down. “Sounds like a solid start to a plan,” Stolly said. “But we need more specific goals. We want them to live in married bliss, like the rest of us, right? And Cruz is planning to formalize the work he does with the military dogs once he retires, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what he said,” I replied. “Connecting K-Nines and their handlers makes him really happy.”

Naese’s smile widened. “If she likes dogs as much as Cruz, that’s another angle we can work.”

“What if Vivian doesn’t want to leave San Francisco?” Maxim asked.

Coach Kramer snapped his fingers before pointing at me. “That’s why we get Lola involved now. If she likes Vivian, there’s no way she’ll rest until she’s gotten the two of them together.”

Coach Whittaker leaned back on the couch, a slight smile gracing his lips. He crossed his hands over his stomach and let the rest of us plan—as if he weren’t as invested as we were. But I knew that wasn’t true. Cruz was a special player because he was a special man who’d held us all together during those early rough years as the league’s newest expansion team. He also held us together now that we were a force few other teams could match. I might wear the captain’s patch, but Cruz was the big brother for everyone.

“The first thing you need to do is get him to talk about the last night they saw each other,” Coach finally said.

We turned and frowned. “That’s ominous,” Stolly muttered.

“It’s part of what Lola told me in confidence. But if you want to understand Cruz’s funk and why he’s pushing away the love of his life, that’s where you need to start.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Any suggestions?”

“Well, if it were me, I’d remember the trip Cruz took last summer?—”

“To Michigan!” Maxim shouted, like this was a pop quiz.

“He was supposed to be gone four, five days, but we didn’t see him for a month,” Naese said. “Hana said he and Vivian spent a weekend together.”

“That’s where I’d start,” Coach said, slapping his knees. He rose.

“What aren’t you telling us?” I asked. I pulled out my phone.

Coach shrugged. “Like you said, there’s a reason Cruz isn’t talking to Vivian and hasn’t asked her to come here. Just like there’s a reason he stayed away for nearly a

month. If you can figure that out, you'll probably know why he's breaking his—and her—heart.”

I blew out a breath. “It's time to play sleuth. We have to get to the bottom of this. For both their sakes.”

“And ours,” Maxim rumbled.

“Yeah, Cruiser deserves to be as happy as the rest of us,” Naese said. “Ah! Found something...”

He grunted, clearly unhappy. Turning his phone around a moment later, I read the headline: Man hospitalized after knife attack .

I grimaced. “Damn. That's a big thing to keep quiet about. We definitely need more information.”

“We should talk to Cruiser's mom to get more information about all this,” Naese said.

“Glad you offered,” I told him. “Talk to her and pump Hana for information.” I rubbed my finger over my upper lip. “We gotta fix this, stat.”

Chapter

Vivian

LABOR DAY WEEKEND, the previous year

The ache in my heart swelled as I stared out at the languid waves from my beach blanket. I enjoyed the puffs of warm air that intermittently cooled my skin. “Bye, Mom. Thanks for being such a wonderful one to me,” I murmured. “I’ll always miss you.” Tendrils of peace slid over the ache in my heart, and I breathed deeply. “You were right. It’s beautiful here,” I told her, trusting she could hear me somehow. I’d never been to this part of Michigan before—never been to the Midwest—but my mother had been born here, and I wanted to spread some of her ashes at her favorite childhood haunts as I reevaluated my life and where I wanted it to go.

This was my final leg through the grief. She’d been gone five years now, but I’d had to finish my degree and get my career started before I had the time or energy to make this final stop. Now an established oncology nurse at University of California, San Francisco’s hospital, I’d found the work more draining and less fulfilling than I’d hoped.

That was also part of why I’d come here. I’d been close to my mother, done everything I could to ease her last months, but the frenetic pace of my job and the number of patients I was responsible for had already worn me down. I wasn’t sure I could keep doing the work I’d taken such pride in before. I also wasn’t sure I wanted to continue to put myself through the emotional hardship of losing people I’d gotten close to.

Perhaps the answers would come in time. I hoped so. The sun shone as the faint sound of water lapping lulled me into a half doze. For a first solo vacation—and any vacation in years—I smiled at my ability to relax. I’d really needed this time to recharge and reconsider.

“Now, if I could just find someone special to spend my life with,” I murmured. My lips tipped up. “I bet that’s asking too much, huh?”

The woman on the towel next to me glanced over, no doubt wondering who I was talking to. I waved, and she returned the gesture halfheartedly.

No more speaking aloud to my mom. Clearly no one else understood.

I leaned back on my elbows and tipped my head toward the midmorning sun, enjoying the dazzling display of a cloudless sky. San Francisco had few bright summer days like this, and now that it was September, the cool mist that dissipated in August had once again encroached along the Bay Area. While I loved the windswept coastline and the thick fog that hugged me like a blanket, there was something to be said for toasty beach days.

I startled awake when the wind picked up and whipped off the lake, fluttering umbrellas and spitting sand against my legs and arms. It lifted my wide-brimmed straw hat from my head and sent it tumbling down the beach.

I popped up from my blanket and took off after the darn thing, zigzagging between other people’s chairs, buckets, coolers, and rafts. The hat settled at the edge of a large towel, and I scurried toward it. As I moved, the heat in my shoulders informed me that I’d stayed in the sun as long as I should. I’d grab my hat and head back to my bed and breakfast for a nap before I...

A large, tanned hand snagged my hat, making it look tiny. I stopped, eyes wide as I

followed the hand up to a thick forearm and bulging biceps. The broad shoulders were covered in a fine haze of sand while his barrel chest glistened with droplets and a smattering of dark hair. He was too thick for rippling abdominals, but his stomach was taut and his waist cinched under his black swim trunks.

I lifted my gaze to the man's face and bit back a gasp. He was gorgeous . Dark hair, cropped beard, and thick black eyebrows over a straight nose. His brown eyes were soft as they smiled at me.

Holy wow . I couldn't help but wonder if my mother had not only heard my words but delivered the most perfect answer.

"Isn't this yours?" he asked.

I nodded, tongue-tied by so much masculine beauty. How had this guy just showed up right now? No way...

I wanted to believe in fate—that my mother had sent my hat to this man's towel.

"Here you go." He lifted his arm, offering the hat to me.

I reached forward, feeling slightly lightheaded as my heart thumped against my ribs. Mom, is there any way you could let me know you're involved in this? "Thank you," I said, offering a small, shy smile.

"No problem," he replied. He straightened fully, and I realized he was well over six feet tall. Based on his physique, I figured he had to be an athlete or a gym rat.

"So, I should go..." I didn't want to. For the first time in years, I felt a strong tug of attraction, and I wanted nothing more than to explore it. I glanced at his left hand. No ring. Not that that was proof positive he was single, but at least I didn't have to feel

guilty for lusting after an obviously married man.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” he said, offering a crooked grin that I found utterly charming. “My name’s Lennon.” He offered his hand.

Lennon . The strong name suited him.

I shoved my hat on my head and clasped his hand in mine. The sizzle of attraction zoomed from my fingertips up my arm and down my chest to pool warm and pleasant in my lower belly.

Damn. Lennon was potent .

“Hi, Lennon. I’m Vivian Lee.”

His smile grew wider. “Vivian. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

We stood there, hands clasped, staring at each other. Kids ran by, screaming. Cold water hit my back and shoulders, causing me to gasp and stumble closer to Lennon. He steadied my other arm at the elbow with his free hand.

“Careful there.” He squinted at the kids and the rest of the people on the beach. “It’s getting crowded.” His warm, brown gaze returned to mine. “Want to get a drink—maybe a lemonade or an iced tea? We can go up to the boardwalk,” he added. “Sit outdoors but under an umbrella to cool off.”

I didn’t know this man. I was only in town for the long weekend. “Yes.”

His eyes did that warm, smiling thing before those lips curled up as well. Ooooh . He was delicious .

“Let’s collect your stuff, Vivi.”

I gasped.

“What?” he asked, concerned. He glanced around to make sure there wasn’t a problem.

“N-nothing. It’s just... My mother used to call me that.”

“Vivi?” he asked. His brows loosened as he smiled. I wished I could tell if that was a dimple in his cheek, but the beard was too thick. “The name suits you.”

“That’s what she always said.” And that’s when I knew for sure Lennon was my mother’s answer to my prayer. I stood still, analyzing my feelings and thoughts as he collected his towel and flip flops. Was I being ridiculous? Fanciful? Part of me knew I was, and yet, I couldn’t seem to care, especially when Lennon picked up a thick hardcover by a popular thriller writer. A man who read. So sexy.

“You’re not seeing anyone?” I blurted. I had to be sure.

He side-eyed me. “No. Except you, if you’ll let me.” He tucked the book under his arm and tossed the towel over his shoulder. “I would never disrespect the woman in my life like that.” After a brief pause, he asked, “Are you seeing anyone?”

I shook my head. “No. But I’m just in town for the weekend.” I bit my lip. “I thought it fair to let you know.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the honesty. And so you know, I don’t live in the state. I’m from Texas.”

“Oh?” I asked. “So you’re on vacation, too?”

“Yep. I got in last night. This is my first stop. I’d read about this place and wanted to visit.” He scanned the beach, the water, then redirected his attention to me. “It’s exceeded my expectations.”

My cheeks warmed at the compliment, and I smiled. “I agree.”

We walked back to my blanket and large tote. Lennon helped me fold the blanket but gave me space to sort out my stuff and pull on my coverup and sandals.

“So...you weren’t looking to meet anyone, were you?” I asked, shyness overwhelming me. He offered to take the tote, but stopped, as if unsure that I’d let him. I probably wouldn’t because my wallet, phone, and keys were in it, but I appreciated the gesture.

He shook his head. “Nah. I just had this urge to come to the beach after my run. Originally, I’d planned to get brunch and go for a hike, but I couldn’t shake the need to get to the beach.”

Mom. Fate. Whatever. I really felt like Lennon and I were supposed to meet.

“Now I’m even more glad I listened to my gut,” he added.

“About coming to the beach or coming to Michigan?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Both. I had some time off, and my sister was happy to dog sit, mainly because Belladonna and her dog get along so well.”

He spoke with easy affection about his sister and dog. Sure, he could be laying it on thick in an effort to manipulate me, but I knew he wasn’t. Lennon was direct, easygoing, gorgeous. And he wanted to spend time with me. Internally, I jumped up and down, squealing.

He smiled at me as we headed up the beach to the short, quaint boardwalk with its cafés and shops.

“I’ve never done this before,” I said.

His dark eyebrows shot up. “Gone on a date?”

My gait hitched before I righted myself. A date . Well, good to know he thought of it as such. “N-no. Just gone off with a man I’ve known for five minutes. You know, a stranger.”

He walked beside me up the steps. “Well, I hope to change the stranger part pretty quickly.” He turned and peered down at me. “I’m attracted to you, Vivi.”

He just put it out there, like admitting his feelings was no big deal. Maybe for him it wasn’t. For me...it was huge . I’d always been a bit reserved. Not shy exactly, but slow to warm up to new situations.

“I’m attracted to you, too,” I whispered, mesmerized by his eyes and already addicted to the way he made me feel. I was giddy and warm.

He smiled again, and I smiled back. “Great. So, we’ll see where this goes. Maybe we’ll be bored, but at least we’ll have cooled off, and I’ll have eaten.”

I laughed. “And have a fun story to tell our friends about the capricious wind and a hat.”

He nudged me gently with his elbow. “Exactly.”

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Chapter

Lennon

The moment I saw Vivian, my intuition had pinged. She was special. Very special.

She wore a one-piece swimming suit in a shimmery turquoise that exposed one lightly freckled shoulder. Bright pink toenails peeped out of the sand while big, soft silver eyes met mine. Her bangs tickled her eyelashes, and she brushed them back into that tangle of loose reddish-brown curls tumbling down her back.

She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever met, and my attraction to her was deep, strong . I had to hope it was mutual.

"So...a drink?" I asked once we'd reached the boardwalk. Kids and seagulls shrieked while parents washed sand from their bodies and kids' toys. The sky was bright blue and the sun hot enough to make me sweat.

She nodded, offering me a shy, partial smile. "I'd like that."

"Let me know what looks good."

"Oh, um, you sure?" She tucked a few loose strands of hair back and blinked.

I hated missing even a second of staring into those gorgeous eyes. "Absolutely. I want you to be comfortable."

Her smile lit me up from the inside. “Okay. Well, how about there?” She pointed to a café tucked down at the end of the strip. Its little blue awnings rustled in the breeze. It was more than half full but not in the main action.

“Great choice,” I said.

We walked down the wooden path. “So, what do you do, Vivian?” Not my greatest conversation starter, but then, I hadn’t planned on meeting a beautiful woman today. I’d thought I’d read my book, take a dip in the lake, have a couple of good meals. Then, Sunday evening, I’d fly back to Houston and kick my training into high gear.

Already I was rearranging my schedule so I could spend another day, maybe two, with Vivian.

“I’m an oncology nurse,” she said. “That means I work with cancer patients. Mine are mainly older adults, but I get some younger people in the mix. Too many,” she said with a sigh.

“Wow. That’s got to be emotionally tough. My friend’s wife is an art therapist for kids who suffered trauma. I must say, I’m as impressed by your choice as I am Ida Jane’s. Compassion and an iron will.”

We entered the café’s outdoor seating area. I looked to Vivian when the hostess asked where we wanted to sit. She nibbled her lip. “Is inside okay? I think I’m on the brink of a sunburn.”

“Whatever you want,” I said.

Once we were situated in a booth at the back, we returned to our conversation. I tensed when Vivian asked me what I did for a living. Moment of truth . Some women wanted to hook up with a professional athlete. Others were turned off by the

schedule.

“I play hockey for the Houston Wildcatters.”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t know what I expected you to say, but that wasn’t it.” She smiled at the waiter who brought us water and menus. “Do you like it?”

“I love hockey. I’ve been playing since I was ten, and the moment I strapped on skates, took the stick in my hands, I was home.”

“Wow. That’s amazing. I wish I had that type of connection to my work. Though I don’t like the potential for concussions. We’ve heard so much about those in recent years. Didn’t some football star mention a Parkinson’s diagnosis related to hits to the head?”

“Yeah, he did, and it’s something the team and each player takes seriously. I’ve had one concussion, about five years ago, right after I started playing for Houston. I was a mess for days—hallucinations, headaches, unable to focus, light sensitivity... You name it, I had the symptom.”

Vivian bit her lip. “I just wish sports weren’t so dangerous, that you could enjoy your career without such big inherent risks.”

“Everything has risks. Even nursing, though maybe not the type you do. But I know an ER doctor, and he has some crazy stories.”

“I bet he does,” Vivian said. “Substances like drugs and pain are a rough combination.”

“You sound less than enthused about your career choice,” I said, leaning back against the cushion. “I thought that was a calling.”

Vivian's face fell, and she sighed. "I chose to be a nurse, and to go into oncology, because my mother died of ovarian cancer five years ago."

I reached across the table and touched my fingers to the smooth, cool skin on the back of her hand. "That's tough. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Her expression turned wistful. "Me, too. My mother was an amazing woman, and I miss her." Vivian's teeth sank into her lower lip. "I'm actually here because of her."

"Oh?" I sipped my water.

"My mom was from here. She talked about her hometown a lot, and I wanted to check it out. I'm kind of finishing up my farewell tour, I guess you'd say."

My respect for this woman kept increasing. "I bet she'd love that."

"I hope so. This was my last place to go. Today was my final goodbye." She picked up her water and took a long drink. When she set it down, her eyes were bright, maybe with tears, but her face was relaxed. "That's a bit deep for a get-to-know-you drink. Sorry."

I leaned closer. "Please don't apologize for being you. I happen to like what I've heard and what I see. You're a thoughtful, compassionate woman, Vivian."

She chuckled even as she shook her head. "Well, I'm all right, I guess. Tell me more about you." She cupped her chin in her palms, those silvery eyes focused on me.

We sat in that booth for hours. At first, we simply ordered drinks—Arnold Palmer for her, iced tea for me—then appetizers, and finally a late lunch. As the waiter heaved a sigh while filling our glasses, Vivian glanced around. Her eyes widened and a flush worked its way up her neck and stained her cheeks. "Wow. It's nearly dinner time.

This place has filled up. I guess we should give up the booth so a family can have it.”

I nodded reluctantly. “I have to admit, I don’t want our time here to end. I’ve so enjoyed getting to know you.”

She grinned. “And I you. But I’m not suggesting we go our separate ways.” She tugged out her wallet and riffled through it.

“I got this, Vivi,” I said quietly. I pulled out three hundred-dollar bills and set them on the table under the saltshaker. Vivian gawked at me.

“We hogged one of the best tables all afternoon. The least I can do is leave Joseph a decent tip.”

“That’s so generous,” she stammered.

I smirked. “Maybe I’m just showing off, trying to make you think I’m a better person.”

“Are you?”

She’d collected her items, so I set my hand at her lower back as I led her out of the restaurant. We stepped out into the late afternoon, and I raised my eyebrows. Vivian pointed to the right, so I turned that way, falling into step beside her.

“Nope,” I told her. “My mother was a waitress when I was little. She worked her way up to a high-end place that even offered health insurance. That’s how I was able to get skates. I’ll never forget how excited she was after one generous businessman doubled his check. Mom had told him about me playing hockey and how I was a natural, but it was hard with me and my two sisters. That guy was a regular at the place, always asked for my mom, always left her a big tip. He’s the reason I was able

to do summer camps and get a scholarship in Michigan. Without Brendan, I wouldn't be a starting D-man for my home team."

"So you're a pay-it-forward kind of guy."

"When I can be."

"I like that," she said. We walked in silence until we came to a small, quaint Victorian in pastel blue with yellow accents. "This is me," she said. Then, she laughed. "Well, it's me for the next two nights." She tucked her hair back again. "I had a great time today, Lennon. And I'd love to see you?—"

"How about in an hour, hour and a half?" I asked. I rocked back on my heels, shocked by how much I didn't want to leave her, even for that short amount of time. Is this what falling in love feels like? Can it hit this fast, this hard?

I wasn't sure, but I knew I liked these emotions bubbling up in my gut and chest, and I really liked how Vivi made me feel.

"I-I?—"

I frowned. "I came on too strong."

Vivian shook her head. "It's more that I'm worried about taking up too much of your downtime. I just... I don't want you to regret this weekend."

I leaned in a little so I could smell her shampoo. "There's one thing I know for sure, Vivi, and that's that I could never, ever regret meeting you."

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Chapter

Vivian

Later that night, we sat back on the beach, this time to watch the sunset. Lennon had brought a large blanket as well as a bottle of wine, sharp cheddar cheese, crackers, and grapes. We'd nibbled our way through most of it while we sipped and enjoyed the balmy breeze and the faint lapping of waves along the shoreline.

Lennon was so big, so solid. He made me laugh, but he made me feel safe. Wanted.

I'd forgotten how lovely those feelings were. Now that I'd reconnected with them, I knew I'd crave them always. Especially with Lennon.

"What's that look for?" he asked.

He was careful about touching me, always giving me the chance to pull back or away. He'd told me about his two sisters, and it was clear he took their emotional well-being seriously. My heart warmed to putty as I leaned into his hand, nuzzling my cheek to his palm. He cupped his fingers to accommodate my cheek and chin. I sighed as my eyelids fluttered. Contentment washed over me.

"It's getting late," Lennon said.

"I can't believe I only have one more night here after this one—one more night with you."

“Well, that’s one more night here . But I have a few weeks before the start of my season. I’ll visit you. Then, when you have more time off, you can visit me.”

I tipped my head back and met his dark gaze. “Can it really be that easy? I mean...”

“Are you asking me if this is real? What we’re feeling for each other?”

I nodded, the lump in my throat too large for me to speak around.

“I think it is. I want it to be. But the only way we’ll know is if we keep seeing each other.” His hand slipped from my cheek to my nape. “I care about you, Vivian. More than I have for anyone. Ever. Which freaks me out even as it excites me. I want to know you, to see if we’re as compatible in three weeks and three months as we could be in three years.”

“But we live over a thousand miles apart...”

“We do, but I won’t play hockey forever.”

I sucked in a breath. “You’d move closer to me?”

“If you wanted to stay in San Francisco, then sure. As long as we could visit my mother and sisters from time to time.” Lennon pursed his lips. They were lush and looked so soft against the dark hairs of his beard. “Well, it would probably need to be every couple to three months. My mom and sisters get into mischief.”

I smiled. “I don’t actually have any reason to stay in San Francisco. I mean, I have a friend...ish person in my building, but since my mom died and I finished school, I’ve just been working. I don’t have much holding me there.”

Lennon leaned closer, so close that I could feel the heat of his skin. I shivered with

the need for him to be even closer. “Those details we can sort through once we’re sure this is what we want.”

“Okay,” I breathed.

“Right now, though, I have a terrible need...”

“What’s that?”

“I desperately need to kiss you,” he said.

Without thought, I licked my lips, desperate to feel the pressure of his skin to mine. “Yes. Please.”

He stared into my eyes as his lips met mine. The hair of his beard tickled my cheek and chin, and I shivered again, loving the dichotomy of textures. His lips were even more supple than I’d expected. Soft, warm, delicious . He tasted of the wine we’d drunk but also of man.

That deliciousness settled in my bloodstream like a warm haze, and I knew one taste, one million tastes of Lennon Cruz wouldn’t be enough. He was addictive, even as he felt like home.

He didn’t deepen the kiss more than soft swipes of his tongue against my lower lip and the tip of my tongue. It was sweet but sultry—a promise of more to come.

And I wanted more. Much more.

He pulled back and met my gaze again. Only then did I realize I’d closed my eyes. “Oh, Vivi. I’m never going to get enough of you.”

His deep voice was soft, almost its own caress over my skin. I clung to his shoulders as I pressed my cheek to his. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“I should get you back to your bed and breakfast.”

Disappointment hit, as did nervousness. As quickly as I was falling for Lennon, I wasn’t ready to jump straight into sex.

He must have felt me tense up because he whispered, “Hey, hey, now. We may only have a few days here, but we have all the time in the world to get to know each other. To be with each other. I don’t want to rush us as we become us.”

A faint smile tugged at my lips. “Okay.”

He brushed his lips against my temple. In a graceful move I wouldn’t have expected from such a large man, he rose to his feet. He held out his hand to me, and I placed mine in his. He gently tugged me upward and against him, where we cuddled for long moments.

“There’s also the fact that...well, I like to be in control,” he said.

I tipped my head back and looked at him. “What do you mean?”

He hesitated, clearly trying to choose the right words. “In the bedroom, I like to be in charge.”

“Okay. That doesn’t seem to be a dealbreaker.”

“I hope it isn’t. We’ll explore it when we’re ready.” He offered me a smile.

I smiled back. “I like everything we’ve done together, Lennon. I don’t think you

wanting to tell me what to do during sex is going to change that.” In fact, part of me found the idea comforting and exciting. Being slightly awkward, I’d always spent too much time in my head to fully relax and go with the moment.

“To sleep with you now, so we can get up and out tomorrow,” he said, all business.

“Is this part of you being in control?” I raised an eyebrow.

He considered the question before nodding. “Yeah, I think it is.”

“So...what do you want to do?” I asked. “After I get a nice sleep tonight?”

He side-eyed me as he finished folding the blanket, a smile tugging at his lips. “As long as it’s with you, I’ll be happy.”

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Chapter

Lennon

The next day was clear, bright, and just the faintest bit crisp—a perfect day for a hike, which led Vivian and me on gentle switchbacks up to a rise above the lake. We sat on a sun-warmed boulder at a deep blue pond surrounded by green trees while white clouds reflected on the mirrored surface. I turned to look at Vivian, who had leaned back on her palms. She wore khaki shorts that showed some of her creamy, well-defined thighs, and an elbow-length T-shirt in a pale pink. She looked fresh and sweet and fit—absolutely perfect.

“It’s so pretty up here,” she said.

“It is,” I agreed.

She smiled, flashing a faint dimple, as she continued to look at the view, and I continued to look at her. “Eyes on the prize, Lennon.”

“They are.”

She laughed, a bright, cheery sound that had me cracking a grin. She placed her palm in the center of my chest and kissed me. My arms came around her as I settled into the moment.

Falling in love was everything I’d hoped it would be but better. I was so enthralled, I almost skipped my way back down the trail. We snacked on local cherries, cheese,

and crackers at a picnic table at the lake's edge.

"Ooh, how do you feel about a canoe ride?" Vivian asked as we passed the stack of boats.

"Not sure I'll fit," I said.

"Oh, you're not that big," she said.

I smirked. She flushed and bit her lip. I took pity on her and said, "I've always wanted to canoe."

"Me, too. Do you understand the paddling? That confuses me."

"I think so. But only one way to find out. Let's go."

Vivian laughed so hard at my attempts to get in the damn thing, I thought she'd fall out. Somehow, we managed to shove off the shore.

This far from the public beach, the water was glass smooth. The temperature was moderate, and the faintest hum of insects added to the serenity of the moment. Vivian tipped her head back, elongating her neck and giving me a view of her cheek around her hat's brim.

Her hair was braided today, but soft wisps had slid out, framing her oval face.

For nearly twenty years, I'd been my mother's and sisters' protector. Their main provider. I'd made sure everyone had enough to eat, money for gas, school, clothes. I no longer had to worry about any of them—my mother now worked as an assistant for one of the lawyers at my sister Mia's firm, whereas my youngest sibling, Nina, was in her third year as an interior architect. All were financially stable and held jobs

that paid them more than their bills.

They were happy, healthy, and no longer my responsibility. Vivian could be my priority—Vivian and the family I could see us having. A kid or two sitting between us in the canoe in an ugly orange life vest. Belladonna or another large dog would join us.

The image was so real, so powerful, I ached for it to be true. I vowed then and there that such a future would be mine— ours .

“This is nice,” I said. “Peaceful. I can see why people like doing it.”

“I wonder why my mom moved away from here,” Vivi murmured. “It’s kind of paradise, really.”

“Maybe we could make it a tradition to come up for a week every year,” I said.

Vivian’s silver eyes glowed. “You think you’d want to do that with me?”

“I’m surer with each passing minute.”

She pulled her paddle out of the water and turned to face me. “Me, too. Lennon, I can’t tell you how much I’ve enjoyed the last two days.”

“I know. It’s almost like a dream.”

Later that night, after a sumptuous dinner that left us both full and a little sleepy, we held hands as we meandered down the side street we’d taken as a shortcut to get back to Vivian’s bed and breakfast. It sat at the far end of the street, a tall sentinel against older homes, some dilapidated but others refreshed with crisp lawns and flowers bursting from their beds. We hit a section of the street that was darker than the rest

because a couple of streetlights were out. Unease dripped down my spine and my steps slowed, which had Vivian glancing up at me.

“Maybe we should go back to the main street,” she said.

I shook off my concerns. “The area’s populated enough,” I said. “I’m sure it’s fine.” I shot her a smile to show I wasn’t worried about it...until shapes slunk out of the shadows. Worse was the glint of metal on the blades they held.

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Chapter

Lennon

As one of the enforcers for my hockey team, I'm used to charging toward violence. But this quaint street on a sultry night with Vivian at my side threw me. And that moment of hesitation nearly cost us our lives.

Within a few seconds, four men had materialized from those shadows, surrounding us in that moment of indecision. I drew Vivian closer to me, which allowed the man nearest her to take another step.

"We'll take your money," the man in front of me said.

"And any other valuables you might have," the one nearest Vivian added. He leered at her.

"Sure," I said easily. "We don't want trouble."

The man in front of me chuckled. "Then toss your wad of cash over, big spender."

I reached into my pocket slowly and did as he asked. Vivian whimpered as she slid her small purse off her arm and threw it at the spokesman's feet.

He bent down and counted the bills. "This all you got, hockey star? I expected more from you."

He knew who I was, which meant this wasn't a random act. These men had targeted me, and that put Vivian at risk.

All my senses amplified—along with my heartrate—and yet I couldn't see the fourth man, the one behind me. As I'd anticipated, he was the one to attack first. He kicked me in the back of the knee, and I went down, hard.

"Since you don't have the kind of score we're looking for, we'll take it out of your woman instead," said the man nearest Vivian.

She screamed my name just before the man grabbed her, gripping her cheeks and covering her mouth with one hand while the other arm banded her waist. With a roar that came from some deep, primitive place inside me, I lunged, knocking the other two men into the one holding Vivian. She stumbled but managed to dart away, eyes wide. From the corner of my eye, I saw the fourth man move toward her.

"Run!" I bellowed. Then I swung at the fourth man, connecting my fist to his throat with a brutal hit that dropped him to the ground.

The other three fell back, clearly surprised by my ferocity. That lasted two breaths, maybe three, before they converged.

A fist fight is infinitely different—and more civilized—than a knife one. I took multiple cuts to my left arm, cheek, and neck as I pummeled, kicked, and slammed the three men into each other.

I was outnumbered but not outclassed; I could take these three. But the fourth man must have not been knocked out. In a flash I found my head yanked back and the blade pressed deep into my neck.

"Move again, fucker, and see what happens."

I forced my muscles to relax. He changed the tilt of his blade and pressed it into my cheek. I hissed in pain as the blade sliced through my flesh. The rest of the men moved in closer. The man with the knife yanked it back as the man who'd grabbed Vivian buried his fist in my gut while another slammed his booted heel into my thigh. One of the men slammed his fist against my temple as my body turned toward him, knocking me farther off balance. As I went down, someone slashed my left arm with his knife. All that happened before I could blink or react.

Then, I did respond. My head was fuzzy from the hit to my temple, but I refused to go down easily. It wasn't in my nature. As if on autopilot, I lashed out, and I heard the snap of a broken arm—maybe elbow—as I plowed through one man and kicked at the next one. A knife glinted in the dark right before I jerked back. The blade slashed my head, and blood dripped into my eyes as I punched the third man.

Not going down.

I would not lose this fight. I couldn't. Vivian needed me.

Sirens blared as a patrol car careened around the corner, flashing red and blue lights. I sank to my knees, trying to blink the blood from my eyes as I swayed. My head throbbed. My vision blurred. I couldn't sit up.

I was dizzy, nauseated. Where was Vivi? I slid onto my side. My head landed on something soft. Well, softer than the asphalt road. Vivian's purse, probably. Good. The bastards wouldn't get her ID. I just needed to stay awake long enough to make sure they were gone.

But I didn't. I passed out. At least, I think I did; I wasn't sure because time seemed to wrap and warp around itself.

Vivian . I needed to be sure Vivian was safe...

My head. Something was wrong with my head.

The first man—the spokesman of the gang—squatted next to me. I couldn't make out his features, but I didn't know if that was because of the blood in my eyes, the shadows, or from the blows to my head.

Concussion .

I moaned. That's all I needed—a second concussion. The first time, I'd seized on the ice and had terrible hallucinations that forced the team doctor to sedate me for nearly two days until the swelling subsided enough for me to separate reality from my mind's fevered fantasies. He'd told me then that another hit to the head would cause serious, possibly permanent, damage.

Today, I'd taken some hefty blows, and already my mind felt...off. So did my body; it refused to respond to my determination to punch the bastard who'd threatened Vivian and hurt me. The first man leaned in closer even as the sirens wailed and tires screeched.

The man's fetid breath washed over me, smelling of burning rubber, blood, and sweat.

“You're famous, fuckwad, so we'll know where to find her. You can't protect her all the time. Rich assholes like you shouldn't get all the good things in this world, and we're going to start evening the score with your bitch.”

I blinked as a different man knelt beside me. I shrank back, but he was too busy calling for an ambulance to note my behavior. My vision faded again. Everything felt as if it were coming through a huge fishtank. The distortion of my senses and a heaviness against my skull reminded me of how my older brother, Ruben, had talked about the aftermath of the IEDs his team sped through when in Afghanistan. That was

one of the last conversations I'd had with him, because a couple of weeks later, his luck had run out, and he'd died when his partner stepped on a nearby IED.

The sound of footsteps wobbled from my ears to my mind.

Vivian sobbed my name.

Hospitals are just about my least-favorite places in the world. One I liked even less was that Michigan street with the knife-wielding hoodlums. But waking in a hospital was a close second.

Very close.

"Lennon? Can you hear me? Lennon?"

Vivi's voice. I struggled out of the fog, desperate to reassure her. But my mind shied away from the pain.

When I finally woke, it was to a kind of agony that made me wish I hadn't. I must have made some sound because suddenly, a hand slipped into mine.

"L-lennon? Can you hear me?"

"Yeah. I can hear you."

"Oh, thank goodness." Vivian leaned in close enough for me to see her pale face. It was clean, devoid of the pretty eye shadow and lip gloss she'd worn at dinner. I squinted, noting her messy pile of hair and blue scrubs.

"How long..."

“About thirteen...” She glanced at something above me, probably a clock. “Almost fourteen hours. It’s Monday morning.”

“You have a plane. Work.”

She touched my cheek with her shaking fingers. She pulled back quickly and fisted her hands. “As if I could leave you like this.” She swallowed. “I was so worried about you.” Her voice cracked, but she took a breath and calmed herself. Now, in a set of scrubs, in the face of trauma, I understood that Vivi wasn’t just a good nurse; she was a great one. She’d compartmentalized the terror she must have felt and was there for me the way I needed—serene and solicitous.

“The injuries...how bad?” My mind seemed to be sorting out whatever medication I’d been given, and my thoughts were still fuzzy.

Vivian’s face crumpled, and I reached for her. I winced, remembering the cuts to my left arm. I hadn’t thought they were too bad. Maybe I was wrong.

“M-most are superficial.” She winced. “That makes it sound like it’s not a big deal, but you’re pretty battered, Lennon. There’s bruising from where they hit?—”

“And kicked. One of the guys got in a good kick.” I scowled, but that pulled at the goose egg on my temple. The swelling had to be bad for me to feel it, which meant I had to have had a concussion.

“Right. Hit and kicked.” Vivi stuttered a breath. “The cut to your neck is the worst. It required a lot of stitches. The one to your scalp bled a lot—as head wounds do—but it’s not deep. For both that one and the neck wound, the plastic surgeon did an internal and external set of stitches to minimize scarring. But...” She pressed her lips together and fought off her trembling jaw. After a long inhale and exhale, she continued, “But you will have some scar tissue.” Her face crumpled. “I’m so sorry.

You were walking me back. This is all my fault?—”

“Shh, Vivi. No. No, it’s not your fault. You didn’t decide to take that shortcut. I did. You didn’t threaten or hurt me. It’s their fault. And they’ll pay.”

Vivi smashed her lips together. “Well, they may not.”

I blinked. “Why?”

“Because the police haven’t found them. Not a single sighting.”

“What? No, that can’t be right. There has to be CCTV or...or...traffic cameras...or...”

“I didn’t see any of the faces. They wore masks.”

I frowned but had to stop when my scalp tugged painfully. “They did?”

“It was so fast. But yes. They had on those skiing masks over the bottom part of their face and beanies. So all I could see were eyes. If they ditched the masks?—”

“Gaiters.” At her look, I elaborated. “Those masks are called gaiters. My friend’s Canadian, another one is Russian. They like them when they’re skiing or snowshoeing. They said they’re better at retaining heat along their necks.”

That reminded me of the slicing to my skin. I raised my right hand—that arm, my dominant one—wasn’t injured, and I was so thankful for its use. Another thought hit me— hockey . The season started in a few weeks. I had to play. I’d signed a three-year contract, my largest ever. I couldn’t walk away from that now because I needed the money to set up my nonprofit that would reunite service members with their K-9s.

Plus, my team needed me. I was one of two defenders who kept the Wildcatters on the positive side of goals scored.

“It’s okay, Lennon,” Vivian said, likely noting my rising worry. “That wound is the worst, like I said, but you’ll make a full recovery. In fact, if you grow your beard, no one will know it’s there.”

I dropped my hand. “Okay. That’s good. Very good. I won’t have to quit. I’ll heal before the season. Good.”

“Yes, it is good.” Vivian offered a tentative smile, and I responded with my own.

But my head ached, and worry settled over me. I hurt. I was unsettled by the lack of arrests. “You need to go home,” I said.

“I will. I have to get back to work?—”

“Right. So you should go now. You’ll be safe there.”

Vivian frowned. “I’m safe here. Those men aren’t going to come into the hospital. Plus, they left my wallet, which had my driver’s license. They don’t know my name or where I live.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“You’re agitated. That could be from the medication. Do you want me to call someone?—”

“No,” I interrupted. I took her hand in my right one and gave it a squeeze. “No. I’m good, I’m going to nap, I think.”

I closed my eyes and tried to even out my breathing. But I didn't sleep. I kept remembering the gang spokesman's comments. Much as I wanted to frown, I didn't—it hurt too much. He'd said he'd find Vivian and hurt her because she was mine.

But relief swept through me as I realized he didn't know anything about her and had no way to find her. Me, though, I was easy to locate, just like he'd said. Which meant I had to keep my distance.

Even if the thought made me want to curl into a ball and stop getting better.

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Chapter

Vivian

Something was off with Lennon. He'd been so quiet when I told him the details of our attack. I'd expected him to rant, maybe even rage, but he didn't. He'd simply absorbed the information with that same patient expression on his face.

Only later did I realize that Lennon had slipped on a mask in the hospital—and that armor concealed something that happened the night we were attacked. I wasn't sure what had transpired between Lennon and those men, but those moments had left serious consequences.

Clearly, those long, long minutes when I'd run for help, my heart thumping, had been violent and painful for Lennon. Thankfully, as I'd turned the corner, I'd found a police cruiser easing down the street a couple of blocks away. I'd sprinted into the road, waving my arms and screaming. Well, I'd tried to scream, but I was breathless and unable to do so. Still, the patrol team had noticed me and flipped on their lights so they could get to me faster.

Breathing choppily, I'd told them of the attack, pointing to the road. The man and woman had wasted no time speeding toward the Lennon, siren blaring. I'd slammed my palms to my ears and ducked my head. But my need to get back to Lennon had outweighed the discomfort, and I'd followed the cruiser to the scene. When I arrived, the female officer had been bent over Lennon, assessing his injuries as she spoke into her shoulder microphone. The male officer had torn off down the road, probably after our attackers, though I couldn't see them.

I'd fallen to my knees, cradling Lennon's bloodied head in my lap. "Do you have anything I can use to compress the wounds?" I'd asked.

The officer had nodded and hurried back to her rig.

"Oh, Lennon," I'd murmured. "Please be okay. I need you to be okay."

I'd bitten back the sob working its way up from my chest and focused on doing my best to mitigate his injuries. I'd breathed a sigh when I realized the wound to his scalp wasn't deep. The bruise to his temple worried me, and my anxiety had ratcheted up when he began to mumble about not letting the men hurt me.

"Not Vivi. She's precious. Beautiful. Not Vivi. I won't let you hurt Vivi."

My heart had swelled. Even in this vulnerable state, Lennon had thought of me, wanted to protect me at great cost to himself.

"You're safe now," I'd told him. The officer had thrust a cloth toward me, and I'd applied pressure to the wound on his scalp, pulling the fabric around so I could also compress the deeper cut on his neck.

"Vivi," Lennon had mumbled. "Too sweet to be caught up with me. Ruben was right. I always end up causing hurt."

Clearly Lennon didn't remember those frenetic moments between the police's arrival and the trip in the ambulance. He'd passed out when they lifted him onto the gurney.

I'd insisted on riding in the ambulance, nodding my thanks for the antiseptic wipe the EMTs had given me to wipe my bloodied hands.

By the time we'd arrived at the hospital, I'd calmed down enough to realize Lennon

wasn't in imminent danger. I'd given the officers my statement and then gone to sit in the waiting room.

A little girl there had looked at me and my blood-covered dress and burst into tears. The charge nurse had come around the corner to see why the child was so freaked out and shook her head. "You, come with me."

Linda, as I found her name to be, had offered me the staff's bathroom facilities and a pair of her scrubs, which I was still wearing because I hadn't wanted to leave the hospital until I was absolutely positive Lennon would be okay.

I looked over at him in the bed as he stirred. "What do you need?" I asked.

He peered up at me from half-closed lids. Whatever medication they'd given him was strong. Or his concussion symptoms were worse than I'd assumed. I bit my lip, wanting to ask him about his history with concussion, but I stopped.

Delving into Lennon's medical history might upset him. Better to let him tell me what he wanted, when he wanted.

"Water, please," he said.

I picked up the cup and tipped the straw so he could sip the liquid comfortably.

"You have to go home, Vivi," he told me.

I frowned. "Are you trying to get rid of me?" I kept my tone light, but my heart was heavy.

"No, of course not. But you have a job, and I'm sure there are consequences for missing a shift. I don't want that for you."

“I’ve already called the hospital?—”

“But you told me you didn’t have a lot of accrued time off. Don’t waste it on me.”

“It’s not wasted,” I snapped. Then, I closed my eyes and blew out a breath. “I want to be here. With you.”

“There’s nothing you can do for me here. Except lose your job, and I don’t think you’re willing to let me pay your rent.”

I looked away because he was right; I wasn’t comfortable with Lennon paying any of my expenses. We hardly knew each other. “I…” I swallowed the lump bulging in my throat. “I don’t want to leave you.” I don’t want to lose you. You’re the very best thing that’s happened to me in years, since before my mother fell ill.

Yesterday, I might have said that to Lennon, but now something was different. The situation between us was…off. “You don’t want me anymore,” I whispered.

“Oh, Vivi. No, that’s not true. I…” He closed his eyes, and his lashes tangled together as he squeezed them shut. “I care about you. A lot.” He met my gaze. “But I can’t be the reason you’re hurt, that you lose your job or can’t make rent. That’s not okay. You see where I’m coming from.”

Slowly, I nodded. I did see, but something deep inside me said that if I left now, this way, nothing would be right between us again. “I…”

“I’m going to be stuck here for…what?”

“Two days, possibly more,” a voice said from the doorway.

We both turned, Lennon more slowly and with obvious discomfort, to see an older

woman in a white lab coat standing just inside the room. She had a small pair of silver-rimmed spectacles perched on her nose. “I’m Dr. Delancy, and I can say with a degree of certitude that you aren’t going to be leaving for a minimum of two days. I think four is more likely.”

“Why’s that, Dr. Delancy?” Lennon asked.

“Because we’re monitoring internal bleeding.” She raised her eyebrows. “And for concussion protocol. I really don’t like the initial scans.”

Lennon turned quiet. After a long moment, he asked, “Is it bad? I’ll have to let my team doctor know, so I need to be prepared for the outcome of your decision.”

I sucked in a breath as the situation formed a clear picture: Lennon might not be able to play hockey for a while—maybe ever—because he’d saved me.

I struggled to keep my breathing calm and my expression neutral, but I could now understand why he was so adamant that I leave. The attack may have cost Lennon his livelihood. Of course he needed space.

Dr. Delancy and Lennon spoke longer, but their words were white noise to me. I kept seeing him on the ground. My mind returned over and over again to the blood. To his mutterings.

He must resent me. I couldn’t blame him. I bit the inside of my cheek; the pain centered me, just as it had when my mother was alive. I made the painful decision, the necessary one: I had to go. I had to give Lennon the chance to heal and the space he’d asked for.

That also meant I had to give up the possibility of a future with him.

He might want you again, once he's cleared to play—once the trauma of the attack fades.

I nearly snorted. Always the optimist . Somehow, no matter how bad the situation became, I couldn't stop wishing for a better outcome.

That was over.

I wasn't meant for a family or happiness. Best I could do was ease pain for others.

Time to take your medicine, Vivian. Take it and move on. Let Lennon live his life.

Get used to being alone. That's what always happens. That's what you deserve.

Chapter

Lennon

“How are you feeling?” Coach Whittaker asked when he picked me up at Houston’s Hobby Airport eight days after my originally scheduled return date.

“Good. Really good,” I assured him. “Dr. Delancy cleared me to use the hospital’s physical therapy equipment on the third day, as Dr. Haberman suggested. And before you ask, I kept exercise light that first week. I haven’t had a headache or any issue in five days.”

“But you did have another trauma to your brain, and I take that seriously for all my players, Lennon. You’re too young to have a serious mental injury.”

I chuckled as he pulled the car away from the curb and began the arduous task of driving through the city’s traffic. Houston was always congested, no matter the time. But it was heavier than usual during this midday period. “Construction?” I asked.

“When isn’t there something new to build or something old to rip out in this city?”

“Especially highways.”

Coach chuckled. “I need you to talk to me, Lennon. I understand you not wanting to share the attack with your teammates, but I think it’s the wrong call?—”

“They’d worry about me more than you do, and that means they would play to defend

me as opposed to how it's supposed to be: me defending them." I forced down the frustration that tried to fizz through my chest and past my iron-clad control. When you're as big a guy as I was, you couldn't lose control. "And that change in play could well cost us a run for the Cup."

"Of course they care about you," Coach said, sounding exasperated. "You're one of our cornerstone players."

"I'd like to keep it that way for another three, maybe five years."

Coach smirked. "Seeing as you'll be past thirty-five by then, we'll just have to see." He sobered. "Roles change, but that doesn't mean you're less integral to our success."

I snorted. "Yes, it actually does. I don't want to be relegated to the bench."

"I wasn't thinking the bench, and Dr. Haberman gets the final call on that one. Not me," Coach said.

"And he's seeing me now?"

"Always so impatient, you players. Yes, I'm driving you to the facility to meet with him. Soon we'll have a better picture of what we're dealing with and how best to help you."

"Letting me play my game is what you need to do."

Coach grunted. "We'll see."

I'd had to ask my mother to keep my German shepherd, Belladonna, for an extra week, which meant my dog was probably five pounds heavier and much worse at listening than when I'd left. My mother spoiled the dog more than she did her kids.

Not that I blamed her; when Belladonna turned those liquid brown eyes on me, I was a goner.

“Hola, Mama,” I said as I walked through her kitchen door later that evening. Belladonna woofed and danced, licking my hands and rubbing against my joggers as she whined with pleasure.

“My son! How are you feeling? Oh, you look peaky. Sit. I made posole. It’s good for sickness.”

“Good to see you, too, sweetheart,” I said to my dog, giving her ears a scratch. “I’m not sick, Mom. In fact, I just got a clean bill of health?—”

“Posole will help. Good nutrition in your veins to keep your vitality up.”

I couldn’t help but smile. My mother loved her kids deeply and hard. She wanted to do something for me, and cooking was one of the ways she showed love. I enjoyed her dishes, and I wasn’t going to turn down one of my favorites.

At least I hadn’t planned to until my mother shot me a sly look. “So when do I get to meet Vivian?”

My mother had been in the U.S. for over fifty years, but she pronounced Vivian’s name Vee-Vee-Ann . It was rather adorable. I thought Vivi would like that, too.

My smile slid as I realized I couldn’t tell Vivi my mother wanted to meet her; I couldn’t tell Vivi my mother already knew about her, knew how much I cared about her. “You can’t, Mom.”

She reared back and clutched her chest, her eyes wide. “The hell you mean I cannot meet the woman you love?”

Leave it to my mother to get straight at the heart of the matter. I dropped my forearms to the table and my forehead to my arms as I began to describe the ending of my time with Vivian.

“And she just left you?”

I didn’t look up, but Mom’s color would be high, and I was sure her eyes flashed with anger.

“I didn’t really give her a choice.”

“Oh, that woman had a choice. She chose to leave you when you were injured.”

I lifted my head, and Mom narrowed her eyes as she drew herself up. “That’s not the woman I want for my beautiful son. You deserve more than that, Lennon.”

I chewed on my lower lip as I debated how to answer—if I should answer. “I pushed her away. I made her leave. The lead attacker, he said he would find Vivian through me. That he’d, that he’d...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. A shudder worked itself outward from the ice block in my belly.

“Oh, my darling. I didn’t mean to bring back the bad feelings. I didn’t know. You didn’t tell me he spoke to you again.”

I frowned, something about her statement snagging in my mind. The start of a headache pounded against my temples.

“The posole, my son. You need a big bowl and a good night’s sleep.” She ran her fingers through my hair and scratched my scalp lightly, just as I’d liked her to do when I was small. She rose from the table. “When does training camp start and will you be cleared to play?”

Thoughts of Vivian receded as I gave my mother the details about my concussion and how the Wildcatters medical staff wanted to handle the possible traumatic brain injury. “So, I can skate, but they’re putting an additional layer of padding into my helmet, and I have to be honest with Coach Whittaker and Dr. Haberman about headaches and any potential hallucinations.”

My mother set the bowl in front of me with a loud thud, and some of the broth sloshed over the side. “Sorry! So sorry, darling. I’ll get it.”

“What’s wrong, Mom?”

Her frown tightened her brows, but she shook her head. “Nothing. Eat now. And then you rest. Tomorrow will be soon enough for these worries.”

I stopped the spoon halfway to my lips. “There’s nothing to talk about. Vivi and I are over. At least until those men are found.”

She raised a single brow. “Who said I considered Vivian a worry?”

Touché. I went back to eating my soup.

That day and every day over the next weeks and months, I continued to think about Vivian. Usually multiple times a day. Too many. But she was important to me. Very important, and I wanted to let her know how important she was. I also wanted to keep her safe.

I puzzled over how Vivian had acquiesced to leaving after that initial conversation with Dr. Delancy. The more I thought about it, the stranger her reaction was. Vivian had become silent. Because I’d grown up with a houseful of women, I knew withdrawal when I saw it. As much as that hurt my heart and bruised my soul, perhaps it was what I deserved. I’d made this mess what it was.

We were more than two months into the season now, and I still fell asleep with Vivian's beautiful face front and center in my mind. And inevitably I woke, as I had every night since the attack, in a cold sweat, crying for her to be okay as I held her bruised and bloodied body in my arms.

I flung my arm over my eyes, pretending the tears seeping down my cheeks were sweat. I repeated what the hospital social worker had told me: dreams of a loved one being hurt after trauma were normal. Just because I thought it subconsciously didn't mean the scenario would happen. Our minds were built to unravel scary issues.

Mine was having a hard time letting go of the worries. But I could do it.

Especially once those men were in jail. Then I could protect Vivian properly. Once that happened, I could tell her how I felt about her.

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Chapter

Vivian

I tucked my phone back into my scrubs pocket as my shoulders slumped. Nothing. Lennon had texted a few times, mostly about his dog, who I adored already. But since I'd returned to San Francisco, there'd been no calls, no mention of a visit—nothing like what we'd been discussing before the attack.

I leaned my head against the wall and tried to find some sense of calm. My shift today had seen the end of two patients. I hated those moments. I wasn't sure I could keep doing this work, not now that I was in a funk over Lennon.

That wasn't quite true. More than my feelings, I'd been struggling with the mere sight, let alone smell of blood ever since I'd been coated in Lennon's. And since Lennon had quit talking to me, every negative bump, bruise, and shred of grief seemed amplified. When I added that to the loss of patients, I wasn't sure how much longer I could stomach this career.

I wasn't in a great headspace to nurse my patients, which meant I wasn't a great nurse. I hated that reality.

"You all right, Vivian?" Maude asked. She was an older nurse, close to retirement. She patted my shoulder as she walked past. We both knew today had taken a toll. She stopped and spun back. "You're on a break, right?"

I nodded, my throat tight. Everything felt off since I'd returned to San

Francisco—like I couldn't get my bearings. Part of that was Lennon withdrawal. Leaving him there, hurt and in the hospital, had never sat right, and I struggled to focus on my tasks when all I wanted was to nurse him , talk to him, be with him.

I sighed. I was especially down today, but every day had become a chore.

“They just brought the dogs in for the kids. Go pet one. Does wonders for the soul.”

“Thanks. I'm not very good company?—”

Maude wagged her finger. “This is medicine for your mental health. Be sure to pet a dog. I'll walk you over there myself, missy.”

I tipped my head and smiled a little. No, I didn't appreciate being spoken down to, but I did love how big Maude's heart was. “I'll head over as soon as I eat. Cross my heart,” I added when Maude opened her mouth.

“Now,” she said.

I laughed. Unlike some of the other younger nurses, I appreciated Maude's tough love. “I'm going.”

Ten minutes later, I had my fingers buried in the soft pelt of a golden retriever who panted gently against my shoulder. “Maude was right. You've really helped my mood, Sasha,” I murmured into the dog's ear. I pulled back from the doggy hug and gave her ears a scratch. “I should get one of you,” I said with a smile.

“She packs quite an anti-anxiety punch,” her handler said.

“She sure does,” I said, stroking Sasha's head for a few more moments. Then, with a sigh, I rose from the floor. My back was stiff from the long shift and my tightly

bound emotions. Crying happened only in the shower, in the privacy of my home.

So, I worked the rest of my shift and then headed there, where I performed my ritual cryfest. I'd just dressed when I heard a knock at my door. This was welcome distraction from my spiraling thoughts. Maybe it was Lennon. He'd promised to come see me... I practically sprinted across my apartment, stubbing my toe on the back of my couch. I winced but my momentum propelled me into the door, which I hit with my shoulder. The loud thud had a blush blooming on my cheeks.

"Vivian, are you okay?" That was Hana Sato, my quiet, somewhat shy neighbor I'd been trying to get closer to for months. I yanked open the door, both disappointed she wasn't Lennon and thrilled that she'd taken me seriously about stopping by.

"Hey, Hana! Yeah, I'm fine. Stubbed my toe. I'm so glad to see you."

"Does it hurt?" Hana asked in that soft voice that made me think of my mother's thick, delicious, homemade hot chocolate. She made it the traditional way, with cinnamon and red chile powder from her home state of Oaxaca in Mexico. I missed my mom's specialty drink nearly as much as I missed her hugs and advice.

That was a lot, especially now.

So much for guiding me to the love of my life, Mom. More like the biggest dud of my dating experience.

"I'll be fine," I assured Hana. I hoped that was true. I waved my arm as I stepped back. "Come in. Please."

Hana's liquid brown eyes reminded me of a doe. She was soft and slightly unsure, but the intelligence in her gaze burned bright. "Are you sure?"

“Of course.” I held the door open wider and smiled.

She scooted into my living room, her limp slight but noticeable. She wore a pair of dark dress pants and a simple white blouse. Hana wasn’t fussy, but her choices were classic and clean. Her business attire made me feel frumpy in my sweatpants and fitted T-shirt. I hadn’t bothered with shoes because I had no plans to leave my apartment until my next shift.

Burrowing and wallowing wasn’t healthy or productive. I made a mental note to look into helping out at the animal shelter; if I walked dogs for them, I’d get some much-needed exercise and fresh air while creating less time to fixate on what had been the most perfectly romantic weekend in romance history—until it wasn’t.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be off,” Hana said. “I’m not interrupting anything important, am I?”

“Nothing is going on tonight. I’m on a two-day rotation right now, and I finished my shift and just got out of the shower. I need a meal and maybe a glass of wine.” I raised my eyebrows. “Want to join me?”

“Sounds like the best plan.” Hana limped to my red velour sofa and settled daintily at the end, stretching out her leg. Her injury hurt her often, but she did her best to hide it. Once she reached the couch, she flopped back against the cushions, taking up the position I’d left moments before.

Oof . So that’s why she was here. She’d had one of those emotionally trying days, too.

Now even more, I wished for my mom’s cocoa. It was so much more comforting than a cool glass of Chardonnay.

“Want some onigiri?” I asked.

We had a tiny, hole-in-the-wall restaurant two doors down that served some of the best Japanese cuisine I’d ever tasted.

Hana hesitated a beat too long before she shook her head and dropped her gaze to the floor. Ah, she was in a financial crunch. That’s why we lived here, in this building. It was relatively affordable—for the Bay Area—and safe. That meant I could power through another thousand dollars a month on my loan payments. Based on my current trajectory, I’d be out from under those in five years.

“You seem preoccupied,” Hana said. “I’ll go.”

What had we been talking about? Right. I’d asked if she wanted takeout. “No, no. Don’t leave. Please. I had a rough day and could really use the company, so this is my treat. I’m craving the salmon.”

Hana bit her lip as she rolled her head to face me, no doubt to tell me she wasn’t interested in the dinner—something we both knew wasn’t true. But I pulled out my phone and quickly placed an order. “You know onigiri is only good when its fresh, so now you have to help me.”

She placed her hands over her gurgling stomach, trying to silence her hunger pangs.

Hana wasn’t as lucky as I was. I only had student loans to pay off; she had medical debt along with her loans, and I knew she rarely ate out—or probably ate like she should, for that matter. She wasn’t able to make additional payments that drew down the interest and principal. From what I could tell, she was barely making ends meet, which was shocking for such a talented aerospace engineer with what I assumed was a great salary.

“While we wait for the food, tell me what’s going on,” I coaxed. “I mean, I’m glad you’re here, but you don’t often just pop in.”

“I’m sorry. Really. I can go?—”

“That’s the opposite of what I want, Hana. You’re welcome any time. I mean that. I’m glad you’re in the building with me.” I smiled, suddenly aware that she needed a friend just as much as I did.

Her eyes filled with hope as she smiled back. Oh, yes, Hana and I had been friendly, even distant friends, before. But tonight, I hoped we were on our way to a connection. My grin widened, and hers did, too.

“Good. Now that we’ve established our bestie bond, tell me what’s going on,” I said.

“I don’t like my boss.” Hana made a face.

“Jeremy?” I wrinkled my nose. I’d met him a few times when he’d dropped Hana off or picked her up. I didn’t like the guy either, because of how proprietary he was about Hana—like she was his to own. “What’s to like? He’s Silicon Valley slick.” I grimaced. “I dated one of those guys while I was still in nursing school. I couldn’t handle the constant sales pitch.”

Hana pursed her lips, seeming to evaluate my comment. “Yeah...that.” She turned to face me as I settled against the edge of the couch. “On the other hand, he’s smart and ambitious and building a really freaking cool apparatus that will allow us to transport goods to the moon and space.”

“Pssh. Best I can tell, you’re building the apparatus. He’s just writing your check.” And probably not enough of one if Hana couldn’t even grab takeout once in a while. “But what brought this on?” I asked.

She moved her gaze to the fascinating beige-y white of my ceiling, clearly expecting it to have more answers than I did.

“Jeremy asked me out,” she said, her voice soft, nearly regretful. “For the third time. We’ve gone for coffee, gotten dinner at the end of a long workday, but this feels...official. Like he wants to take our relationship to a more significant level.”

“Oh. And you... want to go?” I asked.

“No, that’s the thing. I don’t like Jeremy like that . Or much at all, which is what I realized earlier today. I can’t be with him romantically. Not just because he’s my boss but because...well, I had the love of my life,” Hana said, her voice quieter than usual. “And that’s over. I won’t find that deep of a connection ever again.”

She said it with such certitude; I felt terrible for her.

“You’re young, Hana. I get that you feel that way now, but...who knows? In ten, fifteen years, maybe you’ll find the perfect man.”

We’d be on the cusp of too old to have kids in fifteen years. I frowned, hating that I might miss out on something so important to me because my damn heart refused to give up on Lennon.

Well, it hadn’t been that long, and healing took time. There was every likelihood he’d pull his head out of his rear...and nothing. He didn’t want me; I now reminded him of one of the worst moments in his life, though thankfully he’d been able to return to the NHL. I’d been so worried until I saw his sweater—I’d learned the term as I watched that first game of the season—appear on my screen, along with what I’d learned were some impressive statistics.

Seeing him there, where he clearly belonged, I couldn’t blame him for his change of

heart about me—about us . But my stupid heart refused to give up hope.

“The one I lost...he’s my soulmate, Viv,” Hana said with absolute conviction. “There’s no way I’ll ever feel that way about another person.” She sighed. “I’m not saying I couldn’t find contentment, maybe even some pale version of love. But I don’t want that. I’ll know it’s lesser.”

When the delivery guy buzzed, I went down to grab our food as I mulled over Hana’s comments.

I returned to face her once I’d paid the delivery kid. “Are you sure ?”

“Yes. I imprinted. Like a crocodile.” She shrugged. “And anyway, I wouldn’t want that type of connection again.” She sighed as she rubbed her leg. She hadn’t given me all the details about her injury, but I was in the medical profession. I could tell her leg had been crushed based on her limp, and she wore a brace I could see through her trousers. “All it did was leave me hurt and yearning.”

I groaned, unable to keep the words back this time. “That, sister, I understand.” I glanced down at the food in the unassuming paper bag. “Let’s eat some feelings.”

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Chapter

Lennon

This late-November matchup was a brutal contest of muscle and grit. I used to get off on games like this because I pitted my skills, strength, and mental prowess against my opponent.

Tonight...not so much.

It started when Ottawa's defenseman caught me by the throat. The hold was tight, bruising, and I fought both my memories of the men who'd attacked Vivian and me and the Ottawa player.

I wrestled him off and pivoted on my skates, slamming my fist into his face once, twice—I would have hit him a third time but the referee whistled, skating between me and the man I'd dropped to the ice.

Maxim placed his hand on my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Fine," I gritted out. I wasn't. We both knew it.

Coach Whittaker did, too, and he called me over to the bench. "Take a breather."

I sat, stiff and quivering, as my rookie replacement tried and failed to hold his own against Ottawa's dynamic offense.

Rising, I stomped over to Coach. “Put me back in.”

He glanced at me, then gave me a longer look. He lifted his clipboard to shield his mouth from the cameras and spoke. “You lost your shit out there. I’m assuming because of the attack in September. I can’t have that, Lennon.”

“I’m fine. I was just angry with his high sticking and physical play. I’ve got it under control. Put me back in before we lose.”

To punctuate my comment, Ottawa’s star player slapped a shot straight into the back of the net. Blue lights whirled, and our fans groaned.

Coach cursed. “Don’t make me regret this.” He waved me forward and into the game.

I ground my teeth into my mouthguard and skated hard, giving Stolly and Naese and even Cormac some great shots. Finally, Naese did a nice little flick in from behind the net, and we were back up by one goal.

The game ended at two-one, and I felt grim satisfaction...interspersed with a deep unsettled feeling. That D-man’s hand at my throat had brought up emotions I hadn’t known I was feeling. Emotions I didn’t want to feel.

I threw off my uniform and skates and showered, trying to get out of the arena as fast as possible. But that failed when Stolly gasped and pointed at my arm.

“Dude, what’s that?” Stol asked.

“A scar,” I said.

“You didn’t have that earlier...did you?”

“It’s been there since September.” I resisted the urge to stroke my hand over my beard. I knew those scars were covered. Even so, I hated that they existed and proved how I’d failed Vivian.

“What happened?”

“Nothing worth mentioning,” I said.

I felt his eyes on me, as well as everyone else’s in the locker room. I dressed hurriedly and headed home without a word to anyone. Belladonna met me at the door with a tail wag and a whine. I shut the door and dropped to my butt right there in the entryway, rubbing her ears to calm myself.

She scooted forward until she draped over my lap, her muzzle on her paws and her soulful eyes staring into mine.

“I think I’m a fucking mess, Bella girl. I think I need to work through this shit before I do something stupid.”

So even though it was after ten, I called the team psychologist, Amber Needham.

She picked up on the second ring. “Lennon, I’ve been expecting your call.”

“You have? Why?”

“Silas said you have some things to work through. Maybe work out.”

I blew out a breath that held a lot of annoyance and also some thankfulness for my coach. He looked after me—after all of us—and we were lucky to have such a staunch supporter.

I leaned my head back against the door and, petting Belladonna, walked Amber through the issue I'd had tonight with the player's hands on my neck and the reasons for it—the attack in Michigan in September.

“Wow. It's completely understandable that you'd react that way. Bodies and minds work through trauma at different paces and with varying results. Talking about the attack, how it made you feel, and how you felt tonight are all good steps to understanding and respecting your healing process.”

“I'm not sure I can heal,” I mumbled.

Amber waited.

I squeezed my eyes shut, annoyed that she was going to make me say the words, deal with the shit I didn't want to. “This all leads back to Vivian,” I told her with a long, drawn-out sigh.

“Tell me,” Amber said.

So I did. By the time I'd finished explaining about Vivian, my ass was numb, the dog was asleep, and I felt...unburdened.

“Thank you for sharing those details with me, Lennon,” Amber said. “I think we should meet again, either via telephone or in my office this week.”

“Will talking about the attack make it easier for me to do my job?” I asked as I shifted. My legs were stiff, and my toes were tingling.

“It should, but I'm not sure. What I do know is that dealing with trauma means it no longer has as much of a hold over you.”

“I sense a but ,” I said. I grunted as Belladonna clambered off my lap and shook herself. I twisted to my knees and slowly rose to my feet. Those floor tiles were not comfortable.

“I don’t think this is as much about what you suffered that night as what you lost,” Amber said softly.

She meant Vivian.

And she was absolutely right.

We ended the call a couple of minutes later, and I was shocked to see the time.

“After midnight. Wow. All right, let’s go pee, girl.”

I clipped on Belladonna’s leash, and we went outside to the grassy area where the dogs in the building did their business.

I pulled up Vivian’s information, my gaze drawn to the tiny picture of her, laughing as she sat in that canoe. I loved that photo, not because of what she was wearing or even the memory of how fantastic that day had been...until it wasn’t. I loved that photo because of the way Vivian had looked at me. Love had glowed from her eyes and seemingly every pore of her face.

“I want you here with me so bad, Vivi,” I said. “So bad. I wish...”

I cursed as I exited the app, shutting down the chance to contact her.

I’d waited months to call her. Months. My texts had been innocuous at best—just a way to let myself confirm she was still okay. She had to be angry, probably hurt as well. Reaching out now would only make the situation worse.

But I changed my tune almost immediately when I found Naese blubbering in the corner of his house a few days later. As I listened to him talk about his girl, Hana, something akin to excitement rose in my chest and flickered over my skin.

I knew that name—Hana Sato was Vivian’s neighbor. Talk about a sign from the universe! I’d call Vivi, talk to her about Hana, and ease the way for me to get back in her good graces...

Oh, everything was looking up. That’s what I told Amber. That’s what I believed.

Until my monthly call to the detective on the case up in Michigan told me they might have found one of the attackers, and that he’d had Vivian’s credit card in his possession.

“They know who she is?” I asked, appalled.

“Seems like they do,” he said.

“But how? I was on her purse. They didn’t take her cash or license...”

“My guess is the credit card fell out and was easy for him to get. I’m surprised he still had it, because Vivian told me she’d closed the account. Though I’m sure you knew that already.”

I hated that I didn’t, but I couldn’t contact Vivian, not if these assholes were keeping tabs on her—holding on to her credit cards.

Fuck .

Just...fuck my life.

I'd really thought I'd be able to talk to her, woo her, love her as she deserved by now. My free fist clenched and my throat tightened.

This was just how I'd felt when that asshole had threatened her as I lay bleeding on the ground.

But even so, Naese's well-being and happiness were important... I knew I shouldn't call Vivi, shouldn't deepen the longing I had for her, but this was important. Or at least those were my excuses the next day for doing what I wanted to do pretty much all the time: call Vivi. Talk to Vivi. Connect with Vivi.

I had it bad. And I knew my feelings for her weren't going to fade, despite the reality of our situation. So this opportunity felt like a gift. Anticipation raced up my spine as I dialed Vivian's number, which I knew by heart. Not that I'd called her— ever—but that didn't mean I didn't want to.

It had been too long since I'd heard her voice, and I'd missed that sweet, sultry sound to the point of withdrawal. Our lack of connection might be my choice—and it was the right one—but I still very much hated having to cut Vivian out of my life.

Her future came first, though, even if she didn't know it. And she didn't, because I hadn't told her. Didn't plan to tell her... I was too much of a wuss to explain why I hadn't followed up on the plans we'd made at dinner that last night we'd spent together. I, Lennon Cruz, the six-time NHL All-Star, was more afraid of...actually for a tall, slender nurse than any opponent on the ice.

Instead of the voicemail I'd expected, her soft voice came through the phone's speaker and into my ear, head, and, of course, my heart.

“Hello, Lennon. I'm kind of shocked you're calling me.”

“Vivi.” Her name came out as a breathless sigh that caused me to gnash my teeth. The thought bubbled up, soft and light and utterly sweet in my chest: I missed you, Vivi. God, how I missed you .

“I’m assuming you have a reason for calling,” Vivian said in the lengthening silence.

I had no one to blame but myself for the distance she’d put between us. Well, me and those guys who’d threatened terrible, horrible things...

I blinked away that memory, preferring our last interaction, where she’d hugged me and kissed my cheek before departing to catch her flight. I’d touched my fingertips to that strip of skin just above my beard for days afterward, floating in a miasma of drunken pleasure, even as the rest of me ached from the pain of letting her go. All that euphoria from the briefest of brushes of her lips.

Based on that reaction, I’d have a heart attack of pleasure if Vivian and I ever did more than touch casually. Might be worth it. After years of living like a monk, I was clearly starved for feminine attention.

“Lennon? Are you there?” Vivian asked. “Is everything okay? I should have asked—What’s wrong?”

The worry in her voice brought me back to the present. I cleared the emotion from my throat and refocused on the current situation. “Sorry. It’s great to hear your voice. It’s been too long.”

She let the silence spiral out, and somehow, I felt the accusation through the phone.

But seeing her in person, putting her in danger, simply wasn’t an option. Again, the memory of the assailant, his putrid breath on my cheek as his ugly words accosted my ear, wracked through me.

I'd been doing so well. I thought I was past the nightmares. I rose from my couch and spun in a circle, seeking something to tell me how to move forward with this conversation without spilling my guts or blubbing like an infant.

"So, ah...I found out you live in the same building as Hana Sato," I blurted.

Better get straight to the point so I could get off the phone. But that thought, of making Vivi a chore, caused my chest to ache. Vivian was the farthest thing from a chore.

I want to hold you close so I can feel your heartbeat against my chest. I want to fall asleep with you in my bed. I want to wake up to your beautiful face. I want to love you fully and completely, as I'm meant to do.

As desperate as I was to say those things to Vivi, I couldn't. The attacker's words slithered through my mind like a moray eel—and felt just as sinister as those patient predators. The knife he pressed to my throat still pinned me in place.

A massive shudder ripped through me. Those derelicts would never, ever touch Vivian again. They wouldn't have a chance to even frighten her; I wouldn't let them.

I reminded myself that I was making this call for Naese. He needed my help, and I'd do anything I could for my teammates—even rip out my own heart and stomp all over it.

I just hoped I wasn't hurting Vivian, too, though I feared I was.

Self-loathing skittered through me, like a spider treading over its web. There were no easy ways to get to the happiness I'd mapped out for us. Damn those men for threatening her. If it had been just me, I'd call them out. Hell, I'd gone toe to toe with them before and held my own, three to one. I hadn't won that battle, but I'd kept them

busy long enough for Vivian to run for help.

“Oh. Well, yes, Hana does.” Vivian sounded surprised and a little hurt. Right . I’d brought up Hana Sato, Naese’s ex-girlfriend, and in the process been an abrupt ass to my...nothing.

Vivian and I were nothing .

My throat burned. I rubbed it against my free shoulder, tangling the hair of my beard.

I knew the building Vivian and Hana lived in was safe and clean, but on the edge of the respectable part of town. I couldn’t understand why Vivi hadn’t chosen a safer place to live, especially after we’d been attacked last year. I’d been planning to buy a house before I went to Michigan but decided to hold off after I returned, appreciating the security of my condo while I finished healing.

“Great. I need some information about her,” I said.

“Umm... I’m not sure I should be offering up details about my friend. How do you know Hana?” Acid bit through the line, and I winced.

Vivi couldn’t be jealous that I’d asked about one of her friends, could she? The protectiveness I got, but... A thrill of pleasure at the mere whiff of the thought trickled through my chest before I locked it down.

Stop it, Lennon. This isn’t about you. You made a vow, and it’s not fair to either you or Vivian for you to lead her on. So focus!

“Never met Hana,” I explained. “I’m just setting up a meet-and-greet for one of my teammates, Naese.” I needed to end this conversation soon.

“Oh. Well. That’s not what I was expecting you to say.” Her voice shifted from edged-with-steel to confused.

I bet she was scrunching her nose. She was adorable when she did that. I wanted to touch her warm skin, bask in her presence... I pressed my free thumb to my eye socket, desperate to push away the image of Vivian my mind had created. “Yeah. So, I’m helping him out. Getting him enough intel so he can talk to her again.”

“Again ? I don’t understand. How is it possible that Hana has met your teammate? And where would they have met? Hana’s always at work...”

“Ah, I’m so glad you asked.” I smiled, enjoying that I could share Naese’s romance with Vivian. This connected us in a safe way, one that wouldn’t end with her being abused, broken, destroyed.

Talking about my friend’s love life was as close as I’d get to my own HEA—yeah, I knew that term and yearned for my own, which was why I’d gotten into reading romances. I liked the hockey ones best. That was egotistical, but some of the writers were clearly fans of the sport. As they should be.

“Do you have a bit of time?” I asked. “Because this story shouldn’t be rushed.”

“Um...yeah. I’m off today.”

“Well, settle in, buttercup.” I took my own advice and flopped back onto my couch, scooching around until I was comfortable.

She snorted at my silliness, and I grinned. This is what I’d missed with her, what I craved—that easy connection we’d shared from our first encounter. I’d have to give it up again after I fixed Naese and Hana’s sad ending, but right now, I got to talk to my woman and enjoy every single second of the call.

Vivian listened with the same intense attention she gave most tasks; I could practically feel her focus through the phone. “Wow. Just... wow ! Hana dated him through high school and college? I’m so shocked. Hana’s never mentioned your teammate.” Vivian turned quiet. “Never. Which means there’s a reason.”

I hadn’t told Vivian everything I’d learned about Hana, and I wouldn’t. Hana Sato deserved as many of her secrets as possible—to share or not in her own time and way. I felt protective of the small, dark-haired woman with the luminous brown eyes in the same way I did Vivian or my own sisters. We all had heartbreaks and shames in our past.

But I could share Naese’s part of the story, and I’d enjoyed the captive audience—not just because Vivi was a good listener, but because it was a connection we’d always have, no matter where our lives took us next.

Yet even as I told myself that, I knew it was far less than what I wanted, what Vivian deserved. I could feel the wall she’d built between us on this call. She wasn’t going to ask me why I’d pulled away, and she wasn’t going to argue my choice with me. And I wasn’t even brave enough to bring it up, to be honest about it.

“Come to think of it, Hana hasn’t mentioned much about her life before she moved out here at all,” Vivian noted.

“Don’t tell Naese that,” I said lightly, pulling myself out of my head. “It’ll break his heart. Crush it.”

She hummed. “Never. I work with cells, not full organs, so I wouldn’t be the right medical practitioner to patch him up.” Humor seeped into her tone. “But I do have a question,” she added.

My heart clenched. Was she going to push me after all? “Sure. What’s that?”

“Why are you getting involved in your teammate’s love life?”

She asked the question as if it were simple, but my heart heard the accusation there. She was the only woman I’d met who I could see myself with forever—not just be with but be happy with. But I’d put Vivian in danger. I hadn’t meant to, but that didn’t matter. We could never be more than just friends—if we could even truly be that. I was pretty sure we couldn’t, and that meant I would eventually have to let her go. With that, my heart sank to my shoes. Why had I thought I could handle this? “Once I have more details, I’ll be in touch,” I said with gruff finality.

Her sharp inhalation caused my pulse to race. “Please, Lennon... Don’t .” Her voice cracked on the last word.

I dream about you. I’m in love with you. The words sizzled on the tip of my tongue. They clung, bitter and yet so sweet. But just because I felt that way didn’t mean I could act on my feelings, and leading Vivi on was cruel.

I needed to stop interacting with her. For good.

“Goodbye, Vivi.”

Chapter

Vivian

Staring at my darkened phone screen, my stomach collapsed in on itself and seemed to shrivel. Just like my heart. “Bye, Lennon,” I whispered, blinking back tears. I’d heard it in his voice; he was telling me goodbye forever . More than likely, if he contacted me again, we’d be back to text. And I doubted he’d do that.

Why had he changed his mind about me—about us. We had been an us . From the first moment I met Lennon Cruz, I’d felt an intense connection. Over a mere few days, that crush had bloomed into love. And I couldn’t shake it.

In fact, my feelings for Lennon were destroying my life. As much as I wanted to be angry with him for hurting me, I couldn’t be. I was a nurse; I’d seen how trauma affected people’s decisions. Rarely was it logical or even in their best interest. My professional assessment was that Lennon had been more deeply impacted by those men’s assault than he would admit. Because of that and because I, on some level, reminded him of that attack, he’d pulled away.

I understood, which was part of why I hadn’t pushed him. But that didn’t mean I had to like it. In fact, I loathed this current situation with as much intensity as I loved Lennon.

Tears burned my eyes. I didn’t want to live this way. I didn’t want to be ruled by my emotions. I didn’t want Lennon Cruz to have such sway over me. I didn’t want to lose him, but I already had—if I’d ever actually had him in the first place. We had fun.

Then it ended in violence, pain, and blood.

We were over.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed past the pain in my chest. Okay . I should start looking in to buying a house and building a life, one that did not involve Lennon Cruz. Because he'd been loud and clear in what he hadn't said to me today: He was not and would never be interested in pursuing a relationship with me.

I spoke aloud to the empty room. "I should have tried with Chad."

Chadwick Henderson III was an anesthesiologist who often consulted with my patients before one of the oncology specialists operated. We'd clashed over a patient last month when I'd been told to up their dose of sedative before a surgery. I'd done so because that was my job—to follow the attending doctor's orders—but Chad had been angry, as he'd had to push back the operating time.

We'd come out of the experience more aware of each other, but I'd still been hung up on Lennon, uninterested in pursuing anything with him. Still, I respected his work and ethics, and he seemed to like me for those reasons, too.

After a few long conversations in the staff room, he'd asked me to get coffee after one of our shifts. I'd agreed so I didn't have to go home to my empty apartment.

But for the duration of our coffee and scone, we'd talked about work. We had little else in common. That was pretty much the story of my dating life. The only man I'd felt a real, deep connection with was Lennon, and now we didn't have a future.

At this moment, I missed my mom more than ever. She always made laugh and feel better about a situation, about how to get through it. I'd promised my mother I'd live my life to the fullest. But something had been missing from the moment she'd left it.

Perhaps that was why I'd latched onto Lennon so quickly. I hated being alone. And much as I didn't want to admit it, I wasn't happy at work, and I didn't think I could become happy with my current workload.

I was at my best with about half, maybe a third, as many patients—not because I couldn't do the work; I could and did manage my patients' needs each day. However, I couldn't give so many patients the one-on-one focus they deserved. And because I couldn't do that, I was less invested, less enthusiastic about getting out of bed and doing the same rat race yet again.

Thankfully, moments later, Hana's staccato burst of knocks sounded on my door, pulling me from my melancholy. I jumped off the couch and threw open the door. I was glad she was here to commiserate with. Though I'd rather she spilled the tea on her former relationship with Paxton Naese. Holding in my questions about that was going to be brutal. But I didn't want to jeopardize the possibility of reconciliation, so I'd be biting my tongue. For now.

"Um...I'll just head back to my place."

I must have come on a little strong. "You absolutely will not leave me to my sour mood, Hana." I smiled and opened the door wider for her to enter. I bit my cheek to keep from blurting out that her ex-boyfriend was desperate to get in touch with her.

Hana raised her eyebrows, her doe eyes delving deep into me as she settled on the couch. "Hmm... I'm sorry to hear you're in the same situation. What's going on?"

I licked my lower lip. "I...don't know where to start."

Hana tilted her head. "At the beginning."

I smiled at her gentle snark. "All right. Let me grab some wine, because if I start

there, this is a long story.”

“I have all night,” Hana said with a smile. “Especially if you have wine and food.”

I laughed as I moved around the kitchen. I placed an order for takeout and brought back two glasses, the bottle tucked under my arm. I sat down in the overstuffed armchair across from her.

“For as long as I can remember, it was always my mom and me,” I began. That seemed like the right place to start. I scratched my cheek. “My dad was around when I was very young, I think, but he and my mother got divorced. Family life turned out not to be for him. He was in the military, and after one tour, he decided not to return to our house around the time I started elementary school.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Hana said. Her eyes held the sympathy of someone who understood. “I lost my dad when I was a kid. I still miss him.”

“Thanks.” Yet another thing Hana and I had in common. I swallowed a gulp of wine. “That’s old news. Mom and I were fine for years, but then she was diagnosed with cancer. She fought hard, but she didn’t make it.” I stared into my empty glass, shocked that I’d finished the drink already. But talking about this part of my life was difficult.

The door buzzer made that static-laced honk I’d come to find amusing. Excusing myself, I ran down the stairs to the small entry vestibule, grabbed our food—onigiri had become our thing—and gave the delivery teen some extra cash. The wine had hit me, thanks to my empty stomach, so I appreciated that when I returned, Hana had set out plates and napkins for us both at the small, round table I kept behind the sofa. Like most of my furniture, it was secondhand, but it was solid wood and sturdy, and the dings and dents added a farmhouse air to the piece.

“That’s why you went into nursing,” Hana said, picking back up the conversation.

I poured another glass of wine and raised the bottle toward Hana. She shook her head, still cradling her half-full glass.

I nodded. “I was kind of lost, and I missed my mother. I still do.” I swallowed. “At the end of last summer, I went back to her hometown to spread some of her ashes, like she’d asked. I met a guy. He was on vacation there. We really hit it off, and the weekend was so special.”

I sighed and shook my head. “We were out on the last night before I had to fly back, when these guys came out from behind a building. They had knives and demanded our money. We gave them that, but... But then...they decided they wanted me.”

Hana’s soft gasp caused me to meet her eyes. “Lennon lunged so fast, I barely saw him move—and he’s a big guy. He managed to get the knife out of the first guy’s hand, but there were four of them. Still, Lennon didn’t hesitate to wade in to the fray. He shouted at me to run and get help. So I did. Luckily, there was a police car just a few blocks away, but even in those few minutes it took to find them, Lennon was left bleeding, close to passing out.”

“Oh my goodness...” Hana pressed her fingers to her lips, her eyes huge.

“While the officers searched for the robbers, I stabilized Lennon, and we got him to the hospital. Thankfully, most of the wounds were superficial. He needed forty stitches in total, which was way better than it could have been.” I shuddered as a hint of that night’s terror swam through my bloodstream.

“Your guy kept their damage to a minimum.”

I nodded. “To me at least. He had some head trauma, I’m pretty sure. I stayed with

him that night, but then I had to go home. Well, I would have stayed, but he wanted me to go home. Told me flat out I needed to go.” I shook my head. “I hated to leave, you know? We’d connected before the attack, and after... Well, not many people experience something like that. But he pulled away. I, I guess he couldn’t see me the same way anymore.”

“Wait, go back. He never told you the reason he wanted you to go?”

“Not really, no. He was going to visit, see if we had a future, but now I just get an occasional text about his dog.”

“And this has been going on for...what? Two, three months now?”

I shrugged. “About that, yeah. I mean, I get that he was hurt, and that was traumatic. But I can’t understand why he keeps in touch via text if he doesn’t care for me.” I shook my head. “The whole situation confuses me. Worse...” I stared down at my last onigiri. I wasn’t hungry any longer.

“Worse?” Hana prompted.

I met her gaze, willing back the tears I didn’t want to shed. I sucked in a breath. “He called today, and talking to him hurt. Not talking to him hurts. My heart hurts .”

Hana hummed. “I feel like there’s more to this. Like, this guy should have explained his reasoning to you. You deserve that.”

“I mean, what could change if he did?”

Hana studied me. “You’re scared.”

I narrowed my eyes. “How could you possibly know that?” I didn’t like to admit it,

even to myself.

“Please,” she scoffed. “Your fear is obvious. Why don’t you talk to him? Sit down and have a conversation about your concerns?”

I blinked at her, a rock settling in my belly. “I haven’t seen him in person again.”

“That seems odd,” Hana said. “Based on what you told me about your first days together.”

I stared down into my wine glass. “I was positive he was the one.”

Chapter

Lennon

I inhaled the cold, crisp, faintly chlorine smell of fresh ice, letting the familiar smells and sensations ground me. Nearly five months had passed, and I missed Vivian more with each passing day. I fucking hated February. Dark, short days with too many hours in the night to remember.

I'd been looking forward to this game, though. And I forced myself to focus on that. Montreal was a tough team, one we'd likely face in the playoffs. I closed my eyes and let the pleasure of the rink take me someplace good.

"How are you doing, Cruiser?" Naese asked as he skated up next to me.

"Fine." I tapped my stick on the ice, shifting it back and forth, back and forth, warming up my forearms and shoulders.

"When are you going to call Vivian?" he asked.

"I'm not."

He scowled. "Why not? She's perfect for you?—"

"I'm not. Leave it alone."

"Fine. Pull your panties from your ass. Jeez."

He skated off, but Cormac took his place. “What was that about?” he asked, frowning. He followed my lead, copying my stick work.

“Nothing.”

“Hmm...”

“What?”

“You’ve been a grumpy bastard the last few months. Even Maxim noticed—said you’re acting like him before he met Ida Jane.”

“I’m fine,” I said, stressing the words.

“Hmm...”

“Don’t you have a team to see to?” I snapped.

“I am,” Cormac said. “But I can tell you’re not ready to actually deal with your problems, which means the rest of us will have to pick up the slack.” He pivoted on his skate and darted away.

Thankfully, no one else bothered me during warmup. I kept to myself, not interested in talking.

As I stood during the national anthem, I looked up into the crowd. I smiled, but my heart ached. Hana, Naese’s girlfriend, was there. Hana had arrived in November, and he’d talked her into moving in with him from the get-go—the bastard hadn’t wasted any time. I didn’t blame him. If I could have, I would have asked Vivian to move in with me that weekend we’d had in Michigan.

I couldn't believe our weekend together had been almost six months ago now.

Six months.

I had the worst February blues ever, and it had nothing to do with a midseason slump. In fact, I had a damn fine looking stats sheet. I dropped my hand as the song ended. Stats meant practically nothing to me. Worse, I was too busy with hockey to connect K-9s with their former handlers. I missed that work, badly.

Amber thought that project was good for me, that I needed some positive outlet in my life. My mother had said the same thing.

The game was fast-paced and hard-hitting—my favorite kind because I had to be totally focused. Thankfully, we secured another win, and a good one, too. I managed to get an assist when I smacked the puck to Naese, who re-aligned his stick so the momentum carried the apple straight into the net under the goalie's pads. It was a sweet move, and one I wished we could recreate. I had a feeling Coach was going to try to recreate it, but that was the magic of a live game. Sometimes the timing was just there.

Coach Whittaker eyed me as I took off my gear, his gaze lingering on the scar on my arm as I stripped out of my compression shirt.

"Lennon, a word," he said.

I bit back a groan as I tugged on a T-shirt and headed toward his office. "Yeah, Coach?"

"I got a call I thought you might be interested in." He gestured toward the seat in front of his desk. I sat, and he leaned against the desk. "But first, tell me how the sessions are going with Amber."

I shrugged. “Fine.”

“You’ve been saying that a lot, you know.”

“Eventually, you’ll believe me,” I said, feeling irritable.

“I think it’s more what you want to believe, Lennon,” Coach said.

I gritted my teeth. “Why did you call me in here?”

“Well, I wanted to see how you were doing since Dieudonne put his hands on your neck in the game tonight.” He peered at me. “I was giving you space, but I’ve made a note of each time someone touches your neck and head. You freeze. It’s not long, but it’s worth noting because I’m not the only one who has. Players are making a point to do it, which means they know it’s a weakness of yours.”

The cold, icy feeling returned, along with a throbbing in my ears. I swallowed the reaction, just as I tried to ignore how much the moment had again reminded me of the attack—and of everything it had cost me. “It’s not. I’m fine.”

“Amber’s expecting your call tonight to discuss how that made you feel,” Coach said.

“I said I’m fine. Jesus. What do you want from me?” I swallowed hard, realizing how disrespectful I’d been.

Coach stood and moved behind his desk.

I clenched and unclenched my hands. “Sorry. That was uncalled for.”

“I think it’s the tip of the iceberg, actually. You’ll talk to Amber.” He pointed his reading glasses at me. “And you’ll let me know if there’s something we need to sort

out.”

Much as I wanted to tell him to fuck off, I bit back the response. “Yes, Coach.”

“You’re not yourself, Lennon,” he said, concern darkening his eyes. “If you’d just be honest about what happened and how much that attack affected you?—”

I shot out of my seat and was out the door before I realized I’d walked out while my coach was still speaking. Unwilling to go back, I stalked to my locker, grabbed my wallet and jacket, and slunk out of the space, pretending not to hear Cormac calling my name.

Amber called me four times that night, but I ignored the phone. It was petty, stupid, and landed me in back in Coach’s office the next day.

“You’re not skating until you work your shit out,” he announced. “Go talk to Amber. And, Lennon, I know about Vivian. I know you’ve refused to see her since you came back.”

“How the fuck do you know about that?”

“Your mother came to see me. She’s concerned, as am I.” He waited until I met his gaze. “You’ve been more aggressive on the ice, more likely to hit first and hit harder—and worse yet, more often. The younger guys look up to you, Lennon. Right now, you’re not acting like the role model I expect you to be.”

“I’m doing my job,” I snarled. “I’m keep my offensive line safe.”

“No, you’re actually making it more likely that someone will get hurt.” Coach sighed as he settled back in his chair, swiveling to and fro for so long, I started to get antsy. My legs jiggled. “If you can’t work this out—whatever it is that’s bothering you—I’ll

have no choice but to bench you.”

“Me? I’m putting up the best stats of my career?—”

“You’re on the verge of a complete loss of control.” Coach peered into my face for a long, uncomfortable moment. “Just talk to her , Lennon. Work out whatever the problem is so you can get your head back in the game.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant Amber or Vivian. I didn’t ask. I just nodded before heading down the hall to Amber’s office. At least he couldn’t fault me again.

“So...you want to tell me why you ignored my calls?” Amber asked in lieu of greeting. She was in her mid-forties with pretty, gamine features and a tumble of dark, natural curls. Her coal black eyebrows rose as she regarded me from behind her chunky, stylish spectacles.

“I was bus?—”

“Lennon, do us both a favor and stop lying.”

I stood in the doorway, hands fisted at my sides, feeling the way I had the one time I’d been sent to the principal’s office in elementary school. One of the kids had called my mother a dirty Mexican whore. I hadn’t known exactly that what last word meant, but I knew I didn’t like how he put dirty before Mexican , as if we were less than him because of our heritage and darker complexion. So, I’d pounded an apology out of him.

Never had to fight again—all the other kids remembered that little snot’s bloodied and bruised face.

“I’m not doing this,” I said, turning away.

“Before you go, I have just one question for you.”

I stopped, my back rigid. Amber waited until I turned to face her once more. She was smart, caring, warm, and tough—everything we needed in a team psychologist. She refused to let us hide from ourselves, so I braced myself for the question.

“When you finally choose to deal with the issue that has you so afraid you’re running from me, from your friendships on this team, from the woman you claim to love yet won’t even talk to, do you think those people will still be waiting for you? Follow up: Do you think they’ll all just forgive your behavior and go forward, as if nothing happened?”

An antsy, nasty feeling crept through my guts. Vivian . It had been months. What if...what if she was dating? What if she was happy with some doctor douchebag? What if she married him?

I stared at Amber as the possibility played out—Vivian driving her kids to dance class and...soccer practice because I knew she wouldn’t have a kid who played hockey. I’d ruined the sport for her. That wasn’t me trying to aggrandize myself; I just knew that when Vivian moved on, she’d cut every single tie to anything related to me from her life.

“I...”

“Sit down, Lennon,” Amber said gently as she rounded her desk. Her expression switched to concern from the cool, implacable mask it had been. Her strong fingers wrapped around my wrist, and she led me to the couch that sat against the far wall of her office.

Once she had me settled, she took the seat in a chair between me and the door, effectively blocking my exit.

“Just so you know, I cleared my entire schedule. I’m here for as long as you need.”

That turned out to be a good thing because I needed a long time to start talking. Too long, but I’d kept all the thoughts and fears in my head for so many months that they’d tangled and morphed and turned into something more sinister.

Finally, my stomach growled, rousing me from the daze I’d settled into. I noted Amber staring out her window at the Houston skyline. Skyscrapers dotted the view to the horizon, which was bloated with thunderheads. A storm brewed. Nothing new. I had one inside of me as well. I took a deep, painful breath and blew it out slowly. “I’m afraid.” The words cut into my mind, my pride, seemingly my very flesh.

Amber handed me a bottle of Gatorade. The blue kind, my favorite. “Most of us are—of something,” she said. “What is your fear?”

I took a long drink and set the half-empty bottle on my knee. Okay, I could do this. I was an adult. I was in touch with my feelings. I was the sensitive one of our group. “I’m afraid that if I see Vivian again, she’ll be hurt like I was.”

“Is that likely?”

“I think so.” I explained what I remembered the assaulter saying to me.

“Hmm...”

“What does that mean?”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “It means I’m considering your response, but it created a new question: Is your fear rational?”

My session with Amber left me feeling shaky but also more at ease—not my body,

but my mind.

The weird and terrible truth about our minds, Amber had told me, was how often they lied to us.

The thing that made me me had lied to me. How fucked up was that?

I wasn't cured after talking, but I was less burdened.

Yet that might well be a curse, because now I worried about Vivian more than I had before, when I'd shoved all thoughts of her aside. Of course I wanted her to be safe, but I wondered if I could ever make her happy. If she'd ever trust me. If she'd started seeing someone else, if I had the right to contact her and mess up her life again.

So many thoughts jumbled together, but at the center was my fear of that main attacker, threatening to hurt Vivian because of me. That I still couldn't shake.

What if Amber was wrong and my fears were founded? What if...

There were so many possibilities my mind spun. But first thing was to apologize to Coach Whittaker.

He looked up when I entered his office. "Lennon."

That was the tone he used for naughty rookies and dumb shits who got out of control. Silas Whittaker didn't suffer fools. Unfortunately, money and youth created more foolishness than just about any other scenario.

"May I sit?" I asked.

He gestured to the chair, and I eased into it. I cleared my throat. "I behaved poorly

last night and this morning. I'm sorry."

"Thank you." He waited.

I stared back.

The silence grew.

"I talked to Amber."

"I know."

Again, the silence. I hated it—it made my skin itch. He knew; that was why he did it.

"I have something on my mind that's gotten in the way of my performance on the ice and with my teammates."

"I know."

"I'm working through that," I said.

Coach heaved a frustrated breath. "Look, Lennon, I respect you as a player and as a man, but right now you're acting like an idiot. Just call Vivian."

"It's not that easy. I...left things on poor—no, I just kind of quit talking to her."

"Then call her, ask her to listen, and explain your fear. I don't know a lot about her, but if she cares about you like you care about her, the truth will help a lot."

"I..."

“If you try to bottle this up, you’ll end up in this exact spot again. And again. And I will lose patience. So will your teammates. And when they do, the chemistry will be off. Who will you have to blame but yourself when you end up on the second or third line or traded?”

I sat back as Coach’s statement hit me square in the chest. “That bad?” I croaked.

He met my gaze. “Yes.”

Silas Whittaker didn’t bullshit us. Still, I didn’t like swallowing the truth. I nodded. “I’ll fix it.”

“I hope so, for all our sakes. Because without you, our chances to win the Cup plummet.” He raised an eyebrow, then took off his reading glasses. “Now to the other news I mentioned. I received a really interesting call from Camden Grace, the country singer.”

I shifted in my seat. I knew the man. He’d been my older brother Ruben’s commanding officer before he died.

“He wants to connect with you,” Coach said.

“Why?”

“To talk about your K-Nine program.”

For the second time that day, I was gobsmacked by emotions. They uprooted and twisted in my chest. But these? These felt good.

Chapter

Vivian

When Hana's husband, Paxton, video-called me in late February, I picked up, worried something had happened to her. She and I hadn't been talking as much now that she was in Houston and a newlywed. I missed her.

I had wanted to go to her wedding last week, which they'd performed over a long, game-free weekend, but couldn't handle the thought of running into Lennon, so I'd deferred, claiming I needed to work. And because I'd felt bad about lying to Hana, I'd picked up extra shifts, putting the money toward my loans. I was getting closer to paying them off.

"Hey, there, Paxton. How's Hana?" I asked in greeting. I'd only met him via FaceTime, but I talked to Hana regularly. She'd asked about Lennon once, and it didn't seem she'd made the connection between my Lennon and the D-man on Paxton's team. I hadn't connected the dots for her—not yet. I knew I should, but then I'd have to see pity in her gaze and hear her sadness when she told me Lennon had moved on.

I wasn't ready to accept that, so I refused to put myself in that position.

Paxton smiled at me, his boyish charm fully on display. "Han's great," he gushed. "She's working on some cool things at NASA. If I'm lucky, maybe I'll get to test something out."

I laughed.

“Look, the guys and I, we were talking about some stuff... So, yeah, I called because I have a huge favor,” Paxton said. He munched his lower lip, uncertainty bleeding into his expression. “And I really, really need you not to say no—though you can. I mean, it’s totally up to you, but I just really want you to say yes?—”

“Oh, give me the phone, hijo. You’re probably freaking her out.”

The phone shifted, then rebalanced with an older woman on the screen. She looked like Lennon—the same lovely brown eyes. My breath caught, and my pulse pounded so hard in my neck, I felt my skin shift.

“Hello, querida,” the woman said. She smiled. “I’m Lola Cruz. Lennon’s mother. I made Paxton call you because I needed to speak with you.” She turned to glare at Paxton. “Privately.”

“I’m going,” Paxton said. Lola waited until a door shut before she returned her gaze to the screen. “You are even more lovely than Lennon said. Or the Facebook photos.”

What was happening? Had I entered some alternate plane of existence? “Erm, well...thanks?”

Lola smiled again. She glanced over at the closed door, then leaned closer to the screen. “I don’t have a lot of time,” she said.

“I’m sorry?—”

“No, no, I mean, I have cancer. Lennon doesn’t know yet. I will tell him, though, and soon.”

Oh. My. God. Lennon's mother had cancer. My mouth fell open, and I snapped it shut.

"I will start the chemotherapy soon, but I don't know how I will handle it. I don't do well with pills. And this...this is toxin." Lola shook her head. She refocused on me. "I need you."

"I don't understand..."

"I need you to come here, to help me through this time."

"I have a job..." I said, my voice small. Lola Cruz was asking me to help her. Saying no went against everything I understood about myself, my life. If I had a chance to help my mother again, I would.

But how could I say yes to Lennon's mom? That would get me nowhere in my bid to move on with my life.

"I will pay you your regular salary plus more. You can keep your benefits from your current job for one year, yes? I'll pay that, too."

"How..."

"I have the money. Lennon, silly boy, gives me an allowance." Lola rolled her eyes. "I don't need it, but he insists. Always looking out for those he loves." Her smile was indulgent. "And...I have some other financial avenues."

I stiffened at Lennon's name. Why would she ask me to do this? Insanity. Lennon didn't want me there.

"You must come," Lola said. "Lennon is lost without you. He doesn't know it yet,

but he made a terrible mistake. So terrible, and it has to do with you.”

I licked my lips. “What are you talking about?”

“He will tell you that, in time. But he needs you, Vivian. I’m his center right now, and that must change. You must become his focus. He’s going to lose me and eventually, hockey. He’ll be adrift.”

I shook my head. “I can’t—this is crazy...”

Lola leaned closer so her eyes filled my screen. They held uncertainty, some fear—normal emotions for cancer patients—but they also held determination and love.

“He pushed you away because he cares. I can’t say more because this is something for you two to work out. But I know you will be the best person to care for me. And I will beg you if I must. You will be well compensated. You will have a nice home and lots of good food to fill your belly.” She grimaced. “For as long as I can cook, anyway. But you must come. And soon. I need you, Vivian. Please .”

I felt myself nodding, and for some crazy reason, I drafted my resignation letter as soon as Lola and I disconnected. I submitted it, too.

Two weeks later, I exited the Houston InterContinental terminal and headed to Lola Cruz’s house in a rideshare. It still seemed like pure insanity.

What the hell am I doing?

Chapter

Lennon

When I'd joined Cormac on the ice this morning, he'd asked me to stop by his place later this afternoon. When he told me the rest of the guys had already been invited, I made sure to get to the Memorial Park area, where Cormac and a lot of my other teammates had purchased homes, as quickly as possible once practice was done.

The neighborhood was really nice—quiet, large lots, big homes that weren't disgustingly ostentatious, and near the arena to make the commute reasonable. It was not an easy feat to find a place that ticked all those boxes, especially in the rapidly growing Houston city limits.

I'd thought about looking for a place here too, but there wasn't any point without Vivian. Hana, my previous connection to her, was married to Naese and living here now, and while it did feel good to have helped them find their way back to each other, I hadn't been able to ask Hana if Vivi was dating anyone. I wasn't sure if she'd know. And the not knowing was eating at me—possibly more than it would hurt to swallow my pride.

I should have known something was up when I walked into Cormac's place and smelled enchiladas. My nose quivered, and my mouth watered.

"Come in, Cruiser. We have some things to discuss," Cormac said, waving me over. He glanced at Maxim, who gave a faint nod, then to Stol and Naese, who repeated the gesture.

“Adam wanted to be here, too, but Felix has the shits,” Maxim informed me.

More information than I wanted or needed, so I just gave a faint grunt.

“So, yeah...” Cormac began. “We wanted to talk to you about Vivian.”

I stiffened. “What about her?”

“She’s coming to Houston,” Cormac said.

The floor seemed to drop out from under me, and my ass landed somewhere between Cormac’s sofa and Stol’s knee. He groaned and shoved. I shifted enough for him to move his leg. No way was I going to get up.

“She agreed,” Naese said. He beamed, clearly proud of this development.

“Wait—just wait. You invited Vivi here?” My mouth dried out, and my hands began to shake. My chest tightened. Was I...? This felt...

“Christ. He’s having a panic attack,” Stolly exclaimed.

“Catch him before he hits the ground,” Cormac bellowed.

Hands wrapped around my biceps and another laid on my back. “Breathe the air,” Maxim commanded. “In and out.”

Someone pounded my back, hard, causing me to cough.

“Easy, Naese. Don’t whack out his lung,” Cormac said.

“I’m helping,” Naese muttered.

“You good there, Cruiser?” Cormac bent down to peer in my face.

“No,” I growled. I rose and whirled. “How could you do this? She’s safe in San Francisco.” My fists clenched, unclenched, re-clenched again as rage and fear tussled in my veins.

“She’ll be safe here, too,” Maxim said. “More so with you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I bellowed. “She’ll never be safe with me as long as those pieces of shit are out there.”

“What are you talking about?” Stolly asked, but based on his shifty eye movement toward Cormac, they’d talked about this.

The assholes. I was going to beat them all to a pulp. I whirled on Naese. “Those fuckers threatened to hurt her. How could you let them put her in danger? She’s not safe with me,” I bellowed. It was like my mind had been taken over by some other entity. Calm wasn’t something I understood.

“Erm...” That was Cormac. “What do you mean she’s not safe with you?”

“The attacker. The spokesman.” I paced the space, a caged tiger, muscles bunching and quivering with the need to unleash the pent-up aggression and fear tugging at my skin and hair and very essence.

“You think that guy—a scrawny meth head—can take you on and win?” Maxim snorted and shook his head, chuckling.

“Don’t you dare laugh. You weren’t there. You didn’t get your neck sliced, your head punched. Have to listen to that slime talk about what he’d do to Vivi if he saw her again.” That was the most I’d mentioned about that night to anyone. I didn’t like to

talk about it, didn't like remembering how I'd failed Vivi.

Maxim sobered, his mouth slack as his eyes widened. "I..."

"And you!" I whirled on Cormac. "I expected leadership from you. Not going along with some harebrained bullsh—"

"This was my idea," my mother said as she swept into Cormac's living room. "They knew about the assault and Vivian, though clearly not as much as I expected based on this ." She frowned at me, waving her hand to encompass my yelling and my friends' chagrined expressions. "I want her here with you, where she belongs."

The enchiladas I'd smelled... Dammit .

I choked, gasped, and bent over to settle my hands on my knees. Naese pounded my back again, the stupid turd.

"Back off, Paxton. He is struggling to breathe." My mother paused. A moment later, she bent down and looked into my face. "With me, hijo?"

"No."

"You are very frightened," she said. "Just as I told Silas and your team doctor."

Heat burned up the back of my neck. "They said?—"

"Lennon, son," my mother began, her voice soft. She rubbed my back in a soothing way—not trying to crack ribs like Naese. "Are you sure that criminal said those words?"

"Yes! He said them to me, so of course I'm sure."

“But the police—I called the detective, Ahmed, and spoke to him.” She waited for those words to sink in. I blinked at her. “No one was near you when they arrived. That’s why they couldn’t apprehend the criminals. They’d done a jackrabbit and skedaddled.”

I rose, frowning, confusion replacing my fear. Lightheaded, I stumbled. Naese gripped my arm while my mother continued to run a soothing hand up and down my back. “Wh-what?”

“Those bad men were not near you. They ran away before the police turned the corner. They knew the police were coming because of the sirens and lights.”

I licked my lips. “You’re saying... You’re saying that...”

“Could it have been a hallucination?” Cormac asked. I’d never seen him look so worried.

“I don’t... It was real .”

“What was he wearing?” Maxim asked.

I shrugged. I couldn’t remember.

“Color of his hair? Eyes?” Stolly asked.

I opened my mouth but shut it and shook my head.

“Can you think of anything specific about the man who spoke to you?”

“N-no...” I blinked at my teammates. With effort, thanks to my trembling limbs, I moved back to the couch. I took a minute to breathe with my forehead pressed to my

fists. Then I lifted my head from the bent-over position, more in control of my emotions. “You think I hallucinated the man?” I tried to meet everyone’s gaze. They all looked worried.

Cormac glanced at the others. “We remember what happened during your first concussion, how you hallucinated then. You were so sure we were there to hurt you...”

“Made me sick,” Maxim said.

Stolly looked away, his jaw tight.

I narrowed my eyes. “So, because I have a history of hallucinations?—”

“Specifically of deep, personal harm during them,” Cormac supplied. “I asked Amber if it was possible for that to happen again. She and Dr. Hutchins conferred, but they didn’t tell me anything about your case specifically .” He paused. “When I pushed, asking if it was possible hypothetically, they said yes. In fact, they think it’s likely—and that’s your mind’s pattern when it’s injured.”

“A pattern. There’s a pattern for concussion.” I knew that. We all knew our symptoms usually amplified with more head trauma. But I’d never considered the hallucination possibility. It had all seemed so real. My chest squeezed. My heart ached. “You think I’ve spent months pushing away the love of my life for nothing ?”

The guys all looked at each other. Cormac grimaced as he answered for them. “Yeah. That’s what we think. And worse, we know Vivian’s been talking to some doctor, who sounds like a total shitbag, according to what we got from Hana.”

I covered what could have been a horrifying shriek with a cough and clearing my throat.

Cormac paused respectfully. “And for the record,” he continued after a moment. “The ladies were going to contact Vivian and bring her out here if we didn’t. So, we did it first.”

My mother muttered something about men and egos and needing to win. She wasn’t wrong. “You’re a better man than this doctor,” she said, sitting beside me and patting my hand. “And Vivi loves you. So the boys hatched a plan to get her here. Because they love you. And also, they want to have a matchmake win.” She glowered at me, causing guilt to flare. “I don’t approve of this part of the process, but I like that they included me. And I wanted to see how you reacted to the news that your Vivi has a new man.” She smiled brightly. “You hate it.”

“I do,” I said. “I really hate it.”

“Good. So you fix the problem between you two, and I get grandchildren.” My mother started babbling on in Spanish about how cute my babies would be while I met each of my teammates’ eyes.

They were more than teammates, though. We were family—a patchwork of backgrounds and hobbies and personalities that fit because of our love of hockey, competitiveness, and decency. These men were some of the best people I’d ever known.

“Thanks. All of you. I appreciate you wanting the best for me.”

“Took you long enough to realize that,” Stolly grumped.

“You’re not going to hit me, are you?” Maxim asked. “I don’t want a big bruise on my face. Ida Jane fusses.”

“But she makes you apple butter to soothe the booboo,” Naese taunted.

“It is delicious. More addictive than drugs.” Maxim sighed. “I love that stuff, and I hate that I love it so much, but I love it too much to?”

“Got it,” Cormac said. “Back to Cruz. Look, man, we weren’t trying to piss you off or freak you out. We just want you to be happy.”

“And Vivian makes you happy,” Naese said. “Or at least I know she makes you all wistful and shit when you’re not together.”

“You boys may all be grown men, but your mouths offend my ears,” Mom informed them. “Speak like humans, not middle school children.”

“Yes, Lola,” Cormac said. “Sorry.”

“Good. Now, let me talk to my son un momentito.” My mom turned toward me. “Son,” she said in Spanish. “I understand your fear. First your father, then Ruben. But Vivian won’t be hurt because you love her. Well, not more hurt. You’ve put her through a bad time.”

“How do you know.”

“I got the Facebook, don’t I?”

“You’re stalking Vivi on social media?”

“I needed to know if this woman was good enough for you.” Mom sniffed. “She’s lovely. I think she likes animals more than you,” she added with a smile.

I chuckled. Noticing my friends frowning, I switched to English. “She does love them. In Michigan, she asked to pet every dog we met.”

“This is how I know she is for you, my son. She has a big heart.” My mother also switched to English.

I chewed my lip as I tried to work through my thoughts. “What if...what if she can’t forgive me for pushing her away?”

“Oh! I go this one!” Stolly said. He plunked his butt down on Cormac’s coffee table and put his hands on my shoulders. “You keep working at it. Like a drill. You give her your full focus, you make sure she knows she’s the priority. It’ll take time. You might have to sleep on a too-short couch?—”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Naese asked.

“I’m just saying, it might be hard or uncomfortable,” Stolly snapped. “But you don’t give up. You’re an NHL player, man. You know all about perseverance. So...persevere.” He punctuated his point with a nod.

“That’s very good advice,” Mom said.

Stolly ducked his head, but we all saw the smirk he tried to bury in his shoulder.

“I had to make Ida Jane love me,” Maxim rumbled. “She took time to trust that I was serious.”

“If that guy can do it, so can you,” Cormac said.

“Hey!” Maxim exclaimed.

“What? You’re a dick...erm, difficult personality,” Stolly said with a side-eye at my mother.

She turned her head away to show she was ignoring his potty mouth.

Maxim shrugged. “True.”

“So, as your friends were saying, you prove you’re trustworthy. If Vivian is smart, she won’t believe you,” Mom said. “So you’ll have to work for her, for your relationship.”

Cormac rubbed his hands together. “We have some suggestions.”

“You can discuss them over the enchiladas,” my mother said.

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Naese said, bolting to the kitchen.

Chapter

Vivian

“I shouldn’t be in Houston.” I fidgeted in the back of the rideshare, staring out at the massive sprawl and thousands of cars on the huge highway.

I’d been at a low point the day before Lola Cruz had called me that first time two weeks ago. Over the span of the previous week, five of my patients had passed away, an alarming number, and I’d gone on a disastrous date with Dr. Dewan Kapoor. The man was kind, thoughtful, respectful of my limits—everything I should want in a partner. Yet the evening had been an epic bust that ended with me rage-eating an entire bag of caramel corn. Dewan wasn’t Lennon. Full stop.

I hated that I couldn’t get over him. I remained stalled, stuck in this stupid spot where my heart continued to yearn but my mind knew the relationship was over.

“Why not?” the driver asked, looking up at me in the rearview mirror.

I sighed. “It’s complicated.”

Perhaps that’s why I hadn’t been immune to the appeal from his mother. Perhaps. More, though, she reminded me of my mother, and because I was in a place where I needed guidance and love, I’d been more than happy to respond to the text she sent me the evening after that first call, then again the next morning, that afternoon, that evening, the next day and the next... We’d fallen into a pattern of communicating, and I’d mentioned that my mother’s family was from Oaxaca.

Lola had then told me stories from her trip there in her teens. She'd told me about meeting Lennon's father, a traveling musician who had become a truck driver to support her and their oldest child, Ruben. They'd had Lennon and his two sisters nearly ten years later. She told me about losing her husband, then Ruben, and how that had affected young Lennon. She told me how she'd had to work as a waitress, slowly moving up to better and better restaurants, until she now ran front-of-house in one of the nicest restaurants in the city.

Hers was a tale I understood, one that Lennon shared—perseverance, hard work, dogged determination to reach goals. I respected that story; I'd lived that story.

Lola told me how Lennon didn't understand health benefits and hadn't ever asked about her salary. He sent her an allowance, and Lola was a saver, especially now that her kids were out of the house, which was why she could hire me as a private nurse. That and because she had a grant. I was pretty sure that meant someone on Lennon's hockey team knew about her diagnosis and was helping her pay my salary.

I'd suggested I take less, but Lola wouldn't hear of that. She'd mentioned my Kryptonite—my own fault—that I'd only have to work with and for her, not a slew of other people, too.

“Romance involved?” the driver asked.

“I'd like to think so.”

“That's why I'm here,” he said. “I found the love of my life on a dating website.”

I smiled. “That's great.”

“It was. Until she left me for an oilman last month.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Houston’s huge and hot and has its problems, but it’s also a pretty great place to live.” He started listing the places he liked to go, and my mind drifted back to Lola—and how I’d ended up in the backseat of this car.

She’d sent me recipes to try from the Yucatan, where she’d grown up. We talked about my mother’s hot chocolate and Lola’s version. I’d tried them both, loved them both, and felt as if my mother were there giving me a hug.

All of which was why I’d followed through on this crazy plan and now said to the Uber driver, “Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime. Hit up the aquarium!”

I stepped out into the late afternoon and immediately felt like I was melting. It was February, for goodness’ sake, yet I was hot, sticky mess. How did people handle this heat and humidity? Why would they want to?

I tugged my suitcase up the walkway of Lola Cruz’s small, neat house not far from the city’s secondary downtown. At least it didn’t seem that far, but I had looked at a map of Houston and nearly choked. Talk about sprawl...

The thoughts I’d kept at bay as I’d packed and traveled now hammered at my mind: Lennon might not know I’m coming. Lennon might not want me here. This will do nothing for my ability to move on. Am I just going to be torturing myself?

What have I done?

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and pulled up the mental map I’d created of Houston. For whatever reason, maps and interesting facts tended to calm my mind.

Hana said they gave me something to latch on to besides my spiraling anxiety. She was probably right.

The city ballooned and zigzagged all over the place, seemingly without end. There were two—two!—loops around the metropolis, connecting various highways and neighborhoods. And the place had a main downtown, but also a secondary one called the Galleria, where there was a big mall and lots of oil and gas companies, as well as restaurants, clubs, wine bars, pubs, jewelry shops, and just about everything else you could think of.

Okay. So Houston was big enough to hold both Lennon and me, should I decide to stay. And it had some of the best cancer hospitals in the nation, should I need to get another position.

Everything would be fine. As my mother used to say, these were obstacles, not Mount Everest. With a resolute nod, I opened my eyes and rolled my case up onto the little stoop, where it caught on the step, and I smashed my big toe. Pain radiated upward as I winced. “Ouch!”

I was a mess. A hot mess, which was the very thing I’d tried so hard to outrun since the night of the attack. I’d worked hard—really, really hard—to move beyond my panic about being alone outside. And about blood.

I was a nurse, so getting over the sight of blood had been accomplished through continued exposure. The first couple of months back on the job had been rougher than during my school years, which had been hard enough.

Clearly, that night in Michigan had left indelible scars on my psyche—just as it had Lennon’s. That was part of why I hadn’t simply called him or just shown up, like I’d dreamed about for weeks after.

My nose stung, and I sniffled as I thought about Lennon's gentleness with me before the attack. How I missed him.

I wasn't ready to cut the final tie, but I had to be prepared. We'd diverged on our paths because of our shared trauma. I couldn't force him to look at me the same way—to not see the woman who'd been part of the assault, the catalyst for his wounds. Just as he couldn't force the nightmares or squeamishness from my mind.

Coming to Houston was a mistake, my mind suddenly blared. I was smart enough to admit it, and woman enough to own it. But there was nothing I could do to change it. I'd made a commitment. I was a nurse.

"Pull it together, Vivian. This isn't like you," I murmured. "You're stronger than this." I rubbed three fingers over the space between my eyebrows, desperate for relief from the tension headache building in my skull.

Then I heard the front door open. "Vivi? What...what are—why are you... How?"

My head shot up. Lennon's voice, all rich cream and smooth chocolate, flowed over my eardrums, making me want to purr. I adored his voice, had from the beginning. My gaze swept up to meet his, and I was shocked to see how much thicker and wilder his beard had become, probably an additional three inches stuck out from his face. His lips had all but disappeared into the mass. His eyes, though, were the same. Warm, focused on me, and filled with some of the off-kilter confusion I was experiencing.

"H-hi, Lennon." My voice was too high and thin. I swallowed, trying to get better control of myself. "It's been a while."

He continued to stare with an intensity that disconcerted me. "I...I just found out you were coming."

I dropped my gaze, no longer able to bear the weight of his. “Your mother invited me.”

“Ah. Yes. Well, um, hi. Welcome.” He said the word lamely with a slight wave.

Oh, this was worse than awkward. Maybe I’d melt into a puddle and disappear forever. “Why are you here?” I asked. I glanced around, still waiting for Lola to pop out from behind Lennon. “Where’s Lola?”

“Out—at my sister’s place.”

My mouth dropped open. “What? No!” My voice dipped. “She’s supposed to be here...”

“She said she had to step out, asked me to come by and take the enchiladas out of the oven. Sounded like an emergency when she called a couple of hours ago.” His voice told me he now had doubts about that.

I clenched my fists. This setup wasn’t right . Or fair. I hadn’t prepared myself to see Lennon, and clearly he wasn’t ready to see me.

“Hang on.” I pulled out my phone. I noted with irritation that I’d left it in airplane mode and now switched it over. Almost immediately, text messages popped up, the pings so rapid that they made one continual chime. Six from Lola.

Okay, well, I guess I couldn’t be mad. She’d tried to warn me.

“I clearly didn’t get the messages in time.”

A petite German shepherd padded up next to Lennon, her dark fur a stark contrast to her sherry-colored eyes. She sat at his foot, her tongue lolling out of the side of her

mouth, ears perked forward as she studied me.

“Oh, you’re pretty,” I breathed. My gaze sought Lennon’s. “Belladonna?”

At his nod, I dropped my gaze back to the dog. “Hi, pretty girl. Hi,” I cooed. “Aren’t you gorgeous.”

Belladonna glanced up at Lennon, who said, “Go ahead.”

The German shepherd seemed to grin even bigger as she rose and stepped forward, sniffing my outstretched hand before pushing her head against my palm and resettling herself against my leg. I laughed, charmed by her clear affection as I petted her ears. Lennon made a choking sound that caused me to look up at him—though I didn’t stop petting the dog.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Does my petting her bother you?”

He studied me, starting at the top of my head and working down my neck to my torso. I gulped, holding my breath as his gaze progressed with leisurely thoroughness to my toes before he met my eyes once more. “No. Not at all. Belladonna has great taste in people.”

I frowned. “What?”

“She likes you. You don’t know how unusual her greeting is, but I do. She knew from the moment she saw you that you were special. Just like I did.”

I scowled as confusion muddled my thoughts. “I don’t understand. You can’t have thought I was that special. I mean, I haven’t talked to you in months.”

Lennon’s expression softened, and he no longer looked like an angry lumberjack.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you, Vivi.”

He smiled, his beard lifted, and the skin around his eyes crinkled. He was just so...virile. Embarrassing as it was, I’d watched all of his games this season and become something of a Lennon Cruz expert. I could list his stats with the most ardent fan.

I now knew he was a multi-year veteran of the NHL, having been called up for the playoffs during his second year in the minors. His performance as the enforcer during a series against the Avalanche had sealed his position on the Wildcatters, making him a mainstay for the franchise. And I knew he was thirty-two years old.

“Uhhhh...” I shuddered, unhappy with my current inability to speak, but every part of me froze as I soaked him in.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” he offered, opening the door wider so I could step over the threshold and into the large foyer.

“Y-you are?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been trying to figure out how best to reach out. I mean, I knew you were coming, just not when or where. I was going to call you...” He swallowed audibly.

Was he nervous ?

“I’m sorry I didn’t know you’d be here,” he continued. “I would have picked you up from the airport and taken you out for dinner.”

“You never asked me to come,” I blurted, now rooted to the spot just inside the doorway. I’d stopped petting the dog, and she nuzzled my hand, giving my wrist a

quick lick.

He looked chagrined. “Would you believe me if I told you I wanted to? I thought about it every day.”

Finally, those words jolted me back to fully—fine, partially—functional. “That’s not the impression I got. You could have called, or we could have video-chatted. You could have given me some inkling of how you felt...”

“I thought I was doing the right thing, but I’ve come to regret even more my decision to not talk to you. God, I’ve missed you, Vivi.” He peered down at me, making me blush, even as my stomach did a slow, lazy flip. “I want to explain it all. I promise.”

Lennon Cruz was potent. I licked my lips. His eyes flared as he followed the track of my tongue, which meant I slowed down, further heightening the sensation.

He leaned in closer. I held my breath. Would he...? I’d missed him, missed that soft, supple mouth. But he couldn’t, wouldn’t just kiss me now...would he?

“Vivi...?”

“Yeah?”

“Hold really still.”

“O-okay.” My chest heaved as my nipples perked up. Lennon Cruz is going to kiss me —just as I’d dreamed about for more than six months. He wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

“You have a palmetto bug in your hair,” he said, reaching up just as I caught a glimpse of a dark shape near my ear.

“Wh-what’s that?” I whispered, trying to cover my disappointment.

“A flying cockroach,” Lennon said with a grimace.

My reaction was instantaneous. I shrieked and flailed. Belladonna barked and bounded around me, probably looking for a physical threat.

“I told you to hold still,” he said, darting past the dog.

“Get it off! Get it off of me,” I squealed, hopping from one foot to another like a two year old about to pee her pants.

“I’m trying. Dammit, Vivi, I can’t get it with you jumping around?—”

“There’s a roach in my hair, Lennon. No woman is going to stand still when a cockroach is on her. It’s physically impossible.”

I nearly tripped over the German shepherd, but instead fell against Lennon’s chest. He tugged the insect from my hair—along with a few strands that popped from my scalp—whipped open the door, and threw it out into the yard. I backed away as it flew through the air. Thankfully, away from me.

I slammed my hand to my chest and dropped the other one to my knee, heaving for breath. Belladonna quit barking and settled close to me, a faint whine in her throat.

“Well, that was gross,” he said.

“Oh my Gooooooo—I can’t. I just can’t be here .” I gagged, shuddered, then gagged again.

Lennon placed a warm hand— please don’t let it be the cockroach hand! —on my

shoulder. “It’s over now, Vivi. You survived.”

“Are you laughing at me?” I gasped.

“Never. I don’t like those things either.”

He waited, patient and strong and sure, until I gathered myself. When I finally straightened, he smiled at me, his beard shifting so his lips and teeth showed through the thick mass.

“You got the best of the welcoming committee,” he said.

“Oh! You jerk!”

“Come on, you can do better than that. And I meant my dog, not the insect from hell.”

“The fact that such a horror exists is not okay,” I muttered.

He tossed his head back and guffawed. The afternoon light cast most of his face in relief, and I was struck by the strong nose and tailored browbone. His dark hair was thick and lay neatly against his skull, giving him a sleek appearance. My gaze slid back to his beard. I’d bet he let it grow to cover his scars.

He was beautiful in a distinctly masculine sense, and I stared, mesmerized. Lennon was my sweetest drug and ten times more powerful than any hit a dealer could offer me.

“Come on in. Please.”

“I should. I don’t want another one of those horrors to touch me.” My voice sounded

normal, which was amazing considering a shiver worked its way up my spine, causing my hair to stand on end.

“Yeah. It’s a million degrees, and the mosquitoes are already gnawing on you,” he said, closing the door.

“They love me,” I muttered. At least something did.

No, that wasn’t fair, and I knew it. My mother had loved me dearly. Lola had fast become a dear friend. And Hana was now married to one of Lennon’s teammates. Hana and Paxton—I’d never call him Naese like the rest of the world did because Hana had introduced him to me as Paxton—were head over heels in love. She’d never shone so brightly, and I was a jealous hag who wanted that level of commitment and caring with my partner.

I was maudlin today—maybe because I was back in Lennon’s proximity, and he seemed much less affected by my presence than I was by his. Suddenly, it just all seemed too much. “You know what? I’m not sure this is a good idea. I think I should go back to the airport and go home.”

Cruz stood so still, he seemed to be carved from marble. His warm brown eyes searched my face. He tucked his chin toward his chest as his beard shifted. “Is that what you want, Vivi?” he asked softly. His eyes held a pain and yearning I didn’t fully grasp but could feel, deep in my chest and gut.

Chapter

Lennon

She stared up at me with those silvery eyes. My memory hadn't done them justice. Her hair was shorter but still thick with bouncy curls. She was stiller, more watchful. But then I was, too.

We had reason to be.

I stepped a little closer to her, a series of fireworks fizzing in my guts as her pupils dilated and those petal pink lips parted. She still wanted me. And I was desperate for her. Yet she seemed to want to turn away from me now.

I clenched my hands into fists to keep from reaching from her.

“Is that what you want, Vivi? To go home and forget me? Forget us?”

Her eyes widened as confusion crossed her expression. Then hurt and fury sparked in her eyes. “You’re the one who erased us ,” she muttered as she slapped her arm, trying to stave off a mosquito, looking miserable.

A deep, painful ache exploded in my chest, radiating outward faster than a vicious punch to the solar plexus. That I could have handled. Vivian’s miserable expression and her clear disappointment in me I could not.

“Stay,” I said. “At least for now.” I reached down and grabbed her bag when she

hesitated. "I won't push you to do anything you don't want to."

She brushed past me. "Fine."

Normally, I was confident in my life choices, but Vivian caused me to second and third guess myself. It was an unsettling realization that her opinion mattered that much.

"Want something to drink?" I asked as I set her suitcase down near the stairs. She glanced at it, then at me. Her lips thinned, and her jaw tightened. This was not an expression I'd seen from her before, and another blast of uncertainty exploded in my guts. I needed to get us on the same page.

"Listen, let me explain. I thought the guy in Michigan—the main one who I call the spokesman—I thought he told me he'd hurt you if we were together."

Vivian's gaze flew up to mine. "What?" The word was less than a breath.

"That night when we were attacked. I thought..." I shook my head, took a breath. "I had a concussion. You told me I did, but I never put that together with him talking to me."

Vivian stared up at me, her eyes wide, face pale. "I don't understand."

My hands shook so badly. I wanted to hold her to me, bury my nose in her hair. "Want some sweet tea? Mom's is good."

She shook her head. "Just...just tell me."

I wanted to move her into the house, to get her to sit down. I didn't want to hover over her like some weirdo.

“I’ve had two concussions now. Bad ones. And it seems that when I get that type of brain injury, I hallucinate.”

“Okay...” Her brows drew together. “So, you’re saying...what?”

“I hallucinated that night. I was sure it was real, but I don’t think it was now—not based on what the responding officer said. What you said. I...I didn’t know. Not until my mother and my teammates sat me down in an intervention earlier this week.”

Vivian’s eyes never left my face. “You had a hallucination after those men ran off, before the police and I got to you.”

“I think so. Yes.”

“Why do you think that, Lennon? Why tell me this now ?” Her voice cracked. She pressed her lips together, but I caught the faint tremor in her jaw.

“I...” I moved around her, and Vivian turned with me. I crossed the living room, with its pretty hardwood floors and the ornate table lamps with broad shades my mother loved so much. I settled on the couch, which was the farthest piece of furniture; there were two armchairs closer to the door. I wanted Vivian to know she could leave, that I wouldn’t force her to stay. I also really needed to sit down because my knees quaked.

I told her in as much detail as possible what I remembered from that night. As I talked, she slipped into the chair closest to me. Much as I wanted to take comfort in that, I forced myself not to. Vivian was here; she was listening. That was more than I had any right to hope for.

She sat in silence. Then she leaned closer and gripped my wrist. “Tell me again, please.”

I did.

When she let go of my wrist and leaned back against her cushion, I mourned the loss of that contact. Jeez, I was even more of a sap than I'd known—and I was well acquainted with my emotions. I'd had to be with two younger sisters and a single mom.

“You thought he threatened me. Threatened to ra?—”

“Yes.” I didn't want to hear her say the word. “Then kill you. I was sure he'd said that.”

“That's why you sent me away...”

“Yes.”

Her lashes fluttered as she shook her head. “I thought you couldn't stand to be near me.” She met my gaze, hers haunted. “I thought the trauma of the event was too much, and you?—”

I rose from the couch and dropped to my knees at her feet. “No, Vivi. No. It wasn't you. I just... I had to protect you, had to make sure you were safe. It was my penance for walking down that street, thinking I could handle anything...” Tentatively, I took her hands in mine. They were chilled, so I curled my fingers around hers. “I was too cocky.”

Vivian gave my fingers a gentle squeeze. “I need to think this through. I just... I don't know what to do, Lennon. I started piecing my life back together without you in it, and it really, really hurts.” She sucked her lower lip into her mouth. “I can't go through that again. More importantly, I won't.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t think you do. Would you stand up, please? I need to...”

I jumped to my feet, and Vivian rose. She began to pace, shaking out her hands. “You decided what was best for me— for me—and didn’t even let me have a say in that decision.”

“I...” I hadn’t ever thought of it like that. I swallowed hard. “I’m so sorry. It just seemed like the only option.”

“But it wasn’t, was it? If I’d known about the threats he made, I could have mentioned it to the police. You could have mentioned it to the police. We could have come up with another solution that was safe even if it had been true. Instead...” She whipped around, her arms falling to her side. “I cried my eyes out for months ,” she rasped.

“Vivi, I’m so sor?—”

“Don’t. Don’t apologize again. It changes nothing.”

“But...”

“I need to think.” She rubbed her forehead right above her creased brows. “I’ll get a hotel for the night. I just need some time.”

“There’s no need for that,” my mother said as she swept into the room. She wore a casual cotton lounge set in soft lilac and some wedge sandals. Her toenails coordinated with her outfit, and her glasses nestled into her dark, chin-length bob.

She kissed my cheek and wiped away her lipstick. Then, she went over and wrapped

Vivi in a hug. "I'm so glad you're here, my darling. Let me get you settled in your room."

"Room? Vivi's staying here?" I looked back and forth between them.

Lola took a deep steadying breath and turned to me. "Yes. I hired Vivian to come stay with me. She's going to help me manage my cancer treatments."

I felt my eyes bulge. "C-cancer?"

Chapter

Vivian

Despite all my bluster, I wanted to go to him, soothe him, but it was clear Lennon and his mom needed to talk. And I definitely needed a moment to work through my emotions. Lola waved her hand toward a short hallway. “The guest room I set up is the second door on the right. The bathroom is a jack and jill, so you’ll find it without a problem. If you need anything to drink or eat, you come get it. I won’t have you hungry, querida.”

I nodded and gathered my suitcase.

Lennon swayed on his feet, his face pale. “How bad, Mom?”

She hesitated for a moment, her eyes meeting mine. “It’s not a good prognosis, but I can beat it.” Her eyes pleaded with me, and I wasn’t sure if it was because she wanted her statement to be true or because she didn’t want me to tell Lennon that her doctor had given her a year to live.

I took a shower, then dressed in clothes better suited to the weather. I’d just finished braiding my hair, unable to stand the idea of blowing it dry, when there was a knock on my door.

I opened it and stared up at Lennon. “Mom said to tell you she made dinner. She then practically ran out the door and jumped into my sister’s car.”

I studied him. “How are you doing?”

“I...” His lips completely disappeared into his beard. “Today’s been a lot.”

“Understatement.”

Belladonna appeared at Lennon’s side. She pushed her way forward to nuzzle my leg. I petted her head, and she sighed happily.

“Will you eat with me? I could use a friend.”

I smiled. “Sure.”

We headed to the kitchen, which had Mexican tile countertops and backsplash, along with Saltillo tile floors. The appliances were all stainless. There wasn’t a dish in the undermount sink or a spill on the counters. Clearly, Lola Cruz was like my mother—ruthless when it came to running a household.

Belladonna headed to the far side of the room where a heavy wooden table sat with thick, tall-backed wooden chairs. She picked up a large bone from the corner and flopped on her bed with a soft grunt, eyeing us as she gnawed her treat.

“Mom made her enchiladas, beans, rice, and calabazas. I hope that’s okay.”

My stomach gurgled, responding before my mouth. Cruz’s lips quirked up a little. “Guess so. Tea?”

“Water,” I said. “I can’t drink caffeine this late in the day.”

“You got it. The plates are there.” He pointed next to the stove, where the pots and a large pan waited. “Help yourself.”

I plated my food while Lennon got us drinks. Then he served himself quickly and joined me at the table. He stared down at his plate, and I waited. Even before he asked the question, I was gearing up for the answer.

“How serious is it?” he finally said.

“Serious. But I think she has a better shot than the doctor told her. And that isn’t false hope I’m trying to give you. Your mom has a lot to live for, and that means she has a lot of fight in her. But I won’t lie, Lennon. She’s going to need it.”

“Okay.” He picked up his fork, but instead of taking a bite, he drew designs across his plate. “And you don’t mind being here? It sounds a bit like my mother used emotional arm-twisting.”

I took a bite of enchilada, mainly so I had another minute to form my answer. The flavors hit my tongue, and I moaned. “So good.”

“Yeah, it always is.” He took a bite while I had another.

Once I’d gotten through the first flurry of hunger, I set my fork on my plate and answered his question. “I’m glad to be here—as long as that’s okay with you. I needed a change from UCSF, and Hana’s begged me to visit, so... Yeah, I’m glad to be here.”

“Good.” He met my gaze, his eyes vulnerable. “You’ll treat her well, right? I mean...”

I reached over and rested my hand over his. “Yes, Lennon. That’s why I’m here. I want your mother to have every possible chance.”

“Thank you.” The words came from deep inside.

“You’re welcome.” I patted his hand a couple times, then returned to my meal. We ate in companionable silence for a while. “I thought about what you told me,” I said.

He hummed questioningly since his mouth was full.

“I believe you.”

He patted his lips with his napkin. “I’m glad. I won’t lie to you, Vivi. I promise.”

“And I’ll always be honest with you—about your mom but also about how I’m feeling.” I rubbed my finger across the smooth wood of the table, enjoying the satiny feel. “I’m scared to trust you,” I told him. “I’m scared you’ll change your mind, and I’ll be hurt. But I’m scared not to try because I’ll be hurt.” I lifted my gaze to his. “Please don’t hurt me, Lennon.”

“Maybe we could try a date or two,” he suggested. “You can see how that feels.”

“I kind of get the sense we’re on one now.” I glanced around the homey kitchen, smiling because it reminded me of my mother’s place.

“I’ll take you on all the dates, Vivi. Anywhere you want to go.”

My breath stuttered as I inhaled. “One day at a time, Lennon. A bit more trust each day, that’s how you can prove you’re serious about me. I don’t want a grand gesture. I want to know, in my bones and heart, that what you’re telling me is true.”

He nodded. “I respect that.”

“Guess we’ll see.”

“You will.” He hesitated. “And I want you to know, I’m not sucking up to ensure you

give my mother better care. I know you'll do that, no matter what happens between us."

"You're right, I will. I guess I'm glad you realize that."

He stared deeply into my eyes. "I remember everything we ever talked about, Vivian. I know how important your patients are to you. Thank you for allowing my mother to be one of them. Thank you for getting past your anger with me to care for her."

My heart, the one that had been Lennon's since he'd handed me my hat, melted. "I want to trust you, Lennon Cruz. Don't blow it, because I won't give a third attempt."

He gave a sharp nod. "Understood."

Chapter

Lennon

The next morning I stared at my face in my bathroom mirror before I ran my hands over the neatly trimmed beard that still covered my face from my cheekbones to my Adam's apple. I rubbed my throat where it met my neck, feeling the thick ridge of scar an inch from my carotid artery. If that piece of shit had had better aim, I would be dead.

"Huh..." I hadn't realized that before. No clue why it hit me now, but it did, and hard. My hands shook, and I had to hold on to the edge of the counter to stay upright through the quaking. My vision tunneled.

I'd be dead, and my mom would still have cancer, but I wouldn't be here to help her. And Vivi...she would have had to live with my death.

"I'm alive. I'm here. Vivian's here. No one is hurt." I repeated that mantra over and over until I regained control.

I stared at myself in the mirror. My eyes were a bit wild, my lips compressed. "You're going to be okay. It's fine. You're fine." I nodded, and I had to admit, I did feel better—maybe because I'd admitted my fears to Amber, maybe because I'd faced Vivi and finally been able to come clean. Or maybe because there was hope that I'd be able to move forward with Vivian, that she'd still want me even after I'd ghosted her.

Belladonna pawed the air next to my leg as she whined. “Yeah, that was a lot, wasn’t it?” I settled on my bathroom’s tile. “Come on, girl. I could use a snuggle.”

Because Belladonna had been raised to work with Army Rangers, she wasn’t much of a snuggler. But she was also a dog, and she cared about me, just as I cared about her. When I opened my arms, she dove against my chest, nuzzling me as she made soft noises.

I stroked her head as I stared at nothing, letting my mind go as it needed to. Vivian would help my mother through her treatment regimen, and my mother wasn’t a quitter. My mother’s decision to bring Vivian to Houston was a huge signal of approval—one I wasn’t sure Vivian realized.

While she hadn’t said it to my face, my mother’s decision to hire Vivian had told me to get off my ass and live before it was too late. I took a deep breath and released it slowly. I couldn’t do much more about that situation right now except be there for my mom. And I totally would. I planned to spend all my free time here, with her, until I knew she was in remission.

I was a mama’s boy and proud of that—proud of my mother’s work ethic and parenting, which had created four successful, thoughtful people. Proud to be a man she’d helped mold.

I had a much better chance of controlling the situation with Vivian, I decided. I could take her out, spoil her, show her how much she meant to me. I’d start by inviting her to my hockey game later this week.

Belladonna rose from my lap and shook, so I got off the floor, wincing at my aching butt. I texted Amber and asked to sit with her before practice. Then I contacted Coach Whitaker. He agreed to let me come in a little late since we were lifting weights before ice time.

An hour later, I sat in the chair I considered mine in Amber's office, scooching until I was comfortable as I leaned my head against the back, hands on the arm rests. I explained what had happened yesterday and my thought process this morning. "I feel lighter," I told her, "like my body and mind needed to push that shit out of my head."

"And now? What do you want to do now?" Amber asked. She sat across from me, ankles crossed, glasses on the tip of her nose, expression intent.

"I want to marry Vivian, and I want my mom at the ceremony."

Amber raised a well-groomed eyebrow, a smile curving her lips. "Those are some goals. I assume you don't mean today."

"I'm putting them out there to manifest—not today but not too far in the future. I knew Vivi was it for me when I met her last September, and seeing her again has reinforced that." I grinned and leaned forward, slapping my hands on my knees. "That's all I got for today."

"All right. And Lennon?"

"Yup?"

She offered me a full-watt smile. "I'm really impressed with you."

I snorted. "I was a dick."

"We all tend to lick our wounds when we're hurt."

"Yeah, well, I need a make-amends list," I said as I stood.

"I like that," Amber said, also rising. "Tell you what, let me know how that goes."

I paused. “You mean...”

She chuckled. “I mean you can come back when you want, if you want.”

“Can I give you a hug?” I asked. “Before I skip out of here a free man?”

This time, she belly laughed even as she opened her arms.

That afternoon, after practice, I hesitated for the first time in my entire life before entering my mother’s house. I was at the back door, which led into the laundry room and beyond that, the kitchen. Belladonna sat and looked up at me, but I stood mesmerized by the sound of Vivian’s laughter.

I’d missed her laugh. Much like a parched plant lifting its leaves to life-giving rain, I felt myself unfurl, expand, grow. With a smile I pushed open the door and stepped into the room, that lightness in my chest expanding when Vivian laughed again.

“Really, Lola? He said that ?”

“Oh, yes. Little Lennon was quite the comedian.” My mother glanced up at me from her spot at the kitchen table, letting me know she was aware I was there. Vivian’s back was to me, slim and straight. Her hair was piled atop her head in that messy style my sisters preferred when they were lounging. I drank in the elegant, ivory column of her neck, the delightful curves of her shoulders, the slim musculature of her bared arms.

“But his brother, Ruben, died when Lennon was in middle school. He was in the army, a Ranger.” Mom smiled with pride. “He and his K-Nine were killed.”

“I’m so, so sorry.” Vivian’s long, elegant fingers encased my mother’s darker hand. Mom patted Vivian’s hand with her free one before she returned it to her mug.

“Thank you, querida. That was long ago. My heart, while not whole, is at peace.”

“I wonder if I’ll get there. I still grieve my mother,” Vivian said.

“You will,” Mom said with a gentle pat. “Now, let’s discuss my first treatment plan.” She raised her eyebrows at me. “I want it to start after Lennon’s next game. I don’t get to see enough of those.”

My mother held season tickets, which she’d refused to let me buy her. I knew what she was doing, and I appreciated the effort. Who would have thought my mom would be my best wing person?

“Hey, Mom,” I said as I closed the mudroom door behind me. Belladonna raced over to Vivian, all tail wags and lolling tongue. I glanced from Mom to Vivian, noting her surprised expression. “You’re coming to the game? Want to be in the owner’s box? I’m sure Gunnar would love to have you and Vivian there.”

“That’s perfect, Lennon.” She beamed. “I’ll give my tickets to?”

“Please don’t give them away,” I groaned.

She clucked. “I’ll do what I want with them, and what I want to do is give them to my boss. It butters him up, which will be helpful when I need to take more time off.”

Her mouth tightened, and I noted the strain in her eyes. My mother was scared. I hated that she felt that way. I walked across the tiles and hugged her. “Of course, Mom. Of course.”

She rested her head against my shoulder for a moment before she patted my back. “So, the game. This will be Vivian’s first one, so you boys better win.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

My gaze met Vivian’s, and I saw softness in her eyes. I’d talked to her about my close relationship with my mother and sisters, but maybe she hadn’t realized I’d meant it. “So, I’d suggest you get there about an hour early. I’d offer to take you?—”

“No, I don’t like going with you, hijo,” Mom said. “I’ll drive. But tell you what—you bring Vivian back after you celebrate your win. That way she’ll get more time with the CATS.”

“That’s not necessary—” Vivian began.

“Hana will be there,” I said. I’d already talked to Naese to make sure. “And Paloma, she’s our coach’s wife, is looking forward to meeting you. So are the rest of the ladies.”

Vivian frowned. “CATS?”

Belladonna accepted pats from my mother, gave her a soft lick, and settled under the table.

“Comrades, Allies, Teammates, and Spouses. Gunnar Evaldson, our owner, wanted to be as inclusive as possible,” I explained.

“Isn’t that kind of him?” Mom said. “Now, that’s a man who needs a strong partner.” Mom launched into a story about Gunnar, then another. I was surprised, but somehow not, to learn the two of them were friendly.

After a delicious meal, I did the dishes. Wiping my hands on the dish towel, I felt a pang of disappointment. “I have to head out. Belladonna needs a run and so do I.” I patted my stomach. Belladonna perked up, coming out from under the table.

“Oh! Take Vivian. She was saying she wanted to learn the running trails. Plus, she hasn’t seen your place yet.”

Again, my mother’s meddling warmed my chest. She really was a fabulous woman. I faced Vivian. “If you want...”

Vivian licked her lips, her gaze darting between us. “Okay. Just let me change.”

Mom waited until Vivian was in her room before she said quietly, “That girl needs love, Lennon. She’s starved for it.”

I nodded. “I want to give it to her. All of me.”

Mom reached up and patted my cheek. “You already do. She just needs to realize.”

Chapter

Vivian

I squirmed in Lennon's huge truck's passenger seat, wondering how I'd been so easily manipulated. Well, I'd wanted to come with him, wanted to see if we still had that connection. Belladonna made herself comfortable in her large, cushy dog seat that took up the entire backseat of the truck. I loved that Lennon spoiled his dog.

"Want to run first or go by my place?" he asked.

"Run, please." I was nervous and needed something else to focus on.

Lennon drove to Memorial Park, a large expanse of trails and trees interspersed with thick slabs of grass. "I can't believe we're so close to downtown," I said as we got out. "I can barely hear the traffic noise."

Lennon smiled. "It's not Central Park, but it's pretty nice. Ready?"

"Yep."

Belladonna trotted beside us, and I noted that Lennon shortened his stride to match mine. We made an easy loop that was probably a couple of miles, and by the time we'd finished, I was sweaty and probably red-faced. I lifted the hair off the back of my neck and fanned my cheeks.

We walked back to his truck, where Lennon offered me a bottle of water. He poured

some into a bowl for the dog before he drank his own. I'd known from the beginning that he was a kind man, but watching him care for his dog, his T-shirt plastered to his chest and the thick slabs of muscle on his abdomen, caused a thrum of desire.

I finished my water, both pleased to know the connection was still there and afraid to explore it. I inhaled. The only way I could manage these feelings was to work through them, so I might as well start. "Thanks for the run," I said. "I needed that."

He pulled a couple of hand towels from his gym bag and offered me one. We both wiped away perspiration.

"Sure. I like to run. Quiets my head. And with my mom...I think I'm going to be in the best shape of my life."

I laid my hand on his forearm. "I'm sorry you and your family have to go through this, Lennon."

He nodded. "I know you've been there." He cleared his throat and worry settled in his eyes. "How are things looking? I mean, any update on her prognosis?"

"It's actually really good," I said. "She said I could talk to you about this—otherwise, I couldn't."

"I get that."

"So...yeah, the biopsy was positive. The mass will be removed this week, but it's small and localized. The first round of chemotherapy starts next week, and we won't know how she reacts to that until we get there. But she's healthy, and we have ways to mitigate the symptoms."

"Good. That's all good."

I hesitated. “She doesn’t need a private nurse. It’s a large expense and?”

He squeezed my fingers. “Please don’t worry about the money. I can afford it, if she’ll let me pay.”

I laughed. “She won’t.”

“She won’t,” he agreed. “She wants you. And I want you there with her. As long as you’re okay with your arrangement, we’re all happier for it.”

I blew out the breath I’d been holding since the plane ride here. “Okay.”

“I’m really glad you’re here, Vivi.”

I smiled at him. “Me, too.”

“Want to swing by my place now?” he asked. “I’d love to show it to you.”

“Let’s go.”

He helped me back into the huge pickup, and I buckled in while he started the engine.

“So...you don’t live far?” I asked.

“Not too far. I wanted to be close enough in case my mom needed me—when I’m in town, that is.”

“How much do you travel?” We hadn’t discussed his season in great detail when we met. Now, I had a better sense of his travel time, which he confirmed for me.

“About half the season. Sometimes that’s lumped together, and we can be out of town

playing an away series for eight to ten days, but that's rare."

I frowned as I studied his profile. He glanced at me, and I liked how the sunlight glinted off his brown eyes.

"That's a long time. Isn't it hard on families?"

"Yeah, it is. I'd say the travel is the hardest part of being a professional athlete. Partners have to handle whatever comes out while we're playing. It takes a real toll on relationships. But Coach and Gunnar, they've worked to build a network so the families have support. Whatever it is—emergency care, new baby, problems with teens—the Wildcatters organization has a liaison on call that partners can reach for help."

"That's really smart. And so thoughtful," I said.

"It's also self-serving." Lennon's mouth kicked up in a smile. "If a player's worried about what's going on at home, the distraction impacts performance."

"Ah." I settled back into the seat.

After another moment, he pulled into a parking garage. Once we exited the vehicle, Belladonna trotting at Lennon's side, he led me to the elevator and upstairs to his place. I felt his sideways glances that lingered on my legs and bare arms, and I shifted. While my mind kept telling me to be wary of him, of his lifestyle, my heart pushed me toward him. With a mental sigh, I gave in.

I pivoted so my chest pressed against his and rose up on my tiptoes. Before I could blink, I'd touched my lips to his. Lennon made a gruff sound as his arms encircled my waist, his hand splaying wide between my shoulder blades. I shivered as his fingers touched my skin. He angled his head to deepen the kiss, and I opened my

mouth, encouraging his tongue.

I'd missed this—missed him. Each inhale brought more of his scent into my lungs, creating a heady cocktail that made me shove my chest more fully against his hard pecs. He stroked into my mouth, tasting, gauging, learning me and my preferences all over again. Yet it was also like coming home, because he knew me, knew that I went weak in the knees when his tongue rubbed the corner of my bottom lip. He knew I liked to grip the hair at the back of his head. And he knew I couldn't resist when he cupped my jaw, holding me in place as he plundered my mouth.

I smoothed my tongue against his as I rubbed my hips over his, and Lennon groaned low, almost painfully. I reveled as desire bloomed from my pores, cascading across my skin and pooling in my low belly. The elevator dinged, and Lennon cursed against my lips.

“Oh! Well...I hope you plan to step out, young man, because I have places to be,” came a woman's voice as the doors slid open.

We pulled apart and turned. An older woman with snowy white bob and sparkling brown eyes stared at us. Belladonna chuffed a greeting.

“Hello, Mrs. Rodriguez.”

“Lennon.” She inclined her head. “And this is Vivian?”

“It is,” Lennon said.

My world was off-kilter—as much from that stunning kiss as the fact that this older lady, a neighbor, knew my name.

“About time you brought her here. I've been waiting to meet you, Vivian. I'm also a

Vivian. That's how I learned about you." She winked.

The elevator doors started to close, and she put out her hand even as Lennon put his on the other set of doors. "Why don't you two finish your business in your condo? I really do need to get to my appointment." She wrinkled her nose.

Lennon appeared flustered, which on the giant of a man, was utterly adorable. "Yes, we're getting off. Have a good evening, Mrs. Rodriguez."

"I will now that I see you brought your lady-love home." Her smile grew, and her eyes sparkled. "Let's talk soon, Vivian."

"Y-yes, sure. That would be nice," I stammered. My cheeks were so hot I thought my skin might sizzle.

Lennon pulled me out of the car and down the hall. We pretended not to hear Mrs. Rodriguez's chuckle.

"That was mortifying," I muttered.

"Sorry. I, er, lost control."

He opened the door and ushered me into his place. The main room was large and open between the living area, kitchen, and dining room.

Lennon seemed to like natural fabrics and mid-tone woods; the cabinets were a warm maple and the countertops a soft beige. In the kitchen, there were large glass jars with baking basics on a wooden shelf next to a high-powered mixer. Seemed the man also loved to bake. In the living room he had a large sectional in a darker brown leather that formed a U-shape in front of a brick fireplace. The floors were a grayish slate that tied the spaces together.

I pursed my lips, considering his comment as well as his home. I liked this place, very much. “No, Lennon. You haven’t fully lost control yet.”

“You remembered—that I need to be in control.” He glanced over as he shut the door. The heat flaring in his eyes matched by the lust still simmering in my gut.

“I know that you prefer to be in charge,” I corrected. “But you will also enjoy ceding it. Because I’m going to make you.” I sashayed into his place behind the dog, unsurprised that Lennon still stood at the door, rigid, his breathing much too fast.

“Let me put away her leash and make her dinner.” He stalked off. I couldn’t help but smile at the tension radiating off of him. Then he abruptly turned and came back. “I’m going to kiss you some more.” He narrowed his eyes. “And then probably some more after that.”

I smirked. “Let’s see what you got, big guy.”

The next night, I gaped as I sat in the plush leather chair with a Wildcatters logo embossed into the soft material. Lola had parked me at the front of the sky-high box in Wildcatters Arena while she got us drinks and snacks. I was too overwhelmed to do more than take in my surroundings. Everything was sumptuous and so fancy, I didn’t want to touch it. The granite countertops gleamed, the glasses were crystal, and the beverages all had names I’d never heard before.

Two discreet waitstaff in starched white button downs and black pants stood at the buffet, which had to hold twenty different chafing dishes. Lola returned with my glass of wine, and I took a long sip, needing to quench my thirst—and fortify my nerve.

“My season-ticket seats are nothing like this. They’re near the team benches.” She pointed. “I like it down there because the crowd energy is awesome. And I don’t

worry I'll break something."

I nodded. "I'm definitely freaking out about that now."

"Don't." She took a sip of her iced green tea—a very good choice considering her current health. "Gunnar's super laid back. He's not going to grind you up and spit you out for dropping a plate."

"No, I'm not, and I appreciate the kind words, Lola," came a voice from behind us.

I turned to find a tall, fit man in his late forties with the palest eyes—like glaciers. He wore a dark suit with a Wildcatters tie, a seemingly playful nod for such a hard-faced man.

Lola set her drink in the cupholder on her chair and hugged Gunnar. I set my drink down so I didn't drop it. That was wise because when the Wildcatters owner turned his flinty gaze toward me, I quaked.

"I hear you're taking care of Lola as she goes through her treatment."

"I am." I offered him my hand. "Vivian Lee."

His handshake was as firm and no-nonsense as I'd expected it to be. "You're also the one Cruz has been pining for the past few months." Gunnar leaned in closer, his voice low and soft enough to be just for my ears. "He needs you more than you know."

I sucked in my breath. "I'll keep that in mind."

"I hope you will. And I hope you're as kind as he made you out to be. Lennon's one of a few truly special men. I'd like to keep him around for many more years so he can mentor and mold the young ones who are all about bravado and pissing contests."

Gunnar scowled. "It's a struggle to find integrity these days."

"I know," I said. "Some of the surgeons I've worked with do the job for money and prestige, not to save lives."

Gunnar looked out over the arena. "I believe in honor and integrity, Vivian. I also believe like finds like." Those glacial eyes met mine again. This man was hard, but I could see why Lola liked him. He was fair, decent, but he'd be ruthless to get what he wanted.

"I'll remember that," I said.

He smiled as he stepped back. "I know."

When he sauntered off to talk to other people in the suite, I stifled a gasp. "Is that...?"

"It is," Lola said. "I've never been brave enough to go up and say hello."

"And that's..." My voice cracked. I shook my head. "I guess I should have realized a hockey team owner is really rich and he would know other really rich, famous people."

"It's an alternate world," Lola said. She perked up with a smile. "The ladies are here."

I turned just in time to be enveloped in Hana's hug. "I'm so, so mad you didn't come to my wedding, but I understand. When we were in San Francisco, I hadn't realized your Lennon was our Cruz."

I cringed. Because I'd made a point not to tell her.

“Those hockey boys refuse to use most of their first names.” Lola smiled at a petite blonde with a high ponytail and paint-spattered jeans and Converse. She reminded me of an approachable cheerleader. “Except Maxim and Cormac,” Lola continued. “What did they do to get the men to call them by their first names?”

The woman shrugged. “No clue about Cormac. You’d have to ask him or Keelie. And I probably don’t wanna know.” Her accent was thick and sweet, like molasses. “Hi, I’m Ida Jane Dolov,” she said, offering me her hand. “I’m married to Maxim. He’s a D-man like Cruz. They’ve been on the same line for years now. I came up with Hana to be the official welcoming committee tonight because Gunnar only had two more seats, but everyone wants to meet you. We’ll have y’all over for a barbecue soon as the boys get back from their road trip next week.”

“I’m going to have Vivian and Lola over for tea on Sunday,” Hana said. “If that works, Lola.”

She nodded. “I think so.” She looked to me.

I hesitated, but then I smiled. “That would be fabulous.” No reason to assume the treatments would cause her distress. For many, the outlook and attitude were as important as the medication, it seemed. I wouldn’t do anything to reduce Lola’s chances for recovery. Plus, having a strong support network made the entire process easier on the patient.

Lola clapped her hands. “I’ll bring sopapillas.”

“Oh, then I’m gonna join y’all,” Ida Jane said, rubbing her hands together. She pouted. “Shoot. Can’t. I got two new kids coming in for treatment Monday morning, and I need to go over their information and set up my office.”

Ida Jane went on to explain her job as an art therapist, and Lola got us plates of food.

We snacked and ate until the game started.

Ida Jane wiped her fingers on a napkin, leaned forward and cupped her hands before she shouted, “Bust some butts, baby!”

We all giggled, but it only took three plays where I struggled to keep an eye on the puck—it moved so much faster on the ice in real time somehow—before Maxim moved in and started pummeling a guy who’d whacked Naese with his hockey stick.

“That’s called high-sticking,” Hana said from my side.

I knew that, but I nodded because I was too intent on watching the action to speak.

“And it’s a penalty, but the boys don’t like it, so they pound the offender,” Lola added from my other side.

I nodded again. “I know. I watched this whole season. This is way more intense than watching on television.”

“It is,” Lola agreed. “But I love it because my boy loves it.”

“Takes some getting used to,” Ida Jane said. “I used to peek through my hands during my first season.”

That I could understand. I clasped my hands, and my knees bounced. My heart slid up into my throat when Lennon accepted the puck with his stick and moved with grace toward the opposing team’s net. He flicked his stick, sending the puck forward, right before the opposing players flew around him.

My nerves grew tauter in the last period as Cruz body slammed a player into the boards and the puck slipped out. Hana gripped my arm as she raised her other hand.

“Come on, Pax. You got this. You got this... Nice pass.”

We all rose to our feet and cheered when Luka Stol slid the puck in under the goalie's pads.

Ida Jane sat back and fanned her face. “This game is not for the faint of heart.”

“It's raw,” Hana said. She shot me a side-eye and a smirk. “That's why I love it.”

I laughed, and some of the tension left my shoulders. “I think I need another glass of wine.”

“You got it,” Ida Jane said. She brought back fresh drinks for us all, and we sipped and snacked, keeping an eye on the game.”

“So...” Hana said. “When are you and Lennon going on a date?”

I hesitated.

“Oh, yes! Do tell.”

“We went for a run with Belladonna.”

“And after that, they had a passionate embrace in the elevator,” Lola said, waggling her eyebrows.

I gasped. “How...”

Lola smiled. “Vivian Rodriguez is a friend of mine.”

“I think everyone is a friend of yours,” I said.

Lola smiled. “Close. There are a few people in the city I haven’t met.”

“Was it a good kiss?” Hana asked quietly. She leaned her head against my shoulder. This affectionate version of my friend was something new, something I needed to get used to, but something I definitely liked.

I stared down at Lennon on the ice as he skated toward the puck. I couldn’t see his expression, but I knew it was one of intense concentration—like the way he focused on me. We’d made out for a good hour before the intensity had gotten to us. After showing me around his place, we’d gone back to his mother’s, where he’d left me after a chaste kiss on the cheek.

“It was intense.” I inhaled. “ So intense. I can’t wait to do it again.”

“How about tonight and then again tomorrow?” Lola said.

“Dang, Lola. You got this wing-woman thing down,” Ida Jane said.

“Only because I like Vivian.” Lola sniffed.

We all laughed. Then, two minutes later, we cheered because Cormac Bouchard had scored another goal.

After the game, I hugged Lola goodbye. She didn’t want to meet up with the team for the celebration, and I could see exhaustion in her features. She’d promised she was okay to drive, and I trusted her to know her limits.

I waited with Ida Jane and Hana in the suite until the crowd thinned. Then I followed as the two women wended their way through the arena, keeping a light level of chatter as we headed down to the locker room. The security guard at the door smiled at Ida Jane.

“Thanks for the apple butter,” he told her. “My wife’s been putting it on everything. Her current favorite is ice cream.”

“Sounds yummy,” Ida Jane said. “And I was glad to do it, Ross. How’s that baby of yours?”

Ross puffed up as a smile beamed across his face. “Cute as a button and smarter than me already.”

Ida Jane chuckled. “Just as it should be.”

Ross waved us through with a polite nod to Hana and me. My nerves swirled through my belly as I sidled into the locker room.

“I was so nervous the first few times I came down here,” Hana said. “This place is nothing like when Pax played in college.”

I took in the well-appointed space with the cushioned benches and a long bar that held high-end blenders and one of those restaurant-grade glass-front refrigerators with sports drinks, fruits, nuts, and a variety of other healthy snacks.

A huge, dark-haired man with cool eyes strode toward us. I tensed as he snagged Ida Jane by the waist, hauling her up against his chest with ease before he kissed her. “Missed you, Fists.”

I goggled at the brute being so gentle with Ida Jane. She smacked a second kiss to his lips and told him good game.

“They’re good together. Or rather, she’s good for him,” Lennon said from behind me. I startled but managed to bite back my yelp. I turned and tipped my head back so I could meet his gaze.

“Good game,” I said. That felt...inadequate. I blinked, trying to breathe through the overwhelm settling over me.

“It was.” Lennon’s expression softened. “I’m glad you’re here. I know this can be...a lot.”

“Oh, I’m totally freaking out.”

Lennon stilled, intent on me. “In a good way?”

I turned a little to take in the scene before me. Guys were laughing and chatting. Some, like Maxim and now Paxton, had their arms around their wives. They were all so...normal.

I faced Lennon again. “Yes. But I think it’ll take me a while to get used to this.”

His lips kicked up enough that they got lost in his beard. My breath caught. He was just so male . He inched a bit closer so that the tips of his dress shoes—I’d noted they were wingtips...swoon!—brushed my gray suede booties. My breath caught as he raised his hand and brushed my hair back from my cheek and off my shoulder. His thumb settled on the side of my neck, over my raging pulse.

“I like that you implied you’d be around for a while, Vivi. I want that. I want you around a long, long time.” His voice was tender. This was the man I’d spent the weekend with. I tipped my head back a little more, wishing he’d kiss me.

His lashes fluttered, and he gazed at my lips before returning his attention to my eyes. His thumb rubbed up and down my neck, causing a cascade of sensation along my skin, shooting outward to my fingertips, breasts, and belly.

“In fact, if I could have had my way then, just like now, I’d beg you to stay with me.”

Dimly, I heard Ida Jane speaking. Maxim rumbled a reply. But they almost didn't exist in the bubble Lennon had created around us.

"You don't have to beg." I licked my lips. "I want to be here."

He moaned softly. "I want to take this at your pace, Vivi. You're in charge. I told you that. But damn...I want you in my life and bed every night. I want to hold you. Kiss you like I did yesterday."

My breath broke over my moistened lips. His look of longing made me bolder, and I rose on my tiptoes, bracing my hand on his shoulder as I whispered in his ear, "What about fucking me?"

He kissed me fiercely, but then shook his head. "No. Not tonight."

"What? Why?" My voice had a decided whine that was not attractive—or dignified—but I wanted Lennon terribly. I had for months, and he was denying me my biggest treat.

"Because, my beautiful Vivian, I want to take you out and show you off on my arm and know every man and many women wish they were me. I want to make you giggle and scrunch your nose. I want to watch you sip wine and lick your lips as you tilt your head back and moan, your eyes closed and your expression blissed out, as you taste some perfect little bite. "

My eyes widened as heat rushed through me.

"Then, after we're replete from a delicious meal and sparkling conversation, I want to bring you back to my bed, spread you out, and make you scream and come and scream and come."

“Oh. My.”

He said all that like it was a given. No wonder he liked being in charge. I would have fanned my face if the muscles had worked in my arm. But all of them seemed to have gone lax as Lennon described his fantasy date, and who was I, really, to get between the man and his desires?

He glanced around. “Ready to go?”

“Where?” I asked.

“Well, the team’s headed to a restaurant we like—where we normally go after a game. But we don’t have to do that, if you don’t want to.”

I glanced around. Hana waved as she and Paxton headed out the door. “I’d like to go. And have you show me off.”

He placed a hand at my lower back and walked me out of the arena toward his huge truck. I glanced around again, trying to take it all in. “This is more than I could have imagined. So much more than I could have ever expected to want.”

He placed his free palm against the truck and snuggled me against his frame. He leaned down and nipped my earlobe. “What do you want, Vivi?”

“That. What you said earlier. All of it. And more.”

His dark eyebrow shot up. “What more?”

“You. Talking, laughing, holding hands, kissing my temple, cheek, lips. Making sure everyone knows were together.” I bit my lip. It was swollen and sensitive. I dropped my eyes and peeked at him through my lashes. I’d never been an ingenue, but I felt

like one now. “You inside me. Moving over me, in me, surrounding me.”

He inched even closer, so our chests brushed. “Fuck, Vivi. Fuck. That sounds amazing.”

“I want you, Lennon. Now, tomorrow, in ten minutes, next week, next month, seven years from now. But don’t you dare make me wait that long.”

“I won’t. Gah. I’m not sure I can make it through tonight after those sexy words came out of your mouth.” He shifted, and I felt the large, unmistakable bulge against my thigh, which spasmed with the need for more friction.

My panties were sopping—embarrassingly so.

“But you deserve for me to do this right. Perfect. Because that’s what you are to me, for me, my perfect Vivi.”

“I’m not perfect, Lennon. Don’t you dare put me on a pedestal. Then you’ll just knock me off it and end up hating me or resenting me or?—”

“Perfect for me, Vivi. You’re the yin to my yang, my missing piece. And you matter. So let me show you how much. We’re building the foundation for forever. A few days, even a few weeks won’t matter?—”

“I can’t wait weeks,” I muttered.

Lennon laughed and kissed the tip of my nose. “Noted.” He pressed his erection into my belly. “I don’t want to, either. But I have to say... This anticipation is pretty fucking delicious.”

Chapter

Lennon

After a few rowdy hours with my teammates at the restaurant, I'd taken Vivi back to my mother's place late last night. There'd been a smile on my face when I got home, but I hadn't slept well. And not just because Vivian had turned out to be first-class seductress. She was, and I'd enjoyed her dirty words.

Nope, it was the freckles. Those tiny, wholesome spots dusting her nose made me lose my mind. I want to kiss each one, then start over and do it again.

And the things I wanted to do to the rest of her body... Lust pulsed through me as I closed my eyes, leaving my kitchen and cup of coffee behind, and slid into the tantalizing images. We'd be heat and lust and love, mixed up in one electric dance to climax.

I couldn't wait. I also couldn't rush her. Vivian had said those things to me was because she felt safe doing so. I understood that. I needed to breed more of that trust.

But my dick didn't want to listen. The bastard wanted in Vivian right now. And if it had its way, it wouldn't ever leave the tight, warmth sheath of her body.

I opened my eyes and returned to the kitchen island, which was a large rectangle that separated my kitchen from the living room. The countertop was dark-stained maple butcher block. Maybe not the most practical option, but I loved the satiny finish. My hand remained wrapped around my now-cool coffee mug because I'd been too busy

fantasizing to drink the brew.

But there was a question in there Vivian and I needed to address: I liked to be in charge. Absolutely in charge. Would she like that? Hell, I might not like that with her.... No, who was I kidding? I absolutely wanted to be aggressive, assertive, and fuck her to her very limit. Then do it again. “Shit.”

Belladonna raised her head, giving me her full attention.

“Nothing to worry about, Bella baby. Just that your dad’s a sick bastard. Want to go see Mom and Vivi?” Belladonna thumped her tail. “Maybe if I kiss her again like I did last night...” A wave of lust scorched its way through my veins. “Okay, I can’t keep kissing Vivi like that if I’m not going to get a release. I haven’t been this desperate to get off since I was fourteen and figured out how to orgasm.”

I rose from my bar stool and dumped out my coffee. After putting the cup in the dishwasher, I grabbed Belladonna’s leash. She ran up to me, excited at the prospect of a walk. “Let’s go see Vivian,” I said.

As I collected my keys, my phone rang. A hollow feeling settled in my stomach when I noted the Michigan area code. “Hello?”

“Lennon Cruz?”

“Yes, speaking.”

“This is Detective Ahmed. I’m calling about your assault last September.”

In an instant I was back there, on the ground, getting kicked, stabbed—a phantom hand fisted my throat, strangling me. I managed to lean against the wall before my knees went weak.

I squeezed my eyes tightly shut. “Any news?” My voice was raspy, but at least I could speak.

He sighed. “No. But don’t think we’re giving up. We aren’t. Especially now that there’s been another attack, very similar to yours.”

My heart thrummed. “What happened.”

“This couple didn’t survive.”

A swallowed heavily, trying to keep my coffee in my stomach.

“I can tell you a little more...if you’d like to know,” Detective Ahmed said.

“Yeah. Anything. I think Vivi will want the details, too.”

“She’s my next call,” Detective Ahmed said. “You two still talk?”

“She just moved out here.”

“Oh, good.” The relief in his voice was palpable. “Vivian seemed adrift and concerned by herself. I’m glad you talked her into the move. Being near a support network will help her get past the attack.”

I realized Vivian and I hadn’t really discussed how she felt about what had happened. That made me an epic dick. Because we’d been through it together—and because I’d abandoned her for months—I needed to make sure we now worked together to heal.

Detective Ahmed gave me a few gory details, some of which lined up to my memories of that evening.

“Sounds like they’re escalating,” I said, heaviness growing in my gut.

“Yes, it does. Which means they’re getting cockier. We’ll get them, Mr. Cruz.”

“I hope so. No one should be exposed to that kind of evil.”

“Agreed. I’ll be in touch if anything changes.”

“Thanks. And I’ll be there with Vivian in about twenty minutes,” I told him.

“Good. I think she’ll appreciate your concern.”

When I arrived at my mom’s house, she handed me a cup of coffee the moment I entered the kitchen. That told me I looked even worse than I’d thought.

“Vivian is on the phone with the detective,” she said, studying me.

“The news was...gruesome.”

She touched my cheek. “I’m so sorry you both had to survive that. But I’m glad, too, Lennon.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Vivian is special.”

I nodded.

“I’m spending the day with your sisters,” Mom said.

“Good. They’re both workaholics. What are you doing? Can I pay for it?”

I was proud of my sisters’ professions and ambition, but I liked that they were making time for my mother right now before she started chemotherapy next week. I liked to spoil them, too.

“No, no. We’re going to do a day at Mia’s. We have movies and my favorite foods. Just spending time with them is a pleasure.”

“Have fun,” I said. “Don’t do anything too crazy.”

She chuckled. “As if. I think Mia and Nina are even more boring than me.”

I liked it that way, mostly. I wanted my sisters safe and happy. They were safe, but I wasn’t sure they were happy, mostly because they never went anywhere or met anyone.

I frowned. Maybe we all needed to adjust our priorities. I’d been so focused on providing for my mom and sisters, on being a good teammate, on reuniting military K-9s with their handlers, and then on protecting Vivian, I’d forgotten about my own needs.

“I told Vivian you planned to take her on a date.” Mom eyed me diffidently. “Make it a good one, Lennon. She deserves to feel special.”

“I will, Mom.”

She gave a nod and offered me her cheek. I kissed it while she wrapped her arms around my waist. The hug lasted longer than usual. We both needed some level of reassurance.

“Take care of my girl,” Mom said, pulling back. She patted Belladonna, then grabbed her purse and headed out the back door. I heard her car start a moment later. I chugged the last of my coffee and set the mug in the dishwasher. I’d just moved to the living room when Vivian opened her bedroom door.

My breath caught in my throat, and I felt like I’d swallowed my tongue as I tried to

take in all of Vivian in one greedy gulp. Impossible. I managed to rehing my jaw and take a breath as I started at her cute little peep-toe pumps—yes, I knew exactly what those were, thanks to my sisters cooing over shoes for years. Her toenails were a glittery pink, her ankles and calves trim. The hem of her brightly colored, filmy skirt flirted with her knees, giving me a tantalizing view of her toned legs.

The fabric clung just right to her hips, and I had no doubt that when she turned around, her perky little ass would grab my attention. The wide belt cinched in her waist, and the gauzy fabric settled at her collarbones, hiding her cleavage. Nonetheless, stunning.

“Vivian. You are glorious.”

Her luscious, shimmery pink lips parted as she smiled up at me, causing her mane of thick, auburn hair to spill over her shoulders and down her arms. She was so feminine—soft and bright, and she smelled as good as she looked.

“Hi, Lennon. I hope this is all right for today.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

She fidgeted. “So...that wasn’t good news from Detective Ahmed.”

I opened my arms, and she stepped into them with a heaving breath. Ah . She thought I’d push her way again. I pulled her even tighter to my chest and kissed her temple. “Want to talk about it?” I asked. “I should have asked before, but I was so caught up in my head, in my fear?—”

“No. It’s over. I want it to stay in the past. A blip.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Vivi,” I said. “So glad.”

She squeezed me as a shudder rippled through her. “Same goes for me, Lennon. I...” She stepped back and smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. In fact, something that looked like fear...maybe longing moved in their depths. She cleared her throat. “Did you have a plan or should we come up with something together?” she asked.

She wanted to change the subject. I wasn’t sure that was a great idea, but I didn’t push her. She’d talk when she was ready...I hoped.

“Well, I thought we’d go to lunch, and then, if you’re interested, we could either go out on the lake in Conroe or play putt-putt.”

Her eyes lit up with joy. “You remembered,” she breathed.

“That you’ve never played putt-putt but always wanted to? Of course, Vivi.”

She came closer, rose on her tiptoes, and kissed me. I clasped her tighter and happily kissed her back.

Chapter

Vivian

I'd been kissed by Lennon before, but I'd never been so consumed and involved in a kiss that every nerve in my lips, hands, and chest exploded with the need for more. With a gentle dip of his chin, Lennon touched the tip of his tongue to the bow of my upper lip, and I melted further, my mind so full of dopamine, I wasn't sure I'd ever come down.

His tongue smoothed against mine, and my brain melted. Thoughts scattered, pleasure mounted, and I could do nothing more than accept what he gave me. And it was so. Good.

Eventually, he pulled back, his chest heaving, his dark eyes half covered by drooping lids, his lips still damp from our kiss.

"Holy—that was so hot," I breathed. "I'm surprised we still have on clothes, still have a standing house."

He winked, and I whimpered because Lennon winking did things to my insides—molten-chocolate things that might just be a mini orgasm.

"You like kissing me, Vivi? I'll kiss you all day, if that's what you want."

"More," I mumbled against his lips.

“Well, I need to break this off now so I can take you out.” He spoke against my lips, as if he couldn’t bear to be parted from me.

I understood, as I didn’t want to be parted from him.

He rested his forehead against mine and heaved a breath. “It’s so hard to step back when all I want is to lay you out and feast on that beautiful body.”

Definitely not-so-mini orgasm that time. I whimpered as I pressed my lips to his.

“You are so perfect for me,” he mumbled. “I can’t believe I wasted months?—”

I cupped his cheeks and stared into his eyes. “No, Lennon. No recrimination, no regrets. We have now. We need to focus on that.”

He smiled, but his eyes held residual guilt and pain that nothing I said would eliminate. “Okay.”

I smoothed my skirt, then my hair, enjoying Lennon’s gaze tracking my hands. “So...putt-putt?”

A devious expression crossed Lennon’s face. “I think I’ll need to show you how to hold the putter.”

I shivered. Oh, we were going to play...

For lunch, Lennon took me to the Rainbow Lodge, which was a quiet, sumptuous treat set in a log cabin. When I glanced at the menu, I couldn’t help but smile.

“You remembered I like trout,” I said, that warm fuzziness filling my chest.

“And crab. Both are together in that one,” Lennon said, pointing to my menu. He could do that because he sat next to me at the white-linen-covered table, not across from me. His thigh brushed mine, and a pleasant little shiver worked its way up my spine.

When he rubbed against my leg the second time, I dropped my gaze and bit my lip, excitement bubbling as I came up with a plan.

“I’ll have the rainbow trout with lump crab and pecan butter,” I said, smiling at our kind-faced waiter...while sliding my fingertips up the inside seam of Lennon’s khakis. He ordered the mixed grill, and I flattened my palm at the top of his rock-hard thigh. When I wiggled my fingers, I could touch something else that was rock hard.

Lennon waited until our server departed before he rasped, “You’re playing with fire, Vivi.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I’m showing you what I want.” I leaned closer—so close my lips brushed his ear. “And I’m telling you I want you, Lennon. I want you badly. I’ve wanted you for months, and I expect you to make me feel better. No, I expect you to make me feel fantastic . Soon.”

He turned his head and captured my lips in a too-short, but oh-so-scorching kiss. “It’ll be my pleasure.”

He settled back against the chair and asked me about my morning. I told him of my preparations for his mother’s rounds of chemo.

He frowned. “I expected to pay your salary.”

“Nope. Neither of us wanted that.” I held up my hand. “She’s also housing and feeding me, Lennon.”

“I don’t know how she can afford to pay you, though.” He shook his head. “My mom always provided for us—always—but that didn’t mean she ever made a lot of money.”

“That’s between you and her. Please don’t put me in the middle.”

He nodded. “You’re right. Sorry.”

Our food arrived, and Lennon gave my hand on his thigh a pat before he reached for his napkin. I trailed my fingers across his leg, enjoying the intense flash of desire that slid through his eyes before I reached for my napkin as well.

“What else should I know?” Lennon asked.

“She’s correct that it’s better to have twenty-four-hour care, should she need it. Again, though, I’m not sure she will. The mass will be removed on Monday, and then we start a regimen of medication pretty quickly. It’s standard procedure so there isn’t a chance for a new mass to grow. I’ve already spoken to her doctors, and we have a plan in place if she reacts poorly to the treatment.” I picked up my fork but paused, meeting his gaze. “I can’t talk to you about her diagnosis or any of the details.”

He nodded. After finishing his bite, he said, “I know. I won’t put you in that position.”

We continued to chat as we ate. When we’d finished, I resisted the urge to order a decadent dessert because I knew the sugar crash would make me sleepy and possibly irritable.

Lennon placed his hand at the small of my back as he led me out of the restaurant. I heard people whisper about him and ask who I was, and my stomach fluttered. I wasn’t prepared for the scrutiny. But then he glanced down at me, and I realized

Lennon was totally worth the slight discomfort that came with dating a well-known man.

“It’s the worst here in Houston,” he said as we reached the sidewalk. “And in Canada, because hockey is basically what they eat and breathe up there. We don’t ever have to go.”

“Well, there goes my plan for Whistler.”

“I’m sorry, Vivi. It won’t always be like this. Once I retire, people will forget me.” He opened the passenger door to his truck and stared at his shoes.

They were nice ones—stylish, with a strap across the top in a dark leather with a lighter sole. “I was teasing,” I said. I placed my hands on his chest and tilted my head back. A fine sheen of moisture bloomed across my skin, but I wasn’t sure if it was all from the humidity and heat. Desire pooled in my belly as I studied him.

He met my gaze, his still worried. “I don’t want to mess this up. You told me I have one chance.”

I shook my head. “Other people’s actions don’t reflect back on you, Lennon. And anyway, I enjoy spending time with you. I always have. It’s like...” I licked my lips as I struggled to find the right words. “There’s this invisible connection, but it’s more than that. As soon as I see you, my heart speeds up. I get giddy.”

He smiled, his beard shifting so I caught the glint of his white teeth. “And I want you close—as close as possible so I can touch you,” he told me. He leaned closer. “And kiss you.” He rubbed his beard along the sensitive column of my neck. I whimpered. “And soon, fuck you.”

He took my lips then, and all I could do was hold on as he devoured me—in the best

possible way. My heart thrummed madly in my chest, and lust swirled through my veins, warm and heavy in my lower abdomen. I pressed my thighs together, seeking release from the pulsing ache, but none came.

Lennon lifted his head, his eyes gleaming with passion and mischief. “I’m going to make you come so hard, Vivian Lee.”

“You better.”

He nipped at my lower lip, then helped me into the cab of his truck. Good thing because my bones were mush.

Once he’d started the engine, he asked, “What are your thoughts on control?”

I clicked my seatbelt. “What?”

“In the bedroom. How do you feel about letting me be in charge?”

For a moment, my breath left me as I contemplated. Letting Lennon take control meant freedom. I could let go and trust him to catch and hold me. To make me feel good. “I’m not positive,” I said slowly. “Because I haven’t ever tried that. But I think I could really like letting you be in charge—just in the bedroom,” I added.

He reached over and gently tucked my hair behind my ear. “I want to manage your reactions and your orgasms. I have no desire to control your day-to-day life—unless we turn that into a game.” He got a glint in his eye.

“Is that why you didn’t push...”

“What?” he asked when I fell silent.

I gathered my courage because he wasn't looking at me. He was busy backing out of the spot. "Is that why you didn't push for sex? Before."

"I didn't push you because I wanted to make sure we both wanted an us . I didn't want to rush sex, because you and I are more than one night or a fling. This is long term, Vivi. When we do come together, it's going to take time. And we're going to love every minute of it." He dropped his hand to my knee and squeezed gently before sliding his hand up my leg—just as I'd done at lunch. I whimpered as he skimmed my inner thigh. He placed his hand back on the steering wheel. "When we're both ready."

Chapter

Lennon

I delighted in teasing Vivian. She was so honest with her reactions that the power went right to my head. I was lust-drunk on her sweet sounds and soft skin. Her mouth... I was going to have dreams and lots of fantasies about that delectable, soft mouth.

She made a cute, disgruntled sound that ended on a plaintive sigh as I steered us onto the road. “Okay. For now. But I’m not really into playing games, Lennon.”

I reached over and caught her hand, pressing kisses to her knuckles. “I’ll never play games with you.” At her side-eye, I grimaced. “Again. I’ll never play emotional or mental games with you. Your body, though? That I want to play with. Often.”

We rode in silence for the next few minutes until I pulled into the putt-putt lot. Vivian perked up, her eyes bright. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun,” she exclaimed.

She was out of her door and heading toward the reception desk before I managed to lock the truck. I chuckled, enjoying her enthusiasm.

Once we had our putters and balls—Vivian insisted on a sparkly purple one, which I hadn’t even known was a choice—we headed to the first hole.

“Why haven’t you ever played before?” I asked.

“My mom and I always planned to go. It was something she and my dad used to do when they were dating. But I was busy with school and friends, and then with caring for her and earning my degree. There just wasn’t a good time.”

Vivian set her ball down and gripped her club. She held it too high, and her feet weren’t parallel to the putter, all of which would make it harder for her to make her shot. I’d learned that from Keelie, Cormac’s wife. She was an avid golfer. If Vivian enjoyed today, she might want to join Keelie on the real course sometime.

Warmth washed over me at the idea of Keelie and Vivian becoming friends. The idea that had niggled me months before now returned—I needed to look for a house in the neighborhood where Cormac, Maxim, and Naese lived. Houses there seldom went up for sale, but with the right real estate agent, I should be able to find something nearby.

That was...if Vivian decided to stay. She seemed keen, but everything had been out of a storybook this week. Real life, like my mother’s illness, might well drive a wedge between us.

Vivian whacked the ball, and it sailed over the obstacles and rolled into the hole. I gaped. She threw her arms up and cheered. The group behind us clapped.

“I knew I’d be good at this.” She beamed at me.

My heart expanded and thundered against my ribs. I’d fallen in love with Vivian over that weekend in Michigan, but now I was head-over-ass confounded by my feelings for her. I smiled even as I blinked back the tears that sprang to my eyes. I knew I’d remember this moment forever.

A couple hours later, I scowled as Vivian tallied up the final scores. “Beginner’s luck,” I grouched.

“Oh, don’t be a sore loser. I was awesome,” she said. “And it’s not like I won by that many strokes.”

“Seven is a lot.”

“You had bad luck with the windmill.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If you tell me to work on my hand-eye coordination again, I’ll...”

Vivian’s giggle caused me to trail off. Seeing her so happy made me happy. I grabbed both our putters in one hand and cupped her cheek with my free one. Then I kissed her. I was slow, just a tease of lip and teeth before I slipped my tongue into her mouth. Desire detonated, and I reveled in wanting her.

“Get a room!”

The shout from a group of teen boys behind us helped me regain some sense of place—and propriety. Vivian’s cheeks were flushed and her eyes alight with desire and mischief. It was a very, very good look for her.

Chapter

Vivian

“Thank you for today,” I said as he turned down his mother’s street. I was a bit conflicted about where we’d ended our heavy make-out session earlier. Part of me was desperate for more, but I also appreciated Lennon’s restraint. The opposing emotions warred within me, leaving me with a dull headache. “I had lots of fun.”

“That sounds like a dismissal.”

“It...kind of is.” I swallowed, the concern pushing past my desire to simply go for it with him. “I...I want to take us slow, like you said.” Do I? I closed my eyes.

He sighed. “I pushed too hard today.”

I shook my head. “I want to trust that you want me, not just my body, not just sex, or sexy games. But once my head cleared, and I got to thinking...”

“You’re a bit ambivalent about a future with me because the feelings you have for me scare you.”

There was something wonderful and irritating about being with an intuitive man. I sighed because he’d nailed my mixed emotions better than I’d been able to. “Yes.”

“If it makes it better... Never mind.”

“What?”

He pulled into the driveway and stopped. “I don’t think it’ll be helpful.”

“Lennon, talk to me. Please . I can’t take the not knowing.”

He sighed. “I hope this doesn’t grow the chasm between us, but I think part of why I was so adamant about protecting you by pushing you away was because, ultimately, that decision protected me. You couldn’t break my heart or reject me if we weren’t together.”

The first emotion that hit me was anger, followed almost immediately by bitterness. I stared out the front windshield, trying to absorb the emotions clobbering me.

“I made it worse,” he said.

“Not worse,” I replied after a moment. “And I think you’re correct. But that doesn’t mean it felt good to hear. I’m trying to figure out how to respond.”

“You’re mad.”

I shook my head as I turned to face him. His eyes were filled with shadows. “No. I felt that first, but it was grief.” I huffed a laugh. “It’s almost always grief and not anger. For me, anyway. No...I appreciate the honesty. In fact, I applaud you for being vulnerable. But it hurts.” I swallowed. “To hear you say you pushed me away even subconsciously to protect yourself. That really freaking hurts.”

“I wish I could redo the day after the attack. Or the week after. All of it.”

“But you can’t.”

He nodded. “I can’t. All I can do is my best moving forward, knowing I’ve already got one huge strike against me.” He closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest. “I made a terrible mistake. I hate that it hurt you. I wish I could undo it, but I also know that fixating on past actions won’t mean I make smarter, better decisions in the future. So I’m trying to lay it all out there, Vivi. I’m trying really hard to show you that you can trust me with your heart—and with your fears and even the bits of yourself you aren’t sure are loveable. I want you to be comfortable, to be wholly you with me and know that’s safe.”

Tears burned my eyes as I leaned forward and kissed him. It was a simple brush of the lips, but it felt marvelous. Right . “I’ll do my best,” I told him. “Now I think it’s best for me to go in. I want to double check some of the meds I have on hand for your mom and review the schedule.” I paused. “And I’m going to go over and over this conversation, obsessing and dissecting it, because I need to be sure I know where we’re going. Where I want to go.”

He leaned closer and kissed my forehead. “I care about you, Vivian—more than care, so I won’t push you.”

The next week was a haze. Lola came through her surgery well but struggled to expel the anesthesia from her body. Lennon and his sisters, Nina and Mia, all visited, and I finally had to kick them out of Lola’s room so she could fall asleep. Then, I went out into the living room and held Lennon’s hand as he shook. His sisters had gone home, giving us privacy. We hadn’t revisited our conversation from the other day. Right now, Lennon was too raw with worry for his mother. And then he had to go. Lennon left Belladonna with me after his mom’s procedure because he flew out the next morning for a five-day road trip.

As she recovered, Lola was stoic and stubborn, much like her son, but also more willing to ask for help. As I knew I would, I continued to go over and over my conversation with Lennon. I didn’t have to worry about seeing him, so that gave me

time to obsess and dissect.

I was still grappling with my response to his fears. Ultimately, I realized that if he was afraid of me hurting him, Lennon was already in just as deeply as I was. He'd given me that truth, even though it wasn't pretty, and he deserved mine back.

"I came here for him," I told his mother one evening late in the week.

"I know," Lola said.

She was huddled in her chair in a soft cotton lounge set and covered in two blankets. She'd been wracked with chills since the treatment yesterday. I tried to remind myself that meant the chemotherapy was working; the worse my patients felt after the initial treatments, the better their bodies responded. That wasn't scientifically confirmed, but definitely something I'd noted among the people I'd nursed.

"And I know you're here now because you care about me, too," Lola added. Her voice was raspier than before the treatments. She'd lost a couple of pounds and struggled to find a comfortable position.

I settled on my knees next to her chair and took her hand. "I do care about you, Lola. Very much."

"Because I remind you of your mother?" she asked.

I hummed. "A little. Though you're feistier."

She gave a faint chuckle.

"But it's because of the way you treat those around you, how much you love your family."

“That includes you, querida.”

I brushed her hair back from her forehead and offered her a large water container with the flexible straw. I liked this one best because she didn’t have to move much to hydrate.

She looked past me at the television, her expression turning animated. “Nail him to the boards, Lennon!”

I chuckled and returned to my seat on the couch to focus on the game.

It was a fast-paced skate fest where the players whipped across the ice like they had wings. Ice sprayed, bodies collided, and the puck squirted away from everyone’s sticks...

Until Maxim shouldered a Boston player into the Plexiglas even as he shot the puck to Lennon, who tapped it across his stick twice as he flew forward before slapping it up to Naese, who’d snuck around Boston’s goal. Naese shifted his stick, and the puck banked off it into the back of the net.

“He’s so confident on the ice,” Lola said with a soft smile. “He was such a serious boy after his father, Ruben, and then his brother, Ruben Jr., passed. Lennon felt the weight of responsibility on those little, middle-school-boy shoulders.” Lola shot me a sly look. “He’s always been so thoughtful but contained. He carries his hurts deep, along with his inadequacies.”

I nodded, my throat aching for the little boy who went through too much—and the man who was as scared of being hurt as I was.

“I’m looking forward to seeing him tomorrow,” Lola said. “I’ve enjoyed having Belladonna here, but I don’t like her shedding.”

“Lola, I need some advice,” I said softly.

“Ask away.”

I explained what Lennon had told me about protecting himself. She hummed in response, her expression grave.

“I...think his reaction has something to do with losing his dad and brother,” I told her. “Like maybe he’s worried that loving someone means loss.” I hesitated. “Even you... I mean, Lennon loves you. You’ve been his rock, but now you have cancer.” I looked at her. “I can’t be everything to him. And I don’t think I can heal that kind of emotional wound.”

In that moment, I realized I feared the same thing. I pressed my palms to my belly. Everyone I loved had left me. I wanted Lennon, was sure I loved him, but I kept him at arm’s length because I feared that once we were intimate, once he’d seen me at my most vulnerable, he’d disappear.

He’d done it before. I frowned because I told him I’d forgiven him that. But had I? Really?

She nodded. “I think you’re right, at least in part. But I also know that Silas, the Wildcatters coach, has been very insistent that Lennon get help with what’s bothering him. I won’t discuss that with you, but there was a reason I contacted you when I did.” She smiled, and it brightened her whole countenance. “Lennon was ready for you.”

The next morning, I settled Lola in her chair with a cup of ginger tea and an English muffin topped with a thin layer of peanut butter and strawberry jam. Lola liked the flavors, and I liked getting something nourishing into her stomach.

A knock at the door caused me to frown. “Are you expecting someone?” I asked.

Lola shook her head.

I went over and peeked through the peephole. I could see Hana and Ida Jane, along with another woman, so I opened the door.

“Hi,” Hana said with a smile. “I’m so glad to see you.” She pulled me in for a hug. This new version of Hana was much happier and much freer with the hugs than the woman I’d known in San Francisco. I liked the change, though it still surprised me from time to time.

“Hi, friends,” I said as I ushered them in. “What are you doing here?”

“We came to check on Lola,” Ida Jane said. “We brought some of her favorite foods now that she’s through this week’s round of therapy.” She lifted a large brown paper bag that smelled delicious.

“Is that arroz con pollo?” Lola called, leaning over in her chair.

“You got it in one,” Ida Jane said, making a beeline for her. “I’ll get you a plate.”

“Not too much,” Lola cautioned.

“You can save the rest for later,” Ida Jane called over her shoulder.

The third woman shut the door. She was taller than the other two and statuesque with dark curls and tanned skin. She had light brown eyes and a beatific smile.

“I’m Naomi Kramer, one of the original CATS,” she told me. My husband, Adam, played goalie, but now he’s one of the coaches.”

“Oh, wow. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” She set down another large bag. It was lilac and embossed in silver with a store name I didn’t know.

“I talked to Ida Jane and Hana, and we got you a little something from my boutique,” she explained with a smile.

I smiled back. “Oh, that’s so nice,” I said. “Unnecessary, but really kind.”

“I sell high-end lingerie.” Naomi winked. “It really does a lot for your confidence.”

“And feeling sexy,” Hana said seriously.

I gawked. “I can’t believe you said that.” I shot a glance over at Lola and noted that she was trying to bury her grin behind her cup of tea. She caught my gaze and chuckled. “I was married, Vivian. I have two daughters, had two boys. I’m aware of attraction and intercourse.” She raised her eyebrows. “But I am not one of those women who wants to hear all the details.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I said.

“Are there details?” Hana asked. “You haven’t said so.”

I shook my head. “When we met, we had two days together. I’ve just arrived here, and I have a job to do. I’ve still been getting settled.”

“Do you want there to be details?” Naomi asked, waggling her brows.

Thankfully, we all laughed, but I still felt squirmy about discussing my sex life in front of Lola.

“Naomi has no shame,” Ida Jane said with that soft drawl as she re-entered the living room with a plate for Lola. “Don’t worry about it.”

Naomi nodded. “That’s right. I don’t, which is why they brought me. Because I’m the one who’s going to ask you what’s going on between you and Cruz.”

Chapter

Cormac

We'd arrived home last night after five days away, and we had a light practice this afternoon before tomorrow's game. I called the guys over during a water break. We were all hot, sweaty, and a bit out of breath, thanks to the fast-paced skate sprints Coach Whittaker had put us through. Next, we'd match up for some time with our offensive or defensive coaches to work on individual skills before we spent the final hour of practice in a scrimmage.

Naese took off his helmet and swiped his forehead with his gloved hand. I scissored my legs, trying to ease the burn in my thighs, even as I kept the muscles warm.

"We have a problem. Our women went over to Lola's today," I said with a furtive glance at the coaching staff. Ostensibly, we were supposed to be working on improving our timing between offense and defense, but...well, we were getting our asses handed to us by our wives, and that sucked.

Stolly hung his head. "They're just better at this feeling stuff than we are."

I wanted to deny that, but I couldn't. "True. And Cruz hasn't locked Vivian down, even though she's been here for a couple of weeks now."

"It's still early," Naese said, but he looked worried.

"It's because men are taught to provide, not to feel," Maxim rumbled out.

As one, we turned to look at him.

“I’ll be damned. Maximus is a philosopher like our Cruiser,” Naese said.

“Do not ever call me that again if you want to keep all your limbs,” Maxim said. He didn’t change his expression or raise his voice.

Naese skated back a foot, hands out. “Never again.”

Maxim gave him a sharp nod.

“We can debate how our culture fucked us up and anesthetized our ability to be fully human later,” I said. “Right now, we need to get a step ahead of our wives and close this deal between Cruz and Vivian.”

“How do you expect us to do that?” Stolly asked. “And I’m still stuck on Maxim’s revelation that he understands that people have emotions.”

“I will pound you into the ground,” Maxim said.

“No wonder Ida Jane thinks you calling her Fists is an endearment.” Naese shook his head “You have to subtlety of a rock.”

“Gentleman, you can argue, gossip, and plot later. Right now, you’d better skate your asses off,” Coach Whittaker said as he came up beside me.

“Yes, Coach,” we all mumbled.

“Before you go...” Coach cleared his throat. “Paloma told me the women know we asked Lola to help get Vivian to Houston. She said, and I quote, ‘Game on’.” He looked around the group. “I did not appreciate that comment, and I do not like to

lose.”

Stolly heaved a sigh. “We can’t beat them. This is their game.”

“So we find a place where we can win,” I said.

They looked at me as if I’d grown three heads. “Come on! We’ve all wooed our women. We can do this.”

“Meet me in my office after practice,” Coach said. “And come with good ideas.”

Once cleaned up, we slouched into Coach Whittaker’s main office in the top part of the arena. This area was clearly designed to impress businesspeople and had little to do with the ins and outs of the exercise, nutrition, physical therapy, and nitty-gritty of winning hockey games.

This office was large and airy with a statement desk made out of some pale wood, a conversation area that had two couches long enough for me to sleep on comfortably, and a full bar that didn’t have any alcohol but held different seltzers, soda, and fresh-squeezed grapefruit and orange juice.

“Get a drink, sit down, and let’s plan,” Coach said. “Lennon’s coming up in an hour, and we have to get all the details down before then so he can’t screw this up.”

“Is that possible?” Naese asked. “I mean, we’ve all screwed up with our wives at some point.”

“True,” I said. “But none of us quit talking to our wives...” I cleared my throat. “Maybe, Naese, you’re the best one to discuss how to rebuild trust.”

The younger man shot me an annoyed look as he flopped down at the far corner of

the sofa. He popped open his can of fruit-infused water and drank deep. The rest of us plopped into the comfortable cushions with sighs of pleasure. We were big men; we rarely fit on standard furniture. These couches weren't just covered in a buttery soft dark leather, they were big enough to accommodate our frames and both soft and firm enough to support our bulk as well.

“So?” Maxim asked. “When I needed to win over Ida Jane, I whisked her away?”

“Tennessee isn't really a dream location,” Stolly said.

“Well, we can't all get time off to traipse around the world,” Maxim shot back.

“I cooked for Millie. And held her hair while she puked. And slept on her too-short couch.”

“Well, I'm not sure the last two work, but the first one could,” I said.

“I think we're missing the point,” Naese countered.

“What do you mean?” Coach asked.

“I mean that Cruz has to show Vivian he's there for her, not just say it. All these things—taking her on a trip and buying shit, cooking for her, me moving Hana in with me—those are our way of showing that we care.”

“Great.” I slumped down in my seat. “He can't do that easily. And by the time we figure it out, Keelie's going to be smirking at me during their wedding.”

We all stared glumly out the window. Naese heaved a sigh. Coach scratched his head.

The clock tick-tick-ticked toward our doom.

“We’re shit at this,” Maxim said. He stood and began to pace.

“No, we’re not,” Stolly said. He rose and confronted Maxim. “I love my wife, and I tell her that often. I love my daughter, and I tell her even more often. This isn’t about our ability to have and...and show emotions, it’s that...that...”

“We’re shit at creating the kissing scene from The Little Mermaid ?” Coach suggested. At our looks, he shrugged. “Trixie went through a huge Little Mermaid phase. I’m pretty sure I know all the words to all the songs.”

I pointed at him. “That right there. That’s the dedication we need.”

“Serenade us, Coach,” Maxim said.

“Yeah, sing for us. Maybe it’ll get us in the mood,” Stol said.

To my surprise, he did. I winced when he went flat, but Coach had a decent voice and could carry a tune.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Cruz roared from the doorway.

Coach trailed off. Naese groaned.

I jumped up and pointed at Cruz’s sweatshirt. “Dogs!”

Chapter

Vivian

I glanced around at the other women, my heart thumping against my ribs.

“Don’t put her on the spot, Naomi,” Lola chided. “I’m here, and that has to make it hard for her to talk candidly. Plus, she doesn’t know you all well.”

Naomi pouted. “But I want to see that boy of yours happy, Lola. He deserves it.” She looked at me. “He’s helped out each of us, more than once, when our men were... How do I say this diplomatically?”

“You don’t,” Ida Jane said. “When they had their heads up their butts.”

“Fair assessment,” Hana said with a nod. She smiled.

“Lennon has always been a sensitive soul,” Lola said. She took a small bite of food, humming happily as she closed her eyes.

“But I don’t get why you all want to get us together,” I told them.

Hana’s smile widened. “Oh, that’s easy. One, you were falling hard for him last September. Ergo, you’re perfect for each other. And two, our guys all seem to think so, too.”

“Really, we’re doing everyone a favor by getting y’all together,” Ida Jane added.

“We’re even going to let them take the credit for this one,” Naomi said with a wink.

“Because it was their idea,” Lola agreed. She’d taken another couple of bites, and I was thrilled to see a gleam in her eye. Though I wished it wasn’t directed toward me.

“Pax noted that you were Cruz’s perfect woman,” Hana said with a dreamy expression. “That man is so thoughtful and observant.”

“Well, more observant than mine,” Naomi said. She tapped her lip, and I noted her lilac-and-glitter manicure. So pretty. Naomi was one of those women who was always put together. She wore chic like it was her skin.

I shifted, feeling frumpy and slightly out of sorts as they fluttered around Lola and me, darting in and out of the living room to the kitchen.

Hana seemed to sense my discomfort because she settled next to me on the couch and took my hand. “I wasn’t completely sure about the CATS when I first got here either, but I have to tell you, they’re a welcoming bunch. That doesn’t mean we don’t get it wrong sometimes, though, so if you want us to back off and let you figure out what you want—not just with Cruz but in life—we will.”

I stared at her hand over mine, then raised my eyes to meet hers. “I’ve already told you this story, Hana, but I think I should share it with the others to get their take on how best to move forward with Lennon.”

Naomi beamed as she settled across from me. “That’s my girl.”

Chapter

Lennon

“Are you trading me or something?” I asked.

Sweat erupted from my pores, and my hands shook. The last time I’d walked into a room filled with a select group of teammates and my coach, I’d been sent to Houston. That had been my preference, and I was happy to be back in my hometown, but I hadn’t expected it.

I was playing well—really well—and we were on pace to place in the top three. We were definitely contenders for the Stanley Cup. So a trade...

Wait.

That wasn’t possible. It was past the deadline.

My friends and coach went from staring at me to gawking at Cormac. “And what’s he on about?” I asked, gesturing to Coach. “Why were you singing the crab song?”

Stolly snickered. “Crab song.”

“Sounds dirtier that way,” Naese said, laughing.

“Never say that to Trix,” Coach said. “It’s called ‘Kiss the Girl’. And I didn’t plan to trade you until you made a sweet Disney moment into a sexually transmitted-disease

ad.”

I shook my head in confusion. “What is happening right now? And why does Cormac look like he’s a half-second from a stroke?”

“I’m thinking,” Cormac mumbled.

“Finally,” Maxim said, throwing up his arms.

“Oh, as if you were any help,” Naese grumbled.

“I was,” Maxim snapped.

“You threatened to rip off my arm and told us we were doomed,” Naese replied.

“He’s Russian,” Stolly said, as if that made any kind of sense at all.

“Close the door, Lennon. I don’t need Maxim’s violent tendencies broadcast to the whole organization,” Coach said on a sigh.

“What’s going on here?” I asked again.

“We’re trying to come up with a way for you to win over Vivian so we aren’t defeated again by our wives,” Coach said.

“Defeated?” I asked. I perched on the edge of the couch. “So you’re not trading me?”

“Nope.”

My shoulders slumped forward. “Good, because my mom’s in chemo, and I can’t leave her.”

The guys all nodded, offering me their condolences and help. I frowned. “That’s why Vivi’s here—to help my mom. But you guys are trying to matchmake us?”

“We’re not trying,” Stolly said. “We’re doing it.”

“And well...ish,” Naese added with a nod.

I groaned, shoving my palms against my eyes. “That’s why you’ve been asking about my dates. How we met, what happened after?—”

“You fucked up,” Maxim said.

I dropped my hands and turned to my line mate. “You think I don’t know that? You think I haven’t been trying to fix it?”

“You need to do it faster and better,” Maxim said.

“Before our ladies get more involved and take credit,” Stolly said.

“Hana and Vivian are friends. That gives them an in to all the emotions and crap,” Naese explained.

I rose from the seat and pointed a shaking finger at the guys. “You leave Vivian and me alone—you and your wives. Whatever happens between us needs to be because we wanted it.”

“You’re failing,” Maxim said.

“Come on!” I protested. “How could you possibly know that?”

“That’s not true,” Naese said.

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

“He’s just being slow and methodical—” Naese continued.

“Like the way he irons,” Stolly interrupted. “It’s the most boring thing ever.”

Cormac clapped his hands together to get everyone’s attention. “This meeting is off the rails.” He looked over at me. “Do you, in fact, want a long-term relationship with Vivian?”

“Yes.” I gave a decisive nod.

“Goal established. Now, you need to improve execution. That’s why we’re here and why we’ve been helping you—like getting Vivian to move to Houston.”

A lightbulb went on, and my eyes widened. “You’re paying Vivian’s salary.”

Cormac shook his head. “We’re supplementing it. Your mother’s handling half, through her insurance.”

“I worked with her on that,” Coach Whittaker said. “It’s a solid plan.”

“And a worthwhile investment, as long as you don’t fuck up,” Maxim said.

“Stop telling him he’s going to fuck up! That’ll make him fuck up.” Stolly glared.

“Back to the execution,” Cormac said. “You need to romance her.”

“Woo her,” Naese added.

Maxim nodded. “Lock that future down tight.”

“What I want to know,” Coach said, “is what that has to do with dogs.”

Cormac grinned. “I’m so glad you asked.”

Chapter

Vivian

Lola and I had missed Lennon when he'd picked up his dog after the away series, and he'd had a game that next night and another on Tuesday, so all that meant he and I hadn't spent much time together in nearly two weeks. Nor had he seen much of his mother.

Fortunately, Lola had handled the initial round of chemo rather well, and Lennon finally stopped by this afternoon with a meal he'd made for Lola and me.

"I can't stay long. I have to go over to Cormac's to watch film," he said apologetically.

"I know you're busy, m'ijo," Lola said. She hugged him hard but Lennon kept his grasp gentle.

"I'll come by for longer after our next game," he promised her. "I want to spend time with you."

Lola smiled as she patted his cheek. "And you wonder how I know you're the best son in the world."

I enjoyed their interaction, even as it made my heart ache. I missed those moments with my mother, and I wanted that type of closeness with Lennon. He was clearly capable of it, and he'd told me he not only wanted intimacy with me, but he was

ready for it. I had to decide if I trusted him and if I trusted myself enough to give in to the fall required for a real connection to form between us.

As I pondered this, Lennon came up to me in the kitchen and kissed my cheek. I sucked in a breath, my skin tingling where his lips had touched. The longing in his eyes stole my breath, causing my heart to pound.

“You’re beautiful, Vivi,” he whispered in my ear. “Thank you for caring for my mother. I know she’s doing so well because of you.”

I blinked at him, at a loss even as he turned and headed out the door.

The man had serious charm, and I was in deeper now than I’d been back in September.

“Let’s see what Lennon made us, shall we?” Lola asked. “Oh, yum! Green chile stew.”

I ate an early dinner with Lola and then went over to Hana’s to watch the game. As I drove there, I ruminated on my conversation with her and the girls the other day. They’d helped me see that Lennon had been blindsided by how quickly our relationship had progressed. So he was likely playing catch up, just as I was.

“How are you, Vivian?” Hana asked with a hug.

“Good. I think I’m really good.”

She smiled. “I’m so glad. Grab a drink.” She gestured to the large island that held a variety of bottles and cans. Behind the slab of granite was the most ornate—obviously French—range I’d ever seen. It was show-stoppingly beautiful. I eyed it with a bit of envy before I grabbed a juice-infused sparkling water.

“Get ready for a continuation of our conversation from earlier this week,” Hana said as she poured herself a glass of white wine. “And you’ll finally get to meet Millie and Keelie.”

In no time the other ladies arrived, and both Millie and Keelie seemed very kind. I liked them a lot. As Hana predicted, our conversation quickly turned to my concerns with dating Lennon.

“Loving a hockey man isn’t easy, but it is worth it—if you pick a good one,” Ida Jane said from the end of the couch. She raised her violently pink drink to toast her comment.

“Oh, I have to know how you pick a good one,” Naomi said, clinking her margarita glass with Ida Jane’s drink.

“Pssh ... You got one, Naomi. We all do,” Ida Jane said. “One, they see us, and they still love us, even with our faults. Two, they want us to be happy and fulfilled. How many men do that? And three, they’re elite athletes. That means they have stamina.”

Naomi fell back into the couch cushions, cackling.

I pursed my lips as I remembered how I’d also believed my mother wanted me to be with Lennon—if such a thing were possible. Back in Michigan, I’d grasped my burgeoning feelings with both hands and thrown myself into them with reckless abandon. Lennon pulling away had been a shock, but knowing that he’d done so because he cared about me had eased a lot of my fears.

Not all, but a lot.

Reconnecting with Hana and making these new friends added another layer to the foundation I was laying here in Houston. I liked that. I drove home after the

Wildcatter win, feeling fully happy and content for the first time in years.

Since my arrival in Houston, I'd found I loved spending time with Lola, too. She had an acerbic wit and a no-nonsense attitude that must have been a huge asset as she'd pretty much singlehandedly raised four kids. But it also meant she liked getting her own way, which wasn't always possible for a cancer patient.

By the end of the week, she was practically shooing me out of the house.

"I'm supposed to be watching you—" I began.

"I'm fine, Vivian. You said so yourself. So please don't take this the wrong way, but I want nothing more than a few hours to myself with my Hallmark movies and the ironing board."

Lennon appeared in the doorway, wearing a pair of cargo shorts and deck shoes. His shirt was a breezy linen button down in a light blue. "Ironing, huh?" He came across the living room and kissed his mother's cheek.

"Stop. You know you enjoy a good couple of hours at the board, too."

Lennon nodded. "It's therapeutic. Almost meditative."

My eyebrows shot up as I looked at them, so in tune over one of the worst chores ever created. I wore scrubs even here at Lola's because they required minimal maintenance.

Lola caught my expression and chuckled. "I think you might be the ironer in your partnership," she told Lennon.

He came over and kissed my lips. "No problem. I don't want Vivi to have to do

something she doesn't enjoy."

"Does that include scrubbing toilets? Because I hate that one even more than ironing." I wrinkled my nose. "And I deeply dislike ironing."

Lennon smiled as he shrugged. "Sure. I don't care how we split the workload."

I stared into his eyes, unsure if I believed him—wanting to believe him. I slowly fell into the warmth of his gaze, the obvious joy he took in looking at me.

"Oh, there's Belladonna," Lola said. "I wondered if you'd left her at your condo. You really need a yard, Lennon."

He kept his gaze locked on mine. "I do. You're right. I need a house for my family." His eyes grew heated.

As if I hadn't fantasized about kids—and how we'd make them—for the past month. Warmth swirled in my chest, but I tamped it down. We needed to discuss what he'd told me in his truck a few weeks ago—about my ambivalence and our fears of abandonment—before I could fully commit to the future I desperately wanted.

I broke eye contact and ducked under Lennon's arm. "You're sure you're going to be okay, Lola? I can stay?—"

"You will absolutely not. I'll shoo you out with the broom, if I have to. I want you to have fun. And I want to starch the heck out of my jeans."

We both laughed.

"Am I dressed okay?" I asked.

Lennon's eyes moved over me, leaving me feeling like I'd been coated in warm honey. I shivered, enjoying my body's reaction. "You look great, Vivi."

"All right you two, out you go."

"But I wanted to get your tea—" I protested.

"I can get my own tea, and I can take my own pills." Lola held up her hands. "I've been taking care of myself since I was fourteen. I've been taking care of a family since I was twenty. I'll manage a few hours today just fine."

Lennon picked up Belladonna's leash and latched it to her collar. The dog panted happily as we exited the house. Lola closed the door firmly behind us.

"She's coming with us?" I asked, scratching Belladonna's ears.

"Sure is," Lennon said.

"Where are we going?"

Lennon helped me into the truck. He pulled his sunglasses from his shirt pocket but continued to squint as he met my gaze. "We're going to a brewery for lunch."

I smiled. "Sounds fun."

"I hope so."

He slid his glasses on, then moved to open the back door of the cab. Belladonna hopped in and settled on her bed. Lennon helped me up, then went around to his own seat and started the truck.

“I’ve thought a lot about what you said before,” I began before I lost my nerve, “about using the hallucination to protect yourself from getting hurt.” Too much.

“I have, too,” Lennon said. “I get that it hurt you—why you were angry.”

“And I understand why you felt that way. You didn’t know me, not really. It was all new.”

“That’s true, but I’ve reflected a lot, and it’s because I care so much that I allowed my fear to win. I mean, if it hadn’t mattered what you thought of me—if you’d rejected me for not being able to protect you—then I never would have created such an intense scenario.” He looked over at me at the stoplight, his expression stern. “I was wrong, really wrong to treat you that way. I should have been honest much sooner. I’d apologize again, but I don’t think you’d like that.”

“I wouldn’t.” I pulled in a breath and let it out as Lennon accelerated. “I think intimacy—emotional intimacy—means letting you into my unattractive thoughts as well. Sometimes they’re petty or ruthless or...just not nice.”

“But they’re real, and we all feel them.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And because they’re real, they need to be acknowledged.”

“That’s what I’ve done, Vivi. I had scary thoughts—bad ones that hurt you. I’m not proud of that. I hope you can forgive me.”

“I do forgive you. Now, I need to say this: It’s not your mom, who I adore. It’s not your fame, athleticism, money, or even your hot-as-hell body. I’m here, right now, for who you are, Lennon.”

He snatched my hand from my lap and kissed each of my knuckles. “I won’t let you

down, Vivi.”

We drove in silence for a while, and gradually the traffic lessened. “I’ve never been up here. Where are we?”

“Outside the city limits,” he said. “Near Tomball.”

“Still going to the brewery.”

“Yep.”

“Um...Lennon?”

“Hmm?”

“I don’t really like beer.”

“I know. The brewery has hard cider, if you want to try that, as well as some wines from the hill country. And of course they have water, sweet tea—there are a lot of options.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He smiled. “Sure. I hope you like this place. A former teammate started it a couple of years ago with his older brother. He was a K-Nine handler in the army before he was medically discharged.”

“Oh, wow. That sounds like a lot to unpack,” I murmured.

“Yeah. Arlo was a great winger, but he kept getting hurt. I met his brother, Tobias, at a cookout we had a few years back. The guys were discussing what business they

should go into after Arlo retired, and Stolly suggested making a low-alcohol beer that actually tasted good. Stol was being a dick, but the idea was a good one. Then Tobias asked me if I could help him track down his former K-Nine.”

“You do that for a lot of people.”

“I enjoy the work, and I have help. In fact Camden Grace recently got in touch with me.”

My jaw dropped. “The country music star? That Camden Grace?”

He nodded. “He wants to set up a foundation that focuses on reconnecting retired service animals with their handlers, as well as creating a service-dog program specifically for veterans.”

“That’s amazing.” I touched my chest. “What a beautiful idea. And I’m assuming you’d help with more than just physical ailments? You’d want to work with vets’ mental issues as well. Because there are a lot of those—from PTSD to depression, anxiety, you name it—that combat can cause.” I blew out a breath. “And cancers. War seems to kill even after the bullets stop.”

Lennon gripped my hand. He raised it to his mouth and kissed my palm. “You are absolutely perfect.”

My fingers curled around the lingering warmth from his lips. “No, I’m not perfect, and I don’t want to try to be. It would be exhausting.”

He shot me a side-eye as he dropped our hands to my thigh. “Let me rephrase: You’re perfect for me. I knew it last September, and I’m even more sure now. I saw a Bob Marley quote that said there’s no such thing as the perfect woman, just as there’s no such thing as the perfect man or perfect place. The ocean is beautiful near the shore

but becomes murky and dangerous the deeper you go. The moon looks lovely to our naked eye but has craters from where asteroids have pummeled it. Even the sky, which is so big and blue, gets covered in clouds or smog. But all of those things are still fascinating and beautiful. Well, except smog. That sucks.”

I laughed. “Don’t compare me to smog.”

His lips twitched under his beard. “Never even thought of that. Oh, and we’re here.”

He pulled into a spot near a large stone-and-wood building that looked relatively new. It had large windows and a huge, grassy lawn. Live oaks and other trees I didn’t know the names of dotted the space, offering relief from the intense sun.

“Oh my goodness,” I said, pressing my hand to my chest.

Also dotting the huge lawn were dogs. Probably a hundred of them. This was no regular day at the brewery.

Chapter

Lennon

Vivian gasped. “Why are all those dogs here?”

“Those are the dogs we’ve reconnected with their owners in the past ten years. They’re having a little party today.”

She looked over at me, her eyes huge. “You’ve helped reunite that many animals?”

I nodded and tried not to fidget. Maybe this was a bad idea. Now that I was here, this seemed more like bragging than a way to show Vivi my caring side.

“How many people helped you?” she asked, her voice choked.

“In the beginning, I did it myself. I knew my brother’s dog, Duke, had been medically retired after Ruben died. I wanted Duke with us, the family, because it was kind of like still having a piece of Ruben, you know?”

“And you got him back?” Vivi asked.

“Yeah, but it took a while. I was a young teenager, and most people blew me off. Finally I talked to Ruben’s commanding officer—who happened to be Camden Grace—and he set up a meeting with his boss. It’s all about the chain of command. We found out Duke was going to be euthanized because he hadn’t been able to reacclimate after his injuries. I also think he missed Ruben. I pushed hard to see

Duke, to get the lieutenant and general to promise that if I could show them Duke was calm around me, I could take him home. My mom had to sign lots of paperwork, too, accepting liability. Finally, I got to visit Duke. He was pissed, but it wasn't really anger." I swallowed the emotion in my throat. "Like you said a couple of weeks ago, it was grief. Duke was grieving my brother and scared about being stuck in that little cage."

Vivian clasped her hand over mine. I flipped my hand over and held hers, enjoying the connection. "I'd brought one of Ruben's favorite shirts. I couldn't smell him on it, but Duke could. He calmed down enough to lay on the shirt. Then he whined."

Tears welled in Vivi's eyes.

"It took a few hours, but we were able to coax Duke out of the kennel, then into the car. He really connected with my mom, and the two of them became super close. In think having each other while they mourned Ruben helped."

"That's lovely. And heartbreaking." Vivian took a breath, seeming to right herself. "How long did you have Duke?"

"Eight more years," I told her, feeling myself smile. "Duke made it to fourteen."

She squeezed my fingers. "I'm in awe of this work, of how you've improved the lives of dogs and soldiers."

"Wanna go meet some of them?"

Vivian's smile grew. "Absolutely."

Cormac had been right. This was a damn good idea—though not for the reasons I'd thought. It was great because just seeing the soldiers with their dogs made me feel

good about the work I'd been doing in my spare time. It gave me even more determination to work with Camden Grace to set up a more formal foundation instead of my simple nonprofit. With that in place, we'd be able to connect and rehabilitate even more veterans and K-9s.

"Let me introduce you to Arlo and Tobias," I said after I'd helped Vivian out of my truck. I held her hand as I waved at my former teammate and his brother.

She didn't bat an eye at Tobias's prosthetic arm and leg. I fell even more in love with her for that. We had some lunch and spent the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening meeting and petting dogs and learning about what their veterans were up to these days. Camden had mentioned that vets with dogs tended to be more settled and have better employment outcomes in civilian society than those who never reconnected with their canine companion.

"Camden Grace wants to expand the program so former military personnel can request a former K-Nine," I told Vivi as we stood on the porch. "There probably aren't enough retired dogs, though, so we'll need to train more to handle the issues most vets struggle with."

Vivian's eyes shone. "I love this idea." She rose on her tiptoes and kissed me. I couldn't help but take control. I nipped at her lower lip until she let me in. My tongue slipped into her mouth as I tilted my head, taking what I needed while giving her all of me in return.

I just hoped it was enough.

She whimpered into my mouth, clutching my shoulders. I brought her flush against my chest, her breasts rubbing against my pecs. We both groaned.

I eased back when I felt Belladonna brush my leg. It took a few heartbeats to

remember where I was. I blinked into the fading daylight, trying to even out my heart rate and cool my ardor.

Vivian's breath hitched. "Lennon?"

"Mm?"

"I'm ready. It's time. I can't wait anymore." She rocked back on her heels, her expression morphing through emotions. "If you reject me today, I'm not going to ask you again." She bit her lip, her eyes stormy. "It'll be way too mortifying." She sucked in a long, slow breath and met my gaze. "I need to know you want me too."

Chapter

Vivian

Lennon's eyes widened. "You don't know that I want you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know what to think. I know we've had things to figure out, but there have been a lot of mixed signals, and..." I crossed my arms. "I don't want to play games." Does that even make sense? I turned away, feeling my cheeks heat. "Excuse me, please. I need some space."

Lennon looked like he might follow as I walked out onto the lawn, but he was smart enough to respect my feelings. I sighed as I made my rounds, petting dogs and talking to their humans.

I smiled at Aldo and Tobias when I got to the large deck at the back of their brewery. "Your space is beautiful, and the food was excellent," I told them.

"Glad you liked it," Aldo said. "Cruiser went to a lot of effort to make this happen."

My stomach curdled with something akin to shame. I was sexually frustrated and feeling unsure in my relationship—what I wanted, what I needed—and I'd taken it out on Lennon. That wasn't fair. He'd spent time and money and effort on today for me. And he was going slow because he wanted to build something real, earn my trust—which I wanted too. What had come over me earlier? I rubbed my forehead, wishing I could get out of my own damn head and just...go with this.

But, dammit. I was afraid.

Terrified.

My dad hadn't wanted me. My mom was gone. Lennon had left me before. We'd talked it through, and his explanation made sense, but something inside me remained stubbornly unsure. Anytime I loved someone, they disappeared. I shook my head, trying to push past that thought.

"You look unhappy," Tobias said. He shot Aldo a glance, and his brother clicked at the dogs, who rose and followed him down the steps and out into the yard. All around us, people were packing their blankets and cleaning up.

"Just...unsettled," I said.

He hummed. "I understand that feeling. When I came home, after my surgeries and initial recovery, I was told I would need to rely on family until I was able to get my prosthetics. I was grateful but also frustrated. We're human, which means complex. We often have multiple emotions at once. The hard part is when those emotions don't mesh, and we have to do the hard work of finding ways to knit them together."

"How did you do that?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Candid conversations with my brother, since he was my main caregiver. And realizing that what I wanted the world to be wasn't how it was actually going to be. Somehow, I thought I was in total control of my life, which is total BS. None of us is. Ever. Because random shit happens, whether it's a helo malfunction." He waved up and down his body. "Or a relationship or a job—or hell, getting a disease. We can try to mitigate risks, but you can't account for every dumbass who answers a text or changes the radio station or sneezes."

I nodded. “You’re right. But wasn’t ceding the semblance of control hard?”

“Oh, yeah.” Tobias chuckled. “Hardest thing I’ve ever done— way more effort than re-learning to walk.” He leaned closer. “But I gotta tell you, it’s really freeing once you manage it. I can control my reactions some of the time, and that’s as good as any of us can do, really.”

I took his prosthetic hand in both of mine and squeezed. “Thank you for that. I needed to hear it.”

“And Arlo’s right, Cruz is really pulling out the stops. Seems like he messed up before, but that doesn’t mean he’s not invested in your relationship. He’s just...well, not as good at following his emotions as you are. That’s not an excuse, just the reality we were born into.”

I nodded again. “I hear what you’re saying.” I smiled. “And I need to take your advice and be as emotionally intelligent as you’ve been. Thanks again, Tobias. I hope to see you again soon.”

He smiled, flashing a deep dimple in his right cheek. “Tell your man to send me some more tickets.”

I laughed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

We said our goodbyes soon after, and the ride back toward downtown with Lennon was quiet. I stared out the window, trying to decide how best to broach the conversation.

“I should check in with your mom.”

He nodded. “I did. She said she’s feeling fine and going to bed soon.”

Of course he had that covered. Lennon cared deeply for his mom and would never compromise her well-being; I didn't need to worry about that.

"Oh, okay. Great." I took a deep breath. "I lashed out at you, and that wasn't fair. I'm sorry."

He glanced over at me. "It's okay."

I dropped my gaze to my lap, twisting my shirt between my fingers. "No, it's not. You've been nothing but honest and thoughtful toward me since I arrived. I told you our past was past, but I'm the one struggling to let it go."

He remained silent, but I knew he was listening intently.

"I'm afraid, Lennon. Even though I shouldn't be. My dad bailed when I was young because a whiny little kid didn't fit into his fighter-pilot persona." I swallowed. "That's my memory of him." Tears pushed against the back of my eyes. "My only memory."

"Vivi, that's... That sucks."

I nodded. "It does. And then I lost my mom. She was my anchor, my friend. I was twenty years old and alone." I swiped at my cheeks. "Then...I met you, and it was a dream, a beautiful, perfect dream..."

He cursed. "And I disappeared from your life."

"Yeah. It's just...I don't trust this." I squeezed my eyes shut. "That's not fair to you. I know it's not. But how can I trust what you say now when..."

"Ah, Vivi. I get it."

We were quiet. I wasn't sure how to bridge this even bigger moat I'd created. I stared out the window, miserable. His voice startled me.

"I'm taking you to my condo. I'd like you to come upstairs so we can talk some more—if you're willing. And comfortable."

"Okay."

Once he'd parked in his spot, he came around to help me out of the too-high passenger seat and then opened the back door for Belladonna, who hopped down with ease. We remained silent as we headed up to his place.

After opening the door for me, Lennon followed me in and flicked on the lights. Belladonna beelined to her large, plush doggie bed in front of a set of picture windows with views of the Houston skyline. She flopped down with a heartfelt sigh. She had played hard and was clearly looking forward to a comfy sleep.

"Want a drink?" Lennon asked.

I shook my head. I was tired, both physically and emotionally, though it was the emotional fatigue that gave me pause. I didn't want to get so wrapped up in my own drama that I didn't give Lola the care she deserved.

He gestured toward the couches and settled in the corner. "I spent the rest of the drive thinking about what you said," he began, "about how things have gone between us from the beginning." He scrubbed his hand over his beard. "I also heard part of what Tobias told you—about wanting to control situations. I think...that's gotten more important to me since the attack."

His brown eyes met mine, and I saw shadows move in their depths. "I care about you, Vivian. A lot." He shook his head. "I'm in love with you." His shoulders relaxed. "I

love you . I hated the threats to your safety and happiness. I'd gladly take another beating if it meant keeping you safe and whole."

I leaned closer and cupped his cheek. He turned his head and kissed my palm.

"But I can't make decisions for you the way I've been doing with how fast and how far to take our relationship—that's stifling, and it's forgetting the cardinal rule of treating others as I want to be treated. I appreciate that you don't coddle me or my mom. You're factual while still warm when you share information, even when it's not the best news. I want to be like that with you. Because I respect you. And I love you." He released a breath his eyes holding mine.

Some of the tension and misery eased from me. "My turn?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"I love you, too, Lennon. I have since that first night we spent together in Michigan. I wanted to stop when you quit talking to me, but I couldn't. I wanted to stop when I decided to come out here, but I couldn't. I'm pretty sure I'll always love you, because you're so fiercely protective, even as you're tender and loving."

"Vivi." He leaned closer.

"Part of me loving you is wanting you, physically. And I do. Very much. So, I'd really like you to love me, Lennon, with that big, sexy body of yours."

He leaned in so our foreheads touched. "I'm all yours."

"Good." I tackled him back against the sofa, straddling his thick legs. "Cuz this woman has needs."

The soft brush of his lips and the whisper of his beard against my cheek and chin caused me to shiver. I moaned as I wrapped my arms around Lennon's neck. With the tip of his tongue, he tested the seam of my mouth. That made me so hot. I pressed more tightly against him. In response, Lennon swiped his tongue into the slick interior of my mouth.

He bent his knees so he could get his forearm under my butt. He lifted me with that arm, the other hand still cupping the back of my head. Heat flared through me. I wrapped my legs around his waist and threaded my fingers through his hair. I ground my warm center against his growing bulge, desperate for friction, for being filled—for release from the weeks of unbearable tension.

His grip firmed, pinning me against him. Then, he deepened the kiss still further. I hadn't thought that possible. My nerves were already tingling, and my belly had warmed with desire.

"Need you," he mumbled against my lips.

I pulled back with a gasp. We both breathed heavily—like we'd sprinted a 10k. "If you stop this time, I'll..."

His kiss-swollen lips quirked up. They were so pink and soft, and I desperately wanted them back on mine. "You'll what?"

I met his gaze. "I'll cry."

His expression softened, as did his hold on the back of my head. "Ah, Vivi. I want you desperately."

"I need you, Lennon." I shifted, restless and so sensitive. "No teasing."

“You sure about that?” he asked.

My eyes filled, because I really was so close to losing control. “Don’t.”

He kissed me softly. Then again. And again. Deeper, harder, a flash of teeth across my lower lip. His hand clamped more tightly on my ass as he ground against me.

“Gotta get to the bedroom.” He strode down the hallway as I peppered his neck and chest—anywhere I could reach—with kisses.

He slammed his elbow into the door frame and muttered a curse. But he was gentle as he lowered me down his body. I let my hand slide across his shoulders, over his pecs. He leaned down and kissed me again. His fingers drifted to the zipper at the back of my dress. “I want this off.”

“Yes. Now.”

He unzipped me quickly and pushed the gauzy sleeves off my shoulders. I gave a shimmy of my hips, and the dress pooled at my feet. Lennon sucked in a breath as he noted the silky lingerie set I wore. The bra cupped my breasts, the thin silk stopping just above my nipple. Delicate lace wove up to the straps. My panties weren’t a risqué thong, but a more comfortable bikini that cut high on my hip, revealing my whole thigh.

“You are so gorgeous,” Lennon breathed. His fingertips slid across my belly, swirling around my belly button, and then his knuckles dragged along the top of my panties. “I am in awe of you.”

He slid his big palm back and cupped my butt cheek, tugging me against him. That prominent bulge seemed bigger, harder now. I pressed against it more firmly, moaning as slickness dampened my thighs.

“What do you want, Vivian?”

I arched my neck, and he ran his palm down its side, resting his thumb at the hollow where my pulse pounded.

“You,” I breathed. “All of you.”

He stepped back, took a deep inhale, and let his hands hang loose at his sides. “You got me. Any way you want me.”

Desire licked through me, causing my skin to tighten. “What are you saying?”

“You’re in charge, Vivi. Whatever you want, however you want, I’m here for you.”

Passion exploded as tenderness unfurled in my chest. I cupped his cheek. “Thank you, Lennon.” Control was hard-wired into him. I understood that now that I’d gotten to know him. His need to control situations came from the loss of his father, then his older brother, leaving him unmoored right as he hit adolescence. Hockey had secured a place for him, given Lennon an identity and goals to achieve, but containing a situation, emotions? That felt necessary for survival.

I kissed him as I slid my hands down his chest. I smoothed my hands over the skin-warmed cotton T-shirt, flicking my fingernails against his nipples. He hissed a breath but remained still.

“Touch me, Lennon.”

His hands came up and gripped my waist, holding me to him as he ravaged my mouth. Our teeth clanked, our tongues fought for dominance. I pulled his button-down and tee from his pants, sliding my palms over his slabs of muscle. He shrugged out of the shirt, then tugged the back of the neck of his T-shirt to yank it off. I lifted

his arm and kissed the knife scar he'd gotten there.

With a soft push to his shoulder, I settled Lennon back on the bed, and I divested him of his socks, boots, and the rest of his clothes. "Mmm... You're so big and hard and mine," I cooed.

His erection leaped, brushing his hard abdominals. "Yes, I am."

"You like that?" I crawled over his body. "You like me saying you're mine?"

His hard dick thumped against my inner thigh.

"Yes. Yes." He chanted the words as he cupped my breasts.

I kissed his neck, then moved down over his heart, placing open-mouthed kisses as I worked lower.

He groaned, his hips jittering. "Ah, hell, Vivian."

My breath fanned over his rigid flesh, and I smiled at the bead of precum oozing from his tip. I knelt beside him and took off my bra and panties. I enjoyed Lennon's soft words of praise, so dirty and delicious that I had to press my thighs together to ease the ache.

"Do we need condoms?" he rasped.

I'd thought about that, a lot, since I fantasized about him—a lot. "Are you clean?" I asked. I might be into sexy times, but I was a nurse.

He nodded. "I have a box in the drawer?—"

“I’m on the pill.”

He licked his lips. “You’re sure?”

I nodded. “I want this to be us . Just us .” I put my knee back on the bed and laid out over him. Lennon’s pupils blew wide. His callused fingers smoothed over my breasts, ribs, butt, and then up my back. “I’m going to have you now,” I told him.

“ Yes . Need you, Vivi.”

I kissed him as I reached between us and wrapped a hand around his erection. I stroked up and down, up and down, loving his moans. He reciprocated by tugging at my nipples and kissing me near senseless.

I straddled his hips. Slowly, oh, so slowly, I rubbed my cleft over his sensitive head, enjoying the sensations. Each time I bumped his hard flesh into my clit, a flicker of lightning detonated in my belly. Sweat broke out on our bodies, and Lennon grew louder, his hands fisted at his sides. He was so close to losing control.

I reveled in this moment—in my control over him. He’d given me this gift, his trust. I had to show I would never abuse it. My thighs began to quiver, and my heart pounded against my ribs. We were both so turned on.

I notched him at my entrance the next time I rubbed forward and then sank onto his turgid length.

“Oh my...” His mouth fell open, his hands squeezed my hips, and he seemed to quit breathing as I settled against his pelvis.

“Lennon, you feel so good...so...”

“Vivi.” My name was a prayer, floating from his chest.

I pushed up, my thighs quivering, and sank down. My palms landed on his broad chest as I swiveled my hips. He ground his teeth as I rode him. My breath hitched. “T-touch me.”

His thumb went to my swollen nub. He rubbed my clit, and my walls clamped tighter. “Harder, Lennon.”

He increased the pressure on my clit. I couldn’t take a full breath.

“Your hips. Push into me.” He lifted his knees, drew his hips down, and then slammed back up. My head tipped back. He rose and kissed my neck as he rubbed my clit and pounded into me. The orgasm rushed over me like a high-speed train, slamming pleasure into my sensitized cells and eliciting a high-pitched mewl from my lips.

It went on and on as Lennon powered into me from below. His rhythm was strong, sure, and much too controlled for my sloppy state of bliss.

I collapsed forward so my cheek rested against his chest. He continued to thrust up into me.

“Don’t hold back,” I said. “I don’t want you to?—”

In a powerful move, Lennon flipped us so I was on my back. He shuttled his hips against mine, and I stared into his face.

“I want to look in your eyes when I come,” he ground out. “I want you to see what you do to me.”

He sped up, the pounding somehow harder, deeper, more intensely. My muscles tightened as he shifted his weight so he rubbed against my clit with each push. My chest heaved.

“Look at those pretty tits bounce. Look at that flush. Look at how you take me. So deep. So good, Vivi. You take all of me.”

I did. I took him, and he revved me right back to the edge. His expression tightened as he thrust home. I came again, even harder than before, just as Lennon spent himself inside me.

Chapter

Lennon

I'd always known that Vivi and I together would be earth-shattering. My orgasm went on and on. Heat had spread from my lower back into my limbs and torso. My breath was more ragged than when I did hundreds of sprints.

And yet I was content as I collapsed next to her on my bed. I drew her closer, my hand on her soft, flushed skin. "That was amazing."

She smiled at me, a bit shyly. "I think I might like being in control."

I chuckled. "You being in control makes me lose mine."

The smile turned impish. "That's why I like it."

I inhaled as I stared into her eyes. "I love you, Vivian Lee. I love you so much. Being with you, like this, is fucking fantastic, and I definitely want to do that again, but I just love being with you."

Her eyes glazed. "That is the sweetest thing you've ever said. Thank you, Lennon."

She kissed me. I happily molded my lips to hers and showed her how much I meant what I'd said. She snuggled in closer, her cheek against my chest, and let out a deep, soft sigh.

The high of being with Vivian lasted throughout the next few weeks. We were near the end of March now, and my mother was about to begin her third round of chemotherapy.

I spent most of my nights at Mom's house, in Vivian's room. Both she and I had worried that would be weird, but Vivian refused to leave my mother alone at night, and I couldn't stay away. We made it work, and my relationship with Vivi was a lot less awkward in front of my mother than I'd thought it would be.

Now the Wildcatters were in the last week of games before the playoffs, and the intensity of everything had spiked. Tonight we were playing our biggest conference rivals, and the game had been faster and dirtier than most.

I slammed Medvedev into the boards with a roar. "Don't touch my team."

"Or what, old man? What are you going to do about it?"

I dropped my gloved hand and, in one smooth motion, plowed my fist into his jaw. "Or I'll break you," I snarled.

My teammates and his grappled between us, trying to break us apart. But there was nothing to break up. I'd stunned the kid, and he glared as he spit a glob of blood at my skate. With a smirk, I pushed back so it missed.

"He's a loose cannon," Stolly muttered in my right ear as Cormac said into my left, "We'll watch your back, Cruz. He's going to be gunning for you."

"No. That's my job. I watch your backs." I shrugged off their hold. That's what I'd been doing for years. First I'd played this role to be like my older brother. Then I'd taken it on as penance for his death. Vivi had helped me see that. But now, I was the team enforcer because no one—and I meant no one—fucked with my family. Ever.

These guys were my family. We'd been through so many things—they falling in love and starting families and being incredibly hard-headed, emotionally stunted fools along the way. They were the ones who'd clasped my shoulder and stood silent as I struggled to process my mother's cancer diagnosis. And they'd been there to step up and make sure my mom had the best cancer nurse available—Vivian. They'd verbally kicked my ass when I was dragging my feet with her, unsure how much to push to get the results I needed. I was so, so blessed to have these guys, their families, and Vivian in my life.

I'd never take any of them for granted.

The third period slid away, and we eked out the two-one win. Medvedev refused to tap my hand as I skated past, proving himself to be a self-absorbed prima donna.

I put him out of my mind as I showered, dressed, and headed off to find my beautiful woman. When I cleared the corner of the locker room, Vivian was there, her smile wide and the light in her gray eyes gleaming just for me.

I stepped forward and snagged her around the waist, pulling her against my chest. "How did I ever manage to stay away from you for so long?"

"Willpower." She kissed my chin. "You have it in spades."

"Mmm... I think you mean idiocy." I tipped my head down to look into her gleaming, silvery eyes. "I love you so very, very much."

Her smile dazzled me, and her eyes heated to molten. She rose on her tiptoes and whispered in my ear, "I'm going to need you to show me how much."

I chuckled. "Definitely not a hardship."

She linked our fingers and raised our hands, kissing my battered knuckles. “I love you, Lennon. Just so we’re clear on that.”

“I’m so glad, Vivi. So glad. Let’s get you home so I can show you how much you mean to me.”

She shivered as she tipped her head back. “I like the sound of that.”

Then we both frowned. Neither of us was comfortable having sex under my mom’s roof, so we often went back to my place first, though that came with its own issues, especially with Mom ready for more cancer treatments. Vivi took her duties as a live-in nurse very seriously.

I sighed, then kissed her.

“There may be a home going up for sale in Cormac’s neighborhood,” I said. “It has a pool house—about twelve hundred square feet. I was thinking we might like the house, and the pool house might be perfect for my mom to live in.”

Vivian kissed me. “I like the sound of that. I think your mom might, too. She wants to be independent, but the chemo’s taken a lot out of her. Having her nearby would be good.”

“You wouldn’t mind that?” I asked.

Vivian shook her head. “I’d like her close. You’re so lucky, Lennon, to still have her.” She bit her lip, and I knew she was thinking of her own mother’s slow, painful passing. “I guess we’re just getting older, seeing our parents age and sicken. I’m happy to get the opportunity to know your mother.”

I squeezed her hand. “You really are the best.”

She laughed. “I have my moments.”

My phone rang just as I helped Vivian into my truck. My shoulders tensed when I noted the name. “Hello, Detective,” I answered.

Vivian’s gaze shot to mine, her lips pressed flat.

“We got them, Lennon,” Detective Ahmed said quietly.

I relayed the message to Vivian. Her gaze was steady. “We’ll come up there to identify them in person,” I told him immediately.

Vivian gave a single sharp nod of agreement.

Chapter

Lennon

“You’re sure you have all three of the men? You got the first one, but this took so long, I wasn’t sure you really caught the other three.” I looked at Detective Ahmed again, just as I had two other times I’d asked since we’d arrived at the precinct early this morning. I was in shock; I hadn’t expected the men to be arrested.

Vivian and I had caught a red eye out to Detroit after the game last night. I’d insisted on upgrading our seats so we could sleep more comfortably, and Vivian had reluctantly agreed.

We were both sleep-rumpled and tired now, but we wanted this identification—this period of our life—behind us. The best, and really only, way to do that was to ensure the men responsible for the attack received justice.

The bald, thin detective gave a sharp nod. “Yes, we’re sure. They match your description, Ms. Lee’s description—” He nodded at Vivian. “—and the images we took from nearby closed-circuit cameras. These are the men who attacked you, Lennon. They’re in custody. And after their most current armed assault, they will be spending a long, long time in prison.”

“You’re sure ?” My head seemed filled with cotton, my thoughts sluggish. I struggled to process that it was over. My terrified need to protect Vivi was done. Gone in a blink. “Vivian’s safe?” I hadn’t realized how much I was still holding on to those feelings.

“She is. I promise, Lennon. These guys won’t be able to wiggle out of these charges. There were witnesses. It seems they became more and more brazen. Maybe because they weren’t caught when they assaulted you and Ms. Lee or maybe they just wanted to escalate the violence. In some ways, the reasons don’t matter; they were caught, and there are multiple witnesses plus the video evidence. They’re not going to be able to hurt and terrorize innocent citizens again.”

“Thank you,” I said. I blew out a long breath.

“You’re welcome. I wish it could have been sooner, but these are the reasons I continue to do my job.”

I smiled, already planning to send Detective Ahmed a huge thank-you basket and tickets to the next game we played in Detroit. It would be a couple-hours’ drive for him, but I had no doubt he’d make it. “Thank you for continuing to work on the case. I can’t tell you how relieved I am.”

“I figured you would be. I know that was a terrifying experience. For the record, you handled it better than most.” He raised his eyebrows and looked at each of us. “You ready to see the lineup?”

Vivian

I clutched Lennon’s hand and hugged his thick forearm to my chest as we stared at the six men standing on the other side of the glass. My breathing stuttered, but I kept it together. Lennon’s muscles clenched tighter and tighter. I rubbed my thumb along his palm and slowly, his tension receded.

“Anyone look familiar?” Detective Ahmed asked.

“Yes,” I said as strongly as I could. I needed to take the lead on this one. Lennon was

capable and alpha most of the time, but in this case the traumatic brain injury and hallucination were more real to him than the actual event itself. And I never wanted him to feel less than—especially for something outside his control.

“That one,” I said. My finger remained steady. “And that one.”

“Lennon?” Detective Ahmed asked after he’d noted my response.

Lennon blew out a breath. “Those two for sure, but can you have them speak?”

“Sure,” Detective Ahmed said. He pressed the intercom and asked each man in the lineup to come forward and repeat a nursery rhyme.

When the third man in line spoke, Lennon’s body went rigid. “Him. He was the one who cut me.”

“You’re sure?” Detective Ahmed asked.

“Positive.”

A few more spoke, and then Lennon shuddered. “And he’s the spokesman. The one...”

I leaned tighter against his side. He steadied, and his breathing returned to normal.

“Can I talk to him?” Lennon asked. His muscles were so tight, I worried he’d pop.

“Through the glass or in a detainment room?” Detective Ahmed asked.

“Here. Like this.”

Pride swelled in my chest as he took charge of his fear.

“Go ahead,” the detective said.

“Number Six, did you speak to Lennon Cruz after your companion cut him with the knife?”

The man’s eyes darted back and forth. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Before the police arrived. Did you speak to the man you assaulted when he was on the ground?”

“No way. I didn’t do nothing.” He was sullen, his eyes dark and empty.

“You’re sure you didn’t threaten his girlfriend?” Lennon pressed.

“Nuh-uh. I didn’t do nothing like that. I...I...it was an easy score, see? We just needed the money. I didn’t threaten the woman. That was Anthony. He did that!” He pointed to the first man I’d recognized.

“But neither of you threatened the woman once you incapacitated the man?” Lennon asked.

Both men shook their heads wildly.

Lennon stepped back. “That’s all.”

“Thanks for getting that confession,” Detective Ahmed said. “That’ll make the rest of the process easier—and faster.”

Lennon and I walked out of the police precinct, and the moment we stepped into the

sunlight, I tipped my head back and soaked in the sun.

“That feels so good,” I murmured. “Like we can fully turn the page.”

Lennon stood next to me, his expression stoic.

“Lennon?”

“This may be ridiculous, but I feel like this massive weight has lifted off of me. I can breathe fully, Vivi. I’m not scared of what’s going to happen to you anymore.” He wrapped an arm around me, and I shifted close. His heart pattered against the hand I laid on his chest. With each breath, it slowed. “I know bad things can happen. I know we’re not promised tomorrow, but thinking there were men watching me, waiting to take you—hurt you—it was making me crazy.”

“I wish I hadn’t let my fears hold me back from simply asking you.” I kissed his neck. “We could have resolved our split before it happened, that day in the hospital.”

“And I wish I’d been brave enough to be honest. But now we have today and all the days you’ll put up with me.”

I chuckled. “Like that’ll ever be a challenge.” I rose up on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his neck, burying my nose in the crook of his shoulder. “That’s over. It’s been over. I need you to hold me now, Lennon.”

His arms were around me before I finished the request.

“You know what my mom said is the hardest part of a relationship?” I asked.

“No.”

“Communication. She said it’s hard to be honest with another person, especially when you don’t want to be honest with yourself.” I pulled back to meet his eyes. My calves burned, but I kept myself on my toes, needing to be as close to him as possible. “We talk, especially about the hard stuff. The attraction and liking clicked immediately, and yes, I would have rather have not gone through those months of sadness and blaming myself, but it brought us to a much, much better place in our relationship. We’re honest with each other and ourselves. We admit when we need help. We’ve become a partnership. And that’s because of what we went through—in spite of the odds against us.”

“Ah, Vivi. You’re so smart. I love you. I don’t tell you enough. I love you with all my heart.”

I smiled. “I’m not going to say no to hearing that more often.”

He chuckled but sobered quickly. “I didn’t like the way I felt in there. How those men made me feel. I’ve never been as scared as I was when I was sure they’d hurt you because of me.”

I hugged him tighter. “Ah, Lennon. We all wobble from time to time. I’m shocked that I could be the reason you, Lennon Cruz, star starter for the Wildcatters, fell to your knees. Part of me gets off on that power, but...”

My legs began to shake, and Lennon shifted so his forearm was just below my butt. He lifted me off my feet. Swoon . This man was strong. So capable. Yet, with me he remained gentle, careful...

“But?” he asked.

“But I love you the way you are, and that’s in control. You control your emotions, your reactions, your strength. I find that so sexy.” I nipped at his earlobe. “Well, not

all the time.”Sometimes I do get a high from making you lose control.”

He shuddered as he lowered his forehead to mine. “Ah, Vivi, you have no idea the power you hold over me. And you’re the only one who breaks my control—or gets to control me.” He kissed me, and I felt the thrill to my soul. I reveled in it.

Chapter

Lennon

Vivi and I walked back to the rental car hand in hand, both of us buoyant with the knowledge that our attackers had been caught. I drove her back to the bed and breakfast where she'd stayed the last time we were here, and I made slow, sweet love to my sweet lover.

We had just one night in town because I had to get back for our last two regular-season games, but we decided not to push our luck and go out. Instead we ordered a decadent meal from our lovely hostess, Louise.

We went to sleep wrapped around each other, and when I woke early the next morning, I knew this was the day. My instincts all clamored for me to tie Vivi to me here in this place that had made and nearly broken us, all within the span of a few days.

Now we were mere weeks from the end of this hockey season, and I was only going to get busier, which was why I needed Vivian to know I was all in, that I loved her more than hockey.

I set the ring box on the edge of the pillow between us, my heart climbing into my throat. But it was a good kind of feeling—that pure excitement of childhood Christmas Eves when I'd wiggled and squirmed with the desire to open my gifts.

As I waited for Vivi to awaken, I thought about the time I'd let slip away. Perhaps my

theory of surety was simply wrong. I'd been sure that man—I still didn't know his name, and I really didn't care to—had spoken to me, had threatened Vivian. Yet it was all in my head. Never happened.

Wasn't real.

That told me that a lot of what I experienced was at least through my framing of the true situation. The next time I disagreed with a teammate, my family, or Vivi, I wanted to remember how this felt—the realization that I could be right in my reality and wrong in theirs.

What a total mind fuck.

Beyond that need to be a better listener and a more thoughtful communicator, I thought about what the future would hold. As much as I loved hockey, as much as I cared about my teammates—my family—I needed to move on. It was time. Well, I had one more year on my contract, but I wasn't looking to sign another. As Coach Whittaker had said when he picked me up from the airport last year, my continued health was worth more than even the millions I'd earn by playing longer.

Vivian, our family, now came first.

Her lids fluttered, and she blinked. She stretched before she smiled. Then, noticing the jeweler's box, she gasped. "Lennon..." she breathed.

"Vivian," I replied, smiling.

"I..."

"Do you want to open it, or do you want me to?"

She continued to gawk at me, so I grabbed the box and hopped from the bed. Rounding to her side, I slid to my knees. She sat up, her luscious hair spilling around her shoulders, slightly tangled from sleep. Her eyes were luminous.

I'd chosen this time of day because it was my favorite. Vivian was so soft and snuggly in the mornings. I loved cuddling her—I wanted to do that every day for the rest of my life.

I told her exactly that. Then I said, "Meeting you was such a gift. I knew when we were in that café that you were special—that we were meant to be. I knew you'd be the woman who made me love hardest, which also means you have the ability to drive me craziest, make me angriest, cause me to laugh the hardest, and be the most tender. You're it for me, Vivian Lee. I never, ever want to spend another day apart. Marry me."

"But...hockey—your job, what I'm going to do next..."

I flipped open the box as she stammered. It took a full fifteen seconds before her eyes dropped to the ring nestled there. "Oh...my..."

"I do have to finish this season and play the next one, so you're right that there will be days we're not together. But you'll be mine as I'm yours, and I'll talk to you and text you all the time, so we'll barely feel like we're apart."

Her features softened as love shone in her eyes. She was gorgeous—so perfect for me. She lifted her hand and cupped my cheek. "Yes, Lennon. Yes, I'll marry you." Tears filled her eyes as she continued to hold my gaze. "I knew I would. I just knew it. In my bones, my heart, when we were here before. It was like...my mother gave me you."

I kissed her palm. Then I did it again because I could and because she needed the

connection. I pulled the ring from the box and slipped it on her finger. Vivian had delicate hands, and I'd gone for a statement ring. It was big—my chest swelled with pride because everyone would see it and know Vivian was mine.

That sounded so caveman, because it was. But I was Vivian's, from my soul to my mind and body, and I wanted her to claim me, too.

She stared at the ring on her finger for a long moment, and then she shrieked as she leaped out of bed. Her legs tangled in the sheets and she fell...right into my lap.

I laughed. "This is just like what happened last September with your hat at my feet." I nuzzled into her neck. "Now here you are in my arms."

She looped her slender arms around my neck and peppered me with kisses. "No place I'd rather be, Lennon. Absolutely no place."

When our lips connected, the rightness of us clicked once again. I wasn't sure how that was possible—I already knew Vivian was my great and only love. Still, just like when I'd looked into her silver eyes last year, I knew. She fit me. I fit her. Together, we locked in place, stronger because we were together.

I shifted and stood, fumbling a little to lay her on the bed. I kept kissing as I lay next to her, as I stripped off her flimsy nightie, as I tugged off her panties, as I tugged off my sleeping pants and boxer briefs, and as I entered her soft, welcoming warmth. Slowly, I edged back, then shuttled into her even deeper.

"Lennon," she cried against my lips. "Oh...Lennon."

She fluttered around me, and we both moaned. "You feel good. So good, Vivi."

"Oh...oh, Lennon...yes...it's better. Somehow it's better now."

“Engagement sex is the best.” I groaned, struggling to maintain my rhythm as Vivian convulsed on my dick.

Her soft noises of need nearly sent me over the edge, but I refused. Vivian was going to come at least once—twice, if I could stand it—before I did. I wanted this joining to be the best of her life.

We were free from the past. We were ready to start our lives. This was a celebration to commemorate all of that.

We both breathed hard and Vivian’s body quivered when I finally released deep inside her.

“That was...” I brought my shaking arm to cover my eyes.

“Intense,” Vivian panted. “So freaking intense.”

“Never thought sex might kill me, but I was pretty sure my heart was going to burst.”

Vivian rolled atop me, clutching my shoulders. “Don’t leave me, Lennon. I can’t—don’t joke about that.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and murmured my love, my devotion, my plans to be around forever into her sweat-soaked hair.

Chapter

Vivian

We returned to Houston still endorphin drunk—maybe pheromone drunk, too. The initial giddiness of our first weekend together was back—and it was all-consuming. I couldn't get enough of Lennon, and based on his need to be near me, text me when we were apart, and kiss me senseless the moment he walked into the room, I knew he felt the same.

The next night, Lola and I drove to the arena to watch the Wildcatters play hockey.

“That expression looks good on you,” Hana said when she saw me. When she glanced down, her eyes and smile widened. “So does that ring.”

I sucked my lips into my mouth as I raised my hand to the rush of voices surrounding us. Because we were in the stands, just behind the team, the players turned, too. When Lennon saw all the CATS surrounding me, Ida Jane jumping up and down and Naomi doing a dance, he smiled and winked.

“Lemme see,” Keelie said, elbowing her way through the other women. She cooed over my ring. “So...loving a hockey player isn't so bad, huh?”

I thought back to Lennon's proposal and what had come the night before, and I shivered.

“Girl's thinking about something smexy,” Naomi crowed.

My cheeks warmed, and I couldn't meet Lola's laughing gaze. "I'm really happy."

Hana hugged me so hard, my ribs creaked. "You got your HEA, Viv."

I hugged her back. "Well, we're working on it."

"I hope so," Naomi said, waggling her brows.

Ida Jane shushed her. "We'll talk more about that later." She motioned to the fans around us who were avidly leaning closer.

Naomi pursed her lips. "Good call." She met my gaze. "Later."

We settled into our seats—I had my very own now, a row behind Lola's next to Hana. The game started with ice flying and bodies slamming into the walls.

"Oof, this is going to be fast and hard." Hana gave me a sidelong look. "One of my favorites."

"Stop," I said, giggling.

"Until later," Hana said.

I focused on the game, enjoying the players' athleticism as they sprinted down the ice on their skates. They were graceful, which still shocked me since they were all big men. Goodness, my man's moves turned me on. More than my man—my fiancé . Lennon was big. A bad ass. Mine .

Thanks, Mom . I would always believe my mother had been the one to tumble my hat down the lakefront to Lennon's towel. I glanced at the back of Lola's head, noting the thinning hair and thinning skin. I sighed. She was doing well with the treatments, but

she wasn't in remission. We could lose her, and that would devastate Lennon. It would devastate me.

Another thought formed: Would Lennon blame me for his mother's death? I was the one caring for her, after all. An icy chill settled in my bones, and I struggled to pay attention to the game thereafter.

Hana noted my silence, but after a couple of unanswered questions, she didn't push me.

I waited until Lennon and I were in his truck after a post-game celebratory meal to blurt out my question. "Will you still want me—still love me—if your mom dies?"

He did a double take, then looked back at the road when a car honked. His hands tightened on the wheel. "Where the hell did that come from?"

"It occurred to me tonight. I'm the one in charge of your mother's health?—"

"I'm interrupting you right there. You are not in charge of my mother's medical treatment. Her team of doctors handles that. You administer their medications and handle her daily care. But you are not responsible for the outcome, Vivi."

I scrunched down in the seat, tucking my knees toward my chest. "But you said, when I first showed up, that you knew everything would be okay because I was your mother's nurse. What if it isn't?"

He was quiet for a long moment, and I watched the lights dance across his strong visage. I liked that he'd chosen to crop his beard shorter. He'd probably always be self-conscious about the scars from the attack, but I enjoyed seeing his strong jaw delineated by the thick, dark hair there. Everything about Lennon made me yearn.

“I’m scared,” I said, realizing what was driving my questions.

“I get that,” he said quietly. “And part of the blame’s on me. I haven’t done enough for you to know that I love you, Vivian. No strings, no attachments, no qualifiers.” He glanced over at me, his eyes hungry yet soft. “I want you with me, at my side, always. My mom...” He signaled a turn into his parking garage. “My mom is sick. There’s no guarantee she’ll get well. I know that. I hate it, but I understand that. Just as I know that caring for my mom has to bring up feelings about losing yours.” He parked, turned off the engine, and turned toward me. He took both my hands, his much warmer than my chilled ones, and kissed each of my knuckles.

“I love you, Vivi. I want a life and a lifetime with you. I want a family with you. I want to grieve with you, which I hope isn’t too often, and I want to laugh with you, which I hope is most of the time. Because I love you, and I need you.”

The yearning settled in my belly, warm and insistent, as we headed up the elevator to his condo. My nipples peaked and my skin flushed, sensitized to the warm, rough pads of Lennon’s fingers. He made me so unbearably hot—so needy. Until Lennon, I’d worried there was something wrong with my libido. Now I knew I felt just as much desire as any other woman. I’d simply needed the right man.

Once inside his home, I led him to the bedroom. “Please, Lennon. I need you. I want you inside me.”

His breath hitched as his lips parted, those dark eyes even darker as the pupils seemed to swallow the brown of his iris.

“Fuck, Vivi. I’m not sure I can go slow. Be gentle.”

I unzipped my skirt and let it slide off my hips. I stood before him in my purple-and-black polka-dot satin panty set, unselfconscious about the slight swell of my tummy

between my hip bones or the jiggle in my thighs. When Lennon looked at me, I felt sexy—I was sexy. That was all that mattered.

“I don’t want gentle.” I took a breath. “And I don’t want to be in control. I want you to take me, Lennon.” I spread open his hand and placed his palm on my chest so he could feel the steady thud of my heart.

We needed to work through this issue, just as I’d needed the reassurance that he’d still love me. If we were going to be partners, we had to trust each other and respect each other—and, in this case, give and receive pleasure. I was primed, more than ready. My panties dampened against my slick thighs.

Lennon hesitated, still holding himself back. That wouldn’t do. I laid my palms on the swell of his pectorals before I rose on my tiptoes. Keeping eye contact the entire time, I nipped his lower lip into my mouth. Dragging my teeth back slowly, I licked the abused flesh.

“Fuck me, Lennon. Hard, so I can feel where you’ve been for days.”

The flare in his gaze excited me. His big hands grabbed my hips, and I was airborne. I slammed against his chest and wrapped my arms and legs around him. Lennon leaned in so his beard tickled my ear. “You asked for this.”

“I did, so give it to me.”

His chuckle was decadent—nearly as decadent as his lips and beard on the sensitive swell of my breast. He laid me on the silk duvet, and the coolness against my back made goose bumps explode. He yanked my bra cup down and took my nipple into his mouth, suckling hard at the firm bud. I arched into him, my hands sliding into his hair. He switched sides, kneading my damp breast while he feasted on the other one.

Back and forth he moved, pushing my need higher. My hips shifted, seeking friction. But Lennon remained out of reach, driving me utterly crazy. He slipped my bra straps off my shoulders as he kissed my tummy and massaged my butt. With a tug, he slid my panties down my legs. He pressed his cheek to my belly as he inserted two thick fingers into my entrance. They slid in and out with ease, coated with the evidence of my desire.

He nipped and licked at my hip bone, my outer thigh. My moans grew louder, and I clutched him tighter.

“I want... Lennon, I want...”

He pulled back, away from me, and I cried out, desperate to get closer, missing his fingers. But a moment later, his hot erection pressed to my slit, splitting my plump lower lips, filling me up.

I gasped and shook, shocked at the pleasure of his slow, merciless progression. He didn't stop until his balls nudged my bottom. Still I wanted more, needed more, and I shifted restlessly against him. “Ah, Vivi. You are amazing.” He pulled back and slammed into me. I gasped and clutched the duvet.

Drag out, slide in deep. Over and over, he kept the pace steady and slow—too slow to create the friction I needed for release. I tossed my head back and forth, gnashed my teeth, and took what he gave me.

He slid one arm under my back, then brought it low to the base of my spine, tilting my hips up to better receive him. My thighs shook with the effort to remain passive. I wanted to take him, but Lennon needed this moment, needed to be in control.

He pulled out with a tortuous slowness that was driving me out of my mind, but he shoved in much faster this time. His pubic bone slammed into my butt. I tried to wrap

my legs around him, but Lennon pressed against both thighs, opening me. He stared down at where he powered in and out of me, his strokes strong and sure. He picked up the tempo and the force, and then again, until he was pounding into me.

I loved it. He didn't hold back, instead using his strength to level his hips against mine. I screamed, and he shoved in even harder. This was visceral, deep, all-consuming. I could feel how much he wanted me—needed me. Desire coiled inside, winding me ever tighter.

I clenched my inner muscles, trying to give as good as I got. Lennon seemed to redouble his efforts, pounding me both into and up the mattress. Sweat bloomed over my skin, and my breathing turned ragged. Still he continued forcing me to take him, to accept his pace in the best possible way. The tension rose, rose, rose—higher than I would have imagined possible, pulling my muscles taut.

Lennon lifted my hips and rose to his knees, spreading them so my clit rubbed against his abdominals with the next pump.

I detonated. My mind ceased to take in stimulus as my body shivered and convulsed, sucking at Lennon's hard dick. I screamed and panted, the pleasure so intense it was nearly painful.

His pace faltered as my orgasm blew through me. He gritted his teeth and chanted my name over and over. His palm settled on my knee, and he fell forward as his cock expanded and his balls jerked, pressed tight to my sensitive skin as his seed erupted, bathing my insides in a thick, warm spray.

After, he continued to rock into me, his breathing as ragged as mine as he collapsed his shoulder beside me. And still, he fucked me. Slowly now, softly, as everything was so sensitive.

He eased to a stop, buried in my channel. He placed a hand on my breast, over my heart. "That was incredible," he said.

"Mmmm," I agreed.

"I wasn't too rough?"

"No. You should do that again."

He chuckled. "Give me five or ten, and I will."

"Delightful."

We rested, sweat cooling our skin, our muscles jumping occasionally. The room was dark and quiet, our breathing the only sound.

"I really do adore you, Vivian."

I smiled. "I know. And I adore you, too."

Chapter

Lennon

We spent the next morning at my mom's, enjoying a nice brunch my sisters brought over. I loved how well Nina and Mia got along with Vivi—how seamlessly she fit into our family dynamic. Satisfaction reared up, and I must have looked smug because Vivi rolled her eyes at me.

“What do you two have planned this afternoon?” Mom asked.

I shrugged. “We could play some games?—”

“You have this one day off and you want to spend it with me? No, you are young and in love. You two need to go out and live a joyful life. My boring daughters will stay with me.”

“Oh, we will, will we?” Mia asked, hands on hips. “I think you'd better ask nicely.”

Mom played along, her eyes shining even as she stuck out her lower lip in a pout. “Please, my darling, please stay with me so I'm not alone in my invalid state.”

Nina kissed Mom's cheek. “You are a menace.”

Mom cackled. “I love having adult children.”

“You liked us little, too,” I said.

“Well, I’ll love my grandbabies even more. Now, you two, scoot!”

She hugged Vivi and me, and we ended up in the driveway. I let Belladonna into the backseat before holding out my hand to Vivi to help her into the front.

“Your truck is huge,” she said.

“I fit well in it,” I said with a wink.

“Something like that,” Vivi replied. She settled in and buckled up, seeming pensive as I started to drive.

“You okay?” I asked, glancing over.

“Yeah.” She sighed. “Just missing my mom. I wish...” She bit her lip as she turned to face me. “I wish she could have met you.”

“I wish that, too.”

Vivian closed her eyes. “It just hit me—that I’m all alone.”

“Vivi, you are the farthest thing from alone.”

She offered a faint smile, but I saw the shadows in her eyes. She really believed that. I tightened my hands on the steering wheel. That wouldn’t do. At all. “Let’s take Belladonna ice skating,” I said.

“She ice skates?” Vivi asked.

“Loves it. She needs some exercise. It’ll be fun.”

“I can’t ice skate,” Vivi said.

“Well, little grasshopper, you’re about to learn.”

The practice arena was quiet, as I’d hoped. I grabbed my gear, then realized I didn’t have skates for Vivi—an oversight I should have considered.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’ll watch you.”

“No way. I want to skate with you.”

I dialed Cormac’s number, and he gave me permission to use Keelie’s skates. Thankfully, Vivi and Keelie wore the same size shoe. Once I got her into the footwear and laced up mine, I opened the gate. Belladonna had been sitting, ears perked, ready to go. She bolted onto the ice, her nails skittering across the surface.

“You weren’t kidding,” Vivi said, watching the dog.

I stepped out first, then turned and took her hands in mine. Her skin was cool and soft, her eyes filled with that faintest hint of sadness, as well as trepidation.

I looked into her eyes as we poised at the edge of the ice. “I’ve got you, Vivi. I won’t let you get hurt.”

With a gulp, she stepped forward. I eased backward. She wobbled, and I steadied her. Belladonna raced around the rink on the other side, yapping as she tried to catch the shards of ice she flung into the air.

I released one of Vivi’s hands, and she yelped as she stumbled, but I caught her around the waist and tucked her against my side. “Long glides, like this.” I showed her, and she slowly improved from her tiny fumbling steps. “Good.”

We made two laps around before she gained enough confidence to take her gaze off the ice. She smiled up at me. “This is fun.”

I smiled back. “It is.”

I leaned down to kiss her cool lips, enjoying her taste. I shifted to skate backward, with her front snuggled to mine, as I deepened the kiss. I kept Vivi with me as we made a lazy tour of the ice, all while I devoured her mouth.

A moment later, something slammed into my calf like a damn torpedo, and I went airborne. I tore my lips from hers as I wrapped my arms around her, tensing for the impending crash. From the corner of my eye, I saw Belladonna slinking away.

The impact started in my left shoulder, then traveled down my ribs to my hip. Vivi’s weight was pinned to my chest, but her pelvis slammed into mine, causing me to groan.

Belladonna skittered over to me, sniffing and whining as I tried to regain my breath.

“Not the best landing.” I heard Maxim’s voice.

“I give it a two,” Stol said.

I still hadn’t managed to get my breath back.

“Nah,” Cormac said. “He was at a ten with that kiss move, and the dog fucked his game. I think he deserves a seven because he took the brunt of the fall.”

“Fair,” Naese said. “Looked like it hurt, even if he did land properly. That’ll bruise. Poor bastard.”

“You okay?” I gasped at Vivi. The pain in my dick had receded enough for me to get the words out.

She nodded, her eyes wide. “Are you?”

I laid my head back on the ice. “I’ll be fine. In a minute.”

“Oh. Oh!” She shifted, no doubt to clamber off me.

I groaned as her hip grazed my crotch and gripped her more tightly. “Don’t move. Just...give me a minute.”

“Aw. He’s injured. We gotta help him,” Stolly said.

I gritted my teeth. He was such a dick.

Belladonna licked my cheek. I opened my eyes and found Vivi’s filled with concern. I turned my head and noted Belladonna lying on the ice, her nostrils half an inch from my face. She whined and rested her muzzle on her paws.

“I’m fine. Nothing’s broken.”

“You sure, man?” Cormac asked. “That was a nasty fall.” He crouched. “Don’t listen to Stolly or Naese. They’re young and dumb.”

“I heard that, dick,” Naese muttered.

“Cormac is correct. You are often quite stupid,” Maxim offered. “May I?”

He gestured toward Vivian, who blushed as she realized she was sprawled on me while the guys looked on.

“Erm. Yes. Oof!”

Maxim gripped her waist and settled her on her skate blades in an easy move.

“Careful,” Stolly said as Vivian’s feet came out from underneath her. “Why don’t I hold you up as we skate to the benches?”

“Good idea,” Vivian muttered. “I’m not stable, and I don’t want to hurt one of you.”

“I’ll hold your other hand,” Naese offered. “We’ll get you to safety.”

Cormac offered me his hand. I gripped it, and he tugged me upright. “You okay?” he asked again, quietly. “That was a tumble.”

I shifted my shoulder, wincing. “It’s bruised, and I’ll be stiff for a few days, but I think I’m fine.” I watched as Vivi stuttered her way to the edge of the rink.

“Have the trainer look at it. Just to be sure.” Cormac, ever the team captain, worried over us all. “We need you in prime health for the playoff opener next week. We have a trophy to win.”

“So we do.”

Maxim glanced at Belladonna. “You fucked his moment.”

Belladonna dropped her head back to her paws and whined.

“Don’t shame my dog,” I said. I petted Belladonna’s head and gave her a good scratch. “You’re a good girl. Maxim’s just an ass.”

“Blade wouldn’t behave so poorly.”

“Need I remind you of the racoon incident?” I asked.

Maxim’s resting pissed-off face shifted into a darker scowl.

“I bet Naese’s balls still shrivel whenever anyone says racoon,” Cormac said with a snicker.

“Stop talking about my d—er, package,” Naese called. “There’s a lady present.”

I skated over to Vivi, ignoring my teammates. “Want to get those skates off?” I asked.

Vivian surprised me. “Okay, but I’d like a lesson sometime soon, please. So that next time we skate, you don’t have to be so concerned about me.”

I cupped her cheek and kissed her. “There’s nothing I’d rather focus on than you.”

“Er, dude, I think you’re supposed to say a championship,” Stolly said out of the corner of his mouth. “Especially with the captain right behind you.”

I continued to gaze down at Vivi, much more interested in the play of emotions across her face. “Cormac knows I’ll focus on the game. He knows I’m all in for the Cup. But he also knows that Keelie’s his top priority.”

“He’s not wrong,” Cormac mused. “Except you forgot my son. My family is my top priority.”

I kissed Vivi—just a soft buss. “Exactly.” I pulled back and looked at the crew. They’d formed a loose circle around us. “What’s up? Why are you here?”

“Well...mostly to skate,” Cormac said. He fidgeted. That meant something else was

going on.

“Wait. Where are your wives?”

If these guys weren't at practice or at a game, they were with their partners.

“You are shit at this,” Maxim rumbled.

“It's not easy to deliver subterfuge,” Stolly muttered.

“It's got, like, subtle in it, and we're not really known for being subtle,” Naese pointed out. He winked at me.

Cormac threw up his hands, clearly exasperated. “Why don't you come to the locker room?”

Stol rubbed his hands together. “We have a surprise!”

“Way to ruin it,” Maxim said. He stomped off, grumbling.

“He's really bad at social interaction.” Naese shook his head.

“And somehow he got a wife before most of us,” Stol said with a shrug.

“You okay with heading off the ice?” I asked. “We'll do the lesson some other time. I promise.”

Vivi nodded. “We should ice your shoulder.”

I'd worked hard not to wince, but she was correct. My whole side throbbed as we exited the ice and put on our regular shoes. I raised my eyebrows as I heard voices

spilling out into the hall from the locker room. When we got there, they transformed into whistles and whoops.

Hana came over and hugged Vivi, who seemed shell-shocked. “What...?”

“This is a surprise engagement party since you surprised us by getting engaged,” Hana said, beaming.

“We’re having it here because we found out you were already here,” Paloma, Coach Whittaker’s wife, said. “I would have preferred to have a gathering at our house, but we’ll do that soon.” She offered me her hand with a friendly smile. “Welcome to the CATS.”

“Thank you,” Vivian said.

“We also needed to eat a bit of crow,” Millie said. “The guys did better than we did with you two.”

“Did you just admit—” Stol began.

“Don’t push your luck, big guy,” Millie said, smirking at her husband.

He chuckled as he reeled her to his chest. “Wouldn’t dream of it, Millie, my love.”

“They really did do a good job,” Keelie said. “The doggy date was inspired.”

Vivi looked up at me and smiled. “I like to think Lennon and I figured it out all by ourselves. Though I did enjoy meeting all those wonderful dogs and their people.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night—or not,” Naomi said with a wink. “Now, let’s party!”

Chapter

Lennon

The engagement party wound down early—another reason Coach had hosted it at the arena, no doubt. We knew what was at stake: our chance to win the championship. Life continued to ebb and flow around us, but we needed to stay focused on that goal.

The next week passed quickly—even with my mom’s last round of chemo—thanks to watching film and lots of practice and weightlifting. I hated to admit it, but I could feel the bruises from my tumble to the ice more than I would have ten years ago. The weights weren’t a problem, and my overall conditioning was excellent—I could beat the rookies in sprints. But as this season pushed into the playoffs, I was feeling my age, and I wasn’t sure how many more seasons I had in me. I wasn’t sure how many more I wanted to play. What a change of mindset this year had wrought. I was starting to see what retirement could look like, what I wanted it to be—more time with my family, more time with Vivi.

I hung up the phone as I settled back on my mom’s couch. Vivi had been getting Mom ready for bed. Mom hated that she was so weak after her treatment, but Vivian had a gentle, no-nonsense way of working through ordinary tasks that made them more palatable.

“Hey, fiancé,” she said as she plopped on the couch next to me. She wore a pair of mid-calf leggings and a flowy tank top. She looked relaxed, and I liked her that way. She leaned closer and kissed my throat then wrapped an arm over my chest and threw her leg over my thighs. I couldn’t help but grin at having Vivian so close.

“Who were you talking to?” she asked.

“First, how’s Mom? Really?”

Vivi patted my chest as she nuzzled into my neck. “She’s good , Lennon. She’s doing everything she can to get back to healthy, and it really seems to be working.”

I blew out a breath. “So...Dr. Carmichael wasn’t overstating her current situation?”

She shook her head. “She wasn’t. I think your mom’s going to live a healthy life for a long time.”

“She’s been so upset since her hair fell out...”

“I know. That’s a hard part of this process.” Vivi squeezed me. “It’ll grow back, though. And your mom won’t have any cancer cells left.”

I took a deep breath, easing tension out of my shoulders. “You’re right. I know you are. It’s just...”

“She’s your mother, and you’re worried about her.”

“Exactly.”

We were quiet for a while. I kissed her temple because I could. “I was talking to Camden Grace.”

Her eyes went wide. “Really?” she breathed.

I frowned, not liking how dreamy her expression had become. “Do you like him? Because he’s happily married.”

Vivi grinned. “I think there are many women and probably quite a few men who enjoy looking at him. Plus, his voice is very pretty, too.” She flicked my lower lip, making me aware I was pouting. “Stop that. I love you, and I’m very, very happy with you. But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t fan-girl all over Camden Grace.”

“Now I’m not sure I want to work with him.”

“I think you want to work with him,” Vivian countered.

“Yes. You’re right. He called now, before we’re in the playoffs, to bounce off some ideas.”

“So...where will you fit into all of this?” she asked.

“Wherever I want,” I told her. “He’s building the apparatus. Then I get to decide if I want to take over a leadership role or simply be a spokesperson. Either way, I get to do something worthwhile and improve lives of dogs and people.”

She snuggled against my side. At least it no longer hurt too much. That was key since we had a game tomorrow. “That’s so cool. Do you know what you want to do?”

“Not yet. I figure you and I need to work that out.” I hesitated. “I have one more year on my current contract. Then I can retire.”

She sat up and tucked her legs underneath her. “Is that something you want?”

“Six months ago, no. Now...” I sighed as I scrubbed my hand over my face. “Practices have gotten harder. I’m taking longer to recover.”

“Aw. Poor big man. Are those bruises bothering you?”

“Yeah,” I grumbled.

“I won’t say you should have iced it?—”

“Thanks. I love you,” I said.

She leaned forward and kissed my cheek. With my beard shorter, I could feel the heat and softness of her lips. I liked the sensation. A lot. There were many firsts, seconds, and fiftieth times with Vivi that I liked a lot.

“Lie down, and I’ll give you a massage,” she said.

“That could lead somewhere naughty,” I said even as I stood and helped her up so I could lie down on the couch. She settled her cute little butt on mine, and I smiled, liking the idea of Vivi straddling me.

“But it won’t because we’re at your mom’s place,” she said sternly.

I sighed because she was right. Then I moaned as she slid her hands down my back to the knotted contusion on my ribs. It didn’t hurt, exactly, but I needed a moment to breathe through to the release of tension. “Oh, I meant to tell you. That house I was interested in is definitely going up for sale.”

Her hands stilled, resting lightly on my sides. “What?”

“We can go look at it tomorrow morning, before I have to head in for the game. It’s in Cormac’s neighborhood, near Hana, too. The place is bigger than here with a bigger yard to get you that dog you don’t think I know you’re stalking.”

Instead of denying it as I’d expected, she lay along my back, the heat from her body warming my muscles further. She rested her cheek on my uninjured shoulder and

wrapped her arms on either side of my torso. I loved her affectionate nature, and I realized she hadn't been able to express her love for anyone this way in a long time.

"You think the puppy would get along with Belladonna?" she asked.

"Of course." I lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. She closed her fingers around it, making me smile. It was the little things, really, that made me so damn happy.

In a quick move, I reared up, snagged her from my back and tucked her gently into the cushions before settling atop her. I shifted my hips so my erection pressed against her softness. "Now this is absolutely the best massage of my life."

She wound her arms around my neck. "Not going there . You were talking bigger houses and yards and fur babies."

I rocked against her softness. "I'll give you any type of baby you want, Vivi." I kissed her long and slow and sweet—the way she deserved.

"I...just want you right now," she said.

I chuckled as I trailed my lips down her neck. "You're going to be a great mom."

"I'll start with a puppy. I can't mess that up too badly because I'll love her and feed her, and she'll love me back."

"I'll help you with anything you want."

She tilted my head up so I met her gaze. "I know."

"So...bigger house, adopting a dog together, planning our future post-retirement."

“Oh, we are, are we?” She rolled her hips up to tease me.

“Damn straight we are.” I turned serious. “I want us to be set up—you doing what you love, us finding new hobbies and passions together.” I stilled because we really couldn’t take this any further right now. “I want to be involved in the day-to-day work of the foundation,” I told her.

She smiled at me, all soft and full of love. “That’s a wonderful idea, Lennon. Just wonderful.”

Chapter

Lennon

The next morning we arrived five minutes early to the showing, but the real estate agent Cormac had suggested was already there, bustling through, turning on lights.

“Ah! Mr. Cruz, Ms. Lee. Come in, come in,” Sherri smiled, her highlighted hair never moving as she shook our hands and led us through what she called a grand room and into the kitchen. Vivi’s hand quivered in mine as we took in the high-end range and built-in refrigerator. The place had enough granite countertops for tamale assembly, something my mother and sisters would like. There were double ovens and a built-in pantry in addition to a large eat-in nook and a good-sized formal dining room we could use to host family dinners or the guys and their wives.

Overall, the house was a bit smaller than some of the other ones in the neighborhood with only three large, airy bedrooms—but the primary was upstairs with distressed hardwoods, a large walk-in closet, and a fireplace Vivi cooed over. As I’d been told, there was a large pool with a quaint pool house in the acre-plus backyard.

The house was perfect for Vivi and me and even for the couple of kids I might already be fantasizing about having in the future.

“You think Mom will like that?” I asked.

“I do. I could live there,” Vivian answered.

“Nope. You’re inside, in the great big bed we’re going to share.”

Sherri smiled indulgently. “If you’re interested, Mr. Cruz, I suggest we put in an offer today, before the house officially goes on the market.”

I looked at Vivi, and she gulped.

“Let’s do it,” I told her. I’ll pay the asking price in cash.”

Sherri nodded, her hair still locked in place, as she strode off to make the call.

Vivi’s eyes widened even more. “I forget you’re rich.”

“Not as rich as some of the guys, but I’ve led a simpler life, and I have my condo, which has appreciated well. We’ll sell it when and if we want the cash on hand.”

Vivi shook her head. “Most people have to do a contingency contract and make sure their existing place sells before they can afford to buy a new one.”

I scooted closer, grasping Vivi’s hips and bringing them flush against mine. “I’m not the average man.”

She shimmied against me. “I know.”

Sherri strode back in, a wide smile on her face. “Congratulations. You’re about to be homeowners.”

I looked at Vivian who beamed back at me. Sherri slipped quietly back out the door. We needed to sign documents, and I had a huge sum to transfer, but all that could wait a couple of minutes. This was about Vivi and me. About us starting our lives together, building our future. Damn, it felt good . “I can do this comfortably for us,” I

told her. “It’ll be nice to have you all to myself, with all of our little comforts. Plus, now we can host a barbecue.”

Vivi wound her arms around my neck. “I love you, Lennon. I love how kind you are to your family, to your friends, to me.”

“Now that we’re buying a house—our first house together—let’s celebrate with a win tonight.”

She kissed me deeply, leaving us both out of breath. “For luck,” she murmured.

We won that game and the next three, which propelled us into the second round of the playoffs. We won those games, too, increasing our winning streak and forcing the sports pundits to find loads of superlatives when it came to discussing the Wildcatter organization.

We were able to expedite the closing, and Vivi and I moved into our place during the break after our fourth win, since we had to wait for the other two teams to duke it out in their series.

“It’s going all seven games,” Maxim told me when he and Ida Jane stopped by with a housewarming gift. Naomi and Adam followed them in, and ten minutes later, Hana, Naese, Stol, Millie, Cormac, and Keelie were all in our grand room, enjoying a drink and some healthy snacks while I fired up the grill.

“Good thing I went to the store while you were at Mom’s,” I told Vivi. My mother hadn’t wanted to move in with us, but Mia, my sister, was more than happy to take over Vivian’s bedroom. She was saving for her own house, and Mom’s place cut her commute in half. Plus, Mia understood that Mom might be on the road to recovery now, but she was aging. Mia hadn’t focused much on family for the past ten years, and I could tell she was trying to make up for lost time.

“I’m glad Mia’s there, no matter the reason,” Vivi said. “Your mom came through her therapy really well, but you never know when a body will react.”

“I think you should think about sticking with private nursing,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“Well, you seem more relaxed, happier than you were when talking about your work schedule back when I met you, and because I like knowing I get to see you when I’m home.”

She smiled and kissed me. “All good reasons. We’ll see. Much as I love nursing, I may need to find something else to fulfill me.”

“Whatever you want, Vivi.”

She bit her lip. “Well...”

I waited.

“I was wondering about helping out with the foundation, now that that’s moving forward. Being a kind of liaison between service members and their VA doctors or whatever? Someone who could help with their prescriptions and develop tailored nutrition, exercise, and medical plans.”

My chest warmed. “That’s a fantastic idea, and exactly what Camden and I want to do for these guys.”

She blew out a breath as she blinked at me. “Really?”

“Yeah, it sounds amazing, Vivi.”

She bounced into my arms. I twirled her around, and everyone hooted for us to kiss. I was happy to oblige.

“Man, oh, man,” Naese said, rubbing his hands together fifteen days later. “Game five—we can win the Cup tonight, my fellas!”

“Don’t jinx it,” Stolly said.

I smirked. I wouldn’t have taken Stol as the superstitious one of the group—not while we had a crazy Russian on the team. But the younger man been so serious, so determined to ensure every little detail of his game plan, that I realized it wasn’t superstition, it was anxiety.

I leaned over the bench and patted him on the back. “Just keep doing what you do, and we got this.”

He groaned. “You shouldn’t say that. Don’t say that. I’ll fuck something up.”

“Mistakes happens. Just pay attention. Be alert to opportunities,” I said.

“And don’t fuck up,” Maxim added with that terrifying Russian glare.

“That’s enough,” Cormac said mildly. “But seriously, Stol, don’t fuck up.”

Stol dropped his head between his knees and groaned.

We all laughed. It felt good, and most of the tension seeped from the locker room. Many of us had been here before. We understood the pressure. We knew we had to clear our minds and focus.

We would because we all wanted this series locked down and the Stanley Cup in our

possession. We headed for the ice, and the first period was a masterclass of precision and execution. We owned every minute of every play, and I could practically feel Coach Whittaker's pride in our performance.

I glanced over at Vivi as I came off the ice early in the third period. She was watching me, so I winked at her. She smiled back and blew me a kiss.

I settled on the bench for a breather and water break. When Coach called my line up, Maxim and I were over in a blink, more than ready to slam into bodies and fight for the puck. We might be dominating the ice, but we needed a score to put us on the board—to clinch the win.

It came in a blink, one I almost missed. I was farther up than I normally played because my player had fallen back to accept the puck from his goalie. He bobbled the pass, and it slid toward me. I pushed forward and slapped the puck back at the goalie, who had just settled into his defensive stance and wasn't ready for a shot to the top right of the goal.

It sailed in. The blue light spun, and our hometown crowd went wild.

My back was turned to Medvedev, and my arms were over my head—how many times had I made a goal? Not that many, and this was the first time I'd made the game-winning shot in the winning game for the Stanley Cup. So it was a moment to celebrate.

Then Medvedev barreled into my back, his stick high against my ribs.

Coming to in an utterly silent arena that had been filled with cheering moments before proved scarier than the hit itself. Way scarier. "Am I dead?" I asked. "Broken? What did I break? Can I walk?"

Dr. Hutchins skimmed his hands over my legs, then my neck, though I got the sense he'd already checked that. "Move your fingers," he said. "Good. Toes. Excellent. Legs. Arms." He heaved a huge sigh. "No signs of spinal injury, but we'll strap you just in case."

"Medvedev is toast, Cruiser," Cormac said. "I'm going to make it my personal goal to ensure that piece of shit doesn't get any play time. If you hadn't had your arms up already, you would have landed on your fucking nose."

I'd never seen him so angry.

"And probably lost all of his teeth," Maxim growled. He glared at Medvedev, who was getting reamed by his captain. The guy shot me a malevolent look that earned him a finger wag and an even louder chastisement.

"I'm okay," I groaned. I felt like I'd been hit by a freight train plus a bulldozer. "Maybe not okay. But I didn't bust my head."

"We'll let Dr. Hutchins decide that," Coach Whittaker said. He squatted next to me. "You with me, Lennon?"

"Yeah. I'm here."

"Can you tell me what day it is?"

"Game Five of the Championships."

"And where are we?"

"Wildcatters Arena, which is quiet because they all think I'm halfway to dead." The joke landed flat, but then again, so was I.

“Let me out there. Let me out there,” Vivian screamed.

I turned my head and winced. “Vivi.” She had to be terrified. The last time she’d seen me like this, I’d been the dumbest of dumbasses and pushed her out of my life. My heart hurt as I realized how scared she must be. “Vivi, I’m okay.” My voice was too quiet. I couldn’t catch my breath.

I tried to sit up. Everything hurt. It hurt bad. I couldn’t take a full breath.

“Tell her it’s not my head.” I gritted my teeth. “But I think I punctured my lung.”

Chapter

Vivian

I screamed the moment I noticed the player bearing down on Lennon—about a half second before the unethical piece of shit slammed into my man from the back . Lola sat in front of me, and she'd jumped up as I did. We'd both run down the stairs at breakneck speed, even before some fans began booing.

My heart pumped too fast and my vision swam as I'd gripped and released the handrail to keep me steady. After what had seemed like hours, but was probably under a minute, I was at the boards—held back by security.

“Get out of my way,” I yelled.

“No can do, ma'am,” the guard said, puffing up his chest.

Lola got in his face, which brought more security to our location.

“Lennon! Lennon!” I screamed. “Let me out there. Let me out there. I'm a nurse. I'm his fiancée. Lennon!”

I felt a hand at the back of my neck, and I whirled, ready to do some serious moves if these people thought they could restrain me.

“I'll take Ms. Lee out to see Lennon,” Gunnar Evaldson said.

“But, but it’s still regulation,” the guard sputtered.

“And we’re going to be on an extended commercial break until we can ascertain the health of my player. Now, I suggest you move,” Gunnar added, his voice harder than a diamond and twice as sharp as a blade.

The moment the man stepped aside, I flung open the door and ran onto the ice—where I would have totally bit it if Gunnar hadn’t steadied me.

“I got you,” he said. “And Lennon’s okay. Silas gave me the thumbs up. I mean, I don’t think he’s great because he’s still on the ground, but he’s talking.”

A sob broke past my lips. I swallowed another as I gingerly made my way to Lennon. He was no longer sprawled out prone on the ice. He’d gotten to his side and faced me, his gaze tracking my approach.

“I’m okay, Vivi. I’m okay.” His breathing was labored, and his lips had a faint blue tinge. There was a whistling rasp to his breath. “It’s not my head. I love you.”

“Punctured lung,” I gasped.

“Yeah, it’ll heal.”

“Uhhhhh...” Naese gawped, wide-eyed, staring behind us. The paramedics were on the ice now, too. One slipped a mask over Lennon’s nose and mouth while another stabilized his neck.

“What?” I asked.

“Lola’s giving Medvedev a stern reprimand,” Coach said, his voice filled with humor.

Within a moment, the entire stadium was yelling the same word Lola kept shouting at the now cowering player, “Cabron! Cabron! Cabron!”

“My mother’s cussing?” Lennon chuckled, winced, and hissed into his mask.

“She’s pissed ,” Stolly said. “And spicy.”

“Come on,” Cormac said to his teammates. “Now that we know Cruz is okay, we should save Meddie from Lola.”

“Ah, let her get it out,” Coach said, his tone mild. “It’s going to be all over the sports channels, and I daresay the world’s going to be pretty impressed with your mother, Lennon.”

“She spits the fire,” Maxim said.

“Finish the game strong,” Lennon wheezed.

“Considering there’s less than a minute left, and I think Meddie just pissed himself, we should be okay,” Cormac said. His eyes twinkled. “But we aren’t going to let these shitbags steal your victory.”

“We’ll come to the hospital to celebrate,” Stol promised. “Millie will get it all cleared for us.”

Stol’s wife, Millie, was one of the nicest people I’d met in Houston. If she hadn’t told me the story herself, I never would have known she was a reluctant billionaire who’d been donating tons of money to the city’s hospitals, along with a youth charity Ida Jane had suggested and many of the Wildcatters’ preferred nonprofits. Hana said every time Millie got excited to “only” be a millionaire, some of her stocks would go up, and she would grit her teeth as she looked for another worthy cause. But there

were many of those—probably too many—so Millie was making progress.

Lennon was on the stretcher now, and the EMTs started to roll him away. I still clutched his hand. Cormac took Maxim over to deal with Lola Cruz's wagging finger and shouted commentary. The entire stadium was on its feet, clapping and cheering for Lennon.

This wasn't the exit he'd wanted—but I had to admit, this was one of the best farewells I'd ever witnessed and definitely had to be the most loving one in Wildcatters' history.

Lennon would always be one of their legends. He'd never said that was what he wanted; he wouldn't admit it because he really was rather down to earth and humble. But I understood enough about the sport now to know Gretzky was a god among these players and the fandom. To be mentioned in the same breath as him—which Lennon now would be—was the greatest of honors.

Chapter

Lennon

“As you know, you’ll still get paid the rest of your salary—another eight million on top of your cut for the Stanley Cup,” Coach Whittaker told me four days after we’d won the Stanley Cup.

The coaching staff, plus Cormac, Maxim, Stolly, and Naese were scattered across the seating in my new living room. The house fit everyone well, and I liked the large, mid-century sectional in a deep, rich blue that Vivi and I had settled on.

Belladonna had been making the rounds, getting attention and lots of petting from each of the men. Behind her was Vivi’s puppy, a scraggly little thing that supposedly had some golden retriever in it. I was doubtful, but the little scamp was sweet and wanted to please, plus she hero-worshipped Belladonna. Little Irene, which was Greek for peace, now snuggled onto Maxim’s large thigh. My linemate’s hand found her chunky belly, and he murmured softly to the pup.

Vivian was at Mom’s house, as she usually was this time of day. Mom had come through her chemo really well, and the doctors were cautiously optimistic based on the PET scan taken yesterday. We’d hung out in the hospital together—weird but also affirming.

I’d been released to Vivian’s care after my mother’s procedure. Vivian had driven my truck, something she was still muttering about, first to Mom’s house, then to bring me back to our place.

I sat in my favorite spot of the couch—the one nearest the kitchen—trying not to wince at the too-bright lights or whenever I had to turn my head. I didn't have a concussion, but I had bumped my head on the ice, and I had a hell of a black eye to go along with scoring the winning shot for our team's championship season.

As I'd just learned, my portion of the winnings was about two hundred and forty thousand.

"We're hopeful Dr. Horton will clear you so you can come back to your line next season," Coach said.

"We'll see." I shifted. I met Coach's concerned gaze with my one good eye. "I see what you mean about roles changing."

He nodded. "It happens. I wish you hadn't gotten so banged up, Lennon. When you come back—and you will—I want you to help some of the younger guys. They already see you as an unofficial coach."

"We're just talking next year, right?" I asked.

"If that's what you want," he said. "But if you want to play more, we'll talk about that, too."

"Sounds good." I didn't want to make any rash decisions while I was hurt. Vivi and I needed to continue discussing what we wanted our future to be. "I definitely want to complete next season, but this injury's taken me down."

"Understandable," Cormac said.

"Did you see the coverage?" Stol asked.

“Man, your mom got more airtime than our game.” Naese shook his head but a smile tugged at his lips. “Lola’s fierce.”

“She was the other night,” I said. “I can’t believe Gunnar let her out there.”

“He didn’t. He brought out Vivian, and Lola slipped past security,” Coach said. He shook his head. “If that hadn’t been such a dirty hit, and if Meddie wasn’t already on the brink of being cut, I think I would have had a much different conversation with Jonas.”

Jonas Sutton was the opposing head coach, and he’d been furious with Medvedev for the hit.

“Doubt he’ll get the fat contract he’s expecting,” Naese said.

Stol stretched out his legs. “I’d be surprised if anyone good picked him up.”

“Oh, he’ll play,” Maxim said. He was a fatalistic Russian. “He’ll find a home because there are always like-minded assholes out there.” He winced and covered Irene’s furry ears. “Sorry, baby. You shouldn’t hear such bad words.”

The guys all laughed. I tried, but it hurt.

“How’d the call go with Camden Grace?” Coach asked.

I perked up. “Great.” I explained the details of how we hoped the foundation would work.

The guys whistled. “He’s a big deal,” Cormac said.

I nodded. “He’s also former Army—a ranger and my brother’s CO. He likes the work

I've been doing in the off season, matching dogs back to their handlers. He's going to help me set it up as a real foundation, with a board and everything."

"Ah, you get to have a bunch of dogs at your place?" Naese asked. His lip started to push out in a pout, but Stol slugged him.

"Those are trained killers, dude. No way they'd let you, like, frolic in the grass or some shit."

"Well, they might." I chuckled, then winced. "But the dogs do like to bite, rip, and tear stuff more than they like to frolic."

"What's Vivian's role going to be?" Cormac asked. Of course he remembered I'd mentioned her being involved.

"She's interested in running the other arm of the nonprofit. A lot of the guys come back and get some kind of cancer—pretty sure it's because of those burn pits. She's going to coordinate their care with the correct treatment team at the VA. That's been a problem for a lot of the guys up until now, but with Camden as the face of the organization and a bunch of other rich guys and politicians saying we've got to support our troops, they've made some important changes—changes that'll allow the guys to get the help they need."

"That's great, man. Really great," Naese said.

It was. I was pleased with how things were working out. I hadn't thought there'd be anything worthwhile for me after hockey, but thanks to Cam and Vivi, I was more excited for my first day at my new job than I'd been in a long time, maybe ever. Plus, my mother was well. I couldn't have asked for a better outcome to this season or my career.

“You guys can all donate, and we’ll add it to the list of Wildcatters charities,” I told them.

“Seems like something the organization could get behind,” Cormac said as he rubbed his chin. “I’m in.”

“Millie will love it,” Stol said. “Though she’ll probably want to meet Camden Grace.” He scowled. “I heard her talking to Vivian about him. They think he’s hot.”

We all grumbled, but it was good natured. None of them would mind meeting him either. “I’ll see if we can do some kind of concert to raise money and awareness for the foundation,” I told them.

“And we’ll all pay the huge fee so we can rock out with you,” Stol said.

“Ida Jane loves the country music, so I’m sure she’ll like this plan,” Maxim said.

I tried to laugh, but I couldn’t. Instead, I smiled. “We’ll plan that after my wedding. It’s going to be this summer. As soon as my lung heals.”

The cheering that ensued woke Irene, who barked, then sneezed, and almost fell off Maxim’s lap. He caught her and placed her gently on the floor. Then we got to talking about the best places for a wedding and what kind of food we should have—and which of the single guys we were going to set up next.

Because we’d had a damn good run on the matchmaking side, too. In some ways, it might have been even better than winning the Cup. I kept that thought to myself.

Vivian

“I’m getting married, Mom.” I smiled into the full-length mirror and blinked back tears. “You led me to the most perfect man.” I brushed a tear from my cheek as my heart swelled. “We picked today so you’d know just how much you mean to me, too.”

Today was September first, the one-year anniversary of my first date with Lennon and of the day I’d finished spreading my mother’s ashes. I loved how we’d come full circle, both of us having realized how special the other person was from that first moment.

“Thank you, Mom, for being my mother. Thank you for helping me find Lennon.”

Taking a deep breath, I smoothed the front of my gown. I’d found it on my very first shopping excursion with Lola, Nina, Mia, and Hana. As soon as I’d slipped into the silk halter top, with its open back and thick satin waistband, I’d known. The floor-length skirt skimmed my legs with plenty of movement but felt elegant—like fifties Hollywood glamour. There were no adornments to take away from the chic design, and I felt beautiful in the dress. My veil was a soft gauze with tiny seed pearls rimming the hem.

I’d been hesitant to bring it home, but Lennon had promised he wouldn’t peek, so I’d hung it in the guest room closet. He’d kept that promise, just as he’d kept all the others he made me. That realization always warmed me. Lennon Cruz was steady, consistent, and true. I’d needed him in my life and was so thankful he was here.

Lennon's mother, Lola, and the CATS had gifted me buttery-soft white leather cowboy boots embroidered with dogs and Calla lilies. Somehow, the pattern worked together, and I was utterly besotted with them. They were about to become my favorite footwear.

"Aren't you a picture," Lola said, smiling with soft maternal pride. She looked beautiful and healthy in her silvery teal gown we'd chosen that same day. She'd grown her hair back out in an adorable pixie cut. She placed her hands on my shoulders and kissed my cheek. "You ready?"

"Oh, yes. I am so ready to marry Lennon." I collected my bouquet. We were having a small ceremony of just family and Cruz's teammates, who really could have been called family as well. They guys were even closer now that they'd won the Stanley Cup again, and they were so supportive of Lennon, who had needed more than eight weeks to fully heal from his punctured lung.

He'd be able to suit up and practice as needed for next season, but Coach Whittaker and Lennon both understood that his role with the team had shifted. He was now the veteran who imparted knowledge and serenity, not the young go-getter the team would need moving forward into its next era.

I was so glad I'd met Lennon in time to see him play at the pinnacle of his career. But I was really excited about the work we were starting with the foundation. Camden Grace had footed all the startup costs and most of the salaried positions, meaning Lennon was able to focus on what he did best—reconnecting dogs to their handlers.

I'd enjoyed meeting Camden and was thrilled that he and his wife, Jenna, were here today to celebrate with us. Already I could tell we would likely become quite close—not just because of the work we did but because Jenna cracked me up. She had the craziest sayings that somehow really clarified a situation.

Now that Lola was healthy again, I'd started taking on some tasks for the foundation,

working with the veterans who needed extra care. The work was deeply fulfilling, and I rose each morning with a determination to make those courageous men's and women's lives better.

So far, I thought we were succeeding.

Lola cupped my shoulders. "You are just what he needs, querida. Thank you for taking my call."

My smile widened. "That was the best snap decision I've ever made."

Lola chuckled. "No, I think it was the second best. Your best one was falling for Lennon." She winked, then offered me her arm. "Let's get you married, shall we?"

My skirts and petticoat swished as Lola and I walked arm-in-arm out of the house and into the backyard. The big live oaks offered a lovely shade against the heat of the September evening. Dusk was settling into the sky, and pink clouds blossomed. Tiki torches lined the perimeter of the seating area to keep mosquitoes and other flying pests away. I shuddered, remembering the palmetto bug.

"What's that for?" Lola asked as we waited for the music to change—our cue to walk down the aisle. I'd eschewed attendants because I'd wanted this wedding to be about Lennon and me.

I told Lola the story of my first night in Houston, and she laughed so hard we missed our cue. The cellist came over and told us we needed to walk, but Lola was still guffawing as she led me down the aisle. I knew those photos of her, face alight with joy, were going to be some of my favorites of the day.

They were.

But none was as special as the mental photo I took of Lennon in his black tuxedo and

crisp white shirt as he looked at me that first second we rounded the corner and began walking down the linen cloth we'd set up as an aisle. The sheer wonder on his face made every moment of our months apart worthwhile.

His eyes were so filled with love and joy that I felt mine filling with tears. When Lola and I reached Lennon, he bent down and kissed her cheek, whispering something in her ear. Then he met my gaze as he took my hands. "I'm beyond ready for forever with you, Vivian Lee Cruz."

"I've known since you picked up my hat," I replied.

"I'll be here for you until my last breath," he said.

And those were the vows I'd remember until mine.

Camden Grace crooned into the microphone, his eyes on his pretty blond wife, Jenna, the whole time he sang about enduring love. She patted her baby bump, shyly having admitted she was having a second boy a little earlier.

"I told Cam we're not calling him Waylon, no matter how many beautiful songs he writes me. Now he's made it a thing." Jenna sighed, but her eyes flashed with delight. "He even sang me a song about how cute I looked when I woke up, which was the biggest, fattest lie ever since I was greener than the grass and nearly upchucked on his chest."

I giggled as I sipped my champagne. Lennon had asked to choose the menu and caterer, and I'd happily handed over the tasks to him. The sit-down meal had been delicious—and healthy enough for the players heading back into another season. Unlike my darling husband, I didn't have practice starting next week, so I could imbibe a couple of glasses of the expensive champagne he'd splurged on—and I intended to do so. I also planned to eat a huge piece of cake. I wanted to live up this moment because I was so happy.

“Are you going to give in?” I asked Jenna.

I noted all the CATS had moved closer to the stage. A little celeb crush on Cameron Grace was to be expected—the man was potent. But my gaze drifted to my sexy man. I was utterly delighted to have married Lennon.

“Now, we got one more surprise for the bride before we cut the cake and kick off this party,” Cam said. “And I just wanted to tell y’all that those donations for the K-Nine rescue program are going to great use. We got us four more matches this week.”

There were whoops and hollers as Cam stepped back.

“Pfft, no,” Jenna said, answering my question. “But I’ll give in on William or Nelson, so Cam’ll be happy.” She shot me a sly look. “He’s been practicing.”

I frowned, not understanding Jenna’s comment until I heard Lennon begin to sing. I gasped, my fingers coming to my lips as tears sprang to my eyes.

Jenna bumped my hip before wrapping her arm around my shoulder. “He’s got a fantastic voice. Like a huge, broody angel.”

I laughed as I cried, my gaze fixed on Lennon as he sang a beautiful love song.

Naomi and the other CATS surrounded me as Lennon sang, and they wolf-whistled and screamed when he finished.

Jenna grinned. “This is my kind of crowd.”

“We’re a loud but loving bunch,” I told her.

“Just as it should be.”

“Let’s dance,” Naomi hollered. “Adam, I need those delicious hips of yours pressed against mine.”

Adam grinned as he handed Stoll his beer. “Whatever my beautiful bride wants.”

The deejay picked an upbeat, fun song, and soon everyone was breathless and a little damp from exertion.

“Having fun?” Lennon asked.

I nodded as I rested my head against his pec. He’d shed his tuxedo jacket before the first dance. No, our wedding hadn’t been completely traditional, but it was raucous and fun, and I loved everything about it.

“I could use some water,” I said. “And maybe some more cake.”

Lennon chuckled. “Let’s get you set up.”

I had just offered Lennon a bite of cake when Zaila, a young intern who’d started with the Wildcatters organization last June, came up to us. She smiled brightly, but I thought her eyes were too shadowed for her to be truly happy.

“I wanted to wish you two all the best,” Zaila said. “And to thank you for the invitation.” She clasped my hand in both of hers. “It’s been a pleasure getting to know you all.”

That sounded like a formal goodbye, not just an exit from the wedding, which didn’t make sense to me. Her internship was supposed to be a full year.

From what Lennon had said, Zaila was whip smart. She tended to be quiet, observing the goings-on before stepping forward with suggestions. But what she did suggest had been implemented with great success on the social media channels.

“Thank you,” I said. “We hope you had fun.”

“Oh, I did. It’s so nice to see a couple in love, so willing to broadcast it to the world.”

Gunnar, who had sat next to Lennon with his own piece of cake, stiffened, his intense gaze lingering on the young woman’s face.

Oh . He liked her. I tried to remember how old he was—mid-forties, maybe? I wasn’t sure. At least twenty years older than Zaila.

The look of longing in his eyes that shuttered with the next blink told me he knew the age gap was too large. Pity. From what Lennon said, Gunnar hadn’t been linked with anyone romantically since he’d created the franchise.

I smiled at Zaila. “Lennon’s my person.”

Zaila laughed. “Nice callback to Grey’s Anatomy . I watched all the seasons during the pandemic.” She leaned in closer, her brown eyes sparkling. “McDreamy filled my dreams.” She cast a sly glance toward Gunnar. “But then, I have a thing for an older man. He’s mature. Knows what he wants.”

Oooh . This was getting interesting. Clearly Zaila was attracted to Gunnar. Would they act on it?

Naomi and Adam joined us, as did Maxim and Ida Jane. I loved all of them, but I was a bit disappointed as I watched Gunnar’s expression tighten and a mask fall into place.

I nibbled my cheek. Did I dare poke the bear? Something devilish tickled me—probably that second glass of champagne. I leaned closer to Zaila, which caused Naomi and Ida Jane to sidle forward. Human nature at work—no one wanted to miss a secret.

“You mean as opposed to the college students your age?” I asked, blinking innocently.

Zaila nodded.

“So those young men don’t do it for you?” Ida Jane asked. Her gaze slipped to Gunnar, and I saw the calculation in her eyes. She’d figured out there was something between them, too.

Oh, we’re on to you, Gunnar.

“Hmm... No. I like a man ,” Zaila said. “One who’s confident in himself and knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to go after it.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but before I could, Gunnar stood and stepped forward. He scowled down at Zaila, who stared back boldly. “This is neither the time nor the place, Zaila,” he said, his icy blue eyes narrowed to slits.

“I’m sure you’re right,” she said, looking away. “What do I know about relationships, anyway?”

I shared a glance with Ida Jane. We both bit back grins. Zaila was pushing Gunnar. To...what? Admit there was something between them?

“What. The. Fuck?” Naomi murmured.

Clearly she’d missed the sexual tension between Gunnar and Zaila, and she was worried about her—no doubt hearing the words of her abusive ex-boyfriend. She’d told me he tried to control her emotionally, and when that didn’t work, he resorted to violence.

I glanced at Ida Jane, who gave a slight shake of her head. Let it play out.

I shrugged. I took a sip of my third glass of champagne, enjoying this unexpected show.

Naomi shoved her glass at Adam and went to the young woman, gently placing a hand on her shoulder. She clasped her other hand around Zaila's and tugged her away from Gunnar.

"She doesn't need to talk to you," Gunnar said. Concern flashed in those icy eyes.

Adam stepped forward, likely reacting to his wife's growing anxiety. "Zaila gets to decide that."

I nodded, because she did. Zaila also nodded. This young woman was no wallflower. She appeared to be feisty as well as smart. Possibly just what Gunnar needed in his life.

Gunnar's eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. "You think I'd hurt her?"

"You just did," Lennon said, his hands fisting. "By telling her what to think or do."

I shot Ida Jane a panicked glance. This was our wedding, and Lennon thought his boss had just made the entire situation awkward at best, concerning at worst.

But Ida Jane was fully engrossed in the play-by-play. Great, she isn't going to be any help .

"Oh, he won't hurt me," Zaila said with breezy confidence before I could come up with a response to break the tension.

"For fuck's sake, I'd never hurt her," Gunnar said. He was somewhere between flabbergasted and offended.

“It’s true,” Zaila said. “He won’t hurt me. At least not physically.”

That had Adam, Maxim, and Cormac growling with adorable fierceness. They’d protect this woman they barely knew against a man who could disrupt their lives. I felt even more in love with Lennon in that moment, something I would never have believed possible.

Zaila looked at the guys, eyes wide. She offered them an impish smile and a faint shake of her head. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant he has broken my heart because he doesn’t want you to know we’ve secretly been dating and sleeping together for the past six weeks.” With that, Zaila turned back to Gunnar, who looked both shocked and annoyed.

Ida Jane and I shared a smile.

Bingo .

We stepped toward her, offering her our silent support. “So, now that I’ve spilled the tea and am no longer Gunnar’s dirty little secret, I’m going to go—before I totally ruin the vibe.” She met Gunnar’s gaze and offered him a sad smile. “Goodbye.”

She turned to me and squeezed my fingers. “Sorry, but not that sorry.” With a last smile at Naomi and Ida Jane, Zaila hurried off.

Gunnar seemed rooted to his spot, staring after her. When Lennon stepped forward, Gunnar held up a hand. “It’s none of your fucking business.”

Well . Naomi, Ida Jane, and I looked at each other with wide eyes.

The guys might have helped Lennon and me find our happy ever after, but the women now had our next matchmaking project. And it was already in full swing.

Yes!!! I'm writing a book 7 that gives you all the steamy details of Gunnar and Zaila's romance.