



Check My Body, Grump (Montreal Triumph Hockey)

Author: *Ariana St. Claire*

Category: Sport

Description: When your older, masked Halloween hook-up turns out to be your new stepdads oldest son whom youve never metand now, hes been traded to your home team. An age gap hockey grumpy/sunshine romance

Coleman Sanders was the veteran grumpy All-Star who knew exactly what he wanted. The first time he saw her, pink and purple hair, across the arena, he wanted her. And now, hes the newest member of the Montreal Triumph. In the same city where Eden is.

Eden

I have a stalker. Eyes on me. But for one night, I want to forget. And the Montreal Triumph Halloween Haunted House is the perfect place to forget all my real-world fears. Little did I know my whole world would change forever after he touched me.

Cole

Shes mine. From the first time I laid eyes on her, I knew she would change everything. From Seattle to Montreal, Id do anything for her. Make her dreams and fantasies come true. Even if the first time I touch her she wont know who I am

And now things will never be the same because Eden can never be mine. But Ill make sure no one hurts her. No matter what I have to do to protect her.

Check My Body, Grump is the first book in the all-new Montreal Triumph Hockey series. Montreal Triumph Hockey. Possessive. Obsession. MINE. These #hockeyboys dont always play by the rules.

Total Pages (Source): 20

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

Once upon a time, there lived a princess who loved the light and the dark.

Who dreamed in pinks and purples and blacks. Who wished the prince and the villain could be the same person. Because who better to see her light amongst the darkness than someone who mirrored the very things that scared others away?

The princess dreamed the kind of dreams that had her lips curling into a smile. She also had nightmares that tore soundless screams from her. And still, she waited for the one person who would understand, and never run away. Like her father did.

But the young princess soon learned that hiding her darkness meant she could pretend to be only light, so that people stayed. And as she grew up, it lingered in her. A constant companion that soothed her and scared her in equal measure. But still, she hid it away like a treasured secret. Until one day, she was all grown up.

A princess without a prince, who didn't need saving. A girl who still felt the darkness at every turn, but always fed the light.

She knew two wolves lived within her, and chose to feed one, while still refusing to let go of the other.

And whose darkness drew others to her, who watched from the shadows. Reveling in their own depths. Possessive and wanting her in ways no other had. In one case, like no one ever would after him.

The only question was, which wolf would win.

The little boy never wanted to be a hero. At least, not the kind of hero normal people thought of. Those heroes weren't real. Not in the way people needed. Because they only did things for the adoration of others. But he never worried about people loving him.

He didn't want to save a damsel in distress. No, those other 'heroes' had that covered.

He knew that one day, he would be the kind of hero that someone would need. And that someone would be his entire world. They wouldn't need rescuing. They might need protecting. Or they might need someone to remind them how strong they really are, flaws and imperfections and all the things that make them beautiful.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

EDEN

I'm watching you, Eden.

I balled up the note and tossed it in the trash can as soon as I walked in the door of Book Boyfriends and Lattes. The door locked turned with a loud click and I sucked in a deep breath now that I was alone. And safe. Two hours until Indra or Nia, the owner of Book Boyfriends and Lattes, would arrive with loud fanfare about whatever book they were binging last night.

My fingers trembled as I clicked the lock back to it's I'm going to keep all the crazy people out position.

I had a stalker. I tried to convince myself it was just my imagination. Foolishly. But texts and now handwritten notes were the cold bucket of ice water thrown over my head I only acknowledged when I was alone.

Even more foolish.

The really bad bury my head in the sand reaction to it all?

No one knew. Not Zoe, my BFF. Or Noah, by BFF because he was Zoe's BFF. Not even Nia or Indra, even though the notes had started showing up at the bookstore three weeks ago. It had been easy to ignore the texts for the past few months, even if I read everyone then deleted them right after. For my eyes only.

But these damn notes? Physical evidence. Thrown in the trash, without a second

thought. Until a few days ago when Nia caught me crumpling up the note I shoved neatly in between the door and the door frame when we arrived early to go over last minute signing event details.

I glossed it over, and quickly changed the subject. But, she studied my face for a few seconds before giving in to my blabbing.

Eyes that watch me from the shadows or places I refused to acknowledge. If I didn't say out loud, it wasn't true. If I threw away the notes, they no longer existed.

One of the many lies I told myself.

I stared down at the sketch on my iPad, and ignored the gnawing feeling creeping up the back of my neck as I reached for the steaming mug of chamomile tea I steeped far longer than the instructions said to.

Calm. All the calm. Theoretically, the tea bag could only steep so much magical herbal goodness, but the longer I steeped, the more in control I felt. And so, I drank my very strong herbal tincture with one hand and drew with the other.

"Wow, Eden!" Indra said, scaring the living daylight out of me.

"Indra! Can you tone the ninja down just a little?" Thankfully I hadn't spilled any tea, since I had the biggest Jack the Pumpkin King mug known to man.

But still, I could have.

And then it would have gotten on my iPad, which while a little waterproof, still meant the screen would've gotten all crazy. I breathed in, counting to four, refusing to give in to all the things that could have gone wrong and focused on what didn't.

She grimaced. “Sorry, I swear next time I will actually put on my shoes and click clack all along the hardwood floor and announce my arrival. Forgive me?”

Glaring playfully over the rim of my mug as I pretended to mull her apology over. I sighed, then grinned. “Just this one time, Indie.” She nudged me with her shoulder and pointed at the tablet. Her long dark blonde waves falling forward. Indra worked at Book Boyfriends and Lattes, buying and finding indie authors, ironically enough. She was a few years younger than me, but loved books as much as I did. Her cousin, Nia, opened the romance bookstore six months ago, and I joined as the social media and event coordinator a few weeks after. Because what girl didn’t love a book boyfriend and having access to thousands of them?

Especially one who never lets you down in real life. Or broke your heart.

“I love it.” She leaned over my shoulder and rested her chin on my shoulder. “The neon green. I’m not a haunted house girl, but this,” she tapped her finger on the iPad screen with a sigh, “makes me want to go. Is Beetlejui-”

“Indie! You can’t say his name.”

Her laugh filled the empty bookstore. “I’ll be sure not to say it again, then.” With a sigh, she walked over to the front door, and flipped the sign over. “Nia is going to be late. The girls were at dickhead’s last night and he couldn’t take them to school. Dude needs a wake up call. She’s too nice.” Nia and her soon to be ex shared custody of their daughters, and Indra had a less than glowing opinion of him. It was well deserved, given that he’d been screwing the girls’ nanny. In their house.

“At least he isn’t having the ‘nanny,” I finger quoted, “take them. But, agreed. Why do penises make men stupid?” I groaned, and took a sip of tea. Still hot. Ish. “I can stay for a little bit. My meeting with Lanie isn’t until after twelve.”

“I wonder if it’s their penis, or a lack of communication between both of their heads.” Indra waved her hand, then unlocked the door. “I’ll be fine. Prince Charming will be here any minute to rescue me and take me away from all this.” As she walked behind the barista counter, and poured a cup of coffee, checking the various bottles of syrups, and making sure the fridge was stocked. “And Nia said to remind you to call Delena Bennett to confirm her and that other author you love-”

I nearly squealed with delight. Two of my favorite authors had agreed to come to the signing at the bookstore in three months from now. And Nina entrusted me with all the details and planning while she navigated life as a newly single mother dealing with an obtuse ex-ish husband and her much younger nanny who was also his now live-in girlfriend. Delena Bennett was a coup, because she rarely did signings, but since she finally posted her face on her social media alongside her football player boyfriend, I took a chance and asked her to come. But the other author wrote my favorite MMF trilogy, and getting her to come had taken all the gushing and begging on my part.

“-and to not come in this weekend. Direct order.”

Most of my work was remote anyway, but there was something about the bookstore, with it’s coffee bar that only offered craft worthy lattes, the sitting area with a fireplace that flipped on with a switch but looked like it an old fashioned wood burning style, and the dark wood shelves that lined the walls that soothed my soul. The second floor lined the rim of the main area with a loft and was where the signing was going to be held. The storefront next door was empty, and by a twist of fate, the owner found a tenant that wanted to lease it after the event and was letting Book Boyfriends and Lattes rent the space for the event before the new tenant took it over and began construction.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose as that telltale tingle worked its way along my spine again.

Someone was watching me.

“Eden?”

A beam of sunlight peeked through the clouds outside, illuminating the front sidewalk in an eerie glow. But other than the usual morning foot traffic, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No one standing in the shadows or lingering on the sidewalk.

“Earth to Eden,” Indie repeated, waving her hand in front of my face. I blinked a few times, shrugging off the creepy watching you vibes, and forced a grin. “Sorry. Are you sure you don’t want me to stick around? Plenty of time to get to my meeting, and still have to finish my tea.” Cup in hand, I lifted it, as it magically appeared in the midst of my near panic attack.

Her long, dark hair fell in waves around her shoulders as she shook her head. “Nope.” The ‘p’ popped as she rounded the counter and rested an arm on the vintage cash register Nia insisted on using. It was cute, but most sales still were rung through the mobile device. Plastic or tap your phone. Nia took it all. And refused to get rid of the cash register because it had been in her grandma’s flower shop.

I loved it and threatened to cry my eyes out and force her at celery point (she hated celery) if she ever decided it needed to go.

“I know you came in early and probably did the inventory for the signing even though I told you I would, and ordered the damn peen cookies,” she held up her finger when I opened my mouth to protest, “and a million other things because I bet you stayed up watching Freddie or Beetle-”

“Don’t say it!”

She burst out in loud laughter. “It would serve you right if he showed up.” She shook her head as she teased, “I still don’t know how you resist the urge to grab Noah’s-”

I threw my hands over my ears. “Oh, God, no! I’d have to bleach my skin and go into a contamination chamber! Noah is my friend. Friennnnnnnd. He’s like a...a...” I wrinkled my nose. “OOH! A girlfriend. He’s like a really good girlfriend. Once you watch him squeal and cower when Freddy does the vein puppet thing, he loses all hotness points.”

Indie gasped. “Oh, no. He’s gorgeous. And he likes Tay. Those viral videos of him at karaoke?” She pretended to swoon, hand on her forehead.

I laughed and stuffed my iPad into my bag. “Fine, he’s cute. But, so not my type.”

“Who cares about type when you need to scratch the itch?” Indie wagged her eyebrows.

While I could admit Noah definitely had that golden retriever energy and looked the part of the hockey player suit walk in vibe, there was nothing there. Not even a tingle. Not even the urge to brush off an errant hair. “I do! You,” I slung my bag over my shoulder and waved a finger at her, “need to get laid. Or get a new vibrator.”

She sighed and propped her chin on her hand. “Ordered a new one yesterday. Express shipping applied. That should tell you a little something about my itch and scratch prospects. Self scratching only.” Her nose wrinkled as she gathered her hair and secured it in a messy bun with a hair tie from her wrist. “Now, shoo. Go do haunted house hockey things. And maybe just send me pics of any hot hockey boys to use as scratching inspiration if you run into any?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve only run into coaches and staff the three times I’ve been to Triumph Land. No hockey hotties. But, if I see them at Noah’s, texts will be sent.

Overtly. Though some of those guys would probably love the idea of a girl scratching. Besides the point. Tell Nia not to let asshole bring her down.” As I left, I sidestepped two women talking excitedly about getting the next book in a trilogy that I loved, and with a wave, stepped out into the sunshine.

And ignored the nagging feeling someone watched from a place I couldn’t see.

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COLE

Two weeks later...and three days before the Montreal Triumph Scares and Boo event

UNKNOWN: Ghost. Hockey. Daddies.

COLE: Who the fuck is this?

UNKNOWN: Sanders, I'm wounded. And considering you and Hunter are the first to be initiated into the #ghosthockeydaddies before the big reveal, I'd expected a touch more enthusiasm.

HUNTER: It's six fucking AM, LeCav.

Mystery solved. Hunter sent me a text the day he heard we'd be back playing together for the first time since our AHL days. I had a habit of never deleting a contact. My thumbs worked, adding the goalie, as I slowed my pace on my morning run. Five mile warm up before a workout at the training center later.

NOAH: Beauty sleep is important, Cowboy.

HUNTER: Goalies are so fucking weird.

NOAH: Bestie is running the sign up, J. I know everyone's trick or treat!

*NOAH changed the name of the chat to #GHOSTTHOCKEYDADDIES

COLE: Bestie?

It was a rhetorical question, but LeCavalier didn't need to know that. I knew it all. And Zoe was in the best friend circle with Eden.

Last season, I had a year ending injury right before the playoffs, but I still attended every damn game. Every fucking time I watched Oliver Sutton on my line, playing my position, it lit a fire under my ass to get back on the ice. But, my body needed fucking time to heal, so I tortured myself and traveled with the team and went to every damn game. Seattle might not have won the Cup in their first season as an expansion team, but no one had us getting that far.

Tunnel vision took over my life, determined to get back on the ice with Kas' line.

And then, in one second, one play in the playoffs while I watched from the owner's suite, my whole world changed. Oliver scored off an assist from Kas, and the arena exploded. The text from my father, who'd I'd been estranged from for more than eight years, threw me off kilter. But when I looked up and saw her, my being shifted. Bright pink and purple hair, eyes that drew me in, and a smile that fucked every thing I thought I knew up until then up.

From that one look, one second, I became obsessed. I searched every damn second of footage from the game, scrolled through hundreds of social media posts, hoping to catch a glimpse of pink and purple hair and green eyes. But every damn picture didn't show her face enough to figure out who she was.

I wouldn't call it obsession...yet. But, within a few weeks, I found out she was LeCavalier's best friend's best friend, and lived in Montreal. I called my agent, and within a few days, a trade had me heading north for the first time in my career. Second change in two years, but, fuck, this was the one I knew would be the last. More money, but the only perk I wanted was Eden. Can't exactly put a person as a

clause in your contract, though.

And I planned on changing Eden's last name to Sanders. She didn't realize it yet, but she was mine just as sure as I was hers.

Kas might still be a little pissed at me, but he'd get over it. Eventually. Our first game on opposite sides of the ice would be interesting. We'd played on the same teams for most of our careers.

NOAH: Jax, go get your damn jump rope and do that thing that makes all the girls swoon. If you need someone to film you, I'm available after my spa day with the girls.

HUNTER: WTAF?

NOAH: Ok, it's just a mani/pedi. But I like to pretend.

HUNTER: Zoe has to have some serious shit on you, LeCav.

COLE: How the hell did I get involved in this insanity?

NOAH: You'll grow to love it. And until you've had someone rub your feet or calves not because you're in pain but because you want to be pretty, you'll never understand.

HUNTER: ...

Sweat dripped down my face, so I used the hem of my shirt to wipe them away.

NOAH: Oh, Jaxie. Once you have a day out at mani and pedis with the girls, you'll see.

Here's my chance.

COLE: The girls?

NOAH: Z and Eden. Pink hair. Purple. The other not my woman in my life. Other than my sister. But she loves pedis more than manis.

COLE: Eden?

NOAH: Soph. Eden loves it, though the girl can't sit still the entire time. We alternate toes and tips.

HUNTER: HOW DID THIS BECOME MY MORNING?

My thoughts exactly. But, at least I was learning more about my future wife. And this whole Noah helping my girl get through getting her nails done outings were on their last leg. Or toes. Whatever. The more I could get of Noah, the better.

COLE: Don't knock it until you try it.

Did I ever have a fucking mani whatever? Nope. But soon enough, that will all change.

I was about to get Noah to spill more when my phone pinged.

MR. SUNDERS: Cole. Please. Just talk to me. We are so happy you're in town.

Leave. On. Read.

The first time my father contacted me in over eight years, I had been watching Oliver Sutton score that goal at the Revs/Boston game. And only seconds later had been

when I spotted Eden.

Guess who took priority?

Not the man who told me I'd never make it in the NHL. Among other things. Which was why we hadn't talked, much less texted this entire time. Fuck, I didn't even really know what my baby sister looked like beyond a few random photos even though I still sent a card to her for birthdays and holidays.

Unlike him, I didn't try to poison people and when she said she wanted to live with him. But it also meant not seeing Izzy since.

NOAH: You're the OG's. The other #ghosthockeydaddies might resist. I'll charm them. Don't worry. You guys are desperate to fit in. Just doing my duty. Check your emails. Laney sent everyone's HH info.

HUNTER: You've been bugging me all fucking summer. Poor Sanders doesn't know what he's getting into. And what the hell is HH?

NOAH: Ignore his attitude. He needs coffee. And alone time. #ghosthockeydaddies info *pumpkin emoji*

HUNTER: DUDE. Spilling secrets. Once. One fucking time I was in the damn shower when you texted twenty times. Shouldn't you be bugging Sutton?

NOAH: Time zone. He's in Carolina until tomorrow. And #hockeygoddess made me promise to let them have until tonight.

What the hell was LeCavalier on?

COLE: Lunch after practice LeCav?

HUNTER: What? I don't get love?

NOAH: Cole called dibs, dude.

COLE: Before anyone gets jealous, I'll catch you at practice.

The door barely made a sound as I opened it. Quiet permeated the space. A few boxes scattered here and there took up little to no space in the house. Candyce, my agent's assistant, helped me find my new place before the ink dried on my contract. About a thousand square feet more than my old place in Seattle, the master being most of the square footage.

My girl deserved to have a walk-in closet that would make Ariana Grande jealous.

Yeah, I listened to the song. Noah put it on the locker room playlist he obsessively made us listen to before skills practice.

I tossed my phone on the counter and ran a hand through my hair. The boxes were in every room because the furniture was supposed to be here a week ago, but there had been a mix up. With any luck, my driveway and the truck would have a fucking meet cute in the next day or so. The only place not needing unpacking was the kitchen. No one fucked with my kitchen. Or cooked in it except me. Some athletes had chefs or meals delivered en masse, but I knew what I liked and hated anyone else cooking or prepping for me.

Ten years in the league, and the one time I hired a chef the poor guy watched me cook more than he touched a damn knife. Probably his best payday. After a week, he tried to quit, but then I ended up investing in his restaurant, Haze, back in North Carolina when he wouldn't let me pay him out for his contract. Even convinced Kas and a racecar driver buddy of mine to invest, too.

Still wouldn't let Adrian in my kitchen, but I have let him cook for me at Haze.

I threw the ingredients for my post run shake in my blender, and opened my laptop to check my email. Sure enough, Laney's email about the haunted house and all the details as well as the link for tickets. I scanned it, took note of times and what expectations were, and then clicked on the ticket link.

And bought out the block Noah had let slip when Eden had planned on going through.

"If anyone deserves to be chased through a haunted house, it's Eden," Noah muttered over a mouthful of chicken that he followed with a huge glass of water. "She made me watch the damn movie with Keaton twice after Zoe told her she was designing one of the rooms this year. Twice. And," he wielded a damn sweet potato fry like a damn wand, "she's obsessed with Halloween. Which also means I am being forced into a Nightmare on Elm Street marathon during our first three day lull."

I pushed what was left of my salmon and brown rice around my plate pretending to only half listen when in reality, I had notes sorted and organized in my head. "You'll survive, LeCav."

He snorted with a glance behind him. "Maybe, but what if I can't sleep through the night after? Eden might be a little off her rocker, because I think she actually loves that shit. But then she watches How to Train Your Dragon. The third one. With the Night Lights and the Light Fury. And she cries at the-"

"Spoiler Alert, LeCav."

His eyes widened. "Who knew you had a soft spot for dragons and their Viking riders. Which one is your favorite? You can tell me. I thought I liked the damn two headed one, but there's something about Cloud Jumper- "

“Are you always on like a hundred fucking watt light bulb?”

The goalie nodded, wiping his hands before he picked up his phone. “And speak of the little devil,” he grinned as his eyes stayed on the screen, obviously reading whatever message pinged on his phone.

It took everything I had not to grab his phone and read whatever text had him grinning like a fucking idiot. But, I waited, pretending to be interested in whatever dumb ass sports show with talking heads who screamed more than they talked went on and on about how abysmal the Browns were doing this season, and how they should’ve stuck with Sebastian Lockwood. The new QB and his line weren’t meshing.

Might be they didn’t like the guy. He seemed like even more a dick than Lockwood had been when he played with Cleveland.

Okay, so I might not be interested, but the two guys screamed loud enough that anyone within earshot heard them. It didn’t keep my mind off Eden and whatever the hell she was texting Noah. The grin on his damn face wasn’t helping matters, either. The fact that I didn’t reach over and rip the damn phone out of his hands showed how much fucking restraint I was exercising.

I was just about to reach my limit, when he put the phone down. “Sorry, E thinks Zoe is hiding something other than her coffee addiction.”

Noah talked more than most women did. Not that I had been around too many in the past few years other than the few hours I spent making them scream my name.

That shit was over now. I was a one woman man.

“Maybe she has a boyfriend she doesn’t want you to scare away. ”

He waved a hand in my direction as the waitress set down the check, smiling at him like he was the tip she really wanted. But, Noah offered her a smile and snatched the check before I could even try to grab it. “If anyone scared anyone away, it would be Zoe. I’m like the friend you get in with to try to get the girl until you realize the girl can kick your ass. I got this.” Again, his phone pinged, but he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He swiped the screen, unlocking it, and read the message as he put his credit card on the small plastic tray with the check.

EDEN: I swear, if she’s lying to me, I’ll kick her ass. And then whoever she’s sneaking around with’s ass. Who lies about these things, Noah? Oh!! Nia and Indie are coming to the haunted house, too. Which means you’ll get a chance to tell Nia yourself that you’re doing the BOOK BOYFRIEND AUCTION. Love you!

“Book Boyfriend Auction?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Noah glanced up.

I held my hands up. “Sorry, all caps. Couldn’t miss it.”

“Don’t turn into a creeper on me, Sanders. You’re already in one chat. I need at least dinner and a karaoke night to let anyone be in two. Lunch doesn’t cut it. Three? We’re talking Netflix and not chill level. But I digress.”

No shit.

“The bookstore Eden does freelance event planning for is having a signing, and there’s a book boyfriend auction date for a night thing. I am #hockeyboy. It’s a fundraiser for a local domestic violence shelter and a few other local charities.” His eyes lit up, and instantly, I knew I was in deep shit. “They do need a few more high profile BFFs, and you are the hot new guy in town, and I’m not just saying that.” A few passersby fans stopped and asked for Noah’s autograph, and mine once they

realized the enigmatic goalie wasn't alone. Guy had the energy of a golden retriever mixed with a kid who stole his aunt's Monster.

A plan formed in my mind as Noah smiled for a selfie with the guys kids as his wife drooled over him. I smiled, did obligatory sports pose with the kids. After they left, I glanced at my watch. "It's been fun, LeCav, but my furniture might actually arrive tonight, but if I'm not there to let them in, it's another week watching Netflix on my phone."

His eyebrows shot to the sky. "Still? Why didn't you have your stuff shipped from Montreal?"

I shrugged, pretending to respond to a text from the delivery company, when I really was typing out notes about everything Noah had spilled about Eden. "Donated it." Didn't want Eden to have to touch anything another girl had. But that was all before I caught sight of her. "Either way, I had to have it delivered. Might as well support the local economy."

Noah nodded, though he gave me the kind of look that made me think he knew I was up to something that he couldn't quite figure out. "Catch you tomorrow at practice, Romeo."

I quirked a brow at the nickname. "Really?" I asked and scooped up my key from the table.

Noah popped another bite in his mouth and grinned. "It's better than 'Casanova' or asshole."

"Not by much," I muttered and left as he kept on stuffing his mouth and grinning at the same time.

Outside, rain fell at a steady pace, the streets already a mirrored reflection of the city and all its beauty. But I only had one thing on my mind as I headed to where my truck sat under a streetlight just around the corner.

Eden. And how soon she would be mine.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

EDEN

Careful walking home, Eden. You never know who might be watching...

The darkness beckoned like an old friend, chasing sleep away and any chance at a night of restful sleep. At night when the world closes in on me, the walls and air change from a comfort to a place that steals any sense of calm or serenity. As false as it usually is, the fake facade I wear is like an old friend. But now, it's all deserted me, and the unsettled feelings rise to the surface. When I don't know why my heart beats too loudly, my thoughts race, and yet I can't stop the dread and tears that lodge in my throat.

My thoughts turn my reality upside down, and I want to hide. The shadows take over and I just...cry. But, I get up, climb out of bed. Shower. Fake it til I make it. Smile until it feels less like an act or a mask. Plan. Make lists. Add mundane things to get that serotonin hit that chased, at least a little, those moments away. The world isn't sunshine and rainbows. Logically, I knew that. The moments don't always listen to logic.

The note left for me didn't help keep the intrusive thoughts at bay.

I tossed and turned, the quiet of the townhouse I shared with Zoe louder than any party or event hosted by the social circle my mother once favored growing up. But ever since she remarried a while ago, she and her new husband spent more time trying to be a family with his daughter and me than throwing parties. With her new marriage came more money, but, thankfully, she didn't care.

Money didn't chase away demons. No matter how much of it you throw at them.

Even at a young age, I knew I was different. That the other little girls playing with pink dolls and wearing princess dresses weren't like me. That the dragons and princes who slayed them weren't the stories I told myself when I went to bed. The dragons were the ones I wanted to save, to keep and hide away with. Princes and knights in shining armor held no appeal for me.

I'd always felt bad for the big, bad wolf. A forest at night felt more like home to me. The moon fascinating in a way the sun had never been.

Dark thoughts and my demons. I never wanted to hurt myself. But, there were times I'd stayed in my room, alone with my thoughts and sat in the dark with them far too often for my mother's comfort.

I'd become an expert at hiding them away even making friends with them over the years. And no amount of therapy or 'talking' had chased them away.

Maybe I didn't want them gone, anymore than a normal person wanted to be comforted by the feel of the sun on their skin. I mean I loved the beach, but watching the sunset over the sand as the waves crashed was more beautiful than watching it rise. The darkness didn't hide things. It let them out without fear of being taken away.

The moon remained a bright beacon in the night sky outside my window, and I stared as my eyes blurred. Until finally, I drifted into a dreamless sleep.

"Maybe you should've just spilled about your summer hook up and not lied to me, Zoe." I placed my hands on my hips and glared at my best friend. Well, one of them at least.

"And maybe you should tell me what's really wrong and stop deflecting, Eden." Zoe

crossed her arms over her chest and returned my withering stare.

Locked in a silent battle of wills, neither backing down. Our phones pinged with a notification, but if we had one thing in common, it was the stubborn streak that ran to the point of ridiculousness.

When the sound filled the air again from both of our phones, Zoe gave in. Her eyes scanned the chat as I pumped my fist and swept my freshly dyed locks over my shoulder. “I win! But. You shouldn't keep secrets from me. I always find out.”

“That’s cause you snoop. And I’m not sure if Noah is sober or drunk but he’s asking if we want to do a movie night before or after the haunted house.”

I grabbed my phone and unlocked the screen.

NOAH: Scary movie night means B&J, right?

OLIVER: Why are you asking about blow jobs and WHY AM I INCLUDED?

NOAH: BEN & JERRY’S CYCLONE. Mind out of the gutter.

Zoe snickered as she typed out a response.

ZOE: How about B&J while getting a blow job?

She pointed at me.

Oh, game one. Teasing Ollie had become our favorite past time ever since he started seeing #hockeygoddess last season. Or more accurately, the former Team USA Hockey player turned scout/new head of player development for the Seattle Revenge. It was just too easy.

EDEN: Toss up. B&J is too good to let melt, and I'm not letting any man enjoy my Chunky Monkey while his dick is in my mouth.

OLIVER: You hate Chunky Monkey, and WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT BLOW JOBS?

NOAH: You started it.

OLIVER: I hate you.

NOAH: I'm wounded.

OLIVER: You are not. You're probably over caffeinated and bored and thought you'd pop in the chat and try to mess with my Corey time.

ZOE: Oo

h! Give #hockeygoddess the phone! I need to know. B&J or Blow Job?

Oliver: No. I'm muting you.

EDEN: I got it. B&J before and after Blow Job.

OLIVER: WHY ARE YOU CAPITALIZING IT?

We dissolved into a fit of giggles.

OLIVER: And I'd never take B&J away to get a Blow Job. That's just cruel.

NOAH: A true gentleman. Corey taught you well.

OLIVER:...

NOAH: Kidding. But seriously. I'm buying after the haunted house, and I'd rather stock up now because if I don't I'll forget and there's no way I'm hitting up the freezer section all Keatoned out.

EDEN: Yes. All the B&J's please.

ZOE: Told you she needed to get laid.

EDEN: I'm right next to you.

ZOE: And I'd say it to your face. In fact I will.

"You need to get laid."

I stuck my tongue out at her. And raised my brows. "Wait, are you getting laid?"

My overly confident and sassy bestie waved me off, and retorted, "Do not deflect. Battery operated is a great men-are-annoying substitute, but nothing beats getting tied and spanked or whatever your little heart desires." In the background, our Keurig made a frothing sound that signaled her morning caffeine was done. She switched out the mugs, avoiding eye contact.

"You know you can tell me anything, right?"

She scoffed, adding sugar cookie creamer to her coffee, then slapping the lid on before turning back to me. "Have you ever known me not to?"

I studied my best friend, and noted the way she shifted just slightly. "When you're ready, Zoe. But, I have to run a few errands and meet with the rental company and the

caterer. Damn cupcakes are being very feisty.”

With a grin, Zoe passed me my coffee, then flipped her long brown hair over her shoulder. “Sounds like more fun than checking on the tape situation for Noah and walking a haunted house with the lights. How’s that fun?”

I snorted, coffee in one hand, and my bright pink, to match my hair of course, bag in the other. “Noah and his tape kink.”

NOAH: Are you two having a conversation and ignoring Ollie and me?

ZOE: Be nice or no tape pics.

NOAH: . Fine.

ZOE: Good hockey boy.

NOAH: That’s good #ghosthockeydaddy

The heels of my boots click clacked to the doorway and I rolled my eyes.

Ghost hockey daddy, indeed. If only...

“Call you later. Love!”

I shoved the letter I found last night, tucked into the door jamb further into my pocket and willed myself to forget its existence. Lies were easier to believe in the light of day.

The last note had been under the wiper of my car. Each one a silent reminder that there was nowhere I could hide. DMs from random social media accounts happened

more often than not, and I accepted the fact that people had issues with boundaries. They were easy to dismiss, block, or delete. Fall in Montreal hit different than in Chicago where I grew up until mom met husband number two. I absolutely adored Randall but we weren't as close as my mom wished we were. My stepsister was eight when our parents married and moved to Montreal and spoke better french than I did. To be fair, I knew a handful of terms and knew enough to get by if needed, but Izzy could have an entire conversation in and sounded very French Canadian.

And somewhere, I had a stepbrother I never met because he and Randall had been estranged for years. Uncomfortable family subjects were also a specialty in my family, and my new stepdad continued the tradition. At a very young age, I learned that my fascination for watching the moon or sneaking out of my room late at night or the way I felt bad when someone killed a spider in the house shouldn't be spoken about. That sneaking out to sit in the rain or wishing for the dragon instead of the unicorn stuffy was frowned upon. When I learned to play the violin and loved the melancholy instead of the love songs my mother looked at me strangely and thought I needed therapy.

Thank God my therapist disagreed with her concerns over my very non princess little girl tendencies.

But from that point on, I kept it all to myself. You see, hiding things and showing only what people expect to see became my favorite coping mechanism. So, stalker hidden. If you pretend something long enough, believing it's true isn't a stretch.

Until you're alone at night, staring at the moon.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

COLE

NOAH: #GHOSTHOCKEYDADDIES unite!

HUNTER: That's not a thing.

I snorted. Like a puppy who didn't know how to give up when you tried to get it to stop jumping up on you, the goalie was growing on me. Text chat, on the other hand?

Not my favorite thing.

NOAH: You can make anything a thing, FLYBOY.

HUNTER: Nope.

NOAH: Iceman

HUNTER: Max Vaughn has claim on that one.

COLE: Are you trying to give Hunter a nickname?

NOAH: Add to the conversation, Romeo, or stay out of it.

HUNTER: Theo should be Romeo with his damn romance book crap.

NOAH: Nah, Romeo fits. Or it will.

COLE: What the fuck does that mean?

NOAH: I have a second sense about these things.

HUNTER: It's sixth sense, LeCav.

NOAH: OH! EINSTEIN.

COLE: Nope.

HUNTER: DUDE.

NOAH: Daddy?

COLE: From what I've heard, that's also Theo.

NOAH: HOCKEY DADDY? Shit, the #booksta world loves a single dad trope!

HUNTER: Are you speaking english? Or is this some crazy French Canadian thing?

NOAH: We could go French, but Cole just got here. Let him flounder a little longer before we clue him in on the learn another language thing.

COLE: I'm out. See you at practice.

NOAH: Seriously, do you guys need a ride to get to the creepy trailer?

COLE: THE WHAT?

HUNTER: He means where we're getting our spooky on for the haunted house. English, LeCav. Not Noah speak.

There was no fucking way I'd miss a second of watching Eden arrive or leave. No #ghosthockeydaddies carpool for Romeo.

Shit. Did I just use Noah's nicknames? Definitely losing my shit.

COLE: Meet you there. I have something to take care of before.

I shoved my phone in the pocket of my track pants and grabbed the keys from the hook next to the door and did a quick scan of my place. The new furniture arrived the night Noah spilled about Eden to me over lunch after practice, and the once empty open floor plan living area had a sectional couch positioned in front of the flat screen mount on the wall but still took advantage of the floor to ceiling windows and the view that cost me more than my place back in Seattle. The fuzzy blankets and marshmallow Yankee candles were supposed to be delivered tomorrow. Yet another detail, beyond the Junior Mint addiction, Noah spilled about Eden.

My phone pinged, and instead of Noah's face popping up, the one person I'd been avoiding for over eight years invaded my world.

My father. I ignored it for a few moments, texting the barista at the cafe just around the corner that Eden frequented, making sure she had her favorite pink drink ready to go the moment Eden walked through the door.

Strawberry pink dragon fruit lemonade. Minimal ice. Fuck, just picturing her lips wrapped around the straw had my dick ready to fuck drop the puck. Center ice. Fucking face off.

Thumbs up received with a smiley face. My tip on top of the standing order also included keeping who ordered it for her a secret.

I ignored the other text. The fifth one since the game, and I still wasn't in the mood

for fake apologies or mending fences bullshit. Fuck that. We might be in the same city, but he's never been to even one of my games, even when I played in the pee wee leagues. And when I played in college? He was more concerned about the damn Dean's List.

And then it happened, and we haven't talked since then.

Clad in my team rain-proof coat, I headed out to the garage and hit my key fob, lights flashing in the fluorescent lighting. I tipped my chin at the guy who lived below me with his partner. Thank fuck he seemed to be the kind of guy to keep to himself. Not that I ever ignored the guy, but we exchanged a nod here and there. The light rain fell as the blades swished back and forth in a rhythmic pattern. Cars passed by in a blur as I mentally went over my schedule for the next few days. Skills practice, conditioning, a few late night errands, playlist for the haunted house, morning skate, and the media insanity Laney texted me about earlier this morning to help hype up the Halloween event.

Fingers drummed an impatient rhythm on the steering wheel as I waited at a red light just around the corner from her house. One quick stop, and then I could breathe a little easier. This insane need for Eden had me doing fucking things I'd normally never even dream of. The light turned green, and the car behind me honked. I waved my hand, and made the turn toward where Eden and Zoe lived. Which just so happened to be a few doors down from Noah.

After making sure no one was around that might notice, I parked and pulled the small folded piece of paper from my pocket and climbed out.

And left a little something to let Eden know I was watching out for her.

As I drove past the cafe, I caught a glimpse of bright pink hair through the front window, and fuck if I didn't love the satisfaction of seeing my girl holding the drink I

had ready for her.

Eden would be mine. After this weekend, there was no doubt in my mind.

I had a plan. And nothing would stand in my way.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

EDEN

Don't ever be afraid to be yourself. It's a beautiful thing...

My fingers traced over the words on the plain piece of paper tucked under the silly statue Noah gave Zoe this summer after we all went to an art festival. Out of the rain, tucked under the awning by the front door. A constant reminder of the good things in life. The friends that were family, the life I made despite the moments of darkness that threatened to invade my mind. I almost passed it by, but then a tingle at the base of my neck hit me, and I glanced down and saw it.

Just a simple piece of paper.

Nothing like walking out your front door day and finding another handwritten note.

Something about this one felt different. Up and down the street, the same people and places I saw every morning, every night when I came home. But there was something in the air. Almost comforting and not at all like the anxiety that usually raced up my spine when I thought I was being watched.

Fine. Knew. I unfolded it, read it a few times. Was the handwriting different? Were the words more comfort than warning? My hand shook as I reread it, over and over. Calmness like a warm blanket settled over me.

Then it shattered.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Don't be late, Eden.

A trickle of sweat traced its way down my spine. Uneasiness grew in my belly as my fingers swiped the message, the screen reflecting the morning sun. But, then I remembered the other note I found this morning. Still steadfast between my fingertips and a sense of calm belied the earlier feeling that threatened to drown me. Deep breaths.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

If I ignored it, it doesn't exist. And if it doesn't exist, then I can breathe.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

The familiar mantra I'd repeated to myself whenever the darkness threatened didn't keep the threat away, but it gave me a sense of control over something. Enough that I could keep going, and not let the panic paralyze me.

Rain threw my usual walk to work routine, I parked and ran into the cafe to get my morning pick me up because as much as this girl loved her coffee, my pink happiness drink of choice had been on my mind even before the craziness brought on by this

morning's messages.

I waved at Trina, the barista/drink maven, then scanned the menu, full well knowing I wouldn't stray from my usual order. But, I liked to pretend I wasn't so predictable every now and then. The person in front of me ordered just as my phone vibrated.

MOM: Dinner week after next work for you sweetheart?

My stomach sank, not because I didn't want to see my mom and Randall or even Izzy, but because I would have to put on a smile and pretend I hadn't wanted to spend the weekend watching really bad movies with Noah and Zoe before the hockey season kicked in. Pre-season was bad enough, but once the puck dropped, Noah would blow up our phones more than our movie nights. Nothing made me laugh more than watching the goalie squealing like a little girl at Freddy or singing along to the Descendants while we ate pizza and gorged on Junior Mints. Even if Zoe sang so off key I swore dogs in our neighborhood were even ashamed to hear her.

Family dinner meant Mom casting worried glances my way even though I hadn't had what she called episodes for years. At least, not in her presence. I wished she understood that they weren't dark in the way that meant I would harm myself. That I liked the night sky and all its secrets. That sometimes being sad meant I felt more alive, or that it was ok to not want the shiny things or the fairy tale.

At least my step sister loved watching scary movies with me or going to haunted house tours even when it wasn't Halloween .

I stepped up to the counter, about to type out a response, when Trina slid my drink across the counter.

“Already taken care of.”

“That’s the second time this week. At least let me pay for the person behind me and keep it going.”

She shook her head, the cute chin length blonde wisps flying about. “Someone felt extra generous, and this whole hour is covered. But,” she leaned forward and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “I’m pretty sure you’ll do something to pay it forward, Eden. Take the gift, and enjoy the day. Barista’s order.”

I thanked her, and left a ten in the tip jar before snatching a straw. The sweet and sour hit my tongue, and I felt all the silly worries from the morning run and hide. Maybe this stalker thing wasn’t a big deal. Ignore and forget.

Yep. Sounded perfect.

“We have a situation,” Nia sighed as I entered Book Boyfriends and Lattes, sipping coffee while seated on the counter, legs crossed, and looking way too adorable for a newly single mom of two little girls.

Dread filled me, imagining every worst case scenario. The store next door rented, or Delena Bennett canceling or the hot hockey players Noah had been tasked to convince to join our Book Boyfriend Auction all turned him down.

Or the art we ordered was too NSFW to get printed.

“One of the authors evidently has been sliding into DMs and exhibiting mean girl energy.” She slid off the counter. “And I have screenshots of not one but three chats with different authors accusing other authors of stealing her ideas or making fun of-”

I held up a hand. “Say no more. Mean Girls not admitted. ”

Nia shook her head. “At least it’s an easy choice. She wasn’t even on my wish list,

but someone thought her books were cute and sent me her info.” She shuddered. “The little rodent thing made me throw up in my mouth. Unless we’re talking daddy you know who, that nickname is reserved. Bad nicknames and a mean girl in chats? Nope.”

I bit my lip. “What if we have that MM author come? The one with the really cute book boxes?” I added hopefully. “He’s a sweetheart. And I bet he’d bring the model from-”

“Yes. Do it. Ask.”

Maybe organizing these things wasn’t what I originally wanted to do, but it had quickly become something I wanted to keep on doing. And coordinating with the Triumph between the Haunted House fundraiser and the Book Boyfriend auction meant more doors being opened. More event planning. But, it wasn’t all I wanted to do.

I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do anymore. I loved planning the signing for Book Boyfriends, but I also loved designing the room at the haunted house fundraiser. I also loved just doing nothing some days.

Fuck. Maybe this stalker thing was getting to me more than I thought.

Nia touched my shoulder and I tried not to jump. I blinked. “Sorry, got lost in my thoughts. How are the girls doing?”

She set down her cup and crossed her arms over her chest. “Nice deflection, Eden.” She wagged her french tipped fingers at me. “Mom’s intuition. Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth and shut it. I wasn’t okay. I knew it, and Nia knew it, even if she didn’t know why. I settled on a half truth. “My mom texted about dinner next week,

and I kind of wanted to spend the last weekend before the season started doing silly things with Noah and Zoe. Telling my mom no is not an option, because she keeps hinting about some big news.” I rolled my eyes, recalling our last phone conversation about how things were coming together for our ‘family’ at last. Thank God for sugary sweet drinks that made your day better. “And I have a feeling Zoe is hiding something from me other than the whole Brett thing, but I don’t want to pressure her. Then this author thing,” I waved my free hand and set down my drink with the other. “I hate mean girl vibes.”

“First, do dinner. Your mom misses you. Because ‘mom intuition’. Second, Noah will still be around for you and Zoe to torture on movie nights. Have you asked Zoe point blank?”

“Yep, and she changed the subject, which is so unlike her!”

She shrugged. “Ask again. She might be working through her feelings. Do you remember how long it took me to admit how freaked out I was once I realized I was going to be a single parent? And not to mention how I still hover over the girls because their dad is an asshole who couldn’t keep his dick in his pants and decided the nanny was an acceptable place instead, and didn’t notice his daughter almost fucking drowning?” The smile on her face didn’t quite reach her brown eyes. “She might be processing whatever. Try again. And there are mean girls all over the damn place but we do not have to let them in our space. Fuck that. See? All good.”

A smile teased at my lips, because if there was one thing I learned about Nia was that she loved checking things off a list almost more than finding a morally gray book boyfriend or making cookies with her girls. “Fine.”

“And that’s it? ”

“What? That’s not enough?” I let out a laugh, and hoped she’d drop the subject. Not

that I didn't appreciate her and the insight she was trying to inject, but the whole don't-think-about-it and it-won't-exist-it-goes-away-if-you-think-about-it. "Wait! You are still coming to the haunted house after the girls hit up the kiddo area, right?"

"You bet your sweet ass she is."

"Indie," Nia moaned.

"What? Eden has a great ass. I'm jelly and happy for her at the same time. And I picked up your costume." She handed over a bag with white feathers peeking out of it to Nia, then turned to me. "Asshole will not be picking up the girls, so there is zero chance of no fun being had, and I have handcuffs if need be. You have two weeks to get used to the idea. And make a waxing appointment."

"Handcuffs? And what the hell is this supposed to be?" she asked, pulling out a skimpy white and gold ball of fabric.

"I'm going to handcuff you to the first hot creepily dressed dude I see if you try to leave after Aunt Carla picks up the girls from the kiddo friendly section. And that's your costume, silly. And wax."

"There will be no waxing." She held it up again. "Where's the rest of it?"

Indie placed her hands on her hips. "You will want a smooth kitty, trust me. There's wings."

"Indra, I swear."

The two cousins locked in a stare off. I sipped my drink, grateful to be out of the hot seat and wishing I had popcorn. Or Junior Mints.

“Swear that your kitty is lonely and in need of a little Vitamin D?”

“Indie!! ”

Indra threw her hands up, looking far too cute in her cropped top and athleisure pants. Yep, my ass was definitely bigger and couldn't pull that look off. Or...maybe I could...I made a mental note to do a little online shopping later.

“When was the divorce final?”

Nia glared at her. “Last week.”

I nearly spit out my drink. It had only been six months since the incident. “Wow, that's fast.”

“Good thing I listened to my mom and never put his name on anything but the house. And even then, fucking the nanny and almost letting your child drown looks pretty bad in a divorce case.”

“And when was the last time you got laid.” This time, Indie looked back and forth between the two of us.

I put my hand up. “Woah, there, tiger, don't bring me into this battle. I'm very content with my book boyfriend and anything I order online. And handcuffing her to a hot hockey player might not be the best scenario.” The last one elicited a snort from the younger woman. “Even if it's pre-season, they get kinda aggressive. Plus masks. How will you know if he's hot?”

“Because I helped you figure out which buzzing boyfriend was the best model based on personal experience, and sent you,” she whipped her head toward Nia, “your very own buzzing boyfriend without all the complications.”

“And I don’t need anymore.”

“A good deep fucking and a screaming ‘O’ is not a complication, Nia. I said get laid, not find a new husband for fuck’s sake!”

“INDIE!”

“The doors aren’t open yet.”

A voice from down one of the cubbies where monster romance laid claim said, “I don’t think you locked the door after yourself, dear. And I say get laid and wear the sexy costume.” A silver haired lady and her companion came out from behind the bookshelves holding a stack of books. “And do you have the new Delena Bennett book? She’s my favorite!”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

EDEN

The night of the Triumph Haunted House fundraiser...

Prickles of recognition, impossible as it may seem, skittered down my spine. As I walked away from Zoe, who was going back to help with whatever she needed to do, someone brushed along my side, but when I turned there was no one there. A caress I'd been missing for so long. A phantom limb. Yet I had everything I'd ever thought I'd needed.

Hadn't I? The ache in my chest returned.

The smoke filled the dimly lit room as I entered, flashing lights reflecting off distorted mirrors and ghoulish facades. Each room had a different theme, yet only one person greeted me on the main floor.

Noah, in his Beetlej-um, Keatonesque glory, had me grinning when he suddenly appeared from behind a black column in the monochrome room just before the stairs that led up to the second floor.

"Hey, there little lady," Noah said, with an appropriately smarmy smirk on his face. On anyone else, it would be, and the makeup helped, but it was all Noah, his sparkling brown eyes shining with humor and so much heart. I giggled, because he'd even added a padded belly to authenticate the look. "Want to help me shrink some heads?"

I snorted as he wiggled his eyebrows, the noise faint under the spooky noises playing

from hidden speakers. Hands on my hips, I glared at him the best I could in my bunny mask. “You know he wasn’t the one doing the head shrinking, right?”

“Of course,” he scoffed. “I was trying to keep away anything that might shrink any,” he wagged his brows. “heads around here.”

“Noah!”

“Hey! No names! It’s Beetle-”

“Don’t say it!” I gasped, dissolving into giggles, but my eyes strayed to the stairs. The feeling washed over me once again. Not looking back as he started singing about bananas and dancing, I called over my shoulder, “I’m going to find my...room.”

“Have fun, E.”

The first rung of the ladder, or stairs, sent tremors of fear and anticipation down my spine. The kind of fear where you knew you’d be scared, but somehow safe, at the same time.

Each step up the stairs brought me closer to something unknown and spectacular. Life changing.

I just didn’t know how much.

My eyes widened as he stepped out of the shadows. I let out a shriek of delight and, if I was honest, terror. The tingling in my hand from where a stranger had passed me returned, my heart pounded, and words failed me.

“Want to play a little game?” A voice growled behind me, sexy and smoky. My toes curled and my heart thudded in my chest. “Eden?”

When the mystery man said my name, every nerve in my body shot to life, and I stuttered, “H-how do you know my name?”

The masked hockey player shrugged, a sensual move that drew my eyes to the impressive abs visible between the unzipped black hoodie. Then lower to his pants, and back up because I couldn’t fathom how that poor zipper stayed in together.

“Maybe I’ve been watching you. Waiting for you.”

Holy hell, I was turned on and terrified to admit it to myself, yet I had never felt safer in another person’s presence. “Waiting? To do what?”

“Whatever,” He talked toward me, and I had to tilt my head back to look at him he was so tall, “you want. What. I. Want. Have you ever been chased, Eden? By someone who wants you? Someone you’ve never met, but has watched you?”

I shook my head. “No.” Fuck, was I all alone with...him? Where were the other people? “Do you...want to chase me?”

“Fuck. Yes. And,” he said closing the distance and bending so his breath tickled my neck. I shivered, nearly panting at his nearness, the warmth of his breath on my overstimulated body. “Once I catch you, Bunny, I’m never letting you go.”

“C-catch me?” He moved slowly with a predator’s grace, looking into my eyes with a strange sincerity that belied our cat and mouse situation. “If you don’t want this, Bunny, tell me now, and I’ll walk away. But, if you say yes, know what’s going to happen once I catch you. Maybe even against one of the windows or over the casket in one of the rooms. ”

I licked my lips and whispered, “Yes.”

“That’s my good girl. One last chance.”

“Yes.” I repeated the word.

One hand up my neck, collaring me, and he growled, “Run, little bunny,”

He released me and panic set in, then I smiled as I spun and ran in the direction I had come. Exhilarated and so turned on that every nerve fired with an electric jolt.

Each breath I drew felt like my lungs were on fire. The click-clack of my heels along the hardwood floor thundered in my ears even as it was drowned out by the music that started playing through the speakers right before I found...him. The beats driven and erotic. Spooky and sexy.

His face was half covered by a white and black mask, the bottom half covered in pale white, lips traced in black.

My eyes darted down to his hands as he started toward me as I rounded the corner, caught by a blurred tattoo on the top of his palm. My heart thudded louder and faster as he advanced faster than I could move. My skin tingled, my knees trembled, thighs clenched.

Not out of fear...but desire?

Holy hell. Birds. Swallows? Two birds tattooed on his right hand, delicate and fierce. And God, the way the veins in his hands had me wanting to lick him, suck his thick fingers and lick him...in other places.

OMG.

Was I fantasizing about some random stranger chasing me in a haunted house

wearing a mask? I needed to stop reading stalker romances. Or not.

“Keep running, Eden.”

I ran, but his voice, followed, quick on my heels.

“Keep running, Eden. But you won’t get away. ”

I gasped, darting around the corner, just as he gained on me.

I looped back to the main room but he darted out and caught me by the wrist. I twisted, breaking free and ran.

To the room I had designed. My fantasy.

I darted through the next door, but I didn’t gain any ground. I ran to the coffin with the ghostly bride holding a bouquet of dead black roses. Holy hell, I wanted him to catch me but I didn’t stop running. A fine coat of sweat broke out on my body.

A squeal as he neared again, frantically searching for a way out.

“Tsk, tsk, Bunny.” He leaned one arm on the door frame as I searched for a place to escape, and found none. A sexy and menacing sight. The music poured out of the speakers, the relentless driving beat like a metronome to my core.

Closer and closer, he trapped me with my back against the wall. “Looks like I’ve caught you, Bunny.”

His body was sin and beautiful, from his bird tattoo to his sculpted abs. The room spun around us, disappearing until only need and want remained

“One final chance.”

He locked one hand above my head, and I was lost in sensation, of the scent of his skin, the music, his touch. His breath mingled with mine, exchanging precious oxygen until I nearly drowned in him.

A knee nudged my legs apart and I whimpered, not caring how wanton it sounded. Binding my hands with a silk scarf.

“Yes,” I pleaded, not caring if I sounded desperate.

His mouth claimed mine, taking and taking, teeth scraping, biting until my panties were soaked through.

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m never letting you go. ”

One hand reached beneath my skirt, and tore my panties, wet with my arousal, from my body. I watched as he smelled them, then stuffed them in the back pocket of his pants. He thrust his thick fingers into my wet pussy., and I moaned ,unable to stop myself.

“You loved being chased by me.”

I nodded, mindlessly grinding on his hand, desperate to come. A writhing, mindless thing that needed his touch.

“My bunny wanted to get caught because you wanted this? You’re so fucking wet for me, aren’t you? That’s it, Eden. Ride my fingers. Come all over them. I need to taste you.”

My orgasm tore through me as I came, noises and sounds tore from me over the

music that still played. Over and over, until my body finally let go.

“I’m going to fuck you now, because you’re mine. Understood?”

Unable to stop myself because I needed this, needed him, I freed his cock clumsily. He rolled on a condom, and I watched, fascinated.

One thrust, and he was inside my body, taking. Fucking me until I couldn’t breath, legs locked around his waist. “Choke my cock like a good little bunny.”

We rode the frantic wave together, grunting and writhing, coming until our bodies were spent.

“Shh. No regrets. No shame. Two fucking adults. And I’ll find you again, Eden. You’re mine.”

He cleaned me with the scarf he had bound my hands with, and I nodded. “No regrets,”

“Go find your friend. I’ll see you soon, Bunny.”

One week later...

“Wait,” Zoe’s eyes widened as her jaw dropped. She reached for the bottle of wine on the counter as I grabbed two glasses and set them down in front of her. “ You got freaky in the damn haunted house and didn’t tell me?”

I flinched as her voice hit a note that dogs could hear. “And you’ve been keeping secrets from me and Noah all summer, so don’t give me all that outrage and innocence wrapped in a Zoe package.”

“I told you about Brett.”

“But you told Noah about you banging his big brother during practice. On the ice. Or did Brett? The details are fuzzy.”

The wine nearly sloshed over the rim as she filled both glasses and handed one to me. Using it like a finger, she pointed at me. “Stop changing the subject. Did you even look at his face? I mean, was it one of the boys that hangs out at Noah’s place?”

I tipped the glass back, nearly draining all the contents. Then set the glass down with a silent prayer that the wine would hit me sooner rather than later. But one glass was my limit tonight. Because it was family dinner night. Nothing like a little pregame action. “I don’t think it was any of the guys we know.”

Zoe tapped her finger on her chin. “Then that means new guy on the ice.” She ticked the players off her, finger by finger. “Theo Gerard. Walker Miles. But if you banged my brother I’m out. There are some things I don’t need to know. Or maybe Coleman Sanders? He used to play with Seattle. I bet Ollie can get the dish on him.”

“At least it wasn’t Shaw,” I shuddered. “I know Noah’s other brother likes him, but the guy gives me the creeps. Plus he treated you like shit.” Zoe had dated the player but he had wanted to keep it a secret...because it was special. More like his dick wouldn’t stay in his pants. Ugh, men!

Zoe narrowed her eyes and drained her glass then reached for the bottle. As she refilled it she added, “Mason hasn’t been around Shaw in years, according to Noah. At least not for longer than a random dinner here and there. Noah can barely stand the guy.”

“Then definitely did not let that dickhead anywhere near me.” I set the glass down, and drew in a steadying breath. “Unless you figure out who has a hand tat, I may

never know.”

“Just ask Noah. He knows all their ‘ghost hockey daddy’ identities,” she said with finger quotes.

I smoothed the off the shoulder perfectly pink that matched part of my hair shirt over my leggings and slipped on the rhinestone chunky heeled combat boots with a sigh. “I tried. But Mr. ‘I can’t watch Freddy without squealing doesn’t want to break the circle of ghost face trust’. Maybe I wasn’t the only one who got freaky that night.”

Zoe snickered.

My jaw dropped. “No. Zoe! I knew it!! You and Coach LeCav did the deed somewhere, didn’t you? Tell me!”

She just shrugged and raised her glass. I pointed a finger at her. “We are going to have a conversation about what besties are when I get home!” One last longing glance at the half empty wine bottle. “And I swear, if you finish that off all alone I’ll be so mad at you!”

“Cross my heart,” she mimicked the words, “I will not finish it. Or if I do, I’ll make sure another is chilling. Now go and have family fun dinner time. Tell your mom I said hi!”

I groaned and headed out the door to where the car I requested on my phone sat waiting. After the customary confirmations, I slid into the back of the car, and watched the city flash by and prepared myself for a night of figurative glances and questions designed to see how I was handling my life choices, on top of a slightly overprotective stepfather who tried to keep my mom’s worry at bay. They had the best intentions, and while I loved them, I knew they had my best interests at heart. Even if it drove me slightly crazy.

Thank God I went away to college. And figured out who I was, and what it meant to not be afraid of the person staring back at me in the mirror. I can still picture my mom's face the first time she saw my hair.

Stealing my resolve to not let the evening restart bad habits like making myself smaller, I thanked the driver and walked up the walkway to the house that probably could've housed most of Noah's teammates. And knocked.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

COLE

IZZY: Save me and come to dinner! Please?

Fuck. How could I say no to Izzy? My little sister had never asked me to come visit, not once in over eight years. Not even a hint in the letters we sent back and forth without our father's knowledge.

The night at the haunted house played over in my mind daily, From the first touch of Eden's skin, to cornering her when she made her way to the second floor...the playlist I painstakingly made, perfectly timed so that I was the only one who would see my girl. From chasing her through the rooms, the excitement glittering in her mossy green eyes. How fucking wet she was for me when I caught her.

Fucked her. And claimed her body as mine. Damn, she was so beautiful, sex drunk and still blissed out. I had planned on going to find her until that damn text came in only moments after I made her walk away.

MR. SUNDERS: Come over for dinner. We're practically in the same city. Your sister wants to meet you. And, you have a sister you never even met. Please, Cole.

I raked my hand through my hair, and whipped the mask onto the seat as I scrolled to the next text. It was a photo.

Of my sister, grown up, and...Eden.

Holy fuck.

MR. SUNDERS: This is your stepsister, Eden. Izzy loves her. I know you will too.

The father I refused to speak to after years decided a fine fucking time to make his presence known. Maybe it was my fault for thinking I could avoid him after following Eden to Montreal.

I fucked the step sister I never knew I had. And that was the only reason I had agreed to show up when he texted me again a few days later. Asking me to come over for a 'family' dinner.

Because as messed up as it was, I needed to see her. To make sure she was okay. That I hadn't done some crazy fucking head job on her, and prayed that she was still in the dark about who I was.

Nothing could happen between us now. And not just because I still hadn't forgiven my father for the way he treated me and the things he'd done.

But because even if we had never met, I was still her step brother and the world was a fucking cruel place.

A flash of headlights in my rearview blinded me for a moment, and I sat in the dark, engine off. Waiting. Watching. Annoyed as fuck at the size of the house my father decided to make home.

But I couldn't leave, not when I had the chance to be in the same room as her. To see her and talk to her, even if all the plans I had were nothing more than a fucked up dream now.

Eden closed the door of the car and stood in the driveway, gorgeous and beautiful in the moonlight. Her shoulders squared and chin held high, not moving an inch closer to the door for the length of my heartbeat. And in that moment, it became crystal

clear that she didn't want to be here anymore than I did. She walked up to the door and knocked.

Light filtered through the curtains and blanketed her in a glow that made every detail of her face visible as my little sister threw open the door and threw herself into Eden's arms. The two giggled, the sound carrying as Eden looped her arm through Izzy's and headed into the house. I waited a few moments, the sight of the two of them hitting me like a Mack Truck on the fucking highway late at night.

Shit. Time to face the music. I raked a hand over my face, and went to the front door to face the music.

Before I even made it to the door, it opened and my baby sister squealed and practically jumped into my arms. "Cole!! I can't believe you're here!! Dad! Cole's here!"

I let myself enjoy the smile that lit up her face before I faced the man I swore I'd never speak to again. "You're way too tall to be my little sister."

She pulled back and punched me in the arm, hard. "That's for staying away for so long."

"Ow," I muttered, rubbing the spot where she nailed me. "You could probably take down a few of the guys with that punch, Izz."

A smile spread across her face. "Do you think I could come to a practice or something sometime?"

"Yeah. Just let me figure a few things out first."

"Like those weird signals you and Kaspari Holken had in Seattle?"

My brow furrowed. “You watched my games?”

My not so little sister nodded. “Every single one. And I made Dad start watching with me.” She nudged me with her shoulder, grabbed my hand, and dragged me further into the house. Music played in the background.

“Is that?”

She grinned over her shoulder, and it hit me how much I missed seeing her grow up. “Yes, I still listen to her. My first concert, remember?”

I let her lead me through the foyer and into the open area with a floor to ceiling fireplace surrounded by couches. There was a huge island and a dining room table long enough for most of the team on the other side. “Of course I do. The traffic after was a fucking nightmare.”

Izzy stopped barely inside the doorway and smiled. “Still my favorite memory. You really should consider doing a karaoke night.”

I scoffed. “Not happening, Izz.” She spun around, all teenage girl, and released my hand. “No one needs to hear me singing, no matter how much you’d love it.”

“You weren’t that bad, Cole. But,” she added, “at least now, I have two people who would take me to a concert. Come on, I can’t wait for you to meet Eden. She’s the best sister. I know you’re going to love her.” Laughter drifted over from somewhere just out of my sight, and I knew without looking who made the tightness in my chest worse.

Fuck, I hated that I couldn’t have her now that I knew her mother was the one who married my dad. Not only would the press have a field day with it, my father wasn’t the type to accept anything that would tarnish anyone’s view of him or his family.

Being an NHL player, no matter how successful, was included in his fucked up view of the world. Not a worthwhile or meaningful enough endeavor for a Sanders to engage in. Izzy bounced into the open space where my father stood with his wife.

And Eden.

She fucking stole my breath and made my heart beat in my chest at the same time. The overwhelming urge to take her in my arms, over my shoulder, and claim her again hit me and I nearly growled with need.

“Cole,” Annabell smiled warmly at me, distracting me from Eden and the flush on her cheeks. “It’s so lovely to finally meet you. Randall has told us so much about you.”

“Not really so much,” Eden mumbled under her breath, hiding her lips behind the rim of a wine glass. Her eyes widened as I raked my eyes over her, from top to bottom. Taking in every single pink and purple wisp of hair trailing down her back, remembering how it felt wrapped around my fist. Full, lush lips that tasted like berries dipped in chocolate. Full tits, one shoulder bare. Leggings hugging her ass. I schooled my expression, and I fucking hated the way her expression dropped for the briefest of seconds before her chin lifted. Defiance in her eyes.

Good. She thought I judged her by the way she looked. Little did she know it was taking every ounce of control to not take her away and fuck her until she couldn’t breathe without feeling me everywhere. And after, I’d soothe every ache, every sore spot...and never let her go.

Fuck.

Better that she think I didn’t like what I saw.

“Cole, this is Eden. My sister,” Izzy said, hands in front of her with a grin.

“Step sister,” Eden said, extending her hand with a tight lipped grin, the other hand still holding the glass tightly in her grip.

“Sister,” Izzy insisted. “I mean, she’s been around almost as long as you were, Cole.”

“Izzy,” my father warned, but his tone was lighter than I remembered. “Eden is like my daughter, Cole, and I am so glad the two of you will get the chance to know each other.”

“Cole is one of the league’s best wingers,” Izzy added proudly. Eden’s eyes widened, surprise lighting her verdant green depths.

I shook Eden’s hand, electricity sparking between us. Her lips formed a small ‘O’ before she pulled her hand from mine. I immediately felt the loss of her touch. One time together, and my body already knew it owned her. But that was all gone now.

An hour later, I sat across the table from Eden. Izz to my left, and my father at one end while his wife, Eden mother, sat at the other. The polite talk, only interrupted by Izzy injecting a funny story about the things I’d missed over the past eight years, strained at moments. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but there was something different about how Eden acted tonight compared to the smile on her face I’d grown accustomed to. She was less bright, or maybe smaller in some ways. Moments of defiance sparked here and there, especially when her mother turned her attention to her daughter. Annabell, for what it was worth, seemed less concerned over Eden’s presence, and more interested in trying to talk to me. Like we hadn’t ignored each other for the past eight years.

“So, Cole,” Annabell asked with a pleasant smile that was starting to drive me fucking crazy, “What made you come back to Montreal?”

My father watched, waiting for my answer. Well, fuck him if he thought any of this was for him.

It was for Eden. And even that, he fucking ruined for me. “There is something here I thought I needed.”

Eden canted her head to the side, her cheek resting on her hand. Cheeks flushed from the win she had been drinking. “And now?”

Everyone at the table watched, waiting for my answer. “Now, I’m not sure it’s for the best.”

A flip of pink hair as my little Bunny sat back in her chair, eyes narrowed. “Sure seems like a haphazard reason to uproot your entire life over something you’re not sure about.”

I sat forward, elbows on the table, hands clasped. “I learned something that changed the situation.” Her eyes shot to the tattoo on my hand, and she let out a small gasp just as Izzy asked her mom to pass her something. Her chair made a loud noise as she stood and almost knocked her wine glass over.

“Eden, are you okay?” My father asked as he started to stand, too but Eden waved him off.

“Fine. I just need to, um, make a quick call. Excuse me.” She hurried out of the room in a flurry of pink and purple.

Annabell smiled apologetically. “You’ll have to excuse Eden. She tends to get a little-”

“Mom,” Izzy said, interrupting her with a frown. “Eden doesn’t- ”

“It’s ok Izzy. I know you want to protect your sister. Eden tends to get overwhelmed at times, Cole. Nothing to worry about.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room.

Izzy put her fork down with a loud clunk. “She’s not overwhelmed, dad. Maybe she actually had to make a phone call.”

Eden’s mom put a hand over her Izzy’s. “Izzy and Eden are very close. I’m sure everything is fine, Izz. Just give her a few minutes. In the meanwhile, why don’t you fill us in on what you’ve been up to since Izzy saw you last?” She exchanged a look with my father, and my fucking blood boiled.

A desire to tell them both to fuck off coursed through my veins, but I stifled it. I didn’t know Eden well enough to defend her to the people who lived with her day in and day out while I had stayed away. But something about the way they dismissed her and how she felt pissed me off. The silence drew on like a dark cloud until Eden came back into the room with a smile. She waved her phone and said, “Sorry. Organizing authors for this signing is like herding very cute, neurotic cats.”

“No worries. I think your mother was just going to grab dessert so Cole could fill us all in on how he’s been the last eight years.”

“That’s not awkward, Dad,” Izzy muttered. Eden stifled a laugh as she covered her mouth with one hand and set her phone down on the table to grab her wine glass.

“Izz,” he warned with a smile.

“Just being a teenager, Dad.” She shrugged as if that was all the explanation needed.

“Well, the teenager can help me with dessert. Coffee, Cole? ”

I shook my head with a glower. “The water is fine, thank you.”

“Geez, grump,” Izzy teased as she followed Eden's mom into the kitchen.

“Afraid of a little caffeine?” Eden teased. Poking the bear. “Noah refuses to cut it out during the season.”

I grunted, half hating that she mentioned another man, but it was Noah. “Goalies are a different breed of player. Not afraid. I like the rush. But sometimes, you have to back off and do what’s best.”

Her eyes widened and my suspicion was confirmed with one look. The fucking bird tat on my hand gave it away. I remembered how her eyes locked on it in the haunted house. How she’d licked her lips like she wanted to trace the outline with her tongue.

Not happening.

The last half hour of the night was spent with small talk. My father asked more questions about my career than he ever had when we still spoke, but I still didn’t trust his motivations. Money wasn’t the only thing he cared about, but appearances were everything. In fact, I was surprised he hadn’t tried to make Eden color her hair a more acceptable color.

Or maybe he had, but my girl wasn’t having it.

She’s not your girl, Cole, a cruel voice whispered.

But fuck, I wanted her to be. Even if it was impossible.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

EDEN

You have nothing to be ashamed of Eden, ever...

The note I found just as I left the townhouse after Zoe and I had our little talk was in my pocket. My own personal paper security blanket. On the way over, I played with it, twirling and flipping it between my fingertips. But once the car stopped in front of the ridiculously oversized house, I quickly put it in my pocket so that I could touch it if I needed to.

And I knew I would. Because if nothing else, I could count on my mother and Randall trying to convince me to move back into the house with them and stop being silly. Living out my sorority girl fantasy with Zoe in the city.

More like on the outskirts of the actual city. But they thought it was a phase.

My hair.

The bookstore .

The signing.

Design.

Maybe it was, but I liked it. Being away from them meant I could breathe. They meant well, but I refused to go back. When I arrived, I almost didn't go in, thinking I could hide in the small guest house and wait for the car to come back and get me. The

cool air gave me shivers, but for the first time in a few days, the sense of being watched was gone. Or maybe it changed into a thing I wasn't afraid of any longer. Different.

"Eden! Sweetheart!" My mom greeted me as Izzy squealed and engulfed me in her signature Izzy hug. Full force, no holding back. Even when we Face Timed back in college, it was like she sent those hugs to me. All Izzy, and all accepting and never judging. Not even for a second.

"E!! I can't wait for you to meet Cole. I know we don't talk about him that much," she shot a side eye at her father who was opening a bottle of wine at the oversized granite island, "but he's the best."

"For a brother I barely knew you had, I'm kinda wondering how he can be the best, Iz," I teased, none too gently. I hated that Izzy had an estranged brother. We'd barely gotten to know each other before our parents married, but she was my little sister. When I escaped to go to college, I couldn't imagine not having her in my life. Her brother, in my opinion, was a complete and utter asshole for deserting her. Though, her dad was more protective than those dogs at airports sniffing out all the things people tried to smuggle on planes. And not as cuddly.

"We all know whose fault that-"

"Izz, we've discussed this," her dad warned, earning an eye roll in typical teenage response mode from her. "Sometimes adults do dumb things and it takes them a long time to figure out how to make it right."

Mom smiled at him, and I thought about how they were kinda perfect for one another. Even if the overbearing had started to come my way at the end of high school. Which was why I went far away. Chicago meant freedom and the chance to live without suppressing who I was. They let me go, and paid for college, but were very vocal

about how it wasn't their first choice.

"You know, the guest house is probably the same size as Zoe's place, Eden. And I'd love having you here again."

I snatched the wine glass from Randall, who winked at me. "Traitor. No, wait. Conspirator."

He placed a hand over his heart, gray eyes twinkling. "But she's right. Having you here would mean your mother wouldn't worry about your safety or where you were."

"Twenty four guys. And I live in a very safe neighborhood with lots of burly hockey players, some of whom no longer have teeth which means they can take and throw a punch." I teased none too lightly. "And it's close to Book Boyfriends and Lattes. And I like my privacy."

"But, sweetheart, we'd be close by in case you had an episo-"

"Mom." I sat my glass down as Izzy came to stand by me. I placed a hand on my sister's arm. "It's ok, Izz. Mom is just way too overprotective and keeps forgetting she has you to smother, too."

Izzy snorted. "Oh, trust me, they both do."

My stepfather came around the island and stood behind his wife, hands on her shoulders. "The offer stands, anytime Eden. It's all furnished and ready if you ever want to come and stay until you find a place of your own or need time to figure anything out."

And there it was. The whole Eden-hasn't-figured-out-life-the-way-we-wanted-her-to lead in. I placed both of my hands on the counter. "I appreciate the offer, but I

actually love what I'm doing right now. And if I decide to try something else, then I try something else. Now, can we please just let it go and not have the awkward tension in front of the step sibling I kinda barely knew I had but never met?"

Which was why when Randall's son entered the room, we were laughing and enjoying each other's company despite the inevitable tension that was bound to take over like a big, huge and not as cute as a real elephant in the room.

Everything went as well as I could've hoped.

Until I noticed it.

The two birds tattooed on his right hand.

The same tattoo I'd been so damn transfixed with on the masked man from the haunted house.

The same man who'd chased me.

Then fucked me.

And I was so sure I'd hear from after the way he'd made sure I was okay afterward.

But two weeks, and...nothing.

Until dinner with my parents.

Where I met my stepbrother for the first time.

The masked hockey player who made my haunted house chase me fantasy come to life, better than any romance novel could.

And he acted like he didn't know who I was. And in fact, I was being a bit of an asshole, if not grumpy as hell since the moment Izzy introduced us.

As soon as the pieces fell into place, I freaked out, all the carefully crafted image of me not giving my parents anything to think I was anything but normal and ran from the room.

Hid in the bathroom and texted Zoe, who obviously was as busy as she hinted she'd be because no answer after three texts.

EDEN: HOLY FUCKING HELL.

EDEN: Z, I need you. Are you with Coach Daddy?

EDEN: I think I did something really fucked up.

EDEN: ZOE MILES!!! WHERE ARE YOU?

EDEN: I FUCKED MY STEPbrOTHER!!! IZZY'S BIG MYSTERIOUS brOTHER!!!

EDEN: Shit, did Noah know? Don't teammates share? Why didn't he tell me?

EDEN: No wait, BFF code is stronger.

EDEN: Zoe?

I gave up, because Zoe would only ignore me if she was off with Coach Hottie sneaking for a booty call or maybe just trying to run away from him.

Fuck, wait that was my kink.

Shit, was that a kink?

Suddenly, I wished I had taken the kink test Delena Bennett made all her characters take because I was pretty fucking certain my taboo kink or whatever was way off the charts.

Cole Sanders was my stepbrother.

And the person I let chase me and fuck me in the haunted house without ever seeing his face .

I was in so much trouble.

After dessert, I stood, grabbed my coat and was just getting ready to get a car on my app when Randall said, “Why don’t you give Eden a lift, Cole? She’s had a few glasses of wine and I’d feel better if you drove her and not some stranger.”

“Oh, that’s ok, I do it all the time.”

“Really, sweetheart, let Cole drive you,” my mother added as she patted my arm.

“I wouldn’t want to inconvenience-”

“It’s not an inconvenience. I’ll take you. I’m headed that way, after all,” the man I’d been getting off to using every new suggested toy Indie threw my way said, as if I’d never had a choice in the first place. Decision made, everyone started saying their goodbyes, while I stood there, mouth open.

Izzy hugged me, and whispered, “Movie marathon soon?”

I pulled back and nodded, my eyes darting to Cole and the door and the fact that I’d

be alone with him in minutes and he obviously was annoyed with me. She handed me my coat, and as I shrugged it on, I felt the slip of paper in the pocket. But it did nothing to quell the incessant beating of my heart. If I had a heart attack, at least I was dressed really cute and had a matching set underneath my clothes.

“Call me later this week, Cole, and we’ll go for drinks and catch up some more. I appreciate you coming over.” His father shook his hand, and seemed like he wanted to say more, but then just stepped back as my mother hugged Cole, then me.

“Drive carefully, and it was so nice to finally meet you, Cole. I hope now that we’re in the same place, that this will happen more often.”

Cole didn’t answer except to nod. One hand went to the door to open it, the other to the small of my back to guide me out. Outside, the air had chilled from earlier, and I released a breath. The silence between us a tangible presence in the cool night. Leaves crunched beneath my feet, and I became acutely aware of every sense. The smell of the leaves, the feel of the colder temperature on my skin, each breath I drew louder than the last. The way I wanted to taste his kiss again. Forbidden now that I knew who he was but nonetheless, I wanted it.

But he obviously didn’t since he hadn’t uttered a single word or acknowledged me other than guiding me out the door to his car. A black SUV, sleek and immaculate. The passenger door opened without a sound. Cole leaned his forearm on the side of the door watching as I clicked the seatbelt into place, then he tapped the top and shut the door. The sound made me jump, my body so tight and on edge after figuring out who he was. If I was being honest with myself, my body recognized him before that moment.

The lingering scent I remembered from the haunted house hit my nose, along with that new car smell and leather. And God, the sensory memories made my thighs clench together, my breath coming faster. If he had recognized me or even looked at

me like I wasn't beneath him, maybe my reaction would be different.

Warmth radiated from the heaters, because he must have hit the remote start and warmed up the inside before we said our goodbyes. Cole opened the driver's door a beat longer than expected, standing outside as if he was annoyed at being in the same space, breathing the same air as me.

His eyes remained focused on the road after a single glance at me before backing down the driveway. The hand gripping the steering wheel flexed, the damn tattoo like a beacon in the night, calling me and reminding me of every second I ran and tried to get away and when he caught me. How Cole owned me, and how I had nothing but absolute and implicit trust in him not even knowing who he was.

But, now, my heart and head were arguing and in such juxtaposition that I was second guessing everything I felt that night and since. Story of my life.

He obviously saw something in me he didn't like. Maybe Randall told him about what he and mother called my episodes, which were in truth, just a girl who liked staring at the moon and avoiding the world. Or certain people.

"Are you warm enough?"

His voice cut me to the bone, and I jerked my head. "I'm fine." My eyes tracked the movement as he reached over and turned up the heat. I refused to give him the satisfaction of my full attention. If I didn't fit into his ideal standards but he could fuck my brains out in a haunted house, then he didn't deserve a second of anything I had to offer.

Some people might dye their hair for Halloween, but this was me. 365.

Pink. Purple. I sparkled in the light and the dark. And I wouldn't change for anyone.

Not any longer.

Well, at least, not much.

But this man wasn't going to get an ounce of regret from me.

"How long have you been in Montreal? "

He grunted in response.

Grunted.

"A month or so."

Silence stretched out. He may not want to talk, but I was suddenly not in the mood to give him what he wanted. Petty little victory, but right now, my wounded heart would take what it could get.

"And do you like it here?"

He made a noncommittal noise. Not quite a grunt, but grumpy in its circumference.

"Is this really the first time you've seen Izzy in eight years?" This might be the one thing that pissed me off more than anything. I'd grown up as an only child, and would have loved to have a sibling to share everything or anything with. Izzy was as much my little sister as his, maybe even more so.

"You've probably known her longer than I have," he admitted, his voice strained.

I snorted, and the frozen in place grump of a hockey player shot me a look before his midnight blue eyes slid back to the road. I pretended for a second that that look meant

something more. “You’re right, I have. She’s amazing. And I wouldn’t trade her for anything in the world.”

The rest of the way to the townhouse laid heavily between us, and as much as my body reacted to being so close to him, the moment he put the SUV in park, I reached for the door handle. But before I could do anything, much less open the passenger door, he was there. Big, brooding, sexy, and not mine. Not that he was for even that night.

I had been his, before he chased me in the darkness...and infinitesimally more after, when he caught me. Branded my body and soul as his. Navy eyes locked on to mine, my body locked into place and afraid to move or break the tension. I wanted it, craved it, Craved what he, only he could give me. But my phone chose that moment to interrupt, buzzing insistently. Thinking Zoe had finally deigned to answer my frantic texts earlier. Spell broken, I glanced down, and my stomach sank.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Careful, Eden. Not everyone will take care of you like I will.

Holy hell. I felt the color drain out of my face, a chill that scared me more than anything in the last few months raced up the back of my neck.

“Eden.”

My hands shook, and the habitual denial refused to come. This message wasn’t like the other ones. Frantic, my head shot up and I pushed out of the car, past Cole. I searched up and down the street because he had to be watching. Right now. Somewhere out in the night.

“ Eden.”

A hand gripped my forearm and I spun, only to crash into a hard wall of hockey player slash step brother slash masked fantasy come to life. “Tell me what happened?”

The words wouldn’t come, and before I could stop him, Cole took my phone from me. His face turned to stone as he read the message.

“ Fuck.” He bit out the word as he scrolled through the messages. “How long has this been happening, Eden?”

I wanted to deny it, and take my phone from him. Run and hide. But having someone else share this secret, especially Cole? I hadn’t dawned on me until that moment how much fear I had been pretending didn’t exist. Or that it was real and quite possibly not harmless.

“ Eden . Tell. Me. Now. ”

I tried to get the words out, but nothing left my lips. Not even my breath.

“Fuck,” he swore. “Breath. And give me your keys.”

I numbly handed them over, obeying him without question. His hand, warm and steady, was at my back, guiding me up the stairs. I barely registered him putting the key in the front door and unlocking it, or walking inside. The key made a clanging sound as he tossed them in the bowl by the door, then turned to me and rubbed his hands up and down my arms. Warmth returned to my frozen limbs, the blood following his orders. Cole guided me over to the couch and slipped the throw blanket over my shoulders.

“You don’t have to-”

“I do.”

Those two words stirred feelings back up in my belly. Made me want things out of my grasp. Broke through the numbness in my limbs and in my mind. “You don’t though.” I went to stand, but the look he shot me stopped me. I immediately sat back down, slipped my heels off, and tucked my feet under as I snuggled into the blanket. I wanted to pout, but I didn’t. I wouldn’t. I didn’t like being told what to do, but when he did, with just a look, I felt...taken care of.

Of course. Because I was his ‘sister’ for fuck’s sake. And nothing more.

A second later, Cole held out a steaming mug, and placed it in my hands when I unearthed them from under the blanket. “Drink.”

My heart wanted to melt, because he made chamomile tea in my favorite ‘Resting Witch Face’ mug.

I hated this feeling of wanting him but knowing he didn’t want me. Not anymore .

We sat in silence, both tense and comforting. A few minutes later, I sat the tea down. He let out a sound that made me think he was happy I had drunk some of it.

“Now, tell me how long this has been going on? Were the texts the first time this person contacted you?”

I bit my lip, knowing that once I told him, it would be real. And I was scared about what that meant.

I had a stalker.

My tongue felt thick as I swallowed. “A few months.”

“Months?” he bit out.

I nodded, my cheeks heated. The blanket, soft and warm, scratched my skin. Like I didn’t deserve the comfort it offered, or the hulking man in front of me who wore a murderous expression. At least he wanted to protect his ‘sister’, I thought. “At first, it was just a comment here and there on my social media posts. Harmless. About,” I fluttered my hands, “how pretty I was, or about where I was.”

“And then.” Cole sat, his navy eyes heated, jaw tight. Elbows on his knees, hands clasped like he was afraid he’d hit something. Scary, but I wasn’t scared. Not of him.

“Then...the DMs started. Same thing, but a little...more. I can’t say what or when it changed, just that it did.”

He nodded at my phone on the low table in front of us. “When did the texts start?”

I sucked in a breath. “Right before the notes. About three weeks ago.”

“Notes?” Again, Cole radiated anger, barely contained rage. “What kind of notes?”

Since he’d scrolled through the texts, I left out the details of those. I shrugged a shoulder, my ‘it’s-nothing’ defense mechanism kicked in high gear. The glare Cole shot my way was nothing short of a command.

Cut the bullshit, his eyes said .

“They felt...feel...like a warning,” I admitted, hating and feeling relief at the words.

“Pack a bag.”

“Pack a...why?”

He stood and headed to the stairs that led to the second floor. And my bedroom.
“You’re not staying here. Alone.”

I got to my feet, the blanket falling to the floor. “I’m not going to our parents' house. No. No way.” The panic attack I’d been fighting simmered and threatened to burst free of the cage I’d kept it in.

“You’re not.”

“I-wait, I’m not?”

He climbed the stairs, and I followed. When he reached the second floor, he said over his shoulder. “No, you’re not. Which one is yours?”

I pointed at my door. “That one,” I responded, confused. “If I’m not going back, where am I going? It’s too late to check into a hotel, and I don’t have money-”

When he reached my door, second on the right, he muttered. “With me.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

COLE

KAS: Season home opener. Dinner after? Or, are you too good for me now?

I smirked as I read the text from my former linemate.

COLE: Maybe. Things are getting a little complicated.

KAS: I promise not to bring Daisy.

COLE: You and your pussy.

KAS: They're both the best. No arguing, dinner.

I paused my scrolling through Kas' texts, studying Eden as she put clothes and shoes, toiletries, a blanket and fuck knew what else into various bags I'd helped her pull down from a high shelf in her closet. After she argued with me and finally understood I wasn't fucking asking.

COLE: Might have a guest.

KAS: Bring her. Him. Whoever.

COLE: My sister, asshole.

KAS: I knew you were into kinky shit.

COLE: Step. Never mind. See at center ice, Holken.

KAS: DROP THE PUCK

I slipped my phone into my pocket as Eden struggled to close one of the suitcases. “Four?” She stepped back as I zipped one after the other closed.

“High maintenance,” she said.

“I doubt that.”

“I am. Needy. Loud.”

“Stop trying to change my mind, Eden. I promised my father I’d take care of you. And there’s no fucking way I’m letting you stay here alone while some asshole is stalking you.” I threw over my shoulder. She flinched, and I hated myself for a second until I reminded myself it was good that she was scared. It meant she’d listen and come home with me.

“He meant drive me home, not kidnap me.”

“I take my promises seriously. Which means, you’re not staying here alone or otherwise, Bu-” Shit. I stopped before I said it. Bunny. The nickname conjured up all sorts of images of her. Running. Panting. Coming all over my cock as I fucked her.

“But what? ”

Good. She didn’t catch my almost slip up. “Even if your roommate was home, it wouldn’t matter. And she’s not.”

She watched me, green eyes full of the things I couldn’t give her. “Why are you

doing this, Cole?” she whispered, as if she were afraid to say the words out loud.

Or maybe hear my answer.

I roughed a hand over my face, and told her as much of the truth as I could. “You're my family now, Eden. I can't...I won't let anything happen to you.” One side of my mouth lifted. “And Izzy would kick my ass if I didn't do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

That earned me a chuckle. Her head fell to one side, and she asked, “She never said...much about you. Other than she missed you. A lot.”

Did I tell her the truth, or as much of it as I could without letting the anger take over? I settled for half truths. “I wrote to her every two weeks. But she hid them from our father because, at first, she was afraid he'd take them away. Then, she didn't want to hurt him by bringing me up. That one I didn't get but, but Izzy is...fierce.”

“You two have more in common than you think,” she muttered.

Fuck, her bags were heavy, but I loaded them up, stopping her when she tried to grab one. “I got it.” She glared and I glared back, and she gave in. Eden released the strap of the last bright pink bag with a sigh. I motioned for her to go first. “Keys are on the island. Unlock and pop the lift gate, but stay in the house until I come and get you.”

Eden rolled her eyes, and my cock twitched. Great idea, Cole. Bring your fucking fantasy brought to life that you can longer harbor any feelings, sexual or otherwise, into your house. Where she'll be naked, at least in the shower.

“I'm not-” she started as she headed down the stairs .

“Stay,” I growled from behind her. Yep, fucking growled. With a glare, she grabbed

the keys, walked to the window, held up the remote and pressed the release button.

And sat on the couch. “Fine. But only so I can text Zoe and Noah to let them know where I am. Good thing we know you’re not a serial killer. You’re not, right?” she called as I closed the door and walked to my SUV.

I only hunt my favorite little Bunny , I thought. And too bad that’s fucking over.

The night air was still chilled, but the street was empty at the late hour. Whoever sent Eden those messages either was really good hiding, or a fucking coward. I was betting on both.

You can never be too safe. One step ahead.

FUCK. She was texting Noah .

NOAH: WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING KIDNAPPING MY BESTIE, ROMEO?

HUNTER: Who?

NOAH: Stay up to date, Spice Boy.

HUNTER: WTAF?

NOAH: Pumpkin head. Pumpkin spice. Spice.

HUNTER: No.

NOAH: We’ll circle around.

WOLF: I'm out.

(Wolf left the chat.)

(Noah added Wolf back in.)

WOLF: GOALIE

THEO: Mute it. It's what I do.

NOAH: We are having a #ghosthockeydaddies meeting at practice tomorrow and talk about protocol. But back to the matter at hand. What the fuck are you doing with EDEN?

Through the window, Eden sat on the couch, waiting and trying to not freak out. The fidgeting gave away. I called Noah before he sent another text.

“What the hell is going on? Eden just texted Zoe and me, and Zoe isn't answering, which is also fucking concerning.”

I raked a hand through my hair, and explained the situation. Leaving out that I fucked his best friend in the haunted house and that she'd been hiding this stalker shit from them both. From everyone, apparently. Because knowing my father, if he knew, he probably would've locked Eden up in a bedroom and only let her out with an armed detail.

“Stalker? How long?”

“I don't know. But after seeing the text and how freaked out she was, there's no way I'm letting her stay here.”

“Shit. You can drop her here, but I did one of those season ticket delivery days and I’m at Laney’s thank you for doling his dinners. I won’t get home for at least 45 minutes even if I leave now.”

“It’s fine,” I assured him, while part of me screamed no fucking way. Eden was my responsibility. “I’ll take her to my place. I have plenty of room.”

“Just don’t let her stepdad talk you into making her move in with them.” His voice lowered. “Eden would lose it. Don’t tell her I told you.”

“You don’t have to, I saw it for myself tonight. Plus, he’s my father. I know firsthand.”

“Sorry, I’m still processing that one. Are you sure? Is she freaked out? She won’t answer her phone, and keeps texting that she’s fine and her step brother is letting her stay at his place. Which is fucking crazy that you’re the step brother, Sanders. I should’ve put the pieces together.” The background noise sounded muffled for a second as he called to someone and covered the bottom of his phone. “Have her call me in the morning just to check in. I can see if I can have a security system installed at her and Zoe’s place.”

Yeah, not happening. “I’ll take care of her, don’t worry.” I hung up before he responded and opened the door. “Ready?”

Eden stood and nodded. “But I don’t have to like it,” she warned.

Me, neither, Bunny. Me neither.

The house seemed bigger than it had when I first bought it after I realized Eden wouldn’t be moving in. After my father texted me the picture of her and Izzy together. Every room a reminder of what could’ve been. The damn candles I ordered

stuffed into a closet somewhere on the second floor. The extra blankets that would ever touch her skin in another closet .

A fucking case of Junior Mints in the butler pantry never to be opened.

But, now thanks to some fucking creepy asshole, the house had her scent in it. Drifting down the hallway from the guest suite. Where my step sister, I reminded myself, was staying. But before closing the door, I told her to let me know if she needed anything.

“And tomorrow, after practice, I’m picking you up and you’re getting a new phone. No arguments.” It fucking hit me how sad and tired she looked. And relieved. Eden didn’t protest, and after I pointed out the en suite bathroom and walk in closet, that, I never planned on her using, at least not for long, I shut the door. Padded down the hallway to my room, and fought the urge to drink myself to sleep in order to stay away from the temptation I’d brought into my world willingly.

Temptation I had to stay away from.

No matter how much it killed me to. After an hour of tossing and turning, I gave up and headed downstairs to grab a glass of water and maybe a fucking snack. Cookies.

Or Junior Mints. If I couldn’t kiss Eden, at least I could taste the thing she loved and fool myself.

Fucking sap.

I padded down the hall, down the back staircase that led into the kitchen. The lights under the cabinet that stayed on even at night barely lit the space, but my eyes were adjusted to the darkness while I laid in bed. A clink of ice, the slosh of water. I took a sip and was just about to head back upstairs after grabbing a box of the damn candies

when I noticed a light on in the great room just off the kitchen. The house was semi open concept, but I loved to cook and the kitchen was larger and led into the great but wasn't closed off. If you were on one side of the kitchen, the view into the other area was obstructed.

Without turning on any other lights, I slowly headed toward the light, knowing that the security system and the alarm were activated and no one got in or out without me knowing.

The sight that greeted stole my fucking breath.

Eden. In a white off the shoulder t-shirt and nothing else, holding a glass of wine and standing in front of the wall of windows that faced the pool. The moonlight illuminated her body, every curve I remembered so fucking well in vivid detail. Her face turned up while she looked at the full moon in the clear sky like a flower would be as it soaked up the sun. Hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun. Legs I pictured wrapped around my waist as I fucked her up against the panes of glass in front of her. Claiming what was mine.

She tilted her head, then jumped as she finally saw me standing there. "Oh! I didn't hear you! Wrong stalker," she joked feebly, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. "I hope you don't mind," she added, holding up the glass. "I found it in the refrigerator, and it just so happens to be a favorite. I couldn't sleep, and..." Her voice drifted, embarrassment flushing her cheeks beautifully.

I waved her off, full well knowing I bought it specifically for her, and when I walked past a bottle in the butler pantry this morning, put it in the refrigerator for some reason.

Fate at its twisted finest at work.

“It’s fine.”

“You either?”

“Me either, what?”

Her eyes, large and voluminous in the cool light, seemed tired for more reasons than I think even she knew. “Couldn’t sleep?”

I shook my head. “I usually go for a run before bed. Then do a little yoga to keep my body from getting pissed at me. Helps calm the nervous system.”

“And my sta-“ I refused to use the word, “problems messed that up for you.”

“It’s not a problem at all. You’re family.”

A little of the light went out of her eyes. “Yeah, Family.”

I nodded. An almost uncomfortable silence stretched out between us, and her cheeks flushed more before she turned back to the window and sipped the wine.

I’d never been more jealous of a fucking glass in my life. Or a window, because it got to watch those lips dart out as she licked errant drops from them.

“You don’t have to stay up with me. I’m okay, I promise.” Her voice sounded weary, and I recalled what her mother said about her episodes at dinner.

Fuck. She thought I was worried she was having one.

“You’re not okay, but that’s to be expected.”

She glanced at me before returning her attention to the night sky. “What do you mean?”

I walked up, not quite behind her, or close enough to touch her. But close enough that her scent was stronger and made me want to get closer.

I didn't.

“Having someone send you messages like those isn't normal. Sharing that out loud makes it real. And you should be scared. But getting up and getting a glass of wine, or,” I added, “staring at the moon because you can't sleep doesn't mean there's anything I need to worry about, Eden.”

Neither of us said a word for a few minutes, enjoying the silence and the relief of not having to say anything .

I sighed. “I'll be down the hall from your room if you need anything, Eden. Stay up as long as you like. Or don't. It's up to you. Always.”

And with that, I walked away knowing I lied to her. It wasn't up to her. Or me. Not anymore. Fate stepped in and decided we couldn't be together long before we met. But we were just finding out.

It was the worst feeling in the world. But at least I could keep her safe.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

EDEN

Remember, new phone after practice. Stay here. Wifi password is on the refrigerator. Work from home. We'll talk tonight over dinner and figure a few things out. And I won't tell anyone unless you want me to. We can go to the police to file a report just in case after we get your phone, too.

Cole

The thick printed letters were so...Cole. Masculine, no arguments allowed, and fascinated me. His W's and the way he signed his name. I couldn't put a finger on it, but reading it made me feel safe. Secure. Cared for.

Must be that sibling thing.

I slid my laptop over and pushed away my coffee mug. It was empty, but I might give in and have another cup after I touched base with Nia and Indie. The stash of coffee I found made my eyes flutter and my heart swoon. And Cole had brought my favorite mug, so the morning wasn't as horrible as I thought. A girl needed her caffeine and her favorite mug to start the day. It might not be my house or my bed, but I clung to those things.

An hour later, Nia and Indie were satisfied with the excuse I made up about the townhouse having a water leak. Since they barely knew Zoe, they didn't question the excuse. And staying with family wasn't a lie, either, because Cole was family.

By marriage, but still.

I drummed my fingers on the counter, bored and finished with emails and a few phone calls about the signing and decided to explore the house.

Not snoop, just...take a look around. Familiarize myself with the place.

Low music played from speakers once I found Cole's smart speaker and had it play something so the house wouldn't feel so lonely. The main level had a mudroom off the garage, the kitchen which rivaled the one my mom and Cole's dad had in their house. The great room with its wall of windows. Down a hall one side was an office that looked like it had just been set up because there wasn't a thing out of place, a game room with a pool table, and half bath. In the other direction was another office and a butler's pantry. The door to the pantry creaked, the sound echoing in the quiet. It was bigger than Zoe's kitchen. Sleek and modern like the rest of the house, a tinier replica of the main kitchen. There was a box sitting on the white granite countertop. Or maybe it was quartz? I watched all the home improvement shows with Nia after hours planning the Book Boyfriend signing, so I knew a few things.

The dark cabinets and light floor were in stark contrast, rich and yet inviting in a way my parent's house had never been.

And Cole and Izzy's dad had been more of a father to me than mine ever had been. I didn't even know where he was now, to be honest. I wasn't sure I cared. But this place, Cole's house, felt more home than the one I lived in before I left for college.

Quiet as a mouse, I stepped further in, running my fingers along the smooth, cool counter. The coffee contraption that was more fit for a Starbucks or maybe one of the cafes that did those adorable designs out of the foam on a latte. Book Boyfriends had one, and it was not exactly cheap or at the local Target for pick up.

The box seemed out of place, given that Cole's house was spotless and barely looked lived in, save for the kitchen. Which at least had a few things like potholders and a

box window with herbs on it. Real ones.

Oh, yes, I touched them to make sure they were real.

My curiosity piqued, I looked inside and found...Junior Mints. A case of freaking Junior Mints.

What were the chances Cole loved them as much as I did? Come to think of it, I thought I caught sight of something in his hand last night, but I was focused on the assure people I am ok default whenever found me up at night.

He loved them, too.

Just another reason to hate that he didn't remember me. Or would admit to obviously lowering himself to a one off with a 'puck bunny'. Maybe that was what he thought I was, on top of being 'family', and why he was being so...stand-offish.

Well, the joke was on him. I picked up the box, kicked the door shut, and headed up to my room. And had a box while dancing around in my bra and panties while picking out what I was going to wear to go get my new phone. Because if Cole thought I needed one, then his other 'sister' was going to make sure it was the newest, most expensive annoying phone. Ever.

"Eden?"

His voice sent my pulse racing, and I debated having a stern conversation with myself about not wanting the dick that didn't want me. His actual dick. Not the man himself acting like one. Although the Grump factor was in full effect. The one that growled, grumpily, and sent shivers down my spine despite the explicit dislike and not wanting me himself vibes.

I ran a finger along the outline of my now pink to match my hair lips, smoothed a hand over the cobalt blue dress that hugged every curve, and checked my reflection one last time. My favorite over the knee black vintage Chanel boots that I found through a vintage couture boutique, Magpie Dreams, for a steal, gave me a little more height, but Cole would still tower over me.

“We need to go-”

I spun, as Cole stopped in the doorway to my room, one arm on the door frame. His eyes raked up and down my body with a hungry expression on his face that vanished so quickly I thought I might have imagined it. “I’m ready. And maybe knock next time,” I added as I grabbed my purse and brushed past him. Did I make sure to make bodily contact?

Yes, I did. Because I was betting on that look I thought I imagined being real.

And swayed my hips a little more than necessary as I headed to the stairway. Over my shoulder, I tossed a glance his way and said, “Coming?”

He mumbled something unintelligible, and followed slowly. His footsteps echoed, a study staccato behind me at a respectful distance. “I’ll bring your old phone. They can transfer your info, but keep this one active.”

As he opened the door that led into the garage, I asked, “Why keep it active?”

Cole gestured to his SUV. The garage was big enough for four cars, but right now, there were only two. His SUV, and my car.

“How did you get my car?”

“Noah.”

“And why didn’t Noah tell me?”

“Because I had your phone, remember?”

Oh, yeah. I huffed out a breath as he shot me an expectant look while he held the passenger door. “I can open my own door.”

Cole stared me down, then jerked his chin at the seatbelt. I glared at him but buckled myself in, and only then, did he close the door and made his way around to the driver’s side.

The drive, Cole alternated between fiddling with the heat, changing the song playing via his phone, and steadfastly averting his eyes from any semblance of my direction. And once we went in to switch my phone, Cole introduced me as his sister. Technically true, but it hurt in that place I ignored enough that the wound was reopened and my bravado went down a notch.

I picked out the newest iPhone, knowing it would cost just under a grand. Cole didn’t flinch or bat an eyelash.

So, I went over to a wall of tablets and phones and ignored them while Cole started the process of switching things over. I hated not texting Noah and Zoe. Emails weren’t the same.

“Here,” a gruff voice said behind me as Cole thrust my shiny new phone, with a new case almost exactly like my old one, at me. He slipped my old phone in his pocket.

“I don’t get it back?”

“No.”

“Why?”

He stared at me down. “Because I am taking care of...it.” And then, the grumpy asshole step brother of mine walked out of the store. I gaped after him, gathered myself, and followed. Prepared to give him a piece of my mind.

Again he opened the damn passenger door, waited for me to buckle myself in. But I refused. “It’s my phone, my life, and I-”

A sigh of exasperation left him. “For fuck’s sake, Eden.” He reached over, buckled me in and grasped my chin, gently despite the fire smoldering in his blue eyes. “Let someone fucking take care of you for once who won’t see you as the problem. Let me take care of this so that I can forgive myself for the way I took advantage of you. Let me do this so that I know you are fucking ok.” My jaw dropped, my mouth formed an ‘O’ as he released me, shut the door and got in on his side.

We drove in silence until we pulled into the police station. The officer who met with us seemed to know Cole, and took my statement as well as the notes I’d kept in a shoe box (which Cole produced while I stood speechless beside him), and did something with my old phone. He returned it, then took down my statement with a promise to follow up and asked that I would let him know of any further contact. The last statement was directed at Cole, who clenched his jaw and avoided my pointed glance in his direction.

He led me out, hand cupping my elbow.

Again with the door, but before he could lean in, I hissed, “I swear if you buckle me in, I will bite your hand off, brother.” I yanked the door closed, buckled up and crossed my arms across my chest.

Instead of giving him an ounce of my attention, I checked my new phone. And of

course, Noah had already texted me.

NOAH: Hey, E. Enjoying captivity?

ZOE: CAPTIVITY? What in the ever loving kinky hell is going on, Eden??

NOAH: Like, are Spooky Kinks a thing?

ZOE: Masked...ahem.

EDEN: ...

NOAH: How dark romance do you go, Eden? Is your job widening your horizons?

ZOE: Maybe a forbidden romance?

EDEN: I am not being held captive. Not really. And just because I like spooky, it does not mean dark romance kinks are my thing.

ZOE: So, what is your thing?

NOAH: I promise I won't tell. Is it weird? Or like, am I going to look at you differently ?

I giggled at Noah being Noah but I swear, if Zoe was going to dish, she'd better be ready to take.

EDEN: I mean, I've always thought best friend's older brother sounded good, but...

NOAH: Is that a kink? Or are we heading into trope territory here?

ZOE: Isn't there a practice or yoga class you need to get to ? And I'm sure Eden has things to do.

NOAH: Sigh. Yep. Season home opener tomorrow, and then off to your step bro's old house for their home opener. I think #HockeyGoddess gets to meet the BFF squad.

EDEN: Go be all Zen and I call you later, Z.

I looked up from my phone, only to discover we were back in the garage at Cole's house. His hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white and his nostrils were flaring. "What?"

"If you're done?"

"Oh, I'm just getting started," I said with more bravado than I felt. But I was an expert at faking it until I made it. Cole may think he knows me, but years of hiding things that made people feel uncomfortable from my mother gave me skills that he would never see coming. "I have a few things to get done before bed." I opened the door before he could do his leap-out-caveman impression. Or was it a knight in shining armor?

He'd soon learn I'd read a different type of fairy tale in the dark while I hid away growing up .

I stalked into the kitchen, the heels of my boots keeping time with the beating of my heart. Fast, unforgiving, and filled with a determination now that he's admitted he'd remembered giving me the best orgasms of my life.

The door slammed behind me, but I kept going, and forced myself not to look behind because if I saw another one of those disapproving or distant expressions on his face,

I might not make it to my room. My foot hit the bottom step just as noises from the kitchen hit my ears.

Was he making dinner? Seriously? After all, practically confessing that he'd made a mistake and that was the only reason he was 'taking care' of me?

No. Not looking.

A soft knock on my door woke me. I resisted the urge to wipe the sleep from my eyes, and end up looking like a feral raccoon. Instead I sat up, blew the hair from my eyes and checked the time on my shiny new phone.

Shit. I slept for a little over an hour. Which meant my sleep pattern was taking a vacation tonight.

"Eden?"

Cole's voice, muffled through the door, sounded concerned yet still grumpy. Or growly.

I was going with grumpy, I decided. Anything else would lead to trouble or disappointment. And I'd had enough of that. With a sigh, I stood, barefoot and yanked open the door.

Cole towered over me, a breadth's inch away. Every exhale and inhale in that space shared until he backed away. "Dinner's ready."

As I watched him walk away, I ignored the way his ass looked in the athletic pants he had changed into, or how his thighs flexed, or the way the vein in his forearm stood out as he ran a hand through his hair.

Oh, yeah this should be really easy.

Don't fall for your stepbrother, Eden. That's all you need.

If I didn't go down, would he come back up? And what would happen then? Did I want to find out?

Deciding that was not a road I wanted to go down only to have my heart broken, I padded down the stairs. The most delicious scent greeted me.

Holy hell, could Cole actually cook? And not just boil noodles and throw a can of sauce on it and call it Italian?

"Take a seat, and I'll bring dinner over," Cole said from behind the island. Two sets of plates were set out before him, and two wine glasses as well as water filled goblets were placed next to sets of silverware. He didn't acknowledge me other than those words, his focus on plating the steaming plates of insanely fantastic and mouth watering dinner he'd prepared. The stainless steel stove had several pans, and the aroma of herbs and spices that I couldn't begin to name permeated the air.

Shit. Of course Mr. Forbidden Trope cooked. Check off another fucking green flag I'll have to ignore in my 'brother'.

I ran my finger along the table as I walked to the chair across from his. Cole came from behind me, pulled out my chair, and said, his tone gruff and sexy, "Sit, Eden. Please."

The 'please' did me in. He might have regretted us, but in some ways, making up for it with the phone and dinner were an unspoken apology. And his confession earlier ?

I heard the torment in his words, torn from him.

I held my head high and sat. Cole gently pushed the chair in. I sipped the wine, again, my favorite, and when he sat the plate down in front of me, my stomach decided it was an appropriate time to communicate.

“Excuse me,” I mumbled, embarrassed.

“Don’t.”

I looked up as he sat across from me and picked up his fork. “Don’t what?”

“Apologize.” One side of his mouth lifted. “It’s your body’s way of telling you to take care of yourself.”

I arched one brow. “I thought you were taking care of me.”

He acquiesced with a shrug. “So, it’s telling me, then.” Fascinated, I watched as his hand moved from his plate, the fork filled with the most amazing smelling creation (food was much too lame of a word), and when he put it into his mouth, lips closing around it, I nearly swooned.

And clenched my thighs together so hard, I swear he had to have heard my knees clanging together. He chose that second to notice me, and ordered. “Eat, Eden.”

Things escalated when I figured out that my moans and enjoyment had him staring at me, eyes darkening and a small satisfied smile ghosted on his lips. “This,” I licked my lips, “is amazing. What is it?”

Cole smiled. And I was struck at how rare it was. A genuine, unguarded moment, and fuck, I was so scared it would disappear like it had never happened. “It’s an Indian fusion dish I learned to make from this chef in Carolina before Seattle signed me. The chef is a friend of friend.”

“You like to cook?”

He chewed, and his next words made butterflies flutter in my belly. “Only for certain people.”

Then it hit me. He probably cooked for girls. Lots of girls.

“Oh.” I wasn’t special.

“I can count on one hand, Eden, who I’ve done this for.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. “My mom, before she moved to France with her new husband, and that was a disaster. My teammate, Kas, and now, you.”

“Me?”

“You.”

The only girl, other than his mom, he’s ever cooked for was me?

“But, you’re really good. This would make the girls swoon.”

He smirked. “They swoon no matter what. This,” he pointed his fork at my dish, “is special. It means more when you cook for someone. In your space, invite them in. Food is language in and of itself.”

I swallowed, each bite an apology, prayer, and promise in one. We ate in silence for a few minutes. My heart pounded in my chest, hope bloomed.

He cleared his throat. “And you’re family, Eden.”

And the bubble burst. “Right. You should make this for Izzy, she’d love it. But, if you have a pizza recipe, she’d love that, too. The toppings that girl likes.” The chair made an awful screech as I stood, the wine buzzing and my belly happily full yet suddenly I felt an emptiness inside. “I can get the dishes-”

Cole was next to me, and our hands brushed as we both reached for my plate. Imposing and a good head or so taller than me, yet I’d never felt so safe. Or broken hearted. “I’ve got it. Why don’t you take a bath or something, and I’ll clean up. ”

Did I nearly run out of the room and pray he’d chase me, and when he caught me, fuck me until I cried from wanting his touch so badly? Yes.

Did I stand, alone in the shower, crying, because I knew he wouldn’t?

Yes.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

COLE

NOAH: Family dinner after the game. FYI. Ollie and Kas' treat. Or is it date night? Zoe is coming on the road. Serious moment. I think Eden should come.

I 'd filled in Noah about Eden's stalker before practice, and the goalie had demons flying from him. Blocked every shot during the scrimmage, and after, broke his stick on the crossbar he'd been so pissed.

Good. It meant he'd keep an eye out for her, too. If I ever let her out of my sight, that was.

I trudged up the stairs, fighting the urge to break down her door and take Eden in the shower, hard and fast, and then wash her body and worship her the way she deserved.

Fuck, this being at war with myself messed with my head.

I wanted to protect Eden, not just from the asshole creep stalking her, but from my father and his judgment. I'd be lying if the thought of being with her and seeing the look on his face hadn't entered into my thoughts. But I refused to put Izzy or Eden between us, and the issues we had.

In the middle of the night, I heard footsteps outside my door. Eden, creeping down the hallway, and down the stairs. Fuck, it took all my will power not to follow her, chase her, and take her mercilessly, face to face. I fisted my cock, jerking off until I came all over my bare chest to the fantasy and woman living in my house.

My stepsister.

The next morning, I left long before she woke up after staying up most of the night, but I left her note with her car keys in case she wanted to go to the bookstore praying she wouldn't and asked her to text me if she did.

Along with an off the shoulder Triumph sweatshirt Lanie helped find for me.

The police didn't have any leads, and so far Eden's old phone had gone silent. Eden planned on attending the season home opener tonight with Zoe, and Noah asked to have extra security stationed by them and Izzy, who'd somehow wrangled my father into joining her.

Talk about fucking family time. But, I made Noah promise not to tell anyone, even if Zoe knew now. If my father found out, he'd be relentless and make Eden move home with him.

No. Fucking. Way. Eden was mine to take care of, no matter how fucked up that might be.

EDEN: Staying home. I'll work from here. Zoe is coming over and I'm telling her.

Eden decided that her roommate wouldn't believe any bullshit story we could come up with, so she was going to tell her the police suggested she relocate while they looked into the matter. I had a feeling that Noah and Eden's best friend would see straight through it. No matter that they both knew about Eden being pressured into moving back home. Moving in with a step brother she just met was suspicious as fuck.

Never mind the elephant in the room when I confessed how I'd wanted to take care of her after using her the way I had at the haunted house. We hadn't discussed it since,

or really then, but it didn't change the reality of the situation we found ourselves in.

Home.

She called it home.

Fuck. This was getting bad.

I tossed my phone on the shelf in my locker and finished lacing up. Jaxon sat down across from me and shook his head.

"How the hell does LeCav fit hockey in with all the damn texts he sends," the former Chicago player complained. "He's worse than my ex-girlfriend ever did. And her phone was attached to her hand."

"Bet you wished it was your dick," Shaw said as he left the room.

"Fucking Shaw," Theo Gerard, the other winger on my line muttered. "Too bad his fucking contract screwed us over."

Zoe had been dating Liam Shaw in secret but then she hooked up with our new Coach who just so happened to be Noah's big brother. The team had waived his contract, but there was a fucking loophole his agent found, and the organization decided to let things quiet down before deciding what to do about him. The whole situation had been a logistical nightmare and keeping it under the radar had taken Lanie's entire PR expertise. With any luck, he'd be gone before the All Star break.

Too bad he was a great player. Still an asshole, though.

"Fellow Ghost Hockey Daddies," Noah quipped as he entered the room, a huge smile on his face. "Just tell me I missed Shaw before I make the customary

announcements.”

Jaxon snorted. “Elvis has left the fucking building.”

“Fucking Mason needs to cut him off. If I have to go home and see his face one more time because I want to hang out with my brother, I’ll lose my shit.” He sighed, then grinned again. “Morning skate on the day of our season home opener is not a day to be taken lightly. And, I know many of you have special guests coming, so I’ll make this quick. The playlist in the locker room is a sacred ceremony and there is no booing or leaving during anyone’s songs.”

“Tell me Shaw isn’t included.” Theo stood, and checked his phone for the third time in so many minutes.

“Absolutely not. No fucking bad juju permitted.” He took off the Montreal Triumph trucker cap, flipped it over, then handed the remaining guys slips of paper. “Name and song choice. The player order will rotate every game, but the song choice by said player is fluid. Keep in mind, whoever chooses first has the responsibility of setting the tone for the entire game. Singing is permitted along with air guitar. Appropriate celebrations or choreography choices are allowed, especially if there is a bridge involved.”

The veterans on the team chuckled, while the new guys, including me and Jaxon, exchanged glances. “Fucking goalies,” I muttered.

“Only after you wine and dine me.” Noah quipped. “I’ll draw the first name, then that person draws and so on and so on. Got it?”

A chorus of ‘got it’s’ rang through the room.

“And Coach always gets the final song. Or he’ll make us do suicides next practice.”

Noah grinned again, obviously excited that his big brother, Brett LeCavalier, was the new Triumph head coach.

He closed his eyes and pulled out a slip. “And the first song goes to,” he opened his eyes and read the writing on the paper. “Sunders.”

Shit.

“No pressure.” Noah said. He shoved the hat in my direction with an expectant look.

The slip of paper I pulled that was so perfectly folded that it took extra effort to get the fucking thing opened. “Miles.”

Zoe’s brother gave off none of the energy his little sister did. From what Noah let slip, he and Zoe didn’t grow together because of the difference in their ages, and they had different mothers.

At 6’1”, I was a little taller than he was. Noah, the little shit, had a good four inches on me. As the defenseman reached in and grabbed the next victim, Noah added, “You have until we step foot in that doorway. And the red fruit app hooked up to the bluetooth.” He motioned at the Bose speaker on the table against the far wall. The pass the hat continued until all the guys, save Shaw, pulled a name. Optional morning skate. He left early.

Fucker was out of luck.

Out on the ice, we did drills for about 45 minutes, mostly to get into the rhythm of new lines and chemistry.

And, then, I headed home. To Eden.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

EDEN

Have a good morning, Eden. Text me if you go to the bookstore. Please. See you before the game...And If you want a little something to wear tonight...

The man melted me without even trying. Living with him was one thing. But when he did things like this, the line he drew blurred for me.

I peeked inside the bag on the island next to the note. A bundle of blue and orange greeted me. I pulled it out. A Triumph sweatshirt. With his number embroidered on the lower right, barely noticeable. A subtle thing that linked me to him. I shook it out and blinked.

It was off the shoulder.

He gave me something I would actually wear. Tears welled in my eyes. I reached for my phone to thank him, but a loud knock at the front door stopped me.

ZOE: Open the door so I can hug you please !

Shirt stuffed back into the bag, I spun and ran to the door and whipped it open. "It's about time you climbed out of Brett's bed."

Zoe snorted and handed me a cup of sweetly tangy pink goodness. "And how did the cafe know I was picking up this particular drink especially for you?"

I shrugged. "The last few weeks, someone's been picking up everyone's drinks. Trina

probably remembers you coming in with me sometime.”

“Or maybe you have two stalkers. And one isn’t creepy. Which is both insane to think about and somewhat sexy. Kinda like living with your sexy as fuck step brother you never knew you had who you had insanely life altering orgasms in a haunted house while he was masked and-”

Before she could continue, I snatched my happy drink from her, and glared at her. “Or as sexy as sleeping with your best friend’s older brother to get back at the asshole you never told anyone you were dating in the first place and then dealing with all the orgasms on sleepover nights since he’s still living with your best friend.”

She winced. “About that?”

My lips closed around the straw, but I paused. “Yes?”

“One, I think we both have an age gap, grump maybe forbidden kink.”

“Those are tropes.”

She continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “And since you’re living here, and it’s getting semi awkward with the whole living with Noah and then sneaking over to get fulfill all my naughty fantasies thing. ..I asked Brett to move in.”

“With you?”

Zoe nodded.

I sipped, processing. It made sense. In fact, the fact that it hadn’t come up even before was crazy. “I think that’s a great thing, and so serious of you!”

“Well,” she drawled as she hopped up on a stool at one end of the island and propped her chin on her hands, “I figured Brett decking Shaw and trying to get rid of him deserved blow jobs on the regular. Followed by all the dirty texts during the day that he can make reality in a bed we share and he doesn’t have to leave to go back to his baby brother’s place.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” I grinned.

She sobered up. “So. How serious is this stalker shit? Noah, for once, has been tight-lipped and not running off at the texts.”

Admitting that I’d been keeping something serious from my friends, much less the two most important people in my life, wasn’t easy. That I wasn’t strong enough or capable. “I don’t know. But, he knows where I live. Lived,” I amended. “And might have been watching. Cole drove me home after dinner with our parents, and he didn’t want me to worry.” I left a few details, like that the notes had shown up more than once, and the times I was sure I’d been watched. “The police said it would be safer, for now, to make it harder to find where I was.” Insert, Cole decided. “And there’s no way I was going back to my parent’s house.” A shrug. “And since you and Noah weren’t home-”

“And Mr. Chase-And-Bang-”

“This is where I am staying. For now.”

She snorted. “And are you banging?”

“Zoe Miles, I swear, getting laid has turned you-”

“Into a very happy and even hornier mess. Don’t evade.”

I plopped down next to her as she swiveled on her stool. “He pretended he didn’t know it was me, then ‘not’ admitted it, and has been grumpy and reminding me we are ‘family’,” I finger quoted before continuing, “then sweet and I am...so confused and horny! We pretend nothing happened, but then he’s watching me or I’m showering and wishing he was in the damn shower with me.”

“Or,” Zoe said as she tapped her chin thoughtfully, “chasing you around this house. Because dayum, the layout of that haunted house would make all that can’t resist, so I am going to chase and catch and fuck in every room fantasy come to life in so many variations. Choose your sex adventure fantasy activated.”

“Don’t I know it, but it’s not happening.”

She shrugged a shoulder. “So, push things. Remind him step is not blood, and you’ve already fucked.”

I rolled my eyes. “Have you met him? He’s stubborn. Plus, can you imagine Randall’s reaction? At dinner, he kept calling me Cole and Izzy’s sister. Add in that they seem to still have issues with each other, and the whole anything but siblings rooming together seems way out of reach.”

“Step siblings. And he’s a hockey player. They never play by the rules. Especially these hockey boys,” Zoe added in a dry tone. “And they must all have a mask kink.”

“Yeah, the whole #ghosthockeydaddies thing is blowing up.”

“If Noah ever wants to get a side gig, I think Lanie would hire him in a millisecond. But, it also means I’ve had people sliding into the team’s DMs on every account, and it’s not all pretty. I needed to bleach yesterday after one! Like, no one needs to see your kitty! And, wax if you’re going to do a home photo shoot. And ring light.” She shuddered and plastered on a bright smile. “But, we’re wondering if Book Boyfriends

wants to do a Christmas book boyfriend blind date dinner night with the #ghosthockeydaddies?”

“We’re?” I asked, knowing the answer. Nia might swoon like some poor girl in the Ton from Bridgerton when she found out. Or, she could pull a badass get the Viscount move.

“Yes. I’m not saying it, because you know Lanie is already planning and will be calling you this weekend.” Lanie was Zoe's boss at the Triumph and the head of PR and Player Interactions.

If Book Boyfriends kept gaining a reputation for doing good in the community and had the added benefit of the Triumph partnering it all, then she could put money into the event instead of shouldering all the marketing. “Zoe, this is...amazing.”

“And so fun. Plus, added bonus of torturing the ‘daddies’ with this. Oh, and she’s going to ask about a calendar to coincide with it all. Like, each player is a different book boyfriend.”

Excitement bubbled up, because ideas were zooming around in my brain like a kitten at 3:54 am. “Noah has to be #HockeyBoy.”

She nodded. “He’ll probably organize the entire shoot,” she added with a giggle.

We spent the rest of the afternoon ordering takeout, catching up, and finalizing the media and marketing the Triumph would do for their players for the Book Boyfriend Auction for the signing in three weeks.

“So, Noah, Jaxon, Theo, and Cole.”

I froze, my hand in mid update email type mode to Nia and Indie. “Cole?”

“Noah said he said yes the night of the haunted house. ”

Someone is going to bid on Cole and he’s going to take them out on date.

Great. My stomach churned, and a little green settled over me like a wet blanket. Not with envy. But with jealousy.

“Woah there, Eden. Maybe somebody’s crazy drunk aunt will bid on him.”

I steeled my expression. “Why should it matter to me who bids on him? It’s all for a good cause, and great for the bookstore. Theo, however, is going to draw all the attention. Especially with the newly single dad thing going on.”

“He’s being such a pain in the ass. I understand, but he’s trying to do it all himself, and it’s going to affect his time on the ice if he keeps it up. But, he did add Delena Bennett’s last book on his last post and Noah played along.”

I chuckled. “It was pretty hilarious, and she messaged me because her boyfriend is a football player and got a little hot about it. She said thank you for an awesome night. I have a feeling she’d help with the masked daddies event if we asked, since her last book hit the bestseller list.”

“Ooh, yes! But, as much as I’ve missed living with you-”

“Aw, bestie!”

“Thank you for being understanding about Brett moving in.”

“Just let me move my things out before you defile them.”

She kept going as if I hadn't spoken once again. “And I will see you tonight? Do you

need a ride? Or something to wear? It's the first game, and I know you hate a hoodie or crew neck, maybe I could find something?"

I ticked off my fingers. "Yes, I'm not sure, and got it covered."

"Perfect, road head after the game," she chuckled at my squeak, "and really?"

"Cole picked up something for his sibling." My finger flicked at the bag I had moved to the couch after she arrived.

"Step sibling. And really!"

I jumped off the stool while Zoe eyed the bag. "I'll call you if I need a ride. But, I will sit and cheer and do all the things. And, Izzy and my parents are coming. No stalker talk. As far as they know, there was a water leak that is being fixed."

"And you're staying with your sexy step brother that you fu-"

"OUT!"

A shower and yoga session later, I wrapped my hair in a towel, and slipped on a short black silk robe and went down the backstairs to make a cup of tea before I got dressed. Cole should've come home, but if he was anything like Noah, he had some crazy pre-game day routine he'd follow.

Noah liked to dance around and sing instead of running or whatever the other players did to keep loose, nap, then eat before he did a hot yoga routine. Not being down the street meant I missed out on the hot yoga session with him.

Shit, did that mean I was fucking up his routine?

I frantically looked for my phone as I hopped off the last step and spied it on the island. A relieved sigh left my lips and I flew because I wasn't a puck girl, but Noah had patiently explained all the superstitions to me over Junior Mints one night. While Zoe cackled in the background.

EDEN: Did I mess up your routine?

The dots jumped as he typed. Zoe beat him to the punch.

ZOE: Brett and I haven't figured out our pre-game yet!

NOAH: And I didn't need to know that.

ZOE: SHIT! Sorry!

NOAH: Don't start lying to me now.

ZOE: I am kinda sorry.

NOAH: And nope. You only did hot yoga with me for one division's home games.

EDEN: Did I miss the other one's?

NOAH: Well, there's four, and I didn't want you to make me watch more Halloween movies than we negotiated. Plus, it was our division. No big deal, E.

"You...didn't like it?"

I dropped my phone and squeaked and spun around. The robe flew around me, and I was suddenly and very acutely aware of my not wearing anything underneath. He held up the bag with the Triumph-wear he left for me this morning. I gathered the

neckline with one hand, smoothing the bottom with the other. “You scared me! And,” I licked my lips. “I love...it.”

His blue eyes bore into mine, heated. Pupils dilated. Darted to wear the neckline of the robe, still clenched in my hand, closed. Trained from my neck and lower. My body heated under his scrutiny. Heat pooled between my legs. A spark jumped between us, and I closed the distance between us, chin held high.

I wanted him to admit that there was this...thing...sparks...flying between us. Or something. Anything to show me I wasn't crazy. With each step, his eyes heated, darkening. Until we were close enough for me to take the bag if he handed it to me. I waited, hoping he'd make me come even closer.

A second passed, then another. Just as I was about to take a step, he cleared his throat and held the bag out to me. “I'm going for a run. Be ready at 6, so Zoe can pick you up.”

“I'm not going with you?” My heart sank. I clutched the bag to my chest.

“Unless you want to spend three hours at the arena, Eden, no.”

I lifted my chin. “I don't mind.”

He shifted, and roughed a hand through his hair, which I was starting to realize was his way of battling an internal struggle. “Three hours, Eden. Alone.”

“But I'd be there. With you. In the building, at least.”

He went so still that I was afraid he was going to say no. “You want to be...with me.”

It wasn't a question, and I didn't answer. Let him figure out the answer, if he wanted

one. If things were going to get complicated and he wanted to blur lines, confuse me, and have me live here with him...then he needed to acknowledge this thing between us.

“Fine. Be ready at 4 and I’ll see if you can get into the suite early and wait for Zoe.”

“I can work on my phone, and I actually need to talk to Lanie about a few things.”

Cole opened his mouth then shut it, and we stood there a heartbeat longer, then turned and went out the front door.

The bravado I’d been pretending to own deflated. I sank down on the couch, hugging the bag to my chest as what Zoe said played over and over in my mind.

Push things. I let out a long breath, stood, and prepared for battle. Or a chase.

Promptly at four, Cole came down the stairs.

Hanging a suit, and looking devastatingly handsome.

Tall, dark, and glowering at me like he wanted to eat me alive.

Once he caught me, that is.

Dark blue, tailored to fit, because there was no way he bought that off the hanger. Or anything ever. Because the man’s thighs were almost the size of my waist, and I was not exactly sucking it in. The air had grown chilly outside, and without saying a word about the shirt he gave me or the white strategically ripped jeans and white heels I wore. But his gaze lingered for a beat or three longer than was necessary.

Cole led me to the garage, opened the passenger door for me but instead of letting me

climb in, he took my hand and helped me in and didn't wait for me to buckle myself in. As he leaned over my body, the scent of aftershave tickled my nose. I didn't want to move, and I did. I wanted him to touch me, kiss me again. Do anything. But, I just watched him, his blue eyes hooded as he pulled away and closed my door.

The drive to the arena, he did his usual check the temperature and play music routine. Gripped the steering wheel. His eyes, however, didn't stay glued to the road, but strayed to my side every few moments. We parked in the player's section, and again, he didn't let me climb out, but took my hand.

Every touch, look...it was intoxicating and I couldn't get enough. We walked to the door, but when we got inside, there was a security guard waiting for us.

"Hey, Gus, Thanks for helping out."

Gus, a friendly looking, if not slightly imposing man, grinned. "My pleasure, Mr. Sanders. Lanie said to tell you she was bribing me with cookies and maybe one of those Oreo brownies she is going to steal from the player's room for me, even though I told her it would be my pleasure to help out.." He chuckled and turned to me.

Before either of us could say a word, Cole stepped between us. "Eden, Gus is the head of security for the player's families during games, but he's going to make sure no one bothers you until Zoe and the rest of our family joins you. Gus, this is my sister, Eden."

"Step sister," I corrected, my tone light while the pit in my stomach made an appearance. "So nice to meet you, Gus."

"Same, Eden. Mr. LeCavalier also told me he'd sneak an extra brownie through mysterious channels for you, too." Gus winked, then his expression turned sober. "I also will make sure no one bothers you or makes you uncomfortable."

My smile slipped a little.

“I’ll keep you safe, Eden. You’re a part of the Triumph family, and no messes with my families.” His smile was kind, and even though I hated that one more person knew about my stalker, part of me breathed a little easier because Gus just had that way about him.

“Thank you.” Behind me, Cole grunted.

The sound as familiar as the way he glared whenever I challenged him. Pushed him. I swept my hair behind my ear and turned to him. His eyes darted up.

Caught you, brother, I thought. “Anything you’d like to add?”

My breath caught as he leaned in.

“Be. Good,” he said, too low for anyone to hear. A flush crept up my cheeks. He straightened up and added, “Gus or Zoe will bring you down to where the families wait after the game. Don’t get in too much trouble, Bunny.”

Who was pushing who here?

NOAH: Going radio silent. But, Gus has contraband coming. Enjoy the show, BESTIES!

ZOE: Filming the walk in. I’m so proud. Love you!

EDEN: Do you say anything for luck?

ZOE: I go with have a great game. I mean, I do things for good luck, but, Goalie here won’t want to hear.

EDEN: HAVE THE BEST OPENING NIGHT!

NOAH: Thanks. On both things!

Gus and I walked in a quiet arena that would be soon filled with fans buzzing over with excitement of what a new season would bring. We passed staff in concessions and other kiosk prepping as well as a few other security personnel who nodded at Gus as we walked by.

“Lanie also said she’d stop by once she had a chance. Home openers can get a little crazy.” He chuckled and led me to a door. One swipe of a card, and he ushered me into the suite. “Now, if you want to go down to the seats once Zoe arrives, let me know. And I’ve told the ushers to let me know when your and Mr. Sanders’ family arrives.”

“Thank you again. You don’t have to stay, Gus.”

He smiled and waved me off. “I’m going to step outside and check with my team, and then I’ll be right outside so you can take care of whatever you need. And I’ll keep an eye out for those cookies.” He winked and left me alone in the huge suite. I walked around, looking at the pictures on the wall then over to the area that overlooked the ice. Zoe had asked if my, or I should say our, family would want to stay in the suite or go down and get closer to the ice. Since this would be Izzy’s first time seeing her brother play, I opted for seats versus the suite.

Plus, if I was going to push Cole, he couldn’t think about me if he couldn’t see me. But, then I worried I’d distract him and mess up his game. When I said as much to Zoe while I was getting ready, she laughed through the phone.

“Look, I grew up with a hockey player. Kinda. It’s motivating. Trust me. Ask Ollie.”

Close to the ice it was.

I scrolled through the checklist for the signing, and followed up on a few emails. Forty-five minutes later, Lanie peeked her head in the door. “Eden!”

I stood, and grinned. “It’s so nice to finally meet you!”

The tall, willowy brunette opened the door all the way and breezed in with a little boy in tow. “I hope you don’t mind. This is my friend Travis and he’s super excited to see his dad play tonight. Aren’t you, buddy?”

The little boy peered up at her, then turned to me with solemn eyes and nodded.

“Theo’s nanny quit right before the game because she had to go back home for a family emergency, so I get to have a friend with me until his back up arrives. But we’re good friends, right buddy?”

My heart melted as the little blond haired boy nodded and fidgeted with the Triumph Jersey he wore with his father’s number on the back. So this was Theo Gerard’s little boy. Indie had mentioned her brother had been his best friend growing up a few days ago on FaceTime. Which was a total surprise, because she never once mentioned his name before then.

“Hi. Travis. It’s so nice to meet you.”

Lanie knelt down in front of the little boy. “Remember Mr. Gus? He’s waiting for some really special cookies for you and my friend here. I bet if you wait with him, he might give you a few extra for keeping him company for a few minutes. Plus,” she whispered loudly, “ he plays Pokemon Go and is looking for new friends.” His eyes lit up. Lanie took a phone out of her pocket. “And your dad gave me this so you can play with him, or take pictures if you want.”

Travis looked to be five or six, smiled and took it from her. “Thank you. Miss Lanie.”

Gus peeked in. “Travis, my man, let's scan and catch 'em all. And the cookies are on the way up, but don't tell anyone yet.”

We watched Travis, who turned and waved, and then, once the door closed, Lanie smiled, sad and sighed. “That poor kid has been through so much. And Theo's trying, but some men are just too stubborn sometimes. But,” she clasped her hands together, “I have fifteen minutes, not just because of that adorable mini Theo out there. It seems there's a few girls who tried to sneak into the locker room, and one of them is...never mind. Let's just concentrate on the good things for now!”

We spent the next few minutes covering the players who would be in the auction for this signing, and then we hashed out a few ideas for the holiday book boyfriend blind date dinner. By the time Gus knocked, holding a bag of Crumbl cookies, we were both grinning and I had a plan typed out and emailed to Nia and Indie.

“Zoe or I will follow up with you next week. And of course, the team's PR accounts will help cover the event and promote it like we promised. I can't wait. I do need a few new books,” she grinned. Travis hid behind Gus, eating a cookie, his own bag held tightly in his little fist. Lanie glanced at her phone. “Guess what? I have someone who can't wait to see you , buddy! Let's leave Miss Eden to eat her cookies and go meet her friends.” Hand in hand, the two started to leave, when he turned and waved .

“Goodbye, Miss Eden. Nice to meet you.”

Heart. Melt. “Nice to meet you, too, Travis. Have fun watching your dad play.”

“Ready to see your seats, Eden? Zoe is heading down, and your family just arrived in the guest lot.”

I was as ready as I was going to get. At least Izzy would be there to run interference. I hated that she knew me better than the woman who raised me. They meant well, but sometimes I wish they'd just let me be...me.

Gus held out his arm and gently shook the cookie bag. "And I have cookies."

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

COLE

COLE: Enjoying the game?

My knee jogged up and down, my impatience zinging through my limbs and making me want to jump out of my skin.

First period down, and Noah and his enchanted pipes, his words not mine, had kept the score to two to zip. Sweat dripped down my face as I waited for Eden to respond.

Hunter entered the locker room, toweling his hair and wearing only his pants. “Nice period, LeCav.”

Noah flexed, hitting the playlist from earlier and starting it from the beginning.

A haunting song by Halestorm played, and fuck if I wasn’t transported back to the smoke filled haunted house.

I stood, impatient and trying to not think about chasing her. The way the pulse at her neck throbbed. How she said yes after I told her exactly what would happen when I caught her.

Noah’s voice broke into my thoughts. “Romeo, text incoming.”

I snatched my phone.

EDEN: Surprisingly, yes You’re really good.

It still amazed me that she'd never been to a game. Then again, she grew up with my father, and he wasn't exactly a fan.

I reread the message.

COLE: Just wait. Next one's for you.

Right after I hit send, I cursed myself. I quickly added...

COLE: And Izzy.

Coach came into the room, and I quickly put my phone back up on the shelf.

Just wait, Bunny. You haven't seen anything yet.

The next period was a little more of a competition, and Chicago nearly scored and held us at two until the last fifteen seconds when Theo sent a saucer my way and Killian, our center, spun and faked. Their goalie's head tracked him, but when I deked at the last minute and sent it sailing he moved too late. The puck missed his glove and went into the net.

The guys celebrated, and as I made my way to the bench to hit gloves, I stopped in front of Izzy and Eden high fiving and pointed at them both. My girl jumped up and down and screamed my name. Her cheeks were rosy and her green sparkled. My father and her mom cheered, but I only had eyes for Eden.

Third period flew by, because every time i hit the ice, I could feel her eyes on me. Watching. Breaking down my resolve. But then, just as the buzzer sounded, I looked over and saw my dad hugging her and Izzy.

I ducked out before Zoe or Lanie could corral me into the media room. Let Theo and

Jaxon do their captain and alternate duties game one. There was a girl waiting for me to take her home.

No, not just any girl. My girl.

The happy noises coming from the family waiting area grew louder and louder as I neared, but when I walked through the door, everyone disappeared except for Eden. Her pink hair stood out in the crowd, but even if she hid it under a hat, I'd know where she was. Just like I knew where she ran from me that night. Fuck, now I was getting a hard-on.

“That was a great game, Cole.”

And six words made all that disappear in an instant.

I turned to see my father standing with Izzy and Eden's mom. Eden caught my eye from across the room where she stood with Noah and Zoe. The goalie wore a huge grin on his face, which was well deserved. A shut out on opening night was fucking awesome. I glanced around, thinking Walker would want to celebrate with his sister, but he was nowhere to be found. Zoe didn't look bothered but Eden's eyes softened as she waved.

The sweatshirt I had Lanie find for Eden fit her just the way I had imagined. When she got up from the couch at home earlier, all i wanted to do was tear off the jeans that fit her body like second skin and tell her to run after kissing her senseless.

“That was even better in person,” Izzy gushed. I broke the stare, and returned my little sister's hug. “And I can't believe how fast it looks in person. Or the way the ice smells. ”

I chuckled. “That's actually one of my favorite things. The smell. But just the ice, not

the locker room. You won't want to smell that, Izz."

"Guys only smell great after a shower," Zoe teased as she and Eden joined us. "Trust me. And their equipment is...well, let's just say I feel for the equipment staff. It was so nice to meet you all tonight. Just let Eden or Cole know if you'd like to come to another game. The players have tickets available for most games, and if the seats aren't available, you could also watch the game from the suite."

The world faded away as Izzy prattled on about the game, trying to get our father and I into a conversation, but after a few minutes, I interrupted. "Eden looks tired, I'd better take her home. Thank you for coming," I added, hugging Izzy and nodding at everyone else. Hand at her back, I guided Eden through the crowd and down the hall. We walked in silence, but every once in a while, she'd smile and glance at me.

When we went outside into the chilly air, I asked, "Why are you smiling?"

She stood next to me as I opened the door and helped her in my SUV. "Because I had fun. For the first time in a long time, I didn't have to pretend."

Her admission stole my breath for a second, and when I leaned in to buckle her seatbelt as she rolled her eyes with more mirth than brattiness. I lingered longer, then said as I stood with my arm on the door. "I'm glad."

The drive home tortured my fucking dick because all it did was argue that I was being fucking stupid. And I reminded myself of the shit my dad would put her through, and how people would look at her because we were related, if only by marriage.

Traffic was heavier than usual because of the game, but the further away from the arena I drove, the lighter it was. I checked the heat. Eden rarely wore a jacket, and she refused to ask me to turn up the heat so I always made sure she was warm. Or that there was music playing after I noticed that she always had something playing in the

background.

Stars twinkled in the night sky and when I pulled into the garage, I glanced over at Eden. A soft snore left her lips and she curled up in her seat. Fuck, she was beautiful. I carefully and quietly got out and went to her side. Slowly, and maybe because I wanted to enjoy her body against mine, I unbuckled her and took her in my arms. She snuggled into my neck with an adorable noise.

Thank fuck I showered after the game, though the day was catching up to me. Thank God our next game wasn't tomorrow. And since we had a great game, Coach made the morning skate optional. So, just a workout in the afternoon. Our next two games were away, first in Seattle then in Vegas. Talk about a temperature shift. I still hadn't figured out how to tell Eden she was coming with me. Or how the logistics were going to work. At least in Seattle, I knew Zoe would be there, and maybe even for Vegas. But spending one night, not to mention two to three, away from Eden wasn't something I wanted to do.

With a little creative finagling, I manage to get inside without dropping or waking Eden. Once we were upstairs, I glanced down the hallway. Her door was shut, but mine was ajar.

Shit.

I glanced at both doors again. Weighing my options, and talking myself out of taking her into my room or somehow opening her door without waking her up. Eden was a usually light sleeper, and almost every night I heard her in the hallway, making her way downstairs at two in the morning.

Her breath, soft and sweet against my neck, was steady. The feel of her sleeping in my arms made my dick rock hard, and not just because I wanted to be inside her. But because she felt safe enough to be vulnerable with me.

Fuck it.

I walked past her door, and pushed open my door with my foot. I made my way into the room, each footstep so fucking loud, I thought for sure she would wake up. On the last step, I gently placed her on my bed and pulled my arm out from under her sweet body. Fuck she looked absolutely perfect lying there. On the navy comforter, her bright hair splayed out around her. I glanced at the number 17 on the bottom of the sweatshirt. It nearly reached her mid thigh, and my mouth watered at the thought of her creamy skin in contrast to the Triumph colors, wearing only the thing I bought for her.

With great care, I slid her shoes off, one by one. Eden stirred when I unbuttoned her jeans, shifting when I peeled them down her legs.

“You don’t have to-” she murmured, trying to sit up

I gently made her lie back. “I will be the perfect gentleman, Eden. I promise. Lie down.” She did, and just when I thought she fell asleep she sighed and opened her eyes, then shut them again.

“Maybe I don’t want you to be,” she mumbled, still more than half asleep. My dick made itself known, tenting my dress pants. Thank fuck she couldn’t see what having her in my bed did. Her scent mingled with mine on the bed sheets. Fuck. Temptation right in front of me.

“Shh, Bunny. Under the covers,” I whispered. There was something about her sleeping in the shirt I bought her that lit a fire in me I didn’t trust. She turned to the side and snuggled into my pillow and buried her nose in it.

I went to stand when she grabbed my hand. “Stay. Please? Just for tonight. It's been such a good day. I don’t want...” Green eyes filled with a mixture of happiness and

sadness that I'd recognized more often than she knew.

"I'll stay." I shucked off my shoes, and took off my shirt and pants then slipped on a pair of gray sweats. I started to lay on top of the bed, but Eden grumbled as she fell back asleep.

"Don't be silly, Cole."

Fuck it. Blanket be damned. I slipped under, careful not to touch her no matter how badly I wanted to. I could have this, sharing my bed with her and not touching her or crossing a line I shouldn't.

Just for one night.

Mmm. If this was a dream, I never wanted to wake up. Eden's soft, warm body touching mine, Her scent enveloping me. Her soft sighs lingering in my ear. I'd do just about anything to stay asleep longer. Skip the alarm. Pretend that I could still have her here, and make her mine. The way I wanted. Craved. Needed.

Before that fucking text. Be inside her sweet body anytime I wanted and fuck her or take her so slowly she'd beg me to make her come. Every damn day.

"Cole."

One word. Whispered. And I was thrust out of my dream. I didn't want to, and I waited but then I opened my eyes.

There she was. The girl I couldn't have. In my bed. Face to face. Closer than I'd let myself get. Her thighs entwined in mine. My erection and her, with only fabric between us. Breathing the same air, teasing, tempting and fuck, I couldn't think of a good reason not to kiss her.

Except that she wasn't my Bunny. She was my step sister

"Do you miss her?"

"Her?" I asked, my voice sleep ridden.

"Izzy."

I swallowed. Good. This, I could concentrate on. "Yes."

"Why didn't you..."

The dark stretched between us. "It's complicated."

She closed her eyes. "Cole?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

The two words ripped a hole in my heart, and she was there. All the hurt and pain I had seen in her eyes, the way she hid things. But I had to know. Hear her say it. "For what?"

Green eyes. Soft lips. "For not letting me be alone. And making me not be scared anymore." Tears welled up in her eyes, and I couldn't not hold her. Just for tonight.

"Oh, Bunny," I whispered and opened my arms. "Come here."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded. “Tonight, I’m sure. I’ll still be a gentleman.”

“For tonight,” she whispered, cuddling into my arms. I held her in the dark as I listened to the sound of her breathing growing more and more steady. Each breath a little further apart. Until she fell asleep. As much as I didn’t want it, I fought sleep, until, just like my girl, it took me. And I dreamed of her, the life I wanted that was no more.

I crawled out of bed, not wanting to wake her or have her apologize or feel awkward, and took a shower down the hall in the second floor guest bathroom. A cup of coffee and a run later, I made a trip to the cafe she loved and picked up her pink drink then headed back home. As I pulled out of the parking lot, I called the security company that installed the system before I moved in.

“I need to activate all the cameras, inside and on the property, including along the fences.”

The night she moved in, I’d shown Eden how to set and disarm the alarm. But the truth was, most of it was operated solely through my phone or my SUV. When I left or came home, there was a biometric sensor on my phone and the touchscreen that did more than the code. Eden had the manual code, but after practice yesterday, I’d checked her old phone like I had been doing. And for the first time in a few days, her stalker had messaged her.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Where are you, Eden? Hiding? You haven’t found my notes in over a week.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: It’s not nice to ignore someone who cares about you.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Ah, there you are. Beautiful. You look good in those colors. But you know you should be mine after all I’ve done to make sure you’re safe. It’s ok.

We'll find a way.

I'd nearly trashed the fucking workout room. Noah had been the only guy still in the locker room when I came back, snarling and ready to fucking punch something. Luckily for him, I'd calmed down just enough to show him the messages.

"We have to show Brett. And Gus." The head of security was a former Navy Seal and the guys teased him about special ops missions. He was imposing but also one of the nicest guys I'd met at the Triumph. "Gus knows people."

Gus was also the one who hooked me up with the security company. They were based in North Carolina, but the owner was also former Navy and had a Marine and a few other former military on his team along with guys I was pretty sure knew how to more than just change a grade or two.

Telling Coach was a no brainer, and not just because he was Noah's big brother or our Coach. Zoe was his girlfriend, and this creep knew where Eden used to live. And where Zoe and Brett now lived.

And, the owner of the team, Marc Laurent knew, too, because Brett insisted as did Gus. Laurent hired Gus because he knew of his special talents, and had no problem putting them to use.

Eden didn't know it, but there were no less than three sets of eyes on her at all times while she was in the arena. And the security company recommended a freelance team that would keep an eye on the house when I couldn't be there. Courtesy of the Triumph. They weren't kidding when they said they took care of family. Eden was family in more ways than one.

"The cameras can be adjusted, and aren't in areas that are sensitive. I've set them to your biometrics, which means you can control which ones are in use at any time,

either from the control unit in the panic room or your phone.”

Unbeknownst to me, the house had a panic room that the previous owner installed but hadn't disclosed when he sold the house because he hadn't used it once. When the team sent out someone to oversee the installation, the Marine vet and It guy found it on the grid for the house and accessed it. I stepped into the room only once when they'd set the system up for me.

“Can you add Eden's biometrics to access the room, too?”

“Yep. Give me a few seconds. I am swiping it off her phone now...and...done. You and Eden are the only ones with access to the room.”

I turned into the driveway, passed the black sedan parked in the street. Subtle. “I appreciate it.”

When I went inside, Eden was in the main living room doing yoga. The lines and curves of her body mesmerizing. My eyes refused to look away.

I watched for a few minutes, until she sank down, and ended her practice, sitting with her knees crossed, hands in front of her heart, head bowed. When she opened her eyes and saw me standing there, her cheeks heated, but she didn't look away. “Where'd you run off to?”

I held out the cup. Her mossy green eyes widened. “How did you?”

“You left the cup on the counter yesterday. It had your order on it. Good guess?”

She took a sip and nodded, eyes closed as her throat worked as she drank. “Perfect guess.”

“The game in Seattle, and Kas and the rest of the guys-”

“I am already going. Group text, remember? I wouldn't miss it for the world. Especially now.” She stood and walked up the entryway stairs. Halfway up, she stopped and threw a glance over her shoulder at me, pink hair piled on the top of her head. “Cole? Thank you again.”

EDEN

Two days later...Seattle

See you tonight. Don't let Sophia turn you into a Revenge fan.

After we fell asleep together, I woke up the next morning in Cole's bed, alone. His side of the bed was still warm, and it didn't escape my notice that he'd tucked the comforter around me. Or that I had wrapped my body around him and had the best night of sleep in a really long time.

Hyper awareness, in all its fun and glory, invaded every aspect of my life since middle school and when the messages started, they were just another thing I had to deal with. Conceal, and keep to myself so that no one saw the things they would say were out of the ordinary.

Cole changed that, layer by layer, and gave me permission to just exist. To not worry if I wasn't smiling or if I wanted to stare at the sky. Sit in the rain. Or stop trying to please everyone by fitting into the mold of what they expected of me.

I caught a flight in the afternoon to Seattle with Zoe and Gus, who laughed when I asked if he had a crush on me now, while Cole flew with the rest of the team a few hours earlier. The seven plus hour ride was the longest one I'd ever taken, but as soon as we landed, Cole texted me, and the lines we started dancing around the last few days blurred even more.

Bags and carry on luggage in hand, we weaved through the crowds of families and

travelers running to catch connecting flights. Gus walked behind us, and every so often, I glanced back to see his eyes scanning the crowd. He'd wink and Zoe'd nudge me to keep moving.

The car dropped us off at the same hotel the team booked, but we'd arrived after so I did not expect to hear from Cole because it was close to ten at night and the time change meant the guys were probably trying to adjust and get to bed early.

Expectations were not my strong point, especially with this man.

COLE: If Gus texts me before you again, no more presents.

Zoe was staying in the room across from me with Brett, and Gus refused to let me carry my bags which meant my hands were free to swipe the key card and read his message.

I rolled my eyes, and started to type out a response. "Traitor," I said with narrowed eyes at the burly head of security.

Gus chuckled. "I could still probably take him out, but if he got the whole line on my case, I'd be in trouble. You, I can just bribe you with cookies."

I laughed. "Next time, I'll bribe you with cookies."

"Sounds perfect, Just don't tell. And I'll be next door if you need anything. Cole and Noah are the only players on this floor other than Coach. The other rooms are my families. And you have to have a key card for the floor, so no worrying allowed, Eden. Let me do it all."

I thanked him, and figured out Cole or the police must've decided to keep an extra eye on things. My money was on my stepbrother.

Door shut, I stared at my phone. The dots danced, stopped, and started.

COLE: EDEN.

I read the words, and heard the growl as if he were standing right in front of me, demanding. This time, he wouldn't be wearing a mask. This time, there would be no doubt of who was ordering me to run.

In one stride, I went to the small table next to the bed and flipped on a light. A soft glow filled the room enough that I could see, but not enough to hurt my eyes or chase away the night.

On the bed, sat another bag like the one he gave me a few days ago. This one contained another off the shoulder sweatshirt, this time with his number emblazoned on the back. No name. Along a box of Junior Mints.

COLE: It's curfew, so I technically can't leave my room.

EDEN: I am fine. All tucked up in my room with my Junior Mints. I didn't know they were your favorites, too.

COLE: They're not.

I wrinkled my brow.

EDEN: Then why do you have a case of them in your house?

COLE: You mean the ones you stole?

If he knew I took them, why didn't he say anything?

EDEN: I didn't steal exactly. I hid them, but then you never said anything.

COLE: Because I bought them for you.

EDEN: But, you had them before you met me. Well, without a mask. And you were eating a box that first night.

The dots dance for what felt like forever until...

COLE: Because I wanted to know what you tasted like again.

And the line was so blurred I wasn't sure it existed any more.

There was a knock but not from the door I had entered my room from.

A rapid fire series of knocks were coming from a door...on the wall inside, which meant...

Holy hell. Cole and Noah were in a connecting room to mine. I walked over to the door, flipped the latch and opened it to find Cole standing there. Gray sweats. Shirtless. Abs and man chest and forearms and did I mention the pants were slung low so that the V action was going strong?

"You shouldn't have opened the door, Eden. What if I was-"

"Some crazy stalker who wanted to break into my room by booking the one next to me that the head of security already assured me the floor only had you, Noah, and a few families plus Zoe is across the hall with your Coach? I think the probability of having more than one stalker is pretty slim." His jaw clenched and I recognized the look. Before he could chastise me I asked softly, "Why does your room have a door to mine?"

He glanced behind him, and I peeked over his shoulder, thinking Noah would be there, but the room was empty. “Eden-”

“Is Noah in the shower?”

He shook his head. “No, he has his own room.”

“He..does? But I thought you were roommates?”

“We are, for the rest of the trip. But, we thought you would feel safer if I was close by, and Noah agreed to stay in the room on the other side.” He pointed to the other wall behind where a flat screen sat on a dresser. “And I told him I got the door because I’m your-”

“Brother”, I finished.

He stepped in closer. “Step.” The air crackled with the same intensity it had the first time we met, and all the thoughts of pushing him, making him see me, and not a relative, but the girl he chased and made feel so alive that I’d been only half alive around him since.

“Cole?”

“Mhmm? ”

“Tell me why you...please.”

I didn’t dare move because I didn’t know if I could survive another shut down. Another moment of him walking away because it was better for me.

Not because he thought he wasn’t good enough. But because he didn’t want me seen

as something less. Ever again. Because this man saw all the dark, silly, romantic parts of me that I hid from everyone else without me having to even show him.

“I just...needed to. There’s no other choice for me, Eden.”

The space between us closed, and I wasn’t who had moved closer but I didn’t care. Neither of us backed away. Every nerve in my body ignited, every breath I took came from him. My skin tingled with awareness. Heart pounded faster and faster, my lungs battled to draw in adequate oxygen. The room spun. “But you still won’t–”

“We can’t do this, Eden.”

His navy eyes bored into mine, our breaths mingling in the dark. The back of the bed, only a piece of furniture moments before, now a place where we could lose ourselves. Lie while the lights were out and the sun asleep. The moon high in the night sky, stars sparkling. And reality seemed so far away. For me, at least.

“But,” I licked my lips, “we already have, C-”

“That was before.”

“Before what? We’re still the same people as before we knew.”

Cole didn’t move away, but I could feel him closing off to me even as his eyes said otherwise.

Before I could lose my nerve, I brought my hand up to his chest. He covered it with his own, the frantic beating of his heart mirrored my own. “I only know that I don’t care. ”

“You will.”

My head went side to side, so fast the room spun even more. “No. I have spent way too many years changing who I am to let it happen any more. I don’t care if anyone says anything. We didn’t even know each other. We never slept in the same house until you decided to protect me. Protect me. Not change me or try to make me into someone I’m not. The candy, the movies, the wine? You did that all because I like them. You didn’t get things that you thought I should like. You. See. Me. Cole.”

One second, I was terrified he’d walk away and then the next, he let out a growl, and yanked me into his arms, kissing me with a ferocity that both thrilled and scared me in its intensity. But I needed it after so many nights sleeping in the same house, a few feet away, then in his arms.

It wasn’t gentle or delicate. It was a claiming that had started all those nights ago and nothing or no one would stop it. He swallowed my moans, taking more and more until I was breathless and begging for his touch.

He pulled back, fisting my hair. “Fuck, Bunny, I’ve been dying not being able to touch this body. Bury myself inside you. Take whatever I want for far too long. I am going to fuck you, do you understand me, Eden? Hard. And I don’t fucking care who hears the screams you’re going to make because of how I use you. Last chance, Bunny.”

I licked my lips, full well knowing my panties were soaked and the minute he touched me I’d lose any semblance of control because I knew, remembered with an aching realness, how he made my body his. How I’d loved every second and wished for it since. No one would ever be what he was to me ever again. I knew it in the haunted house, and I knew it now.

“Yes. ”

With a primal growl, he scooped me into his arms. My legs locked around his waist

and I hated not taking my clothes off because I needed to have his body against mine with nothing between us. He spun, and I was in the bed getting my pants pulled off so quickly I was sure they were ruined, along with my panties, which were torn off. I tried to prop myself up, clumsily lifting my shirt over my head. When I became trapped in my franticness. Cole yanked it the rest of the way off. I made quick work of my bra before he tore that, too.

Naked before him, breathing like I'd just run a marathon, my skin flushed under his gaze. Part of me screamed to run, but the other part knew it would be useless.

And there was time for that later. His erection looked bigger than I'd remembered, straining under the gray fabric. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband and tugged them down. His cock bobbed, thick and hard, precum already leaking from the tip. He grabbed my ankles, pushing my legs back, my thighs against my chest. "You're mine, Eden. No one else's. I'm done. And I'm going to take your pussy the way I've been thinking every time I've fisted my cock while you slept in my house. My personal little fuck toy to use and play with. Hard."

His crown teased at my entrance, and even though my panties had been soaked, my body wasn't ready for his size or the intensity of being held open. Exposed in every way. My cheeks heated and I nearly wept with the onslaught taking over my body as he thrust in, Stretching me. I yelped, and his eyes flared but I only said, "Please." The single word the only thing I could coherently get out before he narrowed his eyes and buried himself inside my body.

I panted, unable to focus on anything other than Cole taking away every thought, every worry, and using my body and the sounds filling the air. It was freeing and every thrust, every inch he claimed, pushed me over the edge.

My body exploded as he growled, sweat coating our bodies. Back arching, I felt the waves of pleasure in a nonstop rush. The room spun as I came, his grunts and hands

and cock suddenly too much and I didn't know how much more I could take.

I barely had come down before he flipped me over and pulled me up onto my knees, his hands gripped my hips, holding me up when my body would have let go. Again, he took me, filling me, the sounds of skin slapping skin over and over as he took and took.

"MINE," roared as I came again, and I felt him fill me, over and over until I finally collapsed. His body on top of mine, drenched and boneless.

Our breath slowed down, and suddenly, I giggled.

He propped himself up on his elbow and glowered at me as I turned my head so I could see him. "What's so funny, Bunny?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me or-"

"Or what?"

His fingers skimmed my ribcage and I giggled again. "No! Okay! Just don't tickle me!"

Blues eyes darkened."But what if I like the sounds you make?"

I giggled again, happy and tired in the best way possible. "Then I definitely won't tell you, grump." He glared. "This is totally a forbidden trope. And I don't care. In fact, I love it. And you are even hotter than I remember, ghost hockey daddy."

Cole rolled me over, still caging me in. "Oh, Bunny. You haven't seen anything yet."

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

COLE

NOAH: #GHOSTHOCKEYDADDIES check in.

HUNTER: We were only a floor below you, LeCav.

NOAH: Yes, but what if you overslept? Or snuck out and got in trouble?

HUNTER: What if we snuck out but didn't get in trouble?

NOAH: LALALALALA

THEO: Trav did this yesterday except he was singing a song he heard you sing and didn't know the words and not because he didn't want to hear that having your vegetables made you strong.

NOAH: First, that's my man. Second, lies. And third, I can't lie if I don't know. My mom would kill me if I lied to Brett.

COLE: How are you this chipper at 7 am?

A second later, a separate from the #GHOSTHOCKEYDADDIES chat appeared.

NOAH: OTHER SIDE OF HER WALL. Also, you break my bff's heart, you're out. No more chat. See you on the ice.

Noah LeCavalier might be a goalie, which was a whole other level of different, but he

cared about Eden and maybe, someday, I'd get over the fact he was in the BFF chat with her and I wasn't. I knew he saw her as a friend and sister, just like Zoe. But the caveman still wanted to pound his chest when they were laughing together. And don't get me started on movie nights.

After a shower, and four more orgasms, Eden and I fell asleep and I wasn't even worried about the game tonight. Gus promised to keep an eye when I left for morning skate at my old stomping grounds. A few of the staff remembered me and welcomed me back.

I hated leaving Eden alone, but her best friend was right across the hall.

Being back in the building where I first saw Eden during one of the darkest points in my career was like looking back at your high school rink and remembering when you were ready to stop but your coach believed in you and wouldn't let you.

And to think, without that injury or Ollie joining the team, I would have never known Eden existed. Sure, I might have looked up during the game...but she wouldn't have been there. Fucking fate was a crazy bitch.

EDEN: Zoe and I are meeting up with Sophia for lunch, but I'll be back at the hotel around 2...for nap time. Or something.

Fuck. Yes.

"Listen, I've pretty much had it up to here," Noah said, coming up beside me after practice and motioning toward his neck, "with anyone sneaking around on and then finding out after. I'm going to get lonely pretty soon. And if no one's told you yet, just because Coach is my brother and my other best friend's boyfriend, fuck that's a mouthful, you had better be really careful and not hurt E. Cause she's worked really hard to break away from her parents, including your dad's, expectations of her. And

she's been a kick ass sister to Izzy."

"No worries there," as we boarded the charter bus back to the hotel for the afternoon. "But," I added as I glanced around and lowered my voice, "if I ever get my hands on the asshole stalking her-"

"I get a turn," he said, eyes darkening. "Just cause a goalie can smile and do kick ass karaoke doesn't mean I won't hurt a guy for fucking with my girl."

I shot him a death glare.

He put his hands up. "Okay, okay. Our girl. Lunch? Strictly Ghost Hockey Daddies only."

Phone in hand, I sat down, and Noah took the seat next to me and checked the time. It was only half past noon, which meant Eden would be out with Zoe, and Gus, for at least another hour and a half. I nodded. "Yeah. Sounds good."

"Wait, where's the grumpy forward from my line?" asked Theo as he rubbed his chin, the scruff from preseason gone.

Noah leaned back. "He got laid."

Fuck being nice to Noah. No more movie nights for the goalie and my girl.

After lunch, where Theo spent half of the time on FaceTime with his son and his nanny, I rode the elevator up with Noah, who was giggling and making me watch TT of dad jokes.

"You are so fucking weird."

“You can’t tell me these aren’t hilarious. And blame Brett, uh, Coach. He started sending them in our family chat a few years ago, and it’s taken on a life of its own.”

I leaned back and looked at him out of the corner of my eye. “How many chats are you in?”

Letting out a sigh, he shrugged. “Three. Used to be four, but then I realized keeping Ollie by himself when Zoe and Eden knew him was silly. Then he added Mikayla, but she fell in love with some racecar engineer over Christmas and blew my dreams to bits. Boyhood crush that I knew was never going to happen. And her boyfriend finds our harmless flirting amusing, so at least there’s that.”

“Woah, LeCav, focus.”

The floors passed, and when the doors opened on our floor, he added, “Wait, Z and E still have separate one with me. So four. I can add you to—”

“Nope, one is fine.”

He started to protest but I swiped the card on Eden’s door, and shut it before he could .

She was sitting on the balcony, wrapped in a sweater and turned when I walked into the room. “Good skate?”

I nodded, stalked in her direction and watched the way her breathing sped up and her pupils dilated. “Thinking about coming back to you, in this room, was the best part.”

She shifted, rubbed her hands on her arms, thighs closing. “I don’t want to distract you, Cole. I can leave...”

“Not going to happen, Bunny. “ Her cheeks flushed at the word. “And practice isn’t an issue. Having you at my games? No better motivation. Now get your ass in here. Now,” I growled. She stood, making her way to me. Eyes looking up as I towered over her.

“Now what?”

“Now...you’re going to get on your knees and suck my cock while I fuck your mouth.” I put my hands on her shoulders, and she was in front of me, kneeling like a fucking goddess.

And I wanted to ruin her. Completely. Come all over her face, down her throat. Make her lick it from my fingers. Smear in on her tits.

I fisted her hair, slowly angling her head back, as she opened for me, tongue out. I pulled down the training pants and briefs, freeing my eager cock and thrust in to her mouth, feeding her every fucking inch until I hit the back of her throat. Wordlessly, I fucked her mouth, only my growls and grunts of approval filling the air. She gagged a few times, but never pulled back. Tears streaking down her face.

Her hands, which were on my thighs, shrugged out of her sweater. Under she wore a white cami tank, and I reached down, exposing her lace bra and pulled her tits free of the cups. Her nipples were hard, and I pinched and pulled at one, never releasing the hold I had on her hair, driving my cock further down her beautiful throat. Her muffled cries around my cock only made me increase my tempo.

Her eyes widened when I tugged even harder on her nipple, loving the moans and her responses. She snaked her hand between her thighs. “Feel how wet you are when I use my mouth. Feed you my cock. Fuck, you take it so good. That’s it baby, touch your pussy while I fuck my pretty little mouth.”

A second later I lost control, thrusting hard and driving my cock down her throat. Holding her so her mouth touched my lower abs. I pulled back just as I started to spill my seed in her mouth, pumping, then pulling out so I painted her face with the last few drops. "Show me," I ordered.

She opened her mouth and showed me her tongue covered in my cum. I made an approving noise.

"Swallow." She complied as I smeared it with one finger on her tit, then gathered the rest with two fingers. "Open again for me, Bunny." When she opened her mouth, I made her suck my fingers clean then pushed her onto her back, yanked off her capris off the rest of the way, and ran my tongue along her soaked core, feasting as she writhed and begged me. To stop or for more, I didn't care.

And made her come all over my face. Twice.

"Payback, Cyclone," Noah said over the din in the back of the little pizzeria the guys and I used to overrun after many a home celebratory post game dinner. Or particularly rough practice.

Oliver grinned and shook his head. "Weren't you the one who told me the beginning of the season is meaningless?"

Noah sent him a dismissive wave. "I lied."

Next to him, Oliver's girlfriend and Revenge Scout and newly appointed head of player development for the Revenge. "He's not lying, but it's okay to let him think so. But, Hunter out-skated Kas in the last period."

"Hey, I had an assist in the last period." Kas sat forward in his seat, then nudged me. "If this guy was on my line again-"

“You wouldn’t have Ollie. And Ollie wouldn’t have me.” Corey interrupted him with a grin.

Noah hooted. “Nice one, Hockey Goddess. She has a point.”

My former Center sat back and pouted until Jules, his fiancée kissed his cheek. He pointed at Noah. “You killed my hat trick chance.”

“It’s okay, Hot Shot. I have plans.” Jules whispered in Kas’ ear while Noah covered his eyes.

“I’m surrounded by love and it’s worse than being in a romance novel.”

Eden pointed at him with her fork, pasta twisted around it and way too big for her mouth. “Listen here, Hockey Boy, there’s no way this,” she waved the pasta fork around, “is worse than a sports romance! And Theo knows you are so wrong!”

“Well, Theo is not here to tell me I’m wrong, so I will just flirt with the waitress.”

I snorted because I was pretty sure the waitress was the owner’s wife and her grandkids were all working in the restaurant tonight, too. “Her husband might not appreciate that, LeCav.”

He glared at me. “Way to burst my bubble, Romeo.”

Eden, who had been talking to Sophia, who was pretty much the Revenge’s Lanie and was dating their couch, and Zoe stopped mid sentence. “Romeo?”

“I was trying out nicknames, and I figured since he was your step brother it was kind of fitting?”

“Noah, first of all, they both die, they were not related even by marriage and-”

“But!” He held up a finger. “They had the whole forbidden thing going on. And it wasn’t just about that. I was pretty sure Lanie was going to put grumpy winger over here all over on the sosh medes for media day. The girlies were going to swoon. Plus I was trying to get him to do the auction, and the nickname was what tipped him over the edge.”

“It really wasn’t. And ‘sosh medes’?”

“They don’t need to know that. And social media. Catch up, old man.”

Eden giggled. “They do now!” She glanced my way, then averted her eyes.

After our afternoon nap, Eden asked me not to say anything about us becoming an...us. Just yet.

“What if...the...what if he finds out and hurts you?”

“Eden, no one is going to hurt me, If anything, he’ll figure out he has to fucking give up.”

“He won’t. And...” she inhaled then let the breath out. “I’d rather our parents, and Izzy, not find out on some puck gossip account or something. I want to tell them ourselves, so they can see...”

Her voice trailed off.

“Fine. But I’m not keeping my hands off you. And you’re not moving out. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

I smacked her ass. “Now get in the shower so I can make you dirty and clean you up at the same time before the game.”

Her brow wrinkled. “Aren’t you afraid too much sex is going to throw off your game?”

“First no such thing. And hell no. Not when it comes to you naked and me soaping your body down. Shower. Now.”

An hour later, when Eden yawned and even Zoe looked ready to crash, the party started breaking up.

Fuck, I hated that Eden was flying home tomorrow morning and while I was off on the West Coast road trip to kick the rest of the season off and wouldn’t be home for over a week.

Back at the hotel, Eden snuggled up against me, and fell fast asleep. And unlike at home, when we slept apart, she didn’t wake up in the middle of the night to look at the stars and slept the whole night through.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

EDEN

Miss you, Bunny. More than you know. And stop hiding the damn Junior Mints and watching Freddy without me...

It was becoming routine. Flowers or a gift with a handwritten note every morning since I flew home alone. Zoe stayed with the team, managing and posting the Triumph's social media for the away games, but I had the signing and final details to keep me busy.

Part of me waited for the inner freak out, or the way my melancholy scared away people, but all Cole did was...accept me.

Almost a week without Cole, and I was going crazy.

We FaceTimed as much as we could, and I learned that while not a substitute, watching Cole stroke himself was one of my favorite sights in the entire world. And the first time he ordered me to touch myself for him, I thought I'd die of mortification. So, I told him to hold on, poured a glass of my favorite wine, downed it, and poured another and brought it with me to his room.

"I love seeing you in our bed, but fuck I wish I was there with you, Bunny."

"Don't you mean your bed?"

"No. It's always been ours, baby. Now, show me that pretty pussy of mine so I can stroke my cock while you make yourself come like a dirty little bunny."

A few more hours and he'd be home, and Izzy was coming over for dinner. We'd decided last night, after a particularly intense remote controlled FaceTime toy-fueled session, that telling our sister was the best way to ease our parents into accepting the idea. Not that either of us expected smooth sailing, but Izzy grew up without our parents' pressure to be what they thought their child should be.

NOAH: Your brother is intense. You two should skip the whole hi honey I'm home and go straight to whatever will take the edge off his grumpy ass.

ZOE: Ew, Noah!!

NOAH: She knows what I mean. And at least you're not hearing about your older brother's sex life nonstop.

ZOE: In all fairness, I stopped. And Walker is a lone wolf. I can't even get him to come over for dinner much less coffee or ice cream.

EDEN: What kind of human being doesn't want to meet for ice cream?

NOAH: I mean, depends on where you're taking him. Is it a Frosty or are we talking the place that has Campfire S'mores?

EDEN: OOH! Remember the Blackberry Crumble? We need to go back.

ZOE: I'll never outgrow sprinkles.

NOAH: Top tier happy moment is seeing them on my frozen scoop of bliss.

COLE: Why is Noah grinning while he's texting you Bunny?

I grinned. The Triumph won three out four games on their West Coast away game

trip or whatever Cole called it. My brain was too full of signing things to add all the hockey terminology.

EDEN: Are you jealous?

COLE: I don't want to have to lock my goalie in a closet because I get all your smiles. Among other things.

NOAH: FYI I am grinning even bigger because I know Cole is about to growl. Jaxon and I have a bet on how long until Cole puts me in some random closet while I'm texting you.

ZOE: I want in on this action.

COLE: If he didn't just save our asses that last game, Bunny, I'd put him in the nearest closet .

The giggles took over.

EDEN: Noah, snort, and cover your phone. 3 2 1...

EDEN: Hold on, Cole.

NOAH: STEAM COMING OUT OF HIS EARS.

COLE: WHY IS HE HIDING HIS PHONE?

ZOE: PICTURES PLEASE.

A few seconds later, a picture of Cole glaring into the camera appeared.

COLE: Is he sending you pictures of me?

EDEN: I mean you're pretty cute.

COLE: FFS

EDEN: I love you, Noah. Don't tell Cole.

NOAH: ...

COLE: YOU LOVE NOAH?

EDEN: Like a brother! He's my best friend, silly!

COLE: Bunny...

EDEN: NOT STEP

COLE: Better. But you are so in trouble. And you'll like it.

“Wait, so you two are dating? ” Izzy's eyes lit up with excitement. “And when did you start cooking?”

“First, consider yourself on a very short list of people I will cook for, it's Indian fusion. And yes,” Cole said as he shuffled around behind the island while Izzy and I waited at the table, collectively drooling over the aroma of spices and the visual of every single dish as he brought them over. And I definitely drooled watching his forearms flex with every movement.

Cole in the kitchen might be my favorite love language ever. Other than the amazing orgasms and his magical hands. The man gave the best head massage when we had

our get dirty then clean up after in the shower moments. Fantastic hands to match his other attributes. He looked over at me like he read my thoughts. My very dirty thoughts. The look he shot me said he would make good on every single dirty one.

“Is that okay, Izz? We haven’t told mom and dad yet.” I ate a bite as Cole sat down. The moan came out before I could stop it from the flavors in my mouth. “Please make this for me again and again and again.”

The man smirked. “Oh, I haven’t even made my best dish yet, Bunny.”

Izzy glanced between us with an amused expression. “Bunny? Not as in, ‘puck bunny’ though, right?”

I covered my mouth to stop the laughter and stop the possible food flying everywhere, and swallowed. “No, and it’s-”

“A long story for another time,” Cole finished, eyes darkening. “And maybe never.”

“Wait. Does this all mean if you get married, my sister is going to be my sister-in-law?”

And that’s when my laughter hit an all time high and loudness level with Izzy’s as Cole’s face drained of all color. Thankfully this time, my mouth was not full.

I laid a hand on his arm as he paused midair, setting Izzy’s plate in front of her. “Breathe, big guy. Wedding bells are not ringing in this room.”

“Wow, did you cook this?” Izzy asked as I eyed Cole, who suddenly got really quiet, spun and went back to the island and returned with our plates. He set them down, and looked at me.

“What is wro-”

“I’m going to marry you, Eden. And don’t look shocked.”

Izzy paused, fork right in front of her mouth. “Wait, you want to marry Eden?”

My brain stopped braining. The word marriage was a little bit more serious than just doing...whatever it was we were doing.

“Yes. And don’t look so shocked. I told you, once I catch you, I was never letting you go.”

My cheeks heated and I squirmed in my seat. The rest of dinner, Izzy spent asking Cole all sorts of questions and telling him stories about school or her friends. When she brought up watching his games with their dad on tv together, Cole’s expression hardened. I knew he and Randall had a falling out, but I hadn’t asked him what happened and he never volunteered any details. His name never came up before I left for college, and after I graduated I stayed away as much as possible because of my own issues except to spend time with Izzy.

“He loved watching you, and I even taught him the basics of the game.” She rolled her eyes. “It took him forever to remember that there are three periods and not four quarters. And no half-time. That one still confuses him.”

Cole scoffed. “He probably did it just to spend time with you, Izzy. It wasn’t about me. Trust me.” He stood and cleared the table, and Izz grabbed her plate and helped him. She handed it to him at the sink. “He never came to one game until this season. Took me to practice. All he did was pay for things in the beginning. And tell me how I was wasting my life on something that didn’t matter. When I went to college on a hockey scholarship, it was because my high school coach believed in me and my talent enough to push me and make sure I had every opportunity to do what I loved.

Not dad. Not once. I was a disappointment, and he never let me forget it. But he loves you, and that says more about you than him, Izz.

The room fell silent save for the sound of the faucet and clinking of silverware as they loaded the dishwasher. My heart broke, because while I had a mom who loved me and maybe worried a little too much, she never said anything or did anything that wasn't about making sure I was happy. Our definitions of that were different, but she supported me in an overwhelming way. I was the one who had tried to fit her mold because I didn't want her to worry.

Cole's dad was a little overbearing and way over protective (must be a Sunder's genetic trait), but I never knew why they were estranged. We never talked about it, and even Izzy avoided the subject with me. I never even knew she and her dad watched the games because I'd avoided going back as much as possible.

"He was so proud of you. I know you don't believe me right now, but it's true. Remember when you got hurt last season, and I texted you?" He nodded, drying a dish and putting it away before leaning against the counter, arms crossed. "Dad was so freaked out that he made me do it. He sat next to me, listening to the commentary about what a loss it was for the Revenge because you were such an 'integral' part of the team's success up until then with the line. And, Cole, it was like a switch went off. He might have started watching the games because of me, but he continued because he was proud of you. And so am I."

After Cole left to take Izzy home, I sat outside on the wooden swing, wrapped in a fuzzy blanket I found in a hall linen closet. Everything she said. And Cole said. It made sense now. His drive. The laser focus when he's training, and training in general. I knew there were morning skates that were optional, but he went to every single one. Even when he was here, he spent a few hours in the gym in the basement running, stretching, lifting weights or in the living room watching tape. Unless he was chasing me around the house, trying to tickle me, and making me scream his name so

loud I was glad the nearest neighbor was too far away to hear.

If I knew one thing growing up, it was that my mom only wanted the best for me. But, I also knew that when she looked at me, she wanted to see the little girl she dreamed of having, who loved Disney Princesses and fairy tale endings and wanted to have imaginary tea parties.

Not the little girl who loved watching reruns of the Addams Family or wanted to sit outside at night and talk to the stars and moon. Who thought the big bad wolf was misunderstood, or read Poe with a flashlight instead of Jane Austen. A little girl who watched princes rescue princesses and not a crazy man in a striped sweater who terrorized people in their dreams and cheered when the girl finally took control of those dreams in the last movie. Who thought saying Beetlejui- too many times really would bring Michael Keaton in all his zombie faced glory to life in her room.

Disappointing her became my biggest fear, and so I molded myself into the girl in middle school who didn't love those things. That I didn't love being lost in my melancholia once in a while because the world was beautiful even when the lights were out. That being sad meant the moments when I was happy meant so much.

The back door opened, and Cole's footsteps sounded softly on the deck as he came up behind me. The swing rocked back and forth. "Want company?"

I nodded and scooted over and lifted the blanket so we could share it. "I think Izzy had fun watching her big brother cook. I don't think I ever remember your dad helping in the kitchen. Like, ever."

He put his arm around me and pulled me into his chest, and did that one little amused laugh thing he does. "He never did when I lived with him, either. And yeah, I think she did."

A comfortable silence settled over us. I let it linger a few minutes, enjoying the warmth of his body, the scent of his aftershave and the lingering scent of the spices he cooked with earlier.

“How are you feeling about your dad and the watching you play hockey on tv?”

He was silent for a few minutes. The steady rise and fall of his chest paused, and then he let out a huff of air. “I’m glad Izzy never had to deal with the side of him I did. But, it pisses me off that he watched me play not because he wanted to, but because my baby sister made him. Growing up with him every day meant not living up to the expectations of working for his company. Or becoming a lawyer or whatever career choice he thought was more suitable. ‘Whacking a puck on ice led to nowhere and nothing’. Every fucking time the other kids’ dads showed up, I kept hoping. My mom came, but after a while she stopped, and then they divorced. Thank fuck for Coach Gibbs, because my freshman year was a shit show. Izzy was too young to remember the divorce, and I tried to be there for her, but she was so much younger than me and worshiped him. When my mom moved to be with her new husband in France, I was all I had. So, I went to the rink every night. Before school. Sometimes I slept in the locker room.” He shifted, and out of the corner of my eye, I watched his face change. “Coach found me asleep on a bench, using my pads as a pillow, which I don’t suggest. Not comfortable, and they stank. Still do, but the equipment guys try their best.”

“So that’s why you don’t bring them home,” I teased and shivered as I snuggled closer to him. The swing moved abc and forth lazily, and I tucked my feet underneath me.

“Partly,” he chuckled, tucking the blanket around my body. “But, he never asked why. Only asked me what I wanted to do every day when I woke up.”

“And what did you say? ”

“I told him my biggest secret.” He kissed the top of my head. “I wanted to do something I loved, and do it well. From that day on, he set me up with a training schedule that most kids would hate, but I loved it. There was nothing like the smell of the ice first thing in the morning, or being the first one to carve an arc in it with your skate. The sound the puck makes when it flies, or stealing it from someone. Scoring. The fans came later. But all that was home. Where I belonged, and my dad hated it. Coach Gibbs talked my dad into letting me play, and buying my equipment. I don’t know how. The rest...got me here.”

The blanket slipped as I sat up and stared into his eyes. “I’m proud of you. And I am so glad you don’t bring home smelly pads.”

“What’s your biggest secret, Bunny?”

My heart caught in my throat, and I couldn't say it out loud. I knew. I had always known. But he wouldn't let me look away. I drew in a deep breath. “My biggest secret? If I show someone all my broken parts, the place I hide in the dark, that they'll make me fall and then realize how messed up I am. And break me even more because they want to fix me.”

Cole brushed my hair from my face, but I couldn't bear to look at him. To see the pity in his eyes. “Those pieces aren’t broken, Eden. It’s what makes you beautiful.”

And right then and there, I knew I’d marry this man.

“It’s cold. Get your ass in the house, or I’ll carry you.”

I eyed him as disentangled himself from the cozy cocoon we’d made. “I’d rather you chase me.”

His navy blue eyes darkened. “Oh, I will. But, I think I’ve already caught you.

Inside,” he ordered.

Blanket wrapped around me, I followed him inside and watched as he locked the door behind me and armed the alarm. I checked my phone, making sure Indie or Nia hadn’t texted with any issues. The event was next week, and so far I’d put out one fire and added two new authors along with a cover model who agreed to be in the auction because he was on the cover of two of the attending authors. What I saw sent a chill through me, and I dropped my phone.

Cole turned to me at the noise and bent down to pick it up. “Got it.” He knelt down, he reached for my phone from where it had fallen under one of the stools. When he stood, I couldn’t move, or speak. “Eden, what’s wrong? Tell me.”

I could only shake my head and point at the screen.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Oh, Eden. I really wish you wouldn’t have done all this. You were mine. Not his. And now, I have to punish you.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:27 am

COLE

One week later...

NOAH: Listen, if Shaw shows up in the damn locker room today pregame, someone just locks the door. Problem solved. #GHOSTHOCKEYDADDIES ASSEMBLE!

HUNTER: That's Avengers Assemble, LeCav.

NOAH: Who's Iron Man in this scenario?

THEO: How did we get here? Cole. He has the toys.

NOAH: Why can't I be Iron Man?

COLE: Why does anyone get to be Iron Man? And what the hell is going on now?

I was just about to freak the fuck out, when Noah responded. I didn't have time for this shit. The police called this morning and only had one lead, but it turned out to be a dead end. The detective on the case asked if Eden and I were connected in any way after someone left a note on my SUV outside the cafe with Eden's pink drink. She was at the bookstore nearly everyday this week, and I grabbed a few things and dropped them off for the entire team of the bookstore while they finished setting up the event space next door.

We both know I deserve to get the girl.

And this morning, after I dropped Eden off and came back from my run, there was one on the fucking front door. The scary part is it could've been there for at least two days, because we never used the front door, and I only had this morning because the security company was running a test on the upgrade to the system and the back door was locked down.

Hands off what's mine. One warning.

NOAH: Shaw freaked out after a meeting with upper management and trashed the training room and the locker room before security escorted him out. They finally dropped the hammer. Ooh, Thor. Claimed.

Ever since it came out that Zoe and Coach were dating, and she had been seeing Shaw before, upper management was trying to find a way to release Shaw. They tried in preseason to release him on waivers, but his lawyer found a loophole in his contract that kept him on the team.

Sounds like they finally closed it.

COLE: No shit.

HUNTER: It was wild. But are we talking chubby Thor or in shape vs Hulk Thor?

THEO: Trav says you're all crazy and I am Hawkeye cause I never miss.

NOAH: Nice one, Trav! DAD POINTS SCORED.

HUNTER: At least Coach doesn't have to hold back anymore. These past three weeks have been fucking rough.

NOAH: Groin pull my ass. Some girl probably kicked him in the balls. At least he

went home after the Seattle game and the rest of the swing was peaceful.

HUNTER: Is Walker even in the chat anymore?

WALKER: I keep trying to leave but LeCav keeps adding me.

NOAH: ZOE WILL GET MAD IF I DON'T. She says you need to socialize more. Or something.

I roughed a hand over my face, and eyed the door to the butler's pantry. The door to the panic room was behind one of the sets of cabinets on the inner facing wall. After the last creepy text message and the psycho involving me, I showed Eden how to get in using her fingerprint and how to get in. At first she resisted, but when I teased her about putting Junior Mints down there along with a fuzzy blanket if she ever wanted to avoid the world.

I hoped to God she never had to use it. And I didn't let her know about the ones he sent me. My girl did not need anymore shit added to her plate.

WALKER: I socialize.

HUNTER: OOOOKKKKK.

WALKER: Fine, Hunter. Just remember, you asked for it.

NOAH: WHY AM I NOT INCLUDED?

WALKER: ...

NOAH: Eden just texted and said to remind you all that you need to be at the auction at 6 pm, no later. And she also said to say hi to Cole.

Fucking Noah.

EDEN: I did not tell him that.

COLE: Is he texting you?

EDEN: He can't help himself. Zoe is off on a media day with Lanie promoting the auction with Theo, and Oliver is ignoring him because he's having tape time with Corey. Don't ask. I think he's jealous.

Noah hoarded tape like a goddamn goalie dragon. And he was the only one I'd ever played with who taped up his stick. Goalies were a different breed.

THEO: Zoe said to tell you all to be good and not make Lanie mad tomorrow night.

WALKER: Tell my sister I am still not doing it. Even if she calls mom.

THEO: I have enough family drama, Wolf. That's all on you.

NOAH: And Eden also said she's wearing my jersey number tonight.

EDEN: Please ignore Noah. He's having a sugar rush induced fever dream from too many sprinkles on his ice cream last night.

At this point I wasn't sure if I should chuck my phone or take away Noah's. Either way, I was in trouble. I went down the stairs to the panic room, and checked the laptop the security company hooked up to the entire system, and went over the footage in the drive for the last few days, then checked to make sure Eden was still at the bookstore. I hated her being anywhere without me, but realistically, unless I locked her in this room, it was hockey season and we both had to be places.

The feed from the house was linked to the app on my phone, but the outdoor footage was only processed on the server at the security company and accessible on this laptop. Keeping an eye on Eden when I wasn't with her had been top priority until now, and I'd foolishly thought she was safe here.

An hour later, my eyes were burning from checking the tape, but then, I hit pay-dirt. Last night, a figure in all black. On the front porch, sticking something in the front door .

I emailed the footage to the police detective and the security company.

No one stalked my girl. Except for me.

"You are wound tighter than a fucking top," Theo said as he edged forward on the bench next to me. "The penalty box is not the palace to score a goal, Sanders."

"I fucking know that," I growled at my line mate. Even Noah avoided me in between periods. There was something I was missing, I was sure of it. Right out of my reach, but fuck if I knew what it was.

We were down 3 to 2, and the energy in the arena was getting more and more aggressive. Eden and Zoe were in the suite for this game because I wanted her locked up and out of the open. Izzy had called earlier in the day and asked to come to the game with Eden, and my baby sister was none too impressed with not being in the lower seats.

Eden had been finishing up for the signing tomorrow at Book Boyfriends and Lattes and had run by to pick up Izzy. I was jumping out of my skin because I hadn't seen my girl face to face since early morning when I dropped her off.

For once in my life, I wanted the game to be over. The lines changed up, and I went

over the boards. One more time in the box and I'd hit my record from my rookie year when I'd been trying to prove myself. The rest of the period flew by in a blur and when the final whistle sounded, I congratulated Noah on his saves and Theo on his two goals in the third off of Killian and hurried to the showers to change .

Gus greeted me at the door to the room with the rest of the families.

“All clear, no issues, Cole.”

“Thank you for-”

The former special ops team veteran held his hand up. “No need. Plus, she brought cookies.” He patted me on the shoulder. “Maybe look less like you’re going to kill somebody after that game.”

Shit. I nodded and thanked him one more time before making a beeline to my girl.

Fuck it. We'd been keeping things a secret long enough. I was done, and ready to claim my girl. I took her face in my hands and kissed her in front of Theo and his kid and the rest of families, including Izzy.

“About time, Romeo,” Noah called as he entered the room with Zoe in tow.

I pulled back, and swept her bright pink and purple hair behind her ear. “Hey, Bunny. I can’t wait to get you home and fu-”

“Cole,” she started to worry and alarm lit her green eyes.

Next to her, Izzy shifted from one foot to the other. Someone cleared their throat behind us, and I turned to find myself face to face with Eden mother. And my father.

Shit.

‘Why are you kissing your sis-’

Eden went to open her mouth, but then her mother placed her hand on Eden’s arm. “Randall, they aren’t related, never knew each other, and I swear to the Lord above if you are as blind as you are obviously being and haven’t figured out that your son has been in love from the moment he saw Eden and have an issue with it, I will make you sleep on the couch. In the guest house. ”

“Mom?”

Annabelle Sanders placed her hands on her daughter’s shoulders and smiled. “Eden, if you really think I didn’t see the way the two of you looked at each other, and the way you light up every time I mentioned him, you are sadly mistaken. Plus, Izzy is not as good at keeping secrets as she thinks she is.”

Izzy threw her hands up. “I didn’t say a word!”

“You didn’t have to. Now,” she said to my father. “Stop being an ass. Cole, your father has been watching all your games and loves you. He was an idiot, and regrets it all. And we came to tonight’s game so he could tell you face to face after seeing you do what you love so much.”

My father still looked like he wanted to say something about Eden and I, but then he let out a sigh. “Cole, I was an ass.” Annabelle patted him on the arm. “And I know I can’t expect you to forgive me right away, but I really want the chance to get to know my son better. And I am so proud of you. Of everything you’ve accomplished.”

Noah came up and threw his arms around me and Eden. “And I didn’t have to make Eden wear my number tonight to get this all out in the open. I say we get ice cream.

With sprinkles.”

EDEN

I added a little something for you to bid on me at the Book Boyfriend Auction to your account. Fair warning, I like to chase you. And once I catch you, I am NEVER letting you go, Bunny.

See you tonight...

The doors to Book Boyfriends and Lattes opened at nine am, and the sold out event had a few bumps early in the morning when the lights in the upper signing area wouldn't come on. Who knew there was a random switch somewhere that Indie shut off because Travis, Theo Gerard's son, convinced her that light switches in the on position were not good for polar bears? And when Ian, the book cover model arrived, some poor reader fainted, almost taking out the cupcake tower. But, like a true book boyfriend, he caught her and saved the day.

I slid up beside Indie, and grinned at Theo, who sat on stool, posing with readers and authors against the far wall. "Look at Theo being all book boyfriend material over there." I nudged her with my elbow.

She snorted. "Yes, he's just amazing. Ugh, I am going to need to disinfect that wall and the stool after this."

"Woah, need a latte or a cupcake or maybe a book boyfriend to get the crabby gone?"

Indie huffed out a breath. A loud giggle from over by the romance book posting hockey player earned a death glare from her. "As if his ego needed any more

stroking.”

I snorted. “I think you need more stroking, my friend. I thought you two called a truce?” Indie had started helping out Theo here and there with his son last week, and the little boy loved playing with Nia’s two little girls.

“Truces only work when both people honor the terms,” she grumbled. “But, I need to go next door and let the caterers in and get the lights turned on. Have fun watching the show!”

I laughed at her as she walked away and stuck her tongue out at me. Thankfully the day was almost over and then I could go home, shower and come back for the auction. A yawn escaped my mouth and I tried to cover it with my hand but only succeeded in almost whacking Nia in the face.

“I mean, I know you get feisty when you don’t have your Junior Mints, but no need to take me out,” she teased. Her lips turned up in a big smile. “Why don’t you go and shower, and the girls and I will finish up.” She checked her watch. “Forty five minutes, then Delena Bennett turns into a pumpkin until tonight.”

The second floor staircase had a line all day, but it was finally down to just a handful of readers. Izzy came with Cole first thing, and though he hated knowing his little sister, who was almost seventeen knew who Delena Bennett was, let her get a somewhat slow burn not as spicy as the stalker masked romance book signed before taking her to lunch in town. The best selling author had been having the time of her life all morning and into the afternoon. She signed every book and NSFW piece of art while her football player boyfriend handed cover after cover to her with the cutest smile that smoldered when they thought no one was looking.

Which we all were, but romance bookstore and signing had everyone in their feels.

I wrinkled my nose as another yawn escaped me. “Are you sure?”

Nia gave me a playful shove. “Go. I got this. And if I don’t, maybe Ian will help me,” she sighed.

I gathered my things, said goodbye to a few of the authors and went out to my car. As I drove home, cursing myself for not having a second cup of coffee, I checked my phone.

COLE: Hope the rest of the day went well, Bunny. See you soon.

My heart fluttered and the butterflies went wild. When that man used that nickname, all I wanted to do was go back to the haunted house and do all of it all over again. Then watch Halloween movies all bundled up under fuzzy blankets eating Junior Mints in a bowl of freshly microwaved popcorn.

Hmmm. Maybe Zoe could hook me up with the house they used as a surprise sometime since it was unoccupied.

I pulled into the driveway, hit the garage door opener and parked. Another yawn escaped me, and I checked the time. I had just enough time to take a quick nap before Cole got back from dropping Izzy off. After checking my messages to make sure Nia and the signing hadn’t spontaneously combusted, I laid down on the couch under my favorite blanket and shut my eyes and fell fast asleep.

“You always look beautiful when you sleep, Eden.”

I stretched, my head still fuzzy and not awake. My lips curled into a smile, eyes still closed. “Are you saying you like to watch me sleep?”

“I did. But then you moved in here, and fucked everything up. Even after I warned

you. Tsk tsk, Eden. All my carefully laid plans, laid to waste because you decided to fuck your step brother. But I forgive you.”

A warning went off in my head, jolting me fully awake.

My eyes shot open, and I tried to sit up, but hands held me in place.

“Calm down, Eden. It’s just me.”

I blinked, and tried to figure out what was happening, and why Liam Shaw was in Cole’s house. Again I tried to scramble away, and this time he let me. But he didn’t move back, blocking me so that I couldn’t stand up. “What are you doing here? Did Cole let you in? I thought Noah said you were cut from the team? Are you trying to get back-”

HE chuckled, a dark and menacing sound. “Oh, Eden. No, Cole didn’t let me in. In fact, Cole is stuck on one of those practically deserted roads with a flat tire after dropping off your sister. He’s going to be delayed, which is perfect because I packed your bag, and since I’m not on the Triumph roster anymore, you’re coming with me to Chicago. ”

“Why would I go to Chicago with you?”

Dread filled my veins, and I slowly moved to the end of the couch, gauging the distance to the front door.

“Don’t be a silly girl, Eden. I’ve been telling you all along no one will take care of you like me. Even before the front office decided to trade me, I had my agent talking to Chicago because I knew you liked it there. And I bought a house with a playroom where I can keep you so happy.” His breath hitched, and he licked his lips.

“A...playroom?” Shit, what the hell was going on?

Liam nodded. “I know you like the darkness. All those times Zoe sneaked me into your house, I watched you go on to the deck and stare up at the night sky. I know what you need, Eden. And I loved watching you every night while you slept. Planting the cameras was hard, and making Zoe keep it a secret was a bitch, but she was never the end game. You were. Watching you touch yourself while I jerked off? Fuck, I can’t touch you-”

I sprang up, and darted to the door, but he grabbed me by the arm. “Oh, no, you aren’t running from me.” He yanked me against his chest with a snarl. “I know you like to be chased. But maybe you need it a little rougher than he gives it to you.” He wicked the side of my cheek as I whimpered.

“Please,” I sobbed.

“I knew you’d be perfect for me. Too bad Sanders broke you in first. But, I won’t be as gentle if you run. Say it again, Eden. Beg me.”

Every part of me screamed to run, but I knew he would only follow and getting away would be nearly impossible. I glanced down the hallway. The light in the butler’s pantry was still on from this morning when Cole had deposited another case of Junior Mints since we had finished off the last one. I sobbed in relief, thanking God that Cole was a possessive, grumpy man who took care of me and let me take care of myself.

“I even ordered another case of them for the panic room, just in case you want to go down there and read Poe or hide for a day. Just remember, the pass code takes a second, but your finger print, just like your phone, opens it for four seconds then seals the door and alerts the security company.”

“Please,” I said again, and prayed he’d want me to run.

“Oh, Eden. I’ll even give you a little head start since you love the chase.” He breathed in and ran his nose along the back of my neck. “One. Two-”

In one quick motion, I jerked my head back, making contact with his face. He grunted and released me. I darted for the hallway and the light that Cole left on.

“When I get you, Eden, I’m going to have to punish you for that. You’ll scream but after,” he yelled, his voice getting nearer as I grabbed the frame of the door and hurled myself in and pressed my hand on the nondescript keypad. “I make you come with my marks and blood all over your body.”

The door slid open soundlessly, and I jumped through, and counted.

One.

Two.

“I’m coming.”

Three.

“Right outside the door, Eden.” And just as his face appeared, I let out a scream as the door closed, locking me in.

Four.

COLE

“Fucking tire.” I wiped my hands as Noah grinned behind me.

“Impressive.”

I arched a brow. “Please don’t tell me you don’t know how to change a fucking tire, LeCav.”

“I do, but I just sent a picture of you changing it to the chat. And Eden. Lucky for you, she must still be busy, because you look hilarious in it.”

“There is something wrong with you.” The wind began to pick up as I eyed the clouds gathering.

“Looks like a storm. And we have an auction to get to,” he said. A look of concern flashed across his face. “Have you talked to Eden?”

I shook my head. “No, my fucking phone died and my charging cord is messed up. You were the only text I sent before the battery juiced out. Why?”

“I texted her when I left in case she needed me to pick up anything, and she hasn’t responded.”

Fuck. My stomach dropped. “Do you have a charger in your car?” He nodded. I locked my SUV and jogged to his car. “Get in and drive, LeCav. Now.”

Noah wasted no time, and once we were on the road, phone charging, I took the card out of my wallet for the security company and used his phone to call.

“Mr. Sanders, are you in the residence? A few minutes ago, panic protocol was activated. We’ve alerted the authorities and they are on route. Ten minutes ETA.”

“Panic protocol?” My blood coursed through my veins, pounding until it was all I could hear. I took a deep breath.

“-and the room is sealed. But no one is entering the code. EMT’s are also arriving. Are you hurt? Is anyone with you?”

“I’M NOT HOME,” I yelled, and Noah hit the gas when I made a motion with my free hand. “Is she ok?”

“Sir, we don’t know. But the door was activated and shut within the parameters.”

Noah sped through the streets as the agent tried to get the laptop online in the room. Shit. I never showed Eden what to do after the room was activated. Just how to get in.

An eternity passed and suddenly, Noah flew up the driveway to my house. Eden’s home.

A red pickup truck sat in the driveway. Noah said in a confused tone, “What the fuck is Shaw doing here?”

Like a rush, the pieces fell into place. Shaw dating Zoe in secret. Him knowing her number, where she lived. That she was with me in Seattle. All the little detail he’d terrorized her with. We jumped out of the car and ran up the front stairs. The door was unlocked, the alarm deactivated. I searched the entryway with my eyes as I ran in.

“Open the fucking door, Eden, and I will only make you bleed a little bit. You’ll like it.” the voice was coming from the butler’s pantry. And where the door to the panic room was. A loud pounding, and Shaw started yelling. “OPEN IT NOW YOU CUNT. YOU’RE MINE, AND I WILL SHOW YOU WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU ACT LIKE A SLUT AND SPREAD YOUR LEGS FOR SOMEONE ELSE!”

He had his hand pulled back to pound on the door again when I rounded the doorway. He looked my way, eyes wild and crazed. I let out a roar, and barreled into him, catching him by the waist and tackling him. Noah came running up the hallway, but I had Shaw on the ground. He fought back, years of landing punches in the NHL kicking in instinctually.

But I had the advantage because he was trying to hurt my girl.

And I protected what was mine. Blow after blow, I hit him until I heard sirens and Noah pulled me off.

He was out cold, and never getting near Eden again.

As the police swarmed in, we raised our hands, yelling explanations as they pointed their guns. One officer spoke into their radio. “Suspects in house. One down, two standing. Request owner’s name to verify passcode?”

“Coleman Sunders.”

I waved my hand but kept them high. “Wallet in my back pocket but my fiancée is missing and might be in the panic room. Passcode is Beetlejuice.”

Noah groaned beside me, arms still raised.

One of the officers retrieved my wallet and nodded.

“Passcode confirmed.”

“Does Eden know it’s Beetle-”

I punched in the code, and the door slid open. Just inside sat a sobbing Eden, who leaped up as soon as she saw me. “Baby, are you okay? Did he?”

Her eyes darted to where Shaw was coming around as he was being cuffed. “No, I’m fine. He didn’t get a chance to-” she broke down in tears.

A flurry of activity happened, statements and evidence gathered. But the entire time, Eden stayed by my side, and I only released her once to hug Noah. I glared at him the entire time, which made them both amused.

After things settled, and the officer asked if we would come down to the station in the morning to make our statements, everyone but Noah left.

I took Eden’s hands in mine. “We can leave, and you never have to see-”

“No, I love our house. I’m keeping that room. And I prefer your version of stalking, Junior Mints and all,” She sucked in a breath. I let out a relieved chuckle. “Plus, where else can I say I kicked the bad guys ass and my best friend and my boyfriend rescued me? This is our home. But we are changing the passcode.”

Noah giggled and covered his mouth, but Eden followed second later. Tension and scary moment melted away. I shot the goalie a grateful look and he nodded with a small smile, taking my girl in my arms.

Hands on her upper arms, I pulled back and looked into her brilliant greens eyes, and brushed her colorful hair off her face. Then, I cupped her cheeks in my hands. “I love you, Bunny. And if anything had happened to you-”

“But I didn’t. Because you took care of me even when you weren’t here. And I love you, too. Cole. Fiancée?”

I shrugged. “So I forgot to officially ask.”

“Well, I officially say yes. I already know where I want to marry you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep. Where it all started. But this time, no chasing until after the event. ”

“I’ve already caught you, little bunny.”