



Mind Pucked (Chicago Blue Jays #1)

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Category: Sport

Description: Becoming a nanny for my brother's rival was never a part of my life plan...

My brother and Jackson Turner have always competed for the same spot on the ice.

Until a car crash wiped out my only family, as well as Jackson's wife...

Leaving him a tragically widowed, yet still sizzling hot single dad.

I've always wanted to get to the bottom of my brother's death.

So when I get the chance to be Jackson's nanny, I jump at it.

Unfortunately my enemy hires me...and I fall in love with him, and his little girl.

Freaking gulp.

But Jackson is potentially guilty of my brother's death, not to mention what happened to his long dead wife.

Playing for keeps with a messed up, obsessed hockey player is dangerous.

And when I decide to double my shifts as a nanny and amateur detective, I get into an icy mess of secrets and lies that threaten to cut through me.

Will Jackson save me and his daughter from the darkness in time?

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PROLOGUE

JACKSON

There's only hours left before the biggest game of the season. Hell, the biggest game of my life. For years, the Chicago Blue Jays have been so close to making it to the Stanley Cup. So close, even making it to the playoffs, but we've always failed out somewhere.

This year, we have a seasoned team, and we work together like no other. Sure, there are a few weak links. Some of the guys, I'd rather not be on a team with, but we make it work. We're mature, we're good players, and we're a team.

I don't know why I got here so early today. The locker room is quiet as I lean against my locker. I press my head against the cold metal and whisper encouraging words to myself under my breath.

A couple of the guys are here—Felix and Colin, they're always early birds. And I think Stephen, our backup defense, is hanging around somewhere with his girlfriend. The flavor of the week. He's the youngest of us, so it's to be expected. Usually, we'd be razzing him about it, but we don't want that kind of energy before this game.

Tonight, we play against the New York Knights. It's the seventh game of the Stanley Cup finals, so this is the make-or-break moment. It will either be us up against the Miami Wave for the actual Stanley Cup, or it'll be the New York Knights. And I fully intend on being the one who gets to kiss that sweet piece of metal and hold it in my hands when we reach victory.

I hear some noise coming down the hall. Finally, we might get some energy building in here. I hate it when it's silent—it gets me in my head.

I expected Preston to be here early too, but he's nowhere to be found. I could call him, but I'd rather not. He's going to be a complete ass to me today, and I'm not looking forward to it no matter what kind of player he is. He's my rival and one of the best enforcers on the team other than myself. It's his job to talk shit. But he tends to do a lot of it off the ice too.

“Hey, looking somber in here. What's up? What's up?” Benjamin and Oliver burst through the door, shouting and waving their donut shop order in the air. It's part of their pregame ritual. I bet the shop stayed open late just for them too. Such loyal customers. Plus, I think the owner has a thing for Benjamin.

I give them a sideways grin. “Are you sure you want to be having all that sugar right before a game like this?”

Oliver walks over and gives me a bro-hug, patting me on the back. “How else will I stay awake out there? This stuff's the best fuel, baby.”

Benjamin's already sitting down on the bench, digging in. Always hungry, that one. I guess most of us usually are. We're big guys and need a lot of food to sustain us. I just don't feel like eating much today—I'm afraid of throwing up on the ice.

“You look like hell,” Felix says, always Captain Obvious, as he starts putting on his equipment. A little early if you ask me, but the goalies are always something else. Way overprepared. But I suppose we need that now more than ever.

I shrug. “You know how it is. I always feel better once the game starts.” And it's the truth. I've been this way for a good decade. Something about big games really works my stomach up. The closer we get to the playoffs, the more likely it is that I actually

end up with my dinner all over the floor during the pregame ritual. I figured I'd do them all a favor and just not eat this time. Nothing to come up anyway. Nothing that isn't water.

More team members start coming in, and we all watch as Luca and Kai switch shorts.

Oliver shoots them a look of disgust. "You guys seriously decided to go through with that?"

Luca's face twists in anger, his fists clenched and ready for a fight like always. "What, you got a problem with it? I'm ready to go tonight. I suggest?—"

I walk up to him and place my hand on his shoulder, shaking my head. Luca backs off, but his arm veins are still popping out with the tension.

"You've seen it on TikTok—those game rituals really work. And Luca's my rival, so why the hell not?" Kai says with a cocky grin, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I can't believe you're gonna do a pregame ritual from TikTok," Felix comments.

Luca looks like he could kill, but I just laugh it off. His cocky grin and stance make it obvious that he doesn't give a shit what anyone thinks as long as he's a winner. "The joke's on you when your rival ends up being the savior of the game. I do what I have to do for luck. What does it hurt?" he asks, smirking down at Felix.

Felix's brow wrinkles. "Oh I have my rituals, but none of them involve swapping germs with someone else."

Everyone starts getting ready, putting their pads and jerseys on. It's getting closer and closer to game time, and my stomach makes terrible noises that only I can hear.

Everyone cringes as Felix pulls a pair of socks out of his locker. He grins, holding them up proudly. “Yeah, baby.”

“Shit, Felix. How long has it been since you washed those damn things?” Kai covers his nose and walks away as far as he can, which isn’t far considering the room is packed.

Felix pulls on his socks, which are looking a little worse for the wear. If I had to wager, I’d say they’ve probably never been washed.

“Haven’t washed these puppies since the first game of the season. Why would I ruin the luck, boys?” Felix wiggles the socks all around like a little kid. Everyone screws up their faces. “Take it in. This is the smell of victory. Better than someone else’s junk.”

That gets a laugh out of me, which is hard to do when I’m trying to get in the mood pregame.

However, a strange worry is starting to build. Everyone’s here, plus wives and girlfriends are starting to come in and out to wish us good luck, except for Preston. Where the hell is he?

I pull out my phone and send him a quick text.

As much as I want to look good without you here, this is not the night. Get the hell over here.

Hopefully, it’s threatening enough.

I tuck my cell into my locker and pull out my iPod. It’s old-school. I’ve had it since my senior year of high school, and it’s always served me well.

Five songs. Five songs are all I have on this thing, the same five songs I listen to before every game. I pop in my headphones, and I let the world around me fade away. I have just enough time to listen to my music before Coach comes in here to give us a pep talk. The one where he basically tells us it's okay if we don't win, but he expects us to win.

I close my eyes and bob my head to the music, getting completely lost in it. It's a good mix of EDM, rock, and classical. Something for every part of my mood and every part of my nervous system. I actually put a hell of a lot of research into this playlist.

The noise around me grows louder as I get to the last song and more and more family members come in and out. Coach is good about letting us see our loved ones before the game. Especially at big games like this. He believes that instead of a distraction, it gives us motivation.

It's one of the things I love about him, and it definitely sets him apart.

As I'm putting my headphones away, there's a tap on my shoulder. I turn around to find Quinn, Dean's wife, surrounded by three children.

Two are her own, a little boy and a little girl. And one is the most beautiful little girl in the world—my little girl.

I smile down at her and reach to pick her up as she lifts her arms and rises onto her tiptoes to try to reach toward me, even though she's not even two yet. Not for another two weeks.

I lift her up into my arms and give her a big kiss on the cheek, then look at Quinn. "I'm guessing Lyla's not here yet?"

Quinn shakes her head. “Sorry. I haven’t heard from her or seen her yet. But don’t worry—she’s not going to miss this game. Even if her boss is an ass.”

Quinn rolls her eyes and goes over to see Dean. They share a deep kiss as I tickle Hayden’s side.

She rubs her hand across my stubble, and my heart has never felt more full than in this moment. This is exactly what I needed before the game. But it would be nice to get to see Lyla too.

In fact, Lyla’s kind of our lucky charm. Ever since I married her, she’s always come back here and made everyone feel good before the games. And she’s always got something freshly baked to offer everyone. Only this time, her new boss made her work.

It’s been hard since she started this new job. She’s been working long hours and dealing with some discrimination and all kinds of bullshit. I’ve offered to go beat their asses, but she won’t let me.

I give Hayden another kiss and pass her to Quinn as she’s on her way out. “Be good for Auntie Quinn, okay?” I tell her and she blows me a kiss.

She nods, letting me know that of course she will be a perfect angel. She always is.

Along with Quinn and the kids, any remaining family members filter out of the locker room. The pregame energy’s hitting, and everyone is somber. I don’t know if it’s because of what’s at stake, or the fact that one of our best players, Preston, still hasn’t shown his damn ugly face.

Coach comes in, hitching up his pants like he always does. He squints his eyes, making eye contact with every one of us at least twice before saying anything.

“Does anyone happen to know where the hell that cocky asshole Preston is? Of all the games to miss...”

Everyone shakes their head and mutters that they don’t know.

“Well, we’re going to get ready anyway. Because this is our game. Isn’t it, boys?”

We all scream in unison, fists pumping in the air. We start chanting and high-fiving, five minutes before the game. Preston has five minutes to show up.

Luca looks happy about it, hoping he gets to come in instead. But dammit, I was hoping he wouldn’t. He’s such a hothead, we’re likely to get way too many damn penalties with him.

I squeeze through the crowd of players and pull him in so I can whisper in his ear. “Please, man, keep it under control—don’t fuck this up today.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he says, not even looking at me.

Great .

If I get ahold of Preston after this, and I find out he had no good reason to miss, like him or a family member dying, I’ll kill him myself. I may hate the bastard, and I may wish that I had the team to myself sometimes, but this is a time when we need him most.

Everything goes completely dead silent. Dean is kissing a rabbit’s foot, and some other players are praying. Anything at all to give us an extra edge on this game.

I take seven deep, slow breaths, feeling every part of me relax. I visualize myself out on the ice. How smooth I’m going to skate. How easy it’s going to be to get that puck

into the goal. How simple it's going to be to slam every bit of aggressive competition against the wall and take them out.

I imagine looking up into the crowd and seeing Lyla and Hayden—flustered, cheering me on, and wearing my jersey.

This game will be perfect. It's all going to be fine.

“Okay, boys, time for the ice.”

Coach motions for us to head out and we all get into a line, skating out to a roaring crowd. The stadium is full, other than a couple seats and a few stragglers.

I try to find Lyla, but I don't see her yet. I do see Quinn, right next to my girl who's cheering hard, though she probably doesn't even know what she's cheering for.

That's okay. She'll wear my jersey one day too.

The buzzer goes off, and we start the game without Preston. The game flies by. Everything is a blur, and I let my instincts take over. I only have to slam someone once. The New York Knights are playing a clean game. It makes me nervous, actually. I feel like I need more bodies to slam every time I look up and can't find my wife.

No Preston. No Lyla.

Somehow I keep my head in the game, and we're winning when we get to halftime.

I pull my helmet off, heading back for a break and a lot of water. Dehydration is overtaking me as I work hard to make this game the game of a lifetime.

The sound of a throat clearing pulls me out of my thoughts, and I turn around to see Coach with his hands on his hips, standing next to a police officer.

I can feel the blood draining from my face. I don't even know if I want to know what this is about.

"Is it Lyla?" I say, my tone quiet and deep, barely above a whisper.

A few other players are looking on, but Coach takes me into his office and tells me to sit.

"Will someone just tell me what the hell is going on?" My temper flares.

"Lyla is your wife, correct?" the officer asks.

"Yes, what do you want?" I don't mean to be so short, but I hate when people act like this. They never get to the damn point. I want to know what the hell is happening with my wife.

"Your wife has been in an accident. A pretty bad car accident. She was unconscious at the scene and taken to the hospital. She's got some severe injuries. I know you're in the middle of the game, but if I were you, I might get myself to the hospital too."

For a moment, I can't do anything but stare. It's as if I can't process the information I'm being given.

Lyla was in an accident. Lyla is not here. Lyla is in the hospital. Lyla has bad injuries.

I repeat it to myself until it actually starts to sink in.

“But you said she’s alive, right?”

The officer nods, but the look on his face is a bit grim. So she must have some pretty bad injuries after all.

“Do you have any information you can give me about her condition or about the accident?” I ask, knowing I’m about to make the hardest decision I’ve ever had to make.

The officer shakes his head. “I was the one sent here to make sure you got the news. A couple of my colleagues are on the scene, gathering evidence and getting the report down. I can send one of them to meet you at the hospital with more information. Do you plan on going now or after the game?”

I look at Coach as if he’s going to give me the answer. His face softens. I can tell he feels sorry for me, but he’s not going to give me the answer.

“Coach, do you need me?”

He purses his lips and shifts uncomfortably next to his desk. “Jackson, of course I need you. Not gonna lie about that. You’re our best defender. Especially with Preston gone too. But...”

I slam my fist on the desk. “But what?”

I’m dying here, and I think he knows it.

“I can’t make this decision for you. But if it was my wife, you know where I’d be. Team, game, be damned.”

I look back at the officer. “Can you give me just a few minutes to think? I just need a

few minutes.”

The officer nods and makes room for me to leave. I go back into the locker room, where everyone watches me as I punch my locker over and over again until my knuckles split open.

Dean and Benjamin come up to me and push me down onto the bench. They sit on either side of me, Dean watching me as Benjamin questions, “What’s going on? Is this about Preston or Lyla?”

I’m barely even thinking about Preston at this point. For all I know, he’s blown hockey off entirely, sick of being my rival or some shit. Maybe I offended him somehow, or Coach did. I really don’t fucking care. “Lyla,” I manage to croak out.

“What did they say?” Dean asks, trying to coax it out of me. “We can’t help you if you don’t tell us.”

Normally I’d say something shady about not needing their help, but this is not the time for that. “There was a car accident. Really bad. She’s in the hospital, and the officer wants to know if they need to send his colleague now or later to talk to me when I get there.”

Benjamin nods. “So, you’ll have to leave the game.” Not a question, but a statement.

“Yeah, but can I really do that? You need me. And Preston’s not here either.”

I clench my fists and tighten my jaw, but it’s Dean who pulls me out of it.

“Look, we’ve got this. Kai or Andrew, they can fill in. Kai’s been dying to show off. You know we won’t lose this game. What the team needs is for you and Lyla to be okay. We all love her.”

I feel a damn tear escape my eye and roll down my cheek.

No, I can't think negatively. Lyla will be fine.

"Look, I'll go tell Quinn what's going on before we go back to the game," Dean says. "She'll take care of Hayden as long as necessary. We've got this. You need to go to your wife."

I look at Dean, grateful for the brothers I have on the team. People who have become family to me. I don't have that much, outside of Lyla and Hayden. But these guys, they make up for it.

"Thank you," I manage to croak out, and then I'm grabbing my things and taking off in a run.

When I get to the hospital, I feel incredibly lucky that I wasn't pulled over or in a car accident myself. I was going much too fast for anyone's comfort, weaving in and out of traffic. Because of the accident, and all the traffic from the game, it was a nightmare.

This whole thing is a nightmare.

I don't even bother locking my car, rushing into the emergency room and telling the lady at the desk my name and my wife's name.

"Sir, you really should wait your turn."

I shake my head. "I just quit playing in a finals hockey game because a police officer told me my wife was in a bad car accident and I needed to get here immediately. So, I think it's my turn."

She purses her lips at me and then types something into the computer. At least she's doing what I've asked.

"She's still in triage. All I know is that she's in critical condition right now. You need to go to the waiting room. Over there." She points to a room down the hall behind her, just next to the restroom.

"Someone will come tell you what's going on as soon as they can. But be warned, it's been a busy night."

I scoff, lurching off to the waiting room. Even the tiny room smells like the hospital. There's some kind of talk show rerun on the television that hangs in the corner, and there's some sludgy coffee and tea sitting on a tiny table with one of those dollar-store tablecloths.

I sit down in one of the chairs, barely fitting with my stature, and I wait.

I bite my nails, my leg bouncing up and down with anticipation.

Come on, come on.

It's driving me crazy not knowing what's going on with Lyla. I haven't seen hide nor hair of a doctor or a police officer. What the hell was the point of me even being here?

Then, a man in a white coat walks in. He has dark hair, and a crooked nose like it's been broken too many times.

I stand up and walk toward him. "How's Lyla?" I ask. He looks startled, having to look up a significant amount to reach my face. If I had a dollar for every time I intimidated a professional because of how built I am, I'd be so much richer than I

already am.

“Lyla is your wife?”

I sigh and nod, sick of the question.

“Your wife...” No. I don’t like the pause. What does that mean? “Your wife had many injuries. Several burns and contusions to her chest. And the force of impact caused injuries to the back of her head. Between the blunt force trauma and the severity of the burns, there was nothing we could do. She didn’t make it. I’m so sorry.”

My world begins to spin around me like I’m caught in a tornado. Every moment I’ve ever had with Lyla. Every game. The birth of our daughter. And then it all collapses into a big pile of rubble.

“But the officer told me...she was alive at the scene...”

The doctor places his hand on my arm, daring to bridge that gap even in the state I’m in. I have to give him some respect for that. “I’m so sorry. I know there’s a police officer waiting for you out in the lobby as well. He just finished getting my statement.”

“She’s gone?”

He nods. “Yes, sir. You’re welcome to come say goodbye if you like.”

Until water starts dripping into my mouth, I don’t realize I’m already crying. I nod and follow the doctor past curtains with people behind them. People who are still getting treatment for whatever emergency. People who get to live. People who are not my wife.

Then, he brings me behind the curtain where she's lying on the bed. She could be sleeping if it wasn't for all the bruises and burns on her. I can even tell just from her neck and her face how much trauma she's been through.

"I'll give you a moment." The doctor shuts the curtain on us and leaves us alone.

I approach the bed, almost afraid to touch her. She looks so fragile and in pain I'm afraid I'll hurt her, the fact that she's gone and can't feel anything not really sinking in yet.

Then, I start bawling like a baby. I grab her hand under the sheet, and I run my other hand through her beautiful hair. "How the hell am I supposed to explain this to Hayden? You were supposed to be there to see her grow up. To see her get married. How can you leave us alone like this?"

But of course, I get no answer. She's nearly cold, and her spirit's not here anymore.

I hope she gets to be at peace. I hope I can find a way to move on and make Hayden's life a good one, even without her mom. I hope we make her proud.

I give her one last kiss on the forehead and walk out, looking for the officer who's going to give me answers about how the hell this happened.

I head out into the lobby and instantly spot him. "So, what caused the accident? What do we know?"

"You're Jackson, I take it?" he asks in a monotonous tone.

"Obviously."

"Your wife was found alive at the scene. The passenger door was hanging open, but

the passenger was never found. Though, there was blood on the dash. Whoever it is, they can't have made it too far. We're checking other hospitals and getting a search out there. We're hoping the passenger knows more about what happened, but the car seemed to have some kind of brake malfunction. And then it was engulfed in flames. We're still investigating."

There was another person in the car. Someone who left Lyla alone to suffer while they ran off. Who the hell was it, and what the hell is wrong with them?

"If you give me your number, we can let you know as soon as we know more," he says.

I nod, trying to keep it together, knowing that I'm going to have to go tell Hayden that her mom is never coming home. And I'm going to have to sleep alone tonight.

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AMELIA

It's been two years since my brother's death. Or at least what we assume was his death. And I still feel horrible about it.

I know there's no way I could've predicted what was going to happen to him—a terrible car accident that didn't make much sense.

I was finishing school at a private college, Biltmore, leagues away from him. I was trying to get my dual degree, a Bachelor of Science in childhood development and educational psychology. I managed to get the degree, but left before I got my educational certification for early education or did clinicals to get into the psychology field. I had either option ahead of me, but I rushed home to be there for my parents after the loss of Preston.

But it was almost like I mourned alone. I was sad, and I was angry. And I was looking for answers that my parents thought were better left alone. In fact, six months in, they had Preston declared dead. There was no sign of him, and everyone said that the accident was too bad, and there was too much blood, for him to have actually survived. Even though he made it out of the crash, he would've passed out and died somewhere else. Maybe in the woods outside of town, hell if I know. It never made sense to me.

In fact, for the past two years, little has made sense to me.

So, I hightailed it to London to work for friends of the family. They were always flitting around the world with their kids due to their work. Originally from Paris, then moving here to the US, and then to London, they needed someone to go with them and care for their children. With my experience, they thought I would make a great au pair.

My parents had no problem sending me off, saying goodbye. They simply checked in every once in a while. And the isolation was good for me at first. It helped me grieve properly, away from all the rumors and whispers. It helped me really remember my brother the way he was meant to be remembered.

But I couldn't handle it—the fact that a piece of paper said that Preston was dead.

So when I came back home only a month ago, I dove into the case. I remember seeing car accident photos in the beginning, trying to make sense of it all. The whole thing was a mess. The car caught fire way too easily. The brakes weren't working. So many odd things that just pointed to foul play in my book.

I know I'm no investigator, no expert, but even as an outsider looking in, it's still pretty damn obvious that there's something fishy about this whole thing. And yet I've not heard a peep out of the police. Not a peep from my parents to say that they're on the department's case to get more information. It's as if my brother never existed. Nobody seems to care.

So, I've taken a deep dive into his life. And my brother above all loves hockey. He always has, always will, even in the grave.

He was an enforcer for the Chicago Blue Jays. A star player. And he had a rival—a rival who he knew long before the Blue Jays. As far as I can tell, Jackson is still alive as a star player while his rival, Preston, is for all intents and purposes dead.

I remember the two of them from when I was younger. It was before I left for college, but I was so reserved I never tried to get to know Jackson at all, even though I thought he was the bee's knees. He was great at hockey, he was funny, he was smart, and he was hot.

That's kind of all it takes for a young and inexperienced girl.

I remember how the two of them would talk shit to each other and get in a lot of fights. They were in trouble at school all the time, even college, for fighting on the ice. Until then, I thought what they had was harmless. That they were only shit-talking each other because they were jocks.

After talking to others, and after seeing clips and interviews from games and when they got accepted to the team, I'm not so certain now.

Maybe it's wrong to speculate, but I have a bad feeling that Jackson has everything to do with this. That it's Jackson who wanted my brother gone.

The motive gets a little muddy. But you know when you get that feeling in your gut when something is the right answer, but you don't know how to prove it? That's what I have. It's the same feeling I've had the entire two years, but I've only now started to give voice to it.

If I think real hard, I can come up with a few reasons that Jackson might have wanted Preston dead. Or maybe not even dead, just injured. If my brother couldn't play hockey, then that would take the rival out of the game. Maybe Jackson would get a raise or more fame or even get on a more high-profile team.

The Chicago Blue Jays were doing great. They were at the top of their game. But that was the first time they became true Stanley Cup contenders. There are plenty of teams that have been multiple times—and even won multiple times—that would give

him more of the attention he might have wanted.

But when I look him up, I find that Jackson is still very much a Blue Jay. I don't know if he's had other offers and turned them down, or if offers just never came.

There's one other fact that plagues me. Preston was in the car with someone else—Jackson's wife, Lyla.

Lyla also passed away that day, but she was found at the scene alive, though she was too injured to tell anyone anything.

Testosterone, I've learned since becoming an adult and getting out there, can make men do some weird things. Guys get it in their heads that they need to find any way possible to compete. And sometimes they use women to do that.

Maybe the rivalry went too far. Maybe my brother got caught up in it all, and he was having an affair with Jackson's wife.

Affairs are the number one motivator for killing someone. You can watch it on all the true crime shows. If there's cheating in a marriage, it's pretty much guaranteed that's the reason somebody ended up six feet under.

So, maybe Jackson knew. Maybe Jackson knew, and the rage was too much. He wanted to get rid of them both and make them pay.

But the fact is, no one has ever looked into this. No one even knows why Preston was in the car with Lyla. And the cops don't seem interested in pursuing the matter.

Most people tell me to just forget it, to move on. But all of this just makes me even more suspicious.

It's the pain and possibilities that keep me going. I can't seem to move on. I'm looking for my brother in people's faces everywhere I go, wondering if he's still alive and has just forgotten who he is.

He may have been a shit-talker sometimes. A little hotheaded too. I remember when we were little, he would get so vindictive about things. I might accidentally knock over a toy of his or come into his room when he didn't want me in there, and I would end up with something broken, stolen, or some horrible prank played on me. The kind a girl shouldn't have to go through.

But as he grew up, the need for pranks wore off. He ended up becoming my biggest protector. I always felt safe with Preston around. Now, going through life without him is strange. It's like being in a foreign country and not knowing the language.

So, I've been trying to work my way into his old inner circle. I want to know everyone he knew. I want to understand the dynamic and see if any of the rest of them feel the same way I do—that Jackson may have had something to do with it.

Lucky for me, I have money and connections. The kind of money and connections that managed to get me VIP season passes to see the Chicago Blue Jays. And tonight, I'll be at the third game in a row, sitting next to a woman named Quinn.

Quinn Eastburn is the wife of Dean Eastburn, who's also a long-time Blue Jays player. They have three kids together. But even more importantly, those kids are friends with Hayden. And Hayden is Jackson's daughter.

She's only four, and from what Quinn tells me, she's been traumatized from losing her mother. She doesn't talk to many people, and has almost no trust, but she seems like such a sweetheart.

If I wasn't here for investigative purposes, I would still love doing what I'm doing,

which is making a connection with the children in order to get to the adult. Because from what I hear, Quinn has always helped out with taking care of Hayden, even before Lyla's death.

If I get to know Quinn, and Dean, maybe they'll have something worthwhile to say. Maybe I can get to the bottom of this.

I take a look at my makeup in the mirror, making sure it's not too much. I don't want to look desperate, but I have been trying to appear like a superfan.

Other than the fact that Preston played it, I have to admit that I didn't know much about hockey until a couple months ago. I started really looking into it when this plan came to me. So, I've learned to cheer at the right times in the right ways. I've learned how fun it can be to watch them beat the shit out of each other on the ice. And I've watched other young women to see how to dress.

Jeans and a jersey. Natural looks. Still with a feminine air. It makes them notice you. It makes you fit in too.

I grab my purse and keys and head out the door of my apartment, being sure to lock it behind me. I climb down three flights of stairs, cursing at everyone for the fact that I just had to end up on the third floor. And I had to pick an apartment without an elevator, mostly because I love the look of it and the fact that it has more square footage than any other one-bedroom apartment in town.

The price I pay for luxury.

I'm a little breathless as I reach the bottom of the stairs. I get to my car—the little blue Honda I've had since I went away to college—unlock it, and climb in.

Taylor Swift is playing on the radio, and I turn it up. I sing along off-key, not really

giving a shit, as I make my way downtown to the rink for the game.

The stadium won't be packed—it usually isn't until later in the season—but the traffic is a little bit slow as I make my way there.

Plenty of time to get in my head about all this and think about turning around multiple times. Sometimes, I do feel guilty about what I'm doing.

It's not like anyone asked to be entangled with someone like Jackson. I doubt Quinn knows he's directly harmed someone. But the suspicion must be there. There must be more people who think that Jackson had something to do with Preston's death.

It's going to take a lot to convince me otherwise.

I get to the stadium slightly early. Just in time to grab something to drink in the long line before I make my way to my seat. I'm so close to the rink I'm sure I'll be able to smell blood if any is spilled.

That guilt flares up again as I realize how many people would kill for seats like this. But I took it from them, because I just can't let the past go.

I'm about to take a seat when I hear a bit of commotion coming down the stairs toward us. I look to my right and I see that Quinn is on her way with all four children in tow.

Lucy, Joseph, Thomas, and Hayden all have different personalities, and are all in a whirlwind as she tries to get them to settle down and follow her to their seats.

I can't help but smile and let out a soft chuckle. I'm sure it's pure chaos, but it's the kind of chaos I thrive on. I've only given it a brief thought in the past couple of years because of my age and every damn thing I'm busy with, but I would love to have a

house full of kids one day.

They always just make me smile.

I meet them at the end of the aisle and hold out my hands. Two of the kids grab hold and start talking away at me about whatever happened at school that day. I'm only half listening, giving Quinn a soft but empathetic smile. I can tell she's been sweating because her hair is stuck to her brow. She's trying to juggle the kids and all the snacks at once.

"Rough day?" I ask her, and she nods as we finally get the kids to the seats.

"You have no idea. Dean's been talking about having a fourth, and I'm just absolutely against it. I'm considering getting my tubes tied. I absolutely love these kids, but some days, it's too much."

I nod. "I can totally understand that."

Quinn cocks her head to the side. "You look a little young, but do you have any?" she asks.

I shake my head. "No, not yet. Definitely a little young, and a little single." I laugh at it, but there's this hole that hits my stomach at the thought. I don't want to be single, but I've been too busy running from my past and then digging too deep into it to worry about relationships. Before that, I was just way too sheltered.

"Oh."

I know what she's thinking. She's thinking I wouldn't understand it at all. So, I have to explain.

“What I mean by that is that I’m actually an education major. And I’ve been an au pair. I even babysat my way through college. So, I have a lot of experience with wrangling children.”

Quinn smiles. “That would explain why you’re so good with them. I love that. I bet you’ll make a good mom one day.”

I smile at her kindness, and all of us sit down and start snacking as the game begins.

Suddenly Quinn turns to me, her mouth open like she just had an epiphany. “You know what, I just thought about something. I know you’re a big fan, and you’re clearly good with kids. Are you looking for a job by any chance?”

“Yeah, I actually am. I just recently got back from college and then a trip to London where I was an au pair. Definitely in the market. Why do you ask?”

My heart is beating fast. This could be the in that I need. Does somebody on the team have a job for me? Does she know of someone who has a daycare or a kid?

“Well, one of our team members, Jackson, he has a little girl. Well, this is actually his little girl.” She points to Hayden. Of course, I’ve known this. But she’s never revealed before who Hayden’s father is, just mentioning that she helps care for her while her dad’s playing.

“Oh, well I wouldn’t mind helping out. Hayden’s been so sweet, after all.” I lean down and pinch her little cheek, and she blushes and giggles.

“Yeah, and you’re so good with her. Honestly, he’s had a really hard time finding a good nanny. I know he’s exhausted. I think I can get you an interview if you’d like?”

At that moment Joseph stomps on Lucy’s foot, and Quinn has to deal with that.

I shake my head and lean down to Hayden. “How would you like that? Me and you hanging out more while Daddy plays hockey?” I tickle her belly. She lets out that cute giggle again and looks down shyly before nodding to say that she would like it.

“I mean, I don’t want to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, but honestly, an interview would be a lifesaver.”

Quinn smiles, pulling out her phone. “Perfect. I doubt he’ll be up for it after today’s game or anything, but I want to text him and let him know, if that’s okay? That way, you already have an in. Give me your number so I can give it to him to call.”

As the crowd cheers while two of the players get into a fight, I lean over her phone to make sure she’s got the right number and she can hear me. She shoots off the message, and it feels surreal—that there’s a chance I might get to talk with Jackson himself. I might get to pick his brain about Preston.

Will he recognize me? Hopefully not.

I would hate to blow my cover and ruin the whole thing before I even get started.

I enjoy the rest of the game, feeling like everything is finally lining up for me. I’m going to find out what happened to my brother.

This house is gorgeous. It’s not as big as the one I grew up in, but it’s pretty sprawling, and both the front and back yards are huge. A white picket fence wraps around the whole property, and there’s a swing on a tree that shades some of the bedrooms. The front of the house is perfectly landscaped with beautiful hibiscus and some vines creeping up the side.

The siding is custard yellow, and the shutters are all painted white. There are huge colonial-style columns coming up from the deck, and a quaint swing sitting next to

the door.

It's good to know that Hayden has a great place to grow up, but I wonder how empty it feels without Lyla.

Maybe if I never get to the bottom of this, at least I'll know that Jackson's facing the punishment of having to raise his daughter in the house he used to share with his beloved wife. How the ghost of her must haunt him.

I take a deep breath and go up to the blue door, knocking on it three times. I hear a happy squeal from inside, a sign that Jackson and Hayden are playing. My stomach seems to roll around across my intestines, like I'm swallowing bowling balls or something. From what I hear, Jackson is a great father. But I can't let that get to me. I have to stay focused on the goal.

Soon enough, Jackson opens the door. He moves to the side to let me in and sends Hayden over to play with her toys in the playroom just to the right of the entryway. I look up to see a grand chandelier dripping with crystals, and I wonder if the crystals are real or not.

"Hi, I'm Jackson. You must be Amelia?" he asks.

I smile at him, feeling self-conscious under his gaze. He still looks like he's a decade younger than he actually is. Just like the same timid teenager I knew him to be, fighting with my brother.

Do I look so similar? I don't think so. I still have the freckles, but my hair has finally grown long. Puberty hit me hard and late. I don't even carry myself the same.

I hold out my hand to shake. "Yes, I'm Amelia. Quinn told you about me."

He nods, but he doesn't smile. "Yes, I'm aware. Quinn says you seemed to be some kind of kid whisperer or something. I received your email that she forwarded to me with your resume."

He points toward the living area, and I follow him there, sitting on the leather couch across from him as he sits on the loveseat. On the glass dining room table is a printout of that very resume.

He looks at the paper quietly, and I make note of the differences. There are subtle changes in his jawline, and he has stubble now, but other than that, he's the same guy. Just a little grumpier.

"Well, your qualifications look great. But if you don't mind, I have a few questions. The thing is, I'm pretty picky about this position. After all, my daughter is my life."

He leans back in a way that makes him look so sure of himself, and his tone is almost accusatory. Harsh.

I shift my feet uncomfortably, wondering if he's put two and two together yet. Surely, he must vaguely remember that Preston had a sister.

Maybe not. Maybe he's so out of touch and uncaring that he doesn't even notice the last name at the top of the resume.

"Sure, I can answer some questions."

I put on my game face and ready myself to win this position. It's the only way I'm ever going to move forward from losing Preston. So, grumpy or not, for today, I need to make Jackson love me.

JACKSON

I look Amelia up and down, examining her in more ways than one.

She's young, but how young I can't quite put a finger on. She just has one of those faces. A face that could belong to a teenager or a thirty-year-old. And she has a great body.

If I was interviewing for a girlfriend or one-night stand, she'd be perfect.

The problem is, I'm looking for a nanny for Hayden. The only reason I haven't completely turned Amelia away at this point is because of her resume and because of Quinn.

Quinn made a big deal about me hiring this girl. Apparently, they have seats next to each other at the games. And every time, Amelia helps Quinn with all the kids, including Hayden. Quinn even mentioned that Hayden laughs with her and will hold her hand on occasion. It's not much, but for Hayden, it's everything.

I don't know what kind of trauma a one-year-old can hold. I don't know how memory actually works for such a young child. But there must be something there, because Hayden has not let any woman get close to her since my wife's death. Even though she can't remember her face or anything specific, somewhere in there, Hayden must remember her mother.

It's been killing me, because on the one hand, I absolutely want to preserve my wife's memory, but on the other hand, I need to know Hayden is cared for and safe when I'm not home. And if she can't bond with a nanny...well, that makes it impossible to feel like she'll be okay.

But this Amelia, some superfan who's been getting to know Quinn over three hockey games, has come in and proven that Hayden still has something in there. That someone other than me can pull some kind of socialization out of her.

Amelia is way too pretty for this job. She has me thinking dirty thoughts, thoughts that I don't usually think much anymore. Losing Lyla, it did something to me. It broke something inside of me. I don't usually feel anything for women anymore. Maybe I'm a bit like Hayden that way.

Amelia is perfect on paper too. She has years of experience caring for children. Babysitting for money throughout college. An au pair job. Two science degrees in education and child psychology. In fact, she's overqualified.

Quinn and the resume both mention that she's fresh out of college and looking for a job to get her through getting her certifications. Call me selfish, but part of me worries that if I hire her, I won't be able to keep her. And if my daughter bonds with her, there's no letting her go.

So I'm wary about this.

Mostly, I'm worried about the fact that she'll be around my teammates. There's no keeping her away from them, considering I want my daughter right there with me in the action. Like always. Hayden's never going to grow up and wonder why I wasn't around. She'll be a part of my life, even if my life is busy and different.

But Amelia, she's the kind of woman the hockey players will chase. I've already had

problems with that.

Vaughn, even though he's married, slept with my last nanny. That's why I had to fire her. The drama was hashed out in the locker room one day, and Coach gave me all kinds of shit for it too. Said that my nanny was completely unprofessional. Hayden was crying by the end of it.

I don't know why, but Vaughn's wife stayed with him after that, only to then be paranoid all the time, asking all of us on the team whether he's being faithful and to watch him for her. Since then, he's been as faithful as he gets, looking but never touching. Though, I think the incident ruined their marriage forever.

Sometimes, I feel responsible for it. Like I should have interviewed my nanny more thoroughly or watched her more carefully. But how was I to know she'd jump into bed with a married hockey player?

I sent her packing. She and Hayden barely got along anyway. I don't know how someone can't get along with a three-year-old, but I guess it happens.

And Amelia is twenty times more gorgeous than she was. How am I going to keep the wolves off of her?

And what if she's the type to do the chasing?

I just need to ask the right questions.

"So, what made you decide to travel to London to be an au pair? And how do I know you plan on staying in the States now?" I ask. I know my tone is harsh, but if she scares easily, she's not going to be a good fit. I want a nanny that can handle anything and everything that could come up. I'm not taking any chances with Hayden.

She sits up straight, her perky little breasts sticking out and making me have to cross my legs to the side. I'm glad I'm not wearing sweatpants.

Her nose wrinkles up as she moves, accentuating the freckles all over her face, adding to that youthful look of hers. But she talks like she's a sophisticated adult. "Well, I actually went through something really tough. My parents had these friends who travel a lot for work, and they were leaving the country. They have twins. Very young. They just couldn't imagine trying to settle into the new place without the help. It was a good thing for me, a great job and a great experience...getting to see the world at my age. But it was also time for me to grieve, and process what I was going through."

I narrow my eyes at her. Is this girl for real? It's like she has the perfect answers. Did she prepare in the mirror or something?

"So, you don't plan on leaving the country again anytime soon?"

She shakes her head, her wavy brown hair moving with it. "Absolutely not. I'm back for the long haul and looking forward to getting my life back together again. I feel like I've had a lot of time to think and heal. It was a great experience. But I definitely prefer being home." She grins, and I have to clear my throat.

"I have to say, your resume is impressive. Very impressive. I would think you'd want more than just a nanny job."

She purses her lips at me. For a moment, I think she might challenge me on the fact that I didn't actually ask a question.

But then she takes a deep breath and places her hands on her knees. "I think that's fair. Of course, I want to work in my field, but I have a couple of choices ahead of me about what I could do. And either way, it's a long road to get there. I need to be able

to pay the bills, of course. Plus, I love working with kids. I don't really care in what capacity at the moment. There's plenty of time to further my career. I'm only in my twenties, after all." She shrugs.

I nod, glad to have at least some idea of how old she is. College graduate, over a year abroad, she's probably twenty-three to twenty-five.

"There's something you should know. My daughter—she's only four, but she's been through a lot in her life. I don't know how much Quinn has told you but?—"

She stops me, and I try to contain my anger at her interrupting me. The thing is, she does seem professional, just with a strong personality. Exactly the kind of personality I would normally want protecting my daughter.

So, I need to chill. If she can stand up to me, then she can stand up to anyone.

"I'm aware of the tragedy your daughter has faced. And I'm so sorry to hear about it. However, if you take a look at my resume, you'll see that I did major in educational psychology. It's not like I'm some kind of therapist, but I do feel fully prepared to handle her ups and downs and any mood swings. And I understand grief. I won't get offended if she's not overly affectionate."

I lean forward, my elbows on my thighs. I don't want to like her. She's too pretty—the kind of pretty that could get me in trouble. But she's being professional. This is exactly what I need, and Quinn's brought it to me. I technically have no real reason not to hire her. And this is about Hayden, not me.

I have to trust in my own willpower. It's only been two years—two years and a couple weeks, to be exact—since the loss of my wife. It's not the time for me to get involved in anything, especially when Hayden clearly hasn't healed.

“Part of the job means bringing Hayden to events. Hockey games, parties, and sometimes even other professional events. You’ll have to maintain a level of professionalism. I’ve had trouble with that in the past. Would you give me any trouble with that?”

She squints one eye, as if she’s trying to figure out what I mean by being unprofessional. It’s one of the cutest faces I’ve ever seen. Shit. This is a problem.

“Well, as you can see, I did go abroad by myself following college, and I was an au pair. I’m happy to give you the phone number for a direct reference. I went to a private college. You don’t really get through those without a level of professionalism. And I would be totally fine going to events. I love hockey, and I’m very serious about caring for children. There would be no issue.”

I can’t help but grin. I believe what she says. Amelia really is the perfect fit. Every question I continue to ask her, even right down to questions about boyfriends and what she would do if one of the players hits on her, she simply points back to her qualifications and her professionalism in her work and school. There isn’t a single hint that there would ever be an issue. In fact, she seems offended by the idea.

On paper, Amelia is the best thing for Hayden. How can I possibly turn that down?

I can’t. It’s that simple. Of course I’m going to hire her. But I need to make it appear real.

I stand up and hold out my hand to shake hers. “Thank you for this, Amelia. It’s been very eye-opening. I have a couple more interviews to do, but I’m very interested. Can I contact you using the number on the resume?”

She leans over, almost too close, and I can smell lavender and vanilla on her. She places her finger on the number at the top of the page. “Silly me. This was my

number while I was in London. I have a new one now, but you should already have that from when you called me to set up the interview. You still have it?" she asks, biting her bottom lip.

It's like she's being sensual and doesn't even know it.

"Yes, I have it." I back away from her, half sprinting toward the door to open it and get her out of here. Luckily, we won't be alone in such close quarters most of the time. She'll just be caring for Hayden.

"I'll give you a call, then."

She meets me at the door and blinks as if in a daze. I feel a bit bad for the way I'm treating her, but I just can't have her here screwing with my mind right now.

"Thanks. I hope you have a nice day."

She walks out the door but then peeks her head back inside for a moment. She finds Hayden with her eyes and makes a point to say goodbye to her too. "You have a good day too, Hayden."

And Hayden actually waves to her. Honest to God waves to her.

My heart nearly stops, and it takes everything in me not to slam the door in Amelia's face just out of shock.

I go over to where Hayden is still sitting, playing with some of her toys—a couple of Barbies that look like they've been electrocuted.

"Amelia's my friend."

“She is?” I ask her, picking up a Barbie and making her dance.

Hayden laughs, that cute little belly jiggling, as she does only for me.

“Yes, Daddy. From hockey.”

So, she cares enough to remember her. Well, now I definitely have to hire Amelia.

I get down on the floor with every intention of playing with her, even if sometimes I have no idea what game we’re playing. I just try and let her lead. It’s the way all of the parenting books taught me. The ones I had to get when I realized I was really going to be doing this all alone. I bet Lyla would’ve been naturally good at this. She probably would’ve been able to read Hayden’s mind. But, Hayden has me, and I do my best. Better than my best, because she deserves it.

I go to pick up one of her Barbies and she looks up at me, a toothy grin spreading across her face. I try not to laugh, but it reminds me of the Cheshire cat. This is how I always know she wants something from me. And I doubt I’ll say no.

“Daddy?” she asks, beaming at me, her hands clasped.

I school my face. “Hayden?”

She lashes out at me with her hand playfully, hating when I tease her like that. “I’m bored with my Barbies. That’s what I want to tell you—I’m bored.”

“Bored? Well...” I look toward the back door that leads out into the yard. I’ve spent a lot of time over the past couple months putting together some new toys for out there, so that when it was warm she’d have plenty to do.

She may be a little too young for some of it still, but it’s a shame to let it go to waste

on a day like this. “It’s really nice outside. Do you want to go outside, Hayden?”

She nods vigorously and puts her hands in the air, clapping them together and then putting them in the air again. The signal that tells me she wants to be picked up.

For the past two years, we’ve developed a language all our own. I don’t know if other children and their parents do this. I’m sure some kids have symbols for things or hand gestures, especially before they can talk. Hayden still talks baby talk with some words, but she can also talk really well.

But sometimes, she prefers what she and I have—she likes it when I can just understand what she wants.

I get up and reach for her, lifting her up into my arms in one swing. “Wheee!” she squeals, as if I’m taking her on some kind of amazing ride. “Piggyback?” she asks.

I roll my eyes and then give in anyway. I pull her onto my back and she hangs on around my neck. I grab ahold of her legs and start jogging toward the patio door.

“And off we go.”

“Yay!”

When we get out there, I point out all the options. I got her cornhole, ring toss, stuff for volleyball, sidewalk chalk, and even a full playground set.

“Swing. Then wing toss.”

I smile, actually dreading the day when she can say the word ring properly. For now, it means that she’s still small. Still my little girl.

I get her into the swing and start pushing her, but only a little. She always acts like she's scared at first. Eventually, she'll beg to go higher and then for me to let her do it by herself.

I remember when she was still too little to be in the normal swing. When I would put her in the baby swings and she would just cry unless I pushed it just enough to rock her.

If Lyla was still here, our lives would be so different right now. Firstly, there would be no nanny. Maybe the occasional babysitter so we could have a beautiful night together. I would woo her with romantic dates—it's something I used to love to do with her. And the way she would just light up for them...I don't know if anyone else could possibly make me feel the way she did. And even though Hayden was so little when she left us for good, I feel like Hayden would be different too.

Hayden is so shy. And especially when it comes to women, she just doesn't feel a bond with any of them. She doesn't trust anyone. Just the fact that she cared enough to say that she remembered Amelia is a big deal, but it also kind of worries me. Because there's no replacement. No one could ever take the place of Hayden's mother.

Lyla was something else. Hardworking. Beautiful. She knew how to have a good time too. And now, the little girl she gave birth to, the daughter she loved so much...she's growing up and Lyla can't see her do that. It gets me. Every time I make a mark on the wall where Hayden's grown just a little bit more, and her mother's not here to see it, it makes me sick to my stomach.

“Okay, Daddy. I do myself now.” She lets out a happy squeal as she takes the swing almost as high as it can go.

I take a few steps back and just watch her enjoying herself.

The one thing I'm glad about is how quickly she recovers after the anniversaries. The second anniversary of Lyla's death was only a month ago. I've still been taking it hard. I've been having weird dreams about her, and going back to wondering what the hell happened that day when she was in the crash.

It still sticks in my mind, and I wish I had answers. But even our families, when I can find the courage to talk to them about it, tell me that it's way past time to move on. In more ways than one. It's not that they don't miss her, but they just don't want me to keep dwelling on it like this. It's not good for us.

Hayden has cried and asked about Lyla a few times. I don't know if she would even know it was the anniversary of her mom's death or not if I didn't say anything. It's hard to know what the body truly remembers.

I cheer her on as she continues to swing, and then she finally stops pumping her legs, clearly ready to slow down and stop.

I'm right behind her to support her as she gets sick of waiting, and I reach out to stop the swing from swinging.

She hops out and goes over to where the ring toss game sits next to the patio, pulling the colored rings off and passing me half of them.

"You first, Daddy," she says, gesturing for me to step up in front of her.

I smile, loving how kind she is. But again, that pang hits me. The fact that her mother will never know that she's this kind. Or this smart. Or this beautiful.

I'm slow about tossing the first ring, showing Hayden again exactly how to throw it to make sure she has a shot. I'll never get onto her for not making it, but I want her to have the ability.

I just barely miss the back stake, and I act disappointed. Then I back up and point for her to get in front of me and try it.

“Help me?” she asks, turning that sweet little face to me.

I kneel behind her and hold on to her wrist, showing her just how to curve it inward and then flick it out.

Hayden gets a tight grip on the red ring, closes her eyes for a second, real tight as if she’s making a wish, and then lets it go the way I showed her. Sure enough, she makes it onto the first stake.

She jumps up and down, then turns around to give me a hug. “Thank you, Daddy. That was so cool.”

I nod and tickle her underarms a little. “It was pretty cool.”

After she’s tucked in bed, I’m sitting on the couch and nursing a beer, flipping through Netflix to see if there’s anything interesting I haven’t watched yet. And of course, there just isn’t. There never seems to be these days. But then again, this is the time of year when things get quiet. I think too much, and I want a distraction. But there is no such thing. There’s no distraction from the grief and the pain when you lose the person you love the most. Especially when you don’t have answers about why you lost that person.

I’m trying to literally shake the thoughts out of my head when I hear Hayden crying from her room.

I set my beer down and take the stairs two by two. It always worries me, setting my heartbeat racing when she wakes up like this in the night. I don’t know why, but I just have this anxiety, this panic, that something could really be wrong.

That life has come to take yet another thing away from me.

As I make it up the stairs, I see that she's already wandered out of her room, rubbing her eyes. "Daddy?" she asks, and her voice is husky.

Her eyes are red as she moves her hand away. I reach for her, putting my arms out, and she grabs onto them willingly.

I scoop her up and hold her, allowing her to put her head on my shoulder. "Hey, princess, did you have a bad dream?" I ask her, stroking her hair soothingly.

She shakes her head, and it leaves me feeling confused.

"Then, what's wrong? How can I help?"

"I think..." she begins, but then she starts sobbing. I give her pressure, squeezing her tight and letting her know I'm here while I bounce her up and down in my arms, pacing back and forth in front of the staircase. It's all I can do, because when she gets like this, there's just no soothing her and talking it over until she's ready. It can be about anything, but I have a bad feeling I know what this is. It's happened before.

Finally, she whispers in my ear, "I think I had a dream about Mommy. I miss Mommy."

She doesn't say it very often. I know she doesn't remember her face, and I have to show her pictures. And thank goodness I have them. I have them everywhere.

"Oh, but it was a good dream?" I ask her.

She nods and pulls back to look at me. Her eyes are so red. I wish I could fix this.

“Yes.”

I tap her nose with the tip of my finger, trying not to get emotional myself. This is not the time.

“You know what? I have those dreams a lot too. It’s memories. Or something like that. It’s a good thing, because it means we remember her, and wherever she is, she remembers us. It’s almost like a message.” I don’t even know if I believe what I’m saying, but I want to. And it’s the best way I have to ease how she feels.

“Mommy talks to me?” she asks, and I nod, unable to say anything now without crying myself.

We stay like that for a few minutes as we come down, just breathing with each other in each other’s arms. Then, she asks me, “Daddy, can you read me a story?”

I nod, knowing just the one she wants. It was Lyla’s favorite. She read it to her even while she was still growing in the womb.

I get Hayden back into her bed and pull out the very worn copy of Goodnight Moon . I curl up in bed next to her and start reading it, and she points her finger when there’s a word she knows, like moon.

I don’t leave the room again until I’m sure she’s asleep peacefully. As I do, I can hear my vibrating cell phone on the couch down the stairs.

I take my time getting to it, not knowing what anyone could possibly want that’s so important at this time of night. I see on the caller ID that it’s Oliver.

I’m sure Dean’s with him too. Those two are always together if Dean’s not at home with his wife.

“What’s up?” I ask, hearing how down I am in my voice. I hate being the downer in the group. Losing my wife and being a single dad, it doesn’t make you the most fun to be around. I’m nothing like a typical hockey player. I’m supposed to be wild, getting into fights and getting women, but instead I’m reading bedtime stories, then having a beer alone on the couch, wanting to be left alone.

“Hey, what’s up, buddy?” Oliver says. I can hear Dean’s voice in the background, confirming my suspicions. There’s lots of noise, so I can only assume they’re out somewhere. “What are you doing? We want you to come out.” I think he’s a little tipsy.

I chuckle a little, trying to be a good sport. “You know I can’t go out, guys. I’m still trying to hire a nanny, though I think I’ve narrowed it down. As soon as I have one, I’ll be able to go out with you guys again some. Right now I have to be with my little girl. Just go ahead and have fun without me.”

I hear some shifting and movement through the phone, and then Dean is the one on the other end. “Do you want me to call Quinn to watch her? I mean, she’s watching our kids anyway. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind.”

I shake my head, thinking about all the times I’ve used and abused the fact that Quinn is such a good mother. And a good wife. “No, I can’t keep using her like that. She’s got three kids around to take care of. I don’t want to keep putting another on her plate so that she never gets a break, especially when Hayden refuses to bond with her.”

Dean chuckles darkly. “Man, you’re making me look like such a bad dad and husband right now.”

I close my eyes softly, not wanting to make him feel that way. “You know that’s not what I mean.”

“I know, I know.” I hear Oliver going off about something in the background. “Well, I really do hope you find a good candidate. What’s the holdup?”

I shuffle my feet, wondering if I should even say anything. But why not? These are my guys. Basically my brothers. “Well, I think I found a candidate, but honestly I’m worried about what happened the last time.”

It’s Oliver’s turn to talk, and yes, he’s definitely drunk. “Man, is she hot? If you’re that worried about it, she must be hot. Does that mean you’re finally into somebody?” he says, and I swear my chest tightens like I’m having a heart attack at that idea.

I haven’t dated anyone, haven’t even tried, since my wife’s death.

“Okay, that’s not even funny, Oliver. Drunk or not, don’t joke about that shit.”

Dean takes the phone away from him again. “We’re sorry, he just had too many, too fast...” Dean trails off, and I can tell he doesn’t know what to say at this point. I don’t know what to say either.

“I just need some rest. It’s okay. I’ll see you guys at the next practice.” Then, I hang up, not wanting to be in this conversation anymore.

AMELIA

I open a new tab, pulling up Spotify. It's too damn quiet in this place. I've been sitting at my computer for over an hour now, looking for jobs I can apply for and researching various programs to get my teaching certificate locally. I think I'm still in the running for the nanny job with Jackson and Hayden, but I don't really know. It's been three days, and his behavior didn't really tell me anything. Nothing useful, anyway. So, since I have rent to pay, I have to keep looking.

I pull up a playlist of my favorite songs to keep me going, and I stretch my neck and back, wiggling my fingers and toes before getting back to it.

I finish off the application for a daycare, after answering some open-ended questions. As if they're really going to look at my answers. No need to make this process more efficient. It's supposedly so easy to get a job when you have a degree in something. That's the whole reason we waste an extra several years of our lives and lots of money to get one. Well, it was my parents' money in my case, but still. Someone needs to do something about this.

I hit submit and then move on to the next application. This one seems to only be asking for a resume and then a couple questions about my education and experience, but I see it doesn't pay very much. I might as well work fast food for that wage.

I close the tab and roll my eyes, trying to stay positive.

“You can do it.” I feel silly, speaking to my self like this, but at least there’s no one around to hear in my own damn apartment.

A neighbor turns up their music, and I scowl at our shared wall. I turn up my own music. A song comes on that makes me want to get up and dance, but I’m stuck at this stupid computer trying to figure out what the hell to do with my life. A life that still feels like it’s in shambles after losing my brother.

I should be taking responsibility for myself, and for my future, but instead I feel a responsibility to my family to figure out what happened to Preston. I feel a responsibility to him, even though he was always my protector. If he is up there somewhere, really watching over me, he’s probably screaming about how he didn’t protect me all those years just for me to do this. This is not my job.

I roll my eyes and shoot him the finger.

I look at the three programs I have open for getting my certificate. One of them is really expensive, and I don’t want to ask my parents for any more money. They have it, and they’ll give it willingly, but I want to do something for myself for once. So, I close that one.

The next one has a payment plan. That’s promising. I start going through the website, looking hopefully at everything it has to offer. This might be the one, though I’ll look at the other one just in case.

I’m in a trance, lost in the music I’m listening to—finally, now that the neighbor has gotten the message about their stupid death metal music blaring—when my doorbell rings.

I scowl as I go to answer it. I’m not exactly expecting anyone and haven’t ordered any packages. I sigh when I look through the peephole and see my mother standing

on the other side of the door. She's technically my stepmother, but I don't think of her that way. My mom died when I was young, and my stepmom came into our lives not too long after, so both Preston and I have always just called her "Mom."

She's wearing all those frown lines she's developed over the past year. Losing Preston has aged her and my father so much. They were so quick to talk about moving on and having him declared dead, but here they are looking worse than I do. It's like they've turned into zombies.

And she's been hovering ever since I came back to town. She immediately asked for my address, and she keeps showing up unannounced.

It's a good thing I love this woman, because otherwise I'd be telling her off about my age and my privacy.

I plaster on a smile and swing the door open.

"Amelia, so glad you're home." She doesn't wait for me to invite her in, just comes barging through so that I have to push the door open the rest of the way real fast. Her heels click against the cheap tile entryway, and the door creaks as I swing it shut. I have to give it a little extra shove with my shoulder to get it closed all the way before I can lock it.

She takes a few more steps into the apartment and looks around, as if it might be different than was the last time she was here, only five days ago. She has a bag in her hand, no doubt full of something to leave here. She never shows up empty-handed. And I don't know if it's just a habit after being a guest at a lot of important people's houses, or if it's charity. Either way, I wish I could tell her to shove it, but I just can't hurt her that way. After all, I'm her only remaining child.

"Hi, Mom. You know you really should at least tell me when you're coming. I want

to make sure the place is clean and I don't have any plans made..."

She waves me off with her manicured nails, almost scratching me on the nose. I have to dodge and weave like I'm in an MMA match.

"Don't be silly. I don't need anything special. I just need to see you."

She turns to me as she says that, and she gives me the sad watery eyes. The ones I always feel so manipulated by, like a dagger to the heart.

I lead her into the living room so she can sit down, though she always sits on the very edge of the cushion. Maybe I need to get one of those plastic couch covers to make her feel better.

"What's in the bag?" I ask, trying to make conversation.

She smiles and passes it over to me. I reach for it and take a look inside.

There's some kind of store-bought dessert and some homemade dinner packed up into a couple of to-go bowls.

"Just a few things. Making sure you have your fridge and freezer stocked."

I accept the gift, going to put it away in the kitchen, but I roll my eyes the whole way.

"You do know that I'm grown and can provide food for myself, right?"

I turn toward her, watching as she wipes her clammy hands against her white slacks.

"I know that. I just want to be helpful. Let me spoil you. After all, you're my only daughter."

She gives me those puppy dog eyes again, and I resist the urge to remind her that I'm not just her only daughter, but her only child now. I'm constantly reminded of that fact when she pampers me like this in a way she never did before.

"So how's Dad?" I ask, getting the elephant in the room out of the way. I haven't seen my dad much since I came back to the States. Supposedly he's depressed or something. Or he was, and counseling and medication helped him feel better, but now he's having to do double duty at work to make up for the time he lost.

The two of us had a major disagreement when he wanted Preston to be declared dead. I told him it was too soon. Well, I didn't just tell him, really. I screeched it at him and even went as far as threatening to punch his nose and break it.

I'm not proud of my behavior, but I still stand by the fact that it was probably too soon. It made it way too easy for detectives to dismiss everything they found at the site of the accident.

"He's okay." My mother shifts uncomfortably, looking away and using that uncomfortable high-pitched tone of hers. As if it will get me off the topic. Doesn't she know it just makes me even more interested in whatever she's hiding?

"Well, I wish you'd elaborate, but I doubt you will. How about you tell Dad that I'd actually like to see him every once in a while, can you do that?"

She nods, picking at fingernails that definitely don't need it. If she keeps doing that, the false nails will just pop right off.

"Well, I just wanted to drop by and give this to you. Your father and I have somewhere to be. In fact, he's got a doctor's appointment. I've got to take him."

I raise my eyebrows. My father's not the type to go to the doctor unless it's

something serious. “Something wrong?”

She looks down and shakes her head. “No, of course not. He’s just been carrying a little bit of weight about...”

She trails off, never finishing what she meant to say. Instead, she gets up and gives me a hug, stilted at best, and then leaves.

I blink at the doorway for a few moments after she leaves, my brain trying to catch up with what just happened.

Breeze in and breeze out. The way my mother’s always done for my whole life and with all the people she knows. But I have to say—I did miss her and my father while I was away. It’s nice to know they still care, even if sometimes it feels like they treat me like I was second best to Preston.

I’m about to go into the kitchen to make some lunch, a late one at that, when my phone starts to ring. I go to look at it, and see that it’s Jackson. I immediately pick up the phone, trying to figure out how to make my voice sound not at all nervous and definitely excited for the job.

Good Lord, Amelia, you’re overthinking this.

“Hello?”

“Is this Amelia?” he says. His voice is husky, almost sexy, if it weren’t for the fact that he’s perpetually angry.

“This is she.”

“This is Jackson, from the nanny interview. Hayden’s father.”

I catch myself nodding along to each explanation he gives. It's as if he thinks I don't remember him. But maybe he thinks I interviewed for multiple nanny jobs. I shouldn't take it personally.

"Yes, it's good to hear from you."

"If you're still interested, I'd like to offer you the job taking care of Hayden. But the catch is that I need you to start within the next week. Are you available?"

I try not to jump for joy. This doesn't only fix all my money problems, it gets me one step closer to finding out what happened to Preston. "Yeah, I'm free to start right away. Is there anything specific you need from me?"

"No. Just know that technically the first day will be a working interview. You're hired, and I'm not talking to anyone else, but I just have to be careful."

He doesn't say the rest, but I know how protective he is from talking to Quinn and from observing Hayden's behavior. It's interesting that Hayden is supposedly so traumatized by what happened when she was so little. It makes me wonder what secrets I'm going to uncover.

Well, I'll get to dig deeper down the rabbit hole now. "Absolutely. That's not a problem."

"How's Wednesday?"

"That'll work."

Before I can thank him, he's already hung up. Figures.

I run the conversation back in my head, as well as the interview. I was never exactly

close to Jackson. And due to our age difference, I wasn't as close to Preston as I would have liked to be during most of the time that Jackson was around.

Jackson must not know who I am. He's not giving me any reason to make me believe that he does. Of course, this will help me out, because he'll trust me more so I can get more information. But I can't say it doesn't upset me just a little bit that there's not even an inkling of any idea who I might be, especially considering my last name. But then again, Williams isn't exactly an uncommon last name.

Before I put my phone down, it buzzes, letting me know I have a text message. I unlock it and take a look, seeing that it's from Brooke, my best friend.

I've known Brooke since we were about twelve. We actually met in middle school and went to the same horrible, snobby high school together. Then we split up at college—I went to that prestigious private school on the behest of my parents, and she decided to go public. It was such a scandal in the community. But she wanted the experience, especially since she was going into psychology. She thought she needed to be around normal everyday people in order to understand them.

I kind of get it now, and wish I'd had the balls back then to stand up to my parents and do what I wanted. I have my chance now, and the two of us are still great friends.

Her college turned out to be not too far from mine, and she used to drive to see me on weekends. Her parents had bought her a car, and she had the freedom to do whatever she wanted. They were much more lax than mine.

And so we've kept in touch. I'm grateful, because now she's pretty much all I have. She's basically like a sister to me.

I read the message and smile.

Leaving work for the day. Want to go out?

I text back immediately.

Of course. Getting ready now.

I go into my closet and dig out something appropriate. I never go clubbing or anything, it's not really my kind of thing. But I still try to not look like an old lady. I'm already getting that cat lady look just lounging around my house in my pajamas or sometimes my cutoffs.

I find myself completely ready by the time Brooke walks in the door, setting her purse down and giving me a hug. Even though it's only been a couple of days since we've seen each other, she always acts like it's been ages. It's really nice to have a friend like that.

"Okay, so where are we going?" I ask, feeling an energy run through me. I always feel so much better when Brooke is around. Sometimes it's like I'm waiting for life to happen while she's out living it. I don't feel like I'm entirely myself until she shows up. She's offered for us to live together a few times, help with rent and all that, but I don't want to take advantage of her like that. Besides, if she starts dating someone and then falls in love, I don't want to make it awkward when she has to kick me to the curb because she's ready to move in with the guy. That wouldn't be great for our friendship.

Brooke shrugs, looking up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "I don't know. Where do you want to go?"

I shake my finger at her. "I picked the last two times. It's your turn, and you're not getting out of it." I smile, and it makes her laugh.

“Okay. Fine. I haven’t been to the coffee shop around the corner in a while. You know the one with the cookie mocha frappe that I love?” she asks, clearly not able to think of the name.

“Yeah, that little fake Italian one. I haven’t been since the last time we went together.”

I point toward the door and playfully push her out, giggling as we head to her car and get in. Before we get out of the parking lot, she’s already blasting Taylor Swift with the windows down.

We sing along to our favorite songs for the five-minute ride, getting a few strange looks. Maybe it’s because people think we’re a little too old for this. Or maybe it’s because they think we look deranged. Who cares? Life is too short to be anything but yourself. Being myself is hella fun, and I don’t give a shit what anybody thinks about what I should be doing at my age or not.

Besides, I work with children. And children love adults who can still play. In fact, I find some of the best parents never really grew up. At least not in the ways that count.

We pull into the coffee shop parking lot and Brooke insists on sitting here to finish the current song—because it’s her favorite—before we go inside.

Another woman even comes up to the car looking all corporate and chic—only to start belting it along with us. Taylor Swift is clearly universal.

When the song is over, we roll up the windows and go inside, her car making a little beep beep as she locks it.

We breeze through to the counter to place an order of our favorite drinks, even flirting with the barista who’s probably only eighteen. But honestly, we probably just

made his day. He can go tell all of his friends how these adult women flirted with him.

Adult. It's funny that we're the adults now. How long does it actually take to feel like we're adults? Only time will tell.

Sometimes I feel like we're just playing the part, like we're acting. But maybe that's all being an adult is—pretending like you know things.

We sit down with our drinks and a couple of snacks, taking our time. Brooke tells me all about her day, trying to be careful not to reveal anything specific about her patients.

She's in her first year as an actual practicing therapist. Sure, she went through her clinicals and all that, but that was with supervision. This is the first year she's doing it without help.

She was always so shy about it too, doubting herself. I remember having to pump up her self-esteem on late-night phone calls all the time.

From what I can tell, she's great at it. Sometimes her psychobabble will slip into conversation where it doesn't belong. It's kind of endearing, though. Sometimes. As long as she isn't trying to psychoanalyze me.

“So, what have you been up to today?” she asks.

I look at her, assessing whether or not I should tell her about the nanny job. I haven't even told her about the interview for that yet. I've been psyching myself up to tell her about my plan. I know I can trust Brooke, but that doesn't make it easier. Even if she did still have contact with Jackson, which she barely did in the first place, I know she'd never tell. But I'm worried about an outside perspective knocking me down a

peg. I'm afraid of someone telling me I'm crazy—because it will only confirm something I already feel.

Sometimes I feel a little bit crazy still trying to look for answers when everyone keeps telling me there will never be any. Isn't that the definition of insane—doing the same thing and expecting different results?

“Well, I think I got a job. I've been meaning to tell you about it. It's kind of complicated, though,” I tell her, looking away and sipping my coffee.

Brooks giggles and points to my face. “What the hell is that?”

I look back at her and squint.

She snorts, causing a couple people to look at us. One of them is the barista, though he gives her a little sideways grin like he thinks it's cute.

Then I burst into laughter. “He seems to think you're pretty cute. It's so sweet.”

Through the giggle, she says, “Just about as sweet as the foam that's on your lips.”

I groan and wipe at it. “Better?” I ask her.

She nods and takes a few deep breaths before she regains her composure. “Now, tell me about this job?”

Something about the way she's looking at me and expecting me to tell her everything makes me blush. It's not so much about embarrassment as it is about nerves. Anxiety. My face always gets hot when I feel nervous about something. That in and of itself is embarrassing.

“Come on,” Brooks says. “Spill, before I start psychoanalyzing you over this behavior. Is your boss hot or something?” She leans forward, her tiny stomach pressing into the table.

I lean forward too, almost afraid that somebody might hear me. I don’t know who the hell in this coffee shop would even care what I’m up to. I sincerely doubt Jackson is an Italian coffee drinker. I doubt he would come to a place like this at all. But I just get so anxious at the idea that word could get back to him before I have a chance to ask any questions or look through his computer. Or...I don’t know what. I really don’t have a good plan, now that I think of it. I just hope that by being around him I’ll get some good information and ideas. Like some kind of osmosis.

“Okay, look. If I tell you this, you can’t tell anybody, got it?”

Brooks gasps. “Oh my God, is he like some hot single dad or something?”

My face and demeanor are deadpan, but a weird tingle shoots through me. If I’m being honest, Jackson is hot. I’ve always known that. Hell, every woman knows that. But the thing is, he could also be a murderer. Or at least, he could be devious in his dealings. He’s not someone I need to be getting involved with or even noticing his good looks.

“No.”

I lean back in my seat, no longer feeling so forthcoming.

She wiggles her hand at me against the table, almost knocking my drink over. “Come on. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. But maybe it’s time for you to start living your life for you. You’ve spent a lot of your life kind of locked up, but I know there’s a wildcat inside of you waiting to get out.”

“Is that your professional opinion?” I tease, pursing my lips.

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. We’ll finish our coffee, and then we’re going to go and buy some cute bikinis and hit the beach.”

“You want to go to the lake today? Isn’t it a little late in the day?”

She shakes her head. “Never too late to go to the lake. And that is where you’re going to tell me what the hell you’re hiding about this job.”

I know there’s no point in fighting over it. She’s going to pull it out of me one way or the other. So, I just nod my agreement and pick up my coffee. I swirl it around a little with my finger, then lick the whipped cream off the top.

What is she going to think of me when I tell her I’m still dwelling on all of this? Hopefully, she’ll separate the professional and the personal, because I can’t handle hearing her psychobabble about this right now. Not when I’m so close to getting what I need.

Just like she promised, we finish our coffee, grab some bikinis at a little shop across the street, and drive to the lake. It has the beautiful backdrop of the city, and sand just like any other beach. The difference is, it’s a lake instead of an ocean. But I’m partial to it.

I love the fact that I can just turn around and see the hustling and bustling of the city. The cars going across the highway. Life happening. Beaches at the ocean sometimes just feel too quiet. I know some people enjoy that, but I don’t. It makes me think strange thoughts. I shouldn’t be by myself so much. Maybe I am going crazy.

We’re lying across blankets on the sand, and Brooke turns to me. “Okay, you promised. It’s time to tell me what’s going on.”

I lean back and allow myself to relax, and I look up at the sky. I do the thing we all did as kids where you look up at the clouds and try to figure out what they look like. While I look, I start to spill it all out, like paint onto a canvas. I tell her everything about how long I've been holding on to what happened to Preston. Not that she doesn't know my family is still all hung up on it and grieving in our own way. But she doesn't know the lengths I've gone through for this.

“So let me get this straight. You've been basically pseudo-stalking Jackson so you can find some kind of information about what happened to Preston? And that's because you think Jackson is responsible for what happened to Preston because they were some kind of petty hockey rivals?”

The way she says it does make me sound a bit insane.

I nod my head. “I mean, pretty much. But, there are so many other motives. The thing is, you know very well that the last person Preston was with was Jackson's wife. They were in a car together. She died, so I can't ask her. But you can't tell me it's just some strange coincidence. And the cops never said that Jackson knew of a reason for them to be together either. Isn't that strange? I always got the feeling that things were just playful competition when they were younger, but then it got more serious as they got older. Like, they low-key hated each other.”

Brooke whistles. “Okay, but it does sound like a little bit much, even for hatred. You play pranks on them, and you might wish bad things would happen, but you don't cause a fatal car accident for the person you hate—especially when your wife is involved.”

I rest on my elbows again. “Unless they were doing something that made Jackson hate them both.”

Brooke raises an eyebrow. “Would now be a bad time to ask about your trauma

around relationships? Because it seems to me like you're putting some interesting feelings on a couple that for all intents and purposes everybody said was the perfect couple."

I scowl and roll my eyes. "Yes, this would be a bad time."

"Okay, okay. I get the Preston thing. You miss him. You feel guilty because you weren't here when everything happened. You feel like you could have done something more to stop it, even though logically, you know that you couldn't have."

Brooke reaches over and pats me on the hand. There's that famous psychobabble. But this time it's comforting, so I let it go.

"If I remember right, you cared about him too." I really shouldn't have brought it up. I always knew Brooke had a thing for my brother. It seemed like a silly school-girl crush for a while, but I kind of wondered if she was ever going to go for it. Sure, there was an age gap there, but not big enough to cause some crazy scandal.

"I did." Brooke looks away, and I wonder if she's hiding a tear. She was so good at being there for me after his death, but I always thought she never took the proper time to grieve Preston herself. "It doesn't matter now. I probably would have outgrown it anyway. It was just a crush."

I can feel the emotion underneath what she's saying, and I definitely wish I could find out what it would've been like had she started dating my brother. For all I know, she could have become my real sister. Now, I'll never know.

I squeeze her hand, and our eyes meet. Her eyes are glistening with unshed tears, but there's also a strength there. She's always been so much stronger than me.

"I am dating this new guy. It's real casual."

She's trying to change the subject for my sake, and I go right along with it.

“Really? So, is he hot? Good in bed?”

Brooke gasps as if I've asked her the most scandalous question ever and then throws a hunk of sand at me.

I gasp but then laugh, yanking her up with me and dragging her into the water.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 3:01 am

4

JACKSON

I tap my toe inside my shoe, trying to calm down as I keep looking at my phone to check the time. I don't know what it is, but I'm worried I've made the wrong decision by hiring Amelia. I've wanted to call it all off so many times now, but I don't have a choice. I need a nanny, and she's the most qualified.

Plus, Hayden has been looking forward to this. She thinks she's getting to play with her friend all day.

Friend. She sees Amelia as a friend.

My heart skips a beat, and I place my hand on my chest as the pain gets me for a minute before my heart starts beating the correct way again.

Right now, Hayden is down for her nap, but she should be awake any moment. About the time that Amelia should be walking in the door. Assuming she's on time.

It feels like my phone takes hours to change just one minute. It's 1:59 p.m. One minute until Amelia is supposed to be here. So, why isn't she here yet? Does she even care about how she looks? This job?

Surely, someone who takes this seriously would be here already.

Stop it, Jackson. Stop being an ass. Stop worrying so much.

I think about who I was before my life went to ruin. Was I always like this? So high-strung?

Sure, I was serious about hockey. And I was a hothead—still am. But I don't think I was anxious. Not really. Not like this.

There's a light knock at the door, and my head snaps toward it.

I can hear Hayden stirring in her room, and it's as if my whole body is attuned to the sound. I shouldn't be able to hear her stirring in her bed upstairs, not from down here, should I?

My nerves are on edge as I open the door to see Amelia holding her purse and a large tote bag.

Sure, she looks too young to be a teacher, but what she's carrying screams elementary school teacher. Her hair is even up in a bun.

She's cute as hell. How do I expect to be able to sit here all day, watching her bond with my daughter while she looks like that?

Get it together, Jackson. It's just another nanny. And she's too young.

I don't have a problem with age-gap relationships. And among the guys on the team, it actually happens pretty damn often. But after what I've been through, I feel like no one her age could compete with that. No one could compare or relate.

Besides, I can't do that to Lyla. Lyla is my one and only, even though she's not here anymore. It'll be just me and Hayden forever.

But dammit if my cock doesn't know that as it twitches in my pants.

“I came at the right time, right?” Amelia says, popping her head inside to look around me.

I realize I’ve just been standing in the doorway like some kind of village idiot.

“Yeah, I’m just a little on edge today.”

She gives me a tight smile, and I feel like such an ass. I’m always so grumpy and mean around her. Maybe it’s for the best.

She brings in the tote bag and sets it down next to the couch. Then she turns to look at me and claps her hands together. Yes, I can definitely see her as a teacher.

“So, where’s Hayden?”

“Oh, she’s taking a nap right now. But she’ll be up any...”

The patter of little feet comes bounding down the stairs. It’s Hayden.

“New nanny day?” she asks me, a big smile on her face.

I nod at her, and she comes running into my arms.

Amelia observes our reactions to each other as I pick Hayden up, floating her in the air like an airplane for a moment before settling her on my hip.

I realize for just a moment that Amelia’s looking me up and down. I feel this weird heat between us, and I clear my throat. I can’t have any of that. It would not bode well for either of us.

“Why don’t you go make sure your toys are all cleaned up? I know you were playing

a lot before your nap. And let me and Amelia talk for a moment,” I tell Hayden, tickling her belly.

She giggles, and I set her down. She goes right to her playroom, no fighting, no problem.

Sometimes I worry that Hayden is too easy of a kid. That she hasn’t had a chance to be rebellious or think for herself in any way.

I should be grateful, and I am, but there’s that damn worry again. Something about being both mom and dad to her has really gotten to me. If I keep it up, I’m gonna get a damn ulcer and not be able to play hockey.

“So, what’s the plan for today? What is all this?” I point to Amelia’s big bag full of stuff, the one that reminds me of Mary Poppins.

She laughs nervously, and I catch that she’s got a couple beads of sweat on her forehead. Maybe she’s just as anxious as I am.

“Well, if you’re okay with it, I actually brought some stuff to go over colors...and the alphabet. I know they learn pretty much all of that stuff in kindergarten, but sometimes they go through it really fast. It’s really important to work with them at home on some of that stuff before they go to school.”

I blink a few times, not sure how to respond. She’s gone from nanny to full-on tutor. And now that I think of it, I haven’t really been working with Hayden on much other than on speaking. I don’t know if she even knows her colors or her numbers or anything like that.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea on the first day? Don’t you want to bond with her first?”

Amelia's smile drops, but she nods. She starts swaying back and forth on her feet as she explains, "Yeah, of course. But that's probably going to be part of our routine. So if we are going to bond, we need to bond over something that we would normally do. So she can get used to it. Besides, I have some other ideas too. We'll play first, probably with puppets because that's what I brought. I hope you don't mind."

She pulls some animal puppets out of her big bag of tricks. I shake my head, affirming that I don't mind, because maybe I should say as little as possible right now.

"Well, we'll play with these, and then I'll be helping her to do some work on colors and the alphabet. If not, then that's okay too. I was also wondering if we could go to the park. I actually brought some birdseed that we could feed to the ducks."

She reaches down to pull out a big bag of birdseed to show me, and I try to stifle a laugh. She's way overprepared for this. But who am I to judge? I'd much rather that than someone who doesn't give a shit.

But she's almost too perfect. It has me looking her up and down for a flaw, but instead all I notice are her cute little curves.

I turn around and head toward the playroom. I don't want Amelia to see my reaction to looking at her like that. I need to get myself under control, and fast, or this is going to be the worst working interview ever.

I get down to Hayden's level, placing my hand on her shoulder. "You did a good job cleaning up, but can you put the Barbies away too?" I ask her as I catch her distracted, playing with her two favorite Barbies, nearly mutilated from the overplay.

I make a mental note to get her some new ones next time I have a moment. Or maybe it's something I can get Amelia to take her to do. Give her some money and send her

to the mall so Hayden can pick them out herself.

Hayden does as I say and then runs to give Amelia a hug against her leg.

Amelia leans over and pats and rubs her back, and I notice that she's careful to give Hayden affection but not any more than she might want.

That's right, Quinn told her about Hayden's behavior. The two of them have interacted before at the hockey games.

Well, she seems to know what she's doing. I should be able to take a deep breath of relief, but there's still some tension within me that I can't explain.

"So, Hayden, are you ready to have fun today?" Amelia asks. I notice that while Amelia is using a friendly voice, she's not using baby talk or anything like that. She's talking to Hayden like an equal.

Hell, maybe I'll be learning some stuff from her too.

"Yes! Did you bring any new toys?"

"I did. Do you want to see?" Amelia asks her, getting Hayden all excited.

I interrupt this for a moment, tapping Amelia gently on the shoulder. That scent of hers walks up my nose again, and I hold my breath. "I'll just be hanging out in the house. Pretend like I'm not here unless you really need something. I'm just observing."

Amelia nods her understanding, and I walk away, feeling like a stalker. Maybe I should've just let her do her thing. But it would be weird if I backed out now.

I watch as Amelia takes Hayden over to her bag of goodies and explains what everything is. Each item is laid out for Hayden to see, so she knows what the day will be like.

I watch Hayden carefully. I don't think I've ever seen her so relaxed with a stranger. Even when she's playing with other kids, there's normally this tension in her body.

Maybe all this time what she needed was someone who went to school for this.

Amelia has Hayden choose one of the animal puppets, a zebra, and Amelia picks up a giraffe.

The two of them are pretty cute as they make the animals have a conversation with each other.

A lot of it is nonsense, the same nonsense I experience when I try to play with Hayden, but Amelia just goes with it. It's like she always knows what she's trying to say and never hesitates. I remember Quinn saying she was like some kind of kid whisperer. Now, witnessing it for myself, I can hardly believe it.

Again, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I'm bored. And hungry." Hayden's little voice drifts to me, and I realize she's done playing with the puppets. She's already discarded the zebra in the middle of the floor.

I'm about to step in when Amelia stands up and points to the puppet. "Okay. Let's clean the puppets up so we don't have a mess later or lose any of them."

Without further prompting, Hayden does just that and then comes back to Amelia. "Can I have a PBJ?"

Amelia looks up at me for one moment, and I nod my approval.

Amelia puts her hand reassuringly against Hayden's back and starts leading her to the kitchen. "Sure. Why don't you help me make one?"

I focus on releasing the tension in all my muscles and try to put my focus elsewhere. My eyes keep drifting back over to them, as if they might need supervision while making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

It's ridiculous. It makes me wonder about how much worry my wife was dealing with before she passed. Did she ever feel like this? Constant concern that something was going to happen? Or do I have some unresolved trauma? More than I thought?

The rest of the afternoon with Amelia is great. Even though Hayden had never worked on colors or the alphabet before, she's rocking it, completely cooperating with Amelia as if she's just playing another game. And Amelia seems to know exactly when to stop—as soon as Hayden starts fidgeting and looking elsewhere.

As Amelia starts cleaning up the material, Hayden looks between us. "Park time?" Her eyes widen at the thought.

How long has it been since I took her to see the ducks at the park? She probably doesn't even remember. Now I feel really bad.

But maybe I've just been too afraid of her getting hurt. She's so little. She seems even more delicate than most kids her age. Or maybe that's just me.

"Yes. As long as your daddy says it's okay."

Amelia's words bring me out of my thoughts.

I stand up and go to grab my keys. “Of course. You did such an excellent job today, princess. We’re definitely going to the park.”

“To feed the ducks?” she asks, her eyes getting even wider with excitement.

Amelia laughs affectionately and stands up, helping Hayden up as well.

“Yes,” Amelia tells her. “We’ll get to feed the ducks. But you have to make sure you’re properly dressed. Good shoes to run around the park in.”

Hayden looks thoughtful for a moment and then runs up to her room. She brings her Princess Belle tennis shoes down and shows Amelia how she can put them on herself. They’re Velcro, of course.

Amelia holds out her hand for a high five. “Good job. You’re such a big girl. You’re so much smarter than I even knew. You might be teaching me soon.”

The two of them giggle like conspirators.

We all hop in the car and go to the park, and Amelia rides shotgun. I turn the AC up, blasting it on me. Amelia seems perfectly comfortable turning one of the vents away from her.

I keep catching myself looking over at her, even though all she’s doing is looking out the window or sometimes pointing things out to Hayden.

“Look, there’s an orange car. Finally.”

Hayden claps. They’re playing a game that Amelia calls rainbow cars .

“Now, let’s do yellow!” Hayden announces, so the two of them start looking for the

next color car.

I doubt they're going to find yellow, unless we come across a bus, but the game keeps Hayden occupied in the car. Why didn't I ever think of something like that?

We get to the park, and the two of them are out before I can say anything, running off with the birdseed. Amelia's keeping up, so I hang back and give them some space. I find a bench in the shade where I can still see them but I'm not hovering over them.

I wonder how Amelia feels about me breathing down her neck like a paranoid freak all day. If she does this well when I'm watching her, what can she do when she's left to her own devices?

I have to start trusting her. She's showing me that I can. This will be good. Maybe the guys can even stop bugging me about the fact that I never come out with them anymore.

And the team has an event tomorrow—a photo shoot in a park. I always like to bring Hayden with me, because I want her to be cultured and I want to get as much time as possible with her. There's supposed to be a movie playing in the park afterward. I'll have to make sure Amelia's on board for all that, though.

I look up when I hear a squeal, and I stand up, feeling a pang of worry. The two of them are being chased by a duck, one who looks really eager to get more food. It keeps trying to peck Hayden, but Amelia gets in the way and chases it off, leading it toward her instead.

The father in me wants to intervene. My body seems to think that there's danger even though it's a duck.

Just a duck, I tell myself. Seriously, calm down.

But then I watch as both of them fall over. Hayden gets back up, but Amelia's still on the ground laughing.

That leaves Hayden to be chased by the duck again all by herself.

I march over there, my face practically purple from anger. Somewhere inside, logic lets me know that my reaction is inappropriate. Especially when I see that Hayden is just fine. She's just throwing seeds to the duck and laughing.

"Are you good?" I ask, looking down at Amelia.

She grabs her stomach, pulling herself out of the laughter, and nods. "Yes. Just having a lot of fun and I fell. I can't get back up for all the laughing."

I offer my hand and yank her up, my face way too close to hers as she dusts herself off. I shouldn't feel anything, but that twinge is there all over again.

"Look, Daddy. I made a new friend. A duck friend."

I deflate at the words. Hayden's having such a good time. There's no danger here.

"Thank you." I look at Amelia when I say it, and I back up several steps so we're not so close to each other.

She nods. "Of course."

We stay until the sun goes down, stopping for a break at some point to eat some tacos from a food truck for dinner. Hayden groans when I say we have to go back home, but it's about to be her bedtime, after all.

After Amelia says goodbye, and I tuck Hayden in, the silence starts to envelop me

again. After the day Hayden has had, I know she'll get to sleep right away. I'll be left alone with this huge hole in my heart that Lyla left. Some days it just gets so lonely.

Eventually, I drag myself into my own bed and lie down, hoping to just crash and sleep. Unconsciousness is better than this emptiness I feel without the woman I was meant to be spending every day of the rest of my life with. Instead, I end up in a dream. One I haven't had in a while, but it makes me just as hurt and angry as the day I missed out on the finals because my wife was dying.

"Sir, you need to take the detour. We're cleaning up from an accident that's under investigation."

The officer looks like he's already sick of me as I get out of my car. I'm lucky he doesn't reach for his gun as I go barreling toward him. Not that I can say for sure I'd care if I was shot. If it weren't for Hayden needing me, I'd be a goner already.

"I know. It was my wife." My voice cracks, and tears involuntarily cloud my vision. "My wife was driving. Can I just...I just want to see what happened."

The officer slowly lowers his arm and purses his lips, but as I clear my vision, I can see the look in his eyes. Pity. How bad was it, that he's considering breaking protocol for this widower?

"I can give you a few minutes, but you can't touch anything. Do you understand?"

I nod, knowing he means the words to sound harsher than he's able to say. Instead, he's looking at me like I'm some kind of specimen to study. The young dad, robbed of his partner in an accident that the police and doctors can't even make sense of.

He lets me pass but watches me like a hawk, staying only about a foot or two behind me as I wade through the glass shards and ashes to the smoking, crumbled mess that

was once a car.

My hand flies to my chest, and I nearly collapse at first sight. I honestly can't tell how much of the twisted metal was there for her to be trapped in before it burst into flames, and how much has been taken away from the fire since then.

I stumble forward, some sick part of me needing to see what used to be the front seat. The smell is acrid, and I try to ignore the fact that there's a hint of burning flesh in the mix. Instead, I focus on the damaged front end, the small opening they had to pull Lyla out of, and the deployed airbag that's nothing but a burnt scar now.

I almost reach out and touch what's left of it, the last place she was sitting and alive and vibrant. My wife. But then the officer clears his throat while hanging over my shoulder. It brings me back to my senses, and I jerk back, circling around to the other side where that motherfucker escaped the scene.

There's less damage to this side, at least from the crash. The seat is all the way back, like it was shoved back to avoid getting crushed. That can't be a coincidence, unless the person sitting there was gigantic. Even I don't need that much space.

The fire has done more damage, though it's clear no one was seated here when it did. The door is wide open, one of the only recognizable parts of the car in its original form. I notice something inside the pocket, almost glued on with the heat—a wallet.

I turn around and point to it, my brows furrowing at the officer. "Did all of your team miss this?" I grit out.

He comes around to the other side of me and looks down before calling over someone in a suit wearing gloves. She gives us a look, and I'm told it's time to go. "But I want to know whose it is," I protest as the officer tries to lead me back to my car.

“It’s a wallet!” the detective calls out, and my world stops. They’ll get the bastard now. They’re about to say the name on the ID, but then...

I sit up in a cold sweat in my bed. While it feels like morning, the glaring darkness outside my windows lets me know it’s nowhere near. So, I drag myself to the kitchen for a warm glass of milk, hoping it’ll help me go back to sleep when really, I don’t know that I want to.

I smile and lean into my teammates as several photos are snapped. I don’t know what the hell is taking so long for just a few good pictures, but I don’t work for a magazine. I’m just a hockey player. What do I know?

We’re told to relax and wait to see if this round came out, and I search the crowd gathered around the picnic tables to my right. Amelia’s hard to see since she’s so short, but there she is, shoving her way through with Hayden on her shoulders, the coffee I begged for in her hands.

“Tall Americano, double shot of espresso,” she tells me with a half smile as I reach her. I say nothing, feeling like an addict as I swipe the huge cup and down the hot liquid like it’s oxygen.

“Late night?” she asks.

I almost snap at her that she shouldn’t pry, but then I force my shoulders to relax. It’s not her fault. “Kind of. Couldn’t sleep is all.”

She nods, some kind of knowing look in her eyes. “I have trouble sleeping sometimes too.”

The empathy in her voice nearly kills me. She’s so pretty, young, and fun—I keep forgetting she faced something that sent her running to another country to get over it.

I'm tempted to ask her about it, but I wouldn't want her asking about my issues. So, I leave it alone. I can't let myself get too close to her anyway.

As the coffee kicks in, I loosen myself up and pull them to the side, swooping Hayden into my arms from atop Amelia's shoulders. She squeals with laughter as I whoosh her around in the air and then hold her, propping her up against my strong arm.

I look at Amelia for the first time and nearly growl. This is her first time at one of our events. It's a photo shoot with our new jerseys. Coach booked us a feature in a sports magazine. We'll all get a pretty penny from it to put away for our kids or whatever. But Amelia is in these cute little jean shorts that accentuate her tight ass. She's wearing a purple top tucked in and a studded belt. Her hair is in a braid except for these two face-framing tendrils that are begging to be touched.

What the hell was she thinking?

Hayden's playing with my face, and Amelia squints at me. "You okay?"

I avert my gaze and I'm about to answer when a couple of the guys walk over. Vaughn has his son Gabe with him, the only reason I don't immediately throttle him. Hayden and Gabe love to play with each other. Vaughn's soon-to-be ex-wife waves from a few feet away, and I give her mental kudos for being such a good co-parent after Vaughn cheated with my last nanny.

Oliver and Felix are coming our way too, and then I spot Teresa, Stephen's wife, trying to run after their son Max who's on his way over to see Hayden and Gabe.

I put Hayden down, and the kids immediately start chasing each other in a game of tag only they know the rules to.

They start to wander toward the pond, and Amelia follows to watch over them, leaving me and the guys alone.

“So, that’s the new nanny, huh?” Felix asks, pointing toward Amelia and the kids.

I tighten my jaw and nod, hoping he isn’t about to say anything about her. Felix is a friend, and I’d hate to lose him over this, but I’d deck him if he went for her. I can’t have that shit happening again.

But it’s Vaughn who says, “She’s a cute one.”

I turn on him, my fists clenched at my sides. “She’s off-limits.”

Vaughn puts his hands up in surrender and backs away slowly, leaving me digging my nails into my palms. This rage just won’t go away. The thought of Vaughn touching Amelia has me feeling like I could turn over all the cars in the parking lot like some kind of wild animal.

Dean comes up behind me—Quinn is dragging their kids off to play with Hayden and the others—and he places his hand on my shoulder. He leans over and says, “It’s okay. Vaughn’s not going to be dumb enough to do that again.”

I unclench and turn back to find Felix and now Oliver staring at me.

“What?” I ask, a little harshly.

Felix winks. “A little possessive for this one, aren’t you?”

Dean still has his hand on my shoulder, and I feel him shaking his head behind me. But Felix never knows when to stop.

“Hey, I’d be on edge with that around too if I hadn’t gotten laid in a while. My cousin is still available. I can set the two of you up. She’s not clingy, and she’s six months out of things with her fiancé. I’m sure you’d hit it off.”

I shake my head, ready to let him have it. I’m sick of him trying to set me up. Sick of all of them doing it. I was married. They just don’t get what that means to me. I know I should move on one day, but Hayden is still young, and I made a commitment to Lyla. How can I forget about that like it didn’t happen?

I’m about to tell him exactly that, and make it clear what I’ll do if he doesn’t knock it off, when Oliver reads the tension in the air and offers, “You know, I’d like to meet this cousin of yours. Why are you never trying to set me up, Felix?”

The two of them go off on their own to talk about it, leaving me watching the kids from afar with Dean at my side.

“You okay, buddy?”

I sigh, turning to him. “Yeah, I just didn’t get much sleep last night. I started having dreams about the crash again.”

“We’ll all understand if you can’t stick around for the movie. Your nanny can stay. I know she and Quinn seem to get along. You can take a nap and pick them up after.”

I shake my head. I promised Hayden I’d bring her to this. The team members with families specifically asked to do the shoot today so we could have a picnic afterward and watch the showing of Frozen in the park. It’s Hayden’s favorite Disney movie. “Nah, I can’t do that to Hayden. I had some coffee. I’ll be fine as long as Vaughn stays off of it.”

“We’ll all watch him for you.”

“One more photo, guys!” Coach calls to us, bringing us back to formation. Both Dean and I groan as we get back into position and plaster on our million-dollar smiles for the photographer. A couple more snaps, and they start packing up as the sun starts going down.

“Thank God,” Oliver grumbles, walking past me toward the parking lot. “See you at the next practice.”

I wave at him and make a beeline for Hayden, whose Frozen shirt is already dirty from playing with the boys. She sees me and comes running, and I catch her, scooping her up.

Amelia comes over to us, a bright smile on her face as she watches us together. That look shouldn’t make me feel warm all over, but it does.

Maybe Felix is right—it’s just that I haven’t been on a date or even had a one-night stand for the past two years. It’s making me desperate. I don’t know if I have any plans to change that anytime soon, but if my nanny keeps making me hard, I may not have a choice.

“Are you ready to eat and see Frozen ?” I ask Hayden, and she claps happily.

Amelia laughs at her reaction and leans in to tickle her, accidentally brushing my arm. Our eyes meet for a moment, and I swear the grin falls from her face before she moves away a few steps.

The mood gets better, and Vaughn stays away from us as we eat and the sun goes down. Just after sunset, the movie starts, everyone camped out in chairs or on blankets where we can see the large projection screen. Max, Hayden, and Dean’s kids are playing and dancing between our blankets as Amelia keeps a good eye on them.

With her here I can actually relax, and I'm tempted to just doze off, except that Hayden's excitement as she stands up and gets ready to sing along to the songs has me remembering I don't want to miss this. I have to hold all these memories for myself and for Lyla.

By the end of the movie, Hayden has tired herself out and is actually cuddling Amelia in a way I didn't expect. I remain still and just watch them. Even Quinn notices and gives us the thumbs up. Hayden has known Quinn her whole life and still won't do this with her.

It's late, almost Hayden's bedtime when the movie is over, and I have to carry her to the car. I buckle her in, thinking she'll fall asleep on the way home, and then get in the driver's seat next to Amelia. When the engine starts, Hayden pops up in the back seat like she was never tired at all.

Amelia and I laugh, and Hayden claps, pointing to Amelia. "Ami, Ami!" she calls her, and as I back out of the parking space Amelia turns her head so she can look at her.

"What is it, Hayden?"

"Did you see me? I danced with Max! Max is so fun! But Gabe, he did not like Elsa. That's stupid." I see her in the rearview mirror, crossing her arms over her chest with a sour face.

"Oh, well, I love Elsa. Maybe he just likes a different character."

"Maybe," Hayden concedes. "But then he chase me. All over the place, so I'm dirty."

I blink, trying not to interject as she becomes a complete chatterbox with Amelia. She's never done this either, and it warms my heart in a good but very dangerous

way. I can see us both getting far too attached to this woman next to me.

What if she leaves? What if she's too good and I can't hold back?

I shake my head and turn my attention back to their conversation as I make the turn onto our street.

"You can have a bath tomorrow."

"No, now!" Hayden wines.

Amelia shakes her head. "You need sleep. Besides, tomorrow means you have more time, so you can play with all your toys and have bubbles!"

"Bubbles!" That gets her attention quick. "Pink, smelly bubbles?"

Amelia looks at me as I pull into the driveway, confusion marking her face. I laugh. "It's a fizzy bath bomb that she likes. It turns pink. That's what she means. It smells like strawberries."

"Oh." She turns back to Hayden. "Well, if your dad can show me where they are, then I'm sure you can have one. That sounds so cool."

"Very cool."

I let Amelia get Hayden out of the car and follow them both up the stairs to Hayden's bedroom. Amelia helps her brush her teeth and get into her pajamas, and once Hayden's in bed she goes to leave the room, but Hayden squeals, "I want Amelia to read to me tonight! Hmph!"

I turn to her and shrug. "I guess tonight she gets what she wants."

Amelia nods. “She’s a princess tonight.”

I trade places with her, trying not to touch any part of her as I go to leave the room while she and Hayden decide what book to read for bedtime. I sneak down the stairs, not wanting to disturb them while they’re building such a good connection. I go into the kitchen instead and instantly know I need a drink.

I lean against the counter and run my hand through my hair, trying to shove down all these conflicting emotions. This is what I wanted. I wanted Hayden to bond with someone—especially another woman. It’s just so hard seeing that it isn’t her mother or my wife.

And the way it’s affecting me is baffling. Maybe it’s just that nurturing part of me I’ve embraced since becoming a single father.

I shake it off and go into the cabinets, opting for some whiskey tonight. I add some ice into a glass and then pour probably a little more than I intended. But I know it’ll help me sleep, and I need that. Plus, Hayden will sleep like a baby after getting all that energy out.

I take the drink into the living room and set it on the coffee table long enough to go to the bedroom and get changed. I don’t want to be in my jersey all night.

I must forget to close the door because I hear a mutter of “sorry” as Amelia creeps past before I get my shirt on.

“Oh, sorry. Just so used to living alone,” I say bitterly, coming out to find her leaning against the side of the stairs. I walk past her and over to the couch, letting my whole body sink in like I might actually become one with the piece of furniture.

“Bourbon?” she asks, pointing at my glass.

I raise it to my lips and take a sip, letting the liquid cool and burn at the same time, all the way down until it drops into my stomach. I swear I instantly feel better. “Whiskey,” I correct before drinking some more.

I look away, assuming she’s just waiting to make sure Hayden’s asleep and doesn’t need anything. It’ll be better for us both if I simply pretend she’s not here.

5

AMELIA

I hear Hayden shifting upstairs and I go back up to her bedroom to see what's going on. She's mumbling, half asleep now, and has kicked her covers off.

I go over and pat her back softly until she calms down.

I smile in victory once she's asleep again, and I pull her blanket up a little higher. She's such a beautiful little girl. Even after the trauma she's been through, she's so smart, and she loves her father with everything inside her. I don't want to take her dad away from her when I find out he had something to do with my brother's death. I don't know if they have any other family—from the sounds of it, they don't—but I have to know the truth.

I hate that I'm essentially using Hayden to get to her father, but I don't see any other way around it. I need more information about my brother's death...the whole thing is enough to drive me crazy.

When I know she's good and asleep, I get up from the edge of her bed as carefully as I can. I keep the lamp on the dimmest setting and edge for the door. I know she's a light sleeper and Jackson has mentioned that she has night terrors sometimes. I haven't had to deal with that with her yet, but I'm sure it will happen sooner or later. However, I have yet to be needed overnight.

Once I'm out the door, I head for the steps, making sure that I'm quiet all the way.

When I get down the steps and round the corner into the living room, I stop in my tracks as I see Jackson sitting there nursing another drink. His back is to me now as he sits so casually in the armchair, having moved in the short time I was gone. It's like he's closing himself off from me on purpose. His jaw is tight, and it looks like he might cry as he sips the amber liquid in the glass.

I consider grabbing my things and sneaking out now that my job is done for the day, but if I'm ever going to get to the bottom of my brother's death, this may be my only way to do it.

Deciding to draw attention to myself, I go into the living room and begin picking up a little. I know it's not something I have to do, but I've done it every evening up to this point. It's a good enough excuse to stick around on the off chance Jackson will talk to me about anything other than his daughter.

He's such a grouch, and so set in his ways. I get it, I really do, it's just hard to gain any information from him this way.

"I can do that," Jackson barks, but it's clear he is exhausted.

I don't say anything for a moment as I look over at him. I plaster an expression on my face that might convey shock at seeing him. He doesn't have to know that I know he's been sitting here the whole time.

"I don't mind," I say softly as I pick up a half-bald Barbie and march her into the toy room to put into the bin. "I'll just get these few things picked up and get out of your way," I add as I bend over and grab the parts to the doll house furniture we were playing with together before we left for the park.

"Fine," is all he says as he grumbles under his breath and takes another sip of his drink.

I don't say anything right away, contemplating what I need to say to get him in the mood for talking.

I can tell he's bothered by something. My heart softens a little as I wonder what's eating him. There's no way it's nothing, with that look on his face.

Once the floor is picked up and the coffee table is clean, I head to the kitchen and tidy up a little. I half wonder if he'll follow me in here, but when he doesn't, I grab my things and go to stand in front of him.

"I guess I'll head out now," I say, but I realize quickly that he isn't even going to look up at me. "I know it's not my place, but is something wrong?" I ask, mustering up as much kindness as I can.

The sound that escapes him following my words is...not great. It's a chuckle, but not the kind of chuckle that suggests he's laughing or being funny, but rather the kind of chuckle that speaks volumes. It's one of those that instantly make you worry about the person you're speaking to—regardless of whether you know them well or not.

What I do know about Jackson is limited, but I feel like I know him perhaps a little better than he knows me. I feel bad for him, and I know that I shouldn't, but I do.

He remains breathless, wordless after, and for the first time I struggle to actually hate him. Sure, he's a great father, and he's a damn good hockey player, from what I can tell, but I have to hate the man who may know something about my brother's death. I have to. Preston deserves justice, and I'm clearly the only person willing to give him that.

"No, seriously, what's wrong?" I chance as I sit down on the sofa across from him. "I'm here if you need to talk."

I feel a little guilty pushing at his pain. Especially after seeing the human side of him, the side he shows when only his friends are looking, but this...this is something far worse.

“When my wife died, my whole world ended, and the only reason I kept going was for that little girl in there,” he says, and it’s honestly more than I expected him to say.

“I’m sorry about that,” is all I can say, as I lower my coat and purse and sit back down.

“I don’t know why the fuck I’m telling you all this, but she wasn’t alone when she died,” he offers.

“Oh?” I say, playing the part. In truth, I’m still a little annoyed he hasn’t put two and two together about who I am.

Does he not remember me at all? Or is he so stricken with grief that he can’t see what’s going on around him? Apart from hockey and his daughter, that is.

He and my brother spent years as rivals in one way or another.

“Yeah,” he grumbles.

“Do you know who was with her when she died? I mean...did they die too?”

“The sorry bastard wasn’t with her—all I know is that a wallet was found at the scene, and the owner of that wallet was nowhere to be found.”

“Was it someone you knew?” I wonder out loud, trying not to give away the fact that I know more about the situation than any normal nanny should.

“It was,” he says. “I mean...I don’t know what the hell I mean,” he rambles on as if he’s already drank five glasses of whatever’s in his cup.

I try to gain some composure. Mentioning the wallet without even telling me who it belongs to makes no sense at all. I hate all of this, but I remind myself that being here, taking care of Hayden...this is truly the only reason I’m here—to get to the bottom of all this.

I know in my heart of hearts that Jackson has something to do with this. I still have a feeling that perhaps he suspected his wife of cheating, or that maybe she was cheating on him with my brother.

I have to take a moment before speaking again so I don’t betray myself.

“Have you thought about asking the police if there’s any more information to give you on the matter?” I ask him.

“Don’t you think I’ve exhausted my options?” he snaps as he sits up a little and leans forward, letting his cup hang limp in his hands between his knees.

“Well, how am I supposed to know? I can’t tell if you suspect something bad happened, or if this was all just an accident.” I know I risk losing him and this conversation for good if I keep questioning him, but I can’t help it.

“I don’t fucking know anymore,” he spouts as he gets up and storms to the kitchen.

I take this opportunity to follow him as he fiddles in the fridge for a beer. He tries for the cap on the beer a few times before growling. Here and now, even with me angry with him, he seems so helpless.

I reach across and take the beer, slamming the lid end down on the countertop until it

pops off.

“How the hell?” he asks, as I hand him the beer. “You should show that little party trick to some of the guys on my team...they’d never open a beer the old-fashioned way again.”

He smiles a little, which sends some sort of chill down my spine. I don’t know where it’s coming from or what emotion it is exactly, but it’s here and I can’t shake it. I let my anger at the situation replace the chills.

“You’re welcome,” I say as I decide it’s time to leave.

Getting too comfortable with the enemy is not an option. Not when I have so many questions that I know I’m not going to find the answers for anytime soon.

He nods and heads back to the living room where he sits back down in his chair and begins to nurse his drink. I don’t know what to say or do to make the conversation go any further, so I just nod and grab my things.

“See you tomorrow,” I say as I head for the door.

“I’m sorry I’m like this,” he says behind me, but he doesn’t so much as look my way as I walk out and close the door behind me.

As I go, hot tears stream down my face, and I start to sob. All the emotions of the past few minutes with that man come flooding in, and no matter what I do, I just can’t stop them.

I go over the facts as I cry. I know there was a car accident two years back. I know my brother is gone...dead or otherwise, he was deemed dead six months later. Now, I know his wallet was found, but nothing more than that.

As I get into my car and head down the road, tears are still freely falling. I wonder if I should feed Jackson information that might lead to him realizing who I am. Would that knowledge make the connection work in my favor, or will it harm my investigation?

If there's even an investigation to be had. I don't really know what happened to my brother, and unless I'm able to prove Jackson's involvement, I won't know any more than I did two years ago.

6

JACKSON

I sit with my head in my hands as I wait for Amelia to put Hayden to bed. All I can think about is our conversation last night. I divulged more to her than I should have. There's no way I ever should have mentioned the wreck to her, or the fact that a wallet was found.

She doesn't know anything about me and my life when my wife was alive, and she doesn't need to know anything now. I hired her to be a nanny, and that's all she needs to be. I love the fact that my daughter gets along with her, especially when she hasn't taken to women for so long, but it still puts me off that Amelia fished for information last night.

Just like last night, I'm sitting in the same chair with a drink in my hand. It's my nightly routine and what gets me through most evenings alone. I have no desire to go out and party with the guys who are as close to me as brothers, nor do I want to fuck around. I'm content sitting here, drinking a beer, and listening for my daughter to wake up.

I hear the steps creak as Amelia comes down. Again, she goes to pick up the toys.

"I can do that," I grumble as I get up and storm off to my office to take a breather.

I don't know why she thinks she has to stick around to do this, or what she thinks she'll gain by hanging around. If she thinks I'm going to talk to her tonight she's

sorely mistaken.

I pace in the middle of my office with the door open, thinking about what I need to say to her as my anger mounts. I know her curiosity could simply be harmless, but deep down I feel like she's either digging for information or trying to get my attention in a way that I'm not ready to give.

I look around at all the trophies from various hockey games and tournaments. The pictures on the wall are of my brothers—the men I've spent so many years playing the game with. This truly is the only room without pictures of my wife and little girl in it. It's a shrine to my life as a hockey player.

I seethe for long enough and storm back out to the living room, hoping she's gone. When I see her coat still here, I roll my eyes and sit back down in my seat, sipping my beer. It's gone warm, disgusting, but I down it nonetheless.

Amelia walks out of the kitchen, and I can feel her eyes on me. I don't know why it bothers me so much, but she has to leave. She evokes so many feelings in me that I don't want or need at a time like this.

"I really don't mind doing this before I have to leave each night," she offers as she picks up the last toy in the middle of the room.

That's not the point. I'm more than capable of doing it, and it's not in her job description. Once the kid goes to sleep, the nanny is no longer needed. I think about telling her exactly that, but I can't bring myself to, not just yet.

"I can do it," is all I say with my teeth gritted.

"Jackson," she begins, and the use of my first name sends me over the edge.

“Don’t you think I already feel bad enough that I can’t be there for my little girl all the time? That I have to hire someone to watch over her when I’m not around? Don’t you think I might want to do some of these things myself?” I note the hurt in her eyes right away.

“I—” she begins, but it comes out as a stammer. “I—” she tries again.

“You what?” I snap.

“Are you okay? I mean, really okay?” she asks, as she lets the toy fall back to the ground. “It’s okay to not be okay, and to need help. Like I said, I don’t mind at all, and you seem to be trying to unwind...I really don’t mind.”

“You...keep...saying...that,” I say through my teeth, getting up from my chair.

I turn and face her once more, not sure what there is to say.

“I’m fine,” I say curtly as I wave my hands around sarcastically. “I am fucking fine,” I say again. “I don’t need someone to talk to, I don’t need a nanny turned therapist, I don’t need a built-in housekeeper, and I don’t want to talk about my dead wife anymore!”

“Fine,” she says as she looks down and leans over to pick the toy up off the floor. “But I am here to help if you need me.”

“Are you done for the day with the duties in your job description?” I bark at her.

“Yes. Hayden is in bed,” she says tentatively as she heads for the toy room to deposit the toy in her hand. “Asleep,” she adds.

Why isn’t she getting the hint? Do I really need to be meaner about things?

“You’re free to leave then,” I say, pointing at the door.

She doesn’t move toward the door. She just stands and looks at me as if thinking about what else to say. I feel a chill run down my spine as I wait for her to do as I said.

“I, uh...” she stammers, and I can feel my blood grow to a rolling boil.

“Leave,” I say tensely, perhaps more callously than I should.

Amelia tightens her jaw. Her eyes are on me, locked with mine for a moment before she grabs her things and storms out the door.

I wait for the door to close behind her before I storm back to my office and send my glass full of beer hurtling toward the bookshelf. It splatters as glass breaks and crashes to the ground. Smelly liquid covers the books and sinks into the floor.

I hate her...I hate this whole thing.

“Why did you have to leave me, Lyla?” I scream as I fall to my knees and punch the ground over and over.

I resent Lyla, sometimes. She left me alone with our daughter to raise her by myself with the help of one nanny after another. Up to this point, no one has cared to push like Amelia has.

It pisses me off that she makes me like this. Nothing in the past two years has made me feel this way. I’m so lost and cold inside, as if I’m dead.

I fucking hate that I don’t have answers to the questions she has...questions that I’ve had for this whole time.

I punch the ground again, thinking about why the fuck Preston's wallet was in Lyla's car. They never found his body. His blood was on the scene, in the car, on the ground, and he was just gone.

Were they fucking? They couldn't have been, right? My wife knew how I felt about Preston.

Hot tears spill down my face as I continue to hit the ground until my knuckles are red.

I get to my feet and grab a hockey stick off the wall. It's the one Lyla gifted me when she told me she was pregnant with our little girl.

With as much force as I can muster, I take the stick in my hand and send it flying into the remaining shards of glass on the ground. They spray up in the air just to land again on the ground in more pieces than before.

"You're a fucking asshole!" I scream at myself. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Moving to the beer-sprayed bookshelf now, I continue to swing and hit until there's nothing left in me. I have no energy or care...it's all gone. All the anger, all the hate whisked away for the time being, leaving me a shell.

"Dad-dee," Hayden's crying voice calls from the top of the stairs.

I shake my head, disappointed in myself for waking her up. She has such a hard time sleeping as it is. She doesn't need me making it worse, and she certainly doesn't need to see this mess.

I run out of my study and close the door behind me, leaving my problems in there.

I see her tiny little frame standing at the top of the steps. She's rubbing her eyes as

tears come tumbling down.

“Daddy’s coming, baby. I’m so sorry I woke you,” I say as I take her up in my arms and hold her.

She sniffles. “Is Ami still here to read to me?” she asks, and my heart breaks.

She actually wants Amelia here, and I just ran her off. I’ll be lucky if she ever comes back. Such a wonderful woman, and I ran her off like she was nothing.

“No, Ami is already at home,” I say to Hayden, using the name she has coined for the woman. “But I will cuddle you and read you a book.” I carry her back to her room and curl up in the bed next to her.

I kiss the top of her head as I reach for her favorite book.

“In the great green room there was a telephone, and a red balloon,” I begin the story , and before I can even get to the end of the pages filled with all things in the bear’s room, she’s asleep.

The next morning, I wipe the sides of the bookcase and sweep the the shards of glass off the floor. I didn’t have the strength after leaving Hayden’s room to even come back down here.

As I sweep the last few shards into the dustpan, I can’t help but think about what Amelia said. All she wanted was to help me. It’s clear I can’t even help myself.

Once the room is as clean as it’s going to get, but still smelling of beer, I sit down at my desk. I contemplate what I need to do first in order to help myself, and finally decide on calling the police station to ask for an update on my wife’s wreck.

It's been a while since I've even called for an update, let alone showed any interest in what they might have found out lately.

I find my wallet, pull out the rather rumpled card of the detective on the case, and attempt to read the faded number. Once I'm sure I have it right, I push send and wait for an answer.

"Detective Humphry, how may I help you?"

"Uh, yes, this is Jackson Turner," I say, searching for exactly what I need to say. "My wife was Lyla Turner. I was wondering if there have been any updates on her investigation or anything new about the wallet found on the scene?"

There's dead silence on the other end, followed by a swallow as if the detective is thinking about what he's going to say before he says it.

"Jackson," he says, taking another breath, "we pronounced Preston dead months ago. There hasn't been anything more regarding the whereabouts of his body, and I hate to inform you that we never truly found any connection between your wife and former teammate."

"I see." I pause for a moment. "So, what are the next steps going forward in the investigation?"

"So, how's that little girl of yours?"

"Don't distract me from the topic at hand," I snap. "I just want to know where the investigation surrounding my wife's death is going from here."

"Jackson..." The detective pauses.

“No,” I say, already feeling like I know what he’s going to say.

“Jackson,” he says again. “I’m sorry, but the case is cold—there is no investigation.” His voice sounds like he regrets telling me.

“I see,” I say softly. “Thank you for taking my call,” I add before hanging up.

I feel so defeated and frustrated, and I think about losing it like I did last night. I feel the heat growing inside as I stand to my feet and clench my hands into fists. I’m seconds away from punching something when I hear a noise at the door.

“Dad-dee,” Hayden says as she rubs her eyes. “Will you make me some breakfast?”

I shake my hands out to unclench them as I pick her up in my arms.

“Yeah, sure, let’s go eat. What are you wanting for breakfast, baby?” I ask as I carry her to the kitchen.

AMELIA

I try not to shake as I fix dinner for Hayden and her dad. My slight altercation with him last night was enough to send me home in tears yet again. I need to decide if I can handle this or not. I hate that there's a little girl hanging in the balance—a little girl who already trusts me. Should I decide to leave, it will be Hayden who gets hurt the most.

My heart can't handle that thought as I stir the food in the pan. I'm working on hot dogs will all the fixings per Hayden's request.

I lean down and check on the sweet potato fries. They're just about done. I've made sure to fix enough for Jackson should he want some, but he doesn't always sit down and eat with us...not when he's so busy with hockey and other things.

I set the food out on the table, making sure to put a plate out for all three of us. Jackson is at practice right now but will be home any minute.

I've decided that tonight I'll leave the moment I get Hayden down to sleep. I don't want to overstay my welcome or get yelled at like the last two nights. Well, technically I was only yelled at last night, but I was essentially treated like crap the night before.

As soon as Hayden and I begin to eat, I hear the back door opening. We both look up to see Jackson coming in.

“Dad-dee!” Hayden yells as she gets up and wraps her arm around her sweaty...and extremely shirtless father.

“Hey, pumpkin,” Jackson says as he pats her on the top of the head. “I have to go take a shower really quick.”

“I made enough for you,” I say from where I’m still seated at the table. “I mean, if you want to eat something after you shower...or before,” I stammer out, looking him up and down.

His muscles are tight, rippling everywhere. I didn’t realize there was all that under his hockey jersey. I nearly turn into a puddle and have to tear my eyes away before he notices.

He smiles a kind smile, and it makes me almost forget what happened last night. To my dismay, instead of going upstairs to take a shower first and putting on a shirt, he sits down at the table with Hayden and me.

I try not to gulp audibly at his closeness, but I know if I don’t distract myself with something, I will explode.

“It’s just hot dogs,” I say as I push some of the toppings toward him.

“Thanks,” he says as he begins to make his plate. “It’s perfect.” He plops some cut onions on top. “I wanted to be sure I got home before you put Hayden to bed. I missed her going to sleep the last few nights and...well, I needed this,” he adds.

“Do you need me to head out then?” I wonder, not wanting to overstep.

“No, you have to put me to sleep,” Hayden says as she bounces up and down in her chair.

“Your daddy can do that,” I say, and I begin to get up, but then I feel a hand on my arm.

I look down to see Jackson’s hand there.

“No, it’s alright, you can stay. Enjoy the food you made and put her to bed. She likes it when you do it,” he adds as he takes a bite of his food.

I smile as I take a bite of mine as well.

For a while we all three sit and talk. We eat our meal together, and all the while he still has his shirt off. I catch myself several times glancing his direction, but I have to cut my eyes away so he doesn’t catch me. I don’t know why my body is betraying me like this.

We all laugh together as Hayden talks about her various adventures with her Barbie dolls, and I’m happy when Jackson explains more about hockey. Just because my brother was a player doesn’t mean I know much about it.

I fake my way through the rest of the conversation, learning about different shots that are achieved with a stick and a puck. It feels so natural to be sitting here, almost like we’re a little family. That thought brings me back to Lyla.

I feel bad, like I’ve taken her job, even though I know she can’t be here. I wonder what it would be like for me if she had survived, and if my brother had survived. Would I be a nanny? Most likely not, but I’m glad my path has brought me here.

Once we’re done eating, we all three clean up together. I smile as Hayden works diligently at moving food around the table in the name of cleaning it. I let her continue to clean as I put away the dishes, but I wipe the table down after her for good measure. Of course, I wait until she’s in the other room to do so.

As I finish cleaning the kitchen, I can't help but admire the laughter coming from the other room. It wafts through the air as her dad tickles her and plays with her. I love seeing them interact together, but it gives me a strange feeling.

I walk into the living room and listen to Hayden talk to her father as I clean up in here too.

"Today we played outside," she says, talking a mile a minute. "We used the water ballons. Auntie Quinn came, and her kids."

"Oh?" Jackson says, looking up at me.

"Yeah, the kids played Candy Land, and then Hayden did all her colors. She knows more of them than the older kids do...I'm impressed," I add.

"That sounds like a fun day, baby," Jackson says, as he kisses a now yawning Hayden on the head. "I'm glad you got to see your Auntie Quinn and the kiddos, but I think you are ready to head to bed now," he adds, handing her over to me.

"You sure you're okay with this?" I ask.

"Yeah," he answers. "I think while you put her to bed I'm going to go up and take a shower, but I'll be done by the time she goes to sleep, I'm sure."

I nod as he makes his way up the stairs. With Hayden on my hip, I pick up the last few things in the living room and head upstairs with her in tow.

"I let her lie down on the couch in the living room on Friday nights to watch TV until she falls asleep as a treat," Jackson yells out of his room. "She likes to take a stuffed animal with her."

“Okay,” I say as I head into her room with her to get her ready for bed.

Once her nightgown is on and her teeth and hair are brushed, I take her back into her room to choose which animal she wants.

“I want the brown bear,” Hayden says as she grabs it off her bed and takes my hand to head back downstairs.

It takes next to no time and only half an episode of My Little Pony before she falls asleep. I smile up at Jackson from the couch as he walks in. He gathers Hayden up in his arms to carry her limp and sleeping form up to her room. While he’s gone, I gather my things. I don’t want to allow much time for Jackson to get all up in arms again.

I have my things in my hand when Jackson makes his way back down the steps. I don’t say anything to him as I head for the door, but all the while my mind is replaying the image of him walking through the back door without a shirt on.

“I’m sorry about last night,” Jackson says, stopping me in my tracks. “My behavior was totally uncalled for. I’m just stressed out, and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

My heart thrums in my chest at the sight of him when I finally turn around and face him. I’m shocked that I’m getting an apology—I wasn’t sure he knew how to do that.

He bends down and picks up a toy from under the couch that I missed. As if on instinct, I reach to take it. For some dumb reason, our hands brush and my heart races. Our eyes are locked as I take the toy, and all I can say is, “Okay.”

Rather weakly might I add.

With our eyes still locked, I feel an intensity that has never been here between us before. I turn and toss the toy in the general direction of the playroom before facing him again. His hands still hover slightly in front of him, as if the electricity felt moments ago still lingers.

I don't know what's wrong with me. Jackson's a great dad, a great hockey player, and generally a great guy. My theories regarding my brother aside, this man is wonderful—perfect, in fact. Still, I should leave.

Wordlessly, he steps forward, closing the gap slightly.

My heart threatens to explode as our eyes stay locked. I think about running out of the house, but the want inside me shuts down that idea.

I want to stay and see what's about to happen.

As if that thought sparks in him too, he closes the gap between us. His hands grasp my face on either side, and he pauses, hanging in midair. There's so much tension between us, and I feel it build up even more as I sigh, staring into his eyes.

“Jackson...I—” I begin, but then everything I was about to say flies out of my brain as our lips crash together.

I don't know if I moved first or if he did. All I know is the desperation and need between us. Heat is pooling in places I haven't felt heat in so long. I need this...I need him, more than I need to know about my brother, more than I need answers, I need Jackson.

My lips part ever so slightly as if an invitation has been sent, and he accepts.

I can taste and smell him, his body wash and musky shampoo. I think I will

remember his smell for the rest of my life.

“Oh damn,” he moans against my mouth, and I know for sure that I am in for it.

I need to stop. This needs to stop, but our mouths just keep tangling together, his tongue slipping into my mouth. He tastes like whiskey and salt, and it’s making me heat up all over.

This is so wrong. I can’t want this.

But I can’t seem to stop, even as his hands are on me, sliding down to grip my hips with a firmness that has dominance and authority in it.

I could use this to my advantage. I know that. If I’m close enough to him that he’s making out with me, then I can get information. It doesn’t have to have anything to do with my hands against his hard chest, my mind wondering what it would be like to be skin to skin with him right now. It doesn’t have to be about his hands sliding down over my ass and squeezing like he owns it. It certainly doesn’t have to be about him pulling me closer until I can feel his hardness against my belly, making me wonder how well he would fill me up if I let him. If he wanted me that way.

The guilt eating away at me has everything to do with Hayden. She’s a sweet little girl with trauma, sleeping in her bedroom upstairs. And Jackson is a good dad. A great one, actually. He’s stepped up in both roles for her, and he’s so caring and sweet. It’s a rare find. But that doesn’t mean he never did anything wrong. That he didn’t want Preston out of his way for some reason.

I put my anger into the kiss and push myself against him, my chest burning with desire as well as rage. He pulls me in, and I love the taste of his mouth on mine. I can’t believe it, but my knees are getting weak.

His hands are all over me, one palm cupping my breast as he moves his lips to my neck. His kisses trail from the bottom of my ear down to my collarbone. Then he kisses the other side of my neck, and I feel like I'm a meal he's been hungry for but has been too afraid to taste. I can't guess how many women, if any, he's been with over the last two years, but the way his lips press against my skin...there's a desperation that makes me think it couldn't have been all that many.

The only other possibility is that he's just that passionate of a lover.

He steps forward, and I shuffle with him until my legs hit the couch. He kisses down the front of my chest, and his hands are at my sides, lifting the fabric of my shirt. I instinctively begin to lift my arms, but something pops up in my head.

We're standing right in the living room. I can't help but feel like Hayden could hear something and come downstairs and see us. I'm not sure if I should say anything. I honestly think he'd be embarrassed to bring me back to keep nannying if we were caught by her.

I try to remove the thought from my head, but I can't quite seem to shake it. As he slides the shirt over my head, he drops it to the floor and embraces me with more kisses.

"Won't Hayden see us?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He pauses and glances toward the stairs. I'm scared I've ruined the momentum.

"She won't come downstairs—if she even wakes up, she calls from her bedroom or maybe from the top of the stairs, and she can't see us from there." The confident delivery of his words helps me to feel completely relaxed.

I don't say anything, pulling him in for another kiss, helping him get back into the

moment with me. His hands move down my back, and he grips my ass with a powerful and firm grip that has me melting. I may not know much about hockey, but I know that the strength and stamina required to have such control on the ice and whack the hockey puck into the goal keeps him in amazing shape.

I slide my hands from his broad shoulders down to his bulging muscles, and I can feel myself getting more excited and wetter by the second.

His fingers are on my jeans, unbuttoning them and gliding the zipper down. I'm nearly trembling, never having felt such a strong need to be unwrapped for his pleasure as I feel right now.

"Let's get down onto the couch," he says, and I nod my head because I can't even find my voice.

He pulls my pants down over my hips and down my thighs, and we lower ourselves until I'm sitting on the couch. He pulls away from me, and I instantly notice the lack of warmth against my body. I want to pull him back toward me, but he takes my shoes off and pulls my jeans off my legs, leaving me in only my bra and thong.

"Damn, you are so incredibly sexy," he says, eyeing me like a sweet piece of candy he wants to taste.

He soaks me in, inching closer on his knees toward my body. He caresses my thighs, his mouth on my knee, his hands tracing the lower part of my leg as he places butterfly kisses all along my inner thigh. I open my legs wider as he gets closer and closer to my center. As his face reaches my eager pussy, he makes eye contact with me as he places his thumb on my clit through my panties.

Even with the fabric between his thumb and my skin, it's enough of a tease that I think it might make me beg for him to pull them to the side. He uses his pointer and

middle fingers, rubbing them up and down my slit until I'm tingling everywhere.

"That feels so good," I say, the words spilling from my mouth as I allow my head to start drifting back and settling into the soft, cushiony pillow of the couch. "Please don't stop."

He kisses my inner thighs a bit longer, increasing my anticipation for him tenfold until he finally pulls my panties to the side. When his tongue licks my clit, my whole body lurches back.

I thought his tongue felt good twirling around with mine, but it's even more incredible in between my other pair of lips. It doesn't feel like he's out of practice at all, but maybe this magnetic attraction between us is at the core of what makes everything feel so perfect.

His fingers slide inside of me as he continues to lick me down, and I find myself thinking thoughts I would ever expect to be thinking during a hot sexual encounter.

I think that he must have been an attentive husband to be so giving and mindful of a woman's pleasure, and that Lyla was a lucky woman. I also wonder if we're on the couch because he doesn't want to take me to his bedroom where they shared a bed. I'm almost grateful if that is the case—I'm not sure I could feel comfortable in that room.

God forbid there's a picture of her somewhere on the nightstand or hanging on the wall. I don't need her judging us. I already feel bad enough pushing aside the more practical reasons I shouldn't be involved in this family.

I can't believe I'm so weak, giving in to the desires of my flesh and this man who has me in a chokehold.

I run my fingers through his hair as he has me squirming. I slowly direct him upward and away from my inner thighs, and I lean in to kiss him.

I can taste myself, and I feel an animalistic urge to taste him too. I want both of us to be slippery and able to feel the pleasure we're working toward together. I pull myself closer to him while he's still on the floor on his knees. I pull at his shirt, practically ripping it off over his head.

"Come join me," I say, still speaking just above a whisper and patting the couch.

He lifts himself onto the couch, and there's something about seeing him relaxed with his muscles on display. I forget about any self-consciousness I might have about being in this house.

All I want to do is straddle him. As I do, he looks surprised and almost overwhelmed, biting his lip as he crinkles his brow and scans my body. I've been a bit forward, and I think about climbing back off him, but then he has his strong hands on either side of my arms, squeezing like he's trying to stop himself from devouring me completely. I lean in, kissing his lips and his cheeks as he moves his hands to my back and unclips my bra.

He slips the straps of my bra over my shoulders and down my arms, leaving me bare and vulnerable. His fingertips rake down my chest and circle my nipples. They're so erect, and as he rubs his thumb along them goosebumps appear along my entire body.

I let my hands run along his chest and down across his six-pack abs. The thought of ripping him out of his pants consumes my mind, and before I can even move my hands to undo his belt, he's undoing it himself.

He throws the belt to the side, and I take over unbuttoning and unzipping him. I help pull his pants down so his erection is standing tall. I lick my fingers and gently wrap

my hand around his erect cock, leaning in to kiss him deeply while I start to work him over. Leaning back, I take a second to lock eyes with him, and we keep our eyes open for a moment as I stroke him up and down.

Finally, I shift my panties to the side and sit down on top of him, moving slowly to allow my body to adjust. He lets out a sigh of pure pleasure, and so do I.

“Does that feel good?” I ask breathlessly.

“You have no idea,” he says. His eyes close and I begin to rise and fall on top of him, his cock filling me.

I moan, but I’m still trying to be mindful of how loud I get. As I come all the way down on top of him and he’s deep inside, I bring my hands to my breasts and rub them, heightening the sensations radiating through me. He has his hands on my hips and my ass, helping me work him.

As I begin to move more aggressively, he lets out a few soft moans.

Then he lifts me up and lays me down on the couch, climbing on top of me and entering me again in a swift thrust.

The couch is wide, so it’s plenty big to accommodate both of our bodies. He brushes the hair from my forehead and stares at my lips as I widen my mouth in a big O, silently signaling that he feels so good I hardly know what to do with myself.

I run my hands down his back and squeeze his shoulder blades, begging him to keep going as he thrusts inside of me repeatedly. I can tell he’s so tense, and still holding back.

I can’t say for sure if he’s only like this because of me, or if he’s just been holding on

to too much for the last two years, but I suspect he's using me to get out some of his aggression. I don't mind, because I know what it feels like to have so much that needs to be released.

I haven't been able to relax or feel overwhelming pleasure in ages. I've been drowning in my thoughts, questions, and fears. I want Jackson to use me as much as I'm using him to get to a satisfying release.

Jackson brings his hand down to where our bodies meet, and begins to stroke my clit in time with his thrusts. I whimper, my pleasure rising and rising until I'm finally able to let myself go. I fall over the edge into the best orgasm I've had in a long time, my body shaking and clenching around him in a true release. It's all I can do not to moan loudly in satisfaction, but Jackson helps keep me quiet by pressing his mouth to mine and swallowing every sound I make through my climax.

Once I'm spent, he brings himself even closer to me, his chest pressed against mine, and I smell his intoxicating scent as he burrows his head into my neck and keeps thrusting until I hear him whisper to me that he's coming. I want him to, desperately need him to. I don't want him to pull away.

Then, at the last second, he pulls out and comes all over my inner thigh, his head thrown back and his body shaking. I'm surprised at the sudden emptiness, but I know he made the right decision. He has no idea if I'm on birth control or not. Given how much younger I am, the fact that he already has a daughter, and that we aren't even officially together...he definitely made the right choice.

I lie still, breathless for a moment, both of us trying to come back to reality. He smiles a little bit of an embarrassed smile and tells me he'll be right back with a towel. I sit up just enough to be able to see the chandelier and find myself mesmerized by how beautiful it is while I process everything that just happened between us.

This was great for me, and I hope he feels the same. I don't want him coming to his senses and trying to get me out of here for good. It's impossible not to notice how awkward and uncomfortable he was about having finished on me instead of inside me, and I wonder whether that was the reason he didn't show any kind of affection afterward.

But it's not like I should be expecting affection from him anyway.

When he arrives with the towel, I sit up a bit more, trying to get myself together.

I arrange my hair to one side and wipe the beginnings of sweat from under my eyes. He hands me the towel and I wipe his fluids from my leg, folding the towel before setting it down. I don't know what to say. I don't know if I should say something, or if I should wait for him to say something first.

I reach down and gather my clothing, and he begins putting his clothes back on too. I feel a bit embarrassed, but I have to say something.

"That was great," I say, immediately hating the words I chose. It sounds like we just played a game of basketball or had a nice time at the mall. It doesn't capture the passion or any depth.

Jackson smiles and moves in closer. He puts his hand on my thigh and softly rubs my cheek. "It was really amazing."

As he looks into my eyes, I simultaneously feel pulled toward him and want to run away. Now that our time together has ended, the reality of the situation looms over me again.

I'm supposed to be getting closer to him because I suspect he might have something to do with my brother's death. The conflicting emotions of wanting him and being

suspicious of him overwhelm me. I can't spend another second in this house. I need time to consider what to do next.

"I'm really tired though...I think I'll go."

"You don't have to," he offers.

"Thank you, but really," I say. "This was amazing, but I should take off."

"Alright, no problem," he says, and we both stand at the same time. "Have a good night."

Jackson softly takes my hand and leans in to kiss me on my cheek. My heart and my mind are at odds with each other. One flutters at his touch and the other tells me I'm the most terrible person in the world.

8

JACKSON

It's been a couple days since I was intimate with Amelia, and I don't know how to make sense of what I'm feeling. I wish someone had given me a handbook or something when I left the hospital without my wife.

No one tells you how to navigate life after loss. No one prepares you for being attracted to other people again, let alone sleeping with them.

I'm sitting on the floor in my bedroom in front of the closet Lyla and I shared, sorting through some of our things. I know it's already been a couple years, but sometimes it feels like it all happened yesterday. I hadn't allowed myself to cross that physical line with anyone before Amelia.

I've been suppressing that side of myself for so long, for so many reasons. Partly because I'm so busy focusing on Hayden, partly because I don't want to confuse my daughter by bringing anyone around who might not be permanent, and partly out of loyalty to Lyla.

I know that I fulfilled my vows and I'm allowed to do whatever I want, but damn it still hurts like hell.

I slide a pile of papers, documents, and other items toward me. Some of these things I just shoved into the closet because I couldn't deal with them at the time.

There's something about getting rid of things that belonged to her that feels like I'm letting more of her go. One of the best realizations I had after being with Amelia was that I may be more ready to face certain things than I realized. Plus, the fact that I was so terrified to bring a woman back into the bedroom I shared with Lyla was a sign to me that I need to reconsider my setup inside this house.

Lyla is everywhere I look, and a new woman would pick up on it immediately. I know it would make us both uncomfortable.

As I pick up some old bills that I paid online months ago, I remember something I read once about getting rid of things. It said that if the thought of letting it go made me sick to my stomach, maybe it wasn't time yet. However, if I could wrap my head around it and didn't have such a visceral reaction, maybe the time had come to let it go.

The overwhelming guilt I once felt about letting anything go of anything with Lyla's name on it has lessened considerably. I guess enough time has passed that I can recognize that getting rid of some old bills doesn't mean I love her any less.

They're just bills. I scoop them up and put them in a pile to be thrown away.

Next I find a copy of our marriage certificate and the appraisal for the wedding ring I bought her.

My heart sinks as I read over the details of our union in black ink. This is the type of sentimental item that does make me sick to think of getting rid of, so I place it in a keep pile.

I try to hold back the tears as snippets of our wedding day flash in front of my eyes. The way she smiled that day is a shocking contrast against the memory of her lifeless body after the crash. I curse my brain for hanging on to the negative memories just as

fiercely as the good.

“Hi, Daddy,” I hear a sweet little voice say.

I turn to find Hayden in the doorway with a Barbie doll.

“Hey, munchkin, what are you up to? I thought you were playing.”

“I was,” she confirms, “but I don’t feel like playing all alone anymore.”

“Fair enough,” I say. It’s ironic in a way, because that’s exactly what life has been like since Lyla left. At some point, it gets tiring going at it alone.

She takes a few steps toward me and notices the piles I have going.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

She sits down on her knees and observes the piles as she twists the Barbie doll’s head around and around and around. There’s no great way to explain things to her, as I know she’s young and might not fully understand. I owe it to her to try though.

“I’m deciding what of Mommy’s we should keep and what of Mommy’s we can say goodbye to.”

“But why do you have to say goodbye to any of it?”

“Well...I guess when we get rid of old things that don’t have any real meaning anymore, we can make room for newer things. And we can keep the things that make us smile forever and ever.”

I decide on a few more things for the toss pile. It’s nothing very important, just some

receipts, a cafeteria lunch card from her old job, and some flyers she'd printed off for a bake sale. I find a picture of her at the park with Hayden and we both light up at the sight of it.

I thought I had gathered most of the pictures up after the funeral to put in an album, but this one must have snuck through. Hayden is all smiles on the baby swing, and Lyla looks as beautiful as ever, her hair wild from a gust of wind.

Hayden points her finger at the picture. "Look! We're at the park!"

"Your mom loved taking you to the park...any time she got to spend with you was so special. Think we should put this in the keep pile?"

Hayden flashes a smile with all her cute baby teeth showing and gives me a big thumbs up.

"Alright then...and what do you say about going to the park right now?"

Hayden flings Barbie from her hands and claps. "Can we? Now?"

I smile and run my fingers through the top of her hair. "You bet."

Hayden is so excited about the park, but I want to spoil her extra today. Sometimes I wonder if I go overboard, but I can't help it. I always want her to know how loved she is.

Plus, I'm afraid that having talks about her mom might bring on some feelings of sadness. I always want to balance the sad feelings about her mom being gone with some good feelings.

The local creamery is only a few minutes up the road and serves the most delicious

homemade ice cream, and we stop in for a cone. Hayden looks adorable covered in chocolate ice cream with chocolate sprinkles. It's dripping down her chin and she can hardly keep up with it melting away.

I take the ice cream cone from her and lick the sides a little bit to help her keep it under control. I take some napkins and clean her up as she giggles. It's in these little moments when I wish more than anything that Lyla could be here.

I can't believe how much I'm thinking of her right now. It's not like she isn't always on my mind, but I wonder if what happened with Amelia has me ramping up my memories even more.

My mind must be trying to reconcile the past and the present somehow. I can't tell if what I'm feeling is guilt or regret, or just fear of life moving forward.

Once she finishes her ice cream cone and we get her cleaned up, Hayden widens her eyes and points to a small display of balloons on the counter. One of them is bright yellow with a giant happy face. "Daddy! Look!"

"I see it," I say, and the pangs of dad guilt once again tug at me. I don't want to ruin our day with breakdowns and tears, and I want to keep her in good spirits as I have a feeling more questions or conversations about her mom might crop up at the park.

I've become such a softy I can't even believe it myself sometimes. I hope Lyla would be proud.

"I'll take the yellow one," I say, walking toward the cashier and pulling out my wallet.

"Take it," the cashier says, smiling. "They're actually for the little kids."

I smile and take a few dollars out, putting it in the tip jar before grabbing the balloon in one hand and Hayden's hand in the other.

"Thank you, Daddy!" Hayden squeals, and I'm on top of the world.

Once we buckle up, we head down the street to the park. It isn't overly crowded when we arrive.

I've always had mixed feelings coming back to the park, being that it was one of Lyla's favorite places to come with Hayden as a baby. I know I can't avoid familiar places though, and it's good for me, just like cleaning out her things.

We spend some time walking around the park. Tall trees line the walkway between the part of the park that's meant for the smaller kids and the other park area that caters to the bigger kids.

Hayden is running around with her arms out to her side like an airplane, the balloon tied to her wrist. I can't believe how big she's gotten these last few years.

I nod my head at some of the people passing by, riding bikes or speed-walking with their partners. An older woman is walking with her dog, a furry little thing who stops and sniffs me.

The woman apologizes and tries tugging the dog away from my leg when Hayden sees what's happening and starts running.

"Puppy!" she yells, and her legs are like the wind as she races to us.

"Let's be gentle," I remind her once I get the okay from the owner that it's alright for Hayden to pet the pup. I lean down and show her how to greet the dog by letting it sniff me first and going under its mouth instead of aggressively coming at it from

above.

Hayden moves her hand in and I watch as the string of the balloon comes loose and the balloon begins floating into the air. I do my best to try and snatch it but the wind picks up and it's out of my reach before I can grab it. Hayden lets out a whine and her shoulders immediately deflate with defeat.

The dog becomes a bit agitated at her reaction and starts barking at her. This only makes Hayden more upset, and the owner flashes a sympathetic look and apologizes under her breath before keeping it moving with the dog.

It isn't until I glance up that I see Amelia and a friend jogging up the walkway while chitchatting. Amelia spots the scene going on between me and Hayden and jogs over to us.

As if Hayden being upset over the balloon and the dog isn't enough, seeing Amelia has me more overwhelmed than I ever anticipated I'd be during a quick fun outing at the park.

"Hey," Amelia says, sympathy in her voice as she takes a knee to see if Hayden is okay. "Are you okay? What in the world happened?"

Hayden points to the sky where the balloon has gotten caught in some branches far too high to be able to retrieve it. As I look down on their interaction, I can't help but feel such a relief that Amelia came into Hayden's life—she's so good with her.

I also can't help but notice how good Amelia looks in her workout gear. It's tight in all the right places and flashes of our time together come flooding back. I try to look away before I make it awkward, and I say a quick hi to her friend. She looks so familiar, but I can't put my finger on where I may know her from.

“Hey, I’ll bring you a balloon the next time I come to see you, okay?” Amelia reassures Hayden, squeezing her gently. She asks Hayden if she would like to meet her friend, introducing the woman she’s with as Brooke. Hayden lessens her sniffles and gives the friend a little wave. I’m glad to see things turn around so quickly, but I’m not sure what to say to Amelia.

Amelia already had the last couple days scheduled as her days off, which means I haven’t seen her since we had sex. And I never called. I never sent a follow-up text. I dropped the ball in every possible way on that front. I have no idea what she might be thinking, and she can’t possibly know what I’m thinking.

All I’ve been able to think since it happened is that what we did is wrong, and I can’t keep going down this road. She’s too young. It’s not appropriate.

“I don’t want to assume anything though,” Hayden says, directing her statement to me. “I’m not sure my services are still necessary.”

“Of course they are,” I say.

My response is almost instinctual, before I have a real chance to think of a reason why they wouldn’t be. I also know that I’ll likely be getting bugged by the boys to go out over the weekend.

It doesn’t matter how many times I try to convey my preference to stay in and do nothing, it doesn’t stop them from trying to get me to go out with them. This time, I’m considering it. I know I’ve made a lot of progress this week with my efforts to move forward. Whether I was planning on being intimate with Amelia or not, it was a huge step in permitting myself to do something I wouldn’t have dreamed of doing for the past two years. Taking the steps to clear out a few more things was big as well.

It could be time to keep trying new things, and to stop being so afraid of what might

happen if I get out into the world.

“I’m sorry it’s so last minute,” I continue, “I know your next scheduled day isn’t until Monday, but I could really use your help this weekend if you aren’t too busy. I think I’m going out with the guys and could use a hand.”

Amelia flashes a smile and leans down to Hayden, nudging her gently on the shoulder. “You hear that, kiddo? It’s your lucky day. You’ll get your balloon soon. I’m coming by this weekend.”

Hayden smiles through her drying tears and offers up an enthusiastic, “Yay!”

“Great,” I say. “I’ll text you the details as soon as I have them, okay?”

“Yep,” she says. “You do have my number...”

The way she says that last part could be a small dig at my failure to contact her over the last few days, though I could be overthinking it. I’m so out of practice with dating, casual relationships, or interactions with women in general that I don’t know what to do with it other than brush it off.

I’m only glad things have been smoothed over enough that I don’t have to worry about never seeing her again or leaving Hayden disappointed. Even if Amelia isn’t right for me, she’s right for Hayden.

It isn’t until Friday that I get a chance to think about anything other than the awkward interaction between Amelia and myself. It’s been consuming my brain, and I know I need an escape from it.

When Dean calls and asks how I feel about getting the kids together for a playdate I’m more anxious to say yes than usual. I need the distraction and a break from

playing dad so intensely. It's always easier to decompress with other parents around.

By the evening, I have a few snacks out for everyone to munch on and when the doorbell rings Hayden runs over to it. She's always thrilled to see Dean and Quinn's little ones, especially since they have a little girl she can play with.

The moment she opens the doors, the kids are already running into the playroom together. I invite Dean and Quinn in as we laugh and shake our heads at the kids' excitement.

We sit down in the living room, and as I stretch my arms out on the couch where I had sex with Amelia, I can feel myself squirming in my seat. It's strange having information like that on my mind while Dean and Quinn are trying to catch up on the week's events.

I don't even realize I'm zoning out until Dean is snapping his fingers and trying to get my attention. I attempt to laugh it off. I don't even know how long I've been staring out into the air.

"You okay?" Dean asks. "You seem a little out of it, bud."

"Yeah, sorry," I say, shrugging it off and grabbing a chip from the table. "It's just been a long week."

"Oh yeah?" Quinn asks. "What's been going on around here?"

I think their jaws would drop open if I told them I had passionate sex on the very couch I'm sitting on with someone who is not Lyla and many years my junior. It isn't that I don't think they would be happy for me to be moving forward in some way, but they wouldn't expect it from me.

“Just a lot of stuff with Hayden,” I say. “Did some cleaning up around here. We’re getting into a new routine with the nanny I hired.”

“Oh, Jackson,” Quinn says, sighing in relief. “I’m so glad to see you getting some help around here with Hayden. It can’t be easy.”

“Yeah, I don’t know how you do it,” Dean says. “You sure you’re alright though, bro? You seem off.”

“I’m fine,” I say, faking a small smile and casually grabbing another chip.

“Would you leave him alone?” Quinn says. She nudges Dean and gives a slight eye roll, “Who wouldn’t be tired with everything on his plate?”

“Thank you, Quinn.” I toast her with a chip dripping in dip and glare at Dean for being an all-too-overbearing friend. “I’m fine.”

“Then come out with us,” Dean says. “You said you’ve got the nanny now, right? You don’t have any more excuses to skip another boys’ night.”

Quinn crosses her arms and leans back in her chair. “Dean and his boys’ nights. I swear, it’s like I have another child in the house at times.”

“You go on your girls’ trips. The man needs to get out of this house.”

Quinn nods her head in agreement. “He has a point. It might be nice for you to get out. And that’s coming from me, Jackson...”

“I did tell Amelia I might need her this weekend,” I admit.

Dean’s face lights up and he claps. “Finally!”

He takes his cell phone out and calls someone. Quinn flashes him a look like she can't believe he's being so over-the-top about this. Dean points his finger at my phone and is mouthing me to text the nanny while his phone rings on speakerphone.

"Hello," someone answers. I think it's Oliver.

"Hey, I'm here with Jackson and Quinn. Guess who's coming out tomorrow?"

"At this point, I might go with Quinn," Oliver jabs.

"In your dreams," Quinn says. "I've got a date with my reality shows."

I can't believe it, but I've got my phone out and I'm confirming with Amelia that she can come over tomorrow night to watch Hayden. I haven't been out in so long. There's a part of me that hopes she'll text back and tell me something came up and she can't make it.

"Jackson, you really coming out with us tomorrow?" Oliver asks.

I barely have time to set my phone down again when I get the vibration of a response. Amelia texted back immediately that she'll be here, with a smiley face emoji. It's been arranged, and there's no getting out of now.

"Looks that way, buddy," I say. "Now you can all shut up about it."

"Not likely," Oliver quips back. "We're going to get you your groove back."

I can't help but laugh a little bit. As terrified as I am, it always feels good to have something to look forward to again after a long time sitting it out.

The next night, I'm in the car with the guys on my way to the club. I managed to

hand Hayden off to Amelia by exchanging as few words with her as possible. It was cordial and polite enough, but still tense. I know I need to have a real conversation with her soon.

“I can’t believe you came out,” Oliver says, grabbing my shoulder to loosen me up.

Dean is driving, Vaughn is in the front seat, Oliver is on my right, and Felix is by himself in the third row of Dean’s truck. I know they’re going to go above and beyond tonight, being that I haven’t been out in so long.

I think Oliver and Felix must have already been having some drinks before we came out, because the car has the smell of alcohol to it even though there aren’t any drinks in here with us.

When we pull up to the club, it’s packed. There’s a long line of people waiting to get in, and I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen so many scantily clad women in a row. I feel like I might need to have a drink just to be able to relax around so many gorgeous women.

I’m shocked as we pour out of the truck and walk up to the line only to be shuttled right on through the doors. Dean shakes the bouncer’s hand and gives him a pat on the back—it seems like they have some sort of arrangement going.

We walk right on through the club and pass the men sitting around the stage, all ogling the woman in pasties and a thong in the center stage. We pass tables where groups of people are sharing some hard liquor and bottles of champagne on ice.

Before I know it we’ve walked the entire distance of the club to a pink curtain separating us from the rest of the place.

“Whoa,” I say. “What is this?”

“It’s an ode to you joining us out here, man,” Dean says.

We’re immediately greeted by a server who takes our drink orders. Dean takes the couple of drinks that are already on the server’s tray and hands one to me. I gladly take a few gulps to loosen up. I haven’t been out like this in a long time, and I don’t know what they have up their sleeves.

We take a seat on the velvet couch that wraps around the room. Flashing lights from the disco ball hanging from the ceiling circle around the darkened room. The music is blaring, and I keep sipping on my drink as I see Oliver get up to talk to someone else who works at the club.

After Oliver takes a seat, the four of us are just sitting listening to the music when four girls walk in. They’re all topless, with the tiniest string thongs covering their front. Tall, short, blonde, brown hair—they’re all extremely attractive.

I’m still taking them all in when they each go their separate ways toward the four of us. The second my girl is near me, I feel my dick reacting in my pants. She has the tightest body with perky tits. I can hardly pull my eyes away from her, but I only manage to look away long enough to notice that Dean is whispering in his stripper’s ear and giving her money, politely asking her to not give him a dance.

I’m relieved he’s being respectful to Quinn, because I’d hate to have to be responsible for knowing something like that and feel guilt or the obligation to tell her. I’m somewhat jealous of him, because I would have done the same thing for Lyla.

The stripper pulls my face back toward her, and her dancing is hypnotizing as she gyrates in front of me. She brings her chest toward my face, and her tits are so supple I could lick them. I immediately flashback to my time with Amelia and how much I loved having her breasts in my mouth.

Even as the stripper takes her finger and places it under my chin, giving me the most intense eye contact as she begins to straddle me, all I can think of is Amelia climbing on top of me and the way it felt when I entered her.

It's almost too much, and I can't concentrate on what's happening in front of me without it creating an uncomfortable ache I can't do anything about. I want to enjoy this beautiful woman dancing all over me, but it's too much like the experience I had with Amelia to get my mind off of the very thing I was hoping I could get my mind off of tonight.

I slip her a wad of cash and excuse myself. Oliver and Felix are so caught up in their good time they hardly even notice that I'm leaving the private room. Dean immediately gets up and grabs my arm, checking to make sure I'm alright.

"Bathroom break," I say, half smiling to downplay the fact that I'm just trying to get the hell out of there.

Dean nods and returns to his seat on the couch. I feel a rush of relief once I'm on the other side of the curtain, even though the club is as energetic as ever.

I know that since I'm already out, I should take the opportunity to relax. I don't need an intense lap dance to have a good time. I call the bartender over and order myself a drink.

It's not like me, but I gulp it down completely the second it reaches me. I notice some girls sitting at the bar looking cute and ask the bartender to send them drinks on me. I take a seat and enjoy another drink when one of the girls looks over at me and gives me a flirtatious look.

We both stand up and walk toward each other. She thanks me for the drink I sent her and we dance together a little bit.

I wouldn't normally dance so comfortably with a perfect stranger, but the drinks seem to be hitting me hard. She moves in on my body, moving her hands around and down my back. I can't believe it, but even more than the guilt I feel about Lyla, the rush of thoughts and memories of Amelia are back in my brain.

"I'm sorry," I say, realizing that the night is an epic fail. I need to get out of here. I need to get home, back to Hayden, back to bed where I belong.

I can tell I'm feeling buzzed as I walk to the front of the club. I don't want to bother the guys who seem to be having a good time, so I take my cell phone out and call an Uber. I then text Dean, saying that I'm sorry but I'm not feeling good. I'll need to take a rain check on coming out again.

I'm already driving off when I get a text from Dean telling me to feel better. I'm surprised he isn't giving me a hard time, considering how out of his way he must have gone to make tonight a more than special event.

I'm just thankful to be home as the Uber pulls up to the house.

As I get out of the car, I spot Amelia's car in the driveway and remember that I still need to face her, to send her on her way. She's sitting on the couch, in the same spot where I last saw her naked.

She looks up from her phone and must notice I'm a little wobbly on my feet because she's right next to me in just a few seconds.

"Are you okay?" she asks, ushering me to the nearest chair. "Can I get you water or something? Something to eat?"

As she's leaning down, I can't help but put my hand on her cheek and give her a deep kiss. When we pull away, she's looking at me breathlessly, confused. The only thing I

can think to say is what I've been thinking all night as the other girls were all over me.

"The only thing I want to taste is you."

"Maybe some other time, okay? You seem pretty drunk."

She takes me by the hand and leads me through the house, up the stairs, and to the bedroom. A part of me wonders if she's going to change her mind and let me have her as soon as we reach the bed. Instead, she helps me sit down on the edge of the bed, watches me kick my shoes off, and tucks me in under the covers. I haven't felt this intoxicated in a long while.

She leans in and gives me a small, sweet kiss. "Have a good night, okay? Hayden's been asleep for a little while. I'll just see myself out."

Just the smell of her has me excited. The taste of her lips has me craving her. I want her again. I want her body all over mine. I can feel the growing need in my pants. I can't tell her that though. I know she probably thinks I'm a jerk after not contacting her this whole time and pushing for only one thing.

She leaves the room and closes the door behind her. I'm left with a raging hard-on and I don't know what to do with it except take care of it.

I pull my pants down and grab onto my cock as the taste of Amelia lingers on my lips. I imagine her opening the door again and telling me she's changed her mind.

I remember what her body felt like all over mine, what her lips felt like wrapped around my desperately hard cock. I rub myself vigorously as I imagine myself fucking her brains out, her moans in my ear, and the bounce of her tits as she rides me. I climax in minutes, the release so good after thinking about her all night.

I do a half attempt at cleaning myself up a bit so I can sleep comfortably, and before I know it, I'm passed out in this darkness. It isn't until I open my eyes again and the sun is glaring through the window and Hayden is knocking at my door that I realize how awkward and how much worse I made things with Amelia last night.

I can't quite piece it all together, but I know I'm in so much deeper with her now, and I have no idea what in the hell to do about it.

AMELIA

The longer I think about it the more guilty I feel. I know it's stupid and unproductive, but it enters my head at the oddest times.

Most often it happens when I'm playing with Hayden, and she gives me one of her silly expressions that I know she's learned from Jackson. On her they're innocent and adorable. On him, they're hot and very appealing.

Why do I keep coming back to this? It's never going to be erased. I can't change what happened. Do I actually wish I could? I don't really know, and that's why I can't seem to get past it. Beating myself up about it over and over again isn't helping me at all.

It's making me a nervous wreck and causing me to pay less attention to my job, which I shouldn't ever allowed to happen considering my job involves the welfare of a precious, innocent little girl.

"I need a red block," Hayden announces as she pokes me on the hand I have covering a blue one. "You're silly today. I know more colors than you."

See? I can't even listen to her requests with an open mind. I'm in another world and that's not okay. Any other day I'd have already anticipated her need and the red block would be waiting for her before she even asked.

Worse, I have no idea how many times she asked me for it before she poked me to get my attention.

Not good, Amelia. Quit dwelling on the past and making stupid mistakes.

I'm in this situation to get closer to Jackson in order to discover what happened to Preston, not to go to bed with him. Sleeping with your enemy is always a bad idea, even repulsive in some cases.

Although, in this case it's definitely not repulsive. The chemistry between us is almost ballistic, and I can't deny how easily he turns me to mush with just a smile.

"Please," Hayden says again.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. Here you go," I say, picking up the red block from beneath my knee and passing it to her. "Look at what a wonderful tower you've built. I'm so impressed. Do you live there?"

"A princess does," she calmly replies. "I'm Daddy's princess. Not a real one."

I tweak her cute little nose and laugh. "Of course you're a real one. Who told you differently?"

"Joseph did. He says princesses live with queens and kings, not hockey dads."

Of course it was Joseph, Quinn's son. He likes to tease, and Hayden is too young to understand. Joseph also enjoys bursting fantasies whenever he can. He's a lot like the hockey players he idolizes. Men are all the same, starting at birth.

"Don't worry about what anyone says, Hayden. We can be anything we want to be, including a princess. It's all about attitude. When someone says something against

what you believe just smile and tell them you can choose to be anything you want and so can they.”

“Like this,” Hayden exclaims while giving me her best cheeky smile, which is simply too adorable for words to explain.

“That’s perfect. No one can resist that grin. And it’s definitely a princess grin. But if you aren’t the princess in your tower, who is?” I ask, trying to keep her engaged in her project.

“Mommy,” she states. “I just know she is.”

My heart breaks as she speaks. Her little face is full of joy as she continues to build, not knowing how difficult it is for me to hear her words. My smile is gone.

I forget sometimes that I’m not the only one who lost a loved one in that wreck, and the guilt over using this nanny job to find out why I lost my brother returns tenfold.

“If she’s in that tower, then she’s watching you grow as tall as it is,” Jackson says from behind me. “And she’s blowing you extra kisses from the window.”

He swoops Hayden off the floor and swings her high into the air. She giggles like she always does, then circles his neck with a big hug, squeezing until she makes him pretend to squeal. It’s amazing how resilient children are.

“Daddy’s home,” she announces happily.

“I see that. I bet you’re as surprised as I am,” I reply.

He stares at me for an instant as if wondering why I sound miffed. I sort of wonder why I do as well. It’s his home, his child, and his life.

He can come home early anytime he wants to. I don't have a right to get frustrated and definitely not angry, yet here I am building up a huge pile of both that would reach the top of Hayden's tower.

"I think it's a surprise to all of us. Maybe I should have called ahead, but when they told us to leave early because of an electrical problem in the building we all raced out like a bunch of kids released from school. I'm sorry if I'm screwing up some big plans or something," he apologizes as he tickles Hayden.

"Outside, Daddy. Play outside," she says between giggles.

"We have to clean up the blocks and have a snack first," I remind her.

"Daisy," she whimpers with a pouty face she uses to get her way. She's already learning to use her womanly wiles, especially where Jackson is concerned. He's ready to give in, so I quickly speak up.

"Daisy has to eat a snack too. Her mom will bring her over in about thirty minutes, so there's no time to argue. Let's put the blocks away so we can have some grapes and string cheese. We need energy to play outside," I explain.

"Can I count the grapes? I can count all the way to five." She climbs out of Jackson's arms and begins skipping around the room, picking up stray blocks.

"Absolutely. I'm sure your daddy won't mind. I think he may want me to leave so he can have you all to himself for the rest of the day."

"No, please don't," he says in mock terror. "Don't leave me alone with two little girls. I wouldn't know what to do with them."

"Just think of them as small women. Smile and give them a lot of attention. Tell them

how pretty they are and never let them know you're nervous," I jokingly advise.

"Haha, that's not as funny as you seem to think it is. I'm fine with Hayden, but other little kids confuse me. I can't read their emotions the way I do hers. That's your territory. Besides, Daisy and her family are new to the neighborhood. I imagine her mother would prefer a woman hanging around. What mother in her right mind would leave her daughter with a hockey player?"

"You have a point," I concede. His charming smile and real nervousness are almost too much for me. I won't leave him stranded, nor will I disappoint the two little girls I promised to teach how to play hopscotch.

I decide it's time to stop torturing myself with guilt. Jackson doesn't appear to feel guilty about anything, so why should I? Instead of worrying about what is now water under the bridge, I'm going to use it to discover the truth about what happened to Preston. Attraction can be a weapon, and I'll use it that way.

Once the toys are put away, Hayden has a snack, and she puts on her tennis shoes, and then we all go out to greet Daisy and her mother. Jackson's charm goes to work immediately, and he doesn't seem to have any nerve issues when he flirts with the new woman in town.

I roll my eyes as I watch the woman practically fall all over him before I remind her she has an appointment with her dentist, which is why we're having the playdate to begin with.

We lead the kids out the back door. As we do, Jackson asks, "Is there a problem? You weren't acting very friendly, and I assumed you got along great with the new neighbor. Am I wrong? Is there some reason Hayden shouldn't be playing with Daisy?"

I sigh and answer, “There’s absolutely no reason the girls shouldn’t be best friends. They get along great. I suppose her mother melting at your charms just like every other woman just strikes me wrong. She’s married—and happily so, according to her—so why does she need to fall all over you?”

He laughs and replies, “She was just being a fan. Some women like hockey. I thought you did too. Isn’t that why you come to the games?”

“It wasn’t hockey she was flirting with. That was all for you. And before you say it, no it wasn’t because you’re a great player. It was simple sexual tension.”

This time his laugh echoes across the back yard, startling birds out of the trees. “You sound jealous.”

“As if,” I say, sounding like a fifteen-year-old who’s crushing on the quarterback.

His chuckle follows me into the yard. The entire time I’m drawing the hopscotch game on the concrete I feel his eyes on me. Out of spite for the way he’s making me squirm, I do my best to make him uneasy as well.

It’s a simple matter to make sure I swing my hips as I walk, bend over in a way that shows off my bottom, and sometimes put a little shake into moving my arms so that I draw attention to my breasts. After all, I have to strategize for this war I’m fighting.

Eventually, I forget he’s there. It’s far too much fun to teach the girls how to play and hear their joy when they manage to jump on one foot without falling.

I’m concentrating so hard on the girls it startles me to hear Jackson call my name. Neither little girl pays any attention to the disruption, but it’s automatic for me to turn at the sound of my name.

“I got us some of the tea you made from the refrigerator. Sit and enjoy it. I think the kids have the hang of things now,” Jackson offers.

I glance from the giggling girls to the icy glass of cold tea, trying to decide between duty and refreshment. The tea wins.

I tell myself my decision has nothing at all to do with the handsome man I’ll have for company or the thought of talking through some things we need to deal with as soon as possible.

“I’ll be on the porch if you need me,” I tell the girls. I shouldn’t have bothered. They’re both racing over the grass toward a ball that’s suddenly more interesting than the hopscotch drawing.

“Hayden’s happy. Daisy seems to be her ideal playmate,” Jackson informs me as I take the tea he holds out to me.

“So far everything is going well. It’s when they get bored or tired I worry about. Children, even when they really like each other, tend to squabble under those circumstances,” I reply.

“I’m sure you already have a remedy planned for that. You’re great at thinking ahead,” he answers.

“Not always,” I murmur.

I can see that he knows exactly what I’m talking about. His own discomfort shows on his expressive face, just as Hayden’s face tends to show all her emotions.

“That was all on me,” he says without explaining what he means. He doesn’t need to, since we’re both on the same page of that script. “I can’t really put any of the blame

on you. I made the choice, and now we're stuck with the consequences."

"Just what are the consequences, according to you?" I ask.

"Awkwardness, embarrassment, and acknowledgement of our obvious attraction to each other. My behavior was out of line. You're an employee and I'm your employer. At least, that's how it should be. I may be ready to apologize for what happened, but...a part of me doesn't really regret it. I'm mostly sorry for the distance and awkwardness it's caused. I don't want what happened between us to interfere with Hayden's needs," he explains.

"I'd never let anything cause a problem with Hayden. She has nothing to do with us, at least not at this point. It took two of us giving in to our desires to do what we did, so I'm just as guilty as you. I'm hoping we can just put it in the past and go on as if it never happened," I say.

"I'd like to think that's possible, but I'm not certain it's that easy. I'm sorry, I truly am. However, forgiving and forgetting are two different things. Even if you forgive me I can't forget it happened. It felt too good, too right in that moment. Now, it feels like a misjudgment, a mistake. I don't know how to reconcile it in my head."

He seems contrite and sincere. He's not even looking me in the eye. He's gazing out at the yard where the girls are kicking the ball back and forth, yet he's not actually seeing them.

It makes me wonder what he is seeing. Maybe an image of us wrapped around each other? Or of him kicking me out of his home?

"I don't understand what you're trying to tell me," I admit.

His laugh is contemptuous. He slugs back the rest of his tea before replying, "Neither

do I. That's the biggest problem I'm having. I don't exactly know what I feel, need, or want. It's all tangled up in my head. The past and the future can't coexist in my mind. It's too confusing and unsettling for me to handle. My imagination goes haywire when I try to figure it all out."

"I suppose confusion is understandable in this situation," I answer. "You have needs and desires, but I'm the nanny. You certainly didn't expect to get hot over me any more than I expected to be attracted to you. Let's just try to forget it. I know you said you can't, but there's got to be a way to get back to how things were before this happened."

"Either you aren't listening or I'm not saying this right. I don't think I want to go back to before. And yet, I don't think I want to go forward either. It's all mixed up. Maybe I'm not ready for another woman to mean something to me, or maybe you aren't the right someone. Then again, you might be."

He blushes and stands to pace the porch before adding, "I'm not looking for a serious relationship. Playing around is easy, simple and freeing in a way I haven't had in a while. I'm not looking to give that up. Truthfully though, I'm not meant to be a player either. I don't enjoy it like the others do. I miss sharing a home with my wife, having meals together and knowing she's in the stands watching me, even rooting me on."

I'm shocked by his admissions and humbled that he's confiding in me. "Okay, how about we take it slow, one day at a time. We'll try for an honest friendship first. If it becomes more, then so be it. If not, then no harm is done. I can do that. Can you?"

His intense gaze finally meets mine. He struggles a little before answering, "Yes, I think I can."

Over the next couple weeks, we try out our plan. It seems to be working quite well,

and a friendship and understanding is slowly building.

One evening I take Hayden to a new pizza place that has small kiddie rides and games for everyone. Jackson meets us after his practice. A giggling Hayden snags him to teach her how to play Skee-Ball because she keeps hitting the plastic barrier above the ramp.

“Why haven’t you helped her with this?” he asks with a knowing grin.

“I think you’ve already figured that out. I suck at it. Who do you think showed her how to toss the ball and hit the guard in the first place?”

“I’m assuming you didn’t do well with baseball either,” he teases.

“I’m not gifted at sports. I’d rather watch. What about you? Can you play anything other than hockey?” I ask, trying to get a feel for who Jackson really is behind all his confidence.

“I do okay with most sports, but hockey is the only one I excel at or truly enjoy. It just seems to come naturally. You know, like you with kids. If you don’t like these types of games why did you bring Hayden to this particular pizza place?” he inquires.

“So she can discover what she likes and excels at. Obviously not Skee-Ball, but we’ll find something else. Besides, I intend to play some of the old arcade games. They’re my favorites. I bet I can beat your ass at any of them,” I challenge.

We settle Hayden at a table with a snack and play a competitive round of Asteroids. I manage to beat his score, barely. It’s fun and I discover Jackson is able to relax his arrogant attitude when he’s enjoying himself.

He gets us beers and we continue asking questions about favorite colors, television

shows and other trivial things that give us insight to who we really are inside. It's so adorable when Hayden joins in telling us her favorites as well. It feels almost as if we're a family.

All that swiftly changes when Jackson does mention family.

"My mother called, and she's invited us to a family gathering over the weekend. I know it's short notice. It was for me as well. But I'd appreciate it if you'd come with us. Hayden does better at interacting with people when you're with her. She looks to you for guidance. She's gotten really attached to you very quickly."

"I'm attached to her too. How can I not be? She's precious, smart, and caring. But...I don't think me going to a family function will go over well with your parents. You didn't say they invited me, or even mentioned me at all. I'm not on their guest list. I won't intrude. Hayden will do fine without me," I argue.

"I won't do fine without you. I need your help with Hayden. I'm inviting you. It'll be fine, I promise. Please, say you'll come."

"Please, Amelia," Hayden adds.

"Fine. But if your parents get upset, it's all on you. I tried to warn you." I'm giving in because Hayden asked, not because of the eager expression on Jackson's face.

When the day arrives, all I want to do is back out and spend the day at home. The thought of facing Jackson's family is almost too much to bear. My discomfort rises as the time to leave draws closer.

Jackson is picking me up, and I won't go back on a promise I made to Hayden. If I stay home, I would have to teach her that grownups don't keep promises, which I'm not willing to do.

I'll set a good example no matter how I feel inside. She's been so excited and eager for this all week, and I'm ashamed for even considering another option.

Both Hayden and Jackson are in great moods when they pick me up. They don't appear to notice how upset I am. I guess I'm better at hiding my nervousness than I thought. Maybe I'm worrying about nothing, and it'll all be fine, just as Jackson promised. Yet somehow I don't think so.

I quickly discover how right I am. His mother greets him with a smile and gives Hayden a hug and kiss. Then she catches sight of me. Her lips lose their smile and turn down at the corners. I can read the disapproval on her face.

Jackson sees it too. Before his mother can say anything, he immediately proclaims, "This is Amelia. I invited her along for Hayden's sake. They're a great team and Hayden does better in social situations when she's around."

"You shouldn't have taken it upon yourself to bring her," his mother replies with a hint of hostility. "I extended the invitation to you and Hayden. There's no need for the nanny to be here. I'm certain Hayden will be just fine for one day without her. I'm quite capable of watching my own granddaughter, for goodness sake. I'd prefer you sent her back home, Jackson. This is a family gathering after all."

Jackson is chastised and embarrassed. He knows I'm hurt and it's all his fault. His lips move as if to argue with his mother, but he doesn't. He already knows what the outcome will be—he'll lose and I'll suffer more embarrassment. Hayden will cry or have a temper tantrum. So, he does the only thing he can to salvage some dignity.

"Here, take my keys," he says, turning to me. "It seems you get the day off after all. Thank you for changing your plans for us. I truly thought it was okay to bring you. I'll listen to your advice next time."

“How will you get home?” I ask.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll manage. There’s always a way to fix things, so I’ll be fine. So will Hayden. I’ll make sure of it.”

I walk back to the car, pretending I’m fine. I hold my back straight and walk slowly, rather than running the way I want to. I don’t look back, even when Hayden starts to cry and ask why I’m leaving. I block out her grandmother’s retort, not wanting to know what she says.

I’m hurting bad enough without knowing what ugly things she’s saying about bringing the hired help to a family gathering. Hayden doesn’t see me as help. She knows me as a friend. I hate that someone may change that for her. It’s wrong on so many levels.

It’s stupid to be hurt over this. I know better. I’m the one who warned Jackson it was a mistake. I should be glad I’ve gotten a reprieve. The entire day would have been awkward and uncomfortable. Now I’m free to make other plans—plans I didn’t have even before Jackson asked me to come along.

He only assumes I have a busy social life. He doesn’t know I’m obsessed with finding answers about my brother’s disappearance.

In the spur of the moment, and to end my pity party, I call Brooke. We need a girls’ night out for a change. She’s fast to agree and is willing to come to Jackson’s house to get me so I can leave his car there.

“Okay, I know something big must have happened to bring this sudden party mood on. So, spill,” she says when I get in the car.

“It’s a long story. I’ll explain, I promise, but I’d like to have a couple drinks to relieve

the frustration first. Can you wait?"

"Oh, wow! It sounds like something juicy. I'll wait. It won't be easy, but I'm betting it's worth it. Nachos, drinks, and dancing coming up. I know just how to get your mood turned around. Let's go party. You could use some fun in your life. You spend far too much time with kids. It's time for some adventurous adulting."

Over margaritas and nachos, I explain about Jackson's invitation and his mother's reaction to my presence. Brooke is as appalled as I am.

"Well, I'm sure Jackson will say something to her about it once Hayden is occupied elsewhere. I can't see him letting it go. I bet he's embarrassed and angry too. I wonder whose side his father will take. Anyway, forget about that for now. It's the old hag's problem not yours. If she wants to be prejudiced against the help then let her be. One of these days she'll have to face the fact that she can't take care of herself and her 'help' won't be there," Brooke says, toasting me with her drink.

She's right. I need to forget about it. I push it to the back of my mind and enjoy my night of freedom.

10

JACKSON

I 'm in the locker room getting ready for the game. The usual swapping of underwear and socks happens, and I stifle a smile at my teammates shenanigans.

Most of these guys don't even think about the germs their junk gives off and how sharing said germs might land any one of them in a sorry position. I've never been one for such rituals, but if it's rituals that get these guys going, then by all means...ritual away.

"Are you not worried about Felix's ball hairs mingling with yours, Oliver?" I ask as I pull my own shorts up.

"Shut up, man, you're just jealous 'cause your ass is too big to fit our shorts," Oliver retorts as he wiggles his ass at me.

I grab my towel and snap it in his direction, and it lets out a whap sound as it connects with his left cheek.

"Ow, man, that fucking hurts," Oliver bellows as he jumps away, rubbing his cheek. "I'll get you back, Jackson—just you wait." But the smile on his face suggests he's joking.

Luca walks in, a little late for his normal pregame happenings, and I have a sinking suspicion that something is up with him. Between my worries over Luca and the fact

that my mother is in the stands with my daughter and nanny, I have a feeling something will go wrong today.

My mother doesn't know when to keep her mouth shut sometimes, and given the fact that Hayden likes Amelia so much, she's liable to say something to Amelia to try to run her off. I don't want that to happen, but on the other hand, I also don't want my mother to assume I'm sleeping with the help.

Which I am, but she doesn't have to know that. Not that I think of Amelia as the help much either, but...I shake my head as a whole host of hoots and hollers come from the door as our families start to enter the locker room.

I smile as I see Amelia and Hayden in the group, but seeing my mother in the mix just sends my stomach rolling.

"Jacksy, my boy," she says as she blows air kisses at me.

"Daddy," Hayden says as she wrinkles her little face and jumps from Amelia's arms into mine.

Our attention cuts to the center of the room as the hockey sticks began to drum on the ground. This is known as "TJ," and the families like to be involved. The sticks make an echoing sound as they slap against the concrete, and I hand my practice stick to Hayden so she can join in. There's no way I'm going to let her use my game stick.

She joins in on the drumming, and I smile to see all the guys tapping their sticks to their own individual rhythm.

Stephen from team two does a little double tap between each long tap. Oliver is definitely dancing to the beat of his own drum as he knocks his stick side by side with Felix. I follow the rhythm that Hayden sets for us as she dances up and down with her

stick.

Eventually all the players come together in the middle, jiggling their sticks and tapping them to the ground. They each overlap until they become a mingle of plastic and wood. Soon, we're all tapping in unison, showing that our team can work as one.

I look over to see my mother scowling at the noise, but Amelia is looking at Hayden who's wearing the biggest smile I've ever seen on her face. Soon, Oliver breaks free from the chaos and throws Hayden into the air, planting her on my shoulders as we finish the ritual.

This is so much better than swapping underwear.

I look over at my mother who is also looking at me, but then she looks back at Amelia like she's realized the nanny is watching me. A look crosses her face, but it quickly leaves as she seems to realize that Amelia must be watching Hayden on my shoulders. My mother nods to me as she takes her leave from the locker room. She's never been one for such rowdy practices, even when I was a boy.

She would let me hang out with my friends and fellow teammates as long as we wanted, as long as we weren't rowdy. Once we worked up to more than a normal octave, she usually shut us down quickly. I hope one day Hayden can experience the chaos and joy of friendship like this. These are my brothers.

Once the drumming stops, Amelia walks up and grabs Hayden off my shoulders.

"Down you go," she says with a smile as she helps her down, grabbing her hand at the end. "Let's go find your grandmother so we can sit with her for your daddy's game."

"Play really good for me, Daddy," Hayden says, smiling as she bounces off toward

the door holding Amelia's hand.

My heart swells at how happy this little girl has been recently. I think about all the nannies we had in the past, and how she hadn't gotten close to anyone since her mother. Not that she was old enough to remember her mother, but I know she senses that no one will replace the woman who meant so much to both of us.

I watch as Coach walks up to the center of the room as we all sit down or take a knee. He's usually good for a pep talk, and the closer we get to winning this thing, the more intense his talks become.

"You guys are all winners," he begins, but before he can say another word, we all cheer. "I know our team has gone through a lot together. You guys have grown, have learned how to take a few punches, and have developed skills far beyond what I imagined. I want you to go out there and do your best, be your best, and win this thing!"

It isn't a particularly long or loving speech, but it's enough that cheers erupt from all of us, and we get up and throw our fists in the air. I join in on the madness as we all grab our things and whoop and holler as we exit the locker room, making our way to the entrance of the arena.

Still making a scene, we enter the arena from our designated doorway. The entire audience erupts in cheers as we come out, allowing each one of us to be announced with both our names and numbers. Each of us gives our signature cheer or dance as we amp up the crowd, getting them ready for an awesome game.

I look across the ice to where the other team is warming up. It's getting so close to the playoffs—they're going to be good.

"Look, boys, the girls are coming in," the right wing from the other team says.

“Your mother!” Felix shouts back as we pass.

I smile, because there’s nothing wrong with a little playful banter, especially if our team ends up winning. It doesn’t always have to be harsh or mean words—a simple knock on a guy’s inability to score can put a player over the edge. It’s honestly one of my favorite parts of the game.

I smile and wave playfully at the team’s right wing as we skate by, blowing him a kiss for distraction.

“Don’t, Jackson, he might like that a little too much,” Oliver says as he pats me on the ass.

I look over to where Felix guards his goal. He’s gesturing obscenities at the goalie from the other team. Oliver takes his center position as face-off is about to begin.

A whistle is blown as the centers take their position. The puck is released, and the game starts as Oliver darts forward, sticking the puck before our opponents can grab it.

I see Luca take up his position from the corner of my eye, wishing like hell it was Preston. I might be upset that he was with my wife when she died, and that he and I had been rivals all our lives, but I do miss playing with the sorry bastard.

“Luca, watch out!” I yell as the other team’s left wing flanks in, accidentally hitting Luca in the chest with his elbow.

Oliver shoots the puck in the general direction of the other team’s goal and I quickly skate up and grab it with my stick. I glance over to make sure Vaughn and Benjamin are in their places as I lock eyes with Felix.

He has full control of our goal as I head toward the other team's.

As I make a move to pass the puck, I catch Amelia watching me from the stands. My heart does something I'm not sure I like as I fake the pass, dodging a player from the other team and an elbow to the nose, but just barely. I shoot the puck and it's intercepted by Oliver who has seemingly come out of nowhere. He banks the shot and makes the goal as the puck zooms past their keeper.

"Score!" Felix cheers from our goal.

One of the asshats from the other team spits profanities our way as they set up to start again.

The play begins again as we set up a similar action. Vaughn fakes left, intercepting a pass from Benjamin who's playing defense. I glance over in time to see ol' Benny boy take one to the face. He spins around and grabs the jersey of the player on the other team.

A brawl breaks out when both players go skidding into the glass partition on the other side of the rink. Oliver sinks the goal and cheers erupt, but a penalty is being called.

"Come on, man," I say as I go to play my part as enforcer. "Get off him!" I yell, grabbing Ben's jersey and pulling him back a good two feet.

The other player doesn't want to take a hint as their enforcer comes to assist. It takes him and another guy to make sure their guy doesn't piledrive Benjamin again. Ben backs up and allows me to pull him to his feet.

"Don't need you getting the shit kicked out of ya," I say, as I pat him on the shoulder and head.

The player from the other team is put in the box for a time-out as Ben smiles a bloody, toothy grin at the man who's now fuming like a caged tiger.

"Just wait until I get out of here—I'm coming for you," the player says as we set up.

"Oh, I'm shaking in my skates," Benjamin says as he lines up to get things started again.

"Ben," I scold him, but mostly it's playful.

"What?" Benjamin smiles. "If mama bear over there wants to fight because I poked her cubs, then let's see what the sow can do," he finishes, making sure the player in the box can hear him.

The next play starts, and Luca, who's been acting aggressively up to this point, decides to essentially steal the puck from Oliver. Oliver frowns at him, wondering what the hell he's doing.

Luca looks at me as he passes, the other team's players hot on his heels. It's been fairly quiet, and other than showing up late, he hasn't been his usual self. One of the other players sticks his stick out, tripping Luca as he makes his way to their goal.

Luca goes flying, and before I can get to him, he throws a punch that lands directly in the opponent's face. Both players crashed to the ground, but of course it's Luca who will get the penalty for this. While the other player initiated it, Luca was the first to start the brawl.

"Stop, man—you know we can't afford a damn penalty!" I yell at him, wishing like hell he had a more level head. I grab his arm to help him up, realizing that he's bleeding from his nose.

“Get off me, man.” He shrugs my hand off his arm and scrambles to his feet.

I watch as Luca enters the box and throws his helmet to the ground. He nurses his gushing nose, resulting in a medic coming to assist.

I try not to pay too much attention to the blood draining from his nose that might be broken. I wince when the medic pops it back into place, and my eyes begin to water at the thought of it.

After Luca gets let back in, the game continues to be really intense. We take turns slamming opponents into barriers, shit-talking, and just round about playing a normal game of hockey.

As we get closer to playoffs, the teams are all fighting hard to make sure they get a spot. My adrenaline kicks into overdrive as we approach halftime.

So far, we’re winning, but the second half could bring on any amount of changes. The whistle blows, marking the end of the first half, and my stomach lurches. I don’t know if it’s post-traumatic stress or what, but even though it’s been a few years, this part of the game gets me every time.

As we skate off the ice to enter the locker room once again, all I can think about is the day that officer came to tell me my wife had been in an accident. So many games have been played since then, so many years have passed, but still it’s the only thing I can think of until the hype of the locker room replaces the thoughts in my mind.

We walk in cheering, throwing our skates off to the side so we can have a break. Eventually the morbid thoughts are replaced with the beautiful face of my daughter and Amelia as they walk into the room.

“Looks like your job as enforcer has come in handy tonight.” Amelia smiles.

“More than a few times,” I say with an eye roll in Luca’s general direction.

His nose is taped with a ridiculous amount of white medical tape. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought he was one of those nerds on the beach with a glob of sunscreen on his nose. I don’t stare too long, looking back to Amelia and my daughter.

“What’s up with him?” Amelia asks as Hayden runs over to give Felix a high five.

“Not sure...he’s had his shorts in a wad for a while now. If you ask me, we’d have better luck if someone else moved to the team from team two, but no one plays his spot as well as he does.” I wipe sweat from my neck with a towel.

“I see,” she says, just as my mother walks in.

Her demeanor is better now that the game is half over and there’s less noise than before.

“Good game so far, son,” she says, and I smile at her. “Your nanny and I have been chatting, and it seems Hayden has quite the affinity for the sport.”

I smile at Hayden as she runs from Felix to me and jumps into my arms.

“Yes. You do, don’t you, baby?” I say as I knock my nose against her little cheek.

“What, Daddy?” she asks with a wrinkle of her nose.

“You like hockey, don’t you?” Amelia says as she takes her from me and hugs her tight.

“I want to defend the goal like Uncle Felix one day,” Hayden says, but then she leans

over to my mother and puts her hand to her mouth like she might be getting ready to tell a secret. “They get the most action,” she whispers.

We all laugh. “Is that what Uncle Felix told you?” I ask, leaning in to kiss her cheek. “Well, you, Amelia, and Grandma better make your way back out there—the second half will start soon enough.”

“Otay, Daddy,” she says as she slides out of Amelia’s arms and then takes each woman’s hand in hers to lead the way out. “This way, ladies,” she adds as they walk out the door.

Amelia looks back with a huge smile at the last moment, and I’m not sure but I think my mother might have noticed.

In the end, our team wins by a landslide. Throughout the rest of the game, there are many penalties from both sides, three fights, a lot of trash-talking, and another broken nose—but this time it’s the nose of the other team’s goalie when I send a puck flying at his face.

We cheer and celebrate in the locker room as our families gather. I smile at everyone as they make their way out of the room once their gear has been stripped off and put away. Only a few of us linger.

“We’re going to Ted’s bar to celebrate,” Oliver says as he jumps up and down. “You should come with us.”

He smiles at me. I have turned down too many invitations to the bar. I have too many responsibilities. I think about telling him no, when I remember my mother is with us. Maybe she can take Hayden home for the night.

Just then, as if on cue, my mom, Amelia, and Hayden walk in.

“You did amazing tonight, son,” my mother says as she gives me a genuine hug. “I was thinking, what if I took Hayden home with me for the night so you could go celebrate with the boys?”

I smile at her and nod, looking at my daughter for confirmation that this is what she wants. It’s nice that I don’t even have to ask.

“Do you want to go spend the night with your grandma tonight?” I ask her as I kneel on one knee in front of her.

“Yes, please, Daddy,” she says, jumping up and down and clapping her hands.

“See? It’s all set, man,” Oliver says as he walks toward the door. “See you at the bar.”

“Okay, Mom, if you’re okay with it, I’ll go home and pack a few of her things.”

“There’s no sense in that—I have enough at my house to last,” she says as she kisses my cheek, then grabs Hayden’s hand.

“Does this mean I’m off for the night then?” Amelia asks as my mom and Hayden walk out of the room.

“Yeah,” I say, but I don’t want to be rude. “But...you could always come hang out with the guys and I...come help us celebrate.”

“I don’t know about all that,” Amelia says. “I don’t know that me hanging out with a bunch of sweaty guys at a bar sounds like all that much fun.” She slaps me playfully on the arm and snorts out the most adorable laugh.

“We have all showered,” I say. “But fine, you can miss out on the madness. It can

sometimes get more interesting than the games themselves.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” she says with an eye roll. “Okay, you’ve talked me into it.” She allows me to take her arm and walk out with her.

In no time, we show up at the bar. We walk in together, but not touching. I don’t know that I’m ready for the guys to get the wrong idea about us, but as soon as they all see that she’s with me, I wish they had the wrong idea.

“Amelia, over here,” Oliver says, waving her over.

She gives me a half-shy smile as she walks over to where Oliver, and a couple guys from the other team, are playing darts. Off the ice, we are all cool for the most part, though with enough beer in them, and the games they’re playing, it’s possible things might become heated again at some point.

I grab a drink from the bar and watch as Oliver talks to Amelia.

“I need another player—you wanna be on my team, babe?” he asks, and I can tell he already has a couple drinks in him.

“Sure, but only on one condition,” I hear Amelia say.

“What’s that, babe?” Oliver asks.

“Don’t ever call me babe,” Amelia says before grabbing a random shot off the table and downing it.

“Hey, that was my tequila shot,” Oliver says, but he laughs and hands her a few darts.

They begin playing as I try to ignore what’s going on over there. In exchange, I find a

few of the guys sitting at the bar. Luca is nowhere to be seen, but Benjamin is there with his black eye, and Vaughn is sitting next to him, both with a glass of what I assume is whiskey.

“You’re drinking beer?” Vaughn asks me as I sit and sip my drink.

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?” I ask.

“Tastes like piss water,” he answers as he takes a long pull from his own amber liquid.

“Have you had that much experience drinking piss water to know what it tastes like?” I counter, causing Benjamin to spit his drink all over the bartender who has just walked up.

“Oh shit, I’m sorry, man,” Ben says to man I can only assume is Ted of Ted’s bar.

“Don’t worry, happens more than you might think,” Ted answers.

I glance at his nametag...it does indeed say Ted.

“Yeah man, piss water. Beer—that’s what it smells like it would taste like,” Vaughn picks up where he left off like the bartender wasn’t just sprayed with Ben’s mouth liquor.

“Woohoo!” a cheer erupts from over at the dart game and we all turn to see Amelia annihilating Oliver at darts.

The few other wives and girlfriends of the players that are here have gathered to watch them play. Even the ladies belonging to the guys on the other team have joined in on the show.

I thought Amelia was supposed to be on Oliver's team, but now it looks like they're going head-to-head.

I continue to watch as they each take turns throwing three darts at the board. Amelia hasn't hit the bullseye yet but has come far closer than Oliver to hitting it.

One of the wives has taken to keeping score. I ignore both Vaughn and Benjamin as Oliver lines up to throw his first dart of the round...his are blue, hers red.

He throws the first, holding a beer in his left hand as he does. It soars through the air and smacks the outer rim of the dartboard.

"Ohhh," the crowd that has formed boos Oliver.

I can't help but smile as I get up from the stool I've been sitting on and make my way over to watch. Half the bar is focusing on their game.

"Ten bucks on the bombshell," one of the guys from the other team shouts to the man standing next to him.

"I'll get in on that," another man says, and before my eyes, money is being passed around.

Seems so silly to bet on a game of darts in a bar, but if these guys want to drink through the night, they have to make money somehow.

The bets usually start later in the night when some of the guys are running low on cash. Usually in the form of arm wrestling or hockey trivia...never this.

Oliver releases his second dart, and it hits right on the rim of the center bullseye.

“Yeah!” he cheers as he throws his hands in the air, sending a slosh of beer to rain down to the ground. “Oh shit, sorry, man,” Oliver says half-heartedly toward the bartender.

“Dumb luck,” Amelia says, and something squeezes inside me at how stunning she looks tonight. She’s so...relaxed, and it’s a good look on her.

Oliver sizes up the dartboard and squares his shoulders for his last throw. He mimics the pros you see on TV.

Finally, he releases the dart, and it hits DEAD CENTER.

The crowd hoots and hollers just like we were doing in the height of the game. This time, both teams are cheering together. I think it’s great when the guys from the other team decide to stay over and hang out...we all play the same game after all.

Amelia squares her shoulders and aims her first dart. The crowd goes wild as it skims the second dart Oliver threw, right on the rim of the inner bullseye. It’s a smart and calculated throw...at least I think so. When she tosses the second dart, and it lands nestled against his third dart in the middle...I know for sure she’s playing this game with skill.

I watch as the entire group essentially holds their breaths as she aims, breathes, and releases her third dart. It hits the butt of Oliver’s dart in dead center...and sticks, protruding from his blue dart. In fact, it has driven into the plastic of the dart beneath it.

The group goes crazy as money is redistributed appropriately, marking Amelia’s win.

“Wait, wait, wait, that doesn’t count, it didn’t even hit the board,” Oliver says in protest as he waves a hand at those passing money around.

Amelia sizes him up and then goes over to pluck her dart off the board. She then takes his dart off dead center and pushes it into his hand.

“Okay, watch this,” she says as she aims again, and throws the dart.

It hits dead center where his dart had been—this time there is no denying her skill as everyone breaks out in cheers.

I watch as Felix runs up to Amelia and hoists her up onto his shoulders as they all celebrate. She’s handed a shot and downs it.

My stomach coils with something similar to jealousy as I see Felix set her down and take her hand, leading her over to the pool table.

“Are you just as good at this game, darlin’?” he asks, purring through the alcohol clearly already in his system.

“Now this game,” she says as she picks up a ball from the table and looks at it before putting it back down. “I know nothing about this game.” She smiles at him, and it nearly sets me over the edge.

“I can show you how...give you a few pointers,” Felix says, but I have to look away before she answers.

I make my way over to Oliver who’s now sitting at the bar sulking. I clap him on the back, and he winces as if he’s a whipped pup.

“You sore you lost to a girl?” I tease him as I accept another beer from the bartender.

“Just sore I lost period,” he says as he downs a shot that’s just been set in front of him.

I smile at him as I turn on the stool. I face the pool table, but immediately wish I hadn't. Felix has his arm around Amelia as she leans over the table with the pool cue in her hands. His hands are laid over hers as he teaches her how to shoot. My blood boils, and I can't help but watch every move he's making.

Amelia seems oblivious to the fact that Felix is trying to bait her with his usual tricks. She simply thinks she's being taught how to play pool. I've worked as Felix's wingman enough to know this is his routine...and next he'll be buying her shots.

"Yep, here they come," I mumble under my breath as a tray of shots is carried over to them and slapped down on top of the pool table.

They both stand as they grab a shot and drink before Felix opens his wallet and pays for the drinks. I can't help feeling possessive of her as I get to my feet, leaving the conversation that Benjamin, Vaughn, and Oliver are now having about some defensive maneuver.

I walk over to the pool table, unsure what I'm going to do or say to deflect his attention from her. I cook up an idea as I pull out my phone and hold it up.

"Amelia, can I see you for a sec? My mom has a question about Hayden that I don't know how to answer." I note the time on the phone...it's almost midnight.

"This late?" she squeals as she runs over to me, leaving Felix looking deflated.

I put my arm across her shoulders and lead her over to the other side of the bar.

"What does your mom need?" she asks, true concern lacing her face.

"My mom didn't text me," I admit, but then her face creases with concern and I have to think of something, anything that might help me out here.

“Then why in the world would you lie to me?” she asks, shock creasing her forehead.

“I just...” I mumble a little, sure this is going to sound bad no matter how I deliver it. “Felix is baiting you,” I blurt out.

“Baiting me?” she asks, but now irritation has replaced the confusion.

“I mean, this is his game.” I try to change my wording.

“Teaching me to play pool is a...game?” she asks.

“No, teaching you to play pool while filling you full of drinks he buys you, and putting his hands all over you in the name of being a good coach,” I growl, and I know I sound possessive.

“Oh,” she says, realization on her face. “OH...you’re jealous.”

“I am not,” I bite back. “I just don’t want other guys buying you drinks and putting their hands on you is all. It doesn’t look good, and that’s how I lost my last nanny.”

“Okay, I see how it is. You’re worried about losing your help.” She isn’t mad—she’s laughing at me.

Her laugh starts small and then bubbles up, becoming loud and infectious. I don’t know why she’s laughing, but it makes me smile hearing her do so, and soon I’m joining in.

“Why are we laughing?” I wonder as it dies down a little.

“If you don’t want other guys buying me drinks...then buy me one yourself,” she says as she playfully turns and smacks me with her hair.

She saunters over to the other side of the room and plants her ass in one of the bar stools. Felix has already moved on to someone else. He wraps his arms around the busty blonde who he's now teaching how to play pool.

I roll my eyes as make my way over to where Amelia is sitting, and I take the stool next to her.

"Rum and coke," I say to the bartender, and then point to Amelia. "And whatever the beautiful woman beside me wants."

"I'll take the same," Amelia says, sending me a smile. "See, was that all that hard?"

"No," I grumble, though I'm smiling too.

11

AMELIA

My mind is feeling a little fuzzy as I sip on my drink. I've lost count of how many shots I've had through the night. The only thing I do know is that between the hockey game and the bar, I've had a blast.

It's almost made me forget my true reasons for being here. I know I should be focused on my brother and nothing more than that, but it's hard when I'm having fun with Jackson and his motley crew of friends...of brothers.

He's probably right about Felix—he and his new blonde friend are already entangled in a lip-lock. I roll my eyes as I look back to Jackson.

"I watched your little dart game," he says to me, and I smile at him. "You made a lot of people a lot of money with that game."

"I saw money being passed around but I didn't know they were placing bets." I giggle, flattered to know that people bet on me.

"Turns out no one suspected you would be a pro," he teases, and I blush a little out of habit.

My body heats and I don't know if it's the drink or something else that's causing me to feel this way. Either way, all I can think about is Jackson's lips and how kissable they look. I won't act on that though...not in front of his teammates.

“So, where did you learn to play like that?” he asks, and I stifle a shudder.

“My brother taught me,” I say, but I don’t add anything else.

“That’s great. Not a soul has beat Oliver...ever,” he adds, and I’m glad he hasn’t pushed on the brother topic.

I don’t know what I would say to him if he asked me about my brother. I can’t just say, Oh, you know who he is, you may have killed him, but I don’t know. I’m actually infiltrating your life to prove my theory, but you used to be rivals and he might have been screwing your wife.

I hate the position I’m in—my mind wants me to hate this guy, but my heart and certainly my body are screaming at me to jump him.

“I’m happy to be of some help where beating Oliver is involved,” I say as I glance over to where Oliver is sitting. He’s asleep with his head down on the bar.

I giggle.

“Do you want another drink?” Jackson asks me, pointing to my empty glass.

“I’d take a shot or two,” I say, sending my glass into his hand with a little slide across the bar.

“Eight shots of whatever’s handy,” he says to the bartender, and I gulp.

“I hope you don’t think those are all for me—I’d be swimming by the end of the night,” I giggle, leaning forward a little.

Our arms brush and it sends electricity through me. I can see the look in his eyes as

he too leans in a little, but then pulls back as if suddenly remembering we're in a room full of people.

"Four for me, four for you," he teases as he lowers his hand to the bar and lets the tips of his fingers caress mine.

It's an innocent touch, one that most people wouldn't recognize as anything, but it's enough to set me on fire. My gut twists with want and longing as I think about what it would be like to be with him out in the open. Could that ever be possible?

Before I can think too much on the subject, four shots of rum are sat in front of me, and four in front of him...no chasers. I lock eyes with him as if setting a challenge.

I pick up the first one and he does the same as we continue to lock eyes. We both down the contents at the same time, and I reach for the second at the same time he does. I smile as my head swims a little, but at the same time, we down another shot.

Cheers erupt from around us as I realize we've drawn a small crowd, everyone watching as we pick up our third shots and top those back as well.

Somehow as we reach for our fourth, two more shots each are sat in front of us and I see Felix paying for them.

We down the fourth, then the fifth, and by the time we get to our sixth, two more each have been put down. This time Benjamin and Vaughn are splitting the payment for the new shots.

I down this new one and have to pause a moment to adjust to the new taste of vodka. When did we switch?

The group keeps buying and adding to the shots. The determined look on Jackson's

face tells me I'll likely throw up before he gives up. Shots nine and ten go down smoothly, but by number twelve, I'm almost done.

The sheer number of shots that are gathering on the bar in front of us is crazy.

"Do you give up?" he asks me as he shoots down his fifteenth or sixteenth.

"No way." I pick up another and shoot it back...tequila.

I don't know if it's the mix of alcohol or what, but I am beginning to feel the effects hard. I get about half the tequila down as Jackson shoots two more at the same time.

"Give," I say as I slam the half-drunk shot down on the counter and throw my hands in the air. "You win!" I shout as we both start to laugh.

The crowd cheers, and people start to grab the remaining shots off the bar and down them. All the while my eyes are locked in Jackson.

I can hold my alcohol, but apparently so can he. My heart skips a beat as he moves his hand to fully cover mine now. I don't know what he's thinking, but my head swims with the knowledge that a public display of affection is a bad idea.

I stiffen a little as he leans forward, but as our lips meet, I relax into it, allowing him to scoot off his stool and stand between my thighs.

More cheers ring from the crowd at seeing us kiss, and a few of the guys slap Jackson on the back, and ass, sending him jolting into me enough that I can feel just how aroused he is through my jeans...and his.

I know I need to stop this. I am here doing this damn thing for a reason, but right now, my heart, mind, and body have forgotten what and why that might be. I don't

know if I care right now either.

Twenty minutes later, we're crashing into the door of the hotel room we just rented. It's directly across from the bar and a convenient walk for anyone who has drunk too much.

The door slams behind us, perhaps a little too loudly as my legs wrap around him and we press against the wall. My body is hot and fuzzy, but it only fuels my want for him...no, my need for him.

We continue to kiss one another, Jackson nipping at my neck as I lean into the wall. His hands skim under the hem of my shirt, and I can feel our skin-on-skin contact like it's a host of fireworks.

"Jackson," I breathe through our kiss. I feel his fingers skid higher as he uses the wall to hold me up. They slide up my shirt until his palms rest on my breasts. He's pleasantly surprised by how easy it is to get under my bra, and my nipples harden at his touch.

My legs tighten around him as his mouth trails down my cleavage and I arch my head to where it presses into the wall. My breasts heave closer to his face, and he leans down to the top of my breasts and kisses each one.

I pull my fingers free of his hair and grab the hem of my shirt, pulling it up over my head. We both laugh as it gets stuck on the way over and I fight to get it loose.

"I need to use the restroom," I say as I throw my shirt to the ground. "Give me five and I'll be back out."

With a whimper, he lowers me to the ground. It takes me a few minutes to acclimate myself with the hotel suite and find the bathroom. I go inside and blush at how lavish

this place is. This hotel costs nearly as much as a month of rent for my apartment.

I reach down and turn the sink on, splashing water over my face to help calm my nerves. I don't know what has me so hot and flustered. It's not like this is our first time, I just feel different now...more.

Of course it could be the alcohol, but I don't want to admit that to myself.

"Get it together," I tell myself as I grab a towel and dry my face.

Deep down I know what this is all about. I know I'm slowly tearing down Jackson's walls. I like that, but part of me doesn't want to know what I'll see when I get behind them.

I try not to psych myself up in the bathroom too much, feeling a little guilty and shaky because I'm just too damn attracted to him. I'm not supposed to actually like him...am I?

"What's keeping you so long?" he purrs from the other side of the door as he knocks.

My heart skitters as I take my perfume and deodorant out of my bag and apply it. I put my hand up to my mouth and breath into my palm, smelling my breath at the same time.

"Ew," I scowl at myself in the mirror.

I decide not to worry too much about that since we've already been kissing, and I make my way to the door. When I open it, Jackson's sitting on the end of the bed wearing nothing at all, and I run, jumping into his lap, straddling him.

"I seem to be a little overdressed," I say, seconds before our lips meet.

He hoists me up and turns me to lay me down on the bed, and then he snaps my bra open in the back with the use of one hand... one hand!

My heart flails inside me as I feel my breasts break free. With the same hand, he pulls my bra off me and unbuttons my jeans, all in the same no-effort-needed kind of way.

He lays me back and backs off a little, pulling my jeans off, reveling in the fact that I don't have panties on.

"You are so damn beautiful," he says as he crawls over me and leans down, taking my mouth with his.

He trails down my body from my lips to my chin, jaw, chest, and then to my left breast, where he takes my nipple into his mouth, flicking it nimbly with his tongue. He crosses over, kissing a path to where he takes my right nipple in his mouth and does the same.

My hands fist into his hair and I arch at the feeling of his erection at my thigh and the feelings he elicits from me. I feel so free when I'm with him.

"I want you," I moan as he goes down more, kissing just above my navel and then just below.

"You have me," he growls as he kisses at the lowest part of my stomach, falling then to the apex of my thighs. "And I have you," he says eagerly as his lips dip to my molten core. "You're so ready for me." He kisses my wetness, then slides his tongue inside me.

I part my legs even more, letting them fall to the bed on either side of him. He slides his hands under my ass and scoots me closer, lifting me up slightly as he squeezes each cheek.

I fight the urge to lock my thighs around his head, and instead I fist his hair and tug a little, arching my back as he moves. He pulls a hand free and slides it forward until his thumb is pressing against my most sensitive spot, lapping up with his tongue as he moves his thumb in circles.

“Jackson...Jackson...” I breathe, and then I shatter around him.

He looks up and smiles at me as he crawls upward, kissing each spot he had kissed before until our lips meet once again. I can taste myself on him and I moan.

“I could do that forever,” he says between broken kisses.

“I could let you.” I smile as he readies himself over me.

I hold my breath for a moment as he plunges inside. I want him, I want all of him. I reach around him as he lowers his head to my neck, brushing it with his lips as he pushes deeper, thrusting within me, further than before.

I exhale in delight as he moves, flexing his strong arms as he raises up a little to look down at me. I graze my nails along the skin of his back as he pulls almost all the way out, and then enters again...teasingly slow.

“Oh hell, that feels good,” I say as he pulls nearly all the way out again.

This time he thrusts forward, hard and firm and I cry out in delight. He gathers my hands in one of his large ones and pulls my arms above my head, holding me there.

I’m completely at his mercy.

He moves with such ease that our bodies feel like one. I dig my heels into his back as I wrap myself tighter around him.

“Amelia, you feel so fucking good around me,” he says. At those words I explode again, and moments later he does the same.

Panting, he pulls out and lies down beside me. We laugh and breathe as the shots finally kick all the way in. I feel sleep pulling at me, but here, looking at him in this way, I want nothing more than to just talk.

“Did you always want to play hockey?” I ask him.

“Always,” he breathes. “Ever since I saw some boys playing on a chunk of ice when I was only five. I had to know what that game was, and from that moment on, I learned nothing as well as I learned hockey. My parents were just happy I was so invested in something.”

“And it looks like you’ve made good friends,” I say, more as an observation.

“Many of those guys I met when we were younger, and I met my wife the same way,” he admits, but I can tell he wishes he hadn’t said anything like that. “I’m so sorry, Amelia, I shouldn’t have mentioned her like that here with you.”

“No,” I say, finding myself touching his face softly. “Don’t be sorry. She’s a part of your life. She always will be. You can look at your daughter and see her face looking back at you. I don’t mind you mentioning her at all.” I offer him a smile, hoping he believes me. “You should talk about her, it might help...” I pause. “I mean, if you want. I know sometimes it’s better to talk than to keep it all in.”

“She was amazing. I loved her so much. She was a better person than I could ever be. The day she...” He pauses and looks at me as if fighting tears. “The day of the wreck, when I found out she died...I had been so upset that day that she and one of our players weren’t at the game. I was mad at her.”

I fight the gut-twisting feeling at the mention of that player. Preston.

“I’m sure that day left you with so many questions,” I say, hoping it’s the right thing to say.

“Yeah, one more than anything.” He sits up in the bed, pulling his knees to his chest as if he’s deep in thought.

“What’s that?” I ask, sitting up too, putting my arm around him.

“Nothing,” he says darkly.

I know I have to tread lightly here, but I need answers. Now is as good a time as any for this conversation, especially with the influence of the shots and the fact that he’s actually talking right now.

“I heard a rumor...” I say quietly as I rub circles on his back.

“What’s that?” he snaps, suddenly looking me in the eyes sternly.

“I can’t recall where I heard it, but I heard that she wasn’t alone in the accident, is that true?” I ask, hoping I don’t scare him away.

“Yeah,” is all he says, and I don’t know if I should push or not.

“I see,” is all I say, thinking I probably shouldn’t pry much more than that unless he’s willing.

“That player I mentioned,” he snaps with heat in his tone. “They found his fucking wallet in her car, his blood , but they never found his body.” There’s so much anger behind his words.

I fight the need to recoil. I don't know what to say to him, but something tells me...he knows more than he's saying. He's involved with my brother's death.

I know it.

I wait until Jackson falls asleep, and I slip out of bed, finding my clothes strewn about. I put them on as best I can in the dark and make my way out the door, being sure not to slam it on the way out.

I left a note hoping it will work to cover my tracks, but at this point I think I have all the information I need.

Jackson,

I got a call from a friend who needs my help. I left early, hope that's okay. I had a great time with you last night. Let's do it again sometime. See you soon.

Amelia.

In no time, I'm home. I walked, which in the dark wasn't the best idea, but I had to get there. Once I spill into the house, I head straight for the shower to scrub off the lingering feel of Jackson and the fact that I feel dirty for what I've done.

Once I get out of the shower, I dress and fall into bed. I'm exhausted and feel sleep tugging at me right away.

Jackson walks toward me. Heat grows between us as our lips meet. I think about the fact that I don't need to be doing this, but I want to. Oh, how I want to.

I wrap my legs around him and he throws me onto the bed. His actions are passionate and kind at first, but as the heat pools inside me, he becomes rough.

“Jackson, stop!” I yell at him as he leans down and bites my lower lip hard.

“I won’t stop until you’re dead too,” he says as he forces my hands above my head and pinches the inside of my thigh...hard.

“Get off me,” I say, but a sob of fear racks me. “My parents have already lost one child—they don’t need to lose a second.”

Jackson looks at me, and then pushes my head to the side so I’m looking at a video playing on the wall. His hands hold my head still so I can’t look away.

A car crashes.

A beautiful woman is bent at odd angles, but then there’s my brother. He’s alive, screaming for the woman to respond to him, but then a hand reaches in and grabs him.

He’s bleeding bad.

A thudding sound occurs off camera and then the film cuts to the side where Jackson is dragging my brother’s dead body through the woods.

I shoot up in bed. It was just a dream...more like a nightmare.

I realize it isn’t the dream that has woken me up so much as it is my phone notifying me of an incoming video call. I pick up my phone, half expecting it to be Jackson who has noticed I’m gone.

I don’t know if I can talk to him right now, especially with the tremors that are still running through my body. When I look at the screen, I’m only slightly relieved to see it’s my parents.

I sit up in bed and hit the answer button.

“Hey, guys,” I say as both their faces come into view.

I hope they can’t tell I just woke up in fear.

“Amelia,” my father says, but he sounds annoyed.

“What’s up, Daddy?” I ask him, trying not to look visibly shaken, or hungover, which I am most definitely.

“Your father thinks it’s time you come home,” my mom says, but I can tell she’s answering because my father seems to be annoyed.

“Mom, I—” I begin, but my father cuts me off.

“Amelia, we let you run off to Europe, and even chase this wild dream that you can solve your brother’s disappearance?—”

“Death,” I correct him before he can continue.

“Disappearance,” he corrects me in return. “You are what? A nanny now? You need to pack your things and get home so you can get on with real life...in the real world. Not in some delusional fairy tale where you find your brother’s killer.”

“I’ll come home soon,” I say, trying to soothe his mood.

“No! Now!” he bellows.

“Now, dear, don’t be getting too upset,” my mother soothes him before turning to me.

“We’ll give you two more months, but if you don’t have any more proof of your

brother's whereabouts, we will come and get you personally."

"I'm an adult, Mom, you can't just—" I begin, but before I can say any more, the call ends.

I draw my knees up to my chest, fighting my emotions, but like it or not...the tears come tumbling down.

12

JACKSON

I take a swig of my cold beer as I catch sight of the replays from last week's game, on repeat on the screen across the room. It's a goal I made that drew a lot of attention due to it being a pinch play. It wasn't a bad play if I say so myself, but I am a bit biased where that's concerned.

It's been two weeks since the night at the bar and afterparty with Amelia at the hotel. She left that morning, sending mixed signals, but ever since then things have seemed alright between us. I hope like hell that talking about my wife didn't throw her off, but she was the one who encouraged me to talk about her.

But overall, nothing has seemed off between us, so I've allowed myself to believe the conversation did nothing to offend her, and truth be told, it helped me out a lot. I don't know if I'm willing to admit that to anyone, but it was nice to talk about Lyla and not feel like I have to keep her memory all bottled up.

It did strike me as odd, however, that she had heard rumors about Preston being in the car. Not that she knows who it was—or even who Preston was to my knowledge—but it still seems odd that someone told her. I make a mental note to ask her about it next time the conversation presents itself.

Of course, we haven't slept together since that night, but the time we have spent together with along with Hayden has been nice. I'm sitting at a bar and grill, waiting to have lunch with a few of the guys. We meet up every now and again, and recently

I've enjoyed my time with them where before I was avoiding going out with them like the plague.

I tear my eyes from the screen just in time to see Oliver and Felix coming in the door. I smile at them as they sit down and place their orders. I already have my cheeseburger and fries ordered. This place has the best burgers.

"Hey, guys," I say as I wave over Vaughn and Benjamin who are joined at the hip these days it seems.

In no time, our food is coming out to the table and more beers have been dropped off. It's the middle of the day, so none of us will drink much, but it's good to have a cold beer every now and again.

I'm enjoying my burger as I keep looking back and forth between the television with the game on it and the guys who seem to be enjoying their food just as much as I am. Between bites, Oliver and Felix are talking over some strategies for the next game while Vaughn and Benjamin are both on their phones.

I listen in as Oliver suggests we implement plays specifically against the goalie of the team we'll be facing in the next game. It turns out he's a bit of a sieve. It's easy to play against goalies who leave a lot of holes in their play in which to score. I worry that the other team is gonna catch onto that kind of strategy, but I don't say anything. It's really the only plan we have, since the team is rather good...all but their goalie—Sven.

I continue to eat, mostly listening since I haven't been much of a talker as of late. Of course, I have my reasons, but then again, maybe I should talk more...as Amelia said, talking about things and getting them out in the open can help.

"So, man, what's up with you and Amelia?" Ben asks without even looking up from

his phone, as if he can hear me thinking about her.

I smile and shake my head. I don't know if this is the kind of conversation I want to be having with them, but somehow I knew it would only be a matter of time before it came up.

"What do you mean?" I ask, trying to figure out how much they saw that night at the bar.

Truth be told, I've thought about it a lot, but I wouldn't change a second of that night. Apart from the part where I woke up alone, though it seemed to me that she had a good enough excuse to head out early.

"Come on, we all saw you two going shot for shot, and how you bolted once things got hot and heavy after." Vaughn smiles up from his phone. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what ya'll left to do," he adds with a mischievous grin.

I frown as I take a sip from my drink, trying to think of something, anything to say that might divert the conversation. I think about what might get the guys talking the most. Hockey is always a safe bet with us, so I give it a go.

"Hey, did you guys check out that hat trick the right wing from The Avalanche played in last night's game?" I ask, trying to draw Oliver and Felix's attention to the conversation. "I can't believe they traded Owens for Donahue this season," I add, trying to goad Oliver into a rampage about how Donahue is the better goalie.

I know he has strong opinions on the matter, but I don't know if he'll take the bait now that the subject of Amelia has come up. And of course I couldn't be so lucky.

"Not a chance, man." Vaughn smirks. "You're not getting off on this conversation that easy, Jackson."

“What conversation?” Oliver asks, as if just now noticing another conversation has been going on, pulling his attention away from hockey for the moment.

Damn...he did miss the bait altogether. I consider bringing up Donahue again, but I know Vaughn won't let that slide.

“Oh, we were just asking Ol' Jacksy-Boy here about his relationship with one hot nanny who works for him.” Ben nudges me in the side playfully.

The one thing I like about my friends is that they're always good at making me smile.

“Oh yeah, I've been meaning to ask you that myself,” Felix says with a smirk that suggests he has been wondering too.

“There is no relationship,” I say, and truthfully, there isn't. “There's nothing really to talk about. I had fun with her that night at the bar, but she is my nanny...well, Hayden's nanny.” I smile the biggest smile I have in a long time before taking a long sip of my beer in the hopes they don't ask anything else.

The thought of a relationship scares the hell out of me if I'm being honest with myself. I haven't wanted one since losing my wife, and even though Amelia and I have had a few wonderful moments together, that doesn't mean we're together or ever will be.

I don't even know if that's something she would want, but the more I think about it, the more I wonder if this perhaps could be something I want at some point. I just don't know my own feelings well enough to know for sure. I haven't let myself feel anything for so long that it's foreign to me.

“You know,” Felix says, his voice soft this time. “Your wife was an amazing woman, and she loved you, but she would want you to be happy, no matter what that means.”

I'm a little taken aback at how well these guys know me. They would never be mean or hateful about any of it, but they have to know that deep down Lyla is on my mind. She's always on my mind, just a little less as time slips by.

"I know." I frown at him, but not in a way that means I'm angry—I'm just confused is all. "Well, I think I'm going to get out of here. Hayden is expecting me home," I say, and for the most part, it isn't a lie.

"Alright, man," Oliver says, as they all four begin slapping their portion of money for the bill down on the table. "Let's walk out together."

I nod and once the tab is paid and our food is put into boxes, we head toward the door.

"No, but seriously, man," Oliver pipes up as we walk out of the building together. "What do you think about that trade with The Avalanche? I mean, have you ever seen such a colossal mistake? That guy doesn't even know what a dump and chase is." He chuckles.

"Oh, here we go again." Felix rolls his eyes, walking on the other side of Oliver.

I have to laugh a little, wondering if Oliver had in fact heard me back there when I was trying to change the subject and just refused to take the bait. He's such an ass sometimes, but I do love his crazy ways. Oliver is always good at interjecting when it's best for him. He's such a good guy, our comedic relief most of the time, but the expression on his face makes me think that he knew exactly what I was talking about back there.

He just wanted me to squirm at Vaughn and Benjamin's questioning. He gives me a smirk as we go, and I can't help but give him one in return.

Vaughn and Ben have just gotten into an Uber in front of the pub, despite multiple offers by Oliver to take them home on his bike. Oliver doesn't do well alone on his bike, let alone with passengers. Of course, none of us are going to tell him that and we would never hurt his feelings that way, but it's an unspoken vow between all of us to stay off the back of his motorcycle.

There isn't enough money in the world that would get me on that thing with him. I wouldn't have even done it when we were younger, and I did a lot of crazy shit back then.

He bounces back and forth from one foot to another as if he's an anxious pup. I always find his brand of energy kind of amusing and exciting—it's what makes him such a good hockey player. I decide to answer him before he explodes as the subject hangs in the air.

"I mean, did you know what it was when you first got into the game? They say that guy is new, a baby," I add, as we head toward our cars. "A dump and chase, I mean?"

"Yeah, I guess, but even I knew back then when I was a baby, that a dump and chase is an offensive play used to master the puck into the opposing team's zone." He rolls his eyes.

"You're a mess." I smile as I stop in front of his motorcycle and look it over.

His bike is one of those expensive ones that he saved for a long time to buy. There are more custom gadgets on this bike than there are on the ice rink. He's so proud of this thing, but all I see is an intimidating piece of machinery.

"You wouldn't know what to do with me if I was any other way," he says. And he's right—life would be boring if Oliver was normal.

“This is true.” I smile. “But you better get home before you have a heart attack over a dump and chase,” I say to him as he climbs onto his motorcycle and sets it into motion, leaving me and Felix standing in the parking lot.

“Sorry about all the Q&A in there with the guys,” Felix says as he pats my back hard and leans up against his car.

“It’s okay, I just don’t know what I should feel and all that shit,” I admit.

“I just know that, from my standpoint—and you know I have been your friend for years—” Felix adjusts his stance and continues, “The way you look at her, and the way she looks at you...there’s no way that you two are just fucking one another,” he adds with a cool but sly look on his face.

“I don’t know, man.” I really don’t know what else to say.

“What is there not to know?” he wonders out loud.

In a way, I wish I was more like him. Felix seems to know what he wants and has more courage than I do. Of course, my trauma seems to play a huge part in how I respond to things, but I think Amelia could actually have a good chance of breaking those walls down inside of me. If I let her. I shake my head, trying to think of exactly what to say. Being vulnerable with the guys is difficult enough, but I see it coming a mile away.

Most of the reason I’ve avoided spending time with them is that I haven’t really been willing to talk just yet. Perhaps it’s what’s needed, just like Amelia said. There aren’t many of the guys I would open up to just like this, but this small group, they’re my brothers.

“Like I said, for now, I don’t know that anything more is possible. I still have way too

much trauma from my wife's death...I've never really worked it all out," I admit.

"No one expects you to." Felix nods at me. "You'll never forget the love you had... have for Lyla. Amelia won't expect you too either, or whoever you end up with in the long run. Hayden is always going to remind you of her mother, and no matter who's at your side, Lyla will always be with you."

I nod as a tear threatens to fall. I don't cry...haven't really cried since Lyla died. I don't know what it is about my best friend being real with me like this, but it hurts in all the right ways. As much as I'm sure that I need this, I'm also sure that Felix is the only one of my brothers who can talk to me the way he just did and I'll believe it.

"I'll think about it," I promise as I stand taller. "Thanks for talking to me like this," I add, hoping he knows how much I appreciate it.

"No problem at all." He beams as he runs a hand through his unruly hair, then brings his arm back down to look at his watch. "Oh shit, I have to head. I'm gonna be late for a thing."

"Alright...have fun with your thing," I say, knowing damn well he has a date. "See ya, man." I reach my fist up to meet his in the air that hangs between us.

"See ya," he says as he climbs into his car.

I turn and get into my own vehicle as thoughts of our conversation pour over me. It's hard to keep the thoughts away, since now that I'm alone they are so loud...oh, so loud.

I don't want to just be using Amelia for sex and a glorified babysitter. I do feel more for her than I ever thought I would feel for a woman again. Felix is right—Lyla would want me to be happy. Up until now, I didn't think about what it would mean to

actually be happy again.

Hayden has been my only true focus...the only person I've really cared about.

I love my daughter and she makes me happier than anything, and the guys do too, but somehow, when I think about being truly happy again, the only person who comes to mind is Amelia.

As I drive home, I weigh the pros and cons of a real relationship with her. I don't know why I do this—it just seems like something you do when considering something that might change your life. At least that's how you see it being done in all the TV shows and movies.

The pros...she is amazing with Hayden, she loves hockey, she loves spending time with me. She's a decent cook and knows how to stand up for herself. She's fierce and loving in a way I haven't seen anyone be before...and so much more. To me, that list of pros means everything. I like who she is with my daughter, with me, and around my friends...I just don't know if that's enough to build a relationship off of.

The cons...well, there aren't any. Not that I can think of, because to me, she is perfect. I may not know everything there is to know about her, but I want to. I want to wake up every day geared and ready to learn more. I think the only con I can possibly think of is that we haven't had enough time together, but that can easily be remedied.

The biggest thing that attracts me to her is the fact that she's great with Hayden. Hayden hasn't taken to another woman like she has to Amelia. She is sweet as can be and is overall a great person. I don't know another woman like her, let alone one who would care enough to love and care for Hayden in the way that Amelia does. It might be easy to argue that she only does so because she's being paid to, but that simply isn't true.

I've seen them together, and even during times when Amelia is off the clock, she still makes sure that Hayden is cared for and happy.

I still feel like there's more about her that I need to know, but...I haven't really exposed all of myself to her either. There's far too much about myself to unpack, and I don't know if I'll ever be ready to do that. Something about the thought of being with someone after Lyla gives me hope, however...hope that no matter what, I can be the man I need to be for Hayden and for her.

Amelia is exactly the kind of person I can see myself with. I just didn't think I was ready until now. Sure, I'm not sure that I am really ready...even now. But deep down, I can feel Lyla with me, and I know she would be urging me to be happy, to do this for our daughter, and for myself.

Feeling my wife with me only makes me more sure that this is the right thing to do. I smile as I pull into the driveway. So many emotions are coursing through me right now, none of which I can recall ever feeling before.

I walk into the house with a pep to my step that wasn't there when I left for lunch. The house is abnormally quiet and calm, and I look at my watch to see that Hayden is likely down for a nap. I wonder where Amelia is.

I look through the living room and pass my study, eventually hearing soft singing coming from the kitchen. I smile as I round the corner and see her dancing to "Oops I did it Again" playing softly from the speaker on her phone. I lean against the doorway and watch her shake her hips back and forth while she wipes down the counter.

She's so sexy, but at the same time she looks effortless, like she doesn't have to try hard to be amazing...she just is. My heart thuds in my chest, and parts of me begin to coil tight with longing. The effects are even worse given the adrenaline of what I

think I'm ready to do...no, I'm sure of it.

Remnants of the lunch she made for Hayden are still on the stove, though I'm sure soon enough she'll get to those as well. I don't say anything as I watch her. There's a grace and carefree nature to what she's doing. She's a vision in her leggings and oversized sweater.

For the first time, I don't compare her to my wife, and I don't think about all the things I did with Lyla, or how she would have done things differently. Up until now, she has been the standard to which I compared everything to, but now not so much. Yes, she was my wife and I love her very much to this day, but the guys are right—life does go on, and now I'm finally sure that I want it to.

Perhaps my standards have changed, and now the measurable force that drives me forward is Amelia.

I finally join her, putting my hands on her hips and causing her to jump a little. I sway back and forth with her to the remainder of the music, and she turns and dances with me a little.

The song switches to another, and instead of backing away, she continues to sway with me back and forth. This feels so...normal. The word relationship continues to flash before my eyes, a word I never thought I would use again. But here I am, thinking about it repetitively.

Once the song ends, she moves away a little, throwing the towel over her shoulder. She walks over to the stove and starts cleaning up from lunch, not wondering what prompted this impromptu dance session in the kitchen. The smile on her face is what gives me enough courage to say what I have to say.

"Is Hayden napping?" I ask.

“Yes.” She nods as she continues to work in the kitchen.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” She turns around and wipes her hands on the towel over her shoulder.

“What’s up?”

“What do you think about us?” I ask her, a lump forming in my throat that I can’t seem to force down no matter how hard I try.

“Us?” she asks. She steps closer to me, but leaves a decent distance between us, as if afraid to get too close.

Hell, I don’t even know if this is a dream or not. It feels like something I would never do or never had plans to do. I hate that I’m so broken that even asking a woman out seems like a sin to me. Perhaps it’s been so long that I don’t remember how to do these things. I guess I’m going to have to learn along the way.

I search for exactly what I want to say. I decide being honest and open with her is the best thing I can do. I know she’ll appreciate it in the long run, and I have less of a chance of running her off...or at least I hope I do.

“Yeah, I mean, I know I talked to you some about my wife the other day, and until now, I haven’t been able to move past that...I’m still probably not past it completely...” I pause, hoping like hell I’m getting my point across. “But you are amazing, and Hayden loves you, and let’s face it, she hasn’t loved anyone besides me since Lyla passed.”

I pause a moment, trying to judge her expression. At this point, I feel like I’m rambling, but it’s all things I feel like I have to say to her to express exactly how I’m feeling.

“Jackson, what are you saying?” she asks with her hand to her chest, and now I know that I was rambling for sure.

I need to tell her everything...exactly what I’m feeling and what I think of her.

“I’m saying that despite how much we still have to learn about one another, and how messed up I still am and likely will be over things in my past, I care for you, and because of that...I would really like to have an official relationship with you...if that’s something you’re open to?”

She pauses in her tracks and looks at me as if I’ve grown a second head, and I wonder if perhaps I shouldn’t have said anything. When she continues to look at me, not saying anything, I’m sure I shouldn’t have.

But there is no taking it back...unfortunately.

13

AMELIA

My heart thuds as if it might fall into my stomach. I don't know what to say, so I just look at Jackson in shock. I've thought about this a lot recently, but I never once thought he would be the one to initiate this conversation...if a conversation was to ever be had.

I try hard to find the words to say, but nothing is coming out fast enough. The look on his face worries me—like he's maybe wishing he hadn't said anything at all. But I'm so happy he has, and as soon as I find the courage to say something...anything...I'm going to let him know exactly that.

I start with a simple nod...it's all I can manage to do as he continues to look at me with a deep gaze that penetrates my soul.

"Say something," he breathes, and my heart suddenly remembers how to work, though it's still beating out of rhythm.

"Oh, Jackson, I'm sorry, I—" I begin.

"I knew I shouldn't have said anything," he interrupts me. "I'm sorry, let's just pretend I didn't and move on."

I shake my head, trying to get him to stop. I need to get him to calm down long enough for me to explain.

“No, wait—” I step forward and put my hand on his upper arm...his muscle quivering under my touch. “I was trying to say that I’m sorry I didn’t say anything right away. You caught me off guard is all.”

“I guess I’m good at doing that,” he says, putting his hand over my hand that’s still on his arm. “Sorry,” he adds.

My heart skips a beat, and I smile at him as he touches me tenderly. I’m still shocked and happy all at the same time.

Is this the right thing? I have to remember why I’m here. It was never about being with him, though maybe I should have thought of that before sleeping with him.

I want this, though. I know I do. I care for Jackson, I care for Hayden, and I love his life...I just wish my brother was here to see it all. My gut twists as I blurt out my answer despite my better judgment.

“Yes.” I smile at him. “Jackson, I would love to be in a relationship with you. To be able to tell people that we’re...more. To be yours at the games and with your friends...I want this as much as you do.” I pause for a moment. “Maybe even more.” A tear trails down my cheek.

“Are you sure, Amelia?” he asks softly as he closes the distance between us, allowing his finger and thumb to trail down my cheek and under my jaw, sending shivers down my spine.

“Yes,” I breathe, moments before our lips touch, soft at first, but then harder.

Soon the kiss becomes desperate and needy as heat floods me to my center, threatening to spew out like lava.

I feel his hand slip up my back and into my hair, his fingers trailing up the top of my neck and over the back of my head. More chills fill my body as my mind tries to remind me of the red flags.

“Hayden is going to be so happy,” he says as he pulls back from our kiss a little to look me in the eye.

“You think so?”

“That kid loves you, Amelia,” he says softly, taking my face in his hands and tilting my head to look up at him. “I meant what I said about her not getting close to anyone. Even the guys and their wives...all of them. She’s known them since she was born and ever since the accident, even though she was so young, she just hasn’t taken to anyone like you.”

More tears are falling as I struggle for words. All the layers of this man are beginning to fall away. First, he talked to me about his wife, and now he’s admitting that Hayden cares so much for me. I want to be happy—I want to allow this to be good, but even as my heart pounds for him and my body needs him in every way imaginable, my brain is still trying to make me see reason.

How could Jackson have anything to do with my brother’s death?

I don’t say anything else as his lips brush mine again. All my reservations crumble as I melt into him.

His body tenses as he pushes me a little until my back rests against the countertop. The towel from my shoulder falls to the ground with a light whoosh sound and I giggle, a true and happy kind of giggle.

“Damn, how I love your laugh,” he says to me through kisses.

I giggle again like a schoolgirl because my body seems to think that's all I can do under his touch. Something about him makes me feel so good.

He moves his hand from the back of my head, letting it trail down my neck, between my shoulder blades, and down my spine, sending tingles through me and making my mind spiral. His fingers brush down, down, down, down, until they tap the top of my tailbone teasingly. I jolt forward a little, as if my body not only wants his touch but is welcoming it with open arms.

“What about Hayden?” I wonder as he kisses my lower lip.

“She's asleep, isn't she?” he asks with a teasing grin on his face.

“Yeah...for now,” I say teasingly.

“There you have it,” he says, moving his fingers under my waistband at the back of my leggings.

His fingers brush my bare skin, sending lightning through me. The tingles that were there moments ago have turned into a forest fire of want and desire as they coil in the lowest pit of my stomach.

I reach up and brush the stubble on his chin. I hadn't noticed that he seems to be growing it out a little, and it makes his already insanely hot features even more intensely sexy, if that's even possible. My thumb trails down his chin, resting on his Adam's apple as I press in a little, letting my fingers wrap around the side of his neck with the passion that flows through me.

I pull myself closer to him as my lips part, making way for his tongue to enter my mouth. I let my hand slip around his neck, cupping the back of his head and pulling him closer still. I let my fingers twine through his locks.

In this moment, everything feels right. I've forgotten the real reason I'm here, and I've shut down the part of my mind that's screaming that I'm betraying my brother...no, this is so much bigger than all that.

His hand, now resting on my bare ass, slips further down until his he's kneading my flesh, sending more than lightning through me. Oh, how I love this, and yet I hate it at the exact same time. What is he doing to me, and what did I just agree to?

"Jackson," I breathe through uneven breaths...but I don't remember what I was going to say.

Using his free hand, he skims the hem of my sweater, sensual in all the right ways. I don't remember ever feeling this when we slept together before. There's just something about the unadulterated lust flowing through me, mixed with need, and the fact that I am his . It makes everything more intense.

Jackson's fingers skim up my side, over my rib cage, his thumb hooked in the fabric of my shirt, bringing it up my body. I snake my free hand around to the small of his back and press my breasts against his chest, my nipples growing harder and tighter.

Jackson leaves my flesh alone for the moment to tug my shirt up over my head. Apparently pleased to find I don't have a bra beneath all that cotton, he smiles at me mischievously, and in one quick motion he lifts me so I'm sitting on the lip of the counter.

He steps closer, closing the gap, and again I feel his hardness pressing against me, but this time he's pressing against the apex of my thigh, so incredibly close to the spot where I need him the most.

Damn the material that divides us , I think as I fiddle with the hem of his shirt, pulling the white T-shirt up and over his head, revealing the most amazing set of abs I have

ever seen. There is literally no one who compares to this.

“You are so beautiful,” he says as he runs his hands up my sides, allowing them to rest on my breasts that are crying out for his touch.

“You,” I breathe for a moment as I try to think of the words to say. “You are perfect for me,” I admit, still forgetting the screaming in my mind that’s currently attempting to override my heart.

I have never let my heart rule my choices, but this feels so right—even if it’s wrong. At this moment, I don’t care that my parents want me home. I don’t care that I’m here for a whole other reason, and I don’t even care that there’s a little girl sleeping upstairs who could wake up and find us in here...though I’m thankful for the monitor that sits on the counter next to us that still gives no indication she’s awake.

I smile through our kiss and push myself off the counter a little, just enough to allow room for him to slide my leggings off. I giggle again as he tickles me and pulls at my lace panties until both leggings and lace hit the ground at his feet.

Using his foot, he scoots them out of the way, and suddenly I realize I am completely bare here on this counter. I smile as I reach down and tug at his sweats. With little to no effort, they fall down, exposing him to me...he was going commando under there.

My body is enthralled as I take him in. He is bared to me and me to him. Something feels different this time, almost as though we’re sealing some sort of deal that we will be together for all the world to see.

Jackson leans in and kisses my jaw, letting his lips slide against my skin until they fall at the hollow of my throat. I tilt my head back, glad for the fact there are no upper cabinets in this part of the kitchen.

I put my hands behind me, resting on my arms as his lips create a line from the center of my neck to the side just above my shoulder. Literal chills course through me as I think about this feeling and how I want to feel it for the rest of my life. There is nothing like feeling his lips and hands on me.

He peppers kisses to my collarbone, and then my right shoulder. Sparks grow in the lowest recesses of my body and I feel as if I'm on fire with need. I throw my head back a little more as his lips skim downward until he licks my skin...the skin between my collarbone and the hardened mound of my left breast.

“Oh God,” I breathe as he sucks my nipple between his lips.

I can feel him smile around me. I moan through the pleasure and a bit of pain as he rolls my nipple between his teeth slightly. Everything about this man rings through my body. He treats me so damn well and is a total gentleman—in every other way and place except in the bedroom, obviously. I don't want him to be a gentleman now...I need the beast inside.

I try not to shatter as his lips fall from my nipple to the top of my stomach as he kisses down—first to the middle of my abdomen, then my belly button. Now, to my lower stomach, right above where my need is the greatest.

He reaches around me and pulls my ass to the edge of the counter, and I lean back a little to brace myself on my hands once again.

My breath hitches as he falls to his knees before me, and I know exactly what he's going to do...and I want it.

Jackson picks up my leg, putting his mouth against the top of my foot. “I want to kiss every inch of you...every inch of what's mine,” he growls with his lips to my skin.

I shiver at his words and his touch, which causes him to smile against me as he kisses up, up, up my leg. First my foot, then my ankle, my calf, the top of my leg just below my knee...my knee. I tense as his lips travel to my thigh, then the inside of my thigh, up to the apex.

The moment his lips touch my heated mound I hiss through my teeth in delight, arching my back a little more, letting my legs fall over his shoulders.

He reaches around me, pulling me closer, but not so much that I'm off the counter as his lips continue to play at the opening of my core until I feel his tongue enter. Just the tip at first, but as I let out a moan, he thrusts his tongue inside me more deeply, alternating with licks up against my sensitive nub.

My throat gets dry, and my heart begins to race as I fall deeper into pleasure. I writhe against him as he bobs his head, kissing and lapping while he clings to my body as if he needs me forever. I fist my hand through his hair once again, knowing that I'm going to come unglued around him at any moment.

Every moment we've spent together like this speeds through my mind. Every sensual, sexy, hot moment we've spent tangled together plays like clips of a movie...a montage of ecstasy as I explode in a mess of pants and ragged breaths.

"I need you," I say as he pulls away and looks up into my eyes from where he still sits on his knees.

He smiles, sending another jolt through me as he stands to his feet. I pull at him, wanting...no needing him to come undone inside me.

His erection is prominent as he stands before me, and I swallow hard at the thought of him inside me again. I tug at his shoulders to bring him even closer. His lips touch mine as his hardness rests against me. I fight the urge to lunge forward, to pull him

against me, into me. I know it's coming, but part of me needs him right this second.

I feel like I'm falling for this man.

Our lips part as he enters me with a thrust of pleasure. I bring my knees up to his rib cage, hooking my ankles at his back where they rest just above his ass. With my heels, I press him tighter to me...into me.

"Oh, baby, you feel so good," he says, moments before our lips meet again and he starts to move against me, slow and steady at first.

I moan against his lips as I wiggle to meet his pace. His muscles are tight, and we're both sweating despite how cool it is in the kitchen. He moves again and I have to lean back, pulling our lips apart. He doesn't seem to mind since he just moves the location of his kisses to the hollow part of my throat again.

"Jackson..." I say, but that's all I can say.

He thrusts again and again as I buck forward, meeting each one of his moves as we cling together in the desperation of the moment until we both shatter at the exact same time.

Once finished, we stay connected, just breathing in the moment and taking in every lasting feeling that seems to be coursing through us. We are one at this moment, and that's all I want.

"I can't believe you said yes," he says as he sets his forehead to mine.

"I can." I smile as we pull apart.

Oddly, my body already craves his touch the moment he leaves me. It's the strangest

thing.

“Amelia,” Hayden’s voice comes from the monitor beside us, soft in the haze of sleep.

We both laugh as Jackson scrambles for his clothes, throwing mine to me at the same time.

“It’s Daddy, I’ll be up there in just a minute, sweetheart,” he says, holding the button on our end so she can hear him.

“Otay, Daddy,” her little voice says softly as I throw my sweater over my head and pull on my panties and leggings.

Somehow, Jackson is already dressed, and I wonder if he has his long hockey career to thank for the swiftness.

We both look at one another with wide eyes, and then break out in hysterical laughter as I reach down and grab the hand towel I ditched on the floor at the start of everything.

I go back to cleaning as Jackson turns to go check on Hayden, though he turns at the last moment and smacks me on the ass before he goes.

“Oh!” I say as I jolt forward, laughing at his antics. I still have a grin on my face as he walks out to go check on the little girl who I’m learning needs me just as much as I need her.

As I clean and sanitize the counter we just had sex on, my rational thought comes back to me slowly. The thoughts I’ve been holding at bay due to my longing for Jackson begin coming back in. I try to push them away, they need to stay away, but

here it is again...the real reason I'm here.

I didn't come here to be a nanny and fall in love with this child. I didn't come here to fall for her father either...the man who's suspect number one in my mind...but I have.

I just don't really believe anymore that he's capable of doing the things I thought... think he did to my brother. I've created a war within myself that I never intended to create.

I just need to figure out what side of the war I'm on...the side where my brain makes sense or the side where my heart wants to win. I'm thinking my heart needs a chance to come out victorious in the end...for once.

14

JACKSON

Practice is intense, but I love it when I get amped up and there isn't even a game. Coach helps so much with the strategies he gives us, but I think my current mood helps the situation too.

Geared up and with my stick in my hand, I skate down the ice between Oliver and Vaughn, toward Felix at the goal on the other side of the ice. Once I get there, Oliver twists, sending the puck toward me. I grab hold of it as I skate at breakneck speed toward the other end of the ice. We're in the middle of a scrimmage between the B team and us. These scrimmages are my favorite. Sure, I like going head-to-head with other teams, but playing with our own guys is so fun.

There's a kind of challenge to it that isn't here during the games, and it's the best way to show who's improved and who hasn't. This is the reason you have a back-up string...that and just in case one of us A team players gets hurt or can't be on the ice for some reason.

It's a little hard to focus after the conversation and celebration Amelia and I had the other day. Things have been so good between us. I don't know that anything could change the way I feel about her. I fight the distraction as I glide down the ice toward the goal.

I smile as I turn to avoid Andrew who's coming my way. I fake left and go right as I spin, our backs nearly touching as I pass. I feel the whoosh of his jersey against mine

as I barely miss him and come out on the other side, still in control of the puck.

Andrew plays the same position as I do, just on the other side. He knows we barely avoided collision back there, but that doesn't stop us. For being on the B team, Andrew is getting better and one day may even be good enough to take my place...if and when I ever decide to retire or be traded.

Not that I ever think that will happen...at least I hope not. Not anytime soon anyway.

I chuckle to myself as I stick the puck and allow it to glide down the ice, but I don't allow it to get out of control, my blades slicing off the cool surface with ease. I get close enough to Collin, their goalie, and pause for a moment, sliding across the ice, spraying bits of shaved ice over my legs.

I can feel the adrenaline running as I stick back, breathing before slapping the stick to the puck, allowing it to sail through the air, past Collin's defense, allowing it to swoosh against the net.

"Damn it," Collin says as he throws his gloves to the ground with a grunt of disappointment. "How is it you're always getting past me?"

I smile broadly at his tantrum, knowing that no matter how good Collin is, Felix will always be better than him. Felix is the best I've ever seen. I know Coach has worked hard to keep him. He's been up for negotiation six times, and every single time, Coach has managed to keep him as ours.

I couldn't imagine any of these guys not being here. Losing Preston nearly killed us as a team, but we got stronger over the past couple of years. We don't need to lose anyone for any reason.

The thought of Preston sends my mind into a whole other realm, and I have to focus

not to go down that rabbit hole.

After a few more plays, Coach calls a break. I skate to the edge of the rink and edge off, removing my skates and some gear before taking a seat on the bleachers. I take a long drink of my water before grabbing my phone to make sure I haven't missed any calls or messages.

I have twelve missed calls and five messages...all from Amelia.

Call me please, it's important, the texts say in various ways, but none of them give any detail as to why.

My heart races as I dial her number and bring my phone up to my ear to wait for her to answer. It takes less than five seconds for her to pick up.

"Jackson," she says, and I can't help but hear a little bit of panic in her voice. I might be reading into the tone a little too much, but it's the way my mind works.

My heart pounds as I wonder what's going on. My mind flashes as I recall the day the officer came in at halftime to let me know Lyla had been in an accident. I don't know why, but the feeling I'm getting right now is not a good one.

"What's wrong, Amelia? Are you alright? Is Hayden okay?" I ramble, turning to the side a little to shield my conversation from the guys who are still spilling off the ice.

"Now, don't freak out, but I am at the hospital with Hayden," she says. There's a softness to her voice, as if she's trying not to make a big deal out of the situation.

"What?" I stand up, panic filling me. "What's wrong?" I demand, a little louder than I mean to.

“Jackson, calm down, baby,” she says, but it does little to calm me. “We were in the back yard playing like usual, just about to go in for lunch when it started to rain. We were running and Hayden slipped on the wet grass going onto the concrete leading up to the back door.”

“Oh my God...is she conscious?” I ask, fighting to get the rest of my gear off so I can go to her, drawing the attention of Coach and the guys. “How hard did she hit?”

“Yes, she’s fine,” Amelia says with a small laugh. “She didn’t hit her head or anything. We’re waiting for the X-ray results to come back, but she hurt her arm.”

Something snaps in me, and I’m suddenly mad that this has happened. I know accidents happen, but sometimes those accidents claim lives.

“I’m leaving, Coach,” I say as I pass by, dragging my equipment with me. “Amelia has Hayden at the hospital, and I need to go.”

“Okay, Jackson, be careful,” Coach says, worry laced in his voice. “Drive the speed limit and get back to us in one piece.”

I nod, because that’s all I can manage.

“Oh my God, man, is everything okay?” I hear Felix ask as I pass, but I don’t say anything, I simply nod. “Jackson...you okay?” I hear, but I ignore him completely as I go.

“Jackson—” Amelia’s voice catches my attention from the other end of the phone. “Jackson, baby,” she calls again, but my heart is beating too hard for me to register what she’s saying.

“I’m on my way,” I say with a tense tone to my voice. “According to my phone, I’ll

be there in less than ten minutes.”

“Jackson,” she says again calmly, “I have things handled from this end. You don’t have to leave practice if you don’t want to. There’s nothing to worry about until the X-rays come back, and that might be an hour yet...you know how long these things take. They have her comfortable, and we’re really just sitting here watching My Little Pony .”

“Amelia, this seems a little more serious than My Little Pony ,” I find myself saying as I head into the locker room and start distributing my stuff as fast as I can.

I pull on a T-shirt and sweats, followed by my tennis shoes, then grab my keys and head to the door. My mind is in a million dark places.

“I really do have this handled,” she says softly.

I’m not hearing her, though. Parts of me want to believe what she’s saying, but I’m finding it near impossible.

I see red—I can’t understand why she’s trying to tell me not to come be with my daughter. A part of me knows she’s just being nice...she knows how important practice is right now with the playoffs to consider, but still, I’m irritated.

“You are not her mother,” I find myself spouting. “I am her parent, and I need to be the one there with her, so I’m coming,” I growl. “See you soon.”

“Understood, see you soon,” she says, and I can tell she’s hurt.

She hangs up before I can make things right with her.

I head out to my vehicle. That was not at all what I meant to say to her. No, she’s not

Lyla, but in a way, she's just as important to Hayden. When Amelia came on as nanny, I filled out the paperwork to allow Amelia to seek treatment for Hayden if and when it might be needed...exactly for this type of situation.

On the way to the hospital, my worry for my daughter fades a little. She might have a hurt arm, which will mend, but she's okay. I've made an ass out of myself over something so small, something that stirred up memories of something bigger in me that Amelia was not involved in.

I know I sounded so callous, and she must hate me now because of it. I hope I can make things right with her. I would never want her to feel like she isn't important enough to take care of a child who means so much to both of us.

As soon as I walk into the hospital, I ask the lady at the desk where Amelia and Hayden are. She points me in the right direction, and I'm rounding the corner to the room in moments.

Sure enough, Hayden is sitting up in the bed, legs crisscrossed, watching My Little Pony . Amelia is sitting behind her in the bed, her legs thrown on either side of her. Hayden's back is resting against Amelia's chest.

They look so relaxed as they watch TV together. Hayden's arm is covered in cloth and ice as it rests on a pillow over her legs.

"Daddy!" she squeals as she sees me standing at the door.

"Hi, baby." I go over and drag a chair up beside the bed.

"Do you want to sit here with her?" Amelia asks as she goes to move out from behind Hayden.

The hurt in her eyes is more than I can bear. I hate what I've done to her so much. I don't know if I should say anything to her in front of Hayden, but I don't want her to continue to look at me like this either.

"No, you stay there—I'll sit here," I say with a weak smile. "You guys look comfortable."

"I was going to head out now that her parent is here," she says. There's no anger in her tone, but her voice is flat and unfeeling. "The doctor will be in soon to let you know how her arm is. I'll be back to work tomorrow."

She goes to move again, but I reach out and softly grab her arm. I glance at Hayden, who seems to be distracted by the TV show.

"Amelia, stay," I say to her softly as she looks down at my hand on her arm. "I should have never said what I did. It isn't true. You deserve to be here just as much as anyone. You had the situation handled, and I should have trusted that."

"Yes, you should have, but Jackson...I do understand," she says softly. "I was fine with you coming, and I'm great with you being here. I was simply saying that if Coach needed you or you were needed at practice, I had things handled here until you could get here. If it was worse than this, I would have demanded you come, but it's just a bump...maybe a break, but it's just an arm."

"I know, but for some reason when you called—really, when I saw that I had all those missed calls—I couldn't get the memory of the day I found out about Lyla out of my mind. I needed to see her for myself," I say. "I trust you, and I know you can handle anything that's thrown at you, but this was because of my own mind and not being able to deal. I should have never... never said that to you, and I don't mean it at all...please forgive me."

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she says, and she leans into my arm a little, giving me a nudge with her nose against my cheek. “I was a little hurt, but I’m not mad. Hayden is something special, and I would’ve wanted to know that she’s alright too.”

“She is something special,” I agree, and Hayden looks up to me and offers me a smile. “Are you hurting, princess?” I ask her.

“Only a little, Daddy,” she says as she cuddles her arm closer to her little body.

I look back and forth between the two girls who mean the world to me. I hope Amelia really has forgiven me. She isn’t the type to hold a grudge, but I can see the hurt in her eyes even now and it’s killing me.

I look up when the doctor walks in. He has a smile on his face, which does little to help me relax. I don’t even know if I’m all that worried about Hayden’s arm anymore, mostly fixated the way I acted like an ass earlier.

“Hi, I am Dr. Valcourt,” he says, offering me his hand so I can shake it.

“Thank you for tending to my girl, Doc,” I say as I pull my hand away from his and lean back in my chair.

“You have a couple of really great ladies,” he offers. “I almost couldn’t get your little one away from her mama to look her over.”

Amelia gives me a sad look and moves to correct him, but I speak first before she can say anything to the contrary.

“Do you know how our girl’s arm is, Doc? Is it broken?” I look back and forth between him and Hayden.

Amelia gives me a look of both thanks and shock. The whole she's not her mother conversation doesn't need to be brought up again. I shouldn't have said anything to begin with.

"Yes, well, I've just looked over her X-rays," the man says as he moves over to the computer on the wall and brings up the image to point to it as he talks. "She's a very lucky little girl." He smiles at Hayden. "It looks like the impact was right here by the growth plate—" He points to a spot near her wrist. "But, other than some swelling and a little bit of fluid here in this pocket..." He points out a little white patch near the growth plate. "It looks like there are no fractures or breaks...just a bad sprain."

"Oh, well, woohoo! Did you hear that, baby? It's not broken," I say as I rub Hayden's hair out of her face so I can see her eyes.

"While there is no break, she's still going to need to take it easy." The doctor turns the screen off and turns to us. "I'll be sending my nurse in to put a small temporary cast on for the time being. She'll need to wear it for a week, and then be seen by the orthopedic doctor to concur with my findings. Sometimes sprains are more painful than breaks, so alternate Ibuprofen and Tylenol as needed. Other than that, she should be good as new soon enough." He smiles. "I'll get her in here to do that, then we'll get you discharged and home."

"Thanks, Doc," I say, a smile on my face as I shake his head once again in appreciation.

"Yes, thank you, Doctor," Amelia adds with her own smile on her face.

In no time, Hayden's wrist is wrapped in a light pink temporary wrap, and we're home. I don't know what to feel as we sit around the table for dinner that night. Hayden is struggling a little, but Amelia is helping her every step of the way.

I've had to answer text after text from the guys checking on things. The last time I left the way I did today was when Lyla died, so I scared them all a bit. They're happy that Hayden is okay, and so am I.

"Do you really forgive me?" I ask Amelia after we finally get Hayden to bed, which wasn't easy at all. "Because I don't know if I can live with myself if you haven't."

"I forgave you as soon as you said it," she admits. "It's fine. You're right—I'm not her mother, because I will never be Lyla, or even try to be. She was a special woman...but I am Amelia, and for the time being, I'm your girlfriend, Hayden's nanny, and I'm in love with your family. I'll be here for as long as you'll have me, and as long as that might be...I will never try to take Lyla's place—I'll only try to add to it."

I can hear the truth of her words in her voice. There are tears trailing down her cheeks, and I reach up to wipe them away. My words were so hurtful to her, but here she is saying the best things I've ever heard a person say. She is everything, and she's right...she is here to add to our life.

I can't imagine not having Amelia in our lives, and I nearly ruined that with my mouth.

I don't know when I'll ever learn, but something tells me with Amelia around, I'll learn soon enough...I just hope it will be enough. I hope I'm enough.

15

AMELIA

The next morning after the incident at the hospital, we're sitting at the table eating breakfast when Jackson speaks for the first time that morning. He seems to be deep in thought before the words tumble out of his mouth.

"Hayden, how about we go out of town for a long weekend and maybe go to the zoo?" Jackson asks. "Grandma and Grandpa might be able to come with us."

I try not to let the fact that I'm not included in his suggestion hurt me, but deep down it does. I know I can't expect to be involved in everything they do, but I'd thought maybe he would want me with them. I tell myself not to be insecure about it, that he isn't used to having a woman in his life other than his wife, and I don't need to be ridiculous about it. Hayden's voice breaks me from my thoughts.

"Sure, Daddy. What about Amelia?" She looks up at him with wide eyes. "She needs to come with us."

"Oh, no, Hayden. It's okay," I say, putting down my fork. "You and your daddy can go and have fun. I'll be okay here."

"No, I want you to go with us," Hayden insists.

My eyes meet Jackson's, and I can tell he's worried. He bites his lip as he looks at Hayden and then at me.

“Would you like to come with us, Amelia?” he asks me, soft and low. “We’d love it if you’d come with us.”

I do want to go with them, but knowing that he’s hesitant about it makes me hesitate to answer. It feels like doesn’t want me to come along, but I know it’s most likely all in my head since my insecurities have a hold on me at the moment. I sit back in my chair, pushing my empty plate away, my thoughts running wild. It’s the first time we’d be doing anything as a family—of sorts—since getting together. It makes me nervous to think about it. Once again, Hayden’s small voice brings me from my thoughts.

“Melia? Pwease come with us,” she pleads with me.

I can’t deny her. I love her too much. I take a deep breath in and let it out as I look at her and smile.

“Okay, Hayden. I’ll come with you,” I tell her, making her smile. “You’ll need help keeping your daddy out of trouble.”

“Yay!” she squeals in excitement.

“Hey! I take offense to that!” Jackson exclaims in mock offense.

Hayden laughs at his teasing and the sound makes my heart squeeze in my chest. I can’t believe how fond of them I’ve become in the short time I’ve been with them. My eyes gravitate to the laughing little girl.

I can’t help but smile at her joy. Jackson’s eyes meet mine and he moves closer to me, taking my hand in his. My heart thuds in my chest as his warm hand covers mine. His skin feels so good I want to feel more of it, but I know I can’t do that with Hayden right here. His voice brings me from my dirty thoughts.

“I don’t want you to think that I don’t want you to come with us, I just wasn’t sure if you’d want to do something like that, since everything is so new between us still,” he says as he draws circles on the back of my hand with his thumb.

“I know, Jackson. I wasn’t thinking anything bad,” I say softly, fibbing a bit.

He smiles, and I feel bad for even thinking he didn’t want me to go. Maybe one day I’ll get the nerve to tell him how insecure I’ve been when it comes to him, to us. I clear the table of breakfast dishes and load them into the dishwasher as he busies himself packing bags for himself and Hayden. I finish in the kitchen and then head home to pack a bag for myself, and a few hours later, Jackson is loading the bags while I buckle Hayden into her car seat. I climb into the front seat next to Jackson and we head off toward the highway.

“Did you book a hotel or are we just going to find something when we get there?” I ask, looking over at him.

“While I was packing, I found a beautiful Airbnb that’ll be perfect for us. I think you’re going to like it,” he says, excitement lacing his tone.

“I’m sure I will—you’ll be there.”

The radio plays softly as he drives, his hand resting on my thigh. His thumb strokes lazy circles as his fingers rest on the inside of my bare thigh. He likes it when I wear this skirt, since it’s a little shorter than what I usually wear. One of his love languages is physical touch, and I’m not sure if he even realizes it. Everything feels so right and good in this moment and I feel blessed to be with him and the precious little girl in the back seat. I lean my head against the headrest and close my eyes as I smile to myself, thinking about how good things are between us.

We haven’t been on the road for much more than an hour when I hear a soft snoring

sound from the back seat. “I can’t believe Hayden’s asleep already,” I say softly, not wanting to wake her. “She must’ve still been tired from all the excitement at the hospital yesterday.”

“Already? That is fast for her. I’m sure you’re right—that’s the first big hospital visit she’s had since she was born,” Jackson says, chuckling as a devilish smirk appears on his face. “That gives me plenty of time to have fun with you.”

I look over at him and see the smirk widening. In the time I’ve been with them, he’s never been very spontaneous or demanding, so whatever he’s up to is going to be something new—I’m sure of it.

“What do you mean?” I ask softly.

“Just lean back and relax, baby,” Jackson whispers as his hand trails higher up my thigh, pushing up the hem of my skirt. “You’re going to enjoy this, I’m sure of it. I know I will.”

“Jackson, what are you doing? She’s right in the back seat,” I protest quietly as I try to push his hand away. “We have to be responsible adults. We can’t fool around with your child in the car.”

“That just means you’ll have to be quiet for me, princess,” he says as his fingers slide higher, brushing the fabric of my panties.

I gasp and squirm in my seat. I slide down a little and let my legs fall open as he continues to rub me over my panties.

“You like this, don’t you, Amelia? You’re getting so worked up already,” he murmurs as he starts rubbing faster.

My head falls back against the headrest. The feeling of his fingers on me is heightened by the fact that my eyes are closed and I can't see what he's doing. I try to keep my breathing even so my panting doesn't wake Hayden. I bite my lip to keep from moaning as his finger slips under the lace of my panties and in between my slippery folds.

I wiggle in my seat as he slowly rubs his finger against my wetness. I clamp a hand over my mouth to keep myself from yelling out.

"Good girl, you're being so quiet for me. Keep being quiet and I'll make you feel so good," he whispers low.

I haven't seen this side of him since we've been together. The only place I've seen him dominate anything is on the ice. I'm getting so turned on by his behavior that I'm finding it hard to control my moans. I shove my fist in my mouth as he circles my clit slowly.

"Jackson, I'm not going to be able to stay quiet. It feels too good," I whisper as I grip the door handle. "Please, Jackson. I can't."

I'm trying so hard not to make a sound, but a soft whimper escapes me as he pushes his finger in and pulls it back out of me. My hands are on the window and ceiling of the car as if they're the only things tethering me to my body while he pushes another finger into my dripping entrance. I clench my eyes closed as I concentrate on staying quiet. I know I have to do what I can to keep from waking Hayden, but the things Jackson is doing to me feel too good and it's so hard to stay as quiet as he wants me to be.

"Jackson." I whisper his name like a prayer.

"You have to stay quiet, baby. You can do it," he encourages as he slides into me

again.

His fingers push in deeper, and I wonder how he's able to keep driving without swerving while keeping his fingers so deep inside me. I gasp again and he shoves them deeper, curling them to hit the spot that makes me see stars.

"Jackson...please," I beg, knowing I'm going to scream if he doesn't stop torturing that spot.

"Come on, just a little more. You can be quiet, princess. I know you can. I feel you tightening around my fingers, baby. You're getting there." His voice is so low it almost sounds like a growl.

I gasp and bite back a moan as I feel the tendrils of my climax weave their way through my lower belly, the pleasure building as he moves his fingers in and out of me in a steady rhythm.

"You feel so good on my fingers. I can tell you're close—you're squeezing them," he marvels as he keeps pumping his fingers in and out.

I whisper his name like a prayer as he sends me over the edge, and I shatter on his fingers. My legs shake as he keeps moving his fingers until the last aftershock. Then he slowly pulls his fingers out of me and licks my slickness off of them with a grin. I smile at him as I adjust my panties and skirt.

"I didn't picture you to be the kind of guy to do something like that," I say.

"Why not?" he asks, a curious look on his face.

"The only thing I've ever seen you dominate is the ice, Jackson," I say with a chuckle.

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything yet, sweetheart,” he tells me, his eyes never leaving the road.

I grin and we settle into a comfortable silence until we get to our Airbnb, which is close to the Cincinnati Zoo. We check in and take our bags into the house, and I look around in awe at the amazing carpentry that has made the house what it is. Hardwood floors shine and the baseboards have intricate designs on them. Jackson carries in a still-sleeping Hayden and lays her on the bed in the room across from ours.

“Hey, listen, I need to talk to you for a minute please,” he says softly as he leads me into the room that will be ours.

I sit on the edge of the bed, and he sits down beside me, turning his body to face me. He takes my hands in his.

“I don’t want you to take this the wrong way or anything, but my parents are coming, and they don’t know that we’re together yet,” he says, pausing to look at me.

My heart twists in my chest at his words. Why hasn’t he told them about me? Is he ashamed of me?

“Where’s your head at, Amelia? What are you thinking?” he asks me.

“Are you ashamed of me, Jackson? Is that why they don’t know about us?” I ask, hurt in my voice.

His eyes widen in surprise, and he looks horrified.

“What? Oh God, no! Oh, baby, please don’t think that” he pleads as he takes my face in his hands. “It’s not anything like that. It’s just...this is a really big step for me, and I’m not sure how they’ll react to it. They know you’re Hayden’s nanny, so for now

that's all they're going to know, until I figure out what to say to them."

I nod my head in understanding. I can't help but feel like he's a bit ashamed, but I don't want to press the issue with him.

"When they come, I'll just be the nanny," I say quietly.

Just then, Hayden wakes up and we go to explore the rest of the house with her. We find a nice place to get dinner in town, and Jackson can't stop talking about how the season is almost over.

"I still can't believe we've made it to the playoffs," he says joyfully. "I'm glad for the break this week, though. It's going to be rough—four rounds of seven games. We're gonna be worn out by the end, but I think we're good for the win, especially with Oliver and Felix constantly coming up with new good luck rituals."

"What kind of rituals?" I ask with a smile on my face.

"Well, so far, they've been trading underpants," he says, chuckling.

I choke on my sip of water as I laugh. "What?"

"They've been trading underpants before games. It's really been lucky, so they're trying to come up with other new rituals."

"I hope they don't end up with jock itch," I say in a teasing tone.

Jackson laughs a hearty laugh, and the sound makes my heart swell. I haven't ever heard him laugh so freely. The look on his face is one of surprise and then sadness.

"What's wrong?" I ask him, laying my hand over his on the table as Hayden colors

the coloring page given to her by our waitress.

“I haven’t...I shouldn’t...” he stammers.

“Oh, Jackson, it’s okay to laugh. She’d want you to,” I reply softly as I rub the back of his hand.

By the time we finish dinner and get back to the Airbnb, Hayden is asleep, and Jackson carries her in. My thoughts are consumed with the knowledge that his parents are coming for their visit tomorrow—I’m nervous to see them, even if I’m just the nanny. I know that by the end of the visit they’ll know the truth, and I worry about how they’ll handle that truth.

I toss and turn all night long, finally getting up around five in the morning. I drink my coffee and make breakfast for everyone because I know Jackson and Hayden will wake up soon. Just as I finish cooking, they both emerge from upstairs, still looking sleepy.

“Good morning, sleepyheads,” I say as I put their plates in front of them.

“Good morning, Amelia,” Jackson mumbles as he stumbles sleepily to the coffee pot and pours a cup of coffee.

“Today’s the day. Your parents will be here this afternoon,” I say, trying to sound cheerful.

“Grandma and Grandpa are coming?” Hayden asks before taking a bite of her food.

“Yeah, they’re coming to visit before we go to the zoo,” Jackson says as he sits at the table with his coffee cup and starts eating.

I take time cleaning the kitchen after we eat and before I know it, the doorbell rings. My stomach twists in knots and I feel like I'm going to vomit as Jackson goes to open the door. I stand in the doorway of the kitchen as Jackson welcomes them in and hugs them. They move to hug Hayden next and then his mother's eyes connect with mine.

I'm about to say, Nice to see you again , but she speaks first.

"Ah, and you brought along the help," she says as she looks me over. "I'd like a glass of water with four ice cubes. Thank you."

My heart clenches and my stomach drops. I hear Jackson say something, but I can't make out what he says as my ears ring loudly. I bolt up the stairs to the other room down the hall in case they come upstairs. I throw myself across the bed and sob into the pillow, hoping the fluffy material muffles the sound. I don't want them to know they've hurt me. I hear raised voices floating up from downstairs, but can't make out what they're saying. A few minutes later, I hear the door open and know instantly that Jackson has entered the room.

"Oh, baby, come here," he says, soft and low as he pulls me into his arms, caressing the back of my head as I cry into his chest. "I'm sorry about my mother."

"It's fine," I say as I wipe my tears with the back of my hand. "She doesn't know any different, so she's treating me like the help I am."

"No, she shouldn't have acted that way even if you were only a nanny. Listen, why don't you go into town and do some shopping? It'll give me time to figure out what to say and tell them about our relationship," he says softly as he rubs my back soothingly.

I agree, grabbing my purse and heading downstairs with him. He leads me out the front door to the car as his parents watch.

“Go have some fun, you deserve it after all this,” he says, a look of adoration in his eyes. “I’ll tell them, I promise.”

I nod and start the car, pulling out of the driveway. I soon find myself in a shopping center, and my eye catches on a shoe store. I can’t resist a good pair of shoes. As I browse, I see a pair of black and gold strappy heels that I know Jackson would like on me. I pull them off the shelf and try them on, snapping a picture of them on my feet. I send it to Jackson.

Thought you’d like to see these on me.

I wait for his response, taking the shoes off as I do. A few minutes later, my phone dings with a message.

Mmm...I can imagine those on my shoulders...

I feel my cheeks heat at his response. I’m definitely getting the shoes just for that. I pay for them and exit the store, soon finding another store I want to check out. I see a dress in the window that will go perfectly with my new heels. It’s floor-length and black with gold trim around the edges just like the shoes.

Got the shoes. I’m going to see if I can’t find a dress to go with them before the shoes end up on your shoulders.

I send the text with a smile as I walk into the store. I browse around and soon my phone buzzes in my purse. I’m reaching in to grab it when I look up, and my eyes lock with a pair of eyes that belong to someone I thought I’d never see again: Preston.

My mind can’t comprehend what I’m seeing. He’s alive? All the evidence at the scene of the accident pointed to his death. Now he’s right in front of me, breathing and looking at me with wide eyes.

“Preston?” I breathe out, shock filling my system.

My heart stutters in my chest as I realize he’s been alive all this time and hasn’t bothered to let us know somehow.

I watch as he freezes in place and stares at me for several heartbeats before he rushes to me, pulls me into a tight hug, then drags me into the dressing room behind us. He closes the door and turns the lock before pulling me into another hug. He holds me close to him for a couple minutes before pulling back to look at me.

“Amelia? What are you doing here? How’d you find me? How’d you know I was here?” he asks, worry crossing his face.

“I had no idea you were here, Preston. We’ve all been thinking you’re dead for two years. We’ve grieved you for two long, miserable years,” I say, anger creeping into my voice. “How could you do this?”

“If you didn’t know I was here, then how did you find me?” he asks again.

“I’m here on vacation with Jackson. I went shopping so he could have some time with his parents. I’ve thought you were dead, Preston. Why the hell didn’t you ever call?” My voice is growing louder. “Your blood and your wallet were found at the scene, Preston. You weren’t. Why?”

“Why the fuck are you with Jackson?” he asks.

I take a good look at my brother’s face and notice several scars that appear to be burn marks on his face. I wince as I think about the pain he must have endured. My eyes search his face, mapping out the patterns the scars make. He’s still handsome, but I know they must bother him.

I know he wants answers, but so do I and I'm not giving him any until I get mine first.

“I asked you first, big brother,” I say, my chest tightening as I realize we might be at an impasse here.

16

JACKSON

I watch my mother and father play with Hayden on the living room floor. They don't love the fact that her arm is hurt, but they understand that accidents happen. It'll be no time before our little girl is back to normal.

As I watch them interact with my daughter, I realize that I'm thankful for them. I'm lucky to still have my mom and dad. I love them dearly, and even though my mom doesn't know how to slow her mouth sometimes, she really is one of the best people I know.

Despite Amelia being gone a while now, I haven't found the perfect time to talk to them about our relationship. The trio are now on the floor with coloring books and crayons. I have trouble getting on the floor with her anymore and I'm an athlete. My parents are twenty-five years older than me and still get down on the floor with her.

In my mother's defense, it's been several months since they've gotten to see either one of us. It's nice to see them, but I want them to know about Amelia. She deserves for them to know, and they deserve to know that I...for the first time in years...am happy.

I know they worry about me—my mother more than my father. She's been worried about me ever since Lyla passed away. I know deep down she wishes there was a way to take the pain away, just as much as I wish that Hayden would never get hurt, but life simply doesn't work that way.

“When are we going to dinner, love?” my mother asks, looking up at me from where she sits on the floor.

I give her a small smile, but it’s all I can do.

“I want to wait for Amelia so she can go with us,” I admit as I look at my phone again to see how long she’s been gone. “I’m going to head up to my room to get ready...if she isn’t back in the next twenty minutes, we’ll head out.” Though I don’t want to leave at all without her.

She nods and goes back to playing with Hayden. I run up to my room and sit on the bed. I know I asked Amelia to go shopping to get a moment to herself and get over my mother being...well, my mother, but she’s taking far too long.

I try to call her number. I’ve texted her twice and I don’t want her to think I’m some crazy controlling man, because she can shop as long as she’d like, but now I’m worried that something has happened to her.

In a way, I think I must have some form of post traumatic stress or something. I didn’t think that until I got the call that she and Hayden were at the hospital. I panicked so quickly then, and now I’m doing something similar as I worry about Amelia being out there alone and not answering the phone.

When she doesn’t answer, I toss my phone back onto the bed and get up to change my clothes. I told my mother that’s what I’m doing, so I figure a change of clothes is needed to make it look like I’m not about to lose my mind here.

Once I’ve changed, I pace back and forth along the carpet in front of my bed, hoping like hell she calls me or sends a text. I reach down and call again...once, twice, a third time before I decide the twenty-minute time frame I gave my mother has come and passed.

I walk down the steps to meet the smiling faces of my parents and Hayden who is already standing at the door with her shoes on.

“Where’s Amelia?” Hayden asks with her little voice. She seems worried, more worried than I’ve ever seen her before.

“She’ll be back a little later tonight,” I say, praying it’s not a lie and that it’s enough of a revelation to appease my little girl.

I try my hardest not to make a habit of lying to my daughter. I want her to grow up to be honest, and I feel the only way I can do that is if I show her how to do it. I hope she never learns how to lie.

In no time, my parents and I decide on a seafood restaurant in town. I text Amelia the address and name of the restaurant in case she decides she wants to meet us. I’m trying not to freak out in front of my parents, but worry has turned to straight-up fear.

We order our food, and the entire time my mother is eyeing me as if she wants to ask me something but doesn’t want to say it in front of Hayden or something.

“So, how are things shaping up going into playoffs?” my father asks as he takes a bite of his seafood.

“It looks like we’re set up nicely for the first rounds,” I admit, thankful for the distraction. “You should see Felix—he’s gotten so much better.”

“We saw replays from the last game, you made that shot that was top cheddar,” my mother adds, and it’s strange to hear her using hockey slang. “I’ve never seen something so exciting.” She sounds like a cheerleader, and that is exactly what she has always been for me.

Sure, my father and I can talk hockey all day long, but normally when my mom adds her part in, it comes out strained. She wants to be able to talk to me about it but has to come up with words like top cheddar , which is the correct term, but strange coming from her.

My mother is a neat lady, never breaking a sweat for much...other than maybe for Hayden. My father, on the other hand, taught me how to play the game. He's worked as hard as I have for me to invest my time and energy into this life.

"Yeah, that was a good game," I say. "Coach has really changed things up by implementing plays that are new to most of us. We've managed some scrimmages that have shown some of the guys' strengths and helped build morale." I'm glad to be talking to my parents about all this, but deep down I'm still worried about Amelia.

"That's good to hear." My dad smiles at me over a sip of beer. "I like your coach enough...he's a good man, but when he let that one kid take that penalty last month, I about came unglued."

"You and the rest of us, Dad," I say as I realize Hayden is tugging on my shirt to get my attention.

I lean down to talk to her. I can tell she has something big to say, but she leans up a little so she's nearly whispering in my ear.

"Hey, Daddy," she says softly, "where's Amelia?"

"She's doing some shopping and enjoying her time off," I say softly, though I'm not so convinced. Hayden must be just as worried as I am. This is the second time she's asked about Amelia tonight.

"Otay, Daddy." She smiles. "Can I go see the lobsters?" She turns and points to the

tank of lobsters.

“Sure,” I say with a small smile. “I’ll take you to go see them.” I push my chair out a little to get up and join her.

“No, Daddy,” she says as she gets up from the table and walks around to my dad. “I want Papa to take me to go see them.” She offers him her little hand and he takes it, allowing her to pull him from his chair. “We like to name them.” She smiles as she says the last part as if it’s some big secret.

I turn and watch them walk to the tank across the room together, and when I turn back around to face the table and have a drink of my beer, I realize my mother is staring at me. When she leans forward on her hands and bores her eyes into my soul, I know she has something to say.

“Yes, Mother?” I ask teasingly, wondering what exactly has drawn her attention to me like this.

“What’s going on between you and the babysitter?” she asks as she eyes Hayden and my dad, obviously making sure they’re still across the room.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say in a teasing tone until I realize the use of the term the babysitter . “Wait a minute, Mom...she’s not a babysitter—Hayden loves her, and she was never just a sitter, she was a nanny.”

“Was?” she asks with a raise of her eyebrow.

My mother has never been the judgmental type, though after her earlier comments which upset Amelia, I’m not so sure anymore. I don’t want to hear her opinion if it’s negative, though I suppose I’ll never know unless I come out with it.

She reaches across the table and takes my hand, tender and loving like she used to do when I was a little boy. There's something about a mother's love that every son needs—I just don't need her to say anything negative against Amelia.

I don't think I can handle it if she does.

I glance over my shoulder, hoping to see Dad and Hayden heading back, but my father has roped one of the workers into getting one of the lobsters out of the tank. Hayden is now petting it with her free hand. Her big smile warms my heart.

"I saw how you catered to her earlier, how you looked at her, and then when I said what I said, you went to her and let her leave when she should have been working." My mother pauses a moment to take a drink. "There's something more here. And Hayden...that girl talks about Amelia like she hung the moon...and she says you two kiss."

"Well, if you must know, Mom, and I've been meaning to talk to you about all this...yes, Amelia and I are together. I just wanted to find the right time to tell you. It's not an easy move for me, and I don't take it lightly."

"How did all this come about?" she asks as she pulls her hand away.

"It's a long story," I say, hoping she'll let this be the end of it, but deep down I know I have no such luck.

"Well..." She turns toward my daughter and father, who are still at the lobster tank. "Hayden and your father are petting their third crustacean, and it looks like there are at least twelve more in there... so it's going to be a while." She smirks.

"Fine," I groan as I turn toward her again. "What do you want to know? I'm an open book for at least twelve more lobsters." She laughs a hearty real kind of laugh that

makes me feel a little more comfortable.

“Well, it’s clear to see how you look at her, but how did it happen? Did you hire her first, or were you together when you hired her?” Mom wonders. “I mean, either way, I don’t know that you need to pay your girlfriend to watch your child.”

“Well, she was my nanny first, and this is her job, so yeah, I pay her for it,” I say. “I fell for her, and we just sort of happened. She’s great for Hayden, and she has hardly looked at another woman since Lyla died. As much as it hurt me at first, she needs her.”

“And you’re ready to move on all of a sudden? Because last thing I knew, you were still having issues even going out with the guys, let alone dating,” she says. “I mean, I’m glad you’re open to a relationship again, but I have to know that this girl isn’t manipulating you, Jackson...I just want to make sure you and Hayden are okay.”

“We’re fine, Mom, I promise. Amelia isn’t manipulating me in any way, and no, it isn’t easy, and I’m not ready...I don’t think I’ll ever be ready, but like it or not, here it is. She makes me happy.” I smile as I look my mother in the eyes. “And back there when you were rude to her, even though I know you didn’t know we were together, it hurt her, because all she wanted was to impress you guys and make a good impression.”

“There will be time for all that,” she says. “I’ll be sure to apologize to her. I should have never said what I said, but truth be told I should have seen it before now.”

“Well, we haven’t been public much, and we’ve just recently decided to make things official, so it’s not like you’re all that late to the party.” I hear Hayden squeal as she and my dad head back to the table. “Did you like the lobsters?” I ask Hayden as she sits down beside me.

“Yes, they let me pet all of them.” She beams up at me from where she sits.

I lean over and kiss her on the top of the head. “That’s great, sweetie.”

She and my dad start talking about the names they picked for the creatures as my mother keeps glancing at me. I know she’s worried about me, but in the end, I’m an adult and Hayden’s father, so I know what’s best for us both.

Right now, I know that’s Amelia, and I’m still worried to death that she hasn’t returned my texts and calls or showed up.

Wherever she’s at, I hope she’s alright. I’ve half convinced myself to let my mom and dad keep Hayden for the night while I go looking for her, but I don’t want to be that protective freak of a boyfriend. But as images of the police walking in at halftime flood through my mind, reminding me of the day Lyla was in the accident...I can’t help but worry.

I just don’t want to know what it’s like to live without Amelia too. I have to remind myself that just because Lyla left Hayden and I here to suffer without her, doesn’t mean Amelia is going to do the same.

I decide that if she’s not back by the time Hayden goes to bed, I’ll go looking for her. I just hope that when I do find her, she’s safe and has a perfectly good explanation for falling off the face of the planet.

17

AMELIA

My mind is in a million places as I try to process everything that has just happened. I still don't have the explanation I need so badly from Preston, but he's here and alive.

I think about Jackson and the reasons I came to him in the first place. I thought my brother was dead and he had something to do with it, but now I'm convinced that Jackson will hate me if he ever figures out that I suspected him.

"You need to explain to me what exactly is going on here," I say to him as we make our way out of the store after I purchased my dress.

"Let's find someplace private," he says as he looks around like he might be looking out for someone...I don't want to know who.

I nod as I follow him to an ally where a car is parked. He slides into the driver's seat, and I slide into the passenger. He doesn't get a key out to drive or anything, we just sit in the car for the longest time before he speaks again. I don't know if the car even runs, if it's his, or if this is where he has been living.

"I need to know why you've been missing for two years, Preston. It's not fair," I say. "I pretty much stopped my life until recently looking for you...or at least looking for a body to go along with the announcement that you were pronounced dead. Do you know how hard it is to mourn for someone who's dead, but there's no body to bury?"

“I can’t imagine what you went through...have been going through,” he adds as he turns in the seat to face me. “I get why you’re upset, I would be too.”

“I just don’t understand.” I begin to cry, but I hate the fact that I am. “How could you stay away, Pres?”

I want to cry and run away. I feel like I’m looking at a ghost, one that didn’t want to be found. I would have never known he was alive if I hadn’t come here with Jackson...and he has the audacity to wonder why I’m with Jackson.

“Ami,” he says, using the name he called me all the time. “You’re not going to want to believe me at first, but it’s important that you listen to everything, ask questions if you have them, and know that none of this was meant to hurt you at all.”

I hesitate to say anything to him. What could he have to say to me that’s going to make me not believe him?

I think about getting out of the car and just going back to Jackson. His parents will want to go to dinner tonight, and surely by now he’s told them about us. We have plans. I want to be with them. I feel somewhere in the pit of my stomach that I’m not going to like what my brother has to say to me.

“Go ahead,” I say, motioning for him to carry on quickly.

“It turns out that your father put a hit out for my death,” he says, and already I’m having to pick my jaw up off the ground.

“What in the hell are you talking about?” I say with heat in my voice. “What do you mean my father ? We have the same parents, Pres.”

“We have the same mother,” he admits, as if what he’s about to say isn’t going to

change everything. “It turns out that we don’t have the same dad.”

I shake my head in disbelief. Even if this is true...why would my father put a hit out on my brother. A hit? What exactly does that mean?

“I don’t know that I fully understand. Why would our father... my father...put a hit out on you. That means he tried to kill you, right? How would he even know how to do that? Did he kill Lyla? Why would he have done that? Why were you with her?” I ramble, trying to find some puzzle piece that makes sense.

“Well, let me start with one thing at a time.” He smiles a little. “Our mom, when she and your father were first together, had an affair with another man and got pregnant with me.”

“I don’t believe she would do that, Pres.” I frown at him.

“Listen, Mom has been dead since you were little, you don’t know her as well as I do. While I don’t think she was a bad person, I do know that your father cheated on her at every turn, so I don’t rightfully blame her for cheating too,” he admits. “As for the hit...yes, he would know how to do that, but I’ll get to that in a minute. Lyla plays a key role in all this because, Ami...she was my sister too.”

“What?” I breathe, suddenly thinking about Jackson and the part I thought he played in all this, but boy was I wrong.

“Yes,” he says. “Her father is my father. I found out when I did a genealogy thing a few years ago. We came up as a match, as siblings, and they gave us the contact information of the other participants. I found out she was my half sister, and in doing so found out the truth. Working with Jackson only made it easier to be around Lyla more, although...I don’t think she’d told him yet that I was her brother—she was worried about his reaction given our rivalry. She was planning on telling him, after

she and I met up a few times to do some digging into our father, and that's why I was with her the day the hit came through. I don't know if it was meant for her too, or just me, but when I got out of that car, she was unconscious, and I could tell there was nothing I could do for her. I called to make sure an ambulance was on the way, but then I had to get out of there if I wanted to live."

"What about me?" I wonder with heat in my cheeks. "You could have figured out how to let me know you were alive." Our eyes meet across the space in the car.

Hot tears and anger course through me, and I wish that anger could be replaced with something less painful. I don't know who to be angry at, but I need to be mad.

"I didn't want to risk your father figuring out that you knew. I didn't want you involved in all of this," he says. "I didn't want Lyla involved in any of this either, but that was unavoidable."

"I still don't get why or how all this has happened," I say. "He's just a businessman." At least, up until now, that's all I've ever known my father to be.

He's made a great deal of money through the years, and I've enjoyed the life he gave us. I spent some time abroad, and it was all thanks to him. How am I supposed to believe he's some kind of monster? Is he a monster?

"When I was younger, your father—who I thought was mine at the time—told me things...secrets. I swore I wouldn't tell anyone...not even you," he says softly, as if someone might hear us. "Being not only the oldest child, but the oldest son, he expected me to take over for him at some point."

"Take over what?" I ask him, and for some reason, I feel like I should know what he's talking about.

It's almost like what he's trying to say, or rather not say, is sitting at the edge of my mind. I don't want to believe it, so I discount the idea right away. Things like this don't actually happen in real life, do they?

"Ami..." Preston pauses and looks me over before he continues. "Your father is one of the most notorious criminals in the greater Chicago area, and in the United States. He's a Mafia don and expected me to take over for him when the time was right."

I sit dumbfounded, not knowing what to say. The Mafia? These things only happen in books and movies, right?

I think about my dad and who he is to me. He's always been a teddy bear. Sure, he makes me treat our stepmother like my own mom, but I was so little when our mother died that I barely remember her. My mind flashes through everything Preston has said. What's sad is that if this is all true, Dad told me to come home and stop looking because already knew that Preston wasn't dead...there was no body.

"So, let me get this right. Our mother cheated on my father and got pregnant with you. Then you learn that he's part of the Mafia and you're supposed to grow up to take his place, but then you find out he's not your father, and you find Lyla, who is your sister..." I pause, trying to wrap my mind around it all. "Then my father decides to order a hit on you because now you're not his son, and you know too much, and he was worried you'd spill your guts or something. In the meantime, the hit killed Lyla—your sister, Jackson's wife—and just about killed you, but resulted in you hiding out for these past couple years and pretending to be dead?"

"Pretty much," is all he says at first. "I've been trying to find a way to get your father off my case...or make him pay for this, but in the end I haven't been too focused on that aspect, because I don't want to take your only living parent away from you."

"I don't know how much of a parent he is, Pres," I say with a frown. "But I do have a

question. You know how I've always said our mom's death seems fishy? Even when I was a kid, I thought that. There just isn't much explanation behind it...ya know?"

"Yeah," he says, trying to leave room for me to make this revelation on my own, but I don't know that I want to.

"You don't think he killed her, do you?" I blurt out. "I mean, if he was going to kill you and he did kill Lyla...do you think he had our mother killed when he found out she cheated on him or something?" I don't know if I want to know the answer or not.

He pauses to think about my words. I can see the wheels in his brain turning. The look on his face turns sad as he mulls it over. I don't mean to cause him pain, but all of this is a bit too much for me to process on my own.

"Yeah, I do think it's possible," he admits. "I've thought about it for a long while now. Knowing he's a don leaves a lot of room for a lot of things, but as soon as he told me, questions sparked in my mind, including that very thought. I'm pretty damn sure that he either killed or had her killed—just as sure as I am that he'll have you killed if you say anything to anyone about this."

"I'm not going to say anything, Pres," I say with a frown. "It doesn't mean that I won't think about my next move regarding my father, but I won't say a word. He wants me to come home soon, but now I'm not so sure that's something I want. Jackson and I are in a relationship, and I care a great deal for him, and his daughter Hayden."

"I remember Hayden," he says softly. "Such a cute little girl...she'd be my niece you know." He seems sad that he never got the time to be the uncle that little girl deserves.

"I guess so," I say. "I care about them a lot. If I think for a second that they're at risk

of getting hurt, I will hurt someone first.” A protective feeling courses through me that I just can’t remember ever feeling before.

He looks at me as if judging my words. I hope he knows they’re true. Jackson and Hayden mean the world to me. I just hate that this whole time I’ve thought Jackson had something to do with Preston’s death. If only I’d known it was my father who had something to do with it, I’d never have started a relationship with Jackson under false pretenses. But then, maybe I’d never have fallen for him at all...

“Listen...” Preston pauses as he reaches for my phone and begins typing something into it. “I’m going to give you my cell number. It’s a burner phone and I put myself under Hockey Bro, so if your dad does see your phone, he won’t know it’s me.

“Thanks,” I say, but I don’t know if I’ll ever call him for any reason.

“You’re welcome. I think you need to head back—it looks like he’s tried to get ahold of you several times,” he adds, handing my phone back to me. “For now, only say what you have to, but I’d love it if you could keep my secret for the time being...until I can get things figured out on my end.”

I nod as I reach for the bag with my shoes in it. I don’t know that I’m in the mood for shopping anymore, and it looks like it’s about to rain. I get out of the car without saying another word.

I hope I’m able to see my brother again, but if I don’t, I pray he can figure things out for himself. I’m still processing everything he’s told me, but finally, all the pieces fit together. My father is a monster.

I didn’t know before now, but now I know exactly who my father is, and every part of me is screaming to stay as far away as I can.

As I walk away from the car and head back toward the vacation home, all I can think about is Jackson and that little girl I care so much about—I'm going to make sure they're protected from all of this, if it's the last thing I do.

18

JACKSON

I pace the floor of the Airbnb, waiting impatiently for Amelia to return. It's almost dark out, and I thought she'd be back by now. My thoughts are flying everywhere, and I know I'm causing unnecessary chaos, but I can't help it. I'm trying so hard not to panic as thoughts of what might be happening to her flood my mind. I tell myself she's just out having fun, allowing me plenty of time with my parents, but part of me—the really messed-up part—is imagining the worst as minutes tick by.

I try to call her again, but her phone goes straight to voicemail. My heart is pounding hard in my chest and I don't know what to do. Part of me wants to call the police and have them put out an APB on her car, but I know deep down that's a little dramatic. I'm letting the PTSD take over, and I know I need to calm down. I try to call her again, but it still goes to voicemail.

“Where are you?” I say out loud as I look out the window.

“I'm sure she's fine—you know you should never send a woman shopping if you want her home at a decent time, son,” my father says, laying a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“I know, I know. I'm being irrational, but I can't help it. I close my eyes, and I see the pictures of the crash site. I can't go through that again.” I try to swallow the lump in my throat.

“You’re not going to. Just keep telling yourself that. This is a different situation—what happened to Lyla isn’t going to happen to Amelia,” my father says quietly.

“You don’t know that, Dad. None of us know that for sure,” I say, harsher than I mean to.

I run a hand over my face, fear and frustration overwhelming me. I just want her to pull into the driveway and be okay. I need her to be okay. I know I need to talk to someone about my irrational thoughts, but I don’t want to—mostly for fear that the guys might find out. I’d never hear the end of it.

“Amelia has to be a capable driver, or you wouldn’t let her drive your daughter around,” my dad points out, coming over to stand beside me and look out the window.

“I trust her completely, Dad. I know she’s a good driver. I know this is all in my head, I just don’t know how to stop the thoughts.” My eyes stare at the driveway, willing her car to pull in. “Besides, it’s the others on the road that are the problem most of the time.”

I watch as my dad just shakes his head and walks into the other room, leaving me with my irrational thoughts. I call her once more and growl when I hear her voicemail again. I’m tempted to throw my phone, but I know I can’t do that in case she needs me.

“Jackson, you’ve got to stop worrying. You’re going to end up with an ulcer if you don’t,” my mother cuts in as she comes into the room, Hayden following behind her.

“I know, I know.”

“You know, yet you’re pacing the length of this room like a caged tiger. I had no idea you were already so attached to this woman. She’s fine, and you need to stop worrying.”

My mother’s words just make me pace more.

My thoughts are swirling in my head as I continue looking out the window. What if she doesn’t come back? What if I finally found the strength to open my heart to someone again, and she doesn’t come back? I’ll never recover from it, and I know it.

Finally, I see her pull in and I breathe a sigh of relief. I rush to the door and pull it open, running to the driveway. As she gets out, I grab her in my arms and hold her tight.

“You’re okay, oh thank God,” I breathe out.

“I’m fine, Jackson. I didn’t mean to worry you,” she says as she pulls back to look at me, concern flashing over her face. “I just did what you told me to.”

“I know, I know. I just thought you’d be back earlier than this, and I got worried. It’s just my head.” I cup her face and kiss her gently.

She hums against my lips and pulls back from the kiss, sadness in her eyes.

“I’m so sorry—I should’ve called and checked in. I just didn’t want to interrupt your time with your parents. I was also having a lot of fun shopping.” She winks at me.

I remember our text exchange about the shoes she got, and I feel myself twitching in my pants.

“Did you find a dress to go with those shoes you bought today?” I ask her as I grab

the bags out of the car and lead her into the house.

“I did, actually. I think you’ll like it,” she says with excitement in her tone.

“Maybe you can model it for me later.”

“I just might do that.” She grins at me as she goes to the kitchen.

I take the bags upstairs to the bedroom and go back downstairs in time to hear a bit of the conversation she’s having with my mom. I bristle at the things my mother is telling her.

“I’m glad you had a good afternoon shopping—Jackson just worries too much,” my mother is saying as I walk around the corner and come into view.

“I have good reason to worry, Mother,” I say a bit defensively.

“I know that, son, but it’s time you stop worrying so much. You need to stop worrying and start enjoying life. Let people in again,” she says.

“I’m trying, Mom. It’s not that easy,” I say softly, trying to keep the emotion out of my voice.

Amelia puts her hand on mine and my insides soften to mush. I’ve not felt this way since Lyla, and part of me feels ashamed that I’m feeling it. I know I have every right to feel the way I do since it’s been two years since she’s been gone, but part of me still feels like I’m cheating on her.

My parents leave the kitchen as Amelia gets a glass of water and sips it. I study her as she leans against the counter. She looks exhausted. Shopping must have taken a lot of energy out of her. Who knew spending money could do that?

“You look tired, baby. You okay?” I ask her, concern creeping up.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. I’m just a little tired. I did a lot of shopping, and I ran into an old friend. I never knew I’d run into someone I grew up with all the way out here,” she says, smiling at me. “It really is a small world, isn’t it?”

She smiles at me and chuckles, but then her smile turns into a small yawn. She puts her water glass in the sink and yawns again.

“Are you too tired to model those shoes for me? I’ve been dying to see them on you since you texted me about them earlier.”

She giggles, and the sound comforts me in a way I never thought possible. I always want to make her laugh in any way I can.

I move behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist and nibbling her ear gently, smiling against her neck as she lets out a hum of appreciation.

“I’m tired, but I’m not that tired,” she replies with a sly smile on her face as she takes my hand and leads me up the stairs to our bedroom.

The room has an ensuite bathroom that she heads into. I lie across the bed on my side, propped up on my elbow, waiting to see what she comes out in. My thoughts run away with me as I wait for her to finish getting ready.

The swishing of fabric and soft grunts can be heard from inside the bathroom. I chuckle to myself as I imagine her having a hard time getting into whatever she’s putting on.

“Are you okay in there?” I ask, since it’s taking her a while to come out.

“I’m fine. I’ll be out in a minute,” she says as she giggles through the door.

“Take your time. I’m in no rush. Well, maybe a little bit of a rush,” I tease.

My breath hitches in my throat when I see the door handle turning. I prop myself up higher and my eyes go wide as she steps out of the bathroom. She appears in a dark blue knee-length dress that sparkles in the light. The neckline plunges dangerously low and I feel my pants get a little tighter as I think about what’s waiting for me under the dress. My eyes travel down to the shoes, and I imagine what they’d look like over my shoulders as I ravish her.

“Oh lord, princess, you’re killing me in that dress. All I want to do now is take it off of you,” I tell her as I watch her twirl around.

“Well, you won’t be able to do that in public,” she says with a chuckle.

“Maybe not, but we’re not in public right now,” I say, my voice low and husky with desire.

I stand up from my spot on the bed and move closer to her. I can tell she’s getting just as turned on as I am, her chest heaving with quickening breaths. Her pupils are blown, and I can see her nipples straining against the fabric of the dress.

“Something got you all excited, princess?” I ask.

“Yes,” she answers quickly.

Her breathing is becoming more rapid, and I know I’m having the same effect on her that she is on me. All I want to do is pick her up, toss her on the bed, and have my way with her, but I want to take it nice and slow this time. I keep myself in check and slow my thoughts and movements.

I move behind her and slide down one of the straps, kissing the bare skin of her shoulder, aching slowly. Her breaths come faster, and a soft moan escapes her lips as I kiss the sensitive flesh at the crook of her neck. Her hand comes up and tangles in my hair as I kiss and nip my way up her neck.

“Jackson,” she breathes out as my other hand pulls down the other strap.

I kiss her other shoulder, making my way to the crook of her neck on that side also. I pay ample attention to her neck, especially the spot by her ear. She moans softly again, and I smile against her skin. My heart pounds as her sounds arouse me even more.

The dress slides down her body and pools on the floor at her feet. She steps out of the pile of material and bends to unbuckle the strappy heels that grace her slender feet.

“No, leave them on,” I tell her as I pull her back to a standing position.

“I thought you might say that,” she whispers seductively.

“I want you so badly, Amelia. It’s taking all my willpower not to take you right here, but I want to take it slow and make it last for you.”

She smiles as she stands back up. I reach one hand around behind her and unclasp her bra in one fluid motion, while my other hand cradles the back of her neck, bringing her close enough to press my lips to hers.

“You’re so beautiful,” I murmur against her lips.

“Jackson,” she breathes out as my lips find the flesh of her shoulder.

I slide behind her and cup her breasts in my hands. She hums in appreciation, and I

squeeze them a bit.

“I want you, Amelia,” I whisper against her ear.

“Here I am, take me,” she replies, hooking her thumbs under the elastic band of her panties and sliding them down her legs.

“Oh, baby, you have no idea how bad I want you,” I say, almost whimpering.

She steps out of her panties and turns, running her hand over the bulge in my pants.

“I’d say you want me really bad,” she croons in my ear.

I capture her lips in a passionate kiss and back her up toward the end of the bed. When the back of her knees hit the bed, she sits down and leans back on her elbows.

“I’m gonna make you feel so good, princess, but you’re gonna have to be quiet for me since we’re not alone. Can you be quiet for me?”

“I’ll try,” she breathes out softly.

I grab a pillow from the head of the bed and motion for her to lift her hips. I slide the pillow under her and then lean over, kissing her lips again. My lips trail down her neck as she starts to writhe beneath me. I nip the sensitive skin where her neck meets her shoulder and smile as she moans softly. I continue my descent down her body until I’m on my knees in front of her, and then I slide her legs over my shoulders, those shoes running along my spine, and I delve into her sweet center. She fists her hands into my hair and grips as I roll my tongue up and over her sensitive nub.

“Jackson,” she gasps as I work my tongue against her.

I hum against her as I slide a finger inside her. Her hips buck into my face, and I slide another finger in. The noises she makes shoot pleasure straight to the core of me, and I want nothing more than to keep making her make those noises.

“Jackson, don’t stop. Please, don’t stop,” she begs me as she pushes my head closer to her body.

I hum against her again as I pull her bundle of nerves into my mouth and suck on it gently. I love the fact that I’m making her feel good—she’s so responsive to my touch. I move my tongue faster against her as her legs begin to shake. I lay my hand on her lower belly, under her belly button and press down gently.

That’s all it takes for her climax to wash over her, and she moans my name like a prayer as she shatters.

“Jackson...oh, Jackson...” she moans softly, trying not to be loud.

I lap up everything she gives me and keep going, driving her toward release again. It doesn’t take long before she’s shattering again with cries of ecstasy. I slide my way up her body, kissing every inch of her until I’m hovering over her. To my surprise, she rolls us over, maneuvering herself on top of me and kissing her way down my body, taking my rigid length into her mouth.

“Oh, fuck, princess,” I murmur as my hand tangles in her hair.

The sensation of her warm, wet mouth around me drives me insane.

“Oh, Amelia, please don’t stop,” I beg as my grip tightens on her hair.

“Mmm...” she moans against me, sending sensations through me that I didn’t realize I could feel.

“Oh, baby, if you keep doing that I won’t last long, and I’m not finished with you yet,” I tell her as I reluctantly pull her away from my body.

I roll us over again so I’m on top of her, nestled between her legs. I rub the tip of my rigid member against her throbbing clit and a moan slip from her lips. She grips my arms as I slide into her with a pleased groan.

“You feel so good,” I whisper against her ear as I start to move.

She lets out a string of moans as I thrust against her, picking up my pace as she gets louder. I hiss as her nails dig into my back, the heels of her shoes digging into the flesh of my ass.

“Oh, Jackson, so good...you feel so good,” she whimpers as I urge her closer to the edge of pleasure.

I’m getting close myself, but I don’t want the pleasure to end for either one of us, so I slow my pace a bit to catch my breath. Her soft moans fill my ears as I thrust against her faster again. My thoughts are swirling in my mind: This is perfect, she is perfect. She’s writhing beneath me, moaning my name in pleasure. I smile against her skin as I kiss her neck. I love that I’m the one making her feel this way.

“God, princess, you’re amazing. I love the way you look right now,” I whisper in her ear.

Her moans are the only reply I get as I push her toward her release. I know I’m not going to last much longer even if I slow down, but I do it anyway, trying to prolong the pleasure. Suddenly, she cries out, muffling the sound by biting my shoulder as she floods all over me and the bed.

“Oh my God!” she cries as her body shakes.

I keep thrusting into her, speeding up again, wanting to know if I can make her do it again. I grit my teeth, using every ounce of willpower I have to keep myself from finishing. She's trying to be so quiet, but I can tell it's becoming harder for her to do.

"Jackson, please, it's too much. Please," she begs me.

"One more, baby. Give me one more," I rasp out as I go as hard and fast as I can.

I'm barreling toward my release and bringing her to another one, ecstatic to be the one bringing her so much pleasure.

"Jackson, I can't. It's too good, so sensitive," she whispers breathlessly.

"You can do it, baby. Give it to me," I urge as I move my hips against her faster.

I can feel her tense around me, and I know it's coming. Her release crashes over her as she lets out an almost silent scream. Her body trembles against mine as my release follows hers. I groan softly as I spill into her. I thrust against her a few more times before collapsing beside her, pulling her close to me as I try to catch my breath.

"Wow," she breathes out, panting.

"You can say that again."

My thoughts run wild as I hold her tight, my feelings for her hitting me full force. Tonight has made me realize just how important she is to me, and I know I don't want to lose her.

I realize that I might very well be in love with her, and that thought hits me like a ton of bricks. I think about Lyla and wonder briefly whether it's okay for me to love someone else, but then I realize I can't help what my heart feels.

I smile against Amelia's skin as I take in the feelings she's making me feel. I know I want her, I know I need her, and I think I love her. Only time will tell.

AMELIA

I don't want to ruin the rest of the trip, so even though guilt is consuming me, I keep quiet and pretend that everything is okay for the rest of the weekend. It eats away at me, and I know Jackson can tell something is wrong by the time we get back home. It's getting very hard to hide it, and I know at some point I'm going to have to talk to him, but the thought terrifies me. I don't know how he'll react if I tell him about everything I've learned.

My thoughts are all over the place. I can't stop thinking about everything Preston told me. I keep trying to hide my feelings from Jackson, but I know he can sense my distraction.

"What's wrong with you tonight? You've been distant ever since we got back," he says after we get Hayden to bed.

Distant? I've been trying not to be distant, but maybe I've pulled away while trying to keep my emotions at bay. I shrug my shoulders and shake my head, trying to play it off like nothing is wrong. I'm not ready to tell him about everything yet. We've gotten to a really good place in our relationship and the last thing I want to do is ruin it.

I know I have to give him some sort of answer, but I don't really know what to tell him. I look at him, his handsome face clouded with concern. I don't want him to worry, so I try a simple response and hope that he buys it.

“I’ve just had a lot of things on my mind,” I say, hoping he’ll leave it at that. “I’ll be fine, you don’t have to worry. You have enough on your plate already.”

I should’ve known he wouldn’t let it go, and he doesn’t. He looks at me and crosses his arms over his chest, staring at me for a few long minutes as if he’s waiting for me to volunteer information. I stare back, giving him a look that says he’s not getting anything out of me.

He sighs and uncrosses his arms, making his way closer to me. My heart lurches in my chest at the thought that this might be the last time I have him this close to me, so I wrap my arms around him, holding him tight to me. I breathe in his scent and remember the night we shared at the Airbnb. It was the best night of my life and I want him to know it.

“I had a lot of fun with you and your family this past weekend, Jackson,” I say softly as I continue to breathe him in.

I feel him sigh and I know he’s getting frustrated with me because I’m not telling him what he wants to know. His arms tighten around me for a moment before they loosen, and he pulls back to look me in the face.

“Amelia, what is it? What’s so heavy on your mind?” he asks, his tone pleading. “We’re in this together now, remember? You can talk to me about anything. I want to know what’s bothering you so I can help you figure out how to fix it.”

My heart squeezes in my chest and fills with so much love for him as he says those words. I love him for wanting to help me deal with whatever’s on my mind, but I know that there’s no help for what’s going on in my head.

“I know you want to help, but there’s nothing anyone can do. I’m just stressed out about a few things...they’ll work themselves out. Please don’t worry.”

“Why won’t you tell me? Don’t you trust me enough to help you through whatever it is you’re going through without judging you?” he asks me, defensiveness in his voice.

I can tell he’s getting a bit offended at my closed mouth, and I know I’m running out of time. I’m going to have to tell him sooner or later. I just wish I had more time to think about how I want to tell him that I know why his wife is dead.

“I trust you, baby. I trust you with my life. It doesn’t have anything to do with that. It’s really nothing for you to worry about. I just don’t want you to worry about anything other than your upcoming game,” I tell him, stroking his cheek softly.

“I call bullshit, Amelia. You might as well tell me, because I’m not going to let it go until you do.” He leans against the counter, his arms crossed stubbornly.

I swallow hard. I know what’s coming and I know I can’t stop it. I have no more excuses. I have no more reasons not to tell him. He can clearly see that something other than stress is bothering me, and he’s not going to leave it alone until I tell him what’s really going on. I’ve imagined how he’s going to react to the words that are about to come out of my mouth, and I know it’s not going to go well.

I sigh deeply, taking him in. His eyes are soft as he looks at me, waiting for me to speak. My mouth goes dry, and it feels like my tongue is a big sheet of sandpaper in my mouth. I try to swallow it, but I can’t, so I move to the sink to get a glass of water. I take several gulps before setting the glass on the counter. I’m sure he thinks I’m stalling, but the physical reaction I’m having is very real. I don’t want to do this, but I know I have to.

“It’s okay, baby. Talk to me, please,” he urges.

I take another sip of water before putting the glass down and looking at him. His eyes

are pleading with me. My heart aches even more.

I know I can't keep it from him anymore. I have to be honest with him no matter what happens. He deserves to know the truth.

"When I was shopping the other day, the old friend I ran into was Preston," I say softly.

Jackson's eyes snap to mine and immediately harden. His brows furrow in confusion, and maybe even anger. He shakes his head as if he doesn't want to believe what I'm saying.

"What? Come on, Amelia, don't play around like that. That's cruel."

I watch him swallow hard. His throat bobs with the motion and I can hear him trying to steady his breathing. His hands clench and unclench, and his eyes bore into me as if examining my soul.

"I'm not playing around. I would never joke around about something like this. He was in one of the stores I went into after buying the shoes. He helped me pick the dress," I tell him.

He laughs a bitter laugh, and moves away from me, looking at me as if he doesn't know who I am anymore. I know it's only going to get worse.

"Why didn't you just tell me it was him? Why did you lie and say it was an old friend?" he asks. "Are you sure it was really him?"

"I didn't lie, technically. He's an old friend, but he's also my brother," I say, holding his gaze.

I watch as a myriad of emotions cross his face, and I brace myself for the storm of emotions that are about to come my way. He looks away from me for a few moments as he puts his hands on his hips and bites his bottom lip. His face twists into a look of pain, then anger. His lip quivers and I know he's fighting back tears, and it tears my heart up. I never wanted to be the reason he feels pain. I never wanted to hurt him. I knew before I applied for the nanny position that it could go wrong, but I applied for it anyway. I know that things are about to get extremely bad, and I pray I can somehow fix this.

"What the fuck did you just say? Say it again." At my hesitation, he bellows, "Say it again, Amelia!"

"Shh, Jackson, you'll wake Hayden," I say softly as I try to keep the tears at bay even though they're burning the back of my eyes. "He's...my brother."

"Preston is your brother, and you didn't tell me? Why wouldn't you tell me something like that? Why did you pretend like you didn't know who he was? You lied to me!" he cries out, anger bubbling to the surface.

His fist slams into the counter beside him, and for a moment I think the countertop is going to shatter. I reach out to stop him from doing it again, but he pulls back from my touch. My heart cracks when he does, and I know that this is really bad, and I may not be able to fix things.

The way he looks at me tells me that my worst fear might be coming true, and I can't handle that thought. I'm going to lose him. I'm going to lose Hayden. I can see it coming as I watch him process the things I've said. I can tell he's putting everything together in his mind and my heart aches that I've done this to him. I've made him doubt me, the things I've said, and us.

His face is red, and his fists are clenched at his sides. For a moment, I almost wish

he'd hit me. I feel so guilty about everything I want to feel something else. I want to feel pain to distract me from the guilt that sits heavy in my chest. I don't voice what I'm thinking as we stare at each other for a few seconds.

"Answer me, Amelia," he demands through gritted teeth. "Now. I deserve an answer."

"I didn't think it mattered if you knew he was my brother or not," I reply softly, unable to meet his gaze now. My heart aches as I hear him suck in a breath.

I know that's wrong. I've always known it mattered. But if I'd told him from the beginning, it would've ruined everything. It would've been over before anything got started. My eyes stay trained on the floor as tears slip down my cheeks. I can feel the anger radiating from him, and I know if I look up at him it's going to break my heart in two.

I hear him struggling to catch his breath and for a moment, I fear he's going to have a panic attack he's breathing so hard. It feels like he's staring holes into my soul. I want to look at him because I know it's most likely going to be my last time seeing him, but I can't bring myself to meet his eyes. I know it'll be too painful. I keep my eyes on the floor. My heart feels like it's going to fall out of my chest into the pit of my stomach. I'm beginning to wish I'd never seen Preston in that store.

I feel Jackson slipping away from me with each passing second and I know there's nothing I can do about it. I'm losing him. I just got him, and now I'm losing him. He's going to take Hayden away from me too, I just know it.

The more I think about it, the more my heart sinks and my stomach swirls. I fight back a wave of nausea, and I grip the counter. I think I see concern flash in his eyes, but it's gone just as quickly as it appears.

“Look at me, Amelia. I want you to look into my eyes and tell me the truth. No more lies. I want the truth. You really didn’t think it mattered whether I knew or not?”

I look up at him, my heart aching at the pain etched on his face. His eyes hold the betrayal in them, and I know he has every right to feel that way. I know I should’ve told him right from the start that I know Preston and am related to him. I messed things up. I sigh heavily and look down again, unable to see the pain in his eyes anymore.

“The fact that Preston is my brother has no effect on my skills as a nanny, Jackson.”

“You didn’t think it mattered? He got my wife killed—of course it matters!” he roars. “He was sleeping with my wife! It definitely fucking matters!”

I look up then and watch as he rakes a hand through his hair, pacing back and forth in front of me. I can tell he’s trying to process what I’ve told him, and I know I need to tell him the rest to clear Preston’s name with him.

“They weren’t sleeping together, Jackson,” I say quietly. “Please believe me. Preston wouldn’t do that, no matter how he feels about someone.”

“I suppose he told you that?” he asks sharply.

His tone makes me recoil a bit. I know this side of him is the one I’ll most likely get from now on, but there’s a part of me that still hopes he’ll be able to forgive me.

“Lyla was his half sister,” I tell him.

“You’ve got to be making this shit up. Why would you tell me all this? Why are you doing this?” he rants.

My heart breaks and I try to reach for him, but he steps back, not allowing me to touch him.

“Jackson, please. I’m not making anything up. I thought the same thing at first when the wreck happened, but he explained everything to me when I saw him in Cincinnati that day,” I say.

“What do you mean you thought the same thing? What did you think?” He stared at me with a hard gaze. “You didn’t put two and two together that the Preston I talked about was your brother? You’ve been asking for details about the wreck and what was found at the scene, but you’ve known the whole time. What kind of game have you been playing?”

“If I’m being honest, I did think they might have been sleeping together, and if I thought that, then maybe you did too,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

“What would it matter if I did think that?” he asks, a confused look on his face.

“Sometimes jealous husbands do things they wouldn’t normally do,” I reply tentatively.

The confusion changes to a look of shock. “You thought I’d be capable of killing your brother?” He shakes his head, his anger rising even more. “How could you think that of me? We’ve never really liked each other, but I’d never kill him.”

“I wanted to be sure,” I say softly.

“So, if you thought I was capable of killing your brother, then I’d have to be capable of killing my wife too, right?” he asks me, his face full of rage.

“No! I know you’d never do that! Her being there was an accident,” I reply. “My

father put a hit out on Preston because Preston found out he wasn't his father, and my father was afraid Preston he would tell secrets of the family business to others, especially Lyla, since Preston had only just found out Lyla was his half sister on his dad's side. Preston has been in Cincinnati trying to figure out how to take my father down." I can hear how far-fetched the story sounds, but I pray he'll believe me. It's the only thing that makes sense, puts all the pieces together...

"I can't believe you actually did this to me, to Hayden. You pretended not to know anything about them, and you wormed your way in trying to figure out if I killed them. You lied about everything, didn't you? You lied about us?"

"Of course not! I'm sorry I didn't tell you any of this, Jackson. I was afraid. I was afraid of what you'd think. I know that you and Preston have never gotten along, and I wasn't sure how you'd react to having his sister as your nanny. But I never lied about my feelings for you. I care about you so much. Everything I've said to you is true. Everything I feel about you—it's real for me."

He looks at me and shakes his head, tears streaming down his face. I reach out to wipe them from his cheeks, but he bats my hand away.

"Get out. We're done," he says in a low, angry tone.

My heart completely shatters in my chest at his words. My world crashes down around me and my head is spinning. I fight the tears that threaten to spill down my face, and I shake my head, unwilling to believe it's going to end just like that. I know I should've told him the truth, but I'm trying to make it right. Why can't he forgive me?

"Jackson, please, don't do this," I whisper as I fight to keep my voice steady. "I'm sorry about everything."

“You can continue being Hayden’s nanny, because she’s been through so much in her short little life, but you and I are nothing but boss and employee,” he says. “Get out. Now.”

“Jackson, I’m sorry—it was wrong of me to assume the things I did about you, and it was wrong of me to try and investigate it on my own and lie to you, but my feelings for you are real. Please, please forgive me,” I beg as tears begin to slide down my cheeks.

For a moment I see his eyes soften as he sees the tears, but then the mask goes up and his gaze is hard again. His jaw clenches and unclenches in time with his fists.

“Amelia! We’re through! Get the fuck out of my house and don’t come back until it’s time for you to watch Hayden again.”

My eyes search his face for any kind of remorse or uncertainty, and when I don’t find any, I run for the entryway, grabbing my purse. I fling the door open, looking back at him one more time before leaving the house.

Once the door closes behind me, sobs rack my chest and my heart shatters as I leave him behind. I have no idea how I’m going to be able to continue working for him after this, but I have to find a way for the sake of that little girl. She’s been through too much to lose another person she loves, and I won’t do that to her. I won’t let him do it to her either. I’ll continue working there no matter what it takes or how much it hurts.

20

JACKSON

I feel as though my brain has been put in a blender. I can't get over Amelia's betrayal, but more than that, I don't know what to say to Hayden.

Aside from all that, my anger has gotten the better of me, and I'm not performing like I should on the ice. With the big game coming, I know it's only a matter of time before Coach catches on and says something to me.

I've stopped hanging with the guys, and have stayed home other than practice and games. They keep bugging me about what's going on with me, but I don't want to talk to anyone about what happened. I know they all mourn the loss of Preston, but if they knew he was alive...what would they think? I don't need them all to pity me either. I would hate it if they felt sorry for me for being lied to.

That thought sends chills of anger through my body again.

I wish I could talk to my mom about all this, but I don't want to bother her about it. We just saw them in Ohio, and I just told her about Amelia and me. Meanwhile the whole time Hayden and I were with them, Amelia was with her supposed-to-be-dead brother.

More than that, I just can't get over the fact that she suspected it was me who killed Lyla, and who had killed Preston. She knew the body wasn't found...she didn't think I had him tied up somewhere for two years or something...did she?

I shake my head as my phone rings. I look at it, praying it's not Amelia, though I don't know why it would be. I nearly choke when I see it's Coach calling.

"Oh boy, the time has drawn nigh," I say out loud sarcastically as I pick up the phone. "Hey, Coach," I say, trying to sound casual."

"Hey, Jackson," he says. "I was wondering if this is a good time to talk for a minute?"

My heart begins to beat faster. This is it...either he's going to lecture me, fire me, or something bad has happened and he's calling to tell me. I can't win for losing.

"Sure, I have a minute," I tell him, though in truth it seems as though I have way longer than that.

"Good," he says. "I was just wondering if you might be available for a quick meeting with me and a few of the guys in the locker room this evening. I just need to go over a few things."

"Is everything okay?" I ask, hoping that if this is about me, he'll say so.

I need to know what to prepare for.

"Yeah, sure, just wanting to talk over a few things is all," he says, but I don't know that I buy it.

"What time, Coach?" I ask him.

"Let's say six," he says. "The ice is open tonight so that should work just fine."

"Works for me," I say. "See you at six."

“See you at six,” he agrees, and then the line goes blank when he hangs up.

I look at my phone for a moment, dumbfounded. I guess I called that one. I don’t know for sure what this little meeting is all about, but if it’s just a few of the guys, I worry it’s some sort of intervention.

I sigh as I sit back and reach for my beer. I hate that I’ve started drinking so early, but with Hayden at a playdate with some of the guys’ kids and wives, I figured I had the time. Now, as it turns out...I have exactly four hours to sober up.

I chug the remaining beer before taking it to the kitchen and throwing the can in the trash.

I look around and see Amelia everywhere. She organized this place and made it into a home fit for Hayden.

I sigh again as I walk out to the back yard. Even here, Amelia is everywhere. I think about Hayden falling, and what I said to Amelia about not being her mom. Now I know that the whole time, Amelia was sure I was involved in the death of Hayden’s mom, and it feels so much worse.

I sit on one of the swings and drop my head into my hands. I need to get my shit together, that much I know to be true.

A few hours later, and after checking to be sure Hayden can stay with Quinn, I’m driving to the rink. My buzz is gone and now I’m just numb.

I pull in a few minutes before six. It’s hard to see who’s here since the parking lot is massive and goes all around the building. The whole team could be here and I wouldn’t know it.

Resigning myself to my fate, I get out of the car and head into the rink. I can already hear the voices of Coach and a couple of the guys as I make my way to the locker room.

I take a gulp before entering.

Coach is sitting at one of the tables that flank the massive room. Oliver, Felix, Vaughn, and Benjamin are with him.

Damn. I shake my head. These are my best guys.

I know now this has to be some sort of beat-Jackson-down meeting, but as much as I know that, I know they can tell something is up with me, though I haven't said anything to anyone about what happened between Amelia and me, or what she told me about Pres...or any of it.

"Hey, guys," I say as I turn one of the chairs around and sit in it backward like both Felix and Oliver are doing.

"Hey, man," Oliver says, reaching over to fist-bump me.

"Hey," Felix says, tipping an imaginary hat which brings a smile to my face.

"Sup," Vaughn and Benjamin say at the exact same time.

"Welcome, Jackson," Coach says as he scoots his chair up to the table, holding a clipboard in his hand.

"What's up, Coach?" I ask as he prepares to say something I know has to do with me.

It's a gut feeling I can't fight no matter how hard I try.

“Well...” He clears his throat. “First of all, I want you all to know that I’ve been so proud of you guys this season...all of you. I know parts of the season could’ve gone sideways, but you’ve all done your part to keep it going for me, and here we are heading into the Stanley Cup.”

“Yeah, we are!” Oliver whoops, and we all smile and pat one another on the back.

“I want to thank you for that,” Coach continues. “You know it’s been a couple years since we’ve found ourselves here, and I want to see the win just as much as you guys do...maybe more,” he adds. “I just need you all to keep your heads on straight and get through the rest of the season in one piece.”

“Yes, sir,” Felix says as he salutes—actually puts his hand to his head and salutes Coach.

“I picked you guys to talk to because I’ve seen the statistics.” He puts the clipboard down on the table for us to look at. “The polls are in, the numbers have been calculated, and the four of you”—he points to Vaughn, Ben, Oliver, and me—“have the potential for the highest stats of any players to play for the cup in twenty years. They expect your cumulative play to be unprecedented.” He beams as we lean over and look at the projected stats of the game. “And Felix...” He pauses as he flips the page to show the goalie stats for the season. “They have you at the highest stats of any goalie in the league at this time.”

“Way to go, guys,” I say as we all stare dumbfounded at the projections.

“Now, the other guys have some fine stats here, but it’s been said they expect you five to carry us if you can keep yourselves straight,” he says. “In saying that, I’m going to say this. You need to bring your A game and give it all you’ve got. We’re so close, and I know we can work together to get the Stanley Cup and bring it home.” He speaks with such passion I can’t help but beam at him.

It's been so hard to find a smile these past several days, yet here I am smiling with my brothers. I don't know what could ruin this moment.

"We got your back, Coach," Benjamin says as he pats Coach on the back.

"Yeah, well I hope so," he says. "But also, I have to tell you, no matter the hoped-for stats, I need to mention that as of late, there's been a weak link in the ranks and you guys need to make sure you're at your strongest both physically and mentally to prepare for this."

There it is. My smile falls as the realization hits me. He continues on as I pretend I'm listening to what he's saying, but my mind is on a certain woman and how destroyed she looked when I screamed at her to get out of my apartment a few nights ago. The hurt in her eyes still stabs me in the heart like a knife, but I'm still pissed at her and can't stand the thought of looking at her.

I'm the weak link...I have to be. He's not looking directly at me, but it has to be one of the five of us, and I'm it. He wouldn't call for just us, say all this, and have it be about someone else on the A team.

I try to brace myself as I veer back toward the conversation. I'm thankful Hayden is with Dean and his wife while I'm at this meeting, so I won't have to see Amelia when I get home.

That's the last thing I need after an exhausting day.

"Well, that's it for now," Coach says. He looks at me as if realizing I've been lost in my mind these past few minutes.

"Thanks, Coach," I say as he gets to his feet.

I turn my chair around and push it under the table as the other guys do the same, and then head to my locker to grab a few things, trying to ignore the feelings welling up inside me.

“Hey, Jackson,” a voice calls from behind me. “Are you doing okay, man? You seem a bit off lately,” Oliver says as Coach steps into his office, leaving us alone.

I wonder if the guys have been sent to gang up on me now that the whole weak link speech has been made. All four of them were here before me, after all, so they could have gotten assigned to the Jackson-is-messed-up task force before I even got here.

“I’m good. I’ll be on my A game. We’ll get the cup,” I say, knowing my tone is short.

I know I’m just saying what Coach would want me to say, but it doesn’t feel good to talk like this to one of my best friends. Oliver gives me a weird look, and I can tell he knows I’m full of shit. I hope he doesn’t press the issue, but I can’t get that lucky. Before Oliver can say anything else, another voice speaks up.

“You’ve been distracted the last couple of practices, and you were spaced out while Coach was talking there at the end. Something is going on with you, so spill,” Felix says from beside Oliver, seemingly giving me no other choice than to talk.

“I’m fine, don’t worry about it. I’ll play my best at the next game,” I try to assure them. “It’s a big one after all.”

So far, Vaughn and Ben are just flanking the other guys. They haven’t said anything so far, but my gut tells me they will if Oliver and Felix can’t get to me.

“Jackson, we’re your friends—if something is wrong you can tell us about it. We want to help you in any way we can,” Vaughn finally cuts in from my other side.

I give him a small smile, but it's the best I can do. I know these guys are just trying to do what's best for me, but I don't feel like doing this...not here, not now.

"If you're not going to talk about what's got you so fucked up with your friends in here..." Ben begins with a tone of irritation in his voice. If anyone is going to be straight with me, it's going to be him. "Then you need to get your shit together out there," he says, pointing out the door to the ice beyond the barrier.

"You know I always bring my—" I begin, but he cuts me off.

"You're the weak link Coach is talking about, man," Benjamin says, and I feel his irritation rubbing against me. "He's just being nice about it and not calling you out in front of everyone."

I don't blame him for being harsh on me. I know I need to get my shit together. I've been so distracted thinking about Amelia ever since the breakup. I need to push her out of my mind and concentrate on what matters now, and that's the game.

"Thanks for your sympathy, Ben. It means so much," I say in a sarcastic tone, even though hurting him or any of the guys is the last thing I want.

I'm happy when Ben doesn't balk. He doesn't even look like I just spat venomous words at him.

"What's the deal, man? Is something going on with Hayden? Talk to us," Oliver pleads with me. "How's her arm?" he asks, and I have to think to remember she had a hurt arm.

"It's doing much better—it was good after a week," I say, hoping the subject can be dropped.

“That’s fantastic, but there has to be something else going on if your head just isn’t in the game like it should be,” Ben adds, lifting his hand and placing it on my shoulder.

I look down at the floor and shake my head, ashamed to tell them about it because I hadn’t even told them how strong my feelings were for Amelia. Sure, I told them my feelings the day I finally asked her to be mine. They were the ones who encouraged me to get back in the game and go for it with Amelia in the first place.

I love them for it, but I wish I hadn’t gone there now.

They just don’t know that like had already turned to love .

I take a deep breath and meet their gazes one at a time before speaking.

“I know this is no excuse for my shitty playing, but uh...Amelia and I aren’t together anymore,” I say as I feel a lump start to form in my throat. “We were great together, and now we’re nothing...well, I’m her boss and she’s still employed under me, but that’s it, and there’s no hope of it ever being fixed.”

I blink my eyes really fast to keep the tears at bay. I didn’t want the guys to see me cry over a woman, even if I’d felt things for her that I never thought I’d feel again after my wife died. They already think I’m a weak link when it comes to the game, and I don’t want them to think I’m a weak link when it comes to my emotions.

Though...I’ve only shed a single tear this whole time, and crying might feel good. But now is not the time and place for all that. Fuck you, emotions .

“Aw, man, that sucks, dude. I’m sorry to hear that,” Felix says as he pats me on the back. “I know how much you liked having her around.”

“What happened? You two seemed so good together,” Oliver says quietly.

“I don’t really want to go into the why and how, but I promise I’ll be good by the game,” I tell them as I meet their gazes. “And I promise that if I need to talk about it, you four will be the first I go to. I don’t want the rest of the team to know my business, but you guys have been my brothers for years. You were there when Hayden was born, when I lost my wife, and I know you’ll be here for me now.”

They all nod, and I know I have to keep my word to them. I can’t let them down, no matter what I have to do to get Amelia and this whole damn situation out of my head.

I don’t know why, but I have a feeling that’s going to be even harder than I think.

I head back home, ready to see Hayden. She always makes me feel better no matter how bad I feel. I stop by Dean and Quinn’s and pick her up. As we drive home, I glance at her in the rearview mirror. Her little body gets lost in the back seat in the dark, but I know she’s here.

“Did you have fun, baby?” I ask her.

“Yes, Daddy,” she says. “I got to play on the slide with the other kids,” she coos with excitement from behind me.

“That’s so great—I’m glad you got a chance to play today.”

“Me too,” she says. “Do you think I can play with Amelia soon, Daddy?” she asks, and my heart drops.

“Soon, baby,” I say to her. “Soon.” I sigh as I pull into the driveway.

“Otay, Daddy,” she giggles.

“Did you get a bath at Uncle Dean’s house?” I ask as I get her out of the car, realizing

her hair is wet.

“Yep.” She smiles at me. “Auntie Quinn had to wash the peanut butter from my hair. She said me getting a full bath might help you, and I got to play with bubbles !” She says that last word with so much joy.

I hug her tight to me as we make our way into the house, and after I have the door locked behind us, I haul her up to her room.

“It’s late, baby,” I say to her as I open her bedroom door. “We only have time for one song or one book tonight.” I smile at her as she snuggles into her bed under her covers.

“Read to me, Daddy,” she squeals.

I reach down and pick up our favorite book to read together. Because of this little girl and the smile she has on her face right now as she asks me to read her a goodnight story...I know that no matter what...everything will be alright.

21

AMELIA

I never wanted any of this to happen. First off, I didn't want to be in a relationship with Jackson to begin with, in fear he had something to do with my brother's death. Now, knowing my brother is in fact alive, and I've severed any hope of ever being with Jackson again...I'm left empty. More than empty, if that's even possible.

I feel so...aimless.

It's all my fault. If I could have guarded my heart...or if I hadn't let myself fall for this man and his beautiful daughter, then no one would have gotten hurt...and no one would be hurting now. Not even me. Of course, I have to remember that if it weren't for Jackson and being with him, I wouldn't have been in the city where my brother was hiding. I still wouldn't even know he's alive.

My heart is breaking and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. I don't know if I deserve to feel anything but heartbreak. Somehow, I feel this is all my fault, though I know deep down it isn't.

Out of everything that has transpired between Jackson and me since I revealed the truth to him, I'm just happy that he hasn't fired me. If I have to cut Hayden out of my life, I think that would kill me just as much, maybe even more. That little girl means the world to me, and I know deep down that I mean something to her too.

Trying to shake all these thoughts from my mind, I pace back and forth in my living

room. I'm trying to think of anything that might fix this, but there simply isn't anything that comes to mind right now. Not that I think more time will help me come up with anything either.

I sit down and put my head in my hands, and attempt to not let the tears fall, but they do. They always do, no matter what I do to try to stop them.

I should have been honest from the beginning , I chastise myself silently with an exasperated sigh. If I would have just told him sooner...

"Grrr, come on, Amelia, get your shit together!" I yell at myself as I get up again and pace some more. "Oh, great, now I'm talking to myself."

Part of me wants to tell Jackson I don't want to stay employed under him after all this, and another part of me wants to run home to my parents, but that isn't a good idea either. Not now that I know my father isn't who I've thought him to be my whole life.

Oh, what a mess I'm in.

How can my father be so horrible? My father has been the cause of so many deaths. At least Lyla's, and almost Preston's, but who knows how many more? I suppose that's not the kind of thing you can just ask a person.

Hey, Dad, I know you're a psycho out for blood and vengeance and whatnot...and I know you killed Jackson's wife Lyla, and kind of sort of almost killed Preston in the process, but how many others have you done the same thing to? Oh, and am I in danger of having the same thing happen to me because I now know information that I shouldn't?

I roll my eyes at how ridiculous that sounds. Of course I could never bring myself to

say anything like that to him, but it hasn't stopped me from thinking about it a lot lately.

Ever since Preston told me the truth, my mind hasn't stopped playing memories of my father on repeat. Every birthday party, every time he took me out on a daddy-daughter date, even the money spent on me...was it all laced in lies and the Mafia?

My phone rings and brings me out of that thought.

At first, I consider not even looking to see who it is, on the off chance it's my dad and stepmother, but then I think about Hayden again. The possibility of Jackson needing help with her is what drives me to look. What if she's fallen again or something?

I couldn't be so lucky though...right? Not about Hayden getting hurt of course, but about Jackson needing me for anything. He's angry at me, and I don't think anything is going to change that anytime soon.

I finally check my phone and see that the caller ID says the call is coming out of Ohio. The only people I know there are my brother and Jackson's parents, but I don't see it being them. I think about not taking my chances, but my curiosity gets the better of me and I pick up the call on what has to be close to the last ring before rolling over to voicemail.

"Hello?" I say, holding my breath with anticipation. I'm shaking all over.

The prospect of this call having anything to do with what my father is, and does, frightens me to my core. There's no way he knows that I know...is there?

"Hey, sis," Preston's voice calls out, and my heart lurches as I finally let out the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding.

I don't know how to feel. All I've felt is numb, ever since finding out my brother was alive and then betraying Jackson in the worst way. I hate numbness, but it beats the other emotions that come when the numbness recedes.

Damn my emotions, which seem to want to both retreat and explode all at the same time.

"Hey," I say softly, for a lack of anything better to say at the moment. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you," I admit.

"Why's that?" he asks me softly, as if he's trying not to let others hear his voice.

"I mean, I know you gave me your number and all, but you seemed kind of set on keeping me out of it all," I say, hoping I'm not being too hard on him.

"Sorry," I say quietly when he doesn't say anything in return for a long while. "I'm just in a bad headspace. I know you can't be in a great place yourself, but..." I fall still, trying to think of something, anything else to say to finish my thought process, but nothing comes to mind.

"I figured you might want to know what's going on," he says. "But I can go if you don't want to talk to me." My heart breaks. "I didn't mean to cause any problems for you." He sounds dejected.

"No," I snap, hoping to catch him before he hangs up. "Don't you dare. I know you're on a burner or something and I don't want to take the chance of not being able to get back to you if I need to. I don't know how these things work, Pres. I was just shocked is all."

"You're right." He chuckles a little, but it seems rather forced. "I am, and it's a limited-use type of thing until I can figure out how to deal with your dad." It's weird

for him not to say our dad anymore.

“He’s not my dad either if he tried to kill the only brother I’ve ever had,” I snap dryly, trying to figure out how I’m going to go about dealing with that whole situation. “He murdered someone, Pres, and God only knows how many more someones.”

“I never wanted to take your father from you,” he says, his voice dripping in sadness. “He’s going to blame me, you know.”

“You didn’t take him away from me...he did that himself by trying to take my brother.” I sigh because that’s the only thing that feels right. “And he took himself out of the equation when he did that. It’s as simple as that.”

“How are things with Jackson?” he asks, obviously trying to change the subject. “Does he know about me?” It’s easy to tell he isn’t super comfortable with the whole situation.

“Yes, I told him...big mistake,” I breathe. “And he promptly broke up with me after, so you don’t have to worry about that anymore. Jackson is a thing of the past.”

“Why?” he asks with a tone of worry lacing his voice.

“Because, Pres,” I begin, trying to coerce the hostility from my body so I don’t displace it onto him. He doesn’t deserve it after all he’s been through. “I pretty much admitted to him that I only came into his life in the first place because I suspected he had maybe killed you.”

“You what?” I have to fight a laugh at how indignant he sounds. “Why on earth would you think that?” he barks out in disbelief.

“I thought that since your things were in that car, that you must have been sleeping with Lyla and Jackson found out or something,” I rant. “I mean, I know you two were rivals and didn’t get along all that much before you were on the Jays together. It was a possibility that he got rid of you and killed his wife in the meantime. The only problem is...” I pause for a moment, trying to think of the best way to explain what I have to say.

“The only problem is you fell for him, then realized that he wasn’t capable of hurting me at all and that he loved his wife more than any man has ever loved a woman before, and there was no way he harmed a hair on her head?” he spouts, and I know I don’t even have to say anything to let him know he’s right.

“Can I ask you something?” I change the subject, though I don’t know that he’s going to let me get by so easily.

“Don’t run from the subject, little sister, because I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Fine,” I say tersely. “Yes...now, did you ever figure out who your father was? As I hear it, Lyla wasn’t even one-hundred-percent sure who her dad was.”

“Yeah, we knew we were half brother and sister, on our dad’s side, because of the genealogy project. So we decided to look for our dad together—all we knew was it had to be someone who slept with both our moms. And then we found him—we had just discovered the truth right before she died. I wondered if finding out was the cause of the whole thing, but we hadn’t told a soul, so there was no way anyone knew to report back.” He pauses a moment as if thinking of the possibilities. “Unless your father bugged her car or something. Maybe our cells.”

“Sounds like he’s capable of it,” I admit, even though it doesn’t feel so good to do so.

“Either way, we had just found out our father is the coach of the Chicago Blue

Jays...my coach,” Preston says. “I don’t know if Coach knows or not. Lyla and I hadn’t gotten the chance to talk to him, and since then I’ve sort of been dead, so I haven’t gone to him about it since.”

I fight a chuckle. No matter how crazy this all seems, my brother knows how to make me laugh. In the middle of the chaos, he finds moments to slip in something funny, and it feels so good to feel something other than numb for a moment.

In all honesty, I’m having a hard time grasping all the lies that have been told here.

“Do you plan on telling him now that you’re alive again?” I ask, trying not to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

“Not right now,” Preston says. “I don’t want to risk his life in all this.” He blows out a huff of air. “It’s just weird that our mother was apparently a bit more promiscuous in her younger days than what any of us knew.”

“So, you think she cheated frequently on our father?” I ask. “I mean...my father,” I correct myself though the whole thing still feels so ridiculous.

“Well...” He pauses a moment, and I can hear him shifting on the other end of the phone, trying to get comfortable. “There were two that I know of. Apparently, it happened a lot with those two guys though, but that was why I didn’t know right away who my father was.”

“And you’re sure it’s Coach, really?” I ask, trying to figure it all out. “How do you know for sure?” I ask, hoping he has some concrete evidence on the matter. I shift in my seat before getting to my feet again and resuming my pacing. Sitting still for long periods of time has not been possible these last few days, and it’s even less possible now that my gut is twisting with all this new information.

“Two games before the accident, I accidentally threw an elbow that clipped Coach in the nose,” he admits with a wry chuckle. “I helped to stop the flow of blood...” He pauses for a moment, but I think I understand where he’s going with this.

“And you kept the tissues, and had it tested?” I ask.

“Yep,” he says with a sigh. “Then both Lyla and I gave our blood to be tested. A couple days before the accident, the tests came back as a match, meaning he was our father, and I had another half sister. The only reason we knew to check with Coach was that Lyla’s mother kept a journal that named him as a fling she had around the time she got pregnant with Lyla.”

“And you just hoped he was one of our mother’s flings too? That was kind of a long shot, wasn’t it?” I ask with a bit of irritation I just can’t shake.

“Well, no,” he sighs. “As it turns out, our mother kept a journal as well. I took it from the house the last time I went home before the accident...about a week before, I think. I’d seen the book among some of Mom’s things that your father kept in the closet. It didn’t even look like it had been touched in years, but I found it while looking for evidence, and after looking through it, it was clear it was a good thing your dad never saw it. Or if he did, he played dumb for having the evidence right before his eyes that there was a possibility I wasn’t his son.”

“My guess is he knew and hoped you were his,” I admit. “He always wanted a son to carry on the family business...though little did I know what that family business really was.” I snort as I finally sit back down. “I’m still kind of trying to process that one.” I chuckle, but it feels odd to do so.

“Yeah.” Preston laughs a little too, but it’s weak and forced. “Well, our mother talked about three men...your father, a salesman from Indiana that she was with a time or two, and then Coach. The only person who matched Lyla’s mother’s journal was

Coach of course. We put two and two together, and bam...we became brother and sister essentially overnight. I guess Coach gets around."

"I wish you could have trusted me with more of this information when it first came to light," I snap at him, though I don't mean it.

I don't think I do anyway.

I feel like if I had known, I could have helped figure all these things out for them. It doesn't matter to me that my father is the villain in all this...well, it matters to me. But more than anything, I would have died for Preston to be safe and protected.

"And what, Ami? Risk your life too?" he asks, with heat in his own tone. "Because I would have never been okay with that. Hell..." He pauses for a moment—out of irritation, I'm sure. "I'm not even okay with you knowing now, for those same reasons."

"I could have handled it, you know. I'm a grown woman and can take care of myself," I snarl, sounding more like an animal than a human, but then I come to my senses. "Sorry," I mumble. "I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at myself." Tears begin to spill despite my resistance to them.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Preston says, but I don't agree with him. "And you don't need to beat yourself up either."

"We'll see," I say. "But I don't know what to do. I don't know how to live without you, and now Jackson and Hayden. At least for now he's still letting me work for him, so I'm still Hayden's nanny. I would die if he took that from me too."

"You aren't living without me," he says. "I'm right here." His voice is full of conviction. "I just have to stay dead a little longer until I figure out how to deal with

all this. It's not going to last forever, and if you just talk to Jackson, maybe you can work things out with him in the end...but until then, there's only one thing I need you to do."

"What's that?" I ask, not sure I have the strength to do much else.

"Just live every day as normal as you can," he says, and I nearly snort a laugh of disbelief. Normal? I'm not sure I know what that is anymore. "Be the best you can be, and live life happy and normal."

"How?" I ask. "It's going to be so hard. Damn near impossible even."

"I know, but you have to do this...for me," he adds. "Do you hear me? I give you no other choice than to be as brilliant and amazing as I know you to be. This will all work out in the end...promise me," he says.

"Pres—" I begin to protest, but he stops me before I can say anything else.

"Promise me," he demands, and I can hear the need in his voice for me to say that I do.

"I promise," I say, and even though I don't know how I can really promise something like this, I do it anyway, just for my big brother to feel peace.

"I have to go, Amelia," he says. "I won't have this phone after the call is over, but I will call you every third day around the same time. It'll be a different number each time. I won't leave a message or anything if you don't answer, so just know I'll call again in three more days' time."

"Okay," I say with more tears tracking down my cheeks. "I love you."

“I love you too, Amelia,” he says, and then he’s gone.

The call goes dead, and I delete it from my phone log for good measure. I don’t know how much control my father has over things on my end, but I don’t want to take any chances.

Not where my brother’s involved, but I do plan on one thing—I will get revenge for the pain that man has caused Preston, Jackson, Hayden, me, and everyone else he has ever wronged with his higher-than-mighty mindset.

It’s time for the reign of the Mafia boss I didn’t even know was my father to come to an end.

22

JACKSON

I stand in front of the mirror in my room, pulling a Jays jersey over a white T-shirt. My heart thumps in my throat as anger fills me up all over again.

I don't want to see Amelia at all, but I guess it's impossible to get what I want.

I didn't feel right taking her away from Hayden after all this. Now that I've had a chance to think about things a little more, I wish I'd just fired her as well.

Hayden loves her—and that is the only reason I didn't. That little girl has been through so much in her short little life, I couldn't take away someone who makes her so happy.

I leave my room and head to Hayden's room to get her ready. Once she's dressed and ready to go out with Amelia, I help her with her shoes and we head downstairs. I grab her snack bag and pack her a drink and then I head back to the living room with her.

"Why don't you love Amelia anymore?" she asks me as we wait by the front door.

"Honey..." I pause, trying to think of something to say that will make sense to her. "Sometimes, adults just decide not to talk to each other anymore."

"Is it okay if I still talk to her, Daddy?" she asks, and it breaks my heart.

“Of course you can talk to her,” I say to her softly. “Daddy would never take that away from you.”

“Good, because I love her, Daddy,” Hayden says, and sadness flows through me all over again.

The amount of anger and frustration I feel over finding out that not only is Preston alive, but is Amelia’s brother, is insurmountable. The entire time we’ve been together, the entire time she’s been here with my daughter, that woman assumed I had something to do with her brother’s death. You can’t just forgive something like that.

I can’t.

No matter how many times I’ve tried to bring myself to forgive her, forgiveness doesn’t come, and anger resides in all the places where love used to be. I still miss her fiercely, but something in me is completely broken now that she’s not here, but only she’s to blame for that.

A knock sounds at the door before I can say anything else to Hayden. I know it’s Amelia, but it seems strange. She was practically living here before, and now she’s knocking at the door.

I reach over and unlock the door.

“Amelia!” Hayden squeals as she runs into her arms.

“Are you ready to go to the park?” she asks my little girl as she picks her up, though her voice seems strained.

“Yes, is Daddy coming with us?” Hayden asks as she turns her attention to me.

“No, Daddy has to go run a few errands and head to practice,” I say to her as I reach over and kiss her on the head. “You and Amelia are coming back here later. She’s going to fix dinner for you and hang out until Daddy gets home.”

“Will you love her when you get home?” she asks, and my mind races as my eyes meet Amelia’s just for a moment.

“We talked about this, baby,” I say to her softly.

“I know, Daddy,” she says sadly, but then she turns back to Amelia. “Let’s go to the park!” she squeals. “Bye, Daddy,” she adds as she leans over and kisses my cheek.

I watch as Amelia puts her down and takes her hand to walk her to the park.

“Oh, Amelia—” I say, and she spins around like she’s shocked I’ve spoken to her. “You forgot this,” I say, handing her the snack and drink bag I packed for Hayden.

“Oh.” She reaches over and takes the bag. “Thanks,” she says, before turning and walking away with my daughter.

I close the door as my mind runs a mile a minute. My heart is running just as fast, if not faster. I don’t know that I can keep doing this...seeing Amelia repeatedly is going to be the death of me.

This would be so much better if I never saw her again.

I huff as I walk into the kitchen and grab my keys from the counter. I pause as I replay the memory of me fucking Amelia in here, on this same counter. The day I first asked her to be mine. We came so close to being caught by Hayden.

I fight a small smile at the memory, but then everything else comes rushing through

my mind, and the moment's gone.

I head toward the side door to get to my car. When I open the door, I'm shocked to come face-to-face with my mother. She's about to knock, standing there with a chocolate cake in her hands.

"Mom," I say, stepping aside to let her in. "What are you doing here?"

"Does a mother need a reason to visit with her only son?" she asks, looking around as if looking for something. "I saw Hayden and Amelia walking to the park," she adds as she goes over to the stove and begins making herself a cup of hot tea.

"Mom, I really have to get going," I say. "I have?—"

"Yeah, I know, practice," she says. "Well, Coach isn't going to kick you off the team for talking to your mother, is he?"

"I...I..." I begin, but then I throw my hands up and sit down at the table with her as she offers me a cup of tea as well. I take it.

She then goes to work cutting a couple pieces of the cake and handing me one on a small plate with a fork.

"Eat," she commands as she finally sits down with me, her cake and tea in hand.

"Yes, ma'am," I say, as I sip my tea and take a bite of my mom's cake. "Satisfied?" I smile at her through the bite.

"Not completely, but somewhat appeased." She smiles too, and then takes a bite of her own piece of cake. "Make sure Hayden and Amelia get a piece of this, will you?" she adds as she takes a sip of her tea.

“I’ll make sure Hayden gets a piece,” I say dryly, wondering why my mom has come all the way from Ohio just to bring me cake.

“And Amelia,” she adds.

“Mom, what are you doing here?” I ask, trying not to sound rude. “I mean, I love seeing you, but we just saw you in Ohio, and boom—here you are. You didn’t mention a trip here when we talked.”

“Well...” She pauses for a moment. “While I don’t think I need an excuse to come visit my baby boy, granddaughter, and Amelia, I am in town for just one day on business.” She smiles. “I thought you could use one of my cakes...you are rather thin these days.” She pokes at my stomach, and I roll my eyes. “I didn’t know I was coming over until this morning and I just thought I’d pop in.”

“Well, I have to head to practice, and you already know Hayden isn’t here right now...but I hate to just leave you.”

“I thought I might visit with you until you leave, then stay and do some work on my laptop and visit with Hayden and Amelia until my meeting once they get home.” She beams.

“Mom,” I say, reaching across to take her hand, “since you’re planning on doing that...” I pause for a moment, trying to think of the best way to tell her. “You need to know that Amelia and I are no longer together.”

“What? Why?” she asks. “But you’re letting her still work for you?”

“First of all, I don’t want to get into it, and second...yes. Amelia and I might not have worked out, but Hayden loves her and until I find someone just as good as Amelia to replace her, I’m going to keep her on.” Deep down, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to

find anyone better than Amelia.

“What happened?” my mother demands as she turns her hand over and gives my hand a little squeeze.

“I don’t want to—” I begin, but she cuts me off.

“Jackson, tell me everything.”

I give in, knowing she’s not going to let this drop. “You know the day Hayden and I went to dinner with you guys in Ohio?”

“Yes,” my mother says. “The same day you told me about you and Amelia?”

“One and the same,” I sigh.

“Okay...” She prods me to continue with a circulating motion of both her hands before she puts her hand back in mine.

“Well—” I take a deep breath. “You know how Preston’s things were found in the car with Lyla when she died, right?”

“Yeah, a wallet, right?” she says with a shudder. “And loads of his blood.”

“Right, and for the longest time I wondered if they were having an affair or something—and let me tell you, at this rate, that might have been easier to deal with than the truth.”

“So, you know the truth then? They didn’t find his body, did they?” she asks, a bit of hope in her voice. “And I don’t know what any of this has to do with you and Amelia not working out.”

“You will,” I say. “Just be patient.” I smile at her a little, but then the frown returns to my face just as fast.

“Take your time,” she says, back in mother mode.

“So, they never found his body, marked him as deceased after his body didn’t show up. The police were sure the brakes went out in her car, though it was never confirmed and honestly, I never asked.”

“Brakes not working as in...they were cut?” She puts two and two together.

“Maybe, and it’s more than likely since I found out what I did from Amelia.” I wish there was a way to not have to relive all this.

“Still not sure what Amelia has to do with any of this, but go on.” She smiles at me, fully invested in the story I’m spinning for her.

“Well, Amelia is Preston’s little sister,” I snap.

“Oh.” She pauses with her brow bunched. “Did you know that when you hired her...or dated her?”

“No,” I confirm. “And that’s the biggest issue here, but then I found out she essentially applied for the job as Hayden’s nanny because she too thought it was possible that her brother and my wife were sleeping together.”

“I see,” is all she says.

“But...” I pause, more for drama than anything. “It turns out that she thought the whole time that I might have known they were sleeping together and killed her brother out of revenge...meaning she thought I was capable of killing Lyla too.”

“Oh, come now, there’s no way that girl thinks you killed your wife.” She snorts, obviously in disbelief.

“She doesn’t think that anymore,” I say flatly.

“What changed?”

“Well, she says that as she got to know me, she believed it less and less, but it took her running into her brother in Ohio while shopping to know for sure,” I say, the hurt flooding me all over again.

“He’s alive?” She clutches her chest as if holding on to a string of pearls she isn’t wearing.

“Yes, and that’s not all...he’s been in hiding after finding out that he and Lyla were supposedly brother and sister,” I say, still not sure I believe any of this. “I guess Amelia’s father is some sort of mob or Mafia boss, and after finding out that his only son and heir to whatever fucked-up family business they have going on is no longer his son and heir...well, he handled it —” I say the last two words with air quotes. “Taking my wife down with him. But, Mom...” I pause as I think about the possible implication of my mother knowing all this. “I don’t know how much of the Mafia thing I believe, but if it’s true, you could be in danger for just knowing all this.”

“Did Amelia know before all this that her father was a bad guy?” she wonders. “Because if that woman knew and put my grandbaby in danger, this grandma is going to have more than words.”

“She says she didn’t know until Preston enlightened her that day,” I admit.

“So, you broke up with Amelia for her father being involved in something she didn’t even know about?” she snaps, now back on Amelia’s side obviously.

“No, I broke up with her because she thought I was capable of not only murdering her brother, but my own wife, and the whole time she pretended to not even know them,” I begin. “She let me talk about Lyla and the accident like it was all new to her, and the whole time she was playing Nancy Drew or Criminal Minds on her own, unintentionally jeopardizing all of us.”

“I see,” is all my mother says.

Those two words exasperate me to no end.

Deep down, I’m glad my mom showed up. She’s really the only person I have to confide in. Sure, I have all the guys, but I can’t talk to them about all this.

My father and I have a decent relationship, but not one where we can just open up like this. There’s something about my mother that just makes me feel comfortable enough to talk.

The truth of it all is that while my father is a great granddad to Hayden, our relationship has been strained since I was younger. He never emoted much, and that made me grow up thinking men weren’t supposed to feel things, or at least were not supposed to show they were feeling things. When Lyla passed, he made me feel like my pain wasn’t worth all the tears and anger.

Anger...I recall all that anger I felt even up to the point Amelia came along. So much of it consumed me on so many occasions. I hadn’t felt that anger in so many months until recently, and now that’s all I feel all over again.

“Well, that certainly is a lot to take in, now isn’t it?” Mom says with a little smile as she brings her teacup back up to her lips and takes a sip.

“Yeah, and even though I’ve had a little bit of time to process it all, it’s still just as

hard to get through,” I admit to her. “It’s a lot to unpack, and even harder to deal with emotionally. You know how much I struggle in that department anyway.”

“I wish that wasn’t the case,” she says, giving the back of my hand a little pat. “So, they weren’t having an affair...that’s something.” She looks into the distance as if looking for something more to say.

“Nope, no affair, and apparently they were siblings.” I roll my eyes at how ridiculous this whole thing seems now that I’ve spoken it out loud.

“Well, that should make you feel a little better anyway,” she says, and for a moment I’m not sure what she means by that.

“What should make me feel better?” I wonder.

“That your wife wasn’t stepping out on you,” she confirms. “It sounds like she was just trying to get to the bottom of everything after finding out she had a brother with an ex-dad who is a very scary guy.”

“Oh, I don’t know how I feel about it,” I say, though deep down that feels like a lie.

“Relieved,” she says. “That’s how you should feel.”

“It’s hard to feel that way, Mom, when all I feel is the pain of losing her all over again, and now Amelia. I never wanted to fall in love again, and here I am hurting over the loss of a second woman who is still alive. I don’t know which one is worse, if I’m being honest with myself.”

“Come on, you have to agree that knowing she was true to you counts for something,” she says with conviction.

“Alright, I guess you’re right in that department. I’m not mad at Lyla. I’ve always been hurt that she left Hayden and me, but deep down I hoped there was some explanation for Preston being wither her. Did I ever think I would find out...? No. Now that I know, however, I don’t know how to feel. I mean, why didn’t Lyla tell me about all this?”

“My guess is she didn’t want you and Hayden to be in danger of finding out the Mafia was after Preston,” she says, and I know she might be right.

“I’m just so pissed,” I admit as I put my head in my hands.

Rage runs through me again as I process it all. Every time I go through it...I just come back to being mad at Amelia for all of it.

“There’s no need to be mad at the dead,” my mother says. But she has it all wrong—it isn’t Lyla I’m angry with.

“No, Mom, I’m pissed at Amelia,” I admit. “The kind of pain she caused me...and the danger she’s possibly put us in...I just don’t think I can ever forgive her. She thought I killed my wife, Mom.”

“Get ahold of yourself, Jackson,” she says. “You would have done the same thing. Your anger is unwarranted, and you need to grow the fuck up.”

I’m taken by surprise...my mother hardly ever cusses. I can hardly process what she’s saying I’m in so much shock. It’s like I’ve been slapped across the face, and it might hurt less if she had just done that.

“How can you think I would have done the same?” I ask her with disbelief at what she’s saying.

“What if the tables had been turned? Say it was Preston who had died, and they found his body, but Lyla’s body wasn’t there, but her purse was in Preston’s car.” She pauses a moment as she gets up and takes our plates and cups to the sink before sitting back down. “You would have just sat back and done nothing? You can’t think that girl expected to fall in love with you and Hayden.” She reaches over to take my hand again. “You know that Amelia isn’t to blame for Lyla’s death any more than you are...or even Preston. Jackson, she’s the only reason you’ve been so happy these last few months...you told me so yourself.”

I pause and think for a moment. She’s not wrong, but there are so many things I can’t get over. Not right now anyway.

“I just don’t think I can get over the fact that she lied to me, and by extension lied to Hayden,” I say as I shake my head in irritation. “She knew about the rivalry Preston and I had. She knew all of it and she pressed for information, Mom. She made it seem like I could be honest and vulnerable with her about Lyla, and now I know it was all a lie. She was just trying to decide whether I did her in myself.”

Through the anger in my system, a single tear slips down my cheek. My blood feels like ice and my heart is like stone as it falls to the pit of my stomach.

“I do see your side of things, Jackson, don’t think I don’t,” she says softly as she puts the lid on the cake. “But if you trust my opinion whatsoever...I think you and Amelia can get through this. I think you need to talk about it without fighting, and try to see each other’s side of things.”

“I don’t know, Mom,” I say. “I have to head to practice. I don’t care if you stay and visit, but don’t talk to Amelia about this, please.” I get to my feet, somehow feeling a little better than I did before this conversation.

23

AMELIA

Over the course of the last couple of weeks, things have become so weird between Jackson and me. The day I spent with Hayden at the park was fun, but the little tyke kept asking about her daddy and me, and I didn't know what he had told her apart from what he'd said at the door.

I didn't want to overstep or make things worse than they already were, so I deflected most of her questions. I'm just thankful she's still so little, and easy to distract.

When we got back to the house that day, Jackson's mom was at the house, which made things even stranger. Of course, she was nice, force-feeding me cake until I couldn't breathe...or maybe I did that to myself...but she acted as if she didn't know a thing, and that made it even worse.

Working for Jackson sure has its ups and downs. The ups—Hayden. The downs—everything else.

And the fact that my heart still aches to be with him.

Sure enough, Preston has called twice since the first time—every three days, like clockwork, from a different number each time. We make the calls short to keep us both safe, and I try not to talk in detail around Hayden, but it's great to hear his voice and it becomes a little easier each time.

I'm sitting with Hayden at their house. Jackson is playing tonight, but I don't have the strength to watch the game from the stands. I don't want to face everyone, and I don't know what the guys and their wives know or don't know.

Hayden and I are drawing while we have the big game on the massive television in the living room. Hayden doesn't seem to notice the game, or the fact her daddy is on TV, but my eyes drift to it from time to time and my heart aches every time I do.

I smile at Hayden's drawing of their house. It's a four-year-old's version of a house, but it's clearly the one we're in. I frown, though, when I see that she's drawn not only Jackson and herself, but she has me in the picture too. I'm standing right between them, holding both of their hands.

"Can I have a snack?" Hayden asks from her spot at the little table.

"Sure," I say, getting to my feet. "Are you alright sitting right here while I run into the kitchen?"

"Yep." She smiles as she continues to color. "I won't color on the table, I promise," she adds, and I don't know if she's just being sweet or if that means she plans to do just that.

Reluctantly, I run into the kitchen and grab her a juice and some fruit. I plate it and turn to walk out, trying not to think about what Jackson and I once did on this very counter. His every touch replays in my mind...we were together right here...the day we made it official.

I shake my head, trying to think of anything but being alone with him in that way. I miss Jackson in so many ways, but every place in this house reminds me of him and the times we spent together.

I really messed this up for us.

“Who’s hungry?” I ask, trying to sound cheerful, asking as if there’s a whole room full of kids, rather than the one wonderful child sitting waiting on me.

“Me!” Hayden squeals as her hand shoots into the air. “Bananas!” she says as she spies the plate of bananas, strawberries, and kiwi I’ve made for us.

“Your favorite.” I put the plate down and catch Oliver scoring a goal on the screen.

“Yes!” I whoop as I celebrate with the Jays, wishing like hell I could be there.

“Did Daddy make a point?” Hayden asks as she spins around to see the TV. “Because he’s good at that,” she adds, and I can see how proud she is of her father.

“No, not this time,” I say. “But Uncle Oliver did.”

“Who’s winning?” she asks, her little cherublike face beaming up at me.

“The Jays,” I say with my own smile—hers is so infectious, I just can’t help it.

“Go Chicakoh!” she says, trying to pronounce Chicago, and it’s the cutest thing I think I have ever heard.

“Go Chicago!” I match her energy as we cheer the Jays together.

I sit down with her, and we go to town on the fruit in front of us while we return to coloring. I still look up at the TV occasionally to keep up with the game, but each time causes a pang in my heart.

In between glances at the screen, I steal glances at Hayden. This kid means the world to me. I would be lost without her.

I didn't know if this job was something I wanted to last forever when I applied for it. In all honesty, I didn't really think of Hayden at all when I came up with my plan. I didn't think for a second about the child I would be hurting in the long run if I found out her father was a killer, or if I ended up falling for him even after all the lies I was harboring.

I'm a horrible person.

I feel deep down in my bones that it's just a matter of time before I get fired. Jackson hates me, and he has every right to let me go at any time.

I'm shocked I've gotten to keep the job this long.

There are far too many emotions flooding through me right now. I don't know what I'm going to do. It might be easier in the long run just to leave...but I can't do that.

No, I just need to let Jackson know that I'm not here to hurt them. I don't want to do that at all anymore. That's the furthest thing from my mind.

I focus on the game for a moment because doing anything else is not possible. If I continue to think about Jackson and Hayden, I'll likely come unglued.

Oliver has the puck again. He's good, really good.

The image changes to show Felix in the goal box. He's ready for if the other team takes the puck back.

I don't think that's going to happen.

I see Hayden looking too—we're both hooked as we wait for Oliver to make the play.

He hooks his stick back a little so it almost touches the back of the blade of his skate. He's about to attempt a shot, when the right wing from the other team skates in front of the goal on their side and blocks him.

Oliver is forced to make another play. He reels back and sees two guys from the other team coming up behind him. One tries to sneak the puck from him, but he maneuvers it so the guys come up empty.

"Nice play!" I shout, and Hayden mimics me.

"My daddy is open, Uncle Oliver!" she shouts as if the man can actually hear her, and I think it's adorable.

She's right, though—Jackson is open, skating up to the left side of the hash marks. He's not far enough from the center for my liking, since Oliver would have to stick the puck backward away from their goal rather than forward to get it to Jackson, and I don't know if that's safe right now.

"Daddy is off-center," I tell her. "I don't think Oliver can get it back to him. But I could be wrong." I smile at her, then turn back to the TV.

Oliver turns, to my shock, facing their own goal. He skates past the center on their side, who almost gains control but misses by a hair.

Oliver skates back behind Jackson as Jackson goes forward, faking a grab at the puck as he passes him. The other team turns to Jackson, who they think has the puck.

Jackson skates forward toward the other team's goal as if going in for a shot.

He sets his stick back in a J formation, pretending to snap the puck into the net. But there's no puck, and the crowd cheers when they realize Oliver still has it. My eyes

cut to Oliver as the camera pans in on him and the puck that he still has control of.

It was a smart move.

“Uncle Oliver still has the puck!” Hayden squeals, bouncing up and down in her seat.

“Yeah, they faked ’em, didn’t they?” I reach over and muss her hair as we both stay locked in the game. The Stanley Cup is such a big deal, and it would be amazing for the Jays to win, but this signifies the end of a season, which makes me worry even more.

Without hockey, will he still need a nanny?

I can’t think about that right now, so I don’t.

Jackson skates left to get out of the way for Oliver to make his way through for his third score in a row.

He fakes left, then goes right, snapping his stick and sending the puck in a saucer hit that sends it skidding at a parallel to the ice for the entire distance...hovering inches above it just before it slaps into the net.

“Woohoo!” I shout, and Hayden does the same thing.

“Was that a hat-tick?” Hayden asks, causing me to giggle.

“A what?” I ask, trying to figure out what she’s asking as the teams set up again with the ref in the middle of the ice.

“A hat-tick,” she says again, just as sure as the first time.

“You’re going to have to tell me what a hat-tick is,” I tell her with a smile as I fight the laughter. I don’t want her to think I’m making fun of her.

“When Daddy or one of my uncles make three in a row,” she says. “A hat-tick.” She giggles, causing her locks to shake.

“Oh, a hat trick!” I exclaim, finally getting the drift.

“That’s what I said...a hat-tick.”

“Yes, baby.” I lean in and hug her. “That was a hat trick.” I laugh with her now that I know what she’s saying. “Oh look! Daddy has the puck now.”

“Yeah, he just stole it from the other team.” She smiles. “Daddy says the only time it’s okay to steal is on the ice.”

“That’s right,” I say as Jackson heads toward the goal of the opposing team.

He’s intercepted and a penalty is called on one of their players when they hook their stick into Vaughn’s skate, sending him flying across the ice. Jackson helps his friend up but glares at the guy who’s being dragged off the ice and put into the penalty box.

A fair share of fights on the ice have resulted in far worse, but I don’t think they want to get too juicy for the Stanley.

The play starts again and Vaughn snaps the puck. He gets an assist from Benjamin who runs it up the side of the rink just inside the line. Suddenly, Benjamin takes a hit from the side as he gets bodychecked to the ice with a force so hard I’m not sure I could stand afterward.

I wince, and so does Hayden as we eat our fruit and watch the game unfold. Her juice

box makes a slurping sound as she gets to the bottom of it, and we watch as Ben gets up and the ref calls a ten-minute penalty on the other team.

The first guy leaves the box to come back out onto the ice, and I notice he says something to Jackson that seems to irk him, though Jackson seems able to ignore him for the most part.

Their B-team center skates off the ice to the box, and a new player comes out to replace him. The game resumes, and soon one of the guys from the other team has the puck, rushing toward Felix in our goal box.

The player sets up for the shot as Felix reaches up to adjust his helmet by the cage. He knows it's coming his way. The other player brings the stick back, hitting the puck with the back end of it and causing it to whirl over the ground as Felix butterflies, dropping to his knees. The puck hits his leg pads instead of anything vital, and sails back toward the other player.

The ref calls a huddle on the ice and the players go to hear what their coaches have to say. The game is close, but the Jays have the lead right now.

I notice Jackson's face fall again as he passes the player who was in the penalty box first. I get the feeling he keeps saying something to Jackson, but I can't be sure.

When the teams return to the ice, they set up within seconds, and the puck is in play. Vaughn controls the puck quickly, and Jackson seems to be moving parallel to Vaughn, making sure to stay as open as he can as the opponents come skating their way.

Jackson turns to see a player coming at him—the one with an apparent mouth—and the camera cuts to Jackson's face to show a scowl toward the other man. All of a sudden, Jackson turns away from the play and chases the guy, flying on his skates

toward him.

I grab Hayden and turn her head away from the television, burying her face into my shoulder and sending small sprays of what's left of her juice all over us just as Jackson angrily shoves the guy into the barrier on the ice. I turned her face just in time to miss her daddy hurting someone on purpose, and to be honest, I'm shocked he did it.

The player hits hard and ricochets off the barrier with a thud to the ground. I can barely believe it as the fight continues, a flurry of punches that leave both Jackson and the other player bruised and bloody before their teammates can pull them apart.

"What's wrong, Amelia?" Hayden cries out, and I realize I'm holding her way too tight in my arms.

"Nothing, baby—I'm so sorry," I say, and since it seems like the fight has been broken up, I let her turn around on my lap to see the screen once again.

I hold my breath as I wonder if they're alright. The other guy looks like he really took a pounding. Jackson is still seething with anger, but the look on his face suggests he realizes the mistake he made.

The coach yells something at Jackson, and Jackson looks up toward his coach, face screwed up in frustration. He throws his stick to the ground hard, causing it to bounce twice before coming to a halt at his feet. He skates off-camera as the medics come to tend to the other player who looks to be pretty seriously hurt.

"Oh. Daddy's angry?" Hayden says innocently.

"Yeah, but he's okay, look—he just gets to sit down for a while now, see?" The camera pans over to Jackson chatting with the medic, and thankfully he seems to

have calmed down enough that I don't need to explain anything further to Hayden, who happily returns to eating her fruit.

I'm left wondering what in the world the guy must have said to Jackson to make him act this way. There's no excuse for it, but something obviously set Jackson off...I'm just left wondering what in the world it could have been.

24

JACKSON

I stand in defense of the puck, across from the asshole who can't keep his mouth shut...the one who used to be on our team back when Preston was with us. He got traded from the B team, and good riddance.

Wayne Goodall.

I slide by him and stick-check him as he mumbles something to me that I can't quite make out.

"What's with all the trash talk?" I wonder as I pass him, seeing Oliver going in for the kill.

This is the Stanley Cup, after all. Most of the guys are fairly neutral during the games, but there's something about Wayne that sets me on edge.

He was a jerk when we played together, and he's obviously a jerk now.

Oliver brings his stick back and slides it across the ice, and it hits the puck dead-on, sending it through the air at a complete parallel to the ground.

"Yeah, let's go!" I raise my fist in the air over my head as the puck hits the net. "Woo!" I yell as Oliver and I bump chests and head back to reset for the next play.

I skate past a couple of the guys on the other team and notice Wayne at the last minute.

“Hey, Jackson,” he says, but I try to ignore him. “It’s good your wife is dead,” he growls, almost so low I can’t hear him, but I do.

“Oh yeah, why’s that?” I bark at him as Vaughn puts an arm over my chest to hold me back.

“She was such a snoozefest...” he announces, louder this time. “I tried to get in her pants a time or two, but she never put out.”

My blood boils. I don’t know how to respond, and if it weren’t for Vaughn’s arms wrapped tightly across my chest, I would go after his ass and pummel him into the ice. I’m seeing red, but I know I can’t respond...we have a game to win, and Coach is counting on me to step up.

The little intervention we had was enough proof of that for me.

I skate away from the guys, heading back to where the referee stands in the center of the rink. I try to think of anything, absolutely anything other than what Wayne just said to me.

“Come on, man, don’t listen to that guy,” Vaughn says as he skates up to get into position.

“Yeah,” Oliver adds. “He’s an ass, just trying to heckle you into losing the game.”

“Not going to happen,” I say through my teeth as I seethe in anger.

The ref sends the puck into play as the whistle blows. The right wing from the other

team comes forward as the center grabs the puck. He slices over the ice with ease, but already Felix is down and ready and Oliver is on his tail.

I skate behind, defending our goal as their left wing comes up beside Oliver. Benjamin and Vaughn are not far behind, making themselves available if Oliver can manage to steal the puck. Adrenaline is coursing through me and my heart sounds in my ears.

Our team has already had a hat trick or two under our belts for the Stanley Cup, and I have no doubts this maneuver will work. However, every time our team scores a goal, it seems to fuel Wayne's irritation, and he won't keep his damn mouth shut. My temper is going to get the better of me if I'm not careful.

Oliver tips his stick in toward the puck, swiping as if he might get it as he skates backward now, perfectly parallel to the player. Not all of us can skate backward as well as Oliver can. Coach says it's a play we have under our belts to keep the other team on their toes.

I smile as he gets ready for the play that will win us possession of the puck.

"Yes," I say under my breath as he manages to pull it off.

He spins with the puck at the end of his stick, making sure not to let it get too far ahead of him. Several of the others are closing in on him as I make my way up the right side, and I can feel the anticipation run through the crowd as they begin cheering louder. I fake left, then go right, throwing off the right wing behind me.

"Oliver, I'm open," I let him know.

He realizes at the same time, and he sends the puck flying in my direction. I sweep my stick across the ice, grabbing the puck at the last second and then spinning around

and heading toward their goal.

Their goalie crouches slightly, making an X with his knees as he anticipates the play. I look for an opening and see one just above his left elbow. I slide the stick in a J shape behind me, then let it go, swift enough that it sends the puck up and over his arm, almost hitting his elbow as it does.

I hear the whoosh of the net as it hits, and my team and I cheer, joining the deafening sound of the crowd as it goes wild.

I find myself spinning around to scan the crowd. I know Amelia isn't out there, but she's likely watching with Hayden at home. I'm still so furious at her, but I miss her dearly and I'm starting to wonder if things could ever be the same between us.

I head back to the ref to get into place for the next play. Wayne seems to be watching me, but I try to push the thought of him to the side.

That is, until he opens his mouth again.

"I hear you're fucking the nanny," he says.

"Screw off," I say. I don't know what this guy's problem is.

I try to ignore him for the most part as I head back to join my team.

"I would screw her too—do you think I can borrow her for a night?"

I see red—redder than red—and I turn around and fly as fast as I can toward him. I don't care that Amelia and I aren't together anymore, or that my wife has been gone for a while now. He has no right to talk to me about them.

I plow into him a force that could cause serious damage as I cross-check him into the board. I feel his body bounce off my hands and against the board, and he falls to the ice with an oomph sound.

His helmet pops off, skittering across the ice and landing at the feet of their goalie. It must not have been fitted well to begin with if it came off so easily.

I've nearly lost my mind as I dive down on top of him and send my right fist into the side of his face. There's something about him bringing Amelia into this whole equation that sets me off. I'm not sure that I even know what I'm doing, only vaguely aware of the fact my teammates are screaming at me from somewhere in the distance.

Wayne raises his fist and drives it into the cage of my helmet, sending it whacking against my nose. I think I hear bone crack as the metal meets my nose.

"Damn it!" I scream at him as I land another blow.

I'm also vaguely aware of the fact that the crowd has gone silent and there are cameras getting every moment of this, but I don't care. Not even when Wayne gains the upper hand and flips me to my back. We roll over and over on the ice, fighting for any advantage we can.

Blood trickles down my nose, and I can taste it in my mouth, but it doesn't stop me.

"You shouldn't talk about things you have no idea about," I seethe through my teeth.

"Has...to...be...some...accuracy...to...it!" Wayne shouts, punctuating each word with a punch to my head.

I spin again, but before I can land another hit, I feel arms wrapped around me. "Come on Jackson," a voice calls from behind me, but it feels like it's coming from far away.

Arms tug at him and me as they try to pull us apart, but we're both latched on, our arms locked around one another as they pull.

"You're outta here, Jackson," I hear Coach's voice call, and that finally drags me back to reality.

I pull away on my own, looking down at Wayne as his friends help him to a standing position. I don't say anything to him as the reality of what I did hits me like a ton of bricks.

I head toward Coach, who's standing on the edge of the ice in his tennis shoes.

"Sorry to let you down, Coach," I say as I go to pass him, but he stops me with a hand to my shoulder.

"I know you have a lot on your plate, son, but there's no call for this kind of behavior. You're out for the rest of the game." We both look up at the scoreboard to see there are only fifteen minutes left of the game. "See the medic, then join the B team on the bench."

"Understood," I say.

I toss my stick, gloves, and helmet on the bench, and head to the medic. I don't say anything as he adjusts my nose. I'm glad it's not broken, but it is out of place.

"Ow!" I say as the medic jerks it back in position.

"Well, it's what you get for thinking you're Rambo or some shit," the medic teases as he hands me a rag to soak up the blood.

After I'm clean enough, I hold ice to my nose and then sit down to watch my guys

win the Stanley Cup without me as I wonder what in the world I was thinking. Sure, what Wayne said about my wife angered me, but talking about Amelia like that...there must be something wrong with me.

How can I feel so strongly for a woman who thinks I'm capable of killing her brother?

I shake my head as the guys come sliding off the ice. I know Coach will let me celebrate with the guys in the locker room, but it's no thanks to me that my guys won by the skin of their teeth.

"Congratulations," I say as I hug my friends close in a celebratory hug. "I'm sorry to all of you for my behavior tonight," I offer them as we all pull apart. "It won't happen again, but hey, we won the Stanley Cup!"

My team joins me in a chant of whoops and hollers, and they seem to have forgiven me for my ridiculousness.

"Blue Jays rule! Blue Jays rule! Blue Jays rule!"

25

AMELIA

The game was interesting, to say the least. My heart thumps in my chest, wondering what exactly caused that fight between Jackson and the other player. I know I'll likely never know the answer.

It doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things, since the Blue Jays won, but I'm sure Jackson is beating himself up over it.

Jackson's mom and dad are taking Hayden for the weekend to give both Jackson and me some much-needed time off, but as I hand the sleepy little girl over to his mom and gather my things to lock up the house, I have no idea what I'm going to do with my night.

Once they're gone with her, my phone buzzes with a message from Brooke. I smile as I read it.

Hey girl, some of the ladies and I are going clubbing. Come with us! No kids, no guys, it'll be fun! I won't take no for an answer. See you at Club End Game at ten.

At first, I think about telling her no, but it's been a really long time since I've been out with just the girls. I grab my purse and head out the door, locking it behind me before sending her a text and reply.

Sure, I'll be there .

I'm not sure why they're only just going out so late at night, but I guess the clubs get better the later it is. Maybe I'm starting to be a little old-fashioned. I shake off the feeling of bedtime and head up to my room once I get back to my place.

In no time I'm dressed in a pair of black leggings and a crop top. It's a little less conservative than I'm used to, but hey, I'm throwing caution to the wind. I need something to get Jackson and this whole mess with my brother off my mind.

After I fix my hair and apply a small amount of makeup, I throw on my Converse and grab my bag. Once I'm in an Uber and on my way, I take a few minutes to lay my head against the seat and think. My mind drifts to the fight Jackson had on the ice. I still want to know what he was so upset about. Is he still mad at me?

Although, mad isn't exactly the right word to describe how he was feeling toward me. Irrate, or out of control with anger would be more like it.

In no time we're pulling up to the club, and after tipping the driver I get out and make my way in. I quickly find Brooke dancing with a group that includes some of the other girlfriends and wives to the players. They're all dressed in short mini-dresses and wearing far less than I am, but I decide not to think about that too much.

"You look cute," Brooke says as she comes up and wraps her arms around me.

I fall into the hug, wishing I could tell her about the situation with my brother and what happened between Jackson and me.

I wonder if she even knows we aren't together anymore.

"Pick your poison," she says, holding up a tray of shots that seem to have come from out of nowhere.

I'm having a hard time telling the difference between all of the varieties, so I take two. With one in each hand, I down them both back-to-back. I'm not sure it's a wise decision, since the first is a spicy cinnamon flavor and the second is something fruity. I crinkle my nose at the mixture of flavors and Brooke laughs at me.

"You just had a cinnamon toast crunch and a Scooby snack. Not the best of combinations I'd say." She giggles as she hands me a third one. "This one is a lemon drop—it should be a decent pallet cleanser."

I smile at her and down this one too, not necessarily because I think I need a palate cleanser but because I think I need the alcohol.

I don't normally drink this much, but I need something to kill the pain. I know I've made major mistakes in my relationship with Jackson, but part of me wishes he was here with me or that I was with him celebrating.

I continue taking shot after shot, keeping up with Brooke until the tray is empty and she excuses herself to the restroom—or to get more, I'm not sure. Between the last Scooby thing and the toast crunchy, lemon-drop-ish goodness, I'm feeling good.

"Hey, baby," a voice calls from behind me.

The voice is a blast from the past, and I don't even want to turn around, since I already know who the voice belongs to. My ex—Trevor Donahue. I try not to shudder at the thought of seeing him again after all this time.

Trevor and I dated for almost two years. Preston didn't like him from the get-go, but I sure did. Until Trevor showed his true colors. Never once had I suspected him of being violent in any way, until we were together almost a year.

He started to be verbally abusive, but I tried to ignore those parts of him. Mostly

because I wanted a boyfriend, and he was there. When he started to get physical around the two-year mark...well, it didn't take me long to call my big brother and have him help me get out of there for good.

I turn slowly. I can't let Trevor see my worry over seeing him again.

I haven't seen him since the day Preston helped me leave, and I could live a lifetime without having to do it now.

"Hello, Trevor," I say once we're standing face-to-face.

He hasn't changed a bit, it seems. He's still the same smug-looking ass as the day I left.

Why does fate, or whoever or whatever controls my destiny, have to be so cruel?

"What are you up to nowadays?" he asks. "You look amazing, by the way," he adds, which makes me want to cringe.

He leans in a little, smelling like straight-up alcohol.

"I'm fine, Trevor," I say, looking around to see where Brooke went off to.

I see her dancing with some of the girls from our group across the bar. I don't want to disturb her, but I don't want to be standing here with him either.

"My, you are beautiful," he purrs as he moves closer still.

"Thanks," I say as I try to move away from him. "I'm going over there with my friends."

“Wait a second—” He grabs my arm, but not forcefully. “Let me buy you a drink,” he says, but I immediately begin to shake my head. “Come on, just one drink. If after the one drink, you don’t want another or would like for me to leave, I will.”

“Fine,” I say with an eye roll, accepting the free alcohol mostly because I need it to dull my pain...and I know this might be the only real way to get rid of him.

I stand with my arms crossed, waiting for him to come back as he goes to the bar to get our drinks. Suddenly, staying at home seems like it would have been the better decision.

Trevor and I broke up shortly before Preston and Lyla’s car accident, and not for one moment have I thought about him—other than occasionally fearing I might run into him. Part of my decision to go abroad was because of him, and getting as far away from him as possible.

I look up to see him coming back in my direction. He has two of the largest drinks I’ve ever seen. Of course he’s brought me the amount of alcohol that might be in five regular drinks. I roll my eyes.

“Sit with me,” he says, more of a demand than anything.

“Don’t you know how to ask nicely for anything?” I wonder as I take the drink and find a table nearby.

“You know I’ve never been very nice.” He smiles at me as if that’s something he’s proud of.

“Believe me, I know.” I begin to take a sip of my drink, but then decide to chug half of it to calm my nerves.

“My, aren’t we thirsty?”

“I don’t know about you, but I sure as hell am,” I say before taking yet another drink.

Between the shots I’ve consumed, the beer I was nursing before this, and half of this ginormous drink, I’m already feeling a decent buzz.

I look around to find Brooke, making a point to know where she is at all times in case I need to make a quick escape.

A cheer comes from the doorway as a bunch of guys filter in. They’re all wearing Blue Jays jerseys. Obviously, it’s some sort of fan club. Most of them are carrying flags, while others have banners for the Stanley Cup.

I wonder where all the ladies are...but then again, most Blue Jays fans are guys.

I roll my eyes, thinking of Jackson. I’m happy for him and his team, but the pain I have inside is all-consuming. I don’t think there’s enough alcohol in the world to drown out my sorrow, though I know it’s all my fault.

Half ignoring Trevor, I guzzle the rest of my drink and set the glass down in front of him.

“Well, I agreed to have a drink with you, so now that mine is empty, I think I’m going to go dance with my friend,” I say. Truthfully, even if I do manage to stand up I’m not sure that I won’t be so dizzy I’ll be forced to sit back down.

“No,” Trevor says as he puts his hand on my thigh from under the table. “We’re having way too much fun.”

I try to brush his hand away. “Let go of me,” I say quietly, trying not to draw too

much attention.

“I miss us,” he has the audacity to say, trailing his hand up further as if he owns me or something.

I grab his hand from under the table and give it a hard squeeze. He doesn’t so much as flinch. He’s obviously had too much to drink, and so have I. My already fuzzy body is starting to heat up, and I’m both angry and afraid.

“We were never a good thing, Trevor,” I say softly, putting my hand on his upper arm, like I used to when we were together.

Maybe if I can soothe him, he’ll back down. There were many times when I had to act this way in order to avoid getting hurt by his words or actions.

He looks at my hand on his bicep and smiles. “We were fucking awesome,” he says, squeezing my inner thigh hard.

I flinch, causing an even broader smile to cross his face. I have to think of a way out of this without drawing too much attention.

I stand to my feet, swaying from the effects of the alcohol. All the while, I’m fighting against his hold until eventually it falls. He looks at me expectantly as he gets to his own feet. Grabbing the crook of my elbow, he begins to pull me close. I fight against his hold, but he’s much stronger than I am.

“Maybe you should come home with me so I can remind you how good we can be together,” he says, tugging me toward the door.

“I don’t want to go home with you—I’m here with my friends,” I say to him as I try to stand up straight and look him in the eye. “I don’t want to go anywhere with you.”

“Sure you do, Amelia. You never knew what was good for you,” he growls as he forcefully pulls me another five feet toward the door.

I look around, frantically trying to find anyone willing to help...but there doesn't seem to be anyone paying that much attention to us.

“Let go of me,” I say sternly, and then I do the only thing I can think of and slap him across the face.

He flails back, mostly in shock, but doesn't let go of me. Instead, he stands to his full height and looks at me in anger.

“You bitch!” he spits at me in a tone of absolute rage.

He lifts his fist to punch me, and I know he's going to. He's done it before. I brace myself for the impact, somewhat shocked he's going to do it here in public.

I close my eyes, knowing I shouldn't—he likes to see me cower...

Nothing happens.

In fact, his grip on me falters altogether and I feel him moving away from me. I don't know what's changed, but when I open my eyes, I'm shocked at what I see.

26

JACKSON

Celebrating with the guys is a relief after the tension on the ice. Coach seems to have forgiven me for the most part, though it's going to take a while for me to prove myself enough to get back into everyone's good graces.

The entire team and many of the fans have decided to go clubbing, and we all filter through the door wearing our Blue Jays gear, making noise and celebrating winning the Stanley Cup.

It's somewhat bittersweet, but I'd rather celebrate with my boys than wallow in the guilt of my decisions on the ice. Still, it's hard to get over Wayne's comments about Amelia—I can't believe I've let her affect me so strongly.

Shaking her from my mind, I head to the bar and grab a beer.

"I am getting so drunk tonight," Felix says as he steps up beside me at the bar.

"Me too, man." I pay for my beer and take a long pull out of my drink, happy for the ice-cold alcohol as it starts to circulate through my system. Sure, I may not plan on getting smash-faced drunk, but getting a nice buzz to keep my mind off things might not be such a bad thing.

"You played so great tonight, Oliver," I say to my buddy as I pat him on the back. "That hat trick, freaking gold."

“Thanks, man,” he says as he takes a sip of his own drink. “Did you see Brooke and some of the other ladies are here?” He points to a group of the wives and girlfriends of some of the players, and I smile.

“What are the odds we picked the same club as them tonight?” I wonder out loud.

“I don’t know, but the more the merrier!” Oliver smiles as he clinks his glass against mine and starts to chug his amber liquid.

I do the same thing, finishing off my beer in just a couple gulps. I turn around and get a second before deciding to mingle through the crowd a little.

Fans congratulate me as we walk by, and it seems most of them have forgotten the fight I had on the rink, and the fifteen minutes of the game I lost at the end. They don’t care—we won.

As I finish my second beer and move on to my third, I fight the urge to text Amelia. I know I need to leave her alone, but my heart and my brain are at war. It’s not a fun feeling.

Instead of making that mistake, I decide to search out a few of the guys to see about playing a game of darts. I see Vaughn and Benjamin across the room, but as I traverse the crowd to head toward them, something catches my attention off to the right.

A man is clearly getting aggressive with a woman. It looks like he’s dragging her toward the door unwillingly, and by instinct, I have to intervene.

I cut through the crowd as quickly as I can, discarding my drink on one of the tables nearby. I get behind the man the exact moment he raises his fist to hit the woman. She’s just gotten a shot in by the looks of it, although she’s still mostly hidden by this guy’s massive frame.

I grab his fist and twist his arm behind his back as I realize for the first time who the woman is. My breath hitches at seeing Amelia in the grasp of this animal. Much like when Wayne was taunting me, I see red.

There's such a look of fear and uncertainty on Amelia's face that all the hate I held for her melts away instantly. She's got her eyes closed so tight...like she's ready for the impact.

I don't know who this man is, but he sure will know who I am by the end of the night.

I raise my fist and deck him in the face just as she opens her eyes and sees me. I rear back and hit him again as she says my name.

The guy sprawls out hard on the ground. Oddly enough, the fight hasn't attracted too much attention...so far. If I do what I did on the ice, however, I know it will gain the attention of most.

Before it can go that far, Amelia takes my hand and pulls me back.

"Let's get out of here, he isn't worth it," she says, and she pulls me along with her.

We see the man get to his feet as we round the bar toward the back of the club.

"Oh shit, he's coming," I say as I let out a laugh and run with her.

"That guy is after us," she says to the bartender as we pass.

I see the bartender nod to someone and then a giant bouncer moves out in front of the piece of shit who dared to get rough with my girl.

We continue to move, hand in hand, as I think about those words. My girl .

Amelia is no longer my girl. Although, at a time like this, every bit of rage I've felt toward her is doused with fear for her safety. I was just thinking about her, and now her hand is in mine, and we're running out the back door of the club into the alley.

We run a little further down the brick wall where the alley comes to an end. There's nobody in sight...only a stray cat that runs from a dumpster with a scared meow.

We both press our backs to the brick, out of breath. Panting, we look at each other and start to laugh. The laugh becomes uncontrollable as we chuckle hysterically.

"Who was that?" I ask the moment I catch my breath.

"My ex, Trevor," she says.

"Well, a man willing to hit a woman like that, no wonder he's your ex," I say. Now I kind of want to go back in there and beat his ass all over again.

She looks at me for a moment as she gets serious once again. Her smile fades and she looks like she might cry. I want so badly to go back to the moment when we were laughing, but now we're both thinking about everything that's happened between us.

"I'm going back in. I'll let Brooke know I'm leaving, then I'm going to get an Uber home," she says as she takes her hand from mine and begins to walk back down the alley.

My heart is thundering in my chest as I watch her walk away from me. Sure, things are complicated, and I'm not exactly sure how I should feel, but I don't want her to be walking away right now. I can't let her walk away. If I do, it will be the dumbest thing I have ever done in my life.

"Amelia," I say, drawing her attention.

She pauses in her tracks and turns around to look at me. She gulps once, twice, then a third time before walking the few steps back toward me.

“Jackson.”

“I’m still so incredibly angry with you, but I can’t spend another moment away from you,” I admit to her, and even I’m surprised at my words.

“You’re just saying that because you almost saw me get my ass handed to me by a man,” she says with a frown.

“No.” I bring my hand up to the side of her face and grace her cheek with my fingertips. “That’s not true. I was coming to the rescue regardless of who you were. Honestly, I didn’t know it was you until I already had that guy’s fist in my hand. It being you was just an added bonus,” I admit. “Not that you were going to get hurt, but that I could save you. Because, Amelia...” I step closer, until our foreheads are touching. “I’ve been thinking about you every day, every hour, every minute, and every second since you walked out after our fight.”

“Jackson, I can’t...” She trails off, as if thinking about all the things she should say.

“Shhhh,” I say as I put my finger to her lips. “Just listen.” I breathe in her intoxicating scent. The smell of roses and lavender wafts over my senses. “I want to hate you, so much. I do. The truth is, I can’t. No matter how angry I am... was , I just can’t let you go. Do you want to know why?”

“Why?” she says against my finger.

I drag my fingers down her lips, her bottom lip puckering out in a small pout as I let my hand fall.

“Because no matter how much my mind thinks that I should run, my heart says that I love you.”

A tear trickles down her cheek. I reach up to wipe it away, but she puts her hand on top of mine, pressing my palm into her cheek.

“I don’t deserve for you to wipe my tears away,” she says as she looks down, but then her eyes cut straight up to mine. “Wait, did you just say that you love me?”

“I did,” I breathe softly as I close the gap between us. “I love you, Amelia. I’ve loved you for a long while now, and there’s no way a little argument can make me not love you. I just hope you feel the same about me. Because I’m pretty sure my daughter would be devastated if not,” I say, and we both chuckle a little.

“I love you too, Jackson,” she says, and my heart swells.

I reach down, hooking my fingers behind her ear, putting my thumb against her jawline, and pulling her close. Our lips caress one another with a sort of passion I’ve never felt before.

Our kisses become desperate, and I move us back until I have her pressed against the brick wall, not even a paper’s distance between us. I feel her every curve against my body, sending me into overdrive. My cock hardens, begging for what it’s been missing for so long.

She wraps her arms around me, tangling her fingers in my hair as she presses against me. I feel her breasts through her shirt, her nipples hard for me.

I don’t care that we’re in an empty alley, where anyone could walk up at any time. I hardly think the dead end is going to bring in much foot traffic, but right now I don’t care.

I lift her up and press her against the wall, and she brings her legs up around my hips.

“Jackson,” she breathes through our kisses. “I need you.” And that’s all she has to say.

“I need you too,” I say as I reach down and unbuckle my jeans.

Once I’m free from the confines of the material, I reach down past the waistband of her leggings, letting my fingers brush past the fabric of her panties, down to her wet folds.

I don’t need my hands to hold her up—the wall and the strength of her legs are doing just fine.

I tease her clit for a moment, and she arches her back, letting out a soft whimper. She exposes her jugular to me, and I lean in to kiss the hollow of her neck, up the vein to where her neck meets her head, just behind her earlobe.

A shudder runs through me as she moans in pleasure. Her hands break free of my hair and push at her leggings. She’s desperate for me, and truth be told I’m desperate for her as well.

I help push her pants and panties down enough to expose her to me. She’s so hot and ready, and so am I.

Reaching down, I grab my shaft and pump a few times before centering myself against her. All the while our lips are locked in the kind of kiss that won’t stop, our tongues mingling between breaths.

I push against her, thrusting inside with no problem. She’s ready for me.

Her tight warmth feels so good around me as I lean into her and the wall, using it for leverage.

“Oh my God,” Amelia says, her eyes rolling back in her head.

“Tell me about it,” I chuckle against her earlobe as I press deeper and harder within her.

I begin to move faster once we find a pace that’s good for both of us. The sensations that are running through my body right now are enough to fuel me for life.

I let my fingers trail up her ribs. The crop top exposes enough that I don’t find fabric until I’m just above her navel. I continue upward until my hand is cupping one of her perky breasts.

With my other hand, I reach up and grab the wall for stability, allowing my fingernails to cut into the bricks. They don’t give, of course, and I might break a few nails, but I don’t mind a bit of pain through the pleasure.

Moving my hand from her breasts, I reach around and cup her ass, pulling her against me as I thrust.

“I’m so sorry for everything, Jackson,” she says in a half moan, half whisper.

“All is forgiven,” I say, pulling away to allow a whispering distance between us. “As long as we get to do this for the rest of our lives.”

“I hope so,” she breathes as she arches her back again, pressing her breasts into my chest hard.

I quicken my pace, thrusting into her even deeper, causing her to cry out. Completely

lost to the world around us, we both come unglued and shatter at the exact same time.

27

AMELIA

At some point after making love in the alley, again in Jackson's car, and once more when we got to his house, I fell asleep in his arms. When I left this place yesterday I was happy for the break, but now I could not be any more thrilled that I'm back, hopefully for good.

I smile as I roll over to throw my arm across Jackson, but my smile quickly fades when I realize he isn't here. The sheets are no longer warm, so he's been gone awhile.

I immediately worry that might have regrets—our judgment through the haze of alcohol and the excitement of the fight might have been cloudy. A slight sound from downstairs is the only thing that reassures me and keeps me from losing my mind with that train of thought.

I smile as I smell food. Better yet, bacon!

Unable to find my clothes, I slip on one of Jackson's oversized jerseys. It nearly hangs to my knees, and I smile at my reflection in the mirror at seeing the Blue Jays colors on me.

I hustle downstairs, rounding the corner to see Jackson in the kitchen, flipping an egg. Sure enough, there's also bacon, sausage, and an assortment of other breakfast items.

I lean against the doorframe and watch him for a moment, unsure whether he's aware of my presence or not. I could watch this man forever.

I could watch him play hockey, parent Hayden, fight, have sex, or flip an egg and be just as content here and always.

He flips another egg and then looks up to see me standing here. The smile on his face tells me everything—the alcohol and fight from last night have done nothing to influence what happened between us.

“Good morning, Amelia,” he says with a big smile. “Hungry?”

“Ravenous.” I move forward with a smile on my face. “I love you,” I say, testing the waters to make sure everything is still the same.

“I love you too,” he says sincerely, leaning over and kissing me on the lips.

“This smells wonderful,” I admit as I take a seat on one of the stools at the counter.

“Good, because this breakfast is fit for my queen.” He flips another egg in the air.

I smile at that sentiment and lean forward with my elbows against the countertop. I cross my legs in the seat of the stool and relax as he looks me over. I can tell he's taking in what I'm wearing, and it sends a shock of anticipation through me.

I think about the things we did on this counter and wonder when we might get the chance for a repeat. “When is Hayden coming home?” I ask innocently, mostly looking for a distraction so I don't jump him right here and now.

“Well, she isn't due back until tomorrow, but when I called to tell my mother that you and I were back together, Hayden was so excited she wanted to come home today.”

He beams as he starts making plates. “I think I have her convinced to stay until tomorrow to buy us some more time.”

“So, you told your parents we’re back together? Hayden too?” I squeal in shock.

“Of course, why wouldn’t I? Unless you’re rethinking things?” His brow creases as he hands me my plate.

“No, of course not. I just thought maybe you might want to talk about things before we made it official again, but I’m perfectly fine doing it this way.” I wait for him to sit down across from me.

“No, I didn’t want to wait—I was too excited,” he says as he takes his first bite of food. He waits until he chews it and swallows before speaking again. “But...I do want to talk to you about a few things.”

“I figured you might.” I smile at him as I pile eggs on my fork and take a bite. “Delicious.”

“First of all, I’d like to apologize to you,” he says, taking me by surprise for a second time this morning.

“What do you have to apologize for?”

“I’m sorry for getting so angry at you,” he begins with a smile as he reaches across and takes my hand. “You do need to understand where I was coming from, though.”

“Oh, I think I know, but please continue.” I give his hand a slight squeeze.

“It looked bad from my end,” he says softly. “All of it. And I know you already know that. You’re a smart woman, and it took me a while to realize that you were doing

what you were doing out of love. Not love for me, but love for your brother.”

“But then it became love for you too, and I realized my suspicions had been misplaced. I knew that long before I knew Preston was alive,” I tell him.

“I know that,” he admits as he looks down and then back up at me. “But, for me to realize that you thought that of me at all was hard. However, looking at it from the outside in, I can see how it looked. I also know how you felt—after losing my wife, I’m sure it’s similar to your feelings when you lost your brother.”

“The two are definitely not comparable, but I appreciate where you’re coming from,” I admit to him, because I know deep down that losing his wife, the mother of his child, has got to be a whole world different from losing my brother.

Both of them cut to the core...yes. But it’s a completely different relationship, a completely separate feeling. Even I can acknowledge that.

“Perhaps they are, but I understand it more now.” He squeezes my hand gently. “I just know that my wife would like you so much.”

“There will always be a place for Lyla in this home...in our lives,” I say to him as I abandon my food altogether in exchange for our conversation. “And I’m truly sorry for the sorrow I caused—on top of the sorrow you are already dealing with. I care for you so much now. I can’t believe I ever thought you were capable of hurting anyone, let alone the woman you loved so much.”

“It’s forgiven, Amelia. I love you so much—I wish I would have realized before how much I’d already forgave you.” His thumb strokes the back of my hand.

“Now that all the forgiveness has been given and apologies have been made...” I smile at him, returning to my food. “What was that little fight on the ice about

yesterday? It had to be something big. And two fights in one day, aren't you feeling feisty?"

"That was Wayne Goodall," he says as if that's enough of an explanation.

"Wayne Goodall?"

"Yes, he used to be on our team back when Preston was still with us." He pauses a moment, and I realize he's trying to figure out how to word things. "I mean, while he was still a part of the team."

"I figured that's what you meant," I chuckle softly.

"Anyways, Wayne was traded shortly after. He was on your brother's team before Preston was moved to the Blue Jays. There was always a kind of rivalry between me and your brother, but Wayne seemed more like a shadow than anything. Not my shadow—Preston's. Anyways, he said some things about Lyla, and I about went off the deep end, but when he began mentioning you..." He pauses for a moment and reaches out to take my hand once again. "I saw red."

"Me?" I wonder out loud, realizing that he fought for me even when we weren't together. "What did he say about me?"

"It's not worth mentioning, but you sure are worth fighting for," he says as he reaches over and caresses my face, kissing me gently on the lips.

"I love you so much," I say as we pull away.

"I love you too." He leans back and takes a bite of his bacon.

Damn, this man is so sexy when he eats. He's sexy when he does everything.

“I’m sorry that I thought you were capable of such things in the beginning,” I add.
“That was before I got to know you. Before I fell in love with you. Thank you for letting me love you.”

“Thank you for loving me, and for letting me love you in return,” he says, and I’m sure this man is the sweetest man in the whole world.

“Promise me something,” I say to him softly.

“Anything.”

“Let’s vow to never be apart, to always be honest, and to never let our rocky beginnings become rocky endings ever again.” I lift my glass.

“Never again.” He clinks his glass to mine, and we smile, reveling in the happiness of the moment.

28

JACKSON

Hayden came home with the biggest smile on her face. I'm so happy to see my little girl happy once again. Hell, I'm happy to be happy again myself.

My parents stayed for a little while, visiting with us and questioning us about our relationship. My mom seems thrilled.

I smile as I watch Hayden and Amelia playing on the floor together. Things have been going well between us since the night at the club, but I can't help being a bit apprehensive.

I don't like feeling this way, but it's in my nature. It's all been forgiven, but that doesn't mean it's so easily forgotten. I don't bring these feelings up with Amelia—there's no sense in making her insecure about anything. She's amazing.

Their laughter breaks me out of my thoughts, and I smile again as Hayden's giggles fill the room. That's the sweetest sound a father can hear.

I don't know many women who would get on the floor and play Legos with a little girl for hours on end, but Amelia does.

I look at the smile on Amelia's face and God, I just want to grab her and kiss her senseless again, like I did outside the club the other night. I want so badly to trust her with everything in me, but I can't completely let go. I know it's going to take time to

fully heal and move on—I'm just not very patient.

I never have been, and perhaps that's one of my biggest downfalls. She's just going to have to live with all the parts of me that aren't so pretty. As I'm going to live with the parts of our past that need to stay behind me. Behind us.

"Daddy!" Hayden squeals as she finally spots me leaning against the doorframe watching them play on the floor.

"Hi, pumpkin, are you having fun with Amelia?" I ask as I kneel down to her level.

She throws her little arms around my neck and hugs me tight as I stand with her in my arms. She's getting heavier, and I know she's growing up, but I'll carry her around as long as my arms will let me. If she wants me to hold her ten years from now, I'll always find a way to do so...though by then, she'll be a teenager and likely want nothing to do with me. I smile at that thought, hoping she always remains Daddy's little girl.

"We've been coloring pictures, Daddy. Want to color too?" she asks me, her little hands on my cheeks. "I just got done playing with Legos too."

"Sure, baby, I'll color with you." I walk over to the table and sit her back in her seat.

I take a seat next to Amelia and I'm immediately hit with her scent. It's light and floral, reminding me of all the time spent close to her. I can't help but breathe deeper, inhaling it. It's intoxicating, making me think about the intimate moment we shared in the alley by the club when her scent was all around me.

We were so saturated in the moment that it didn't matter to either of us that we were in a semi-public place. The thrill of that moment lives on inside of me.

I clear my throat and get my head back into the present, choosing a coloring page while they continue the pictures they'd already been working on.

"It looks like you two have been having a lot of fun," I say as I start coloring my picture of Elmo.

"We have been. Amelia has such fun ideas. I'm glad you're not mad at her anymore, Daddy," Hayden says, never looking up from her picture.

The thought of Hayden being so devastated by this situation breaks my heart all over again. If I can keep this smile on her face forever, I'll do it.

"I'm glad for that too, Hayden," Amelia says, her eyes locking with mine.

My heart squeezes in my chest. I lay my hand on top of hers and run my thumb along the side of her hand.

"I'm glad too. I can't imagine my life without you in it, Amelia," I tell her honestly. "Or you, Hayden." I nuzzle my daughter on the top of the head.

I watch as Amelia's eyes fill with tears, and I lean over and kiss her cheek before getting back to my coloring. I realize I need to work on trusting her again, and decide that I'm going to take things one day at a time and do my best to be happy in the moment and see where things go.

"Daddy, why did you make Elmo look like a hockey player?" Hayden's voice breaks through my thoughts as she giggles loud enough to echo through the room.

I hadn't even realized I'd done it.

I look down at the paper and sure enough—I've colored Elmo's Tickle Me T-shirt in

the colors of my Blue Jays uniform. I laugh and lift it up to show Amelia what I've done. She smiles and shakes her head.

I've even adorned his head with a small helmet and cross bars on the front out of silver and white crayon.

"I guess it really is deep in my soul, isn't it?" I say as I continue coloring, making sure to get all the details right now that I know what I'm doing.

I finish the picture and move to my laptop on the island in the kitchen.

"Where did you go?" Amelia's voice calls out from the living room.

"I'm going to check my email really quick," I say. "Coach is supposed to send me the roster for the camps he's running for kids who want to learn hockey...I've said I'll volunteer this year."

"How very unselfish of you," she teases me, her voice carrying through the doorway.

"You hush or I'll volunteer you to clean the locker rooms after the kiddos get done." I laugh, and so does Amelia.

I open my email and see that there are more comments from Goodall, the guy I slammed into the barricade. Ever since the game, he's been running his mouth online and I have no idea what to do to stop it. Of course, social media sends it all to my email for me to see.

I roll my eyes.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter under my breath as I read the comments one at a time.

Wayne Goodall: Washed up hockey player breaks nose on the ice, more like I broke his nose on the ice. It's so sad his temper got the best of him...the best thing about that guy. #WhyStayIfYouCantPlay #WashedUpAndWasted. #FannyOfTheNanny

Sandra Fisher to Wayne Goodall: Wayne, why don't you leave that poor man alone. He's a great player and you have no room to talk. #NoGoodGoodall #WashedUpWayne

Wayne Goodall to Sandra Fisher: Looks like we know who has class and who doesn't. #BanThisBlueJaysFan

Chris Patrick to Wayne Goodall: Keep your mouth shut. Everyone knows what you said to him on the ice. #HateOnTheIceNotNice #BadallTheGoodall #WastedOnWayne

I close out before I can read anymore.

"What is it?" Amelia asks as she comes to stand beside me, obviously reading the irritation on my face.

"It's nothing, just some childish bullshit from that guy I beat the shit out of on the other team," I tell her. "There are a lot of comments from fans coming to my defense," I admit, and my heart swells with love for them.

"The guy you slammed into the barricade?" she says. "He's an ass, don't put any stock in what that guy has to say."

"Yeah, it's him. I hoped he'd drop it, but I should've known better." I close the laptop in frustration. "He never could let go of anything. He holds grudges better than he holds a hockey stick. The truth is, I don't know what I did to him in the first place. He said he tried to bag Lyla and she said no...maybe it's that..." I trail off.

“What are you going to do?” Amelia asks me as she goes back to the table to help Hayden pick up the crayons and papers, talking to me through the doorway.

I think for a moment before I answer her. I honestly don’t know what I’m gonna do to shut him up, but I need to do something...and fast. Before it gets out of hand. I’ve been thinking about doing something for charity, and an idea starts forming in my mind as I think about the things he said in his comments.

“I think I’m going to suggest a charity boxing match between us. He’s too chicken to actually go through with it, but it might make him think long enough to shut him up,” I tell her, wondering if she’s going to try to shut down the idea.

I watch as her eyes widen in shock and her mouth drops open. She clamps her mouth shut and narrows her eyes at me.

“Jackson...”

I can tell by the look on her face that she’s about to lecture me and tell me I don’t need to do anything like that, or that I’ll get myself hurt, but it’s the only thing I know that will get him to shut his cocky mouth.

“I know what you’re going to say. But I don’t think we’ll have to worry because I don’t think he’ll even go for it.” I open my laptop again and start making a new post on my social media. “Or, he’ll accept and not show.” I smile.

I am calling on Wayne Goodall to accept an invitation to a charity boxing match I will be hosting. Information TBD. Wayne, if you accept, you’ll be boxing against me...fair and square. Let me know by midnight tonight. #WailingOnWayne #JackedByJackson #StandUpForWhatsRight

I finish the post and hit publish, grinning as I close my laptop.

“Now we wait,” I say, sitting back on the stool and wondering, Did I just make a mistake?

29

AMELIA

I stand in front of the home I grew up in and I'm nervous, to say the least. I raise my hand to knock on the door, but the door opens before I can.

I'm greeted by the maid of all people...she must have seen me coming in the ring camera.

The vast amount of security around my childhood home makes sense now that I know who and what my father is.

"Is he home?" I ask her, not even mentioning who he is...she knows who I'm talking about.

She nods without saying anything, and I know exactly where I'll find him.

I head inside and march down the hall toward the study where father spends most of his time. I walk in without knocking and his head snaps up in surprise. He's on the phone and his conversation stops abruptly.

"Lou, I'm gonna have to call you back. My daughter just barged in without knocking," he says, looking at me in shock.

He knows I'm not normally like this, so he likely realizes I'm here for a reason. My father and stepmother have been begging me to come home for a while

now...demanded it, in fact. Now that I'm here, I don't know that my father is going to love the reason.

He slams the phone down in the cradle, clearly irritated that he's had to end the call. He's the only person I know who still has a landline in their home, but then again, he's never been one to advance with technology.

I sit in the chair across from his desk and glare at him, hoping he can sense my anger. It's been building inside me since I found out my brother is alive.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks me, painting on the sickening father-of-the-year act he likes to use on me.

Once upon a time, it might have worked. But that was before I knew the truth.

"I want to talk to you about a few things and I swear to God, Dad, you better not lie to me," I say through gritted teeth. "I'll know if you lie, because honestly, I already know the truth, I just want to hear it from the horse's mouth."

I'm not sure where my bravery is coming from, but I know I better run with it before I get cold feet. I sit straighter in my chair and look him in the eyes. What I see there is something I've never seen before, and I don't like it. I know in this moment that Preston is right about everything, but I still want to hear it from my dad. I want him to tell me the truth about himself.

"Jesus Christ, Amelia, what's going on? I've never seen you so worked up before," he says, concern flashing over his face for a brief second before his expression returns to its stoic stance.

"I want the truth from you. Did you kill Mom or have her killed? Did you try to have Preston killed after finding out he isn't your biological son and realizing he knew the

truth too?" I know I should only ask one question at a time, but I also know he likely won't answer them all anyway.

I don't miss the look in his eye when I say "try to have Preston killed." He clearly didn't know Preston was still alive, and I just gave it away. Shit. If he wants Preston dead, then he'll go after him again. I can't let that happen. I won't let it happen. I keep watching him as he squirms in his chair across from me. He doesn't look at me for a long time, but finally his eyes meet mine.

"So, you found out your brother is still alive?" he asks, fake joy on his face. "Your mother will be so thrilled."

"Stepmother," I correct him for the first time ever. "Now, are you going to tell me the truth, or am I just going to have to assume that everything is true and leave with that realization?" I hold his gaze. "And never come back."

I can tell by the way he's acting that everything Preston told me is true. My heart thuds in my chest as I wait for him to speak up and tell me it's not, that he couldn't do such a thing, but that never happens. He continues to stare at me as if he's challenging me to say more. My breath hitches in my throat, and I don't know what to say. I swallow hard before sitting straighter in my chair and leaning forward, placing my elbows on the edge of his oak desk.

I look him right in his eyes, daring him to look away from me. A smirk crosses my face and for a moment he looks a little scared.

"I know everything about you, everything you've done. If you want to cast Preston to the side because he doesn't carry your DNA, that's fine, but the one thing you won't do is take my brother away from me. He's been the only one I could ever depend on and I will not let you take him away from me...again," I seethe. "I've already missed two years with him because of you—I won't lose any more time, you got that?"

I can tell by the look on his face that my words have hit a nerve, but I don't care one bit. I sit back in my chair and wait for him to say something...anything. He stays quiet for a long time, and just when I think he isn't going to say anything at all, he opens his mouth.

“What do you mean he's the only one you could ever depend on? I'm very insulted by that statement, Amelia. I've always tried to be there for you,” he says, doing his best to look pained by my words. “I funded your trips abroad, paid for everything you ever wanted. I stood to the side while you went and played nanny to that brat of a child, and?—”

“Don't you dare say one word about that little girl, not one damn word...or her father,” I tell him with my finger pointed toward his chest.

The look on his face tells me he's angry, and for the first time I wonder if I shouldn't have come here alone. I can't be afraid, or at least I can't look like I am.

“I was there for you, Amelia,” he tries to say, but I know different.

“Oh, please. You were barely ever home, and now I know why. You can say what you want to, but Preston was the only person who was constantly there for me after Mom died. You're a shit human for doing what you did to take them both away from me. You are no longer a part of my life. I don't want you in it anymore, but if you ever cared for me at all you'll leave Preston alone and let him come back. Please,” I say, holding his stare. “I promise not to report any of this to the police, and so does Pres, but it's time for you to be a decent man and do the right thing.”

We stare at each other for several minutes until I see him take a deep breath in and let it out. His eyes soften and he looks at me the way he used to look at me.

“Okay, he can come back. I'll leave him alone like you want me to, but nobody is

going to know about his paternity. He's going to be an outcast from the family, so no one will find out. If anyone ever finds out, I'm gonna know you told them, and you're going to be sorry," he tells me, his voice gruff.

"Well, I think it's a real shitty thing to do to the boy who's been your son his whole life just because he doesn't share your DNA, but it's better than him being dead, so I'll take it. I'm sure Preston will appreciate it too. I'll be sure to give him your best regards." I stand from my seat and walk to the door of the study.

I stop at the door and turn to face him one last time.

"One day, when you're older and you're alone with no one to take care of you, you're going to regret doing what you've done to your children. You'll want to make amends, you'll want us to be in your life. You'll want us to help you when you can't help yourself anymore, but by then it will be too late. It's already too late now." I see the cup of half-drunk coffee sitting on his desk and I walk over, grab it, and toss it in his face.

He splutters and spits.

"What was that for?" he growls. "That was still hot."

"That was for Jackson, the man I love, and his daughter Hayden. You took their wife and mother away from them. Screw you and your hidden life while I live mine out in the open." I walk across the room and open the door, leaving before he can say another word.

I hurry down the hall and out the front door, almost sprinting to my car. It's only once I'm inside it with the door shut behind me that I let the tears fall. Even though he was a world-class jerk my entire life, it still hurts to cut him out.

I know deep down it's the right thing to do, especially after everything he's done to Preston, but no child ever dreams of cutting ties with their parents. I start the car and pull out of the driveway one last time, not even bothering to look behind me.

It's only forward from now on, and my future is a lot brighter than my past.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 3:01 am

JACKSON

I sit at my laptop responding to comments about the boxing match I suggested. To my surprise and Amelia's, Wayne has accepted the challenge. I feel Amelia stiffen beside me as she leans over and reads the comments, and she puts her hand on my shoulder.

"Jackson, you don't have to do this. You don't have to prove anything to anyone," she says, concern lacing her tone, and I know she's worried about me getting hurt.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned about it, but I shake my head and swallow the fear. I'm not going to let it get to me. I'm going to do this, to show Wayne I'm not to be messed with and neither is my family. I can tell Amelia doesn't like the idea and I'm not sure what to do to ease her worry.

"Jackson, your talent is hockey, not boxing. You need to let the boxers handle the boxing ring and you keep to the ice." She wraps her arms around my neck from behind.

I chuckle softly at her words. I know she has a point, but it's never too late to learn something new. I know I have to do this, or Wayne will never stop running his mouth. I can't keep getting thrown out of games just because he can't keep his mouth shut and likes to throw insults.

"Baby, I'll be okay, I promise. I've already hired a trainer, and he's one of the best. Wayne isn't going to win. I'm going to make sure of it, don't worry about a thing. He's going to embarrass himself in front of a lot of people, millions if it's televised."

I feel her sigh against my back and my hands reach up to pat her wrists that are around my neck.

“I still don’t like it,” she says softly in my ear. “Even with the best trainers, something can always go wrong.”

“I know, baby, but like I said—he’s most likely going to embarrass himself, and I want that. It might knock him down a peg or two.”

“I don’t know about that, Jackson. You checked him pretty good at the game and it didn’t do anything. He’s been running his mouth online ever since. What makes you think boxing with him is going to do anything different?”

I sigh and turn around to face her. She’s got a point, but I can’t back out now. I suggested it, so I have to go through with it no matter what happens. I start to panic that she might disagree with the idea so much that she walks away. I don’t think I could handle it if that happens. Being apart from her almost killed me the first time—I don’t want to go through that again.

“You’re not going to walk away from me, are you?” I ask her softly.

She looks at me as if I’ve got two heads.

“What? Why would you think such a thing?” She grabs my face in both of her hands. “Jackson, do you really think I’d do that to you?”

“I know you don’t agree with this whole boxing match thing, and I’m scared you’ll walk away from me because of it. A lot of women would,” I say softly, letting myself be vulnerable with her.

It isn’t easy for me to open up and bare my thoughts, and the way she looks at me

tells me she understands that. My heart thuds in my chest as she wraps her arms around me and steps between my legs.

“I’m not going to leave because of a boxing match, Jackson. I may not agree with it, but I know you’re going to do what you think is necessary, and I’ve come to terms with it.” She leans in and presses a soft kiss to my lips.

I let out a hum of appreciation and wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her closer to me and tilting my head to deepen the kiss. I’m not sure how I got so lucky to find a woman like her, but I’m glad she’s in my life. I know I need to tell her that more often, especially after what we’ve been through.

“I’m so lucky you walked into my life, Amelia. I don’t know what I’d do without you,” I whisper softly against her lips.

She pulls back and our eyes meet. Hers are filled with tears, and for a moment I think I’ve done something wrong, but then she smiles.

“I’m glad we found each other too. I know it didn’t start out with the best of intentions, but I’m so lucky to have you and Hayden in my life,” she says as a tear slips down her cheek.

I wipe the tear away and kiss her softly, pulling back to look into her eyes again. My heart is pounding in my chest as I realize just how much I really love her. Her voice brings me back from my thoughts, and I look down at her as she speaks.

“Preston is back in town.”

“How’d that happen?” I ask her.

Preston isn’t my favorite topic, but since he’s her brother, I let her talk about him. I’ll

never keep her away from him now that she knows he's still alive. A wave of jealousy sweeps through me at the thought of him being alive. Why couldn't Lyla have lived too? Why did she have to die? How did he survive? These are questions I know I'll never get the answers to, but they still burn in my mind.

"Since my father isn't his father, he's been cut from the family. My father wants absolutely nothing to do with him, but he agreed to leave Preston alone, so it's safe for him to come back to town," she tells me.

"He doesn't want anything to do with Preston just because they don't share DNA? That's incredibly fucked up. How does Preston feel about it? How are you feeling about it?" I ask her softly, running my hands up and down her back in a soothing motion.

"It doesn't seem to bother Preston. I think it bothers me more than him. He and Dad weren't very close anyway. I think Dad always knew somehow, even when he didn't know for sure." Sadness laces her voice.

I can tell how much it bothers her, and truthfully it bothers me too. I can't imagine a father turning his back on the child he raised, no matter what the DNA says. I can't imagine turning my back on Hayden if I ever found out she isn't mine, but I know that won't ever happen.

"I have to admit that I'm on Preston's side with this. It's really fucked up that your dad is acting that way," I say as I hold her close to me.

I can't imagine how she must be feeling about it. I hope she'll open up and talk about it if she feels like she needs to, but I don't want to push her to talk about it if she isn't ready.

She pulls back to look at me. "Can we have dinner with Preston tonight?"

“Dinner?” I say, and I know there’s a skeptical look on my face.

Dinner with Preston isn’t something I really want to do, but I know it will make Amelia happy. I don’t know how I’ll react to seeing him again, especially knowing that Lyla’s death is on him, in a way. My body stiffens in her arms, and she steps back from me.

“What’s wrong? I know you and Preston were always competitive, but I thought you were kind of friends, despite the competition?” she asks me with a confused look on her face.

How do I tell her that I blame him for my wife’s death? How do I tell her that I’m not sure I’m going to be able to look him in the face without wanting to break his nose? For the past two years, I’ve thought about what I would say or do if I ever got to see him again, but I always thought that wouldn’t be possible. I thought that he died right along with her, even though there was no body to be found. Now, I’m faced with the challenge of being in the same room with him and not ripping his throat out, because I’m dating his sister.

“We weren’t exactly friends, but we were civil with each other. It’s just...part of me feels like he’s responsible for the death of my wife, and I don’t know how I’ll react if I see him. I just don’t want you to get mad at me if being around him is something I can’t handle very well,” I tell her softly.

“I get why you would feel that way, but I can tell you he had nothing to do with it. It was all my father.” She takes my hand and squeezes it, trying to reassure me.

“Okay, I’ll go to dinner. I’ll do my best to be civil, but if he starts anything, I can’t promise I won’t retaliate,” I warn her.

She squeals in delight and runs off to get ready. I sigh when an hour later I find

myself face-to-face with Preston at a small Italian place downtown.

“Preston, glad to see you’re not dead. At least one of us gets to keep our loved one,” I say, a bit harsher than I mean to.

Amelia elbows me under the table and I grunt. I look at Preston and see that his eyes are full of pain, and I suddenly feel guilty for what I just said.

“I’m sorry, Jackson. I really am. I didn’t know what was going to happen. If I could change it, I would,” he says softly as he looks down at his food.

“Hey, man, I know. I’m sorry too—I shouldn’t have said that. Truce?”

Preston smiles wide, and nods his head in acceptance. We continue eating and when we’re done, we’re mobbed by a swarm of paparazzi. Camera flashes and shouts of questions toward Preston overwhelm me. I curse under my breath as I realize that someone from the restaurant must’ve tipped them off. Preston and I surround Amelia and run for the car. I get in the driver’s seat and take off, and catch Preston’s gaze in the rearview mirror. Who knows? It might be nice having Preston in my corner—having another person around to protect Amelia whenever I can’t.

I reach across to the passenger seat to take the hand of the woman I love, and she smiles at me. We’ve come so far, and I’ve never been more excited to see what the future holds.

The End

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 3:01 am

AMELIA

Six months have passed since Preston came back to town, and things have been going well. He's even been getting along with Jackson better than I thought he would.

I'm standing in front of the mirror, getting ready for a party Jackson put together for us. He says he wants to celebrate Preston's return to hockey, but he seems more nervous about it than he should be. I decided to wear the dress and shoes I bought on the shopping trip in Cincinnati, and I smile when I remember the hot sex we had after I modeled this dress for him.

"Are you almost ready, baby? We're going to be late for our own party," Jackson yells from the room down the hall.

"I'm almost ready, I just have to put some finishing touches on my hair," I say as I look myself over in the mirror, making sure everything is just the way I want it.

"I'm going to get Hayden buckled in her seat, hurry if you can," he calls out.

I shake my head and giggle as I pin some of my hair back and leave some of it down. I check my makeup and make sure everything is perfect. Once I'm sure there are no smudges, I grab my purse and head out the door.

Jackson's eyes pop when he sees me. "You look stunning in that dress. It's a shame I won't be able to peel it off of you like last time," he says, his voice low.

I smile and let out a soft giggle as he drives the car onto the highway. I have no idea

where we're headed, and I look at him in confusion when he heads for the marina.

"Jackson, where are we going?" I ask him as he steals a glance in my direction.

"It's a surprise—but don't worry, everyone that got invited knows where to be," he says with a giant grin on his face.

Sure enough, he pulls into the parking lot of the marina and parks the car, shutting off the engine. He turns to look at me with a wide smile on his face and I look at him in shock. He opens his door and climbs out, coming to my side of the car and opening the door for me. He then turns his attention to Hayden and gets her out of her booster seat in the back. With Hayden in one arm, Jackson takes my hand and leads me down a long dock until we come to a stop in front of a very large yacht.

"You planned this party on a yacht?" I ask, completely in shock.

"I did. I only want the best for my lady, and I figured it would be fun," he says as he leads me up the ramp.

Hayden is giggling with excitement, and once we reach the top of the ramp and step onto the boat, I see all our friends and family seated around the top deck of the yacht.

"Surprise!" everyone yells at the exact same time.

Everyone cheers and claps their hands as I start walking around hugging everyone. My heart is so full to see all our friends and family in the same place after everything that's happened. The only person I don't see is my father, and that doesn't bother me at all. I'm glad Jackson didn't invite him to the party after everything I've been through with him and everything I've found out about him and his involvement with Preston's accident.

“Jackson, this is amazing! I can’t believe you’ve done this,” I say as I look around.

The yacht is decorated with strand after strand of tiny fairy lights, glistening against the dark sky like stars. There are tables set up with elaborate table dressings, covered in candles and food. Various dishes and desserts litter the tables across the top deck of the yacht. I walk down the stairs to the deck below, and I’m met with a large dance floor, music playing softly in the background. I can’t believe how elaborate everything is.

“This is beautiful. I can’t believe you pulled this off without me finding out about it. How did you do this?” I ask him in amazement.

“I had help from some reinforcements. Come on, let’s go back upstairs and get some food. I’m sure you’re pretty hungry. I know I am,” he says with a smile as he grabs my hand and leads me back up the stairs to the top deck where all our friends and family are waiting.

Once we get back up the stairs and fill our plates with food, we sit and eat with everyone. Laughter and the sound of glasses clinking echoes through the air, and I sit back in my seat watching everyone. I never thought it would be this way again—I never thought I would see Preston laughing and smiling with old friends and new ones. It warms my heart that the guys on Jackson’s team decided to show up. I’ve never been completely sure how they felt about me, after everything that happened. But I know that even if they’re not there for me, they’re there for Jackson, and maybe even Preston. As everyone finishes eating, Jackson stands with his glass in his hand. He taps his fork against the glass to get everyone’s attention.

The conversation quiets down and everyone turns to look in Jackson’s direction. I look up at him, not sure what he’s doing. Once everyone stops talking and looks in our direction, he sets the fork and the glass down on the table in front of him and then turns to look at me.

“I’m so happy all of you could come and be with us this evening. I’ve wanted to do something special for a while now, and tonight’s the perfect night for it. I wanted to celebrate Preston’s return, as well as celebrate something new.” Jackson’s eyes look out over the crowd for a moment before returning to meet mine.

“Amelia, when we first met, I was a mess. I was deep in grief and trying to navigate being a single father of a little girl all on my own. I had people willing to help me, I was just too stubborn to let them. You walked into my life and met my stubbornness head-on. It took me by surprise, and even though I tried to fight it, I fell hard for you. I can’t imagine my life without you in it, and I don’t want to imagine it. You and Hayden are bright spots in the darkness that seems to surround me. I don’t ever want to lose you.” Jackson pauses as he fishes something out of his pocket and suddenly drops to one knee.

I gasp as I realize what he’s about to do and tears fill my eyes. He opens the little box he pulled out of his pocket and looks up at me, tears filling his own eyes.

“Amelia, my love, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?” he asks me, his voice shaking with emotion.

I can’t stop the tears as they fall from my eyes and run down my cheeks. There’s nothing I want more than to be with him forever. I lean down, grab his face in my hands, and press a kiss to his lips. I pull back with a smile on my face.

“Yes! I’ll marry you, Jackson! There’s nothing I want more in this world than to be your wife,” I tell him as everyone around us claps and cheers.

He stands to his feet and takes the ring from the box, sliding it onto my finger. He shoves the box back into his pocket and wraps his arms around me, twirling me around. He presses his lips to mine and the world stands still for a minute. I can’t wait to be his wife and see what the future has in store for us. My heart is full, and I smile

at everyone around us. The past has been full of heartache and pain, but as I look at Jackson now, the future looks bright. I know with him by my side, we can make it through anything.

1

OAKLEY

Georgia and Dan are excited to invite you to partake in celebrating their special day!

I clutch the wedding invitation in my hands, feeling like I'm about to explode. My eyes dart from the embossed gold lettering on the fancy cardstock to Georgia and Dan, standing before me in the middle of my dad's living room. It's as if I'm trapped in some twisted reality television show. This cannot be real.

"Is this a joke?" I demand, tossing the invitation onto the coffee table. "You two have got to be kidding me."

Georgia smiles innocently, but I see the truth in her piercing blue eyes which are cold and calculating. Dan wraps his arm around her waist, pulling her closer. The way he's holding her—his hand resting possessively on her stomach—makes my skin crawl. She's pregnant, isn't she?

And I thought this day couldn't get any worse.

"Oakley, sweetheart, I know about your past with Dan," Georgia coos, her voice dripping with condescension. "But we're meant to be together. Now we're going to have a family. Isn't it romantic?"

"Romantic?" I scoff, my anger boiling over. "You call sleeping with my fiancé behind my back romantic? You two deserve each other!"

When Dan proposed to me, I was stunned, and I hadn't wanted to embarrass him so I'd said yes. I hadn't expected that a week later I would catch him in bed with my stepsister. And the worst part is that after I ran out of the room, all he could do was say he hadn't meant to hurt me.

Once again, Georgia was picked over me. I'm over it.

"Hey, Oakley," Dan interjects. He's trying to sound reasonable, but his brown eyes give away his guilt. At least he feels guilty. Georgia couldn't care less, despite the act she's putting on. "We didn't plan for things to turn out this way, but what's done is done. Can't we all just try to move on and be happy for each other?"

"Happy for each other?" I sputter, incredulous. "Dan, you betrayed me! And Georgia, you're supposed to be my sister. How could you do this to me?"

Because she always gets what she wants and doesn't care who she hurts in the process.

Didn't I learn that a long time ago?

"Oakley, it's not like I intentionally set out to hurt you," Georgia whines, her eyes filling with crocodile tears. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen. It just...did."

I stare at her in disbelief, my pulse pounding in my ears. Of course she'd try to play the victim here. She's trying to gain sympathy and twist the situation to her advantage. My hands clench into fists as I refuse to give her what she wants.

"Really, Georgia?" I spit, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "You expect me to buy that pathetic act? You knew exactly what you were doing when you slept with Dan. Don't even pretend otherwise."

Before Georgia can respond, Tina, my wicked stepmother from Pittsburgh, steps forward, her icy blue gaze fixed on me. Her designer clothes and perfectly styled hair scream superiority, and I briefly wonder how many hours my dad had to work to be able to afford those clothes.

This woman wouldn't know a thing about love if it hit her in the back of the head.

"Oakley, there's no need to be so dramatic," Tina chides, her voice clipped and precise. "Georgia has made a mistake, but she's your sister. You should be more understanding and forgiving."

"Step sister," I correct her. "And— forgiving ? Tina, this isn't some petty spat over borrowed clothes. Georgia slept with my fiancé and now expects me to go to her wedding and be a bridesmaid? The answer is no. There's not enough money in the world that you could pay me to attend that trainwreck."

The air between us crackles with tension, and I stand tall, refusing to cower under their scrutiny. Despite the pain and betrayal gnawing at my heart, I will not be seen as inferior to them. They may have broken my trust, but they won't break me.

"Oakley, you're being unreasonable," Tina snaps, her patience wearing thin. "We're family, and families forgive each other."

"Family?" I scoff. "I don't want a family that stabs me in the back and then expects me to smile and accept it. And I sure as hell don't need a stepmother who puts me down at every turn. Oh, I forgot Georgia is the golden child and does nothing wrong, right?"

I lock eyes with Tina. She crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed by my outburst. "You've never been happy for Georgia a day in your life, and you want to call her the bad sister?"

That's it. I'm going to lose my mind.

"Excuse me?" I snap. My fists clench involuntarily at my sides, as if preparing for battle. "I told my dad he never should have invited you or your daughter into this family. You two intruded on our lives and tried to manipulate everyone around you."

"Manipulate?" Tina scoffs, feigning innocence. "I've done no such thing. I'm simply trying to help you see reason and support your sister in her time of need."

"Support her?" I can't believe what I'm hearing. "She betrayed me, and you expect me to just...what? Get over it?"

"Life is full of disappointments, Oakley," Tina replies coldly. "It's time you grew up and faced reality."

"Reality?" I retort, shaking my head. "Reality is that you don't care about anyone but yourself, Tina. You or Georgia. You want everyone to follow your twisted narrative, but I won't be part of it. I'm not going."

"Enough!" Tina's voice rises, and I can see the ice in her blue eyes beginning to crack. "You're being selfish and immature."

"Me? Selfish?" I sputter with disbelief. "You have some nerve!"

"Oakley!" A firm hand grips my shoulder, and I turn to find my father standing beside me. His face is creased with concern, and his eyes plead for understanding. "Calm down, sweetheart. This isn't helping anyone."

"But, Dad..." I start to protest, but he shakes his head firmly.

"Come with me," he says quietly, guiding me away from the confrontation. As we

retreat to a quieter corner of the house, I can still feel Tina's icy stare on my back.

They're the ones being unreasonable, yet I feel like I'm the one being punished.

"Oakley, I know it's hard," my dad says gently, wrapping an arm around my shoulders once it's just the two of us. "But you need to find a way to get along with them. We're all family."

"Family?" I scoff, echoing my earlier words. "What kind of family does this to each other? They're not my family, Dad."

"Life is messy, Oakley," he replies with a sigh. "And people aren't always fair, but we have to keep moving forward."

I frown as I struggle to find the words to express my frustration. "It's just so unfair, Dad," I finally manage, my voice cracking.

"I know, sweetheart." He looks at me with sympathy in his eyes. "But trust me, you're better off without Dan. Wouldn't you rather find that out now than later? You deserve so much more than what he could ever give you. Let him be with Georgia. Let him be her problem."

"Maybe," I say hesitantly, not entirely convinced. But then I think about Georgia, her smug smile and growing belly, and a spark of defiance ignites within me. "You're right. Let her have him. I didn't want to marry him anyways."

"That's my girl." Dad smiles, his face softening. "Now, the best way to get back at someone is to show them that you're not affected, so you're going to go back in there, congratulate them, and accept their invitation."

"But, Dad..."

“If you don’t want to do it to be the bigger person, then do it for me...to maintain the peace.”

I look at my dad, a part of me still desperately wanting to say no. But I can’t say no to him, not when he’s done everything for me my entire life. I still don’t understand how he could pick someone like Tina, someone who’s the complete opposite of how my mother was, but I guess it’s not for me to understand.

I’ll never do another favor like this for him again.

“Fine.”

He smiles and rubs my cheek. “That’s my girl.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the unpleasant task ahead, and follow my father back into the lion’s den. The tension in the room is palpable as we approach Georgia and Dan, both of them wearing wary expressions. As if I’m the problem.

“Congratulations on your upcoming wedding,” I say through gritted teeth, forcing a smile that I know doesn’t reach my eyes. My resentment simmers beneath the surface, like a pot about to boil over.

“Thank you, Oakley,” Georgia replies, her voice dripping with false sweetness. Dan simply nods, his gaze never quite meeting mine. “You may actually have fun if you manage to find a date.”

Manage to find? What, as if I can’t find a guy to go with me? The taste of bile lingers in my mouth as I try to force a smile and pretend everything is okay.

My hands ball into fists at my sides, but before I can stop myself, the words escape my lips. “Actually, Georgia, I’ll be taking not one, but three dates to your wedding,” I

snap, glaring daggers at her. Her eyes widen in surprise, and I feel the slightest hint of satisfaction at catching her off guard.

“Three dates?” Dan chimes in, his voice dripping with disbelief. “You must be joking.”

“Does it look like I’m joking?” I challenge, raising an eyebrow and daring him to question me further. The room falls silent, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. “I hope you didn’t think you were my only choice all those years.”

Dan’s nose wrinkles, and I’m happy to see the expression on his face.

“That doesn’t sound very ladylike,” Tina comments, her nose upturned toward me.

“I don’t remember asking,” I snap back.

“Look, all that matters,” Dad steps in, “is that she’ll be coming. Oakley can bring whoever she’d like.”

“Fine,” Georgia finally concedes, her eyes narrowing as she studies me. “I look forward to meeting these mystery men.”

“Trust me, they’re much better than any man I’ve ever dated before,” I retort, my words a personal dig against Dan. Then I spin on my heel and storm out of the house, slamming the door behind me.

As I stride down the front steps, my heart races with a blend of satisfaction and uncertainty. What have I just gotten myself into? Now I have to find three wedding dates, for a wedding that’s only six weeks away.

My eyes scan the quiet suburban street, taking in the neatly trimmed lawns and

identical houses that seem to mock me with their predictability. “Three dates, Oakley? Really?” I mutter to myself, rolling my eyes at my own recklessness. “What were you thinking?”

But as much as I fear the consequences of my impulsive decision, there’s also a part of me that relishes the shock and disbelief on their faces. Maybe, just maybe, this bold move will be the first step in proving to myself—and everyone else—that I’m not the wounded, desperate girl they think I am.

Thankfully, I have three best friends I can call who might be able to help.

“Time to text the boys,” I whisper, pulling out my phone and scrolling through my contacts to find the ones I’m looking for.

GRAY

S.O.S. I need all three of you guys to be my dates to my evil stepsister's wedding in six weeks. I know we haven't seen each other in years, but I need you guys. I understand you're busy, but if you could even just spare the day, I'd be grateful. Just let me know when you get the chance.

I've read her message more times than I'd like to admit. We've kept in touch over the years, calling here and there and texting every so often, but she's right. My brothers and I have been busy.

That won't stop me from doing whatever it is she needs of me, though. I'll always be there for Oakley.

I walk around Oakley's apartment, waiting for her to get back, grateful that the spare key she gave me years ago still works. Her home is the definition of simple, exactly like I remember it. It's just two bedrooms and one bathroom, and she keeps it exceptionally clean. The furniture is nice but low quality, so she got it from some cheap furniture store. It's decorated nicely and feels homely though. It reminds me a lot of the house I grew up in.

Maybe that's what she was going for.

My gaze falls upon the fireplace and the picture frame that sits atop it. I can't resist the urge to pick it up and study the photograph carefully. We were all so happy

then—Oakley, Iris, Theo, Reid, and myself. The five of us, inseparable and full of joy, had no idea how much our lives would change after Oakley’s mother passed away.

“God, we were just kids,” I mutter to myself, smiling at the memory.

Everything was so different then. Sometimes I miss just how simple life used to be.

The door to Oakley’s apartment swings open and she steps inside, her eyes widening in shock as she spots me. She clutches her chest, catching her breath before scowling at me.

“Gray?! What the hell? You scared me half to death!”

“Sorry, Oak,” I chuckle, unable to resist pulling her into a tight hug as I breathe in her familiar scent. I’d missed her more than I realized until I had her in my arms again. “It’s good to see you.”

“Don’t I know it?” she huffs, but I can feel her relax in my arms, her tension dissipating as we stand close together, wrapped up in each other.

Pulling away, I move to her kitchen and start to fill a glass with water. “You know, for someone who loves food as much as you do, you sure don’t have much of it here,” I tease her with a grin, hinting that I looked through her cupboards.

“Ugh, I know,” she groans playfully, wrinkling her nose. “I’ve been so busy lately that I haven’t had time to go grocery shopping. But enough about my empty fridge—why are you here?” She narrows her eyes suspiciously, an amused glint in her gaze.

“Ah, well,” I say, reaching for my phone and holding it up to show her the text

message she sent me. “You needed me, Oakley. And when my best friend needs me, I’m there. No questions asked.”

“Gray,” she murmurs, overwhelmed by emotion. “You dropped everything to come here?”

“Always, Oak,” I assure her. “Now tell me what’s so important about this wedding with your ‘wicked stepsister.’”

Oakley’s eyes darken as she recalls the events that led to her desperate text message. “Dan,” she says, contempt seeping through her words. “He cheated on me with Georgia.”

The words hit me like a slap to the face, and I clench my fists at my sides. The thought of any man hurting Oakley is unbearable, but the fact that it was with her stepsister makes my blood boil. “How could he do something like that to you?” I growl. “I could punch him in the jaw.”

“Trust me, I already did when I found them together,” Oakley says, a mix of pride and anger in her voice. “I punched him right in the face, so don’t bother going after him. He’s not worth your time.”

I can’t help the smirk that comes to my lips at the fact that she hit him. She’s always been sassy, but never violent. Who is this girl? She’s not the Oakley I remember, and I like that.

I move closer to her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “You deserve so much better than Dan, Oakley. You always have. You have other options, better options.”

Oakley bites her bottom lip. “Like you?”

I don't hesitate. "Oakley, you know I've always wanted to be something more with you," I confess, trying to keep my tone light and playful to mask the intensity of my emotions.

She rolls her eyes, clearly uncomfortable with the direction our conversation is taking. "Gray, you're my best friend, but my answer is still the same. I can't date you, because I can't risk anything going wrong—can't risk losing you or your brothers. You're too important to me."

Nothing would go wrong. I wouldn't let it, but I don't bother to say the words out loud.

The sting of her words is sharp, but I swallow down my disappointment, recognizing that now isn't the time to push her on this topic. Instead, I shift gears and offer an alternative. "How about coming back home with me for a while? We could all use some time together, and it might help take your mind off things."

"Home with you?" she echoes, confusion furrowing her brow. "To New York? Why?"

"Because it would be fun to have the gang back together, especially with the Stanley Cup approaching," I explain, a smile tugging at my lips. "Theo and Reid haven't seen you in ages, and they miss you. Besides, the big city might help you take your mind off everything going on with your family."

I watch as she chews her bottom lip, clearly torn between wanting a distraction from her troubles and the uncertainty of leaving her familiar surroundings. "I don't know, Gray. It sounds nice, but?—"

"Trust me, Oakley. You need this," I insist gently, placing a hand on her arm.

She hesitates for another moment. “I appreciate the offer, but I have work?—”

“And I know you have weeks of vacation time stored up, that you never use,” I interrupt, unable to let her slip away so easily. “I booked your ticket last night. You deserve a break, Oakley.”

Her eyes widen in disbelief, clearly caught off guard by my bold move. “You did what?” Her voice is a mix of shock and amusement.

“Yep. We fly back tonight—we need to leave for the airport in about an hour.” I flash a cheeky grin, hoping my determination will sway her. “So, you don’t really have a choice, because it’s too late to get a refund, and you wouldn’t want me wasting money, right?”

Oakley bursts into laughter, shaking her head at my persistence. “You’re unbelievable, Gray,” she says, her green eyes sparkling with mirth. “And apparently rich, if you can afford to buy tickets on a whim.”

“Hey, it’s all part of being an NHL player,” I reply, shrugging modestly. Then, my voice takes on a more earnest tone. “But seriously, Oakley, we need you there. You’ve always been our lucky charm, and we have some important games coming up. The championship game is actually the day before the wedding. So, if you want us as your dates, well...it’s only fair that you do something for us too, right?”

She bites her lip, considering my words. I hold my breath, praying that my charisma will win her over. After a moment, she sighs and rolls her eyes playfully. “Alright, fine. I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this, but you’ve always been impossible to say no to.”

“Thank goodness for that,” I chuckle, relieved that she’s finally given in.

She rushes to her laptop to quickly ask for the time off, grinning at her own spontaneity as she emails her work and fills out a PTO form. But my smile falters as Oakley begins to gather a few of her things. I watch her move around the apartment, grabbing clothes and toiletries with an air of determination. A flicker of doubt tugs at my heart, reminding me that she's always rejected me where it matters most.

But things are different now.

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The fluorescent lights of the airport terminal buzz above my seat, my leg bouncing uncontrollably. My eyes dart between the clock on the wall and the gate to our flight, waiting for the inevitable call to board the plane. Anxiety gnaws at the pit of my stomach, my fingernails finding their way to my mouth as I chew on them.

“Hey, Oakley.” Gray’s voice draws my attention away from my nervous habit. He stands before me, holding a small bag of food with a gentle smile. “I got you some snacks. Thought you might be hungry.”

“Thanks, Gray.” I force a smile, trying to keep up appearances. I glance at the offered food but politely decline. “I’m not really hungry right now.”

His warm brown eyes study me for a moment, his concern evident. “You sure? You seem a little off.”

I sigh, hesitating before answering. “It’s just...I’m not a big fan of flying, you know?”

Somehow, I’d completely forgotten the fear back at my apartment when he invited me to come...

I wish I’d remembered.

Gray’s concerned gaze falls on me. “I didn’t realize you were still afraid of it. If I had known, I would have booked us a road trip instead. I just...”

“Gray,” I start, cutting him off, not wanting him to feel bad. My voice is barely above

a whisper. “It’s not just that I’m scared of flying. After what happened with Mom...” The words hang heavy in the air between us. I don’t have to finish the thought, because we both know the truth that my mom died in a plane crash. “I can’t shake the feeling that something terrible could happen.”

His expression softens with understanding, and he reaches out to gently place a hand on mine. His touch is warm and comforting, a stark contrast to the chill settling over my body.

“Oakley, I promise you, nothing is going to happen. I’ll be right there beside you the whole time.”

My heart swells at his reassurance, but I can’t help the sarcasm that slips past my lips. “Are you suddenly an expert on aviation safety, Gray?”

He laughs, the sound soothing my frazzled nerves. “No, but I am your best friend. And I’d never let anything happen to you.”

Yes. My best friend. That’s what I need right now.

“Thanks, Gray,” I murmur, meeting his eyes. “You always know how to make me feel better.”

“Of course, Oakley.” He smiles warmly, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze before releasing it, just as our flight is called. “Now, let’s board this plane.”

As we make our way through the boarding process, I follow closely behind Gray, my heart pounding in my chest. But as I glance over at him, his steady presence calms me like nothing else can. And for the first time in a long while, I allow myself to trust, to lean on someone who has always been there for me.

The moment my foot crosses the threshold onto the plane, I feel a wave of

apprehension wash over me. Gray's hand on the small of my back grounds me, and I focus on the gentle pressure. We make our way down the aisle, and I can't help but blink in surprise when we arrive at our seats—first class.

“First class?” I quip, trying to hide my nervousness with humor.

Gray chuckles as he stows our carry-ons in the overhead compartment. “I figured if it's your first flight in years, you should do it in style. I've been riding in first class for years now.”

“Style, huh?” I arch an eyebrow, putting on my sassiest expression. “Well, Mr. Fancy Pants, let's see what all the fuss is about.”

We settle into the plush leather seats, and I have to admit that the extra legroom and luxurious surroundings do bring a modicum of comfort. As I'm exploring the various buttons and adjusting my seat, Gray leans in closer, his warm brown eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Enjoying yourself?” he teases, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face.

“I admit, this isn't half bad.” I grin at him. “So, tell me, how has life been treating you since we last caught up? Still scoring goals and breaking hearts?”

Even though I say the words, I know the truth—Gray has never been much of a playboy. Matter of fact, I'm pretty sure he's only ever had one girlfriend. I don't know why, though. He's extremely good-looking, rich, and kind. What woman wouldn't want him?

Except for me.

“Something like that,” he replies with a light laugh. “But enough about me. Are you still figure skating?”

The second I hear the words, the smile drops from my face, and I blow out a breath. I try not to think about my failed figure skating career, but how could Gray have known that?

“Uh, no,” I answer, a bit awkwardly.

He frowns. “Why not?”

“It doesn’t pay the bills.” I shrug. “It was just a little childhood dream anyways. Being comfortable is more important to me than pursuing some dream.”

Gray seems like he wants to say something but refrains. “Are you still working at the hotel?”

“Yep, I’m a front desk agent.”

“And...you enjoy it?”

“Well, you know,” I say, leaning back in my seat and crossing my legs casually. “It’s a never-ending parade of demanding guests, late-night check-ins, and room service orders. But it does have its perks.”

“Perks?” Gray asks, intrigued.

“Free shampoo and conditioner,” I deadpan, smirking at his laughter. “But seriously, there’s something about helping people find comfort during their travels that appeals to me. I might not be chasing my passion like you are with hockey, but it’s a satisfying job.”

“Oakley, you’ve always had the gift of making people feel at ease,” Gray says, his voice filled with genuine admiration. “And I’m glad you found a way to use it in your career.”

“Thanks, Gray,” I reply, feeling a warmth in my chest at his kind words. “You know, sometimes I think about what it would be like if I had followed my passions instead of focusing on comfort and stability. But then I remember how much I love free toiletries, and the decision is clear.”

Gray chuckles, shaking his head. “You never cease to amaze me, Oakley. And for the record, I believe you could do anything you set your mind to, passionate or not.”

“Aw, you’re too sweet, Gray. Stop it before I get a cavity,” I tease, playfully swatting at his arm.

The hum of the plane’s engine vibrates beneath my feet, making my heart race faster. I can feel every ounce of blood pulsing through my veins, and it’s getting harder to breathe as the flight attendants finish their preflight checks.

Gray glances over at me, concern etched on his features.

“Hey, Oakley,” he says softly. “You’re going to be okay. I promised, remember?”

As the plane starts to move, my fear takes over, and I impulsively grip onto Gray’s arm. He doesn’t hesitate for a second, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close. “Just focus on me, Oakley. I’m right here. Breathe.”

I try to steady my breathing, inhaling the familiar scent of his cologne and feeling the reassuring rise and fall of his chest. My rational mind knows the statistics, that flying is safer than driving, but memories of my mother’s death still haunt me.

“Gray, I—” I begin, but before I can finish my thought, Gray pulls me even closer and presses his lips against mine.

My initial shock leaves me frozen, my eyes wide and my mind reeling. But then something inside me snaps, and I surrender to the kiss, allowing myself to get lost in

this unexpected moment.

His lips are warm and tender, evoking emotions I didn't know I was capable of feeling. The world around us seems to fade away, and Gray deepens the kiss.

When he finally pulls away, he does so with a gentle smile that makes my chest ache.

"See? We're in the air," he says softly, his warm brown eyes meeting mine.

I hadn't even realized we were airborne, my fear momentarily forgotten while he was kissing me. The realization hits me like a ton of bricks—Gray was just trying to help me get my mind off of takeoff.

"Thank you," I whisper, not knowing what else to say.

"Anytime," he replies, his voice barely audible over the hum of the airplane's engines. "It's a short flight, but try to go to sleep. It'll make it go by even quicker."

I rest my head on his shoulder, closing my eyes as I try to process the whirlwind of emotions coursing through me. Our kiss was nothing short of electrifying, igniting a fire within me that I can't seem to extinguish. It isn't the first time we've kissed, but this time it felt different than it did all those years ago.

As the plane ascends higher into the sky, I allow myself to drift off into a fitful sleep, lulled by the steady rhythm of Gray's breathing. Despite the lingering taste of fear on my tongue, I can't help but feel safe and secure in his arms.

He's always managed to make me feel safe.