



Our Pucking Secret (2-Hour Quickies #4)

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Category: Sport

Description: I discovered I was switched at birth and my world shattered.

Now I'm fake engaged to the son of the family I always believed was mine.

The only man I shouldn't touch—and the only one I burn for.

Logan LaRue is hot as hell and knows it. Funny too.

A New York billionaire hockey star with a line of fans who DM him Marry me.

He has nothing in common with a nerdy small-town vet like me.

And everything that was rightfully mine.

To uncover the truth—and infiltrate the families we were taken from—we pretend to be engaged.

It's supposed to be simple. Temporary. Controlled.

But the way he looks at me makes it impossible to remember this is fake.

The way his hands and his mouth find every place that makes me forget myself...

As I see the sweet man behind the cocky PR image, I'm drawn in deeper.

And for the first time, I feel really seen and wanted.

But is this love?

Or are we just attaching to the one person who feels like home—

because they came from the parents we cherish?

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

It's Christmas Eve, and I'm not opening gifts—I'm opening sterile gauze packs with bloody gloves and no backup.

Bellwood General isn't built for chaos. It's barely built for flu season. The nurses swap gloves and hall duty like trading cards. And tonight? We were already behind before the snow started falling.

I've been covering both triage and overflow since noon.

Bellwood's maternity and emergency departments share a hallway and a storage closet. Always have. We're supposed to call it "integrated care," but really it just means babies and broken bones in shouting distance .

Maybe in ten years, hospitals won't have to bunk maternity with the damn ER. But by then, I'll be long gone. Retired. Somewhere warm, with a glass of wine and no overhead fluorescents.

I can't wait.

"Catherine!" someone calls. "They're bringing in that MVA now. Red tag, internal bleed."

"I'm on it," I say, pulling on gloves as I push through the double doors into chaos.

The hallway is full—again. The trauma bay is prepped but jammed. A nurse from maternity barrels by with a heated blanket, muttering, "Still no on-call OB. And the board's lighting up like a freaking tree."

The trauma team rolls in a man mid-thirties, soaked in blood, jaw slack. His leg's at a wrong angle. EMTs shout vitals. I catch fragments—BP tanking, GCS low, possible spleen rupture.

I don't know his name. I won't forget his face.

I stabilize him as best I can, calling out orders, wishing I could grab supplies we don't have. Behind me, monitors beep in dissonant rhythm. To my left, someone vomits. To my right, a baby cries from postpartum.

Just another Christmas Eve in Bellwood.

Ten minutes later, I'm back in the hallway, scrubbing a bloodstain off my shoe with a dry alcohol wipe that's doing jack all.

The intercom crackles—'O Holy Night' playing like it's given up halfway through. Then a click. "Triage to L&D—two active laboring walk-ins. One minute out."

I check the clock.

Midnight. Of course.

The first couple comes through windblown, breathless, and looking both terrified and completely happy .

"I'm Elizabeth Collins and this is my husband, John," she says, voice tight. "It started about two hours ago. We didn't want to come in too early—"

"Water broke in the truck," her husband adds. "Old heater went out halfway through town, and we hit every red light on 6."

I nod, already scanning their intake forms. “How far apart?”

“Three minutes, maybe less.”

“All right, let’s get you back.”

Her belly is low, her flannel coat soaked through at the hem, pajama pants tucked into old boots. She’s flushed, but not panicking. Her husband hovers protectively, one hand on her lower back, the other clutching a duffel bag.

“Room Four,” I say, passing her a gown and ID wristband. “We’re short tonight, so it might be me bouncing back and forth. But we’ll take good care of you.”

Mrs. Collins smiles faintly. “As long as someone catches the baby, we’re good.”

A few seconds later, the doors whoosh again.

This time, the cold that follows isn’t weather.

The woman who steps in is perfectly composed and visibly annoyed.

Sleek black maternity coat. Hair glossy under a cashmere beret.

Beside her, her husband holds a phone in one hand and a garment bag in the other. She doesn’t wait for me to speak.

“We were told this was the closest facility,” she says. “We didn’t anticipate labor during the holiday.”

“Name?” I ask, clipboard ready.

“Patricia LaRue,” she replies.

He steps forward. “Laurent LaRue. We were in Leiper’s Fork for Christmas. The roads iced over.”

Her expression sharpens. “We shouldn’t have left Nashville. This was irresponsible. ”

I grab a second gown and guide her to the only other available bay—right across the hall from the Collinses.

“I was told we were having a girl,” Patricia says, eyes on me. “We’re prepared for a girl.”

“No promises in this place,” I say under my breath.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing, ma’am. Let’s get you settled.”

Mr. LaRue sets the luggage down with care. “Do you need anything from the car, darling?”

“There’s a monogrammed blanket in the left-hand case,” she says.

I hand her the gown and band.

I prep both rooms as fast as I can. Fetal monitors hum. Water breaks. Pressure rises. Screaming starts.

Overhead, a trauma code blares through the intercom. A single paramedic wheels in a teenager with head trauma and compound fractures. Blood smears across the floor.

The ER lights stutter.

I wipe sweat from my forehead and reset the monitor for Mrs. Collins. Seven centimeters. Breathing steady. She grips her husband's hand like she's holding onto a rope.

Mrs. LaRue is at eight and climbing. She refuses to lie down. Her husband hovers silently while she paces, then demands the lights be dimmed, then brightened again. At first, she refuses the house anesthesiologist, but her husband steadies her with a touch to her wrist.

"I expect standards," she snaps.

"We're doing the best we can," I say, and rush back across the hall.

Around 2:17 a.m., both babies are delivered—minutes apart—by the on-call resident and a floater from ICU.

The mothers don't hold them right away. We're understaffed, and things are moving too fast. Both infants are quickly wiped, wrapped, and taken to the nursery for monitoring. That's standard when things are chaotic—or when more pressing emergencies are pulling staff in too many directions .

And right now, everything is pulling in too many directions.

I step out to find the nursery crowded. The janitor is mopping a spill from the trauma bay just outside the double doors. A gurney is halfway blocking the hallway. Jerry, one of our youngest techs, is prepping two bassinets.

"Which is which?" I ask.

“LaRue girl, Collins boy,” he says. “Based on ultrasound.”

“No,” I say, tired but firm. “Collins delivered first—a girl. LaRue had a boy. Maybe the ultrasounds were off.”

Jerry’s face goes pale. “Shit. I already printed bands.”

“Print new ones,” I say. “We’ll swap them before delivery.”

He prints two new bands fast, hands fumbling in the cramped space. His gloves are damp. One slips from his grip and skitters across the floor. The janitor pushes his mop forward, nudges it with the bucket wheel, and accidentally kicks it under the gurney.

“I got it,” Jerry mutters, scrambling to pick it up. The ink has smudged slightly. Serial number’s half blurred. The paper’s creased.

We’re both called at once—postpartum hemorrhage in Room Six. Baby in Seven not latching. Oxygen alarm in trauma bay.

“I’ve got the bands,” Jerry says. “Go—I’ll handle it.”

I hesitate. “Double-check them,” I say. “You hear me?”

“I will.”

I leave him there with two bassinets, two sets of swaddles, and one ruined band.

Fifteen minutes later, both babies are delivered to their mothers.

Mrs. Collins, Elizabeth, cradles hers like she’s never known another moment. Her

eyes are glassy with joy and exhaustion. John kisses her forehead, then the baby's.

"She's beautiful," he whispers.

She nods and pulls the baby closer.

Across the hall, Mrs. LaRue, Patricia, holds hers stiffly .

Laurent watches from the chair.

"Well?" he asks gently.

"He's... a boy?" Patricia says slowly. "But the doctor said—"

"Ultrasounds aren't gospel," Laurent says gently. "He's healthy. Thank God."

She blinks. "I always wanted to raise a girl."

He brushes her shoulder. "Then we'll try again. For now? We've got a future hockey player."

She adjusts the blanket with her fingertips. Smooths her thumb over the baby's cheek like she's trying to convince herself.

At the nurse's station, I pull up the logs. Room 4: Elizabeth Collins — Baby: 7 lbs 8 oz, Female. Room 5: Patricia LaRue — Baby: 7 lbs 11 oz, Male

I freeze.

That's what I told Jerry to print—because Collins had the girl. Right?

I check the bands. Collins: Serial 438-22. LaRue: Serial 438-23

Wait.

I grab the backup stickers from the printer roll. 438-22: Male. 438-23: Female

No. No, that's backward.

438-22 should have been the Collins girl. 438-23 the LaRue boy.

I look at the smudged band sitting at the corner of the charting desk. Sticky edge curled up. The name "LaRue" is faint but visible—the number underneath blurred.

Was that the original? Or the reprint? The other band's still on the baby's wrist. But... was it printed before delivery or after ?

Did Jerry switch them?

Did I check?

Or did I just think I did?

Or did we both assume the other one fixed this ?

I stand outside the two rooms and listen.

Elizabeth is humming softly. John is whispering something about Christmas morning.

Patricia is silent. The baby fusses once, then settles. Laurent is asking if she wants more pillows.

There's no blood test logged yet. No second nurse on shift. No printed strip with gender assignment—just handwritten notes and one broken label printer.

I scan the chart. I'd filled it in myself, somewhere between contractions and codes.

I thought it was right. But now—now I'm not so sure.

I think about going in. Asking. But what would I even say?

And how do you ask a mother to give back the baby she's got pulled to her chest?

At 3:08 a.m., I close the nursery door and sit at the charting station with my head in my hands.

I checked the vitals. I checked the monitors.

But not the bands. Not the second time.

What do I do now? Nothing. Not without tearing apart two families built on instinct and touch.

They're named. Logged. Recorded. Being fed.

If I'm wrong, I'd interrupt something sacred. I hope I wasn't wrong.

God, let me not have been wrong.

No, I can't be wrong. Numbers can lie, but mothers' arms don't.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Amanda

Twenty-Six Years Later

"Still breathing?" Morgan asks when I finally answer her call.

"Barely. Turns out being Bellwood's most famous veterinary clinic with you only part time is exhausting.

" I tuck my phone between ear and shoulder while checking a tabby's IV line.

"Ever since you and Max won that dog show championship, everyone wants the 'celebrity vet experience.

' Though the prize money did let us hire Laura, so I'll forgive you. "

"You love the chaos."

"I'd love it more if—" A crash from the lobby cuts me off. Through the observation window, I see Otto—all six-foot-plus of military-honed muscle—tangled in a rainbow of leashes while trying to maintain his dignity.

It's like watching a ballet performed by a very serious tree .

For context: Picture the most intimidating man you've ever seen.

Now make him taller, add shoulders that barely fit through standard doors, and top it

with a jaw that could chisel ice.

His blond hair is military-short, his black fitted t-shirt and camo cargo pants scream special ops, and he moves with the precision of someone who probably knows seventeen ways to kill you with a paperclip.

"Hold that thought," I tell Morgan. "Otto's losing a battle with Mrs. Henderson's color-coordinated canine army. This time, they're wearing tutus."

"Tutus?"

"Sparkly ones. With disco ball effects."

"Poor Otto."

I step into the lobby just as Otto manages to free himself. He straightens, adjusts his t-shirt, and announces with complete seriousness: "Ze small ones are plotting something."

"They're Yorkies, Otto."

"Ja. And now they sparkle." He eyes the prancing dogs. "Zat's too suspicious."

"They're not enemy agents."

"Zat's what they want you to think." He eyes a particularly tiny one. "Ze fluffy one has been watching me. She has plans."

From the treatment area, Laura emerges with a German Shepherd who sits perfectly at heel. Otto's face softens slightly. "Finally. A professional."

He gestures between the shepherd and the Yorkies. "One follows commands. Ze others plan revolution."

Laura's been a godsend since we hired her—skilled in surgery, great with clients, and somehow able to translate Otto-speak into normal human communication. Right now, though, she's frowning at me. "Dr. Collins, you look pale."

"Just tired." I wave her off, though the room does feel a bit wobbly. "How's our parvo puppy? "

"Eating on his own this morning."

My heart lifts. We'd spent three nights tube-feeding the little guy, taking turns monitoring his IV. "Show me."

In the isolation ward, a small black Lab mix wags his tail when we enter. I crouch beside his kennel, and he immediately licks my hand through the bars. Two days ago, he'd been too weak to lift his head.

"Hey, fighter," I whisper, scratching under his chin. "Looking good."

Otto appears in the doorway. "Ze tiny warrior recovers well."

"Thanks to Dr. Collins's all-nighters," Laura adds.

I stand up—too quickly, apparently, because the room spins. Laura steadies me with a hand on my arm.

"Dr. Collins?"

"Just need coffee." I blink away the dizziness. "Let's check on the surgery schedule."

The morning blurs by. A dental cleaning. Two spays. A mass removal that turns out more complicated than the x-rays suggested. By afternoon, my hands are shaking slightly, but there's still a waiting room full of patients.

Otto is now demonstrating leash techniques to Laura. A Golden Retriever puppy has launched a stealth attack on his boots, methodically unlacing them while Otto pretends not to notice.

I'm about to comment when something warm trickles down my face. I touch my nose. My fingers come away red.

Otto reacts instantly, expression grave. "Zat's too concerning."

"It's nothing," I lie, grabbing tissues. "Probably the dry air."

"Like ze dizziness is from coffee? Ze shakiness from surgery?" His voice softens. "You are not fooling anyone."

"Don't you have actual work to do?"

"Ja. Keeping you alive is full-time job."

"I already have a mother."

"And I have no girlfriend. We both have problems."

I snort. "Well, too bad I can't help you with that. We both know I'm not your type. Too much sass, not enough camo."

"Zat's too accurate." He almost smiles. "Also, you talk too much."

This is why Otto and I work so well together. He hovers, I snap, he doesn't flinch. It works. Zero romantic tension, maximum snark. Plus, he's the only person besides Morgan who calls me on my bullshit.

And even if he were my type, the clinic keeps me too busy for dating.

My phone buzzes.

Morgan: Otto texted. What's this about nosebleeds?

Me: Traitor.

Morgan: Best friend privileges. Talk.

Me: Nothing to talk about.

Morgan: Right. That's why Otto's worried.

Me: Otto worries about everything.

Morgan: He notices everything. There's a difference.

Me: I hate you both.

Morgan: No you don't. And I'm staying after rounds Thursday. No arguments.

Despite everything—the headaches, the fatigue, the constant hovering from well-meaning friends—I smile.

Maybe they're right to worry. Maybe something is wrong. Maybe I should see a doctor.

But right now? I have a clinic full of animals who need me, friends who care, and a life that's mostly pretty great. Even if it includes Otto's judgy eyebrows and Morgan's long-distance mother-henning.

Speaking of which... Otto is demonstrating perfect heel position while the puppy continues its systematic destruction of his boots. He knows, but he's letting the pup think it's winning. Under that stern exterior, he's just a big softie.

"Otto!" I call out. "Your student has disarmed you!"

He looks down at his now completely unlaced boots, then at the puppy wagging innocently. "Zat's too clever. Someone has been training ze enemy."

And really, how can anyone stay worried when that's what passes for normal around here?

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Logan

The Garden's alive tonight. Twenty thousand fans screaming, the ice gleaming under MSG's iconic lights, and the Detroit defense looking nervous. They should be.

I crouch for the face-off, muscles coiled. Sweat trickles down my neck despite the chill. Their center, Miller, has a tell—his right shoulder twitches before he moves. Amateur mistake.

The puck drops.

I win it clean, sweeping it back to Martinez while shouldering Miller off balance. He hits the ice hard. The crowd roars.

"That's how we do it in New York, pretty boy!" someone screams from the stands.

I'm already moving, cutting through center ice as Martinez feeds a perfect pass to Wilson. Detroit's trying to trap us in the neutral zone, but their positioning is sloppy. Tired legs in the third. I see the gap before it opens.

"LaRue!" Wilson barks. "Back door!"

The puck hits my tape like it belongs there. I explode down the left side, speed building. Their defenseman tries to angle me off—but he's got forty pounds on me and can't match my acceleration. I cut inside, then back out, making him cross his feet.

The crowd rises as he stumbles. Pure instinct takes over—years of practice making my hands faster than thought. I drag the puck between my legs, spin off a check, and find space behind the net.

"Get him! GET HIM!" Detroit's bench is screaming.

Their goalie's head swivels, trying to track me. Rookie mistake. I fake the wrap-around, watch him bite hard to his right post. Then I bank it off his left pad—right to Martinez's waiting stick.

The one-timer is perfect. Top shelf where mama hides the cookies. The Garden explodes.

"LaRue to Martinez! Goal Howlers!" The announcer's voice drowns in the roar. "The kind of vision that makes him one of the league's most exciting playmakers!"

My teammates mob Martinez, but he points at me. "That sauce was filthy, LaRue! Fucking beautiful!"

Coach is already barking lines for the final minutes. We're up 3-2, but Detroit's desperate. They pull their goalie with two minutes left, sending six attackers our way.

The next shift is pure warfare. Bodies flying, sticks battling. I block a slapshot with my shin—the pain immediate and familiar. But pain's just information. Years of training and natural athleticism make these instincts second nature now.

Thirty seconds left. Detroit's pressing hard.

A clearing attempt hits a skate and stays in. Their star forward winds up for a one-timer.

I dive .

The puck hits my ribs instead of the net. The air leaves my lungs, but I manage to sweep it out of the zone with my stick. The clock runs out as it slides past center ice.

Game over. Division clinched.

The celebration is pure chaos. Helmets flying, gloves scattered across the ice. Our goalie, Price, tackles me into the boards.

"You crazy bastard! That block saved my shutout!"

"Your shutout?" I wheeze, ribs screaming. "It was 3-2!"

"Minor details!"

The locker room is electric. Music blasting, guys hollering, reporters trying to get quotes through the mayhem.

Someone's spraying beer—probably Wilson, that showoff.

It smells like sweat and testosterone. Towels half-on, muscles on full display.

Price struts past completely naked, no shame whatsoever—as it should be.

"Put that thing away," Martinez groans.

"Jealous it's longer than your stick?"

"Only thing long about you is your showers, man. What are you doing in there, romance novels?"

"LaRue's the romance novel cover. I'm the happy ending."

Groans all around.

"That's what you need, man," I say. "Go back to the shower, cool that hard-on down—and slap a warning label on it. Contains small parts. May present a shocking hazard."

Laughter explodes. Parker looks like he just witnessed a car crash and can't decide whether to laugh or throw holy water.

Price just shrugs, still gloriously nude. "Not 'shocking,' asshole. Chocking? Fuck yeah."

I chuck him a towel and turn to Parker. "Don't worry, rookie. First time in a pro locker room is like baptism by dong."

"Hey LaRue!" he calls, recovering. "Your Instagram just hit two million followers!"

"Let me guess," Martinez grins. "Another thousand 'Marry me Logan!' comments?"

"More like five thousand," Parker says, scrolling through his phone. "Oh man, listen to this one—'Dear Logan, I'm a doctor and I can heal your bruises... with kisses.'"

"Don't encourage him," Wilson laughs, tossing a towel at my head. "His head's big enough already."

I smirk. "If I had a dollar for every DM about my big head, I'd have enough to buy dinner. If we count the whole cock, not just the head? That's yacht money, baby."

The room erupts.

"Says New York's most eligible bachelor," Ramirez chimes in, parading around in just a towel. "Mr. 'I'm too focused on hockey to date' while half the city's female population slides into his DMs."

Parker turns bright red as Ramirez's towel slips dangerously low. "Dude, seriously?"

"What? Never seen a natural goal scorer before, rookie?"

The whole room cracks up as Parker tries to look anywhere else.

"But seriously LaRue, what about that model who keeps commenting on your posts? The one with the triple-D rack and the OnlyFans side hustle?" Price grins. "She's perfect for you, man."

Parker coughs into his water bottle. "She said she wants to lick champagne off your abs. Publicly."

I smile. "I've got all the excitement I need right here on the ice."

These assholes. My favorite people on earth. We bust balls, block shots, and bleed together. That's family .

After the media scrum, I finally get to shower and assess the damage. The ribs will be colorful tomorrow, but nothing serious. Just another day at the office.

"Party at O'Malley's!" Martinez announces. "Even Coach is coming!"

"Can't. Early practice."

"Come on!" Wilson throws a roll of tape at my head. "Like the rest of us don't? You can't keep using that excuse."

"You're too focused, man," Martinez adds.

My dad would say you can never be 'too focused'—right before launching into another story about how he would've made it in hockey if he'd just had my natural talent.

Funny how his failed dreams turned into the best thing that ever happened to me.

The sport he pushed me into became my passion, my escape, my everything.

My phone buzzes with messages as I head out. Most from teammates' wives coordinating some charity event. One from Annalise about dinner next week. Nothing from the parents—they're probably still exploring whatever remote location caught their interest this month.

The city's still humming as I drive home. New York never really sleeps, just dozes between rushes. Kind of like hockey players.

My apartment's exactly how I like it—clean, organized, with a view of Central Park that reminds me every day why I love this life. My championship ring sits in its glass case beside my first All-Star jersey. Team photos, press clippings, and a signed stick from the final—every piece of this life I've built. Earned.

I grab an ice pack from the freezer and settle onto my couch, grinning as I scroll through the game highlights. Tomorrow's another practice. Another chance to do what I love.

Life is good. Simple. Focused. Just the way I like it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Amanda

Six Months Later

"You're scaring me," Morgan says, locking the clinic's front door. The evening light casts long shadows through the waiting room. "You never ask me to stay late unless there's an emergency."

I sink into the reception couch, the one we bought secondhand when we first opened The Bark Side. "I need to tell someone before I explode. And you're... you're my person, Morgan."

She sits beside me, all traces of her usual humor gone. "I'm here."

"Remember when you kept bugging me about that scratch that wouldn't heal? And my weird joint pain?"

"The one you kept brushing off as 'just tired'? For like, six months?"

"Yeah. Well, turns out you were right to worry." I take a shaky breath. "After that day I nearly passed out in surgery, I finally went to see Dr. Bonnet."

"About time."

"He ran some tests. Then more tests. Then referred me to a specialist who did even more tests."

" I try to laugh but it comes out wrong.

"They found markers for something called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome.

It's this genetic thing that affects connective tissue.

Explains all the weird symptoms—the joint problems, slow healing, random bruising.
"

Morgan takes my hand. "It seems serious."

"Manageable. Not fatal or anything. But that's not.

.." I swallow hard. "The doctor said it's usually inherited.

He wanted to test my parents to trace the genetic pattern.

Mom and Dad agreed right away. You know them—anything to help their baby girl.

" My voice cracks. "They were so... so them about it.

Dad made stupid jokes about superior Collins genes.

Mom brought snacks to the testing appointment. "

I pull away from Morgan, pacing the small waiting room. "The results came back last week. And Morgan? They're not... there's no genetic match. To either of them."

The silence feels heavy enough to crush us both.

"Maybe there was a mistake?" Morgan suggests quietly.

"They ran it twice. I had them check three times." I laugh, but it sounds hysterical even to my ears. "Want to know the worst part? My parents are so excited that it's 'not genetic' because that means my kids won't inherit it."

"Oh, honey."

"I told them the doctors think it's just a spontaneous mutation. They were so relieved." I wrap my arms around myself. "I couldn't... I couldn't tell them the truth."

"Of course not." Morgan stands, pulling me into a hug. "They're your parents."

"They are ," I whisper fiercely. "DNA or not, they're my mom and dad. The way Mom always made two kinds of stuffing at Thanksgiving because I couldn't decide which I liked better. How Dad learned to French braid my hair by practicing on his fishing lines. They're mine ."

"No one's saying they're not."

"If it wasn't for this stupid syndrome, I never would have known. And maybe that would have been better."

Morgan guides me back to the couch. "What did you do next?"

"What any scientist would do. I made a hypothesis." I attempt a weak smile. "First theory: adoption. It would explain everything, right? My parents would pretend because they wouldn't want me to know. So I hired a PI—that guy who helped us track down that puppy mill last year."

"And?"

"Birth certificate's real. Hospital records show Elizabeth Collins definitely gave birth

to a baby that night. There are pictures of Mom pregnant with me. Labor and delivery notes. Everything."

"So if not adoption then how...?"

"The PI kept digging. And he found something... strange." I pull out my phone, hands shaking. "Two babies were born that night. Minutes apart. In a small hospital that usually only saw one birth a week. Bellwood General."

Morgan leans forward. "Amanda..."

"The hospital was understaffed. Christmas Eve. Bad storm. They were using temp nurses, pulling staff from other departments." The words tumble out faster now. "The PI found old staffing records. They were so short-handed that night, they had an ER tech helping in maternity."

"You think... "

"I think in all that chaos, something happened. Something that no one caught. Maybe they did at some point, but it was already too late. And by then..." I gesture helplessly. "Who would want to know? Who would want to tear apart two families? And lawsuits?"

Morgan's eyes widen. "So the other baby..."

"Belongs to my biological parents." My voice catches. "And my parents' biological child belongs to them. There's no other explanation, Morg."

"Have you tried to contact them? The other family? I mean... Do you even want to? Holy shit."

I nod, unable to speak for a moment. "The PI tracked them down. They're... God, Morgan, they're like something from another world. Old money. New York society. Private schools, summer homes, the works."

"And their baby? I mean, your parents' biological..." She trails off, uncertain how to phrase it.

"That's the crazy part." I pull up another file on my phone. "The other baby born that night? Everyone would think it would have been a girl. I mean, if two babies were switched, you'd expect them to be the same gender, right?"

Morgan frowns. "Are you saying the other baby wasn't a girl?"

I nod. "The ultrasounds said girl. They probably painted the nursery pink, bought ruffled onesies, the whole thing. But when the baby was born..."

"It was a boy," Morgan whispers.

"Yeah." My throat tightens. "They were expecting a daughter. And they got a son instead. Just like my parents might have wished for a boy, who knows. Maybe they had 'John Junior' picked out and everything. But they got me instead."

"Amanda..." Morgan's voice is gentle. "Did the PI find who he is?"

I close my eyes. "A hockey player."

"You're kidding. "

"Their son—my parents' biological child—plays professional hockey. In New York."

Morgan grabs my phone. "Show me."

"I can't. Not yet. Because once you see him, once you know who he is... this becomes real. And I'm not sure I'm ready for real."

"You think they know? He knows?"

"No. No one knows except you and me. And it needs to stay that way." I look at her pleadingly. "My parents can never know. It would destroy them. Obviously, they don't know. If they did, they would have done something about it. Honestly, I'm glad they don't, because I can't imagine my life without them, our family dinners, our animals... "

"But he's their son..."

"And I'm their daughter. Biology doesn't change that. Doesn't change the fact that they're the ones who raised me, loved me, shaped me into who I am." I wipe my eyes. "Besides, his parents clearly did right by him. He's successful, famous even. Everyone seems okay. Why ruin that?"

Morgan studies me for a long moment. "Then why find them—him—at all?"

"Because..." I take a shaky breath. "Because I need to know if I'm right.

Need to look him in the eyes and see if I see my dad there.

Need to know if he has Mom's laugh or Dad's weird double-jointed thumbs.

Need to... need to make sure he's really okay," I whisper. "That my parents' real child is fine."

Morgan pulls me into another hug. "Oh, Amanda. Only you would find out something like this and worry about everyone else first."

We sit in silence for a while, the clinic's evening sounds washing over us. Someone's dog barks in the kennel. The ancient coffee maker gurgles its last breath .

"So," Morgan says finally. "When do I get to see what this mystery hockey player looks like?"

"Not yet. I need... I need a plan first. Need to figure out how to meet him without telling him why. Because once that door opens..."

"It can't be closed."

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Logan

A Few Weeks Later

The puck hits my tape with a satisfying snap. Perfect pass from Martinez. I cut across the blue line, faking left before dragging the puck between my legs. The move usually draws defenders in, but today my mind's elsewhere.

She's back.

Third time this week. Same spot in the practice rink's nearly-empty stands. Blonde hair, loose and a little messy, like she doesn't care how good it looks.

Simple clothes, nothing flashy. Definitely not a puck bunny—those travel in packs and wear crop tops even when it's snowing.

She's beautiful in that slow-burn way that sneaks up on you.

And she watches with this intense focus that's both unnerving and... intriguing.

"Head in the game, LaRue!" Coach barks as I nearly miss a pass.

Right. Hockey first. Mysterious stalker later .

I force my attention back to drills, but I can feel her eyes on me. Every time I glance up, she quickly looks away, like she's been caught doing something wrong. It's starting to drive me crazy.

Practice wraps with conditioning sprints. By the time we finish, I'm drenched in sweat and my legs are burning. Most of the guys head straight for the showers, but I linger, stealing another look at the stands.

She's gone.

Something twists in my gut—disappointment?

Relief? Before I can decide, she appears at ice level, standing by the bench.

Up close, she's... stunning. Not in the obvious way I'm used to, but something about her pulls at me.

Her eyes are sharp, intelligent. She holds herself with this quiet confidence that makes my pulse kick.

I skate to the boards where she's waiting. "Let me guess—you're here to tell me I need to work on my backhand." I flash my media smile. "Though usually my critics don't look quite so..." I let my eyes drift over her, "...qualified to judge form."

She blinks, clearly thrown by the flirtation. "I'm here to talk to you."

"Most people are." I prop my stick against the glass. "Though most don't spend three days studying me first. Not that I minded the attention."

A slight flush colors her cheeks. "You noticed."

"Hard not to. You're kind of terrible at being sneaky." I grin. "Plus, you don't exactly blend in with the usual crowd. No bedazzled jersey, no 'Marry Me Logan' sign..."

"Logan LaRue," she cuts in, all business.

"In the flesh. Though if you're not a reporter or a marriage proposer, I'm running out of guesses." I lean closer, oddly drawn to her serious energy. "Maybe you're a talent scout? Secret agent? Time traveler here to warn me about the next game against Boston?"

She doesn't crack a smile, but something flickers in her eyes. "Were you born twenty-six years ago? On Christmas? "

That stops my playful momentum. "Yeah, actually. In some tiny hospital in Tennessee." I recover with a smirk. "What, did you bring me a belated present? Because I accept both cash and dinner invitations."

She meets my gaze, and suddenly the air feels heavy. Different. Her eyes—there's something familiar about them that makes my chest tight.

"You and I," she says quietly, "were switched at birth."

For a second, I just stare at her. Then laughter bubbles up—sharp, disbelieving. "Right. And I'm secretly Batman."

"I know how it sounds—"

"Crazy? Because that's how it sounds." My eyes narrow. I push away from the boards. "Look, if this is some kind of setup for a story, you're wasting both our times."

"I have proof."

"Sure you do." I start to skate away, but she calls after me.

"Your mother went into labor early. They were passing through Tennessee, caught in

a Christmas storm. Bellwood General was the closest hospital."

I stop. Nobody knows that story except family.

"You were supposed to be a girl," she continues, her voice steady. "The ultrasounds all showed—"

I whirl around. "Who the hell are you?"

"A vet from Bellwood. Who just found out her genetic condition doesn't match her parents' DNA." She pulls something from her pocket—a business card. "And who spent months investigating why."

"A vet." I laugh again, but it sounds hollow. "Right. And you just happened to track down a hockey player to, what, share your medical drama? "

"The PI found hospital records. Two babies, born minutes apart. One to the Collins family, one to the LaRues." She holds out the card. "Both families got the opposite of what the ultrasounds showed."

"This is insane ."

But my hand takes the card anyway. Dr. Amanda Collins, The Bark Side Veterinary Clinic. "You actually expect me to believe—"

"That your parents were expecting a girl? That a small, understaffed hospital during a Christmas storm might have made a mistake?"

"Nice research, "Doctor.'" I crumple the card. "Next time you want an exclusive, sweetheart, just call my agent. This whole switched-at-birth routine? Amateur hour."

Her eyes flash. "You think I want publicity? I have a life, a career. Parents I love who can never know about this because it would destroy them." She steps back. "I'm only here because you deserved to know. What you do with that information is up to you."

"What I'm doing is leaving." I toss her crumpled card onto the bench. "And if I see you here again—"

"You won't." She turns away, then pauses. "But when you're ready to hear the rest, my number's on the card."

"Don't hold your breath."

I snatch my stick and head for the locker room, leaving the crumpled card behind. Just another crazy fan with an elaborate story. The city's full of them.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Amanda

It's been a week since I dropped the bomb on Logan LaRue. A week of silence. Of expensive New York hotel charges and rental car fees I can't afford. I should go home—that's what Otto keeps saying. But I've come too far to give up now.

Which is why I'm parked outside the Bronx Howlers' practice facility, waiting. Again.

When Logan's sleek Audi finally emerges from the players' lot, I let two cars get between us before pulling out. He heads north, away from the city center. I follow at a distance, my rental Corolla blending with traffic as we wind through increasingly upscale neighborhoods.

The houses get bigger, the walls higher.

Private security patrols cruise past. After twenty minutes, he turns onto a tree-lined drive that ends at imposing iron gates.

I slow down, heart pounding as I read the elaborate metalwork—the LaRue family crest, complete with fleur-de-lis and some French motto I can't translate.

Beyond the gates, a fairy tale unfolds. Manicured hedges line a winding cobblestone drive. Gas lamps cast warm light even in daylight. Fountains spray elegant arcs of water. And there, rising from perfectly landscaped grounds, stands what can only be described as a castle.

Jealousy hits like a physical blow. While I was working night shifts at the campus vet

clinic, scraping together tuition... this was waiting. While I was living on ramen and scholarship applications, this existed. A whole other life. My possible life.

Logan's Audi idles at the gate. I drive past slowly, stomach twisted with emotions I can't name.

I head back to my hotel, the image of those gates burning in my mind. The modest room at the Holiday Inn feels even more depressing now—just another reminder of the life I didn't get to live.

My phone rings. Otto.

"Still stalking ze boy? Zat's too creepy."

"I wasn't stalking. I was..." I drop onto the bed. "Investigating."

"Zat's too useless. Ze boy already answered. Come home."

"I know, I just—"

"Just what? What do you expect? That he'll welcome you into his life with open arms?"

I close my eyes. "You don't understand."

"I understand you've blown your emergency fund on zis trip. Chasing ghosts instead of helping animals."

He's right. Of course he's right. But before I can respond, someone knocks.

Through the peephole, Logan LaRue stares back—jaw set, hair damp from a shower,

shirt open at the collar like he got halfway through calming down and gave up. Furious. And still disgustingly hot.

I open the door. "How—"

"Next time you tail someone," he says, stepping inside like he owns the place, "maybe don't brake every time I signal."

I blink. "You—"

"You were two cars behind me for twenty minutes. In a Corolla. In Westchester." He looks me over. "You might as well have had a flashing sign."

My heart pounds. "You followed me?"

"Noticed you tailing me after practice. Waited until you passed the gate." His jaw tightens. "Figured we should talk about why you're still stalking me."

"I told you why."

"Right. The switched at birth story." He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "You show up at my practice, drop this bomb on my life, then what? Expect me to just accept it?"

"I thought you deserved to know."

"Know what? That my parents are yours? That you've convinced yourself your life would have been better if—"

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to," he snaps. "I'm not stupid. I know what that neighborhood looks

like to someone from Bellwood." He steps closer. "Gated estates. Old money. A literal castle at the end of a cobblestone drive. How many streets like that are there back home?"

His voice drops. "You didn't have to say a word. I know exactly what you were thinking."

Heat floods my cheeks. "You don't know anything about me."

"Just like you don't know anything about me. But here you are, following me, disrupting my life because what? You're unhappy with yours?"

"I'm not unhappy with my life," I snap, then soften. "I love my parents. And I love being a vet. Saving something small that can't save itself? That's not just a job. It's... everything."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because everything I thought I knew about myself is suddenly in question!" The words burst out before I can stop them. "Do you have any idea what that's like? To wonder if your whole identity is just... circumstance?"

He stills. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a vet because the Collins bred dogs. Because I grew up surrounded by animals. Because that was my world." I start pacing. "But the LaRues? Do they even have pets?"

"No," he says quietly. "Never."

"You see? So who would I have been? What would I have become if—" I stop,

running a hand through my hair. "Every choice I've made, every passion I have... was it really me? Or just the environment I was raised in?"

Something flickers in his expression. "You think I haven't wondered the same thing since you told me? About hockey?"

We stare at each other, the weight of what we're saying hanging between us.

"I worked so hard," I say finally. "Three jobs through college. Student loans I'll be paying forever. While you—"

"Had it easy?" His voice turns sharp. "What do you know about my life, stranger?"

"I know what I saw today."

"A gate? Some fancy landscaping? That's not a life, that's a facade." He runs a hand through his hair. "God, are you that damn shallow? You think money makes everything perfect?"

I blink. The word shallow stings more than it should.

"I'm not shallow. But I think money makes some things easier."

"Maybe. But you know what it doesn't do? Tell you who you really are." He starts pacing now. "Everything I've achieved, everything I thought made me special—was it just privilege? Just the LaRue name?"

The room feels too small for all this uncertainty.

"And now," he continues, "you want what? To dig into this? To uncover more questions neither of us can answer? "

"I didn't ask for this either," I say. "Finding out about my condition, about my parents' DNA not matching mine—you think I wanted that knowledge?"

"But you had to share it. Had to track me down. Had to—"

"What was I supposed to do? Keep it to myself? Pretend I never discovered the truth?"

"Yes!" He whirls on me. "Some truths don't need to be uncovered. Some questions don't need answers."

"Easy to say from your position."

"My position?" His eyes flash. "You mean the position you've been envying since you saw those gates? The one you think you were cheated out of?"

"I don't—"

He steps closer, anger radiating off him. "Poor little vet, imagining the life she could have had. Well, guess what? You don't know what that life would have been like. Not only you don't know anything about me—you don't know anything about anything."

The heat coming off his body is distracting. I force myself to stand my ground. "And you don't know what it's like to question everything about yourself. To wonder if your whole identity is built on a mistake."

"Don't I?" His voice drops, dangerous. "You think you're the only one whose world got turned upside down by this? The only one wondering which parts of yourself are real?"

We're too close now. I can see the flecks of gold in his eyes, smell his expensive

cologne.

"I didn't mean to disrupt your perfect life," I say, but it comes out breathier than I intended.

"My life wasn't perfect." His gaze drops to my mouth for a fraction of a second. "And now it's not even mine."

He doesn't say anything. Just stares at me like he's trying to peel back skin and bone to find the truth underneath .

"How do I even know any of this is real?" His voice is rough. "You could be making all of this up."

"I wish I was." I sit on the edge of the bed. "But my condition—it doesn't lie."

"Your condition?" Something shifts in his expression.

"Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome." I touch my wrist where that scratch still hasn't healed. "Joint problems, slow healing, chronic fatigue. It's genetic."

"And your parents don't have it."

"They don't have any markers for it. Not even as carriers." I meet his eyes. "That's how I found out. The doctors wanted to trace the genetic pattern and..." I swallow. "Neither of them matched."

He's quiet for a moment. "So you did research."

"I hired a PI. I have a folder. Hospital records, staff schedules, birth certificates—even weather reports from that Christmas Eve."

"Let me see."

I pull the folder from my bag and hand it to him.

He doesn't speak. Just takes it and sinks into the armchair like it's a battlefield position, flipping pages with the precision of a man looking for an exit. A mistake in the records. A misfiled chart. A name that doesn't belong. Something—anything—that proves this is just a bad dream.

But with every page he turns, his jaw tightens. His hope cracks. And the silence between us grows louder.

When he finally looks up, there's something raw in his eyes. Like he hates that this might be true. Like he hates that it matters.

His eyes flash. "So you want my parents now? Their money? You want to switch back?"

"No! I love my parents. The Collins are my family."

"Then what do you want? Why the hell are we even talking?"

"I told you! Because I need to know! Don't you? Be honest with yourself!" The words explode out of me. "But you're right—I'll never know if you really believe me, or if you think I'm just after your family's money."

"If you're not, prove it," he says, voice low and challenging.

"Gladly! How?"

The question hangs between us. We both know there's no easy answer.

He runs a hand through his hair in frustration, and I catch myself noticing how the movement makes his shirt pull across his shoulders.

How his jaw clenches in a way that's unfairly attractive.

I immediately shut down that train of thought—this man might be my biological parents' son.

The whole situation is weird enough without adding inappropriate attraction to the mix.

"We could walk away," he says finally. "Pretend this never happened."

"Could you? Really?"

He meets my eyes. "Could you?"

We both know the answer. The questions are too big, the mystery too deep. Now that we know, there's no unknowing. No going back to before.

"So what do we do now?" I ask softly.

He looks at the folder spread between us, at the evidence of our switched lives. When he speaks, his voice is quiet. "I don't know."

Neither do I.

But as we sit there in charged silence, both lost in thoughts of what-ifs and might-have-beens, one thing becomes clear: walking away isn't an option.

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Logan

I can't stop staring at the records spread across her hotel room floor.

"We need to confirm this somehow," she says, breaking our long silence.

"If I contact the hospital now, this could become a media mess. And I've got playoff sponsors who'd love that."

"The hospital would deny it anyway." She pauses. "What if we control the story? Together. To stop gossip, we need a united front."

"Right. I'll just ask my parents if they've ever heard of..." I wave vaguely at her medical papers.

"Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome."

"Whatever. 'Hey Mom, Dad, quick question about genetic disorders—'"

"Okay, I get it." She runs her hands through her hair in frustration. "What if we just... became friends with all parents first?"

I snort. "The LaRues don't do friends. They do business associates and charity board members. "

"Fine. What about work connections?"

"You want to pretend to be a potential investor in their company?"

"Stop mocking me. It's called brainstorming."

"You're right. Sorry."

"I could be your new vet."

He laughs, sarcastically. "Right. Told you we don't do pets. But my teammates could definitely use a vet. They'd love you do their physicals."

"Not funny," I frown. "But you're right. It's about 'infiltrating' your family, not your team anyway."

She paces the room like she's mapping a heist. "There has to be a way to get close enough to learn more. To confirm..."

"Without raising suspicions," I add. "Without them wondering why we're so interested in their past."

"Right. We need a reason to be around them. To ask questions. To—"

I straighten. "To be family."

She stops pacing. "What?"

"Think about it. Friends are suspicious. Coworkers are temporary. But family..."

"Gets invited to everything," she finishes slowly. "Gets to ask personal questions."

"Gets access to family history."

"Gets trusted with stories."

We stare at each other as the idea takes shape.

"But how..." she starts.

"We'd have to be engaged." The words come out before I fully think them through.

"It's the only way they'd let you in completely. The only way they'd share everything."

"Engaged." She tests the word. "Your parents would accept that? A small-town vet? "

"They'd hate it." I grin despite myself. "Which makes it perfect. They'd be so focused on that, they wouldn't question anything else."

She considers this. "And the Collinses? Would they accept you?"

"A rich hockey player dating their daughter? They'd probably worry I'm not good enough."

"They would," she agrees, but there's no malice in it. Just fact.

"So we do this," I say. "Introduce you to the LaRues, me to the Collinses. Learn everything we can."

"And if we find proof? If we confirm it?"

"Then we decide how to tell them. One step at a time."

"And if we don't like what we find?"

"We stage a friendly breakup. Go our separate ways."

She sinks onto the bed. "This is insane."

"More insane than being switched at birth?"

A small smile tugs at her lips. "Fair point."

I sit beside her, careful to maintain distance. She shifts slightly closer. Not enough to mean anything. Just enough to feel it. "It would have to be convincing."

"Obviously."

"I mean really convincing. The LaRues will be watching for any sign it's not real. Any sign you're a gold digger."

"So will the Collins. Except for the gold digger part." She turns to face me. "Ground rules?"

"No telling anyone the truth. Not even siblings."

"You have siblings?"

"Yeah. Two younger ones. Jett is also a hockey player. Annalise is a scientist. You?"

"No siblings. But keeping this our secret? Agreed. Timeline?"

"Six months. That keeps us safely in the off-season. No travel, no playoffs. Just enough time to investigate, short enough to make a breakup believable if it comes to that."

She nods. "And boundaries?"

I think of how she looked at me earlier, when anger brought us too close. "Whatever it takes to make it look real."

Something flashes in her eyes, but she looks away quickly. "Okay. When do we start?"

"My schedule's clear now, but if we wait too long, it won't be. My parents get back from Europe in a week—we start with them. If we can't even confirm your condition through my side, we may not need to drag the Collins into this at all."

"One whole week gives us time to get our act together," she says.

"Exactly. We show up solid. United. No gaps in the story."

And just like that, I'm engaged to someone all I know about is her birthday.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Amanda

"Want a drink?" I ask, heading to the mini-bar. "If we're going to craft our epic love story, we might need liquid creativity."

"Hit me."

I pour whiskey into two plastic cups. "Okay, how did we meet? And please, nothing involving hockey. I'd rather not pretend I understand sports."

"What's to understand? Man hit puck. Puck go zoom."

I nearly choke on my drink. "Did you just say 'puck go zoom'?"

"See? You're already an expert." His smile is dangerous. "But fine, no hockey. What's your suggestion?"

"Well..." I settle on the bed, crossing my legs. "We could go classic romance novel. I was lost in the city, you gave me directions..."

"Boring. And you'd never ask for directions."

"How would you know?"

"You followed me today using a rental car GPS. Not exactly the 'damsel lost in Manhattan' type. "

"Fair." I take another sip. "Okay, what about... I was treating a celebrity's pet..."

"And I just happened to be there?"

"You could have been dating the celebrity."

His eyebrows shoot up. "Now I'm dating celebrities in our fake backstory?"

"Just spitballing here." I grin. "Though your parents might actually prefer that to a small-town vet."

"Trust me, they'd hate both equally." He leans forward. "What about something completely outrageous? We met while skydiving."

"Because that's believable."

"More believable than me dating celebrities."

"Fine. How about... you were doing a charity calendar. You know, shirtless hockey players with puppies?"

His laugh is unexpected and rich. "Now who's creating unbelievable scenarios?"

"Hey, those calendars exist! And it would explain why a vet was there."

"To protect the puppies from my terrible handling skills?"

"Mmhh. What about online dating?" I suggest, pouring another round. "That's normal, right?"

"Sure. Until my mother asks to see our matching profiles." He grimaces. "I can see it

now: 'Seeking small-town vet with GPS skills...'"

"Hey! I'd have an amazing profile. 'Dedicated animal doctor seeks man who understands puck go zoom.'"

"Swipe right." He grins. "Though we'd have to explain why I was looking at profiles in Tennessee."

"Location settings error?"

"Now who's getting technical?" He shifts in the chair. "What about Instagram? You could've commented on one of my posts."

"Oh god, what would I even say? 'Nice goal, what's a goal?'"

"Better than 'nice puck zoom.' "

I throw a mini bottle at him. He catches it without looking, and something about that casual athleticism makes my mouth dry.

"Social media's out," I say quickly. "Your mother would want to see the comments. The likes. The whole digital trail."

"You've really thought about this."

"I'm thorough. It's why I'm a good vet."

"And a terrible spy."

"Are you ever going to let that go?"

"Let me think." He pretends to consider. "No."

I grab a pillow to throw, but he holds up his hands in surrender.

"Okay, okay. What if... what if we met through a mutual friend?"

"Do we have mutual friends?"

"We could make one up."

"That's more people to keep track of." I flop back on the bed. "This would be so much easier if we'd just actually met somewhere normal."

"Like following someone to their family estate?"

"You're hilarious." But I'm smiling. "Fine, what's your best 'how we met' story? Impress me."

He leans forward, and suddenly his voice drops into something intimate. "It was late. You'd had a rough week—lost a patient maybe. Needed to clear your head..."

"I'm liking this. So far. Don't screw it."

His voice wraps around me like warm honey. "You were in New York for a vet conference. Couldn't sleep. Found yourself walking through Central Park at sunset..."

"Very romantic," I murmur. "Also possibly dangerous."

"Shh. I'm creating art here." He shifts closer, perching on the edge of the bed. "You were wearing that sweater—the blue one that makes your eyes look stormy. Hair loose, like it is now..."

My breath catches. He's noticed my eyes?

"Go on," I manage.

"I was running. Training schedule doesn't care about sunsets. But then I saw you, standing by the lake, looking... lost. Not physically lost. Something deeper."

"Laying it on thick, aren't we?"

"Still creating." His eyes lock with mine. "You were feeding ducks, breaking all the park rules..."

"I would never. That's terrible for their digestion."

"Fine. You were... stopping other people from feeding ducks. Very responsible. Very vet-like."

I laugh. "That's more believable."

"I slowed down. You looked up. And right then, this massive storm rolled in—"

"In this perfectly romantic sunset?"

"Weather changes fast. Work with me here." His smile is soft. "We both ran for cover under the same tree. You started telling me about duck digestion..."

"Smooth talk."

"The smoothest. But I couldn't take my eyes off you. The way you got so passionate about waterfowl health. The way you didn't care that your hair was getting wet, that your sweater was soaked..."

Something shifts in the air between us. His voice has gotten lower, rougher.

"And then what?" I whisper.

"Then..." He's close enough now that I can see the gold flecks in his eyes. "Then I asked if you wanted to get coffee. Get warm. You said you preferred hot chocolate. I said I knew a place..."

"Did I go?"

"You did. But only after making me promise we'd check on the ducks tomorrow."

"I'm very dedicated to waterfowl welfare."

"It's what made me fall for you. "

We both freeze, the words hanging between us. It's pretend, I remind myself. He's just spinning a story. But the way he's looking at me...

"So what else did we talk about?" I ask, pulling my knees to my chest. "Over that hot chocolate?"

"You tell me." His eyes dance. "What would you have said to a strange hockey player who rescued you from the rain?"

"Probably asked if he made a habit of stalking women in parks."

"Ouch. And here I was, being all heroic."

"Fine. Maybe I asked what you were training for."

"And I said 'man hit puck, puck go zoom.'"

"Stop!" I laugh. "No one would fall for you if that was your go-to line."

"But you did. In this story." His smile turns thoughtful. "What would have made you stay? Really?"

I consider this. "Honesty, maybe. If you'd admitted you were as out of place in that fancy hot chocolate café as I was..."

"The famous hockey player?"

"The guy underneath that. The one who'd rather be running in the rain."

Something flickers in his expression. "Your turn. What did I ask you?"

"Something safe. Like where I was from."

"No." He shakes his head. "I asked what made you become a vet."

"How do you know that's what you asked?"

"Because it's me who asked? No. Because I'd have wanted to see your face light up. The way it does when you talk about saving animals."

My chest tightens. He's noticed that too?

"Okay," I say softly. "Then I told you about my first rescue. A puppy in a ditch, barely breathing. Three days of sleeping on the garage floor next to his box..."

"Did he make it?"

"He did." I smile at the memory. "I named him Fighter."

"Of course you did."

We're quiet for a moment, the pretense slipping away.

"Your turn," I say. "I asked you about your first time on ice..."

"First time on ice?" He winces. "Not very romantic. I looked like a baby giraffe."

"Perfect. That's exactly what I want to hear. Tell me you fell on your face."

"Multiple times. My mother was horrified—LaRues aren't supposed to be ungraceful."

"But you kept at it."

"Yeah." Something softens in his face. "In this story, that's what made you give me your number. Not the smooth hockey star thing, but..."

"The stubborn kid who got back up?"

"Exactly." He reaches for the whiskey. "Then I asked what scared you most."

"In the middle of our first date? Bold."

"I'm a bold guy. Also, you'd just told me about sleeping on a garage floor for a puppy. I was intrigued."

I accept the refilled cup. "Fine. I told you... I'm scared of failing. Of not being able to save them all."

"Real answer?"

"Very real." I take a sip. "Your turn. What did you tell me?"

"That I'm scared of..." He pauses. "Of being exactly what people expect. Just another rich athlete with a good PR team."

Our eyes meet. That felt honest too.

"So what did I say to that?" I ask, voice soft.

"You said..." His lips quirk. "'Well, you're definitely not what I expected.'"

"Smooth."

"I try." He stretches, and I definitely don't notice how his shirt pulls across his shoulders. "Then you told me your most embarrassing moment."

"I did not."

"You did. You were very charmed by my vulnerability."

"More like the hot chocolate was spiked."

"Come on." He grins. "What would it have been?"

"Nope. Your story, you tell it."

"Fine. You told me about the time you had to explain to a client why their goldfish was pregnant. Even though they only had one fish..."

"That's not embarrassing, that's just biology."

"...while wearing your scrubs inside out. With cartoon ducks on them."

"I do not own duck scrubs!"

"In this story you do. They're very cute."

"Okay, my turn to make up embarrassing stories about you." I tuck my feet under me, getting comfortable. "You told me about the time you scored on your own goal..."

"That never happened."

"In this story it did. You were distracted by a pretty girl in the stands..."

"Now my parents know you're lying. I never get distracted during games."

"But you do get distracted sometimes. Remember you told me about that time when you nearly crashed into a newspaper stand?"

"I was making that up to test your empathy. First date and all, you know? You failed, by the way."

"Back to our story," I say primly. "After you admitted to the own-goal incident—"

"Which never happened—"

"—I asked about your best moment on ice."

His expression shifts, turns genuine. "Game seven, playoffs. Down by one. Ten seconds left..."

"Let me guess. You scored?"

"No." His voice softens. "I passed. To my teammate. He had a better shot."

"That's... not what I expected."

"Sometimes the best play isn't the glory play."

I study him. "You really believe that."

"In hockey. In life." He meets my eyes. "In this story, that's when you realized I wasn't just another spoiled athlete."

"Smooth again."

"I contain multitudes."

"So what happened next? In this perfect first date story of yours?"

"Well..." He leans closer. "It started raining again when we left. But this time..."

"This time?"

"This time we didn't run."

My breath catches. "No?"

"No. Because I'd spent two hours learning that you were brave, and funny, and cared so damn much about everything. Even ducks."

"Especially ducks."

"Especially ducks." His smile is soft. "So when you tilted your face up to the rain, I..."

He trails off. The air between us feels electric.

"You what?" I whisper.

"I didn't kiss you," he says softly. "Not yet."

"No?"

"No. Because I wanted to do this right. I wanted..."

"What?"

"To earn it. To know it wasn't just another first date, another story to tell."

Something in my chest flutters. "So what did you do instead? "

"I took off my jacket. Put it around your shoulders."

"Very gentleman-like."

"I have my moments." His eyes hold mine. "And you looked up at me, water dripping from your lashes, and said..."

"What did I say?"

"You tell me."

I swallow hard. "I said... 'For someone who hits pucks for a living, you're surprisingly

sweet."

"And I said, 'For someone who lectures strangers about duck digestion, you're surprisingly charming.'"

"I bet you say that to all the vets."

"Only the ones who follow me home."

We both laugh, breaking the tension for a moment. But when our eyes meet again, it's back, stronger than ever.

"Then what?" I ask.

"Then I walked you back to your hotel. You gave me your number—your real one, not the fake one you give to first dates who can't take hints."

"Bold of you to assume I have a system."

"Are you saying you don't?"

"...Continue with the story."

His grin is knowing. "I texted you before I even got home. Just three words."

"'Man hit puck'?"

"'Worth the rain.'"

Oh.

"And I replied?" My voice comes out huskier than intended.

"You waited exactly twenty-three minutes. Killed me the whole time."

"Playing hard to get?"

"Getting changed out of wet clothes. Or so you claimed."

"And then? "

"Then you wrote back: 'Worth the lecture about duck digestion?'"

I can't help smiling. "And you said?"

"Let me take you to dinner tomorrow and find out."

We stare at each other, the pretense wearing impossibly thin.

"That's..." I clear my throat. "That's actually a pretty good story."

"Better than the charity calendar?"

"Much better. Though I still think the shirtless part had potential."

"We could always..." He hesitates. "We could make it real. Tomorrow. Central Park, sunset."

My pulse jumps. "For authenticity?"

"For memory." His eyes are intense. "So when they ask how we met..."

"We'll know. Down to every detail."

"Every word."

"Every look."

The air crackles between us.

"Tomorrow then?" he asks softly.

"Tomorrow." I manage a smile. "Better bring an umbrella."

"And ruin the romance?"

"Can't have you catching a cold before you zoom that puck."

He stands, and I pretend not to notice how reluctantly. "Central Park. Sunset. Wear something blue."

"For my eyes?"

"For the story." But his smile says otherwise.

At the door, he turns back. "Amanda Collins?"

"Yeah?"

"Worth the wait."

After he's gone, I touch my cheeks, finding them warm. This is dangerous. This whole thing—the chemistry, the way he spins stories, how he notices things about me

I didn't think anyone saw.

Tomorrow we're supposed to be creating a cover story. But something tells me we're about to create something else entirely.

And I'm not sure I want to stop it.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Logan

I arrive at Central Park just before sunset, hoping the dark clouds gathering overhead deliver on their promise. Not because I'm usually the kind of guy who wishes for rain, but because I can't stop thinking about how she might look with water darkening her hair, droplets clinging to her lashes...

Christ. I'm turning into a romantic cliché.

The lake stretches out ahead, golden light fighting through the clouds. A few ducks glide past, and I catch myself wondering if Amanda would approve of their diet. Probably not.

When she appears on the path, my carefully constructed story suddenly feels inadequate. She's wearing a blue dress that moves like water, her hair loose around her shoulders. But it's the way she carries herself—confident, amused, slightly wary—that catches in my chest.

"No ducks to rescue?" she calls out, reaching me.

"Night off. Though if I had seen someone feeding them Cheetos, I would have stopped them. "

"My hero." Her eyes sparkle with mischief. "Though you didn't bring an umbrella."

"Hoping for authenticity."

"Hoping to see me soaked, you mean."

The way she says it makes my collar feel tight. "I made reservations at Le Bernardin. Unless you'd prefer hot chocolate?"

"In July?" She steps closer, and I catch the scent of something floral and subtle. "Besides, if you're going to impress me with your billionaire hockey player status, you might as well commit."

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"Isn't it?"

"Maybe I just wanted to see if you cleaned up as well as you tail people."

Her laugh is unexpected and rich. "Keep mocking my surveillance skills, and I might just leave you standing here in the rain."

"It's not raining yet," I point out, just as the first drop hits my cheek.

"You were saying?"

Instead of running for cover, she tilts her face up to the sky, exactly like in my story. But the reality of her—the curve of her throat, the slight smile playing at her lips—is better than anything I imagined.

"We should probably..." I gesture vaguely toward shelter.

"Probably." But she doesn't move. "Scared of a little rain, LaRue?"

"Scared you'll catch a cold and blame me for ruining your vet career."

"Please. I once performed surgery during a tornado."

"Did you really?"

"No. But I like that you believed I would."

The rain picks up, plastering her dress to her curves. I should offer my jacket. Should suggest we run. Should do anything except stand here staring at her like an idiot.

"Your restaurant will give away our reservation," she says softly.

"Let them. "

"Bold move for someone who's just pretending to date me."

"Is that what we're doing?"

Her eyes meet mine, and something electric passes between us. A drop of water trails down her neck, and I have to physically stop myself from tracking it with my finger.

"We should establish our story," she says, but her voice has gone husky. "Remember? For authenticity?"

"Right. Authenticity." I step closer. "Like how you're shivering."

"I'm not—" But she is.

"Like how you're trying to pretend you're not cold because you're too stubborn to admit this was a terrible idea."

"Your idea."

"My terrible idea." I shrug out of my jacket, drape it over her shoulders. "Better?"

"Marginally." But she pulls it closer, and something primitive in my chest purrs at the sight of her in my clothes. "Though now you're the one getting soaked."

"Worth it."

"For the story?"

"For the way you look in my jacket."

Her breath catches. "That's not in the script."

"I'm improvising."

"Dangerous."

"I'm a dangerous guy." At her raised eyebrow, I grin. "You know, hockey. Very violent sport."

"Right. All that puck zooming."

"I thought we agreed to retire that joke."

"No. You'd like that—but I made no promises."

We're standing close now, the rain creating this intimate bubble around us. A strand of wet hair clings to her cheek, and before I can think better of it, I reach out to brush it away. Her skin is warm despite the rain .

"Logan..."

"Tell me something true," I say quietly. "Not for the story. Just... something real."

She studies me for a moment, rain dripping from her lashes. "I'm scared."

"Of getting pneumonia? Because I'd say that's valid—"

"Of this." She gestures between us. "Of how not-fake this is starting to feel."

The honesty hits me like a body check. "Yeah. Me too."

"We shouldn't..."

"Probably not."

"It complicates everything."

"Definitely."

"And you're still not moving away."

"Neither are you."

Her lips part slightly, and I swear I can feel her pulse racing under my fingers, still resting against her cheek. Or maybe it's my own heart hammering so hard she can probably hear it over the rain.

"We should go to dinner," she whispers.

"We should."

"Stop staring at my mouth."

"Make me."

Her hand fists in my wet shirt, but she doesn't pull me closer. Doesn't push me away. Just holds me there, suspended in this moment where everything could change.

"This isn't why I came to find you," she says softly.

"I know."

"We have a plan."

"We do."

"A good plan."

"The best." I trace her jaw with my thumb. "Very logical. Well-researched. "

"Stop making fun of my research."

"I'm not. I'm stalling."

"Why?"

"Because the second I kiss you, everything changes even more. And I want to remember exactly how we got here."

She lets out a shaky breath. "How did we get here?"

"Well, there was this crazy woman following me in a rental car..."

"I take it back. Kiss me now so you'll stop talking."

My laugh gets caught somewhere in my chest, because she's looking at me like... like I'm something real. Something true. Not the hockey star or the LaRue heir or the guy with a perfect media smile. Just me.

"Amanda..."

"I know." Her fingers relax in my shirt, smooth over my chest. "This is a very bad idea."

"The worst."

"It'll mess everything up."

"Probably."

"But you're still going to—"

I kiss her.

The elevator feels too small, too warm. Amanda's shoulder brushes mine with every breath, and I can't stop staring at the water droplets trailing down her neck, disappearing beneath the neckline of her dress.

My jacket still hangs on her shoulders, and something primitive in my chest growls at the sight.

For the first time in my life, I don't care about missing a reservation at Le Bernardin. Food is the last thing on my mind.

She slides the key card home in one smooth motion, and the door opens. When she turns to face me, the look in her eyes sets my blood on fire.

She shrugs off my jacket, letting it pool at her feet.

The sound I make isn't entirely human.

I don't move at first. Just stand there, looking at her like she's some kind of fever dream. Her dress is soaked, clinging to every curve like a secret being whispered into my skin. She doesn't reach for me. Doesn't speak.

She just waits.

And fuck if that doesn't wreck me more than any words ever could.

I step forward, slowly, like if I move too fast, the moment might vanish. My hands find her hips, and she's warm under the wet fabric, trembling just slightly—not from cold. From this.

From me.

“You sure?” I ask, voice low.

Her eyes search mine like she's memorizing something she'll need to survive later. Then she nods, once. “Logan...”

It's all I need.

I kiss her like I've been starving for years and just found the thing that might save me. Her lips are soft but demanding, her mouth opening for me with a sound that punches through my chest. My hands slide up her sides, feeling the slick press of fabric and the sharp ridge of her ribs.

“Take it off,” she whispers.

“Say it again.”

“Take it off.” Her fingers tangle in my shirt. “I want you.”

I reach for the zipper, slow and deliberate, dragging it down the curve of her back. The fabric slips from her shoulders and pools at her feet, joining my jacket on the floor. She stands there in damp lace and bare skin, chest rising and falling like she’s struggling to breathe.

“You’re…” I shake my head. “I don’t have words for this.”

“Then don’t talk,” she says, stepping closer. “Touch.”

I do.

My palms glide up her stomach, over her ribs, cupping her breasts through the soaked lace. Her nipples are hard against my thumbs, and when I brush over them, her head falls back with a gasp that makes my cock throb against my zipper.

“Fuck,” I mutter. “You’re perfect.”

“No,” she says, breathless. “Just real.”

She reaches for my shirt, pulls it over my head in one rough movement. Her hands are everywhere—chest, shoulders, dragging down to my belt. She undoes the buckle, pops the button, slides the zipper down with a sound that makes my breath catch.

Then she drops to her knees.

“Amanda…”

“Let me.” Her voice is low, thick with want. “I need to.”

I could tell her no. Should, maybe. But then her hands slide into my boxers, and my cock springs free, hard and aching and already leaking for her. She wraps her fingers around me and looks up through wet lashes.

“You’re killing me.”

The first touch of her mouth is slow, reverent. Her tongue glides along the underside of my cock like she’s tasting me, learning me. Then she sucks me deeper, eyes locked on mine, cheeks hollowing as she moves.

“Shit—Amanda—” My hands find her hair, fingers fisting gently as I try not to lose it too fast. But fuck, she’s good. Hungry. Focused. Like this is hers to claim.

She pulls off with a slick pop, eyes dark. “Bed.”

I help her up, grab her thighs and lift her easily—she gasps, arms winding around my shoulders as I carry her to the bed. Lay her down and step back, just long enough to shed the last of my clothes .

She watches me like I’m something she never expected to want this badly.

I kneel between her legs, hook my fingers in her panties and drag them down. Her thighs part instinctively, hips lifting. She’s glistening. Wet and swollen and so fucking ready.

I lower my mouth. The first flick of my tongue has her gasping.

The second has her swearing. I lick her like I mean it—slow strokes, teasing swirls, then a firm suction right over her clit that makes her curse my name.

Her fingers twist in the sheets, her hips lift against my mouth, and when I slide a finger inside her, she moans so loud I think the whole floor hears.

“That’s it,” I murmur against her. “Give it to me.”

She does.

Her orgasm hits fast—sharp and sudden. Her body clenches around my fingers, thighs shaking, breath ragged. I keep licking her through it, keep coaxing every last twitch until she pushes at my shoulders, laughing breathlessly.

“Logan—fuck—”

“Not done,” I growl.

I crawl up her body, kiss her hard, let her taste herself on my tongue. Her hands scramble at my back, pulling me closer, lining me up.

“No teasing,” she whispers. “I need you inside me.”

I brace on my forearms, cock sliding through her slick heat, not quite in. “This changes everything,” I say.

“I know.” Her eyes hold mine. “Do it anyway.”

I thrust in slow—deep and steady—watching her eyes go wide, her mouth part. She’s tight, so fucking wet, and the way she clenches around me makes my whole body tense.

We move together like we’ve done this a hundred times. Like we should have. Her legs wrap around my waist, nails scraping down my back as I drive deeper. I kiss her

neck, her jaw, her lips, swallow the sounds she makes.

“Harder,” she pants.

I give it to her.

The bed rocks beneath us, her moans getting louder, wetter, more desperate. I reach between us, thumb circling her clit, and that’s all it takes.

She comes with a cry, her whole body shaking around me. The heat and tightness drag me with her, and I come with a growl against her neck, hips jerking, filling her with every last drop.

For a long moment, we don’t move. Just breathing. Tangled. Quiet.

She curls into my chest, her fingers tracing slow circles on my ribs.

“This is going to ruin everything,” she whispers.

“Maybe,” I murmur. “Or maybe it’s going to make it better.”

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Amanda

A week of "practicing" with Logan flew by faster than I expected. Between stolen kisses, late-night conversations, and actual rehearsals of our story, we've barely been apart. Now, watching the Manhattan skyline grow larger through the car window, I feel strangely ready.

Yet, my nerves are taking over.

I changed clothes about ten times. What do you wear to meet your maybe-parents? I asked Otto, who's been with me by text, and his answer didn't help at all.

Otto : Go naked. Most people meet their parents naked.

Me : Gee, thanks.

Otto: Welcome. Also, this fake boy of yours, does he know you snore like a Saint Bernard?

Me : How would you even know that?

Otto : You fell asleep in clinic break room last week. Thought bears had invaded Tennessee.

Me : I hate you .

Otto : That's too bad. Because I like you. Even if you sound like chainsaw fighting

moose.

"Stop fidgeting," Logan says, catching my restless hands in his. "They'll love you."

"We need a plan."

"We have a plan. Charm them, observe them, don't mention the whole switched-at-birth thing over appetizers."

"I'm serious." I pull out my notebook. "We need to know what to look for. Genetic markers."

"You made a list, didn't you?"

"Of course I made a list. One of us needs to be scientific about this."

He glances at me, amused. "Let me guess—PowerPoint presentation?"

"No." I try to look offended. "Just a checklist."

"Of course. What's on this very professional checklist?"

"Traits that are inherited. My condition. Dimples. Left-handedness. Ambidexterity. Sleep patterns. Color blindness. The way someone rolls their tongue—"

"Now that simplifies things. All we need is to come up with a way to make the four parents show us how they roll their tongues. Should we have them do it one by one or all at the same time?"

"Shut up. This is serious."

“Yes ma’am.”

“Besides genetic illnesses, we need to watch for athletic markers, and even little things like counting patterns or how someone throws—”

He leans over at a red light and kisses my forehead. "Fine. We'll use your nerd list. But I'm telling you... I'll know."

"How?"

"Some things you just feel."

"Very scientific. "

"Trust me." His smile turns soft. "Though I do like watching you plan world domination in that little notebook."

We pull up to the LaRues' estate, and my stomach flips. "Ready to meet Parent Set Number One?"

I take a deep breath. "Let's do this."

The door opens and Patricia LaRue stands there, elegant in a cream silk blouse and pearls, her posture perfect. For a split second, I search her face for any resemblance to my own. There isn't any.

My heart pounds as I study her, trying to avoid a creepy stare. This woman could have been my mother. Should have been my mother. Is my mother? The thought makes me dizzy.

"Logan, darling." She air-kisses his cheek. "And this must be Amanda."

"Mrs. LaRue, thank you for having me."

"Patricia, please." Her smile is polite but assessing. "Laurent! They're here."

I squeeze Logan's hand—this is exactly why he said we needed the engagement story. With these people, anything less would've put me in the 'passing distraction' box.

Logan's father appears, tall and distinguished in a casual way. His handshake is warm, though, genuinely welcoming.

"So you're the vet who's stolen our boy," he says, leading us into a dining room that belongs in Architectural Digest. "Logan tells us you run your own clinic?"

"With my best friend, yes. The Bark Side."

"Charming name," Patricia comments, and I can't tell if she's being sincere. "I haven't seen it. Where is it?"

"Tennessee, actually. A small town called Bellwood. "

"Bellwood?" Patricia straightens. "The hospital there... that's where—"

"Mother," Logan cuts in smoothly, "didn't you want to show Amanda the garden before dinner?"

"Oh, yes." She smiles. "Though I should warn you, we've never been good with plants. No natural talent for it, unlike my sister. She can grow anything."

Is a green thumb genetic? Well, but her sister... and I don't think Logan has tried gardening anyway. Neither have I.

"I read a piece in Botanical Insights last month," Patricia tells me as we walk, "about how orchids have evolved to mimic the scent profiles of female insects. Isn't that wild? Brilliant survival strategy. You'd think I'd be able to keep one alive—but no. They last maybe a week."

I let out a small laugh. "They're deceptively tricky. Too much care and they rot. Not enough and they wilt."

Patricia hums. "A perfect metaphor for... something." She shoots me a sidelong smile, and I smile back. Just for a moment.

As we reach the terrace doors, I catch Logan's supportive nod. Patricia continues describing her failed orchid attempts while I'm hyperaware of every gesture, every mannerism. Nothing I could recognize.

"I actually had some health issues a few years ago," she mentions casually. "The doctors called it a connective tissue disorder. Made gardening quite impossible."

My heart stops.

The LaRues' dining room gleams with old money elegance—crystal chandelier, antique sideboard, carefully curated artwork. Patricia sits at one end, elegant and controlled, while Laurent takes the other, more relaxed but equally polished.

Annalise arrives precisely three minutes late. "Sorry, sequencing data wait for no one." She kisses Logan's cheek, then turns to me with bright curiosity. "So you're the vet who's tamed my brother?"

"Trying to," I say, and she grins.

"I like her already."

She has dimples. Like me.

A server—they have an actual server—appears with champagne. I accept a glass, watching Patricia sip hers with perfect poise. My flute trembles slightly as I lift it, wondering if she would have taught me the same grace.

As the first course arrives—something French I can't pronounce—Patricia guides the conversation through their recent travels in Provence, the vineyard they're considering purchasing, their plans for the winter season in Gstaad.

It's surreal, sitting here, watching these people who might have been my family, who live in a world so different from my own.

The rest of dinner passes in a blur of perfect manners and polite discussion—stock market shifts, a new Broadway revival, vacation homes in Tuscany.

Laurent mentions a recent legal conference in Zurich.

Patricia, a departmental grant she's reviewing at the university.

I try to follow the conversation, but I'm too focused on which fork to use—and on the way Logan watches me, like he's trying to translate between worlds. Like me.

It all feels... impersonal. Like my story about the puppy who preferred to sleep in my boot instead of his bed would be out of place.

Through it all, I feel Logan's quiet presence beside me, his hand occasionally finding mine under the table when certain words feel too far from home.

I find myself cataloging every detail—the way Patricia touches her neck when thinking, how Laurent's laugh lines crinkle just like mine. Are these learned

behaviors or genetics? Would I have been more like them if...

"Amanda?" Logan's voice pulls me back. "Ready for dessert?"

I meet his eyes, seeing my own tumult reflected there. Because how do you sit calmly through dinner with the parents who might have been yours, pretending your heart isn't trying to escape your chest with every new revelation?

You don't. You just hold on tight to the hand anchoring you under the table, and hope no one notices how close you are to shattering.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Logan

We flew into Bellwood Regional Airport around noon. No gates, just a parking lot and the smell of hay. My parents would've sent a driver. Amanda's dad offered to come himself. I'd said we could Uber, and she just smiled like that was the worst suggestion in the world.

The Collinses' pickup truck rattles down a gravel road, kicking up dust in the late afternoon sun. John Collins drives with one hand on the wheel, the other gesturing as he points out landmarks.

"That's where Amanda learned to ride her bike. Crashed right into old Miller's fence." He chuckles. "And over there's where she used to help me train the hunting dogs."

I lean forward from the back seat, genuinely interested. This is a world away from Manhattan penthouses and private drivers. There's something honest about it. Less plastic. Less performed.

"Daddy," Amanda groans from the front, "please don't tell all my embarrassing stories."

"That's exactly what daddies are for, sugar. "

The house that appears around the bend is modest but well-loved—wraparound porch, flower beds bursting with color, a couple of dogs racing to greet us. Elizabeth Collins appears on the porch, wiping her hands on an apron.

"Just in time!" she calls out. "The pot roast's almost done."

Dinner is nothing like the formal affairs I'm used to. We eat in the kitchen, passing dishes family-style, everyone talking and laughing at once. Elizabeth keeps piling more food on my plate, insisting I'm "too skinny for a hockey player."

After dessert, as Elizabeth starts stacking dishes and Amanda's laughing at something her mom said, John claps my shoulder. "Come on, son. Let's walk off some of that pot roast while the women pretend we're useless in the kitchen."

"Hey," I say, following him out the screen door, "for the record, I make a mean scrambled egg."

"Sure, you do. And you're 'too skinny for a hockey player,' remember?" He winks. "That woman's never watched a hockey game in her life. Probably thinks you all look like linebackers."

In the backyard, he picks up a baseball and mitt. "You play?"

"Hockey's more my thing," I say, but catch the ball easily when he tosses it.

What happens next feels like muscle memory. The way he sets his feet, the slight nod before throwing—it's like watching myself. When I release the ball, his eyebrows rise. "That's my exact release," he says quietly. "Took me years to perfect that spin."

We throw in comfortable silence for a while, and I find myself matching his rhythm without thinking. Left hand to left hand, the same instinctive movements.

"You know," he says finally, "I almost went pro. Got scouted and everything. But then Elizabeth got pregnant with Amanda, and well..." He shrugs, but there's no regret in his voice. "Some things matter more than baseball."

I look at this man—this version of what I might have been in another life—and something clicks into place.

John and I walk back inside just as Elizabeth bursts out laughing, a photo album open on her lap and Amanda mock-horrified beside her. The sound hits me in the chest—warm, real, nothing like my mom’s measured chuckles.

"Logan, honey, come see this photo of her first rescue," Elizabeth says, pointing to a photo. "Found this mangy mutt behind the grocery store and wouldn't leave until we took him home."

"Mom," Amanda protests, but she's smiling.

"Stubborn as a mule, this one." John settles into his recliner, baseball mitt still in hand. "Gets that from her mama."

I watch them, these people who could have been my parents, who wear their love so openly it almost hurts to see. No careful small talk about European vacations. No polite distance. Just... family.

"Anyone want ice cream?" Elizabeth asks. "Logan, honey, there's chocolate and strawberry, but fair warning—I can never tell them apart in this light."

"Story of my life," I say without thinking. "Red and green might as well be the same color to me."

John laughs like he gets it.

Amanda catches my eye across the room. Her smile dips for half a second—barely noticeable, but there. Like she just filed something away I didn’t even realize I gave her .

Unlike at my parents', where every revelation felt like walking on glass, here it feels... right. Like coming home to a place I never knew I missed.

"Come help me scoop," Elizabeth tells me, leading the way to the kitchen. "Tell me more about your family while we're at it."

And suddenly I want to tell her everything. About growing up in houses too big to feel warm. About learning hockey because it was expected, not because anyone played catch with me in the backyard. About how sitting here in this kitchen feels more like family than any charity gala ever did.

But I can't. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

So I just help her serve ice cream, letting her motherly fussing wash over me, pretending my heart isn't cracking open with every "honey" and "son" that falls from their lips. Because these people—these warm, wonderful people—they're mine.

Even if they don't know it.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Amanda

Logan's penthouse feels different tonight. The city lights sparkle through floor-to-ceiling windows, but I barely notice them. We're both quiet, processing.

"Your parents..." I start, then stop. How do you describe people who should have raised you?

"Yeah." He hands me a whiskey, then settles beside me on the couch. "And yours..."

I take a sip, letting the burn ground me. "John has your release."

"What?"

"When he throws. That little pause, the way he sets his feet. It's exactly like you."

Logan's quiet for a moment. "Your mom can't tell red from green."

"And Patricia has my condition." I curl closer to him. "Annalise has my dimples."

"A million people in the world have your condition. Or dimples. But what I felt? Left no doubt. "

We sit in silence, the weight of certainty settling around us. All those little signs, those moments that felt like puzzle pieces clicking into place.

"They're so different," I whisper. "The LaRues with their perfect manners and

European wines. The Collins with their pot roast and baseball in the backyard."

"But they're both good people," Logan says softly. "Just... different kinds of good."

I think about Patricia's careful gardening stories, Laurent's gentle smile. About my dad's warm hugs and mom's endless supply of love.

"Do we tell them?" My voice cracks.

Logan pulls me closer. "And break their hearts? No. Let them keep their children. The ones they raised, the ones they love."

We hold each other in the darkness, two pieces of a cosmic puzzle finally understanding our shapes. The truth sits between us—too big to speak, too heavy to carry alone.

But we're not alone anymore.

"Stay," he whispers.

So I do.

Because tonight, we're the only two people in the world who understand exactly what the other is feeling. Tonight, we're the only family we need.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Logan

Two Days Later

When Amanda texts that she needs to talk, something in my gut tightens. Maybe it's the formal tone of her message. Maybe it's how she's been distant. Or maybe perfect moments never last.

She shows up in sweats, no makeup, hair still damp from a shower. Not tired—more like scraped raw.

"You okay?"

"I just need you to listen," she says quietly. "Please. Let me read this article all the way through before you say anything."

"Of course. Want a whiskey?"

She shakes her head. "Just water."

I watch her hands tremble slightly as she unfolds a printed page and starts reading.

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When It Isn't Love: Understanding Trauma Bonds and Emotional Projection By Dr. Celine Hartwell, Clinical Psychologist | Published in The Human Mind Quarterly

Love can be overwhelming. It can feel electric, irrational, even fated. But not all intense emotional connections are true love. In some cases, what we call “love” is actually a trauma bond — or a projection of old feelings onto a new person .

These two psychological dynamics are powerful, especially when they emerge from high-stress situations, grief, or identity upheaval. Let’s explore what they really are.

What Is a Trauma Bond?

When we experience intense, life-altering events with another person — whether fear, grief, isolation, or shock — our brains sometimes mistake that adrenaline-laced attachment for real intimacy.

This is called a trauma bond . It’s not just a clinical term. It’s a trap disguised as devotion.

The classic example is Patty Hearst , the heiress kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974.

After weeks in captivity, she adopted her captors’ ideology and even participated in their crimes.

Psychologists believe she formed a trauma bond — a coping mechanism rooted in survival, not affection.

In fiction, we see this dynamic romanticized.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle falls for her captor.

In *The Phantom of the Opera*, Christine becomes emotionally entangled with a masked man who controls her environment and manipulates her fears.

In dark mafia romance, we see classic trauma bond fantasy dressed up in silk sheets: “He kidnapped me, but he treats me like a queen.” “He threatens everyone else, but protects me.” “He’s cruel to the world but soft only for me.”

These aren’t love stories. They’re psychological case studies.

The confusion arises because intensity feels like depth, dependency feels like intimacy, and shared pain feels like bonding.

When two people experience emotional chaos together, it can create a chemical cocktail of adrenaline, cortisol, and dopamine — addictive and consuming.

But it’s not always sustainable. It’s not always healthy. And it’s not always love.

That is why, in dark romance novels, “love” stories develop as the couple feels alive in the fire—but conveniently end before the trauma bond fades away, leaving only devastation.

In fiction, we mistake high-stakes turmoil for passion. In real life, it’s often a recipe for confusion, codependence, and eventual heartbreak.

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She pauses. She’s been reading with a steady voice, but I can see how hard she’s working to keep it that way. Each word feels like a brick being laid between us.

Her composure slips for half a second—but she steels herself and goes on.

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What Is Emotional Projection?

Projection happens when we subconsciously transfer our feelings about one person onto someone else.

For example, you might instinctively trust and admire someone who resembles a parent you love— even if that new person hasn't earned it. This isn't love; it's your brain flooded with transferred affection. It feels personal, but it's often symbolic.

In romantic contexts, projection can look like

Feeling instant warmth toward your best friend's sibling — not because of who they are, but because you love who they come from.

Feeling protectiveness toward someone simply because they remind you of someone important.

Mistaking familiarity for fate .

Projection isn't about the other person. It's about who they represent in your emotional landscape.

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She stops—the silence stretching dangerous and thin.

"And you think this applies to us?"

"I think... it scares me that it might."

"You really think this was all just trauma bond or projection?"

"I don't know, okay?" Her voice breaks. She stands, pacing like she needs to put

physical distance between us. "I just... I read this, and I don't want to believe it's us—but the timing, the way it happened...

What if we're just... clinging to each other because of the shock? Because none of us can't hold the weight of our fucking secret alone, without breaking? "

She stops, panting slightly. "God, I sound insane."

"That's not what this is."

"How do you know?" Her eyes are bright with unshed tears. "We found out this huge thing about ourselves, about our families. Of course we turned to each other. Of course it felt intense and magic and—"

"I know what I feel. Do you?"

"I think we need time. Space. To figure out this nightmare."

"Amanda—"

"I need to go back to Bellwood anyway. The clinic needs me." She picks up her bag. "We both need to go back to our lives. See if what we feel survives."

"It will."

"Then we'll know it's real." She steps closer, cups my face in her hands. "But if it's not... better to know now than later."

Her kiss is quick, fierce, final. Her hand brushes my jaw with trembling fingers. I want to grab her wrists. Not hard. Just enough to keep her here. "Amanda, please. This isn't some chemical reaction. It's you and me. It's everything we are."

But I don't move. Because that wouldn't be fair. And she's not mine to keep if she doesn't want to stay.

Then she's gone.

The silence she leaves behind is deafening. The smell of her shampoo lingers on my shirt.

Last time she brought me research, I didn't know her. I didn't believe her. I dismissed it.

But now I do know her. And I trust her.

So what if she's right—again?

Three Days Later

Three days without Amanda feel like three years. Each hour stretches endless, marked only by moments I reach for my phone to tell her something, then remember I shouldn't. The penthouse feels too big, too empty, haunted by memories of her laughter.

I keep replaying her words. Trauma bond. Projection. As if everything I feel could be reduced to psychological terms. As if my heart breaking right now is just some clinical reaction to stress.

By the third morning, I can't take it anymore. I book a flight to Tennessee.

The Bark Side looks exactly like Amanda described—small, welcoming. Like everything in Bellwood. I wait in my rental car, watching staff members leave one by one. A tech in scrubs. A receptionist juggling files. Finally, Amanda emerges.

She looks tired. Beautiful, but tired, like she hasn't been sleeping either. When she sees me, she freezes mid-step.

"Hi," I manage.

"Hi. "

"Can we talk?"

She hesitates, then nods toward the stairs at the side of the building.

Her apartment above the clinic is pure Amanda—medical journals stacked on coffee tables, a wall of family photos that makes my chest tight.

I spot one of her and John fishing, both grinning at the camera.

Another shows Elizabeth teaching a young Amanda to bake, flour on both their noses.

"Why are you here?" she asks quietly.

"Because I've spent three days thinking about that article. About you. About us." I step closer, needing her to understand. "And I realized something."

"Logan—"

"You use research like a shield. Maybe you got that from Patricia—not the genetics, but the need to analyze everything until it makes logical sense." I see the words hit home. "You hide behind studies and statistics because feelings are messy. Unpredictable. They can't be peer-reviewed."

She wraps her arms around herself. "That's not—"

"It is. You are both brilliant women. And I get it. There's nothing wrong with it. When your whole identity gets turned upside down, you grab onto anything that feels solid. But some things can't be explained in scientific journals."

"Like what?"

"Like how I would have chosen you in any crowd, even without knowing we were switched. Like how watching you with those scared animals tells me more about your heart than any Myers-Briggs test ever could."

"You know about Myers-Briggs?"

"Had an assistant coach who thought knowing our personality types and zodiac signs would help team dynamics." I can't help smiling. "She quit after walking in on a locker room... discussion about whose sign was more virile. "

That gets a small laugh, and something in my chest loosens.

"The point is," I continue, "this isn't some dark mafia romance. I'm not your captor, you're not paying off your father's debt. We've always been equals. If anything," I manage a teasing tone, "you're smarter than me."

"And you're prettier than me," she says automatically.

"Hey, you said it, not me."

For a moment, we're just grinning at each other like we used to. Then her smile fades.

"But what if—"

"Let me finish, please?"

"Sorry."

"Maybe I remind you of John," I cut in. "Maybe that's part of why you feel something for me. But isn't that true for everyone? Don't we all look for echoes of the people who taught us what love looks like?"

She's quiet, but I see her walls starting to crack. "That's... deep."

"These past three days..." My voice roughens. "Every time something good happens, I reach for my phone to tell you. Every time something bad happens, I wish you were there to make me laugh about it. That's not trauma bonding. That's just... missing you."

"Logan—"

"I've followed your science. Your research. But not this time." I take her hands in mine, relieved when she doesn't pull away. "I'm not separating from you. I want more time with you, knowing exactly who we are, like we really did just meet that day in the rain."

"Why?"

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"Because together, we're better than alone. And someday, we'll build our own family. One where it won't matter which parents belong to who, because they'll all be ours ."

Her eyes fill with tears. "I'm scared."

"I know. But this time, I need you to trust me. Not your research. Not your fears. Just me. "

I brush a tear from her cheek. "I've followed your lead since the beginning. Now it's time for you to follow mine."

She's quiet for so long my heart nearly stops. Then, finally, she whispers, "Okay."

"Okay?"

She nods, and suddenly she's in my arms, face buried in my chest. "I missed you too," she mumbles against my shirt. "Every stupid, stupid minute."

I hold her tight, breathing her in, feeling my world settle back into place. Because this—this isn't about genetics or psychology or fate.

This is just us. Choosing each other. Every day.

And that's all the proof we need.

She doesn't let go. And neither do I.

Minutes pass, or maybe hours. Time doesn't move right when she's in my arms.

Eventually, she pulls back just enough to look up at me. "Stay?"

I nod. Because there's nowhere else in the world I want to be.

She breaks the hug and moves to put on the kettle. I follow, unable to stay more than a step away.

"You always do that," I say.

"What?"

"Use tea to delay."

She smiles faintly. "Not delaying. Just... collecting myself."

I walk up behind her. Close enough to feel the heat of her body.

"What if I don't want you collected?" I murmur. "What if I want you messy, Amanda?"

She turns slowly, eyes catching mine—uncertain, vulnerable, but not afraid .

She doesn't answer with words. Instead, she steps forward and places her hand over my heart. Her fingers press against my chest like she's checking if I'm really here. I cover her hand with mine.

"I really missed you," she says, voice barely above a whisper.

"I know." I lower my head, brushing my lips against her forehead. "Me too."

She tilts her face up, and our mouths meet in a kiss that starts soft, almost reverent. But then she presses closer, her fingers fisting my shirt.

She kisses me—this time with no restraint. No second-guessing. Just heat and need and the kind of ache that comes from holding yourself back too long.

I lift her easily, hands sliding under her thighs. She wraps her legs around my waist, and I walk her backward toward the couch, never breaking the kiss. We tumble down together, her body beneath mine, breath mingling, hips rolling instinctively.

Her fingers push under my shirt, tugging it up. “Off.”

I grin against her mouth. “I asked for messy, not bossy.”

“You like me bossy.”

“I love you bossy.”

The shirt goes over my head, and her hands are everywhere—tracing the muscles of my chest, dragging down to my waistband, exploring like she’s afraid I might disappear if she doesn’t memorize me fast enough.

I reach for the hem of her shirt. “Your turn.”

She nods and lifts her arms. I peel the fabric away and toss it aside. Her bra is plain white cotton, her breasts rising and falling with each shallow breath. I brush my fingers over the straps, then down between her breasts, watching her tremble.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmur.

She rolls her eyes, but her cheeks flush. “You always say that.”

“Because it’s always true. ”

She bites her lip. “Then show me.”

I reach behind her and unhook her bra with one hand, fingers steady even though my pulse is anything but. She watches me as the straps fall down her arms, her eyes dark and full of questions she’s not asking. I ease the bra away, and her breasts are revealed—soft, full, flushed with anticipation.

But I don’t touch her yet.

I just look. Let her see how much I want her. Let her feel it in the way my breath shortens, the way my gaze lingers.

“You always stare like that,” she whispers.

“Because I never want to forget this view.”

Her breath catches, and I finally lower my mouth to her breast. I press a kiss above her heart first, then trail lower, sucking one nipple into my mouth, slow and deep. Her fingers bury in my hair, her back arches.

“God,” she breathes.

I hook my fingers into her waistband and slide her leggings and panties down together. She lifts her hips to help me, and I sit back for just a second, letting my gaze travel over her.

Naked, flushed, eyes wide and unguarded.

“You’re the bravest person I know,” I say.

“Why?”

“Because you let yourself feel everything. Even when it’s hard. Even when it terrifies you.”

Her eyes soften. Her hand comes to my jaw, thumb stroking lightly. “I’m not brave. I’m just... tired of being afraid.”

I lean down and kiss the inside of her thigh. “Then let me make you feel safe.”

Her breath stutters as I kiss higher. Then again. Then again, until I’m right where she’s hot and wet and waiting.

I press a kiss to her clit, soft and slow, and her whole body jerks. Her fingers fist in the couch cushions .

“Logan...”

I don’t answer. I just lick her again, long and firm, then suck gently, teasing her with rhythm and patience. Her hips lift, chasing more, and I give it—let myself get lost in her. The taste of her. The scent. The little noises she makes when I circle her with my tongue just right.

She’s trembling now, legs shaking. “Oh my God, I’m—Logan—I—”

I don’t stop until she cries out, her orgasm crashing through her like a wave. She shudders beneath me, thighs clenching, back arched, mouth open in a wordless gasp.

When she finally slumps back against the cushions, boneless and breathless, I kiss my way back up her body. Her eyes flutter open, dazed and warm.

I kiss her slow, savoring the taste of her still on my tongue, and she pulls me on top of her like she can't get close enough. Her legs wrap around my hips, and our skin slides together—warm, flushed, real.

She whispers my name, like a prayer and a question and a homecoming.

I reach between us, wrap my hand around my cock, and stroke once—because I need to breathe through how much I want this—then guide myself to her entrance.

“I need you to look at me,” I say, voice hoarse.

Her eyes open, wide and wet and unblinking.

“I need you to see who you're choosing.”

“I do,” she whispers. “I see you.”

And I sink into her.

She gasps—soft, sharp—and clutches at my shoulders as I fill her slowly. Inch by inch. Not because I want to tease her, but because I need to feel every goddamn second of this. Of us.

She's wet and hot and tight around me, her body welcoming mine like it was always meant to. I rest my forehead against hers, trying not to shake .

“I missed you,” I breathe. “Oh God, how much I fucking missed you.”

She cups my face. “Then stop holding back.”

I start to move. Deep, steady strokes that drag soft moans from her throat. Her heels

dig into my back, her hips meeting mine like a heartbeat. I bury my face in her neck, in her hair, in the curve of her shoulder—every place that smells like home.

“You feel...” I can’t finish the sentence. There’s no word big enough.

“I know,” she murmurs. “You too.”

Her hands slide down my back, her nails grazing, grounding. I shift my angle, searching until she gasps—right there—and then I give it to her. Again and again. Until she’s clenching around me, whimpering, so close I can feel it building in every breath she takes.

“I’m here,” I tell her. “Don’t think. Just feel.”

She lets go with a cry that’s equal parts pleasure and release. Her body trembles beneath mine, and I follow, hips stuttering, climax pulling through me like a riptide.

I empty into her with a groan, mouth against her shoulder, holding her like she’s the only thing tethering me to earth.

For a while, we don’t speak.

I stay inside her, head on her chest, listening to the rhythm of her heartbeat slowing.

When I finally pull out, it’s gentle. Like I’m afraid of breaking whatever spell we’re under.

She turns onto her side and pulls me with her, our legs tangled, her fingers tracing slow patterns across my stomach.

“What now?” she asks softly.

I brush a strand of hair from her cheek. “Now we live in the after.”

She smiles faintly. “And what does that look like?”

I grin. “Messy. Complicated. Honest. Full of dogs, probably.”

“And tea,” she adds .

“And bad jokes. And your boots on my couch. And me trying to cook and you pretending not to judge.”

Her fingers drift lower. “And this?”

I roll her onto her back again. “Especially this.”

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Amanda

One Month Later

"I don't know how you do this every day," Logan says, watching Otto work with Rex, our newest rescue German Shepherd.

They're in the outdoor training area behind the clinic, where Otto's been helping with our more challenging cases whenever he's "in the area"—which seems to be happening more frequently lately.

Laura and I sit on our break bench, sipping coffee and enjoying the show. Not just of Otto's expert training, but of Logan trying to understand it.

"Ze dog must know you are ze alpha," Otto instructs, demonstrating a command stance.

Logan attempts to mirror him but Rex just tilts his head, confused.

"That's not alpha," Otto sighs. "Zat's... confused tourist asking for directions."

"I held the same pose you did! "

"Ja. Like mannequin having seizure."

Laura nearly snorts coffee through her nose. "Is he always this brutal?"

"Otto or Logan?" I grin. "Because one's brutally honest and the other's just..." I wince as Logan trips over his own feet trying to maintain eye contact with Rex. "Brutal."

"Earlier he asked me if ferrets were just long rats," Laura whispers.

"Better than yesterday when he wanted to know if guinea pigs were failed hamsters."

We watch as Otto demonstrates a complex series of hand signals. Rex responds perfectly. When Logan tries, Rex just flops over for a belly rub.

"Ze dog is mocking you now," Otto declares.

"No, he's not. We're bonding."

"Zat is not bonding. Zat is pity."

I can't help smiling as I watch Logan—this professional athlete, this man who commands attention on ice—completely humbled by a dog who's decided he's more fun as a playmate than an authority figure.

"You know," Laura says thoughtfully, "most guys would have made excuses not to spend their free time here."

She's right. Instead of fancy restaurants or VIP events, Logan's chosen to spend his days off covered in dog hair and being critiqued by Otto.

"Seriously, I still can't believe he gave up his weekend in New York for this," Laura says, watching Logan now sprawled in the grass while Rex enthusiastically licks his face.

"Zat is not proper training position!" Otto calls out.

"He loves me," Logan argues from under the dog. "We have a connection."

"Ze connection is your aftershave. He thinks you are very expensive chew toy. "

I hide my smile behind my coffee cup. The truth is, seeing Logan here, so completely out of his element but trying anyway, does something to my heart. Laura is right—he could be at charity galas, high-end parties, anywhere but here in small-town Tennessee getting schooled by a German dog trainer.

"Watch zis," Otto commands, demonstrating a complex weave pattern with Rex. The shepherd executes it perfectly, earning a treat. "Now you."

Logan stands, brushing grass from his designer jeans. "Okay, buddy, let's show him."

Rex takes one look at Logan's attempt at the hand signal and promptly sits down to scratch his ear.

"Ze dog has better timing than you," Otto sighs. "He knows when to quit."

Laura leans closer to me. "You know, when you said you were dating a hockey player, I expected more..."

"Ego?"

"Something like that. Not..." she gestures to where Logan is now attempting to bribe Rex with treats while Otto mutters in German.

Logan finally gets Rex to complete a simple command and his face lights up like he's just won the Stanley Cup. "Good boy! Did you see that? He did it!"

"Ze dog felt sorry for you," Otto says, but I catch the slight smile he tries to hide.

"No way. We're totally in sync now. Watch this—" Logan attempts another command. Rex responds by stealing the entire treat bag and trotting away victoriously.

"In sync," Otto deadpans. "Like ballet dancer and drunk penguin."

I head toward them, unable to keep the smile off my face.

Because yes, Logan LaRue might be hilariously out of his depth here.

Yes, he might never fully understand the difference between ferrets and weasels.

And yes, he might currently be getting schooled by both a German trainer and a German Shepherd.

But he's here. Learning my world. Trying. And that means more than all the fancy dates in New York ever could.

"Need help?" I call out.

"Help?" Otto scoffs. "He needs miracle."

"I need water," Logan pants. "And maybe a map. And possibly a new career."

Rex chooses that moment to drop the treat bag at my feet, sitting perfectly at attention.

"Traitor," Logan mutters.

Watching them—Otto's stern instruction, Logan's determined attempts to learn, Rex's obvious amusement at it all—I realize something. This right here, this messy, funny,

imperfect moment... this is what real love looks like.

Not trauma bonds or projection or any other clinical term. Just a man willing to make a fool of himself in front of a German Shepherd, all because he wants to understand my world.

"Again!" Otto commands. "Zis time without ze falling!"

Logan groans but gets back into position. "The things I do for love."

"Ze things you do for treats," Otto corrects. "Ze dog is not ze only one who's being trained."

I hide my laugh in Rex's fur, my heart full of something that no scientific article could ever explain away. Because some things don't need explanation. They just need to be lived.

Even if that means watching the man you love get thoroughly owned by a dog named Rex while a German trainer questions all his life choices.

"Left! No, ze other... ach, never mind. Ze dog is now teaching you. I give up."

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Logan

“That wreath’s crooked,” Amanda calls from the kitchen, where she’s arranging cookies. “Like that cross-check you took two days ago.”

“Hey, I still scored after that hit.” I adjust the wreath. “Beauty goal. Almost as beautiful as you.”

She peeks out with a smirk. “Almost?”

“Okay, fine. The goal was nothing compared to you.”

“Says the man who once thought a quickie in a Zamboni was romantic.”

“It is romantic.”

“Says the man who—”

“—lives with you and clearly has great taste.”

She rolls her eyes, but I can hear the smile behind it.

Our first Christmas-slash-birthday dinner is full of warmth and noise—exactly how I imagined holidays with our whole family would be.

Afterward, we’re all sprawled around the living room, bellies full, drinks in hand, laughter echoing off the walls.

“I still think it’s wild that our kids have the same birthday,” Elizabeth says, beaming. “Maybe that’s why they’re such a good match. You know—astrology and all.”

Patricia offers a polite smile. “I don’t believe in astrology.” Her gaze shifts to Amanda and me. “But I agree they’re good for each other.”

The Collinses are still riding the high of their first Broadway show. Dad thanks me again for the tickets, shaking his head in disbelief. “I still can’t believe we finally left Bellwood,” he says. “All those lights... Like something out of a dream.”

“Happy you enjoyed it, Dad,” I say, and he pulls me in for a hug.

“Thanks, son.”

Our moms are deep in debate over who should’ve been cast in some play they both loved, while Laurent plays peacekeeper with a brandy in hand and that dry humor Amanda says she’ll still inherit one day.

My brother Jett and his fiancée Allegra sit beside me on the couch, content and sleepy from dessert.

Across the room, Annalise drapes herself onto the armrest of Amanda’s chair, grinning.

“I always wanted a sister, you know?” she says, linking their arms. “Sometimes I even wished Logan had been a girl.”

Amanda laughs softly. She’s probably thinking If you only knew, but says nothing.

“Sisters for real now,” Annalise adds, extending her pinkie for her new bestie to hook it.

Amanda glances at me, eyes warm with something private. I grin back, all complicity. The bond that brought us here will always be our pucking secret .

“Actually,” Annalise says, nudging Amanda’s shoulder, “I was gonna ask you something. I have this group of best friends—Allegra’s in it too. We call ourselves the Alpha Femmes.” She grins. “Total coincidence we all have names that start with A. Or maybe fate.”

Amanda laughs. “Sounds dangerously fun.”

“Oh, it is.” Annalise’s eyes sparkle. “Our group chats are pure chaos, we’re ride-or-die when it counts. and our girls’ nights out usually end with someone singing karaoke badly. I’d love to bring you to the next one.”

Amanda smiles. “Who’s in it?”

“Allegra, her twin Alexandra, and me... and now you. Having a name that starts with A might as well have been a requirement.” She squeezes Amanda’s arm. “You’ll fit right in. Two sets of sisters now. I’m so happy.”

Amanda leans into Annalise’s side, their arms linked, both of them glowing with that just-found-family kind of joy.

I rise, clearing my throat. “Quick update before dessert round two. The new house is coming along great. We’ll have enough space for our own dogs, finally.”

There are murmurs of approval and a few playful barks from Jett.

I glance toward John. “Dad, you and Mom should come spend a few weekends with us once we move in. I’ve got season tickets with your name on them—and we’ll send the plane tickets early so you’ve got time to make arrangements.”

John beams. “How awesome is it to have a hockey player for a son, right?” He elbows Laurent, grinning. “Second-best thing to being a star yourself.”

Laurent chuckles, brandy in hand. “I suppose we’re both lucky, then.” He lifts his glass. “Though technically, I have two.”

From the couch, Jett pipes up, “Hey—I’m right here, you know.”

John laughs. “You’re always welcome to be my son too. Logan can be the mascot.”

The whole room bursts out laughing as the dads clink glasses, brandy sloshing, pride all over their faces.

I give a sharp whistle. “Hey—people. I’m not finished.”

The laughter quiets. I wait a beat. “We’re getting married.”

Silence—then cheers, hugs, and happy tears.

“And we’re both changing our names to Collins-LaRue,” Amanda adds.

“LaRue-Collins sounds better,” Patricia chimes automatically.

Elizabeth tilts her head. Then she smiles. “I agree.” And before anyone can react, she pulls Patricia into a hug.

Patricia hugs her back.

And just like that, something in the room settles. Like a puzzle finding its final piece.